

PART ONE

ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE CINEMA, 1920–1959

Introduction

The essays in this section describe and define the origins of experimental film practice from both historical and theoretical perspectives. In the first piece, “The First American Film Avant-garde, 1919–1945,” Jan-Christopher Horak notes that many filmmakers who are now routinely classified as experimental or avant-garde artists actually thought of themselves as “amateurs” or “dabblers” in film. Their self-description as amateurs implied artistic integrity and was predicated on a self-definition in opposition to the commercial film industry. Only later would these same filmmakers come to be known as the first wave of the American avant-garde. These filmmakers, Horak argues, were largely pioneers of film abstraction, animation, parody, symbolism, and surrealism. From the earliest days of what is now known as avant-garde filmmaking, filmmakers relied on communities that were loosely connected to distribution and exhibition venues. Horak considers the importance of amateur film clubs and cinema clubs, as well as the first journals that promoted film experimentation, such as *Close-up* and *Film Art*. In addition, Horak notes that such exhibition venues as the Museum of Modern Art, the first to have a film department (in 1935), were largely Eurocentric in their programming. Nevertheless, the works of European cinepoets, such as Germaine Dulac and René Clair, were shown alongside those of American filmmakers, such as Slavko Vorkapich and Robert Florey.

The second article in this section, “Notes on the New American Cinema” by filmmaker Jonas Mekas, provides an important contrast and complement to Horak’s essay. Mekas’s essay reads like a manifesto, a call to arms, whose audience is the experimental film community. Jonas Mekas, who cofounded the film journal *Film Culture*, calls for critics to keep out of the emerging art form, which he poetically terms a “new bud.” Implicit in his essay is the fear that too much emphasis on criticism—with its aesthetic labels, privilege of form over content, and tendency toward canon formation—is a menace to the New American Cinema. Mekas calls for purist cinema, and he sees the New American Cinema as an *ethical* movement more than as a conscious anti-Hollywood movement. In “Notes on the New American Cinema,” Mekas distinguishes himself from critics and their abstract theories. Mekas cites Siegfried Kracauer as a model for the “living thing” he calls the New American Cinema, a cinema free of literary and theatrical ideas. Mekas champions the work of Stan Vanderbeek, Marie Menken, Ron Rice, and John Cassavetes in this egalitarian manifesto. He finds a *morality* in trying new approaches. It is

important for the reader to be aware that Jonas Mekas has had an immense impact on the distribution and dissemination of independent cinema, from his long-running column “Movie Journal” in the *Village Voice* to his cofounding of the Filmmakers’ Cooperative and later the Anthology Film Archives, which now houses and screens the world’s largest collection of experimental cinema.

Lauren Rabinovitz’s essay, “The Woman Filmmaker in the New York Avant-garde,” moves the reader into a feminist perspective of the origins of the New American Cinema. Rabinovitz, writing from the perspective of a late twentieth-century critic and feminist historian, begins with the story of a baby shower for Bebe Baron, an experimental music artist. The shower, hosted by Maya Deren, was attended by Anais Nin, Shirley Clarke, Betty Ferguson, Storm de Hirsch, and other members of a community of women who supported one another and, as Rabinovitz argues, provided role models for one another in a male-dominated arena. Rabinovitz uses the baby shower as a central motif in her study of the cultural contradictions of being an artist and a traditional female, a mother, a nurturer. One of the most important points in Rabinovitz’s essay is that female artists and filmmakers found points of resistance even within a system that constructed their identities from a patriarchal perspective. Though being an artist was considered masculine, Rabinovitz argues, Maya Deren managed to portray herself as the romantic type; Shirley Clarke took on the role of the female beatnik; and Joyce Wieland, to some extent, became the Earth Mother that she was labeled. Nevertheless, as Rabinovitz carefully notes, their films “articulated positions for a *refusal* of the male gaze.” Though contained and categorized, excluded and sometimes marginalized, Deren, Clarke, and Wieland ultimately triumphed in that their works provide a legacy of feminist avant-garde film practice.

The final essay in Part One, “Women in the Avant-garde: Germaine Dulac, Maya Deren, Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, and Trinh T. Minh-ha” by Judith Mayne, is another contemporary feminist approach to the work and aesthetics of women directors. Mayne, like Rabinovitz, combines a historical and theoretical methodology to discuss a shared tradition she finds in the films of Dulac, Deren, Akerman, Varda, Minh-ha, and other women filmmakers. Mayne uses the work of Tom Gunning as a jumping-off point. While Gunning discusses the relationship between early “primitive” cinema and the avant-garde, Mayne finds the “primitive” mode of representation in use as female “primitive” narration across a variety of women filmmakers’ works. Careful to articulate her use of the word *primitive*, Mayne notes that her use of the term evokes both early filmmaking and ritualistic traditional female activities. The playfulness and originality that Mekas called for in his manifesto is clearly manifested in the narrative style of a number of women filmmakers of seemingly disparate backgrounds, as Mayne makes clear.

Taken together, the essays in this section sketch not only the history of experimental film but challenge the very notion of a concrete history. There are multiple ways of historicizing avant-garde practice, and these essays demonstrate that experimental film history is continually evolving with each new wave of filmmakers and video artists.

The First American Film Avant-garde, 1919–1945

JAN-CHRISTOPHER HORAK

A history of amateurs

Contrary to the standard histories of American avant-garde cinema, numerous American avant-garde artists produced films in the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s. They include: Sara Arledge, Roger Barlow, Josef Berne, Thomas Bouchard, Irving Browning, Francis Bruguière, Rudy Burkhardt, Paul Burnford, Mary Ellen Bute, Joseph Cornell, Stanley Cortez, Douglass Crockwell, Boris Deutsch, Emlen Etting, Paul Fejos, Robert Flaherty, Robert Florey, John Flory, Roman Freulich, Jo Gerson, Dwinell Grant, Harry Hay, Jerome Hill, Louis Hirshman, John Hoffman, Theodore Huff, Lewis Jacobs, Elia Kazan, Charles Klein, Francis Lee, Jay Leyda, M.G. MacPherson, Jean D. Michelson, Dudley Murphy, Ted Nemeth, Warren Newcombe, Lynn Riggs, LeRoy Robbins, Henwar Rodakiewicz, Joseph Schillinger, Mike Siebert, Stella Simon, Ralph Steiner, Seymour Stern, Paul Strand, Leslie Thatcher, William Vance, Charles Vidor, Slavko Vorkapich, James Sibley Watson, Melville Webber, Herman Weinberg, Orson Welles, and Christopher Young.¹ Supporting these filmmakers was a network of exhibition outlets, art theaters, and amateur film clubs, as well as film publications. Together these filmmakers and attendant phenomena constitute an avant-garde film movement of more than marginal significance. Indeed, the sheer volume of activity demands attention.

To understand the dynamics of the 1920s and 1930s avant-garde in comparison with its post-World War II American successors, the different self-perceptions and material conditions of the two generations must be recognized. Both defined themselves in opposition to commercial, classical narrative cinema, privileging the personal over the pecuniary. However, the 1950s avant-gardists proclaimed themselves to be independent filmmakers, actively engaged in the production of “art,” while the earlier generation viewed themselves as cineastes, as lovers of cinema, as “amateurs” willing to work in any arena furthering the cause of film art, even if it meant working for hire.

The aesthetic position of the second American film avant-garde, defined exclusively in terms of personal expression, led this generation to reject any collaboration with commercial or public interests, any utilitarian usage of the medium, be it commercial, instructional, or ideological. Ironically, their self-conscious declarations about their roles as film artists indicated a romanticized professionalization of the avant-garde project. Of his own generation Jonas Mekas noted: “To former generations film art was something still new and exotic, but

for this generation it is part of our lives, like bread, music, trees, or steel bridges."² This professionalization of avant-garde filmmaking was, of course, possible only because the institutions providing material support for the avant-garde had expanded to include university film courses (offering filmmakers a place to earn money while making their films), government and foundation grants (allowing them to finance production), and nontheatrical film exhibition within the institutional framework of museums, archives, and media centers (offering filmmakers a place to show their work).

Earlier filmmakers, on the other hand, thought of themselves primarily as film amateurs rather than as professionals. The professional was an employee in Hollywood, producing for hire a profit benefiting the corporate hierarchy, while the amateur was concerned with the cause of film art. Given this self-image, the agenda of the first American film avant-garde could be much broader: to improve the quality of all films, whether personal or professional, to create structures for distribution and exhibition, and to further reception through publications. These cineastes moved freely between avant-garde film and other endeavors: documentary, industrials, experimental narrative, film criticism, film exhibition, painting, and photography. Many were primarily painters or photographers who only "dabbled" in film.

Lewis Jacobs, as a member of a Philadelphia amateur film club, noted of his group: "Our club is composed of painters, dancers, and illustrators. . . . It is our aim to emphasize a direction that will result in cinematic form."³ As a paradigmatic example of the contemporary 1920s cineaste, one might fruitfully look at the career of Herman Weinberg: in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he worked as a manager for a "little theater" in Baltimore, wrote film criticism for various magazines, and made avant-garde shorts.⁴ This range of activities in different cinematic endeavors was of course economically determined, since no single effort offered a livelihood.

For Weinberg, the avant-garde constituted itself everywhere beyond the realm of classical Hollywood narrative. The amateur film enthusiast, "the lover of cinema," was seen as the most ardent supporter of an avant-garde. As Col. Roy W. Winton, managing director of the Amateur Cinema League, noted: "We are concerned about where this Eighth Art is going and we are concerned about it aesthetically as well as socially and ethically."⁵ In making avant-garde works, even the professional could become an amateur, as Weinberg explained in the case of Robert Florey: "It was only when he was working on his own, after studio hours, with borrowed equipment, scanty film, a volunteer cast and the most elemental of props, that, released from the tenets of the film factories, he was able to truly express himself in cinematic terms."⁶

Ironically, the desire to improve the status of the film medium on many different fronts was characteristic of both the 1920s European avant-garde—a fact that has been often suppressed by later historians⁷—and the first American avant-garde. Both European and American avant-gardists entered film as amateurs because economics dictated it. At the same time, amateurs-turned-professionals, like Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter, and René Clair, among others, thought of their contract and personal work as of a piece. Whether "city films" by Joris Ivens or Wilfried Basse or scientific views of sea life by Jan Mol, these documentaries were considered to constitute avant-garde cinema. Thus, Europeans and Americans shared a broader, inclusionist rather than exclusionist view of independent cinema.

While the first avant-garde pioneered alternative forms that survived on the fringes of institutional power, it was only sporadically able to support itself economically. The avant-garde itself had not yet been embraced by institutions that could have created the material

conditions for its continued survival. As a result of such factors, it is extremely difficult, for example, to separate avant-garde film production from the production of some documentary films in the 1930s. Roger Barlow, Paul Strand, Willard Van Dyke, LeRoy Robbins, Irving Lerner, Henwar Rodakiewicz, Ralph Steiner, and others not only earned their livelihood during the Great Depression through organizational, governmental, and private documentary film production, but actually perceived such activity as continuing their experimentation with cinematic form. A history of the early American avant-garde, then, cannot help but broaden its definition to include other noncommercial film forms (e.g., amateur and documentary films), as well as unrealized film projects, film criticism, and film reception.

In its earliest phases the American avant-garde movement cannot be separated from a history of amateur films. Indeed, the avant-garde and a growing amateur film movement were two alternative discourses on the fringes of the commercial mainstream that for at least a few years overlapped.⁸ As C. Adolph Glassgold wrote programmatically in 1929: "The artistic future of the motion picture in America rests in the hands of the amateur."⁹ Both avant-garde and amateur film initiatives received a boost after the Eastman Kodak Company's introduction in 1924 of 16mm film and the easy-to-use Cine-Kodak 16mm camera. The new technology was not only cheaper and safer than 35mm nitrate film; it was also in many ways more versatile, allowing for hand-held camera work and shooting on location and under ambient light conditions. The CineKodak made Everyman and Everywoman a potential film artist, and while some avant-garde filmmakers preferred 35mm, others, like Theodore Huff, could not have made films without the low-cost 16mm alternative. Thus technology played an important role in the development of this first avant-garde, as it did in the experimental film movements after World War II.

The first avant-garde defined itself in opposition to the commercial industry not only aesthetically, but also economically, producing films at minimal expense. Instead of large crews and expensive sets, avant-garde filmmakers worked with modest expenditures of money and materials, their films subject to the personal budgets of an amateur. When Slavko Vorkapich and Robert Florey completed *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra* (1928), the press continually mentioned that the film cost a mere \$97.50;¹⁰ Florey's *The Love of Zero* (1928) was produced for approximately \$120.00, and Charles Vidor's *The Bridge* (1929) for approximately \$250.00, plus sound work.¹¹ Roman Freulich produced *Broken Earth* (1936) for \$750.00, after earning a net profit of \$200.00 on his first short, *Prisoner* (1934).¹² Two independent features, Paul Fejos' *The Last Moment* (1928) and Josef von Sternberg's *The Salvation Hunters* (1925), were both released for under \$15,000. Roger Barlow made a film for supposedly no more than four dollars.¹³

The cause of the avant-garde and amateurs was given a concrete organizational form with the founding of the Amateur Cinema League in 1926, led in its early years by the inventor Hiram Percy Maxim. By June 1927 there were an estimated thirty thousand amateur filmmakers in the United States alone.¹⁴ In 1928 more than a hundred amateur cinema clubs existed in the United States and abroad, while the Amateur Cinema League had more than twenty-three hundred members, all of whom were producing amateur films.¹⁵

Amateur, avant-garde groups sprang up all over the country, some shooting in 35mm, some in 16mm, some only spinning grandiose dreams. In New York, Merle Johnson, an amateur cameraman, shot *Knee Deep in Love* (1926), an avant-garde narrative in which the faces of the protagonists/lovers are never visible.¹⁶ In Burbank, California, the experimental production group "Artkino" was founded in 1925 by two amateurs, Jean D. Michelson and M.

G. MacPherson, the name suggesting a homage to Soviet cinema. They apparently produced at least half a dozen films, including *War Under the Sea* (1929), *The Trap* (1930), *The Power of Suggestion* (1930), and *Oil—A Symphony in Motion* (1933), of which only the last-named title seems to survive in any form. According to Arthur Gale:

This interesting amateur unit has made experiments of a wider range than any other similar group and has the most original list of titles to its credit. In all instances, experimentation has been concentrated on continuity structure, camera treatment and lighting effects rather than upon camera tricks.¹⁷

In New York, the founding of Eccentric Films was announced in 1929. "The first avant-garde production unit in America," they planned the production of an expressionist film with action "harking back to Freud's notebooks."¹⁸ In upstate New York the "Cinema Club of Rochester" was formed in 1928 under the chairmanship of Dr. James Sibley Watson. In Philadelphia, Lewis Jacobs, Jo Gerson, and Louis Hirshman belonged to "The Cinema Crafters of Philadelphia", founded in early 1928 to realize "pioneer experiments in the new field of photoplay production."¹⁹

Professionalism was equated with commercialism, while amateurism connoted artistic integrity. This discourse also identifies personal expression with formal experimentation, a dualism repeated continually in contemporary aesthetic manifestoes and reviews, and echoed in the polemics of the second American avant-garde. The emphasis on formalism is apparent in Frederick Kiesler's comment: "In the film, as in every other art, everything depends on *how* its mediums (means) are utilized and not on *what* is employed."²⁰ Lewis Jacobs concurred: "Such stuff as story, acting and sets are merely contributing factors to the more important element, form. We are trying to make film something restless, fluent and dynamic."²¹

Avant-garde Exhibition and Reception

Just as avant-garde film production created an alternative discourse on filmmaking, the "Little Cinema" movement provided both an exhibition outlet for avant-garde and European art films and an alternative to the commercial cinema chains dominated by the major Hollywood studios. The establishment of art cinemas was apparently first suggested in March 1922 by the magazine of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, *Exceptional Photoplays*,²² which specifically tied the founding of a little cinema movement to the growth of avant-garde cinema:

The showing of experimental pictures in a special theatre or series of theatres, and the building up of an audience, would naturally be followed by the actual making of experimental pictures. Directors and actors, stimulated by what they had seen in this theatre and encouraged by the reception of new work, would feel impelled to try their hand.²³

Three years later the "Little Cinema" movement took off when the newly founded Screen Guild in New York showed a series of Sunday films at the Central Theater and at the George M. Cohan organized by Symon Gould. Other series were programed by Montgomery Evans at the Klaw Theatre (New York) in March 1926, and by Tamar Lane, who formed the Hollywood

Film Guild in the same month.²⁴ Gould, meanwhile, began the first continuous art film program, also in March 1926, at the Cameo Theatre, sponsored by the International Film Arts Guild.²⁵ Seating 540 persons, the Cameo scheduled many European and American films that had been failures in their first run because they were not "popular" enough.

In a speech before the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, Gould noted that the film art movement "had dedicated itself to the task of reviving and keeping alive classic motion pictures, as well as those films that may be noteworthy for the best elements." He concluded: "There is no doubt that this is the age of celluloid. We are only standing on the threshold of unforeseen developments in this momentous field."²⁶

Meanwhile, in October 1926 Joseph Fleisler, Michael Mindlin, and the Screen Guild, acting as the Film Associates, Inc., took over the 5th Avenue Playhouse at 66 Fifth Avenue, proclaiming it the "first succinctly art cinema house in America."²⁷ The first film on the program of the new cinema was the re-released *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1919), often credited with initiating a film art movement in the United States.²⁸ Within a few years "little cinemas" sprang up all over the country. The Art Cinema League, meanwhile, remodeled a barn and presented experimental shorts.²⁹

In spring 1927 the Little Theatre of the Motion Picture Guild, under the management of John Mulligan, was opened in Washington, D.C., the first "little cinema" outside New York City. This was followed by the Little Theatre of the Movies in Cleveland in late 1927, and almost immediately by the Playhouse in Chicago. A. W. Newman, director of the Cleveland cinema, specifically referred to the exhibition of short films that "represent important experimentation" as a part of its mandate.³⁰

In Hollywood the Filmarte was founded in 1928 by Ms. Regge Doran;³¹ other little theaters were located in Boston (Fine Arts Theatre), Rochester (Little Theatre), New York (Carnegie Playhouse), Newark (Little Theatre), Buffalo (Motion Picture Guild), Baltimore (Little Theatre),³² Philadelphia (Motion Picture Guild), Brooklyn (St. George's Playhouse/Brooklyn Film Guild), and East Orange, N.J. (Oxford Theatre).³³ The Motion Picture Guild, under the direction of Robert F. Bogatin, operated the theaters in Philadelphia, Buffalo, Cleveland, and Rochester. Michael Mindlin had his own subway circuit with the 55th Street Playhouse in New York, the St. George in Brooklyn, and the Playhouse in Chicago.

In February 1929 Symon Gould opened the Film Guild Cinema on Eighth Street. Designed by Frederick Kiesler, it was in the eyes of its architect the "first 100 per cent cinema in the world."³⁴ The New York Film Art Guild's inaugural screening in 1929, which was attended by numerous dignitaries, including Theodore Dreiser, presented two avant-garde films by Americans, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928, Watson/Webber) and *Hands* (1928, Stella Simon), along with a Soviet feature, *Two Days* (1927). The premiere led the National Board of Review to name *The Fall of the House of Usher* in its "a Calendar of Progress," noting that: "Amateur experimentation reaches a sudden peak in this abstract film."³⁵

The Little Theatre in Rochester opened on 17 October 1929, with seating for 299. The opening-night program featured the French/Italian silent, *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1923), with a three-man orchestra in the balcony providing musical accompaniment. With its slogan "The House of Shadow Silence," the Little Theatre consciously set itself against large commercial theatres, by now all wired for sound. It was dedicated to showing "art films that appeal to the intelligent and the sophisticated."³⁶ In early 1931 the theater was turned over to Ben and Florence Belinson, who ran it for the next thirty-five years. Today the Little Theatre is the oldest functioning art cinema in the United States.

Not surprisingly, art cinema programs often paired American avant-garde films with European, especially German and Russian, features. Dreiser commented on this mixture in the Film Guild's inaugural program brochure, which referred to "the little cinema theatres, which should, and I hope will, act as havens for artistic American as well as European productions and such experimental efforts of 'amateurs' here as many have the real interests of the screen as art truly at heart."³⁷

The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra played at the Philadelphia Motion Picture Guild with the German/Indian production, *Die Leuchte Asiens/Light of Asia* (1926), while Robert Florey's second film, *The Love of Zero*, was billed at the Los Angeles Filmarte Theater with Gösta Ekman's *Klöven* (1927).³⁸ *The Story of a Nobody* (1930, Gerson/Hirshman) was exhibited with Paul Fejos' arty Universal feature, *The Last Performance* (1929),³⁹ while Charles Vidor's *The Bridge* premiered at the Hollywood Filmarte Theatre with another European feature.⁴⁰ Roman Freulich's *Prisoner* was shown at the Little Theatre in Baltimore with *Sweden, Land of the Vikings* (1934).

Ironically, obituaries for the Little Cinema movement appeared as early as 1929, when the movement was far from spent. John Hutchins' article in *Theatre Arts Monthly* noted in September 1929:

That their bright day is done and they are for the dark, within only four years of their inception, is the unhappy comment on an art movement that from the first was characterized not so much by art as by a truly astonishing lack of foresight, and later by merely bad business methods.⁴¹

The fact that Hutchins wrongly proclaims the demise of at least two cinemas, and overlooks the imminent opening of two others in Rochester and Baltimore in October 1929, suggests that another agenda is at work. In fact, the author finds many of the foreign films distasteful, "static and inferior" (a consistent criticism of European "art" films from allies of the American film industry), argues that the Little Cinemas had "little or nothing to offer," and accuses Gould's Film Guild, for example, of showing too many Russian films. Indeed, it would not be inferior foreign films, but rather a worsening economic climate, that would eventually contribute to the demise of many Little Cinemas. But that would take several more years.

Art galleries were another potential site for avant-garde exhibitions. In many cases gallery organizers screened the films of the artists whose works in other media they represented. Marius de Zayas' New York gallery showed Strand and Sheeler's *Manhatta* (1921) in 1922, after exhibiting Sheeler's photography, drawings, and painting. Jay Leyda's *A Bronx Morning* (1931) was premiered at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York, as was Lynn Riggs's *A Day in Santa Fe* (1931), Henwar Rodakiewicz's *Portrait of a Young Man* (1932), and Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (1936). Presenting European films as well, Julien Levy in fact built up a substantial collection of avant-garde films, which he hoped "to display on request."⁴² Rodakiewicz's and Leyda's films were also shown at Alfred Stieglitz's *An American Place*, occasional showcase for American avant-garde films.⁴³

Another exhibition outlet from 1930 through mid-decade was the Workers Film and Photo League, which was allied with the Communist Party, USA. Apart from its film production and photography activities, the League also set up local 16mm film distribution systems and, in 1934, a national one.⁴⁴ Presenting to its membership Soviet feature films, newsreels concerning left-wing political actions, and evenings of avant-garde films, the League was instrumental in developing an audience for art films, especially at the Hollywood chapter,

which had an ambitious exhibition program under the directorship of Bill Miller.⁴⁵ League member Tom Brandon founded Garrison Films in 1932 to distribute to League organizations.⁴⁶

The largest audiences were undoubtedly the Amateur Cinema League's local clubs in countless American cities. The ACL had begun to organize a lending library as early as 1927, in order, Arthur Gale wrote, to "provide an adequate distribution of amateur photoplays, secure a dependable event for club programs and, as well, encourage new groups to undertake amateur productions."⁴⁷ Its distribution catalogue included *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1928, Charles Klein), *H₂O* (1929, Ralph Steiner), as well as *Portrait of a Young Man* (1932, Henwar Rodakiewicz), *Lot in Sodom* (1933, Watson/Webber), *Mr. Motorboat's Last Stand* (1933, Huff/John Flory), and *Another Day* (1934, Leslie P. Thatcher), all of which were screened extensively throughout the United States. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, one of the most popular, was screened hundreds of times in ACL clubs.⁴⁸ Although ACL's interests turned in the 1930s increasingly to travelogues and other forms of home movies, these avant-garde films were still available through the League in the early 1950s.

The ACL awarded yearly film prizes, adding the winners to its library. *Photoplay* and *Liberty* magazine also staged amateur film contests, which offered public exposure to independent filmmakers. For example, *Photoplay* awarded its first prize in 1929 to Ralph Steiner's *H₂O*, which in turn led to a review in the *National Board of Review Magazine*.⁴⁹ In 1937 an amateur film contest announced in *Liberty* magazine was the occasion for LeRoy Robbins, Roger Barlow, and Harry Hay to produce *Even As You and I* (1937).

Other kinds of distribution were haphazard, usually dependent on the filmmaker's renting the film to individual exhibition outlets. Symon Gould, the founder of the Cinema Guild, apparently set up some kind of distribution network, renting films to both the little cinemas and commercial theaters. However, any profits realized never made their way back to the filmmakers. Strand and Sheeler, for example, complained that their film *Manhatta* disappeared after Gould got the print for a screening at the Cameo Theatre in 1926. Robert Florey was even more specific about promises made to him:

Early in 1928, Mr. Simon [Sic] Gould, then manager of the 5th Street Cinema Playhouse [Sic] in New York offered to give World Wide exploitation to my experimental shorts . . . and to that effect I gave him *all* the negatives and prints that I had. I regret to say that I have not heard from Mr. Gould since 1929, I have never received an account of the rentals or sales of my pictures.⁵⁰

When Frank Stauffacher, programmer for the "Art in Cinema" series at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1946–1951), asked Gould in 1950 about the existence of certain avant-garde prints, Gould answered (on Film Guild letterhead) that he would be glad to undertake a search, for a twenty-five-dollar fee.⁵¹

Several film magazines were dedicated to promoting art films: *Close Up*, published in Switzerland in English; *Film Art*, published in London; *Experimental Cinema*, edited by Seymour Stern and Lewis Jacobs; and the *National Board of Review Magazine*, successor to the board's *Exceptional Photoplays*. The first three journals functioned briefly as critical voices in the discourse around both European and American art film, while the last continued its battle for better films for many years.

Close Up, in particular through its American contributors, Harry A. Potamkin and Herman Weinberg, documented the achievements of the American avant-garde from 1928 to 1934. The

journal was initially impressed with the ability of the American avant-garde to produce low-cost films of high artistic merit, as evidenced in Kenneth MacPherson's editorial on Robert Florey's *Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra*.⁵² In later issues, *Close Up* regularly published stills from new American avant-garde films, as well as reviews and news of future (sometimes unrealized) projects.

Film Art, published in London from 1933 to 1937, continued where *Close Up* left off, with many of the same contributors—Weinberg, Rudolf Arnheim, Oswell Blakeston. The journal, published more or less quarterly, printed not only reviews of American avant-garde films but also stills from films by Lewis Jacobs and Joe Berne and information about new productions.

Experimental Cinema, published between 1931 and 1934, concerned itself primarily with leftist filmmaking but also considered avant-garde efforts. In issue number 5, for example, the magazine published stills from Steiner's *Pie in the Sky* (1935), Jacobs' unfinished *As I Walk* (1934), and Joseph Schillinger and Mary Ellen Bute's equally unfinished *Synchronmy* (1934), as well as a series of notes on various avant-garde efforts, including the Group Theatre project, *Cafe Universal* (1934).⁵³

The *National Board of Review Magazine* reviewed not only commercial Hollywood films, but also European art films, and occasionally American avant-garde films.⁵⁴ Shortly after the magazine's founding in 1926, the journal published a series of articles on the Little Cinema movement. Its coverage of avant-garde films was more sporadic, since it apparently limited itself to reviewing films that were being distributed commercially.

Amateur Movie Makers, the official organ of the Amateur Cinema League, on the other hand, originally focused on amateurs, among them avant-gardists, but shifted away from the latter in the mid-1930s. As the organization became aesthetically more conservative, its members increasingly preferred polished travelogues and Hollywood's professional discourse to formal experimentation. In its early phase, though, articles by Theodore Huff, Jay Leyda, Henwar Rodakiewicz, and Herman Weinberg encouraged amateurs to experiment with film form. The magazine also published reports on local amateur cinema club activities, including screenings of films from the ACL library.

Thus, while the first American avant-garde relied on an institutional framework that was less well developed than that of the postwar avant-garde, their efforts did not exist in a complete vacuum, as has been previously assumed. Avant-garde filmmakers, while working essentially in isolation, were able to screen their films through a number of outlets and saw them reviewed in a variety of magazines. A public discourse on the nature and viability of amateur and avant-garde film first appeared in that period.

To be sure, as the 1930s progressed and the Depression deepened, possibilities for film production, as well as distribution and exhibition, steadily declined. By the late 1930s the ACL had turned completely to travelogues, a number of the Little Cinemas had failed, and money and jobs were scarce. Filmmakers emerging after 1935, like Sara Arledge, Rudy Burkhardt, Joseph Cornell, and Francis Lee, produced their films essentially in a void, until they were discovered by the second American avant-garde. Roger Barlow, LeRoy Robbins, Paul Strand, Willard Van Dyke, Ralph Steiner, and others turned to government- or politically-sponsored social documentary as a means of expanding the borders of cinematic language.

It was, of course, at this very moment, in 1935, that the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) was founded. Under its first curator, Iris Barry, the department's outlook was essentially Eurocentric: it exhibited the classic art and avant-garde films of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the great silents, giving a new generation a film historical

education. MOMA preserved the Berlin-produced avant-garde film, *Hands* (1928) by Stella Simon, but it also allowed the original and only surviving print of Jo Gerson and Louis Hirshman's *Story of a Nobody* to decompose in its vaults.⁵⁵

Relegated to the dustbin of history, the first American avant-garde was not thought worthy of preservation. Many of the films produced by that avant-garde have been lost; others still await preservation. This survey must necessarily remain fragmentary.

Early Avant-garde Film Production

Although European art and avant-garde films aroused intense interest in America and resulted in a degree of emulation, American avant-garde films were unique products of American culture. The very fact that they were born out of the reception of European avant-garde films in America inscribed their position: while often borrowing or quoting the formal techniques of the European avant-garde, they demonstrated a certain wild eclecticism, innovativeness, and at times naiveté that was only possible for American filmmakers working far from Paris and Berlin, the centers of Western high culture. Contemporary critics condemned this eclecticism, as when Kirk Bond wrote of *Lot in Sodom*: "But by any worthwhile standard it is a chaos of conflicting mediums. Nothing is thought out in terms of any one, but the directors, like a painter with his colors, dip by turn into each, following the turn of the story."⁵⁶ Rather than denigrating American eclecticism, it might be fruitful to look at the early American avant-garde with a postmodern sensibility, appreciating the hodgepodge of styles (Expressionism, Cubism, Art Nouveau) and philosophical currents that make up the first American avant-garde.

The first American avant-garde—like the second, and unlike the European avant-garde—seems to have had an extremely contradictory relationship to the modernist project. Its utilization of modernist form in connection with expressions of highly romantic, even antimodernist, sentiments is symptomatic of this ambivalence toward modernism. A particularly American romanticism, which manifests itself in a longing for (wo)man's reunification with nature, informs the early American avant-garde's visualization of the natural environment and the urban sprawl. This kind of romanticism was quite absent from most of its European predecessors, with the possible exception of the French film Impressionists around Louis Delluc.⁵⁷ In European modernist films nature is seen at best as an abstraction, as an ideal aesthetic construct, not as a primordial force from which human society has been forcibly separated. While the European avant-garde is proudly modernist in its celebration of urbanism and the machine age, American avant-garde films are much more ambivalent, viewing the separation from nature with a degree of dread. This romantic view not only separates the early American avant-garde from its European models, but also connects it directly to filmmakers of the second American avant-garde, such as Stan Brakhage, James Broughton, and Ed Emschwiller.

Even within the first American avant-garde, differences can be ascertained. Avant-garde filmmakers in the 1920s produced experiments with the hope of distributing them through commercial channels; avant-garde filmmakers after 1929 produced their work with the expansion of the amateur film movement in view. While the former were often film professionals, working on their own time outside the commercial film industry, the latter were usually true amateurs. This loose division is also marked by the professional use of 35mm film stock

versus amateurs' general use of 16mm at the very end of the decade and into the 1930s. Thus, filmmakers of the first generation, like Warren Newcombe, Boris Deutsch, Robert Flaherty, Charles Klein, Robert Florey, and Dudley Murphy, produced their avant-garde films and simultaneously or subsequently worked in the film industry in a professional capacity.

In 1929 Hans Richter created the first topology of avant-garde film for his seminal exhibition, "Film und Foto," held in Stuttgart, Germany.⁵⁸ In that exhibition, Richter differentiated between absolute *cinema pur* documentary and narrative *art cinema*.⁵⁹ Twenty-five years later, Jonas Mekas developed his own topology in his article on the American avant-garde. It included film drama, film poem, cineplastics, and document film.⁶⁰ P. Adams Sitney's topology in *Visionary Film* divides the avant-garde into five types: trance, lyrical, mythopoetic, structural, and poetic.⁶¹ Dana Polan has rightly criticized this typology as incomplete and lacking "the kind of metacommentary that could concretize its categories in history."⁶² Polan himself has suggested a typology that would take into consideration the "stances the films take (consciously or not) toward social experience."⁶³ He goes on to define the social and the lyrical, the structural and the physiological in avant-garde cinema, but ultimately admits that no topology can contain the diversity of avant-garde practice.

It might be useful to look at all avant-garde films as discursive practices in opposition to classical cinema. We might also fruitfully think of avant-garde cinema as "pedagogical interventions, as works that allow us to see cinema again, in places and at levels where we had ceased to see it."⁶⁴ Looking at the avant-garde in this way allows us to see these films as critiques of mainstream, classical narrative, and as cinematic discourses on a whole range of issues. The subheadings below reflect this range of issues and can be divided into sets of polarities, depending on their referents: urbanism/nature, painting/dance, fiction/parody, and poetry. Clearly the theoretical question of topology remains unanswered, but such a project would demand an extended theoretical discussion that is not possible here.

The Poetics of Urban Space

Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta* (1921) was not only the first avant-garde film produced in the United States, and a model for subsequent "city films" in Europe and America, but also a highly contradictory film in terms of its modernist text. Previous readings of the film have failed to take into account *Manhatta's* romantic subtext, which is visible both in the inter-titles, taken from the poetry of Walt Whitman, and in the film's overall narrative construction.

Manhatta was released commercially as a "scenic," a quasi travelogue, shown in cinemas as a short before the feature presentation, as was Robert Flaherty's so-called scenic, *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* (1927). Financed by Pictorial Clubs of America, and released by Pathé, Flaherty's homage to New York City, ostensibly completed for the three hundredth anniversary of the landing of the Dutch in 1626, was in many ways less rigorous in its formal construction than *Manhatta*.⁶⁵ Flaherty's film was eventually used as a moving-image backdrop for a stage show at New York's Roxy Theatre titled "The Sidewalks of New York."⁶⁶

The film begins with etchings of the Dutch buying Manhattan from the island's Native American inhabitants in 1624, then proceeds with a series of drawings and maps of what the Dutch called "Neiuw Amsterdam." Flaherty next cuts to an aerial view of the city, taken three centuries later. The following images, mostly held in long shot, and often taken from

skyscrapers high above the city, focus on construction: cranes and excavators digging, a dredger working the river, bulldozers, workers blowing out bedrock with dynamite. Intercut with these images are shots of traffic and bridges on the Hudson and East rivers, on the one hand, and skyscrapers, on the other. Through the use of telephoto lenses and his bird's eye view, Flaherty collapses spaces, creating canyons of concrete and iron and giving the city a feeling of incredible density and power.

Unlike *Manhatta*, then, which ultimately attempts a visual symbiosis of city and country, man and nature, Flaherty, the romantic chronicler of "primitive cultures" in *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926), here presents urban civilization as completely overpowering and destructive of nature, as when a lone tree is seen against a backdrop of the concrete jungle. The people of New York play no part in the film. Instead, as Flaherty himself noted, it was "not a film of human beings, but of skyscrapers which they had erected, completely dwarfing humanity itself."⁶⁷ The natural environment, then, has been replaced by an artificially constructed, primordial environment. Only the film's final image, an extreme long shot of Central Park, brings the film back to the first shots of the Dutch invaders and Native Americans, reminding the audience of that great absence that informs the film—the separation from the natural environment.

Much more celebratory of the city and also more humanistic in its view of city dwellers is Jay Leyda's *A Bronx Morning*, a tribute to one of his favorite photographers, Eugene Atget. It is a lyrical look at his Bronx neighborhood in the early morning hours before traffic and pedestrians crowd the street.⁶⁸

An important city portrait from the early 1930s was Irving Browning's *City of Contrasts* (1931). Released commercially by Sol Lesser with a superficial "comic" narration to improve its box-office potential, the film nevertheless merits recognition in terms of its cinematography and sophisticated montage.⁶⁹ Browning, a photographer by trade, visually juxtaposes images both formally, contrasting light, shade, and form through extreme camera angles, and semantically, contrasting various ethnic neighborhoods, skyscrapers, and city parks, the wealthy at Riverside Drive and the shantytown at Hooverville on the Hudson.⁷⁰ Its editing is thus much more ambitious than its soundtrack, creating a "New Realist" montage of the city's contradictions. The contradictory social forces and conditions visualized in the film are accepted as endemic to urban life. The unserious narration, added against the artist's intentions, positions the subject as a tourist, appealing to a desire for the exotic without forcing him or her to confront or analyze the juxtaposition of rich and poor, African-American and European.

The critic, film historian, and cinema manager Herman Weinberg produced at least two avant-garde films on the subject of the city, although the first, *A City Symphony* (1930),⁷¹ was apparently chopped up to provide footage for the second, *Autumn Fire* (1931).⁷² According to Weinberg, the latter film was a *romance sentimentale*, made not for public exhibition, but as a means of courting a woman he then married.⁷³ The film subjectively portrays two lovers who suffer through their separation until they are united at the end. Utilizing a Russian montage style, Weinberg intercuts continually between the two, juxtaposing their environments, identifying the young woman symbolically with nature and the man with the city (New York). That woman is identified with images of nature implies a whole set of textual referents: walking along the beach, gazing out her window at a field of flowers, she is inscribed as "the waiting woman," consumed by the emotional desire of man, an object of the male gaze. This gendered dichotomy is bridged by the film's reunification scene in a railroad station, which

posits a form of narrative closure, cross-cutting images of nature (flowing water) with the station.⁷⁴ Thus, the film mixes elements of the city film with a portrait of nature, expressing a romantic longing for man's lost connection with the wilderness.

In the 1930s Lewis Jacobs also turned to documenting the city. While shooting footage for the Film and Photo League and working in New York as a cutter for advertising films, Jacobs began a project, *As I Walk*, which remained unfinished. It was to be a two-reel documentary of a working-class section of New York, following the "general trend of independent films to show the disgusting social conditions which exist in large and small cities."⁷⁵ A fragment, called *Footnote to Fact* (1934), was finished. A portrait of a young woman, it expressed in images the thoughts and scenes flashing through her mind: documentary shots of street life in New York. Jacobs' inter-cutting between shots of the woman and her subjective views of reality accelerates until the film comes to a climax.⁷⁶ The film's other three parts were to be called *Highway 66*, *Faces in the Street*, and *Night Between the Rivers*. According to Jacobs, the whole was to be post-synchronized, "using sound in a stream of consciousness technique, including snatches of jazz, natural sounds, modern poetry and inner monologues."⁷⁷ The articulation of subjectivity was to become a lifelong preoccupation for Jacobs, as demonstrated by his later film, *Case History* (1956).⁷⁸

American avant-garde films about the city, then, always seem to be about man and nature in the city. Such ambivalence toward urban spaces is nowhere as evident as in Willard Van Dyke, Henwar Rodakiewicz, and Ralph Steiner's government-sponsored documentary, *The City* (1939), possibly the last of the real "city films." From the very beginning the film sets up a country/city dichotomy, juxtaposing the opening "New England" sequence to the following scenes of heavy industry.⁷⁹ The metropolis is seen here as overcrowded, noisy, polluted, and unhealthy; images of smokestacks, traffic jams, and substandard industrial housing predominate. Only in the latter half of the film is a new vision presented: a city without a cityscape, a city in harmony with the environment, a city replicating a small-town feeling, the urban jungle miraculously metamorphized into suburbs. The film advocates a form of city planning where living spaces and work spaces are strictly divided, offering residents of newly constructed, individual houses clean, green suburbs in which the nature they crave and are denied in an urban environment is ever-present. Thus, while *The City's* montage reproduces the formal aesthetics of earlier city films, its ideological position is far from modernist.

Toward the end of the 1930s, Rudy Burkhardt, a Swiss-born photographer who would become an important avant-garde figure in the 1950s and 1960s, made his first films with a 16mm camera. Burkhardt's city films, however, are not marked by the same ambivalence toward urbanism. Many in fact are conscious reworkings of the amateur travelogue, but constructed with an eye for composition, and for the unexpected, the incongruous, the off-beat. In 1936 Burkhardt shot *145 West 21*, a little silent comedy about a domestic quarrel with some of his artist friends as actors. That was followed by *Seeing the World—Part One: A Visit to New York* (1937), a spoof on travelogues.

Burkhardt lived in New York City, and many of his early films were visual poems to that particular urban landscape. In *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1940), his second film about the city,⁸⁰ Burkhardt's camera focuses on crowds, showing their collective power through fast and slow motion, analyzing their individuality through closeup still photographs of faces. In between we see shops, advertisements, and buildings, but these seem to be mere obstacles for the ever-moving crowds of pedestrians, that flow of humanity which had been so invisible in the

avant-garde's first city films. Possibly because Burkhardt was a European, there is much less sense of nature's absence in the city or feeling that subjectivity can only be expressed through a reunification with the environment. Instead, like the European avant-garde, Burkhardt seems comfortable in urban spaces far from nature.

Surprisingly, then, most American "city films" seem to lack the unequivocal celebration of modernism and urbanism found in European "city films." In *Rien que les Heures* (1925, Alberto Cavalcanti), *Berlin: The Symphony of a City* (1926, Walter Ruttmann), and *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929, Dziga Vertov), to name a few of the best-known feature films in this subgenre, the urban environment is celebrated for its excitement, speed, and modernity, with few references to nature, beyond its role in leisure-time activities for Sunday picnickers. The early American avant-garde, on the other hand, laments its separation from the country, a mood nowhere more evident than in its lyrical documentaries of nature.

Lyrical Nature

If we theorize that many of the city films of the American avant-garde constructed a mixture of modernist formal elements and romantic desires, then the avant-garde's depiction of nature seems to be a more direct expression of American romantic sensibilities. Certainly, the documentation of the natural environment seems to be almost completely absent from the European avant-garde, with its modernist fascination with speed, transportation, and the urban environment. The only exceptions to this rule were the scientific films of Jan Mol in Holland and Jean Painlevé in France, whose microscopic views of sea life coincided with ideas about a new mechanical vision and were thus popular with avant-garde cinema clubs, allowing their very empiricism to be co-opted by the modernist project.

What connected American avant-garde filmmakers to Romanticism, however, was their interest not only in depicting nature, however abstracted, but, more importantly, in utilizing nature as a visual metaphor for the expression of human (mostly male) subjectivity. Henwar Rodakiewicz's supremely romantic *Portrait of a Young Man* (1932) indicates in its very title that this nature film is a reflection of the filmmaker's inner consciousness. There is little interest in documenting nature objectively; rather, it is the abstraction of nature that fascinates the eye, its formal play in an infinite variety of patterns of form, movement, light.

Ralph Steiner's *H₂O* is a perfect case in point. This twelve-minute film of water, rain, raindrops, pools, brooks, streams, rivers, and oceans moves from very concrete images of water in all its manifestations to extremely abstract images of the way water reflects and refracts light.⁸¹ For Steiner it is in fact the ability of the camera to capture the play of light in water that becomes the film's text. Steiner's *Surf and Seaweed* (1931) is a continuation of his exploration of water and light, with its montage of closeup images of the ocean, low-angle shots of waves crashing against the rocks, and extreme closeups of the swirling patterns of seaweed.

Very similar in terms of its construction, but closer to the modernist project in terms of its thematic concerns, is Steiner's *Mechanical Principles* (1933). Like *H₂O* and *Surf and Seaweed*, the film's images of reality are iconic. In this case moving engine parts create highly abstract geometric designs, their sense of composition heightened by movement. In the 1960s this kind of film would be called structural, but in the 1930s it was considered an attempt to find the abstract beauty of nature, invisible to the human eye, but accessible to the camera lens.

Mechanical Principles's machine parts are imbued with a strong sense of the anthropomorphic, romantic endeavor to reintegrate technology with the realm of nature.

Much the same can be said for Artkino's *Oil—A Symphony in Motion*, which postulates an even more radical synthesis of nature and technology by discovering the origins of the latter in the former.⁸² The film utilizes a first-person monologue (intertitles), spoken by the oil underground: "I am the pulse beat of green jungles stored in the ground beneath your farms." The monologue in intertitles continues throughout the film, as oil narrates its own rise to power as the force behind technological development. The images, mostly held in heroic high-angle shots with objects shot against the open sky, and strongly influenced by Soviet aesthetics, begin with a pastoral landscape of farms, cows, and farmers, slowly giving way (thankfully, since the soil is exhausted) to oil derricks. Yet these derricks are presented almost as natural phenomena willed into existence by the narrating oil, since they, too, are anthropomorphic, functioning with few exceptions independently of humans and sprouting from the ground like the corn that preceded them. The final third of the film is a paean to technology and the speed of modern transportation, as the filmmakers juxtapose antiquated horse-drawn buggies to motor cars, trains, and planes. A closeup of a turning auto tire, superimpositions in criss-cross patterns of fast-moving railroad cars, and high-angle shots of the oil derrick silhouetted against the evening sky become metonymies for a functioning technology in harmony with nature. With its optimistic view of technology and, by extension, economic expansion, it is also very much an expression of male desire in the early twentieth century.

Henwar Rodakiewicz's *Portrait of a Young Man* is, likewise, an intensely romantic film, communicating a desire for union with nature. The young man of the title in fact never appears in the film; instead, the film presents an abstract montage of the sea, clouds, smoke, trees, and man-made machinery, mostly in closeup. The camera eye as an extension of the filmmaker's body constructs male subjectivity. According to Rodakiewicz, the meaning of the whole arises from the sum of its parts: "In creating a film of nature that represents the cameraman's individuality, the importance of selection cannot be overestimated."⁸³ Divided into three movements, the film's construction and rhythm are modeled on that of a symphony: an adagio layered between two faster-paced sequences.

Another subjective view of the natural environment was presented in Slavko Vorkapich and John Hoffman's *Moods of the Sea* (1942). Vorkapich was an early experimentalist who later made periodic forays into avant-garde film practice (*Millions of Us*, 1935, being a case in point) after establishing himself as a "montage specialist" in the Hollywood studios. Having collaborated with Robert Florey on *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra* (1928), Vorkapich in the 1930s and 1940s created "montages" in countless films, collapsing space and time into a matter of moments, thereby visually circumscribing the meteoric rise of a Broadway star, the cross-country tour of a boxer, or the simple passage of the seasons.⁸⁴ While such sequences soon degenerated from the experimental to the conventional, Vorkapich sought creative expression in the production of his own shorts.

Moods of the Sea, a pictorial fantasy, utilizes Felix Mendelssohn's *Fingal's Cave* as musical accompaniment to images of the ocean.⁸⁵ Opening with a view from a cave onto the ocean, the film orchestrates images of a powerful natural environment: giant waves breaking on the shore, cliffs towering above the surf, a sea gull in elegant flight, clouds gathering above the ocean, a sunset on the horizon. The images, true to Vorkapich's interest in montage, are cut precisely to the music, each image sequence reaching a rhythmic crescendo with the melodies. The

romanticism of Mendelssohn's music contributes to the film's overall romantic quality, but it is both the framed image from the cave entrance at the film's beginning and the constantly moving camera that emphasize the subjective nature of the camera's point of view. Thus, like Rodakiewicz's film, *Moods of the Sea* refers not so much to nature as to the human observer's experience of nature, the moods conjured up through a walk along the sea.⁸⁶

Another film that seems to have existed between the commercial and the avant-garde was John Hoffman's *Prelude to Spring* (1946). Like many of the films discussed above, *Prelude to Spring* hoped to "not speak with words. It talks with images relating an eternal yet ever new story."⁸⁷ Presenting a series of shots of mountains, woods, and brooks, as the snow slowly melts, spring arrives, and a storm comes and goes, *Prelude's* images are composed for their formal beauty. Many of the shots tend toward the abstract, especially the images of flowing water, an effect heightened by high-contrast printing. Unfortunately, the soundtrack's clichéd use of Sergei Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* gives the film a literalness that its often striking images contradict.

Reviewing the gamut of lyrical documentaries of nature, it seems evident that all of these experiments are motivated by a romantic subjectivity that is particularly American in terms of its aesthetics. The level of abstraction may vary, the correspondences established between images and music may be more or less direct, but these films are romantic in mood and seemingly far from the European modernist project.

Painting in Motion

The earliest known American experimental live-action and animated film, *The Enchanted City* (1922) is, like *Manhatta*, informed by romantic and modernist discourses. Made by Warren Newcombe,⁸⁸ the film treads an uneasy line between Hollywood kitsch and avant-garde abstraction.⁸⁹ Newcombe animates what are essentially a series of paintings, sandwiched between live-action images of a couple sitting at the sea shore.⁹⁰ The paintings are highly artificial, seemingly closer to Maxfield Parrish than to modern art. On the other hand, Newcombe's monumentalized spaces, devoid of human life, evidence a primacy of the architectural over the human form, recalling the metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Chirico.

In its narrative of a quest down a river through an enchanted city, the film inscribes a male spectator looking at woman; it is a journey through dreams, through man's anxieties and fears in reference to female lack, as theorized by Freud. One of the earliest images of stairs, a tower, and a woman's face sets the tone by referencing Freud's conception of the phallic woman and man's fear of castration. This fear of castration is almost obsessively reworked in numerous other images, in shots of phalluses, and in the way views are restricted to a tunnel-like vision, culminating in the image of the voyager being engulfed in a giant waterfall, Freud's metaphor for man's disappearance into the gaping black hole of the womb. There is ultimately an irrationality to the sequencing of images, a narrative that does not so much resolve itself as come to a metaphysical halt, a formal *deus ex machina* dissolving the image of destruction into one of redemption. Thus, *The Enchanted City* too straddles romantic and modernist discourses, its narrative of romantic desire fraught with male *Angst* and unresolved conflicts, which the film's final images of nature cannot contain.

Francis Bruguière, who had collaborated on *Danse Macabre*, had by the late 1920s wandered to Europe, where he produced an abstract film, *Light Rhythms* (1930), in collaboration with *Close*

Up editor Oswell Blakeston. In the film, Bruguière and Blakeston animated static forms solely through the manipulation of light.⁹¹ Running eight minutes, the film presents a highly abstract meditation on the power of light to change perceptions of form. In this sense, the film can be compared to László Moholy-Nagy's *Lichtspiel—Schwarz Weiss Grau* (1930), except that in the latter film, light is bounced off a moving object, whereas in this film the objects themselves never move.⁹²

According to her own statements, Mary Ellen Bute began experimenting with abstract animated designs in order to visualize music. Like Oskar Fischinger in Germany, Bute was convinced of the formal possibilities of putting abstract forms to music. She joined forces with a young industrial film cameraman, Theodore Nemeth, to produce a whole series of abstract animated films. Through high-contrast lighting, color, and multiple exposures, Bute produced an effective method of creating animation in the third dimension, the length of the individual shots and their internal movement worked out with mathematical precision to visualize the accompanying music.⁹³

Another pioneer of abstract animation was Francis Lee, who began his experimental work in 1939.⁹⁴ His *1941* is an emotionally powerful rendering of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, presented in completely abstract form as an animated action painting.⁹⁵ An egg is smashed, red color dissolves over a globe floating in blue paint. Broken electric light bulbs litter the phantasmagoric landscape. Lee painted directly on glass, shooting from underneath to a light source above, giving the film's color a strong vibrancy, which is heightened by the extreme saturation of the colors, an effect made possible through Lee's use of the then-new 16mm Kodachrome film stock. As the film progresses, the primary colors of the first images give way to grays, blacks, and browns, as the world is metaphorically turned into a desolate, ashen battlefield.

While this description may seem to give the film a narrative dimension, it must be underscored that all of Lee's early films are essentially abstract, their effect based on the emotional quality of their color and shape rather than any anthropomorphic reality. This also holds true for *Le Bijou* (1946) in which diamonds, red, blue, and gold crystals, and disks seem to move through a barren landscape. The three-dimensional quality of the objects nevertheless increases their anthropomorphic quality, creating an unspoken narrative of pure cinema. *Idyll* (1948) presents a phantasmagoric underwater landscape, using water and oil colors on glass, as in *1941*. Here nature seems to be abstracted, reducing animal and vegetable life to its spiritual essence, where color rather than shape predominates. The vibrant, saturated colors of *Le Bijou* give way in *Idyll* to more pastel hues like chalk colors, the whole underscored by romantic music.

Douglass Crockwell began his experiments at approximately the same time as Lee, and both indeed enjoyed a degree of favor with the second American avant-garde.⁹⁶ In 1938 and 1939 Crockwell, who was a well-known and highly paid commercial illustrator for the *Saturday Evening Post*, produced his first animated films. Working with paint on glass, Crockwell created a series of short animated abstractions, which he later compiled into what he called *The Glens Falls Sequence* (1946).⁹⁷

Dwinell Grant began making abstract films in 1940, shortly after Lee and Crockwell.⁹⁸ His first film, *Composition 1 (Themis)* (1940), used wood, glass, and paper forms animated with a stop-motion camera. The lines, circles, and squares vary in their shape and movement, as well as in their color, which is limited to primary colors. In many respects this work resembles a constructivist painting in motion—Mondrian on the move. Yet, while the film gives a sense

of objects in motion (time), they do not seem to move through anything but a two-dimensional space, and thus lack the kinetic force of other abstract animation.

In *Composition 2 (Contrathemis)* (1941), Grant increases the sense of movement, utilizing pulsating lines that move in circular patterns and seem to breathe as they grow thick or thin.⁹⁹ In his next two films, *Composition 3* (1942) and *Composition 4* (1945), Grant began moving into an exploration of three-dimensional space. In *Composition 3* this was accomplished by using three-dimensional media—clay, wooden objects, and such. In *Composition 4* the third dimension was actually created by developing a 3-D film, which used a beam-splitter and was viewed through polaroid glasses.¹⁰⁰

It seems no accident that a number of the avant-garde filmmakers discussed here were later accepted into the pantheon of the second American avant-garde. Except for Newcombe and Bute, both of whom seemed to be tainted by commercialism, the work of these abstract animators could be subsumed under the aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism, while they simultaneously functioned as legitimate heirs to the European modernist traditions established by Hans Richter and others. For the producers of dance films, on the other hand, such a European modernist tradition was lacking.

Terpsichore on Film

One of America's earliest avant-garde films is *Danse Macabre*. Made in 1922, it was a collaboration between Francis Bruguière, film director Dudley Murphy,¹⁰¹ and the dancer Adolph Bolm. While at first glance *Danse Macabre* seems to be a simple recording of a ballet set to Saint-Saëns' music, the use of animation in its first scene and of multiple exposures to visualize death's threatening presence bespeak its experimental intentions. At the same time, its final romantic image of love conquering death once again reflects male subjectivity.

Another American avant-garde filmmaker in Europe was Stella Simon. A photographer, Simon had studied with Clarence White in New York in the mid-1920s but, as a woman, was unable to receive any training in motion picture photography. She thus resolved to move to Berlin, where she entered the Technische Hochschule in 1926.¹⁰² There she shot *Hände/Hands*, subtitled "the life and loves of the gentler sex."¹⁰³ Unlike Viktor Albrecht Blum's avant-garde documentary of 1928, which shows hands at work, Simon's film is a narrative of hands, dancing through expressionist-influenced miniature sets.¹⁰⁴ The film was successfully presented in Europe and in the United States, although its earnings were never enough to allow Simon to make another film.¹⁰⁵

The film opens with hands waving in front of black velvet, the implication being that these hands and arms will be synecdoches for whole bodies.¹⁰⁶ In the highly abstracted scenes that follow, the viewer sees the mating of male and female, a "coquette" enticing a group of males, a wild party, an attempted suicide through drowning, and a final reconciliation and celebration of life—in short, a story of a *ménage à trois*. Utilizing abstract sets, which have been reduced to constructivist triangles, squares, and circles, the film's spaces are further limited by numerous variously shaped masks. The film's abstract quality is further strengthened by Marc Blitzstein's abstract twelve-tone music.

Yet, at the same time, the film presents a "melodrama" of female subjectivity and *angst*. It is the drama of a woman who is afraid to lose her mate to another, more desirable woman, the melodrama of a woman who is continually playing out masochistic fantasies of defeat and

self-mutilation, ever fearful that she is no longer the object of man's desire. The film's narrative closure, reproducing in its ballet of reunification a Hollywood ending, inscribes woman's desire for sexual harmony, and is indicative of Simon's romantic American approach.

While *Hands* can only be classified as a dance film in the widest sense, *Underground Printer* (1934) seems to have been more of a collaboration between filmmakers and dancers, although with a strong political intent. The film was directed by the photographer Thomas Bouchard in conjunction with the dancer/choreographer John Bovington, while Lewis Jacobs was responsible for photography and editing. Bouchard, who was best known for his photographic portraits of theater personalities, probably brought Jacobs and Bovington together. Bovington appeared in a solo dance in the film, while Jacobs took

the grotesque movements and broke them up into their essences—mounting his sound and image with percussion shocks, throwing into startling relief the gyrations of the dancer as he spins and whirls as Goebbels, explodes as Goering, and exults as the Communist underground printer preparing his anti-Nazi leaflets.¹⁰⁷

According to an ancient distribution catalogue, this was to be interpreted as “an artistic attack on the type of machine made thinking which produced the Nazi menace in Europe.”¹⁰⁸

Another early avant-garde filmmaker to attempt the motion picture visualization of dance was Sara Arledge. Like so many filmmakers in this period, Arledge had gone to art school and worked as a painter before beginning her film experiments. In 1936 she bought a 16mm Cine-Kodak Special, taught her husband how to use it, and began experimenting with multiple exposures, negative and positive images, fish-eye lenses, and colored filters.¹⁰⁹ Her first film, *Introspection*, was begun in 1941 but not completed until 1946.¹¹⁰ It consisted of a series of multiple exposures of male dancers: their heads, legs, arms, moving in layered images.¹¹¹ In one sequence a body is wrapped in rags, much like a mummy, the body moving in a slow, dreamlike manner around its own axis. These images are intercut with negative images of hands reaching out and red-tinted images of a faceless body exercising. The repetition of movements, forms, and visual motifs makes the film almost structuralist in its concern with the cinema's formal applications. Unfortunately, as was often the case with avant-garde filmmakers, this beautifully conceived and mystical film was to remain Arledge's only completed film. A second film, *Phantasmagoria* (1946), shot on 16mm Kodachrome and “presenting some of the manifold possibilities of the motion picture as a medium for the dance,” was apparently never completed.¹¹²

Ironically, none of these early dance films, except for the work of Sara Arledge, entered the canon of the second American avant-garde, even though the dance tradition would continue to have its supporters in the coming years, with many dancers (Maya Deren, Shirley Clarke, Kathy Rose) becoming avant-garde filmmakers. Again one might hypothesize that it was the lyrical and romantic elements in these earlier films that made them less fashionable. The same can be said for the experimental narratives produced by the first American avant-garde.

Short Stories

Not all painters experimenting with avant-garde film made abstract animations. One painter at the edge of Hollywood, both geographically and spiritually, was Boris Deutsch, who in

1925 directed a one-reel experimental narrative film, *Lullaby*.¹¹³ Shot in 35mm, *Lullaby* was apparently produced with the participation of the Russian exile community in Los Angeles, including Deutsch's wife, Riva, in the female lead, and the actor Michael Visaroff.¹¹⁴ Opening on a painted miniature scene of Russian Orthodox church steeples, composed diagonally, almost abstractly, the film cuts to the sitting room of a Russian Kulak and family, drinking and eating happily. In a corner a (Jewish?) maid is rocking the baby of the family. The peasant patriarch mercilessly mistreats the maid, who, as a result, suffers from horrible dreams, including one in which she kills the child. After a brutal beating, the maid flees into the night. In the last image she is happily lying in the arms of an accordion player who had earlier shown her a moment of kindness.

This highly elliptical narrative, shot in two scenes on a very minimal set, is articulated without resorting to any intertitles, while its flashes of interior vision situate the film in the realm of the experimental. These very short shots consist of some of Deutsch's abstract paintings, which spin around their own central axis, denoting the subjective state of the female protagonist. In another scene, reminiscent of *Caligari*, Deutsch's high-contrast paintings of masks dissolve in and out in a subjective vision of paranoia. In fact, the power of the visions, and their stark abstraction and horrific anguish contrasted with the relative realism of the rest of the film, create a narrative excess that the film's final image of tranquility cannot contain.

One of the most important avant-garde filmmakers to come directly out of the Hollywood film industry was Robert Florey. In 1927 he produced *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra* with Slavko Vorkapich. While simultaneously continuing to work on Hollywood film productions, Florey went on to produce *The Love of Zero* (1928) together with William Cameron Menzies, *Johann the Coffin Maker* (1928), and a city film, *Skyscraper Symphony* (1929).¹¹⁵ The first two films in particular featured expressionistic sets (made almost exclusively in miniature and photographed with live actors through mirrors) and an elliptical narrative.

In 1928 Dr. James Sibley Watson, Jr., collaborated with Melville Webber on *The Fall of the House of Usher*, possibly one of the most highly regarded amateur film productions of its day: the chairman of the National Board of Review considered the film to be “the most outstanding contribution to motion pictures as an art form since *Caligari*.”¹¹⁶

Watson's second avant-garde film, *It Never Happened/Tomatoes Another Day* (1930), is an unique example of dadaist aesthetics in early sound cinema: a minimalist and virtually expressionless acting style on a claustrophobic set characterizes the melodramatic love triangle. Although it seems extremely modern to today's eye, Watson considered the film a failure and suppressed its existence; it was recently discovered in the nitrate holdings of his estate.¹¹⁷

Another collaboration with Melville Webber, *Lot in Sodom*, was also shot in Watson's Prince Street studio, using a homemade optical printer.¹¹⁸ It premiered at the Little Carnegie Theatre on 25 December 1933, along with Josef Berne's *Dawn to Dawn*, and continued to play in theaters throughout the 1930s and 1940s, becoming in the process probably the most commercially successful avant-garde film of the era.

Edgar Allan Poe was the inspiration for three major avant-garde works in 1928: “The Fall of the House of Usher” was adapted by both Watson and the French experimentalist Jean Epstein, while “The Tell-Tale Heart” was the literary source for an avant-garde short of the same name. Charles Klein's *The Tell-Tale Heart* was another very low budget off-Hollywood production reprising German Expressionist cinema. It is considered one of the most successful art films of the period.¹¹⁹

The film opens with a closeup of a pair of eyes superimposed over a handwritten text from Poe's opening paragraph. The film relates an insane young man's killing of an old man, and his eventual mental breakdown and confession to a pair of detectives questioning him. Two particularly interesting devices are the use of words burned into the image (similar to *Caligari*), and the intercutting of single-frame images flashing back to the murder to illustrate the subjective state of the protagonist. Another expressionist device is the extremely distorted closeup of the killer, as seen through a magnifying glass by the detectives, hoping to discover "guilt in his eyes." It is in fact the closeup of the old man's eyes and the superimposition of an image of a beating hammer that become visual tropes for Poe's literary device of the victim's beating heart.

Another experimental narrative, produced by the Cinema Crafters of Philadelphia, Lewis Jacobs, Jo Gerson, and Louis Hirshman, was *Mobile Composition No. 1* (1928), a film that apparently has not survived. Jacobs describes it as a story about a love affair in which

significant details, contrast lighting, double exposures, and large close-ups depicted the growing strain of disturbed emotions. In one of the scenes, in which the boy and girl were dancing together, the camera assumed a subjective viewpoint and showed the spinning walls and moving objects of the studio as seen by the boy, emphasizing a specific statuette to suggest the boy's inner disturbance.¹²⁰

Gerson and Hirshman, who were both trained as painters,¹²¹ apparently had a falling out with Jacobs over the conception of their film, because they decided to remake *Mobile Composition* without actors, calling it *The Story of a Nobody* (1930). In the film they attempted to recreate the subjective views of the two lovers, defining them metaphorically through objects, rather than actions. Utilizing a symphonic structure, the film consisted of numerous closeups, which were edited together through dissolves, laps, and quick cutting, depending on the rhythm of the scene.¹²² Thus, as in *Portrait of a Young Man*, the camera's gaze becomes its own text, a direct articulation of the filmmaker's male subjectivity.

Charles Vidor's *The Bridge* was an adaptation of Ambrose Bierce's short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Vidor's film uses a flash-forward technique to visualize the escape fantasy of a World War I Austrian deserter condemned to hang, which metamorphoses into a "life-before-one's-eyes" construction, similar to Fejos' *Last Moment*. Making use of real locations and nonprofessional actors without makeup, the film's quick cutting style, a montage of fantasy and grim reality, effectively created a mixture of objectivity and inner subjectivity, stretching a few moments into a one-reel film.¹²³

Adapted by Seymour Stern,¹²⁴ Josef Berne's *Dawn to Dawn* (1933), at thirty-five minutes in length, was thought to be an "arty" featurette. It told the story of a young farm girl who comes into conflict with her authoritarian father over a young drifter, leading to the father's death of a stroke after the young man leaves. Presented in only a few scenes with a cast of unknowns without makeup, and virtually silent except for a musical score, the film's strength lay in its lyrical realism, its pastoral scenes on a real farm, which did not suppress the harsh reality of American agriculture before the age of electricity and machinery, and its explicit seduction scene. The film's central narrative conceit, the fear of strangers in a rural environment, struck a chord in the American psyche while almost self-consciously developing a lyrical realist aesthetic that nevertheless incorporated flashes of Expressionism. Eric Knight called the film "one of the most remarkable attempts at independent cinematography in America."¹²⁵

Finally, the Hollywood stills photographer Roman Freulich directed a first short, *Prisoner*, which is apparently lost, although a complete script survives.¹²⁶ *Prisoner* opened at the Filmarte in Hollywood in July 1934, and was shown successfully in various little theaters, including Baltimore's.¹²⁷ Taking its cue from the last scene of Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*, the film concerns a prisoner (played by George Sari), lost in the desert and chained to a sheriff (Jack Rockwell). He dreams of escape as his captor sleeps, then awakes to find him dead, making freedom possible, although it is clear that the desert will not allow him to escape alive. Shot in an expressionistic style, with subjective images preventing any differentiation between dream and reality, Herman Weinberg rhapsodized about the film: "The world cinema at large can only justify itself to historians when it will give imaginative young men like Freulich a chance to put their theories into practice and, perhaps, help their bit to found an authentic film language."¹²⁸

A remarkable one-reel short, *Broken Earth*, was Freulich's second experimental short narrative. The producer was Edward Spitz, who had produced Fejos' *The Last Moment* and who now planned a whole series of shorts on "Negro life" with Freulich and the African-American actor Clarence Muse.¹²⁹ *Broken Earth* related the story of a black sharecropper whose son miraculously recovers from a fever through the father's fervent prayer. Shot on a farm in the South with nonprofessional actors (except for Clarence Muse), the film's early scenes focused in a highly realistic manner on the incredible hardship of black farmers, with plowing scenes as powerful as those in *Dawn to Dawn*. The latter half demonstrated the centrality of the religious experience for a rural African-American population.¹³⁰

It seems to be no coincidence that the experimental narratives discussed here not only attempted to expand aesthetically beyond the narrow confines of Hollywood classical narrative, but were also produced by amateurs or film technicians at the fringes of the film industry who were European-born or educated. Ironically, in the cases of Deutsch, Florey, Klein, Vidor, Berne, and Freulich, their European background and extremely low budgets conspired against what was probably their primary goal—breaking into the commercial film industry—and led them inadvertently to produce experimental narratives that would be valorized in the "art cinema" market. At the same time, these films, like those of the Europhile James Sibley Watson, are not simply copies of European art films. Their thematic concerns are for the most part American, their stylistic sensibilities a mixture of sophistication and naiveté, their aesthetics against the grain of Hollywood narrative. In contrast to these serious narratives, the first American avant-garde also developed a more satirical form of narrative.

Parodies as Avant-garde Critique

While the American avant-garde film of the 1920s seemed to focus more on abstract and formalist experimentation, moving from the modernist vision of Strand and Sheeler's *Manhatta* to the new realist abstraction of Steiner's *H₂O*, and from Newcombe's animated dreamscapes in *The Enchanted City* to Florey's expressionist *The Love of Zero*, the 1930s avant-garde seemed, in general, to gravitate toward metaphor and parody, possibly a sign of increasingly difficult times.

In contrast to the earnest metaphors of Watson, Webber, and others, parody was the preferred genre of Theodore Huff, another prominent ACL member, who in the early 1930s directed 16mm spoofs of Hollywood genre films. His first two productions, *Hearts of the West*

(1931) and *Little Geezer* (1932), starred children, giving the films an ambiguous sexuality and implicating the subject in the director's slightly perverse gaze, although ostensibly both films merely imitated the conventions, stereotypical characters, and naive plots of silent film.

Mr. Motorboat's Last Stand (1933), Theodore Huff and John Flory's 16mm silent Depression comedy, is a much less self-conscious work, an ironic comment on America's inability to deal with the economic catastrophe of the 1930s. *Mr. Motorboat* is, in fact, a humorous allegory on America's economic rise and fall, employing visual metaphor in the manner of medieval morality plays. Images communicate their meaning quite literally, like the bursting bubble that refers to the "exploding prosperity bubble" of the 1920s. After working as a film curator at the Museum of Modern Art, Huff returned to filmmaking in the late 1940s to produce, in collaboration with Kent Munson, *The Stone Children* (1948) and *The Uncomfortable Man* (1948).¹³¹

The photographer Ralph Steiner, who had made abstract avant-garde films in the late 1920s, contributed his own parody of American economic life with *Panther Woman of the Needle Trades, or The Lovely Life of Little Lisa* (1931), made in collaboration with John Flory.¹³² The film opens with Jehovah creating the world out of a test tube and proceeds to present a short history of the universe. The birth of Elizabeth Hawes (1903) introduces the real-life heroine, whose career from child seamstress to Parisian designer of *haute couture*, via a Vassar education, is recounted.¹³³ Reminiscent of Robert Florey's *Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra* in terms of its art direction and elliptical narrative style, *Panther Woman* is a parody of the all-American success story, a young woman's fantasy of a glamorous career in an age of diminishing possibilities. Steiner also collaborated on *Pie in the Sky* with Elia Kazan, Irving Lerner, and Molly Day Thatcher.

While most avant-garde films discussed in this section are parodies of mainstream commercial cinema, two films can be seen as parodies of the avant-garde itself. William Vance's *Hearts of the Age* (1934) was, according to Orson Welles, a parody of *Blood of a Poet*.¹³⁴ Vance shot the film on 16mm reversal, after completing a parody of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in 1932. The film opens with a positive and negative image of a bell ringing in a bell-tower. There follows a series of visual non-sequiturs: an old woman ringing a bell, an angel carrying a globe, Death stalking corridors, a Keystone-like cop, a hanged man, a hand beckoning from the grave. Like earlier avant-garde films, *Hearts of the Age* privileges obtuse camera angles, expressionist lighting, and narrative ellipses, utilizing these avant-garde techniques both seriously and with tongue in cheek.¹³⁵

Near the end of the 1930s, Roger Barlow, Harry Hay, and LeRoy Robbins produced their own parody of the avant-garde, *Even As You and I*. The film was shot for the most part in Robbins' home, using leftover film scrounged from the film studios.¹³⁶ The three filmmakers began the project after *Liberty* magazine announced a short film contest sponsored by MGM's "Pete Smith Specialties" series. The contest in fact became the frame for the film's narrative.¹³⁷ Playfully ironic, almost dadaist in construction, the film narrated the attempts of three unemployed young men to make a film for an amateur film contest. After rejecting numerous "boy meets girl" script ideas, the three discover an article on surrealism and proceed to construct a script randomly out of paper scraps. The film within a film is an anarchistic montage of images, which acknowledges its debt to surrealism, Eugene Atget, Donald Duck, Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, Hans Richter's *Ghosts Before Breakfast*, Sergei Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, René Clair's *Entr'acte*, and Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. It ends with the three would-be film artists realizing they have missed the deadline for the contest, and then attempting to invent a useful gadget for another competition. Shot silent, the film was

performed with selections from George Gershwin's *An American in Paris* and, in the second half, Sergei Prokofiev's *Love of Three Oranges*.¹³⁸ Almost postmodern in its use of quotation, *Even As You and I* comments on the pressure of originality when a canon of avant-garde works has already been established, and to the difficulty of becoming a filmmaker and surviving economically in a Depression economy.

As is not surprising in a worldwide Depression, most of these satires have a political dimension, an implicit or explicit critique of social relations in American society and the inability of the economy to meet even the most basic needs. Like their spiritual predecessor, *Entr'acte*, they also question the role of the artist and the intellectual in a society geared toward profit. Unlike European models, though, they are willing to use metaphor overtly, almost naively, in the interest of social critique, their signifiers unambiguously literal. For the surrealist wing of the early American avant-garde, on the other hand, ambiguity is a virtue.

The Symbolic and the Surrealist

Best known as a painter and sculptor, Joseph Cornell produced his first film, *Rose Hobart*, in 1936.¹³⁹ A nineteen-minute (at silent speed) re-editing of images from Universal Pictures' fiction feature *East of Borneo* (1931), with a few snippets from scientific instructional films thrown in, Cornell's film, like his famous collage boxes, is essentially a creation out of *objets trouvés*. Completely eliminating any semblance of plot and dialogue, Cornell's montage of the ostensible heroine, hero, and villain has them moving in slow motion through empty rooms, caressing curtains, reacting to unseen events, never meeting. Their looks lead nowhere, their erotic desires careen into a void, while the audience is left with a mystery, as the film's purple-tinted eroticism masks unfulfilled desire. In keeping with the surrealist creed, Cornell subverts not only the standard conventions of Hollywood filmmaking, but also viewer identification, draining the gaze of meaning.

Jerome Hill,¹⁴⁰ later known for his film animation, began his career in the late 1920s, when he purchased a 16mm Cine-Kodak Special to shoot *The Fortune Teller* (1932)¹⁴¹ in a village in southern France. True to the title, the film has mystical overtones, its narrative constructed from seemingly unconnected images: a young woman hanging wash, a walk in the surf, a consultation with a gypsy fortune teller, a man rising up out of the sea. Apart from their pictorial beauty, the film's images seem to hold some primordial meaning connected to fertility rites, to mystical love and romantic fate, yet they remain ambiguous, like the old gypsy's fortune as visualized in the cards. The film's visual text thus constructs romantically imbued riddles that remain unsolved, the stuff of dreams.

Born in Merion, Pennsylvania, in 1905, the painter and avant-garde filmmaker Emlen Etting graduated from St. George's School and Harvard (1928), then moved to Paris to study painting with André Lhote. He returned to Pennsylvania in 1932, where he started teaching art at the Tyler School of Temple University and making films, including *Oramunde* (1933), *Poem 8* (1933), and *Laureate* (1940), the last a Kodachrome film in collaboration with his wife, Gloria.

Being also a sometime poet and translator of verse by Paul Valery, Etting combined his visual and literary senses in his films, creating film poems "wherein the picture, their sequence and development are used as in a poem as opposed to the customary story form. . . . In the film poem, music, the dance, the theater and the artist will all work together."¹⁴² Accompanied by Alexander Scriabin's *Poem of Fire* and Gustav Holst's *Saturn* cycle, *Oramunde* presents (mostly

in operatic long shots) a mythological Melissande dancing/walking through woods and ocean grottos, searching for her dead lover, Pelleas, and the lost wedding ring of her king and husband, eventually crossing the river Styx in a rowboat with a black-hooded man. *Poem 8* uses a moving, reeling "subjective camera" to signify a male gaze, erotically enticed by several women. The viewer ultimately participates in the murder of a seductress before fleeing through city streets.¹⁴³ *Laureate* demonstrates the hand of the painter in its spectacular use of still-lives and complementary colors, as it metaphorically visualizes a writer's struggle to create poetry by having him (Etting himself) chase and confront various muses (played in classical Greek garb by Gloria Etting and friends of the couple) before receiving his laurels.

Christopher Baughman Young, the son of the landscape artist Charles Morris Young, made his first avant-garde film, *Object Lesson*, in 1941. An avid skier, explorer, and mountain climber, Young was apparently wealthy enough, like Jerome Hill, to finance the film himself. Billing it as "America's first surrealist film," he took over his own distribution after having "most unsatisfactory" dealings with a business partner.¹⁴⁴

Shot in 35mm, *Object Lesson* begins with the statement: "Let us consider objects. For they tell the story of life. There is nothing without meaning—and the combination of things make new meanings that are too complicated to explain." The film itself opens with a series of natural landscapes in which there appear various objects: the heads and masks of Greek statues, swords, shields, violins, tennis rackets. These objects have been strewn about, out of place in the lush vegetation, creating a surrealist image of incongruence: nature and the detritus of man. In the next sequence, Young presents documentary images of the Empire State Building, hydroelectric plants, and garbage, followed by a metaphorical rendering of war. There is no dialogue or commentary, just an array of musical excerpts, including liturgical music, industrial sounds, Eastern European folksongs, and electronic music.

Virtually all the images are static and extremely well composed, like photographs. This lack of motion or action heightens the film's surrealist aspect, allowing the viewer to contemplate both the incongruence of the moment and the juxtaposition of images in a syntactical construction. According to Young, "the objects must first be looked at as objects before they can be thought of as symbols," allowing viewers "to imagine their own story."¹⁴⁵ The filmmaker interprets the film's ending, where statues and objects "just have a good time being themselves and not representing anything," as a state where destruction and war have given way to objects and nature without meaning. Thus, Young wants to have the film read two ways: as a surrealist construct (*sans raison*), and as a metaphorical and poetic vision. His film also stresses the conflict between man and nature, articulating ultimately its belief in nature as a dominant and abiding force.

Lacking any kind of narrative cohesion, these seemingly diverse films nevertheless are evidence of authorial voices that foreground the subjectivity of the artist. There seems to be in the works of Hill, Etting, and Young a romantic urge to understand the mysteries of nature, and possibly to escape into a universe in which a natural order once again holds sway. In such a world the role of the artist is productively defined, his creation not a throwaway object of civilization, as in *Object Lesson*. Even Cornell's conscious deconstruction of narrative in the interest of subverting classical modes of address creates a new narrative out of the void, one in which the artist is central. The subtext in all of these surrealist films is avant-garde practice itself.

Notes

- 1 A first, admittedly incomplete bio-filmography of American avant-garde cinema before Maya Deren (1943) can be found in Jan-Christopher Horak, *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-garde 1919–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995) 363–382.
- 2 Jonas Mekas, "The Experimental Film in America," *Film Culture* 1, no. 3 (May–June 1955): 16.
- 3 Arthur L. Gale, "Amateur Clubs," *Amateur Movie Makers* 3, no. 2 (February 1928): 100.
- 4 Herman Weinberg, *A Manhattan Odyssey: A Memoir* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1982), p. 28.
- 5 Roy W. Winton, "For the Love of It," *National Board of Review Magazine* 3, no. 7 (July 1927): 4.
- 6 Herman Weinberg, "A Paradox of the Photoplay," *Amateur Movie Makers* 4, no. 1 (January 1929): 866.
- 7 Hans Richter provides a perfect case in point. While his early "avantgarde" films were initially produced as advertising films or prologues to commercial features, they were later exhibited and discussed by Richter and others as pure art films. See Jan-Christopher Horak, "Discovering Pure Cinema: Avant-garde Film in the 1920s," *Afterimage* 8, nos. 1–2 (Summer 1980): 4–7.
- 8 See Patricia Zimmermann, "The Amateur, the Avant-Garde, and Ideologies of Art," *Journal of Film and Video* 38, nos. 3–4 (Summer/Fall 1986).
- 9 C. Adolph Glassgold, "THE FILMS: Amateur or Professional?" *The Arts* 15, no. 1 (January 1929): 56.
- 10 See review of *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra*, *Variety*, 20 June 1928; see also Weinberg, "A Paradox of the Photoplay," 866; *Close Up* 2, no. 6 (June 1928): 76.
- 11 See *Close Up* 7, no. 6 (December 1930): 454.
- 12 See "Honor Without Peace in Hollywood," *New York Times*, 5 April 1936, Sec. X.
- 13 Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: Dutton, 1967), p. 220.
- 14 "Cranking Your Own," *National Board of Review Magazine* 2, no. 6 (June 1927): 3.
- 15 See letter, Arthur Gale (Amateur Cinema League consultant) to Marion Gleason, 21 November 1928, Gleason file, George Eastman House (GEH), Rochester, N.Y.
- 16 The film was shown at the Cameo Theatre in New York. See *New York Times*, 26 January 1927, review of *Slums of Berlin*. No print or negative is known to survive.
- 17 See Arthur Gale, "Oil Film," *Amateur Movie Makers* 5, no. 10 (October 1930): 640; see also "Homemade Locale," *Amateur Movie Makers* 4, no. 12 (December 1929): 797. No trace of the filmmakers has surfaced.
- 18 Founded by the playwright Lajos N. Egri, Herman Weinberg, the stage designer Robert van Rosen, and the amateur cameraman Merle Johnson, the group failed actually to produce a film, although Weinberg's *City Symphony* (working title *Cosmopolis*) was apparently scheduled for release through Eccentric. See "Expressionism," *Amateur Movie Makers* 4, no. 8 (August 1929): 526; see also *Close Up* 5, no. 4 (October 1929): 338–339.
- 19 *Amateur Movie Makers* 3, no. 2 (February 1929): 100.
- 20 Frederick Kiesler, "100 Per Cent Cinema," *Close Up* 3, no. 2 (August 1928): 39–40.
- 21 *Amateur Movie Makers* 3, no. 2 (February 1928): 100.
- 22 See O. Spearing, "A Valuable Service," *Exceptional Photoplays* 2 (March 1922); John Hutchins, "L'Enfant Terrible: The Little Cinema Movement," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 13, no. 9 (September

- 1929): 696. See also Michael Budd, "The National Board of Review and the Early Art Cinema in New York: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as Affirmative Culture," *Cinema Journal* 26, no. 1 (Fall 1986): 7–8.
- 23 Quoted in Hutchins, "L'Enfant Terrible," p. 697.
- 24 See Marguerite Tazelaar, "The Story of the First Little Film Theatre," *Amateur Movie Makers* 3, no. 7 (July 1928): 441.
- 25 Alfred B. Kuttner, "The Little Motion Picture Theatre," *National Board of Review Magazine* 1, no. 2 (May–June 1926): 3.
- 26 The full text of Gould's speech was published as "The Little Theatre Movement in the Cinema," *National Board of Review Magazine* 1, no. 5 (September–October 1926): 4–5. See also a report on the speech in "Special Theatres Urged for Artistic Pictures," *New York Times*, 10 October 1926, Sec. VIII.
- 27 "The Little Cinema Marches On," *New York Times*, 6 February 1938.
- 28 "The Fifth Avenue Playhouse," *National Board of Review Magazine* 1, no. 6 (November 1926): 4. According to Weinberg, the day-to-day operations of the 5th Avenue Playhouse were handled by Ed Sullivan, Joe Balaben, and Jean Dubany, with Weinberg serving as publicity director. See Weinberg, *Manhattan Odyssey*, p. 28.
- 29 *New York Times*, 6 February 1938.
- 30 "More About the Little Theatre," *National Board of Review Magazine* 2, no. 11 (November 1927): 5.
- 31 "Hollywood Notes," *Close Up* 3, no. 1 (July 1928): 74. While there were reports of the closure of the Filmarte in April 1929, the theater did continue screenings. See "Hollywood Notes," *Close Up* 6, no. 4 (April 1929): 78.
- 32 The Baltimore "Little Theatre" was founded by the management of the 5th Avenue Playhouse, and Weinberg was sent down to Baltimore to become the new manager. See Weinberg, *Manhattan Odyssey*, pp. 35–36, 47.
- 33 Letter, Arthur Gale to Marion Gleason, 21 November 1928, Gleason file, GEH.
- 34 Kiesler, "100 Per Cent Cinema," pp. 35–38; see also "Four Screen Theatre Being Built Here," *New York Times*, 9 December 1928, Sec. II.
- 35 "The Motion Picture: A Calendar of Progress," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 13, no. 9 (September 1929): 644.
- 36 See program brochure for twentieth anniversary of the Little Theatre (1929–1949), published by the Civic Association of Rochester, vertical file, GEH.
- 37 See inaugural program of the Eighth Street Film Guild Cinema, 1 February 1929, vertical file, New York Public Library, Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center, New York.
- 38 Brian Taves gives an extensive listing of the playdates of Florey's avant-garde films in Chapter 4 of Jan-Christopher Horak, *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-garde 1919–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).
- 39 Harry A. Potamkin, *Close Up* 6, no. 2 (February 1930): 111.
- 40 *Close Up* 7, no. 6 (December 1930): 454.
- 41 Hutchins, "L'Enfant Terrible," p. 694.
- 42 Lincoln Kirstein, "Experimental Films," *Arts Weekly* 1, no. 3 (25 March 1932): 52.
- 43 See "Close-Ups," *Amateur Movie Makers* 7, no. 4 (April 1932): 179. See also Elena Pinto Simon and David Stirk, *Jay Leyda: A Chronology*, published in honor of Leyda's memory by the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, December 1987.

- 44 Russell Campbell, "Radical Cinema in the 1930s: The Film and Photo League," reprinted in *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter Cinema*, ed. Peter Steven (New York: Praeger, 1985), p. 131.
- 45 Interview with Florence Robbins and Harry Hay, 24 May 1991, Escondido, Calif.
- 46 See William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 36–38.
- 47 Letter, Arthur Gale to Marion Gleason, 10 December 1927, Gleason file, GEH.
- 48 Letter, James W. Moore to Frank Stauffacher, 28 January 1947, "Art in Cinema" files, Pacific Film Archives (PFA), Berkeley, Calif.
- 49 The panel of judges for the contest was made up of industry members and private individuals, including King Vidor, James R. Quirk (*Photoplay*), George Pierce Baker (Yale), and Wilton A. Barrett (National Board of Review). See "H₂O," *National Board of Review Magazine* 4, no. 10 (December 1929): 12.
- 50 Letter, Robert Florey to Frank Stauffacher, 27 February 1947, "Art in Cinema" files, PFA.
- 51 Letter, Symon Gould to Frank Stauffacher, 1 March 1950, "Art in Cinema" files, PFA. Even in the late 1940s, the field of avant-garde film distribution had not changed substantially. Thus, Stauffacher and Amos Vogel at Cinema 16 in New York could not fall back on established distribution outlets for avant-garde film, but were dependent on personal contacts to find films and filmmakers, usually borrowing directly from the makers for about ten dollars per film.
- 52 Kenneth MacPherson, "As Is," *Close Up* 2, no. 6 (June 1928): 5.
- 53 "Experimental Film in America," *Experimental Cinema* 1, no. 5 (1934): 54.
- 54 See e.g. review of *Lot in Sodom* by James Shelley Hamilton, *National Board of Review Magazine* 9, no. 2 (February 1934): 14–15.
- 55 Louis Hirshman, a.k.a. Hershell Louis, donated an original nitrate print to the museum in 1947. It was destroyed through decomposition by 1956.
- 56 Kirk Bond, "Lot in Sodom," *Film Art* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1934): 69.
- 57 See Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave 1915–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- 58 See *Film und Foto der zwanziger Jahre*, ed. Ute Eskildsen and Jan-Christopher Horak (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1979). See also Horak, "Discovering Pure Cinema," pp. 4–7.
- 59 Hans Richter, *Filmgegner von heute, Filmfreunde von morgen* (Halle/Saale: Verlag Wilhelm Knapp, 1929).
- 60 Mekas, "Experimental Film in America," p. 15.
- 61 P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943–1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).
- 62 Dana Polan, *The Political Language of Film and the Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), p. 64.
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 Bart Testa, *Back and Forth: Early Cinema and the Avant-Garde* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1992), p. 19.
- 65 Long considered lost, a print survives at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), but this version of Flaherty's seems to have been seriously compromised by re-editing. Directed and photographed by Flaherty, originally in two reels, the film was cut down to one reel by John D. Pearmain, the business manager of the film's financiers, Mrs. Ada de Acosta

- Root and Col. Breckenridge, for its New York release at the Roxy Theatre. See Herman G. Weinberg, *Film Index Series*, No. 6—Robert Flaherty (London: British Film Institute, 1946).
- 66 See Arthur Calder-Marshall, *The Innocent Eye: The Life of Robert Flaherty* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 122.
- 67 Quoted in Lewis Jacobs, "Experimental Film in America (Part 1)," *Hollywood Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1947–1948): 116. See also Wolfgang Klaue and Jay Leyda, eds., *Robert Flaherty* (East Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1964), pp. 210–211.
- 68 Before he began production of *A Bronx Morning*, Jay Leyda articulated his ideas on filming urban landscapes in "Tips on Topicals," *Amateur Movie Makers* 6, no. 1 (January 1931): 13–14, 39.
- 69 MOMA has preserved the original negative, which was a full-aperture silent negative, indicating that Browning had originally intended the film to be silent. See *Travelling* 56 (Fall 1979).
- 70 A still from the film was reproduced in *Amateur Movie Makers* 7, no. 3 (March 1932): 103.
- 71 *City Symphony* was first shown at the Little Theatre in Philadelphia in June 1930. See Weinberg biographical file at MOMA, New York.
- 72 *Autumn Fire* premiered at the Europa Theatre in Baltimore in December 1931. See Weinberg biographical file, MOMA. See also Robert Haller, "Autumn Fire," in *Field of Vision* (Spring 1980), who claims that Weinberg cut up *City Symphony* for his next film. There is some reason to doubt this assertion, whose source may be Weinberg himself, since the former film was shown publicly and it is hard to imagine that a future film historian would intentionally destroy his own film a mere year after its first public screening. On the other hand, William Uricchio in Chapter 12 of Jan-Christopher Horak, *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-garde 1919–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), quotes Harry Potamkin, who may have been the impetus for Weinberg to destroy the film. The 35mm negative of *Autumn Fire* was discovered in 1993 and has been preserved at George Eastman House. MOMA has a 16mm negative and reference print.
- 73 See FIAF notes by Weinberg in *Travelling* 56 (Fall 1979). Given Weinberg's penchant for generating publicity about the production of *City Symphony*, this seems unlikely. In a letter to Frank Stauffacher, 7 March 1947, Weinberg does note that the film was shown throughout Europe and America in the early and mid-1930s, "although it was never intended for public showing, having been made primarily as a personal exercise in cutting." See "Art in Cinema" files, PFA; compare *Close Up* 5, no. 4 (Oct. 1929): 339; *Amateur Movie Makers* 5, no. 6 (June 1930): 377.
- 74 Weinberg apparently planned a sound film remake, *Rhapsody*: "A poem in picture and sound . . . the rushing emotions of two young people very much in love . . . the parallel in nature . . . the flowering of this romance to an exuberant climax." See note in *Film Art* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1934): 83.
- 75 See "Comment," *Film Art* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1934): 34.
- 76 See Robert Allen, "Cine Experimenter," *Home Movies* (1940), clipping in possession of Lewis Jacobs. Thanks to Mr. Jacobs for making his files available to me.
- 77 Letter, Lewis Jacobs to Frank Stauffacher, 12 November 1946. "Art in Cinema" files, PFA. See also Manuel Komroff, "Lewis Jacobs—Explorer," *Direction* (September 1936): 8.
- 78 Jacobs described *Case History* as follows: "Most of the sound was to be INNER MONOLOGUE. . . . Realistic street sounds, remembered phrases and thoughts—all exaggerated and distorted to emphasize the stream of consciousness of one's inner—but disturbed—

- logic." See *Competition du Film Experimental* 21–27.IV.1958, ed. Jacques Ledoux (Brussels: Cinémathèque de Belgique, 1958), p. 71.
- 79 Henwar Rodakiewicz describes the film's construction in some detail in "Treatment of Sound in *The City*," in *The Movies as Medium*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), pp. 278–288.
- 80 Burkhardt went on to make numerous other portraits of his city, including *The Climate of New York* (1948), *Under the Brooklyn Bridge* (1953), *Eastside Summer* (1959), and *Default Averted* (1975).
- 81 Photographed and composed by Ralph Steiner, 16mm black-and-white, silent, 330 feet. Print preserved at MOMA.
- 82 A 35mm negative of this film (without a soundtrack) was recently discovered and has been preserved by the UCLA Film and Television Archives. Producer: Artkino; camera and editing: Jean D. Michelson; direction: M. G. MacPherson; music: Lee Zahler; special effects: Leon M. Leon; black-and-white, 945 feet.
- 83 Henwar Rodakiewicz, "Something More Than a Scenic," *Amateur Movie Makers* 7, no. 6 (June 1932): 249.
- 84 For Vorkapich's own discussion of his pioneering work in the montage field, see "Montage: A Look Into the Future with Slavko Vorkapich," *Cinema Progress* 2, no. 5 (Dec./Jan. 1937–1938): 18–22.
- 85 Originally shot in 35mm: a 16mm print (black-and-white, 340 feet) is available at MOMA.
- 86 Slavko Vorkapich made a second nature film, illustrating woods and wildlife in the style of *Moods of the Sea*, and utilizing Richard Wagner's *Forest Murmurs*. The film was apparently produced for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, but probably never distributed. See letter, Slavko Vorkapich to Stauffacher, 29 October 1950, "Art in Cinema" files, PFA.
- 87 *Prelude to Spring* (1946). Conceived, photographed, and produced by John Hoffman. Production associates: Bror Lansing, Ray Olsen; optical printing: Howard Anderson. 35mm print, 610 feet, at MOMA.
- 88 Using the same "Newcombe process," Newcombe shot a second film, *The Sea of Dreams* (1923). Born in Waltham, Mass., in 1894, Warren Newcombe worked for over thirty years as head of the special-effects department at MGM, but also had a career as a painter with a series of one-man exhibitions in the late 1920s and 1930s. See Newcombe entry in *Who Was Who in American Art*, ed. Peter Hastings Falk (Niadison, Conn.: Soundview Press, 1985), p. 447; see also *The 1938–1939 Motion Picture Almanac* (New York: Quigley Publishing, 1938), p. 561; William Moritz, "Visual Music and Film-As-An-Art in California Before 1950," in *On the Edge of America: California Modernist Art, 1900–1950*, Paul Karlstrom and Ann Karlstrom, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- 89 The film was distributed by the Educational Film Exchange. A print of the film survives at MOMA, and a nitrate original was recently discovered in Argentina, where it was apparently also distributed. According to the credits, the film was presented by E. W. Hammons and produced by Newcombe, "by special arrangement with Howard Estabrook."
- 90 For a contemporary review see Myron M. Stearns, "The Art of Suggested Motion," *Arts and Decoration* 12, no. 3 (July 1922): 191, 221.
- 91 See James L. Enyeart, *Bruguière: His Photographs and His Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 85–93.
- 92 Stills from the film were published by Bruguière and Mercurius in *Architectural Review* (March 1930). A 35mm print has been preserved at MOMA.

- 93 For a general introduction to Bute's work, see *Experimental Animation: An Illustrated Anthology*, ed. Robert Russett and Cecile Starr (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976), pp. 102–105.
- 94 A student of Hans Hoffman at the National Academy of Design, Lee finished his first film, 1941, shortly after Pearl Harbor. After spending the next four years in uniform as a combat motion picture photographer, Lee completed *Le Bijou* in 1946, followed by *Idyll* (1948). See Russett and Starr, eds., *Experimental Animation*, pp. 114–115.
- 95 Completed on 16mm Kodachrome in December 1941, the four-minute film has been preserved by Anthology Film Archives.
- 96 See Arthur Knight, "Self-Expression," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 27 May 1950, pp. 38–40.
- 97 The films were acquired by MOMA and shown at the "Art in Cinema" series in 1946, at which time, having just moved to Glens Falls, New York, he christened one group of animations *The Glens Falls Sequence*, "in lieu of any better name." See letter, Douglass Crockwell to Frank Stauffacher, 31 August 1946, "Art in Cinema" files, PFA.
- 98 Educated at the Dayton Art Institute and the National Academy of Design in New York (like Crockwell), Grant had been an abstract painter since 1933. See Russett and Starr, eds., *Experimental Animation*, p. 111.
- 99 All of Grant's films are available at Anthology Film Archives.
- 100 See Dwinell Grant, "Film Notes to Compositions 1–5," in Russett and Starr, eds., *Experimental Animation*, p. 112.
- 101 Murphy went on to make *Ballet Mécanique* in Paris with Fernand Léger, before eventually returning to the United States to work at the fringes of Hollywood, where he produced off-beat, if not exactly experimental, work. See William Moritz's chapter in Chapter 3 of Jan-Christopher Horak, *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-garde 1919–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). A 35mm print has been preserved at GEH.
- 102 Louis M. Simon, "Stella Simon and Her Film, *Hands*," manuscript (1989), Simon files, MOMA.
- 103 The official credits list Miklós Bándy as director, Leopold Kutzleb (photographer), and the composer, Marc Blitzstein. The film's original length was 609 meters. A 16mm print is preserved at MOMA. See also Simon file, MOMA, which includes letter from Louis Simon (Stella's son) to Ron Magliozzi.
- 104 According to Louis Simon his mother was aware of but never saw the Blum film. Letter, L. Simon to J.-C. Horak, 16 October 1989.
- 103 First shown in Berlin in September 1927, the film was later screened at an all-night soiree of the "Novembergruppe" (16 February 1929), which included Man Ray's *Emak Bakia*, music by George Antheil, a performance of Negro spirituals, and a boxing match.
- 106 See Oswell Blakeston, "Hands," *Close Up* 5, no. 2 (August 1929): 137. Four stills from the film were published in *Close Up* 5, no. 1 (July 1929).
- 107 See "Underground Printer," *Film Art* 3, no. 9 (Autumn 1936): 28.
- 108 Film Classic Exchange, 16mm ART FILMS, catalogue, no date (presumably from the late 1940s), vertical file, GEH. Bovington, who apparently financed the film, had a falling out with the two filmmakers, because it was taken out of their hands and re-edited by him. Interview. Lewis Jacobs with J.-C. Horak. New York City, September 1989. See also letter, Eli Willis to Frank Stauffacher, 9 February 1947, "Art in Cinema" files, PFA. Prints of the film are for sale through a distributor, but were too expensive for this project.
- 109 Barbara Hammer, "Sara Kathryn Arledge," *Cinemanews* 1, no. 6 (1981): 3.
- 110 Arledge had shot three minutes in 1941, but lacked the funds to complete the film. In the summer of 1946 she shot additional footage, and premiered the film in November 1946 in Hollywood. Letter, Sara Arledge to Richard B. Foster, 9 October 1946, "Art in Film" files, PFA.
- 111 *Introspection* was planned and directed by Sara Kathryn Arledge; photography by Clyde B. Smith, Don Sykes; dancers: James Mitchell, Bill Martin, Joe Riccard, John R. Baxter; technicians: Don Littlepage, Ida Shapiro. 222 feet, 16mm, color, sound. Available through Canyon Cinema, Berkeley, Calif.
- 112 Letter, Arledge to Foster, 9 October 1946. A handwritten letter from Arledge to Frank Stauffacher, 25 August 1947, suggests that George Barrati was to write the music for her second film. "Art in Cinema" files, PFA.
- 113 Born in Lithuania in 1892, Deutsch emigrated to Los Angeles in 1919, via Berlin and Seattle, after breaking off his studies for the rabbinate. See Ralph Flint, "Boris Deutsch," *Creative Art* 8 (June 1931): 430–432; see also *Who Was Who in American Art*, 1985, p. 162.
- 114 *Lullaby's* credits list Boris Deutsch for "direction and special effects." No distributor is listed in the print. A 16mm print is stored at GEH. The film can be purchased from Murray Glass Films, Los Angeles, Calif.
- 115 A still from *Skyscraper Symphony* was reproduced in *Theatre Arts Monthly* 13, no. 9 (September 1929). No print is known to have survived in this country, although it is rumored to exist in Moscow.
- 116 See "Club Library," *Amateur Movie Makers* 4, no. 7 (July 1929).
- 117 All the films of James Sibley Watson have been preserved in 35mm from the original nitrate negatives at GEH.
- 118 The optical printer, as well as Dr. Watson's papers, can be viewed at GEH.
- 119 See "Hollywood Notes," *Close Up* 3, no. 2 (August 1928): 54. Three stills from the film are reproduced in the same issue. *The Tell-Tale Heart*, 35mm print, black-and-white, 1,825 feet, is housed at GEH. Klein was a German cameraman and director who trained at UFA (Berlin) and Emelka (Munich), before coming to America with Lee DeForest in 1923. He would go on to a short and undistinguished career in Hollywood before returning in the early 1930s to Germany, where he continued his rather mediocre filmmaking activities in the Nazified film industry. This film is somewhat of an anomaly in his *oeuvre*.
- 120 Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film*, 2d ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), p. 555.
- 121 Gerson studied art at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1920s and became an instructor there for a few years. He later worked as a puppeteer with his wife, Mary Gerson. Hirshman studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, and began his career as a painter, but eventually gravitated to three-dimensional caricatures, which have been widely exhibited.
- 122 See Harry A. Potamkin in *Close Up* 6, no. 2 (Feb. 1930): 111; see also "Modernist Film by Local Makers," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 February 1930, and unidentified clippings in Gerson file. Theatre Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia.
- 123 For a shot-by-shot analysis see *From Fiction to Film: Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"*, ed. Gerald R. Barrett and Thomas L. Erskine (Encino, Calif.: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 87–106. Vidor apparently tried unsuccessfully to get his film released for some time; finally, in 1931, it was distributed to great acclaim under a new

- title, *The Spy*. See Moritz, "Visual Music and Film-As-An-Art," p. 10. A negative without the original soundtrack has been preserved at GEH.
- 124 Seymour Stern, who later made a "career" out of writing about D. W. Griffith, was not only an editor for *Experimental Cinema*, but was also apparently involved in a number of avant-garde projects with leftist tendencies. Prior to 1932, Stern had worked for a while in Hollywood as a script doctor and second-unit director at Universal. Between 1932 and 1936, Stern worked at MGM. He directed the documentary *Imperial Valley* in 1932. See Ira H. Gallen, "Notes on a Film Historian: Seymour Stern," manuscript (1979), Stern file, MOMA, p. 2.
- 125 Quoted in *Audio-Brandon Film Catalogue* (1971), p. 444. This film, like *Lot in Sodom* and *The Spy*, was distributed by Brandon from the 1930s through the 1970s.
- 126 In the mid-1920s Freulich had joined his brother Jack Freulich as a stills photographer at Universal and remained there until 1944, when he became head of the stills department at Republic. See Judith Freulich Caditz, "Roman Freulich—Hollywood's Golden Age Portraitist," *The Rangefinder* (July 1991): 46. Thanks to Ms. Caditz for making a copy of the script for *Prisoner* available to me.
- 127 See "Notes from the Hollywood Studios," *New York Times*, 5 August 1934; *The Little magazine* 1, no. 5 (14 October 1934), program brochure for Baltimore Little Theatre, vertical files, GEH.
- 128 Herman Weinberg, "The Prisoner," *Film Art* 2, no. 5 (Winter 1934): 39.
- 129 Freulich noted that in Hollywood blacks were treated as an inferior race, useful only as "comedy relief," while he (not completely free of his own subconscious racism) perceived them to offer a "rich vein of cinematic material. Here is a race with a tragic background, though primitive and elemental, rich especially in folklore and music." See "Herman Weinberg Interviews Roman Freulich," *Film Art* 3, no. 8 (Summer 1936): 41.
- 130 The film is not mentioned by any of the standard histories of black film, and is misdated by Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black-and-white: A Source Book on Black Films* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1977), p. 272. A short review appeared in *Motion Picture Daily*, 30 March 1936. The film has been preserved by the Southwest Film/Video Archives at Southern Methodist University.
- 131 See letter, Ted Huff to Frank Stauffacher. 20 June 1949, in which Huff apologizes that his film was "not up to your standard" and demands that it be air-freighted back immediately. "Art in Cinema" files, PFA. All of Huff's films are being preserved at GEH.
- 132 The cast included Morris Carnovsky (Jehovah), Elizabeth Hawes, Julian Whittlesey, Alice Shepard, and F. Day Tuttle. 16mm print at MOMA.
- 133 Elizabeth Hawes was in fact the first American *couturière* to have collections shown in Paris. She later married Joseph Losey. See Michel Ciment, *Conversations with Losey* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 39.
- 134 Quoted in Joseph McBride, *Welles* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. 26.
- 133 A 16mm print, black-and-white, 222 feet, can be viewed at MOMA.
- 136 See Renan. *Introduction to the American Underground Film*, p. 220. Robbins was a photographer on a Works Progress Administration (WPA) Project in California that included Edward, Brett and Chan Weston, Roger Barlow, and Hy Hirsch. In some sources Hy Hirsch is listed in the credits, but the film was produced by Barlow, Hay, and Robbins, with Hirsch only appearing as an actor in two shots. Interview with Florence Robbins and Harry Hay, 23 May 1991, Escadido, Calif. See also letter, Harry Hay to J.-C. Horak, 14 September 1990. 16mm print available at MOMA.

- 137 *Even As You and I* failed to win any prizes, although it was shown at the Los Angeles Carpenters' Local Hall, along with Paul Strand's *Redes*, and screened by Fred Zinnemann for MGM executives. Interview with F. Robbins and H. Hay, 23 May 1991.
- 138 Letter, Harry Hay to Frank Stauffacher, 16 September 1949, "Art in Cinema" files, PFA. Robbins, who left a second avant-garde film uncompleted (*Suicide*, 1935–1937), and Barlow both went on to make documentaries after the demise of the WPA photography project in 1939, while Hay later worked as a trade union organizer and gay activist.
- 139 A 16mm print is preserved at Anthology Film Archives.
- 140 Born into a wealthy St. Paul family, Hill moved to Europe in 1927, where he was inspired by French surrealist films. See Jerome Hill, "Some Notes on Painting and Filmmaking," *Film Culture* 32 (Spring 1964): 31–32.
- 141 *The Fortune Teller* and *The Magic Umbrella* were incorporated *in toto* into Jerome Hill's autobiographical compilation/meditation, *Film Portrait* (1972), available through Filmmakers' Coop.
- 142 Letter, Emlen Etting to Frank Stauffacher. 26 March 1947, "Art in Cinema" files, PFA. After Etting's death, all of his films were donated to George Eastman House, where they are being preserved. For further biographical details, see obituary, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 18 July 1993.
- 143 According to Amos Vogel, *Poem 8* "retained a certain poetic vitality and verve" through its early use of the subjective camera. See letter, Amos Vogel to Frank Stauffacher, 7 June 1949, "Art in Cinema" files, PFA.
- 144 See letter, Rosland Kossoff to Frank Stauffacher, 13 August 1949. See also letter, Christopher Young to Frank Stauffacher, 28 July 1949, "Art in Cinema" files, PFA. The film was screened in the series in 1950, won a prize for best avant-garde film at the Venice Film Festival that same year, and was eventually added to Cinema 16's distribution catalogue. See obituary, Christopher B. Young, *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 2 December 1975, Young file, MOMA.
- 145 "Object Lesson—A Motion Picture by Christopher Young," unpublished program notes to be read before (part 1) and after (part 2) the screening, "Art in Cinema" files, PFA.