# REVIEW-ESSAY

**LOVERS OF CINEMA: THE FIRST AMERICAN FILM AVANT-GARDE 1919-1945**
**Edited by Jan-Christopher Horak**
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995, 404 pp.

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. The civilized (European) world impedes efforts to contact the self, they argued; withdrawing into the embrace of nature assists those efforts. This portrayal of humans' relationship with the natural world as redemptive is 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.

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.[1] Suppose, for example, there were a strong avant-garde cinema in 1920s America, that developed with some measure of independence from European models (as Strand and Sheeler's *Manhatta* [1921] and Ralph Steiner's *$H_2O$* [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!* (1963) might be seen to belong to a line that begins with *Manhatta* and continues in the lunch counter sequence of Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke's *The City* (1939)—a film whose Americanness is as marked in Aaron Copland's poignant score as it is in theme and method—and whose photography, as Scott MacDonald notes, seems "at times reminiscent of *Manhatta*," while *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957) 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 (such as *The City*).

These examples illustrate 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 (changing course over those years, but never disappearing), the lack of continuity between the first avant-garde and the second avant-garde (customarily said to begin in 1943 with 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. By and large, the essays in Horak's anthology require us to revise those notions about the emergence of the post-war American avant-garde film.

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."[2] MacDonald astutely rejects the commonplace manner of commenting on *$H_2O$* (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 says of 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 results 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 time. It is instructive to view together *$H_20$* and the famous cream separator sequence in Sergej Ezjenstejn's *The General Line* (1929), or (a combination that perhaps highlights the contrast even better), Steiner's *Mechanical Principles* (1931) and Fernand Léger amd Dudley Murphy's *Le Ballet mécanique* (1924). 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 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. *$H_2O$* and *Mechanical Principles* are utterly different in this regard: neither film evinces any desire to raise its 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 (*$H_2O$*) 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."[3] Repudiating claims for the transcendentality of artistic form has been common among American artists. Indeed, the contrast between *Mechanical Principles* and *Le Ballet mécanique*, or between *$H_2O$* 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's and T.S. Eliot's ideas on poetic form.

Steiner's concern with the conditions of the everyday world also explains why he went on to make radical, independent documentaries in the 1930s, with such works as *Pie in the Sky* (1935) and *The City* (1939) and why, in the 1970s, he returned to making films like *Look Park* (1974) and *Hurrah for Light* (1975) that, as *$H_2O$* 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 contributes a very strong essay on Strand and Sheeler's *Manhatta*, highlighting 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. 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 and nature 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. I see a series of images in which hard and static geometric forms abut one another like the facets in Analytic Cubist painting, and articulate a shallow space which recedes only slightly from the picture-plane. These are 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 began working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (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 of photographic illusion into the faceted, shallow space of Cubism was at one time Strand's principal mission. Strand hoped to reformulate the space of photographic illusion 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.

*Manhatta* conveys a changed understanding 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 the urban world that produced Cubist forms. The concatenation of facets characteristic of Cubist art has much to do with the urban phenomenon of 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 New York as the subject for their films, for neither showed any particular enthusiasm for the urban world.[4]

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 Impressionism and Cubism, but which does not contravene the inherent characteristics of the photograph.

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, of putting 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 truly visionary.

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 it is Strand's commitment to this "radical empiricism" that alone can account for what might strike one at first as the strange course that 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: 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 forced artists to consider their responsibilities. Besides the dubious merit of these aesthetic propositions, there are other problems with their claim. Primary among them is 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.

Americanness appears in a different guise in Lisa Cartwright's fascinating attempt to recover *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) and *Lot in Sodom* (1933), commonly understood as American imitations of German expressionist film, for the indigenous American avant-garde. She 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 extend classic Hollywood techniques to ends that were more than commonly adventurous. To this point in the argument, the article strikes as 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[5] However, at this point the argument takes a most interesting turn as Cartwright goes on to qualify which "modernism" Watson and Webber rejected and which "modernism" they accepted. And to do so, she turns to a distinctively American modernism, that of Ezra Pound. "In a city," Pound wrote in a review of Jean Cocteau's

poetry, "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."[6] Pound here attributes to the modern way of seeing what Ernest Fenollosa in *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* attributes to a sequence of written Chinese—that it too 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 an insight of cardinal importance. But those Fenollosian beliefs also underpinned the Vorticist style of Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* (1961-64). By failing to draw this to our attention, Cartwright missed an extraordinary opportunity to connect the first and the second film avant-gardes.[7] 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 of 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.

The essays I have discussed so far tend to illustrate the hypothesis that there was an indigenous avant-garde cinema in 1920s America, which 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" also supports this hypotheses, arguing 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 Urichhio's "The City Viewed" offers similar arguments concerning the city films of Jay Leyda, Irving Browning and Herman G. Weinberg.

The book devotes less attention to a second hypothesis: 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 tack is Kristin Thompson's essay on experimentation in 1920s Hollywood, which contains a section entitled "European Avant-garde Influences." Nonetheless, the book's lack of any close analysis 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 into American artists' circles. He made a number of films between 1936 (the great *Rose Hobart*) and 1965. Several current avant-garde filmmakers responded enthusiastically to his film work, and Stan Brakhage, Larry Jordan, and Carolee Schneemann all worked with Cornell (in different capacities).

To the end of demonstrating that the American avant-garde film, from its inception, was influenced by European art movements, the book also might have included an essay on Jerome Hill who not only made his films in the period of supposed hiatus between the first and second American film avant-gardes, but also had strong connections with Europe and exercised considerable influence on the members of the second American film avant-garde. An article on Hilla Rebay would have been appropriate as well. An acquaintance of Kandinsky, Chagall, Klee and Moholy-Nagy (the latter remained a lifelong friend), Rebay planned to establish a film centre in New York, which was to house a collection of non-objective films and a studio where film artists could have free access to filmmaking equipment. Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger and Norman McLaren, all of whom began their careers in Europe, were to have had a role in the proposed film centre. Given her association with founding figures of the second American film avant-garde such as Menken and John Whitney, it is 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 by attempting to recover a classic of the European film avant-garde for the American movement. *Le Ballet mécanique* is generally taken as an example of Cubism (or, at least, Purism) in film, principally because we have taken Fernand Léger to be its maker, and Léger was associated with those 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's article sets out his reasons in great detail. The piece is extraordinarily well-researched and cogently presented—almost to the point of being convincing. I remain unconvinced, however, but for reasons of length, the reservations I have about Moritz's argument must remain unstated.

Nor does space permit discussion of several articles 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's article on

Mary Ellen Bute, an important first approach to the films of this significant, and neglected, filmmaker.[8] On the other hand, I am surprised that Horak did not include an article on the films of the poet/painter Emlen Etting, whose reeling subjective camera in *Poem 8* (1933) anticipated the lyrical form that, first, Marie Menken and then Stan Brakhage were to re-invent years later.

All in all, this book is a very, very important beginning, not the least because of its excellent bibliography and filmography (which includes many more films and filmmakers than are discussed in the book's articles). Much remains to be done, but this will be the book that opened the way, and it will remain a splendid contribution to the discussion of early avant-garde film and avant-garde film in general.

R. Bruce Elder
*Ryerson Polytechical University*

**NOTES**

1. It should be noted that P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) reveals its author's Emersonian leaning in its deliberate avoidance of commentary on European influences on American avant-garde filmmakers, as well as in its effort to chart various filmmakers' attempts to work out the Emersonian problematic of the relationship between consciousness and nature.
2. The phrase derives from Edmund Husserl, who declared that he wished phenomenology to return philospphy "zu den Sachen selbst" (to things themselves), but I allude to Charles Olson, "Letter to Elaine Feinstein," *Human Universe and Other Essays*, ed. Donald Allen (New York, Gove Press, 1967), 95: "My sense is that beauty (Schöenheit) better stay in the thingitself [sic]: das Ding—Ja!—Macht ring...."
3. Olson expounds this position in "Equal, That is, to the Real," *Human Universe*, 116-22.
4. Strand's interest was, by and large, rural America and village life in France and Italy. And at the outset of his career, Sheeler leaned towards natural subjects. In the mid-teens, he painted many works in which he applied the methods of Analytical Cubism to natural scenes. Sheeler is best known as a Precisionist painter, and Precisionism was founded on the belief that the distinctiveness of both the natural and the built environment was the predominance of strong, simple forms and crisp detail. When he first turned to Precisionism in 1917, his favourite subject was Bucks County (north of Philadelphia), and even after he moved to New York in 1919, he often turned to remote areas outside of the city for his subject matter. Around the mid-twenties, industrial subjects, rendered in bold, hard-edged Precisionist foms, became increasingly prominent in his work.
5. Including its representation of homoerotic desire, on which Cartwright does comment.
6. Ezra Pound, *The Dial* (January 1921): 110.
7. She does, however, remark that both Stan Brakhage and Hollis Frampton were students of Pound's poetry.
8. According to Rabinovitz, Bute collaborated with Joseph Schillinger on *Synchrony* (1933). Schillinger was a composer and music theorist who proposed an extreme version of

neo-Pythagoreanism, which 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 another). Among the features of this that have made it attractive to artists is that Schillinger endeavoured to show that mathematical transformation of such patterns or their interaction produce aesthetic variety. Schillinger's system appears in a computer book written by Dr. Jack Citron, an IBM scientist with whom John Whitney worked while making *Permutations* (1967) and *Arabesque* (1975), both of which were based on Schillinger's notion of nodes. Schillinger thus figures in the work of two of the filmmakers who bridge the first and second avant-gardes.