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DVD Access to the Avant-Garde

By *DAVID STERRITT*

Quick, name Orson Welles's first movie. Citizen Kane, right? Guess again. It's *The Hearts of Age*, which the 19-year-old prodigy co-directed with a friend in 1934.

This eight-minute trifle isn't much of a movie. Still, its story-free parody of modernist mannerisms gives a tantalizing glimpse of the visual preoccupations — startling images, fluid cinematography, eye-jolting montage — that would become Welles's trademarks.

Want to check it out? Until recently, that meant tracking down one of the movie's few existing prints — or getting hold of the ultra-low-quality videocassette that presented Welles's film (with other works of "experimental" cinema) in a murky, muddy transfer that made it difficult to see, much less analyze and appreciate.

But that was then. Now the elusive avant-garde item is viewable and re-viewable with a flick of your DVD remote. So are an imposing number of similarly adventurous films produced outside the money-driven frameworks of major movie studios.

Unsupported by the film industry's marketing and promotion, such proudly independent works usually plummet straight to obscurity — joining the vast unseen cinema, to borrow the title of a new DVD set devoted to making that cinema (including Welles's early effort) more seeable than ever before.

Not only is this a great development for movie buffs and avant-garde connoisseurs. It also marks a quantum improvement in the plight of film-studies and art-history professors wanting to illuminate this shadowy continent in the classroom.

The territory is so shadowy that its inhabitants have never agreed

on a name for it. Usually they settle for "experimental," despite the connotation of cinéastes fiddling with film like so many mad scientists, or "avant-garde," which means "advance guard" and therefore suggests that Steven Spielberg and George Lucas must somehow "catch up" with high-toned artists whose works play mainly in museums and galleries. I have no better nomenclature to offer, so I'll do what most critics do — use both terms interchangeably.

Celluloid prints of key experimental works have long been available from such specialized sources as the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, and the Canyon Cinema cooperative in San Francisco, to name just two. But most of these movies were made years or decades ago, and the revenues from renting them don't justify making many copies, or maintaining the existing copies in tiptop condition. So you can't be sure what you're going to get — assuming the movie is available at all — until it's actually unspooling on the screen. Irritating scratches, sloppy splices, and badly faded images are common.

As a film professor, I've been down this path many times. Like others I know, I stuck with the purist position — films should be viewed as films, not as videos or digital clones — until I realized those scratches, splices, and washed-out images were making students tune out challenging yet rewarding works without giving them a fair chance.

When your audience has been weaned on Terminator and Lord of the Rings epics, it's not easy sparking interest in the abstract tone poem *H2O*, made by Ralph Steiner in 1929, or the surrealist hallucination *Le Retour à la raison*, shot by Man Ray in 1923, or the colorful *Spook Sport*, animated by Mary Ellen Bute, Norman McLaren, and Ted Nemeth in 1940. It's that much harder if the film snaps in two, slips off the projector's sprockets, or registers on the screen as a barely legible blur. So bring on the DVD's — assuming their images have been carefully transferred from top-quality celluloid prints stashed in archives, collections, and cinematic storehouses around the globe.

The hunt for rare movies can take many forms, but sometimes a

DVD company finds that the hard work has already been done. An example is Kino Video's recent release, *Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and '30s*, comprising 25 pictures (from two to 37 minutes long) gathered by the cinephile Raymond Rohauer over the past half-century. Having acquired Rohauer's collection, Kino needed only to transfer them well and supply DVD extras — pithy annotations by the veteran film critic Elliott Stein, optional English subtitles where appropriate, and music for silent movies.

In compiling *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894-1941*, the New York cinema museum Anthology Film Archives faced a harder job. It accumulated the 155 movies on seven discs (running time: about 19 hours) from 60 international archives consulted by the curator Bruce Posner, who originated the project, and the historian David Shepard, who produced the DVD set. Combing through such treasure troves as the Library of Congress, the Museum of Modern Art, and the British Film Institute, these moving-image detectives selected not only complete, properly stored films but also partially preserved copies whose unscratched, unfaded portions could be spliced together with other bits of footage to create crisp composite prints.

Virtually all the *Unseen Cinema* items are striking, and some are downright dazzling. One example is *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), directed by the French artist Fernand Léger and the American cinéaste Dudley Murphy, who provided many of the movie's playful, collagelike visual ideas. A staple of modernist programs in classrooms and elsewhere, the film contains many seminal Dadaesque images: a woman swooping upside down on a garden swing, a newspaper headline with animated letters, a washerwoman trudging up a staircase that never ends. What's new in the *Unseen Cinema* presentation is the presence of George Antheil's music, composed for the film in 1924 but never before paired with the movie in a readily available edition — not surprisingly, since Antheil's score calls for an unorthodox orchestra including a siren, three xylophones, numerous electric bells, and three airplane propellers.

After years of viewing *Ballet Mécanique* in silence, I found it thrilling to see and hear it in a form even more authentic than that

experienced by its original Vienna audience some 82 years ago, when the music — too unwieldy to sync up properly with the movie — was ingloriously omitted. Its unprecedented sounds and images remind me why I love exposing students to such audacious, inimitable work. In an age when movies and TV shows are straitjacketed in a tiny number of iron-clad formulas, the obstreperous sights and sounds of a Ballet Mécanique are eruptions of liberating artistic freedom that wake and shake our habit-ridden sensibilities.

Like all ambitious film endeavors, the Unseen Cinema and Avant-Garde collections have been criticized. Unseen Cinema, for instance, has been faulted in a Film Comment review for presenting an enormously diverse array of works as if they represented a single cinematic tradition. That complaint strikes me as wrongheaded, since a major point of the collection is its anything-goes eclecticism — historically rich items by D.W. Griffith, meditative travelogues by Rudy Burckhardt, cine-poems by people even specialists have rarely heard of, and forays into film by major painters and sculptors like Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell. Not to mention outlandish montage sequences from Hollywood entertainments like *So This Is Paris* and *Footlight Parade*, which are as idiosyncratic and eccentric as anything else on view. That said, I do see minor flaws in the set, which includes some items that hardly seem avant-garde at all — the early-1930s documentaries *Windy Ledge Farm* and *A Day in Santa Fe*, for instance — and a few that are closer to casual amateurism than to truly creative work, such as the aptly labeled *Stewart Family Home Movies* of the late 1930s, which are more charming than artistic.

Kino's more-modest Avant-Garde has inherited a bit of the controversy that greeted Rohauer's involvement with reissued Buster Keaton comedies in the early 1970s, when he allegedly tinkered with original content in order to recopyright films in his own name to make new profits from them. If minor meddling has indeed affected any of the pictures in Kino's new collection, that will be visible only to the most scrupulous movie mavens — certainly not to the cinema students and film buffs who will use the DVD's as their first gateway into a world of strange and

marvelous visual expression.

The possibilities for eye-opening new DVD experiences are not limited to old movies, moreover, since an increasing number of contemporary avant-garde filmmakers are moving away from their celluloid-only bias and embracing DVD's — the first nontheatrical format with a sufficiently strong image quality — for distributing and exhibiting their works. After decades of presenting his movies only through celluloid prints, the late Stan Brakhage cooperated with the Criterion Collection to compile *By Brakhage: An Anthology* shortly before his death in 2003. The result is a two-disc set by a towering artist who combined aspects of romanticism and modernism into a profoundly personal style, imitating the mind's eye via radically nonlinear photographed images, and painting and carving the surface of the film itself.

Newer still is *The Films of Su Friedrich*, a five-disc set from Outcast Films summing up the career (to date) of America's most influential radical-feminist filmmaker. The highlight is *Sink or Swim*, a 1990 memoir of Friedrich's relationship with her linguistics-professor father. I regard it as one of the most intellectually lucid, aesthetically accessible, and emotionally moving avant-garde films produced in the past 25 years.

But as exciting as it is to have these recent masterpieces at one's fingertips, it's the availability of timeless classics that constitutes DVD's most invaluable contribution to avant-garde history, appreciation, and pedagogy. I even value the flaws found in transfers of old, imperfectly preserved prints of old, meagerly budgeted movies.

In an uncharacteristically ill-considered statement, English avant-gardist Peter Greenaway asserted in 1994 that "material changes in film are irredeemably disadvantageous. Film will not sustain aging processes or be made profitably resonant by them." I thought of this as I watched the dances by a vaudevillian called Annabelle that were filmed by Thomas A. Edison's studio more than a century ago — a time when, as a film historian once put it, every film was experimental. Even the superb *Unseen Cinema* transfers of the Edison movies are marked by "aging processes" galore —

deep scratches, patches of congealed graininess, missing frames that turn the flow of choreography into a rumpus of fits and starts.

But these "flaws" are integral aspects of the Annabelle movies as they now exist, and they are as visually beautiful, as aesthetically expressive, and as historically genuine as anything on the "real" film that ran through Edison's camera. They don't subtract a thing. What they add is magical, unpredictable, unique — touches of the "abstract" imported into an art form that normally does everything it can (even in most avant-garde work) to look realistic. Unplanned though it is, this is a different sort of realism that I find positively poetic.

Then comes the capper — a printed statement, signed by Edison himself, shown immediately after the Annabelle footage: "This film is sold subject to the restriction that it shall not be used for duplicating or printing other films from it. Any use of it for those purposes is an infringement of the patents under which it is made and sold."

Sound familiar? It's the 1893 version of the copyright warning found at the start of virtually every DVD and videocassette sold in today's market. I find the contemporary warning's 19th-century doppelgänger a poignant reminder that motion-picture creativity has always traveled hand in hand with commercial preoccupations. Sometimes art and money have been mutually supportive, and sometimes one has killed the other off. But they've been chronic codependents since the first moments of cinema's existence.

As William Faulkner once wrote, "The past isn't dead; it isn't even past." The stimulating new wave of avant-garde DVD's makes the same point, with a vengeance.

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DVD COLLECTIONS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and '30s, Kino
Video, 2005

By Brakhage: An Anthology, Criterion Collection, 2003

The Films of Su Friedrich, Outcast Films, 2005

Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894-1941,
Image Entertainment, 2005

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