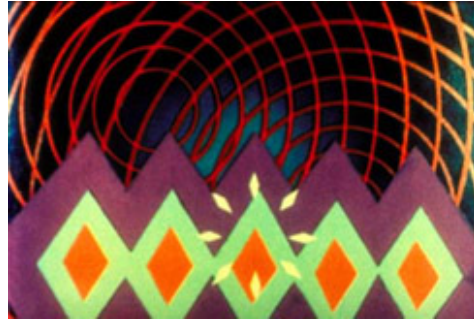


# Unseen Cinema: An Interview with Bruce Posner

by John Conomos  
and Bill Mousoulis



*Allegretto* (Oskar Fischinger, 1936)

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This interview was conducted on June 18, 2002.

One of the two outstanding hallmark programs of this year's Sydney Film Festival was, besides the extraordinary unforgettable Jean Eustache films, "Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant Garde Film 1893 –1941". This four-part program (originally consisting of 20) was curated by the film archivist, curator and filmmaker Bruce Posner whose very illuminating introductions cast a much welcome light on such a vast and relatively uncharted territory of early American experimental films pre-Maya Deren of the 1940s. Posner's good-natured and erudite knowledge of the subject is truly staggering in its comprehensive scope which is clearly evident in the following interview.

"Unseen Cinema" in its four program strands – Picturing a Metropolis; The Devil's Plaything; Light Rhythms; and Lovers of Cinema – endeavours to delineate the unknown accomplishments of early filmmakers (including creative artists, Hollywood directors and amateur filmmakers) operating in America and abroad during the formative epoch of American cinema. According to Posner, many of the films screened in the program were not – contrary to received wisdom – directly influenced by the various European art movements of the historic avant-garde as such. Instead we encounter the films made by a variety of different kind of artists, writers, filmmakers, poets, choreographers, playwrights, etc., who explored the innovative creative and formal properties of the film medium.

All of these filmmakers were cinephiles, first and foremost, or as critic/cineaste, Herman G. Weinberg, says, "lovers of cinema." Weinberg's apt term captures the passion these film enthusiasts and innovators had for their films and their avant-garde, experimental themes and techniques. However, as Posner argues, by the 1930s and the advancement of political themes during that decade many of them were starting to become isolated as their artistic concerns were deemed not as relevant as they were in the previous decade. However, though numerous of them worked in relative isolation, still their films had a large impact on the subsequent avant-garde films of the following three decades or so.

It is only in the 1990s that certain scholars, curators and critics have become critically interested in the possibilities of a viable avant-garde film culture existing before Maya

Deren and her peers in the 1940s and 1950s. (Reflective of this was the forum accompanying “Unseen Cinema”, which was chaired by Jane Mills, and whose panellists Barrett Hodsdon, Helen Grace, and Janet Merewether, along with Bruce Posner, raised numerous interesting ideas and debates concerning questions of definition, film history and theory, exhibition, critical reception and methodology.)

Seeing the diverse and resonant films of Robert Flaherty, Rudy Burckhardt, Jay Leyda, Oskar Fischinger, Slavko Vorkapich, and J.S. Watson, Jr., and Melville Webber, to name a few, in the one programming context as we did with “Unseen Cinema” is to experience a memorable introduction to a highly unknown, rich and innovative world of experimental cinema. It is a world of cinema that demands a larger audience.

The following interview was conducted by John Conomos, Bill Mousoulis and experimental filmmaker, Paul Winkler.

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**Bill Mousoulis** : What was the impetus for the whole “Unseen Cinema” project?

**Bruce Posner**: Around January 1999, I was with my wife in the kitchen on a Friday night, and I put a piece of chicken in my mouth and went – uh-oh. I'd swallowed a chicken bone. Twenty-two days and three operations later I got out of the hospital, and I think that was the motivating factor behind doing the series. I realised that time was limited. I had had a life-time fascination with the history of cinema, especially the history of experimental cinema, and being in the United States, I was focused on the American cinema, and I knew that no-one had really ever dealt with this. There were some books out there – David Curtis's *Experimental Cinema*, Stephen Dwoskin's *Film Is*, Malcolm Le Grice *Abstract Film and Beyond* – and being involved with the movement in one way or another since 1974, as a watcher, maker or player, I knew that all the material was there, but hadn't been dealt with in a professional way. So – I just went at it. The institutionalised side of the US ignored this for the most part. In the mid-'70s there was a book put out by the Whitney Museum called *A History of the American Avant-garde*, covering 1942 to 1974 roughly. Which means that even this book left all the pre-'42 people out. I worked at Harvard Film Archive for a number of years, and just before I left I organised a weekend conference called *Articulated Light: The Emergence of Abstract Film in America*. I tried to get every film that was an abstract film, and there were quite a few, and I thought that if there were this many abstract films, imagine the number of everything else! Also, Jan-Christopher Horak put out a book in 1995 called *Lovers of Cinema* and I started talking to him about the whole project also. And one other thing is that from the '70s, I used to buy films for the Miami – Dade Public Library, which in effect became an archive for no-one would borrow the films, and after awhile I got involved in doing the lab work for many of these films, to strike new prints.

**John Conomos**: Can you outline the curatorial objectives informing the project?

**BP**: I've actually been taking a lot of heat for the curatorial aspects of this program, especially in Germany. In a way, making a series that doesn't have clear boundaries can lead to *everyone* being offended!

**JC**: People like to think in categories.

**BP**: Yes, it's interesting. This trip to Australia has been very good for me because your perspectives here are so different to other ones I've encountered. It seems there's a lack of

films here, so the response has been enthusiastic and innocent in a way. You may evaluate the films later, but initially, you respond very positively. Which is interesting for what it says about the US. In New York, the whole scene is vibrant, but also turned in on itself. It attracts thousands of people, but you have to ask – what is it all about, is it a lifestyle or is it an art? The ideas there are so limited by the people who are curating or influential, and everyone seems to be hardened, there's no naivety. They have narrow ideas about what cinema is, their views are very particular. And there's a kind of revisionism going on currently which to my eyes looks like they're simply grabbing things out of the air, there's no solid foundation to what they're doing.

**JC:** It seems you have a “global” sense in your programming, rather than limiting yourself to precise cinemas.

**BP:** Well, “global” meaning the US. At the moment there's a big movement re-examining early cinema, in the archives, in scholarly work, etc. And this is wonderful because what it's doing is showing that there were many cinemas happening at all times in the world, that had huge output of films, influential output. So now you can find many previously buried treasures, and what “Unseen Cinema” is trying to do is actually expose some of these films, so people can see them.

**BM:** In what ways, if any, has the so-called European historic avant-garde cinema of the 1920s influenced the concepts and techniques of the diverse films included in “Unseen Cinema”?

**BP:** Well, this series takes the opposite position. Obviously a film like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was influential to a lot of people across the board, but on the other hand you have the smaller “art” films, and when they may have crossed the ocean for people to see them is an unknown history. In the US, in the late '20s, small cinemas cropped up, and from 1936 the Museum of Modern Art started collecting prints from overseas, so who knows? Look at the example of Leger's *Ballet Mecanique*. The co-maker is Dudley Murphy, an American filmmaker who went to Paris. Man Ray, an expatriate American working in Paris, is another example – he made films considered very important for the European avant-garde. What does this mean? The first film he made, *Return to Reason*, 1923, was shown in a Dadaist event, and on that same program was *Manhatta*, by Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler, which was made in New York, so there were various avant-gardes there. Ray's film actually then disappeared until the mid-'40s, so it was only shown that *one* night. So how could it have influenced anybody apart from whoever was there at that screening? Let's look at *Manhatta*. It was made in 1920, released in '21, shown at this screening in '23, and London in '26, it actually pre-dates Cavalcanti's city film, the Vertov film, and all the city symphonies of Europe. This isn't to take away from the European influence, but the American influence on worldwide films hasn't been properly acknowledged.

**JC:** There's a variety of filmmakers represented in “Unseen Cinema”. How committed were these filmmakers to the idea of film as an art form and did they, in certain contexts, proselytize like Maya Deren did later in the 1950s? Did they use specialist journals, as did Deren and her peers, to address cinema as art?

**Paul Winkler:** This is a very good question. The question is not whether they were committed, but – *did they know what they were doing?* As Barrett Hodsdon said in the forum earlier, they had a new toy, and it was a matter of seeing what the new toy could do. So the question is: what were their thinking processes? What was their motivation? Did they have any intellectual knowledge about what they were doing? These are the

important questions. From my perspective as an artist, I think they had this new toy, but they only scratched the surface. I think Burckhardt started to invent a few things, but he stopped short and simply went back to filming people on the streets, very conventional documentary footage.

**BP:** But Burckhardt had such a long career. That's his style, and it evolved. He continued to make films into the '90s.

**PW:** Do you think these people were really *aware* of what they were doing, however? Up to a point they must have been, but how much?

**BP:** I have not been able to clearly figure this out, and one of the reasons is that I think that trying to apply concepts that we are familiar with today to back then is very hard. We also look back and try to interpret what happened, and that's difficult. I get the feeling that back then it was very hard for these filmmakers to actually screen their films. They didn't have the proper viewing machines, moviolas, etc. – they had to literally project their film in order to see it. And if they couldn't screen their films easily, then they probably couldn't reflect enough on what they were doing. But from the '20s, a number of journals sprung up. These journals contained dialogues about aesthetics, bringing modernism to America. America had no “culture” in a way, it took its cues from Europe. A clear-cut dialogue started developing, and magazines solely devoted to cinema started appearing. Lewis Jacobs in Philadelphia, with Seymour Stern and David Platt – they formed a thing called *Experimental Cinema*, which started discussing Eisenstein, lefty films, and the avant-garde films. There was a Swiss magazine called *Close-Up*, which contributed an extended dialogue, with American people writing for it. There was Harry Alan Potamkin, a critic with communist leanings – he wrote about experimental cinema for *Close-Up*. Another thing happening in the US from about '26 was a magazine called *Movie Makers*, and it was a journal for the ACL – the Amateur Cinema League, which encompassed everyone from home movie makers to avant-garde filmmakers. There were also some professional organisations getting involved. Someone like Dr. Watson – he had theoretical articles printed in the magazines, but he also delivered lectures at the American Society of Cinematographers. And a dialogue was created, with other critics.

**BM:** How useful has Herman G. Weinberg's 1920s expression “lovers of cinema” been to describe the filmmakers of the time?

**BP:** It was a term that Weinberg used in an article on Robert Florey, in *Moviemakers* magazine, I think the November 1929 issue. The article starts off with this sentence about how Florey represents these lovers of cinema. At that point in time in the US, the movie bug had infected everyone. Horak picked up this term for his book, with the idea being that these were not individual artists per se going out to make creative works, but enthusiasts who wanted to be part of this large, worldwide movement.

**JC:** With something like Oscar Fischinger's *Allegretto*, how does this film exemplify, given its marked German abstract film heritage, the raw direct American spirit that you address in your essay “The Grand Experiment” (2001)?

**BP:** Firstly, I don't see Fischinger's artwork actually being bound nationally. Whatever he was doing came from a mental process, not a country, and that developed alongside his own personal evolution. There's a didactic quality to his image-sound correlation that you might call “Teutonic”, if you wanted to see it like that – it's rigid in ways that could be related back to Germany. In general though, I think his image-sound combinations and motifs are completely unique to Fischinger as a person.

**JC:** He's such a criminally neglected figure – I can't think of one book study dedicated to him.

**BP:** In general, all these filmmakers, even the European ones, have not had full research done on them. Right now, I'm involved in running around the globe, and charting every known print of *Ballet Mekanique*. This is one of the most famous films, but in the archive world there's no definitive record of where these prints are or what they are, their lengths, shot orders. I've found seven different versions. And some are radically different to each other. Leger was always changing things, expanding his ideas. He'd rearrange things to see how they worked. My point here being that most experimental film is neglected – there's no proper study done. And we're lucky that the material at least actually exists.

**JC:** What kind of creative freedom did someone like Slavko Vorkapich have in Hollywood as a montage specialist?

**BP:** There's another unwritten history here, which is perverse as he was famous in his lifetime, like a living legend. Directors like William Friedkin were just bowing down to him. The lectures Vorkapich gave in the '60s and '70s in universities and museums – everyone showed up, from Warhol on one end to big Hollywood people on the other. And people would be bowled over by any program of his work. But when he died, this all just vanished. Vorkapich would travel between America and Belgrade, where he taught at the film school. One of his students there was Vlada Petric and I think his PhD dissertation was on Vorkapich. Also in Belgrade, Marko Babac compiled all the known essays on Vorkapich and published it as a book. I think it's called *On True Cinema* (published in Serbo-Croatian and English in 1998).

**JC:** How sufficient is it to address the legacy of “Caligarisim” (Henri Langlois) in the films by J.S. Watson and Melville Webber? What other distinct qualities do these films exhibit that merit our critical scrutiny?



*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

**BP:** I really think that ultimately *Caligari* didn't have much of an influence on *The Fall of the House of Usher* or *Lot in Sodom*. One of the problems is the prints available – *Usher* exists in such poor quality prints that one can't see the richness of the tonalities. If you look at the *Lot in Sodom* print, you can see the detail, the nuances of the light play, and I believe this doesn't reflect the aesthetics of *Caligari*, which relies more on the sets, and the breaking of space, on the way people move, etc. There's more subtlety in Watson and Webber's films. A better connection may be the work of Murnau, and Watson said he was more moved and influenced by Murnau than by Griffith, for example. Webber was also an art historian, of 14<sup>th</sup> century frescoes, and you can see some of those images recreated in *Lot in Sodom*.

**JC:** Who was David Bradley and how was *Sredni Vashtar* by Saki (1940) – a weird and zany surreal film if there ever was one – received in its time?

**BP:** I don't know much about David Bradley. He was at the Todd school that Orson Welles was at, just a couple of years displaced from Welles, and the man that taught them filmmaking was a man named Roger Hill, with 16mm. Bradley took to it straight away. He obviously wanted to make narrative films, and he started making them on his own, and he

made three features and two shorts in this way – writing, directing, editing. He then went to the army and on his return went to Hollywood, where he made a couple of films at MGM, but they didn't work out. He stayed in Hollywood though, and had a life-long relationship with film, making B-movies. He also became a film collector, of 16mm prints. Getting back to *Sredni Vashtar*, he shot it in 1939-40, but it was finished 30 years later, so the lip-syncing is now perfect. It's a wonderful film.

**JC:** What role did the idea of “cinema maudit” play in the selection of the films in the series? Do you see these films as “damned” films, forgotten films, abused films?

**BP:** Well, we live in an age where nobody cares about all this stuff. In terms of mass culture that is – people talk about art and culture, but they don't really care. I'll tell you a story. When Jonas Mekas was doing the “Essential Cinema” collection, for the Anthology Film Archives, in the early '70s, a lot of the films were still around, were retrievable. But there was a general feeling at the time that they were all “amateur” films, not full creations of their own. And then there's the whole Maya Deren mythos. Her career is very important, but how can one person define a whole century of experimental film? This is what has happened – her ideas affected several generations of people, what they consider to be experimental film. A number of other lines could have been taken instead.

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