

**Some reflections on the Historiography of the American Independent Film Conceived in the Wake of Reading, and Offered Partly as Commentary On, Jan-Christopher Horak's *Lovers of Cinema*, that their Author Intends as Germane to Considerations of Issues Around Teaching of the Documentary and Avant-Garde Cinemas in America.**

By R. Bruce Elder

Jan-Christopher Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

Histories of the avant-garde cinema ordinarily divide the field of study into two major phases, the first (European) avant-garde of the twenties and the second (American) avant-garde. This division of the avant-garde into two phases has served polemical purposes. American art has long been possessed by an aspiration to distinguish itself from European models. Several of the New England Transcendentalists, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, advanced claims that American art had distinctive characteristics. Consider Emerson's "The American Scholar"—near the beginning, Emerson speculates that

Perhaps the time is already come when . . . the sluggish intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to an end. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of fore harvests.

and near the end, he presents his listeners / readers with this call to action:

We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame. . . . The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. There is no work for any but the decorous and complaisant . . . What is the remedy? We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak with our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence. The dread of man and love of man shall be a wall of defence and a wreath of joy around all. A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.

The Gnostic doctrine that the American Republic of the Imagination would be one in which each individual would realize him- or herself through a self-reliance that involves nothing less than plumbing the depth of the self until one would discover the divine presence (spark) within, became the principal item of that polity's founding dogma. Thus the famous "Divinity School Address" casts the "appropriated and formal" language of catechismal instruction, the language that Europe taught America, as the enemy of inspiration and the agency that engenders obliviousness of the indwelling Supreme Spirit. Immediate experience, not second-hand learning, is the key to acquiring insight in the mystery. Thus, in "Self-Reliance," Emerson contends

Our houses are built with foreign tastes; our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments; our opinions, our tastes, our faculties, lean, and follow the Past and the Distant. The soul created the arts wherever they have flourished. It was in his own mind

that the artist sought his model. It was an application of his own thought to the thing to be done and the conditions to be observed. And why need we copy the Doric or the Gothic model? Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought and quaint expression are as near to us as to any, and if the American artist will study with hope and live the precise to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also.

Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative forces of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession. That which each can do best, not but his Maker can teach him. No man yet knows what it is, nor can, till that person has exhibited it. Where is the master who could have taught Shakspeare [*sic*]. . . . Every great man is a unique. The Scipionism of Scipio is precisely that part he could not borrow. Shakspeare will never be made by the study of Shakspeare. . . . Abide by the simple and noble regions of thy life, obey thy heart, and thou shalt reproduce the Foretold again.

The civilized world impedes efforts to contact the self; withdrawing into the embrace of nature assists them. This proposition is the basis for the portrayal of humans' relationship with the natural world as redemptive as a key theme of American documentary film. It is also the ground for the idea of the redemptive power of direct contact with the given thing, which one discovers anew once the deadening effects of historically induced preconceptions have been set aside.

Again, William Carlos Williams' celebration of the local realities is among the features of his oeuvre that made it a model for poets of the 1960s and 1970s; Williams, too, believed that one must overcome the deleterious effects of history in order to open oneself to the exact condition of the local given thing which, because reality is flux (a Parmenidean conviction that Williams shared with Emerson), is made new with every passing instant. Thus, in his essay on Edgar Allan Poe in the tellingly entitled "*In the American Grain*," Williams asserted

The local causes shaping Poe's genius were two in character: the necessity for a fresh beginning, backed by a native vigor of extraordinary proportions,—with the corollary that all "colonial imitation" must be swept aside. This was the conscious force which rose in Poe as innumerable timeless insights resulting, by his genius, in firm statements on the character of form, profusely illustrated by his practices; and *second* the immediate effect of the locality upon the first, upon his nascent impulses, upon his original thrusts; tormenting the depths into a surface of bizarre designs by which he's known and which are *not at all* the major point in question. . . .

The strong sense of a beginning in Poe is in *no one* else before him. What he says, begin thoroughly local in origin, has some chance of being universal in application . . . . Made to fit a place, it will have that actual quality of *things* anti-metaphysical.

. . . [H]e is the diametric opposite of Longfellow—to say the least. But Longfellow was the apotheosis of all that had preceded in America, to this extent, that he brought over the *most* from "the other side." In "*Longfellow and Other Plagiarists*," Poe loses himself to the full upon them. But what had they done? No more surely than five hundred architects are constantly practising. Longfellow did it without genius, perhaps, but he did no more and no less than to bring the tower of the Seville Cathedral to Madison Square. . . .

Poe conceived the possibility, the sullen volcanic possibility of the *place*. He was

willing to go down and wrestle with its conditions, using every tool. . . His greatness is in that he turned his back and faced inland, to originality, with the identical gesture of a Boone.

Most know that the composer John Cage took great interest in the New England Transcendentalists, and especially in Emerson and Thoreau. So it should not be surprising that he developed similar ideas. In *Silence*, his famous statement of his aesthetic credo, he wrote

. . . [O]ne may give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments. . . . And what is the purpose of writing music? One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of the way and lets it act of its accord.

Such conceptions of American particularism are sometimes associated (as it is in the thought of Stan Brakhage) with the belief that language imposes the deadening weight of tradition on experience, and only the raw, unformed experience of the natural body is authentically related to the immediate conditions of living (i.e., related to what, in Williams' sense of the word, is "local"). Or it leads to the stress on the individual, autonomous existent and denial of the reality of relationships—to the belief that only individual sensations and the connections between them are real, to the uncompromising positivism that Leonard B. Meyer call "radical empiricism" or "transcendental particularism" in his great, classic work, *Music, the Arts and Ideas*.

These ideas resonate through the American avant-garde film. The teaching that "That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him . . . Every man is a unique. The Scipionism of Scipio is precisely that part he could not borrow" is precisely the ground of the individualist element of Stan Brakhage's aesthetic. Brakhage's aesthetic theory has its roots in the conviction that immediate experience is the ground of all truth and all value, and that constructing narrative relations between events depletes the experience of the concrete particular of intensity and, what is perhaps as bad, misrepresents the truth about reality. In this regard, Brakhage's aesthetic theories are consistent with that cluster of beliefs that Meyer terms "transcendental particularism."

Ideas about the uniqueness of the American landscape, the American character and American art have also had historiographic consequences. P. Adam Sitney's history of the American avant-garde film reveals its author's Emersonian leanings in its deliberate avoidance of commentary on the European influence on the development of American cinema—commentary that would divert it from its principal subject. Sitney sets out a diachronic morphology of the avant-garde cinema, which charts various attempts to work out the Emersonian problematic of the relationship between consciousness and nature. His is an evolutionary history, and the two forms it presents with greatest enthusiasm are the lyrical and the structural film. Moreover, his historical account works through a dazzling series of connections, which he presents with considerable virtuosity, and thereby to show how the lyrical form was transmuted into structural film—to show that the emergence of structural film did not rupture the historical lineage of the American avant-garde film, but simply used a different set of formal devices to work out the aesthetic problematic that is at the core of the Emersonian tradition. True to the founding ideas of radical empiricism, Sitney's morphology ends up privileging those forms which are conveyed by the ecstasies of those moments when each individual sensation is experienced with such intensity, and so fully, that it absorbs the world.

The very project of a historiographical approach to American avant-garde film that is based on Emersonian ideas of American particularism is what Jan-Christopher Horak's anthology puts at stake. Its set out to demonstrate the common belief that, after an exuberant decade of prodigious activity, the first avant-garde cinema, and European practice, associated with European art movements, disappeared and that after almost a decade and a half of quiescence, a new avant-garde film arose, around the mid-1940s, with a characteristically American form. One appeal this historical construction has for those who want to present the post-World War II avant-garde as evidencing American particularism is that belief that the 1930s and early 1940s witnessed the virtual eradication of the avant-garde cinema and so makes plausible the proposition that when the second avant-garde film movement appeared it had quite a different character from the first.

Suppose there were a strong avant-garde cinema in 1920s America, that developed with some measure of independence from the European contemporary (as Strand and Sheeler's *Manhatta* [1921] and Ralph Steiner's *H<sub>2</sub>O* [1929]—just to choose two works that are pretty familiar—suggest). Suppose further that an independent American cinema continued through the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s, (though, perhaps, it split into two branches, one furthering the radical poetic aspirations of the earlier avant-garde, the other continuing, in the form of the innovative documentary, the indigenous American interest in the thing itself). Then Marie Menken's *Go! Go! Go!* might be seen to belong to a line that begins with *Manhatta* and continues in the lunch counter sequence of Ralph Steiner and Williard Van Dyke's *The City* (1939)—a film whose Americanness is as marked in Aaron Copeland's poignant score as it is in theme and method—and whose photography, as Scott MacDonald notes seems “at times reminiscent of *Manhatta*” (p. 224), while *Glimpse of the Garden* could be seen to emerge out of the paradisiacal representation of nature that is such a marked feature of American art and is as well a common characteristic of the American independent documentary (and appears as well in *The City*).

The example illustrates the importance of the more general point that, if an avant-garde cinema with at least some measure of independence from the European avant-garde emerged in America in the twenties, and if it continued through the 1930s and 1940s, the lack of continuity between the first avant-garde and the second avant garde (customarily said to begin in 1943, the year of the appearance of Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*) would pose an inconvenience to those who espouse the historiographic premise that a new avant-garde, with its own distinctive attributes, emerged virtually *ex nihilo* after World War II. What is more, it illustrates that if there were an indigenous American avant-garde film of the 1920s, then the specific features the second avant-garde (and notably its visionary aspiration) that set it apart from the indigenous first avant-garde would have to be accounted for. One would rather assume, as a initial methodological postulate (to be modified or rejected according to one's empirical findings) that the second avant-garde emerged as the visionary aspirations of the European avant-garde, met with, and transformed the methods, forms and foundational assumptions of the first avant-garde.

On the other hand, suppose that there were an American avant-garde film of the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s, and that this avant-garde, rather than possessing the distinctive attributes of American art, rather was an cinema heavily influenced by the visionary character of Surrealism and German Expressionism (as familiarity with such works as Webber and Watson's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) and *Lot in Sodom* (1933) suggest. If these assumptions were true, one would assume, as an initial methodological postulate (to be modified or rejected according to one's empirical findings) that the second avant-garde emerged as the visionary character of the first, European-influenced avant-garde was transformed by the ethos of post-war American culture.

If the central tenet of this book is true—that is, if an independent cinema emerged in America in the 1920s, and continued through the 1930s and into the 1940s (changing course over those years, but never disappearing) and that this movement formed the basis of the second American avant-garde that emerged around the mid-1940s—then at least one of our hypotheses must be true; and if one of those

hypotheses is true, the prevailing history of the New American Cinema is cast into doubt. Either way, then, it is the history of the avant-garde cinema that describes the emergence of an indigenous, autonomous American avant garde cinema in the later half of the 1940s that this very rich anthology puts at stake—indeed, any attempt to “fill in the gaps” between the avant-garde of the 1920s and the avant-garde that emerged in the 1940s (one of the projects that Horak declares for his anthology) would implicitly critique the familiar story of the emergence of the American avant-garde; and one criterion against which the book should be measured is how effectively it overturns the historiographic assumptions on which the familiar account of the evolution of the avant-garde cinema rests.

To what extent does this collection of essays require us to revise our notions about the emergence of the post-war avant-garde film? By and large, the essays in this volume undertake to demonstrate that the first assumption is true. Scott MacDonald does a fine job of presenting Ralph Steiner’s work in this light; his piece has the additional merit of including detailed commentary on the last, infrequently noticed phase of Steiner’s career (1960-75), when Steiner returned to the direct presentation, in cinematic terms, of “the thing itself.” MacDonald astutely rejects the commonplace manner of commenting on *H<sub>2</sub>O* (suggested by the introductory rolling titles that the Museum of Modern Art added to the film) that the film progresses from representational to abstract. MacDonald comments on the film’s ending (supposedly its most abstract section)

And yet these images are never abstract in the conventional meaning of the term, since one of the layers of imagery we are *always* aware of is the literal surface of the water the reflections are occurring in/on. As a result we are always aware that the phantasmagoria of “abstract” shapes, designs, and textures is a literal, everyday, observable reality, that the miraculous visuals Steiner presents are the result of careful observation and thoughtful composition *and nothing more*.

MacDonald’s comment also hints at a feature of Steiner’s film that distinguishes it from its European counterparts, made around the same the time. It is instructive to view together, on a single programme or in a single class, *H<sub>2</sub>O* and the famous cream separator sequence in Sergej Eizenstein’s *The General Line*, or (a combination that perhaps highlights the contrast even better)—Steiner’s *Mechanical Principles* (1931) and Fernand Léger’s *Le ballet mécanique*. The contrast between the two pairs is similar, and it tells a great deal about what distinguishes American modernism from the European variety. The visual characteristics of both the sequence from *The General Line* (as, indeed, of the the whole film) and of *Le ballet mécanique* derive from a principle of radical transformation that was fundamental to European modernism as a whole. According to this principle, artworks succeed by reconfiguring everyday objects, to produce a new entity which, by virtue of its formal intricacy, transcends the furniture of the material world. *H<sub>2</sub>O* and *Mechanical Principles* are utterly different in this regard: neither film evinces any desires to raise their forms above those of other fugitive, transient compositions that constitute the realm of natural events. In fact, like many works by American artists, they proclaim that artistic form and natural form (*H<sub>2</sub>O*) or artistic form and other forms built by humans (*Mechanical Principles*), have similar ontological and aesthetic status—they establish that artistic form is (in Charles Olson’s words) “equal to the real itself.” Repudiating claims for the transcendentalism of artistic form has been common among American artists. Indeed, the contrast between *Mechanical Principles* and *Le ballet mécanique*, or between *H<sub>2</sub>O* and the cream separator sequence in *The General Line*, is a typical contrast between American and European modernism—just consider the difference between William Carlos Williams and T.S. Eliot’s ideas on poetic form. As Stanley Cavell points out in his very perceptive commentary on the thinker, Emerson tends to see moving away from (rising above?) the ordinary world as a violent, wrenching destructive act that will never carry a person towards the heaven. Among the many virtues of Cavell’s book is that it highlights Emerson’s frequent

use of terms such as “blood,” “organic,” “natural,” and “biological” to speak of what we defy when we attempt to escape into denatured abstractions. The view that reality, including all humans products (and that category comprises works of art) are organically linked, that all objects are similarly animated, has profound consequences which Emerson expounds in “Worship”

And so I think that the last lesson of life, the choral song which rises from all elements and all angels, is, a voluntary obedience, a necessitated freedom. Man is man of the same atoms as the world is, he shares the same impressions, predispositions, and destiny. When his mind is illuminated, when his heart is kind, he throws himself joyfully into the sublime order, and does, with knowledge, what the stones do by structure.

Steiner’s concern with the conditions of the everyday world also explains why Steiner went on to make radical, independent documentaries in 1930s, with such works as *Pie in the Sky* (1935) and *The City* (1939) and why, in 1970s he returned to making films like *Look Park* (1974) and *Hurrah for Light* (1975) that, as *H<sub>2</sub>O* and *Mechanical Principles* did, exfoliated the formal possibilities that arise from the close observation of the everyday objects of one’s immediate environment. Accordingly, Macdonald’s essay provides a fine example of the interplay of documentary and formal impulses in the aspiration to capture direct perception.

Horak himself contributes a very strong essay on Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s *Manhatta*. Horak highlights the Americanness of this work by connecting Sheeler with William Carlos Williams, that great prophet of radical empiricism and celebrator of direct perception of the thing itself. Further he explains that Strand and Sheeler’s inclusion of quotations from Walt Whitman probably reflects an enthusiasm for the poet that Sheeler and Strand shared with others who championed beliefs about American particularism, for Whitman’s utopian valorization of America’s democratic vistas, and of the magnificence of its land and spirit spoke to those convinced that America was destined to play a special role in world history. What is more important, Horak acutely observes that Strand and Sheeler treat the built forms of Manhattan essentially as natural formations, as mountains or canyons, and he shows that this work resolves the dialectic between civilization by according priority to nature, as is consistent with the tradition of American particularism.

I must admit, though, that what I see when I look at the film is rather different. What I see is a series of images in which hard, and static, geometric forms, which abut one another like the facets in Analytic Cubist painting, and articulate a shallow space which recedes only slightly from the picture-plane (including several that, as examples of “photographic cubism” are at least the equal of Stieglitz’ *Steerage*) interspersed among images in which similar hard, and static, geometric forms are contrasted with softer forms like those formed when steam meets cooler air. In combining hard geometric form with softer and more fluid forms, the images in *Manhatta* attempt to fuse Cubism and Impressionism (with the Impressionist form stringently contained within the geometric framework of the Cubist image). The use of soft Impressionist-inspired forms had been the stock-in-trade of photographers who had begun working in the later years of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century (photographers such as Peter Henry Emerson, Edward Steichen, Gertrude Käsebier, and generally the photographers who went under the name of the Photo-Secession). The f-64 school (under whose influence Strand had developed his views about the photograph) and the “Pure Photography” of Frederick H. Evans—even, implicitly, the approach exemplified in the extraordinary work of Oscar G. Rejlander (whose *The Two Ways of Life* of 1857 is one of photo-history’s paradigmatic moments)—reacted against the use of what they saw as anti-photographic forms. The f-64 school and Evan’s “Pure Photography,” repudiated all the painterly influences, but especially that of Impressionist painting. The effort to convert the deep space that the photographic illusion generally presents into the faceted, shallow space of Cubism was at one time Strand’s principal mission. Strand hoped to reformulate the space of photographic illusion,

converting it into the shallow, faceted space of Cubist practice, without minimizing the photograph's affinity for total objectivity, its tendency towards factual reportage or its proclivity for rendering the thing itself which the f-64 school valorized, and indeed without resorting to any of the painterly devices of the Pictorialist photographers.

*Manhatta* conveys a changed understanding, on Strand and Sheeler's parts, of pictorialist form. The first reaction of purist photographers against photography's submission to principles derived from another medium took the rather paradoxical form of affirming photography's affinity with, directly, the urban world that produced Cubist forms, but in the end, with Cubist forms themselves. The recognition that motivated Strand and Sheeler in making *Manhatta*, I believe, was that photography was allied too to the forms of Impressionist artwork, for the visual features of both Impressionist art and of the photographic image are results of a new orientation in the arts towards quotidian, fleeting events. This understanding brought Strand and Sheeler to the realization that their film could incorporate some features of Impressionism without falling into dissembling. Photography's affinity, which it shares with Impressionist art, for the transitory events of everyday life provides the basis for reconciling softer-edged forms of Impressionist art with the harder edged forms of Cubist art (for which photography also had an affinity by virtue of its capacity to exploit the myriad (often incongruous) juxtapositions that constitute modern perception. Thus the making of *Manhatta* was motivated by the desire to produce a work which reconciled both Impressionism and Cubism, insofar as it possesses at least some of the defining attributes of both Impressionist and Cubist art, but which does not contravene the inherent characteristics of the photography.

But Cubism was also an urban phenomenon, and the concatenation of facets characteristic of Cubist art has much to do with the acceleration of modern perception, and with the fact that we frequently are presented with various aspects of a moving object in rapid succession. This interest in the fragmented perceptions of the modern world was likely among the reasons that Sheeler and Strand chose the city of Manhattan as the subject for their films for neither showed any particular enthusiasm for the urban world. Strand's interest was, by and large, rural America, and village life in France and in Italy. And Sheeler, in the late teens and early twenties, just before making *Manhatta*, produced such works as *Bucks County Barn* (1918 version), and *Barn Abstraction* (1918), works which revel in the austerity of popular architecture, and shortly after the film, began creating paintings representing domestic objects made by Shakers.

The desire to reconcile photography's mission of fixing perception with its affinity for fleeting, transitory phenomena—for phenomena having to do with light, smoke and steam—and more generally, for reconciling the hard geometric shapes of Cubism with the softer, wispier phenomena of Impressionist painting, are the real inspiration of *Manhatta*. The Analytical Cubist method eventuated in the despairing conclusion that flux defies having an objective shape imposed on it, and so nothing stable, nothing certain, nothing objective is to be found in the riot of successive aspects—that they constitute nothing more than a phantasmagoria; “photographic Cubism” was something different: the photographer's fragmentation of reality has the purpose of disclosing the object, to put an end to the procession of aspects by providing us with a machine representation of the thing itself. So *Manhatta* reflects the role of the city in creating a crisis of perception (reflected in Cubist art) and the role of photography in alleviating this crisis. It is in this context that we can understand Strand's most peculiar piece of writing, “Photography and the New God,” as a truly visionary piece of writing.

The interest in disclosing the object itself derives from the “radical empiricism” that is such a cardinal feature of the indigenous American artistic tradition, and is fundamental both to the work of Strand and to that of Sheeler. Sheeler was the exemplary Precisionist painter, while Strand's work is a paradigm of the work of the advocates of “straight photography.” Both of them celebrated the ability of the camera's high resolution detail to convey “the object itself,” in its utter uniqueness. In their work, the camera becomes an instrument for confirming the ontological beliefs underlying “radical empiricism.”

It is his commitment to “radical empiricism” that alone can account for what might strike one at

first as the strange course that the Strand's filmmaking took: after making *Manhatta* Strand made no more films for several years; he returned to filmmaking in the late 1930s to work on radical social documentaries and fictions, e.g. *The Wave* (1936), *Heart of Spain* (1937), and *Native Land* (1942). A purely social account is usually given of this seemingly peculiar series of engagements, an account which depicts the transformation of the formal experimentalist into a political issues filmmaker: the booming markets of the 1920s gave way to the bust of the 1930s, which left a decade of economic havoc in its wake. The flush economy of the 1920s had provided individuals with the resources to make work that had no use value—enough capital was “left over” to afford artists the “luxury” of exploring purely formal issues. The social urgencies of the 1930s made such explorations seem an indulgence, one that the economy could not afford. Artists began to consider their responsibilities.

But let's set aside the problems that result from these assertions' being based on aesthetic propositions of dubious merit. There remain other problems with the claim. Primary among them is that the claims rest on the view that the formal experimental work of the 1920s and the political issues film of the 1930s have no common ground. However, they do in fact share important features, and paramount among them is that in America both the formal film and the political issues film have shared an interest in the careful observation of local, American reality. The “formal film” in America has not had exclusively formal concerns, but has interested itself in the local realities and quotidian events that is the basis for the social life that American documentaries have chronicled. Thus the “formal” film is not exclusively formal for the relation between the work and the world is of no little concern (for evidence of the importance of such concerns, consider a range of work that spans Brakhage's domestic films on the one hand and Robert Frank's “self-reflexive” films on the other), while the “political issues” film concerns itself such with such formal questions as finding the means to reveal and to concentrate attention on the revelation of the particulars of quotidian existence (for evidence, consider the formal innovations of Ed Pincus' autobiography work, and how they convey the intimate details of his life's actual conditions).

Lisa Cartwright's essay is a fascinating attempt to recover *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Lot in Sodom*, commonly understood as American imitations of German expressionist film, for the indigenous American avant-garde. She sets out to show, and marshals considerable textual evidence in support of the position, that James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, the makers of those two films, rejected modernist aesthetics and, instead, aspired to reformulate, and to extend, classic Hollywood techniques to ends that were more than commonly adventurous. To this point in the argument, the article strikes me only faintly curious, though, unhappily, it casts Watson and Webber as filmmakers in the parodistic mode, while clearly there is a great deal more to *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Lot in Sodom* than that. However, at this point the argument takes a most interesting turn, as Prof. Cartwright goes on to qualify which “modernism” Watson and Webber rejected and which “modernism” they accepted—indeed a real strength of Prof. Cartwright's piece is the care she takes in characterizing the modernism that Webber and Watson rejected and the modernism that they accepted. And to do so, she turns to a distinctively American modernism, that of Pound.

[in] the literature from Cocteau to Ricker, we find a sort of writing which is sometimes incomprehensible if one does not read every word and try to parse it in sequence. His contemporaries called Keats “incomprehensible.” The life of a village is narrative . . . In a city the visual impressions succeed each other, overlap, overcross, they are “cinematographic,” but they are not a simple linear sequence. They are often a flood of nouns without verbal relations.

Pound here attributes to the modern way of seeing what Fenollosa attributes to a sequence of characters in Chinese—that it offers a “flood of nouns, without verbal relations.”

Connecting Pound's modernism to that of *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Lot in Sodom* is a

key insight, of cardinal importance. But Stan Brakhage makes a similar point when he speaks of the sonnet form as being appropriate for an age when horses filled the streets, but not for the present, and those Fenollosian beliefs are what underpinned the Vorticist style of *Dog Star Man*. By failing to draw this to our attention, Prof. Cartwright missed an extraordinary opportunity to connect the first and the second film avant-gardes. Nor does she consider that the practice of using “a flood of nouns without verbal relations” connects to the desire to present “the thing itself” directly and immediately, without commentary or preconception; nor does she consider how central the ideal the immediate presentation of “the thing itself” is to Pound’s paratactical method of construction. Nevertheless, the careful work she has done in relating Webber and Watson to the modernism of e.e. cummings, Ezra Pound and *Dial* magazine yields real profits.

Given his desire to demonstrate that there existed an indigenous, autonomous American avant-garde cinema in the 1930s and early 1940s (and because a programme he curated introduced me to the work), I am surprised that Dr. Horak did not include an article on the films made by the poet/painter Emlen Etting. Several years ago, when Horak was Senior Curator of Film at the George Eastman House in Rochester, the Innis Film Society invited him to Toronto to present work of the first American film avant-garde. On that occasion he showed a pair of films by Etting (I believe they were *Poem 8* and *Laureate*). Etting’s use of a reeling subjective camera in *Poem 8* simply astonished me; it struck me then that the form of that film anticipated the lyrical form that, first, Marie Menken and then Stan Brakhage were to re-invent years later. An essay exploring Etting’s use of the lyrical form, and the possible connections to Menken’s work would have been a nice addition to the book.

Earlier I postulated a pair of hypotheses—one that there were an indigeneous avant-garde cinema in 1920s America, that split into two branches, one furthering the radical poetic aspirations of the earlier avant-garde, the other continuing, in the form of the innovative documentary, the indigenous American interest in the thing itself. Charles Wolfe’s “Straight Shots and Crooked Shots” argues that this hypothesis is true. He argues that the 1930s documentary should be thought of as a utilitarian strand of modernist practice, and not as entirely divorced from the avant-garde. Wolfe also has very interesting comments to offer on the Americanness of the American documentary of the thirties. William Urichio’s “The City Viewed” offers similar arguments concerning the city films of Jay Leda, Irving Browning and Herman G. Weinberg.

The book devotes less attention to demonstrating our other hypothesis, i.e., that there was an American avant-garde film of the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s that was heavily influenced by the visionary character of certain European art movements such as Surrealism and German Expressionism. One essay that does adopt this tact is Kristin Thompson’s essay on experimentation in 1920s Hollywood, which contains a section entitled “European Avant-garde Influences.” Nonetheless the lack of any close analysis in the book of Joseph Cornell’s work is, in this context, a most peculiar omission. Cornell represents an important bridge between the European avant-garde of the 1920s and the American avant-garde of 1950s and 1960s, for he was an important conduit for introducing Surrealist ideas circulating among European artists into American artists’ circles. He was also the maker of a number of films in the years between 1936 (the great *Rose Hobart*) and 1965. Several current avant-garde filmmakers responded enthusiastically to his film work; and Stan Brakhage, as well as the great contemporary Surrealist animator Larry Jordan, and the painter/filmmaker/performance artist Carolee Schneemann all worked with Cornell (in different capacities).

To the end of demonstrating that the American avant-garde film was never a purely autonomous phenomenon, that from its inception through the 1940s and after, it was influenced by European art movements, the book also might have included an essay on the work of Jerome Hill. For like Joseph Cornell, Jerome Hill was a filmmaker whose works were all made in the period of supposed hiatus, between the first and the second American film avant-gardes; and like Cornell, Hill had strong connections with Europe. In his case, because his forebearers had made a fortune as railroad barons, Hill was able to travel extensively, and so was well-acquainted with the goings-on of the European art

world. Hill exercised a considerable influence on the members of the second American film avant-garde.

An article on Hilla Rebay might have served the same end. Rebay had been an acquaintance of Kandinsky, Chagall, Klee and Moholy-Nagy (the latter remained a life long friend) before moving to New York City in 1927. She planned to establish a film centre in New York—Frank Lloyd Wright's original plans for the Guggenheim Museum included a basement floor devoted entirely to a Film Centre and a Light Institute, which was to house a collection of non-objective films and a study where film artists could have free access to filmmaking equipment. Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger and Norman McLaren, all artists who began their careers in Europe, were to have a role in the proposed Film Centre. Further Dwinell Grant (on whose work Tom Gunning contributes an impressive article) was her assistant between 1941 and 1942, while Marie Menken, the mother of the second American avant-garde, was her secretary. Given her intense commitment to the European conception of *Gegenstandloskunst*, and her association with founding figures of the second American film avant-garde such as John Whitney and Marie Menken, it likely that Rebay too was a bridge between the first and the second American avant-garde film movements.

One very strong article in the book undertakes to achieve virtually the converse to our second hypothesis—rather than showing that the films of the first American cinema avant-garde possess features that distinguish them from the European modernist film, it sets out to show that American modernism influenced a work that is generally taken to be an example of European modernism, viz. *Le ballet mécanique*. Thus, rather than recovering an American film for the indigenous tradition of American art, as Prof. Cartwright does with *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Lot in Sodom*, the article attempts to recover a classic of the European film avant-garde for the American movement. The film in question, *Le ballet mécanique*, is generally taken as example of Cubism (or, at least, Purism) in film. A principal reason for this is that we have taken Fernand Léger to be its maker, and Léger was associated with the Cubist and Purist movements (among others). William Moritz undertakes to demonstrate that Fernand Léger is not the film's principal maker; rather Dudley Murphy and, to a lesser extent, Man Ray, two 'Americans in Paris,' should receive principal credit for the film. Moritz' article sets out his reasons, in great detail. The piece is extraordinarily well-researched and cogently presented—almost to the point of being convincing. However, I remain unconvinced, and for reasons of length, the reservations I have about Moritz' argument must remain unstated.

In addition to articles that argue for one or the other of our hypotheses—either for the indigenous character of the first American film avant-garde, or for the European influences on the first and second American avant-garde film movements—there are others that do a splendid job of demonstrating that American avant-garde filmmakers continued to produce very fine work through the 1930s, when they are supposed to have disappeared. Foremost among these is Lauren Rabinovitz' article on Mary Ellen Bute. Rabinovitz has made an important first approach to the films of this significant, and neglected, filmmaker.

One very interesting remark in Rabinovitz' essay concerns Bute's having collaborated with Joseph Schillinger on *Synchrony* (1933). Schillinger was a composer and music theorist (of a most peculiar stripe) who proposed an extreme version of neo-Pythagoreanism, that reduced aesthetic effect to the result of the interaction of two harmonic patterns (i.e., patterns that could be specified by intervals whose measure have small integer ratios to one other). Among the features of this that have made it attractive to many artists is that Schillinger endeavoured to show that mathematical transformation of such patterns or their interaction produce aesthetic variety. I stumbled across Schillinger's system several years ago, in a computer book written by a "Jaxitron," and spend many months translating the book's APL code first into Prolog, and later into C++. Later, from an electronic music magazine, I learned that "Jaxitron" was a pseudonym for Dr. Jack Citron, an IBM scientist. Recently, while preparing a class on the Whitney's films, I discovered it was Dr. Citron with whom John Whitney worked while making *Permutations* and *Arabesque*, and that those films was based on Schillinger's notion of nodes. I

considered this an exciting discovery for the films of the Whitney brothers constitute another bridge between the first and the second avant-gardes; but it came as quite a surprise to discover from Rabinovitz' research that Schillinger had exercised influence on Bute as well.

Chuck Kleinhans offers an endearing portrait of a film obsessed Theodore Huff, but it is not clear how this portrait contributes to the effort of demonstrating the need to revise our understanding of the emergence of the American avant-garde of the 1940s—in fact the article does not even give the bona fides of Huff's credentials as a member of the avant-garde. Patricia Zimmermann contributes a useful piece, "Startling Angles: Amateur Film and the Early Avant-Garde," describing the conditions of production of avant-garde film, likening it to amateurs' work. The issue she raises is a weighty one: there was a very important split in the early years of the second avant-garde between those who took an artisanal approach to filmmaking and those who considered that they were answering to the artist's high calling; and some of the latter began to derogate those who still maintained the artisanal attitudes and approach of the earlier avant-garde. I believe that this is what is behind the contempt that some "high art" filmmakers expressed toward Ed Emshwiller's works, which were dismissed as "films made to win filmmaking competitions," since, from the standpoint of their lofty Romanticism, they viewed his films as vulgarian works (rather as a corps of younger Canadian "film artists" who, from their standpoint of *übermenschlich* and nihilist perversion, regard form, and craft itself, as beneath them). As a reaction against the lowly status film had been accorded by the academy and the museums, to stake a claim that film is an important high art was salutary; but, as anyone familiar with the conditions of art filmmaking in Canada knows, such "high-mindedness," is often the great enemy of art.

As worthwhile as the implications of Prof. Zimmermann's piece are, had she taken "amateur" filmmaking in the way that Brakhage understands it in his article "In Defence of the Amateur," as meaning the filmmaking that "lovers of cinema" do, or had she explored the aesthetic potentials of the "home movie" or the "travel film," or had she related that aesthetic potential to productions of film artists, as Jeffrey Ruoff does in his article on Jonas Mekas' work, "Home Movies of the Avant-Garde," she might have made an even more significant contribution.

The book offers no clue as to the identity of the compilers of its filmography and bibliography, (though I suspect that Dr. Horak is responsible for it). This is a pity, because they are both exceptionally fine pieces of work, and the filmography especially important. Whoever produced the filmography and bibliography deserves a great deal of credit.

All in all, this book is a very, very important beginning. Much remains to be done, but this will be the book that opened the way, and will remain a splendid contribution to the discussion of the early avant-garde film, and the avant-garde film in general.