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Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1893–1941

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Back cover photo: Ralph Steiner, *Mechanical Principles*, 1930. 35mm film.

Front piece photo: William K.L. Dickson and William Heise, *Eugen Sandow, No. 1*, 1894. 35mm film.

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Emlen Etting: Three Films

R. Bruce Elder

Emlen Pope Etting (1905-1993) was well-known as painter and illustrator, he had thirty solo shows in his lifetime, and his works were purchased for the collections of Walter H. Annenberg, Helen Hayes, Bernice Wintersteen, Mary Clark Rockefeller, Pennsylvania Academy, Addison Gallery, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Atwater Kent Museum, and Whitney Museum of American Art. While he produced primarily stylized figurative paintings and drawings that depict the loneliness of modern existence, the contradictions of character/physiognomy, and the extravagance of nature, he also ventured into geometric abstraction.

Born in Philadelphia, Etting spent his early years in Europe. He returned to the United States for his schooling. After graduating from St. George's School in Middletown, Rhode Island, Etting attended Harvard University and earned a degree (1928) in French Literature. On leaving Harvard, he returned to Europe, and for four years joined the "Lost Generation" in Paris, during which time he met Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Jean-Paul Sartre. It was at this time he took up painting seriously and studied with the Cubist-inspired painter, illustrator (of works by Paul Eluard, for example) and theoretician André Lhote (to whose work Etting's has more than a passing resemblance) and at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière (which numbered among its teachers the Cubist-inspired sculptor Ossip Zadkine, whose free handling of the figure Etting's somewhat resemble).

He worked extensively in illustration. He was the illustrator and translator for Paul Valéry's *Le Cimetière Marin* (published by Centaur Press in 1932) and illustrator of *Koheleth: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (New Directions, 1940) and Franz Kafka's *Amerika* (New Directions, 1946). More of his illustration work is described below.

Etting was also an art teacher and had positions at Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia College of Art, and Florida Southern College.

***Oramunde* (1933)**

In 1940 Etting produced a set of illustrations for *Koheleth: The Book of Ecclesiastes*; in 1946 he produced the set of illustrations for Willa and Edwin Muir's translation of Franz Kafka's *Amerika*; and in 1953 he prepared illustrations for Rainer Maria Rilke's 1899 prose poem, *The Song of Love and Death of Standard-Bearer*, as translated by Christoph Rilke. In 1957 he illustrated *Born a Crowd*, a book by his wife Gloria Braggioti Etting, a photographer of considerable interest. The Rilke project, which apparently was not published, is especially interesting. Rilke's prose poem is a story of war, love, and sex, and to illustrate the text Etting prepared six erotic water-color illustrations of sleeping nudes, wounded and dying nude heroes, and couples making love. The topic suited Etting's talents. Rilke's Symbolist proclivities were close to Etting's own leanings, and the human form was among his favorite motifs. Indeed the very idea of the equivalence of visual and verbal form which underlies some forms of illustration is a Symbolist notion.

The film *Oramunde* is an outgrowth of Etting's book illustrations, for it is, in a sense, an illustration of the tale of Pelléas et Mellissande. Their story is that of two star-crossed lovers. When Mellissande, the wife of Pelléas' older brother Prince Golaud, meets Pelléas the attraction between them is immediate. Golaud kills his brother. Mellissande, having given birth to an infant, dies. The film appears to present a poetic reverie on four moments from the legend, all of them focusing on Mellissande: Golaud's discovery of Mellissande; Mellissande's trip to the castle of Golaud's father, Arkel; Geneviève's showing Mellissande the lofty forests of Allemonde and the sea beyond; Pelléas joining them as distant sailors' cries signal the departure of Mellissande's ship.

The most famous telling of the tale is that of the Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck. Etting's film has some of the formal attributes of Maeterlinck's drama. Like Maeterlinck's drama, Etting's film uses symbols as the principal vehicles to arouse sensations, to breath life into the ephemeral forms which compose the work. As in Maeterlinck's drama, plot incidents have seemingly inscrutable relations with one another, and their thematic significance seems hard to define. One is invited to form an "impression" of the work as a whole rather than to identify the literal meaning of each image and its role in thematic development.

The very basis of the film is the belief that the archetypal imagination is one of the mind's primitive modes. Stripping the story down to its archetypal core is therefore a means of penetrating to the core of imagination.

Poem 8 (1933)

This film represents a quest, through love, for an intensified perception of the beauty of everyday life. This lyrical investment justifies Emlen Etting's calling the film a "poem."

But we could also describe the quest the film depicts as an attempt to capture the vitality, intensity, and velocity of perception—to apprehend what, following C.S. Peirce, I have called the "firstness" of perception. That goal explains the use of the images of urban life (the traffic in New York City, the dynamized images of the architectonics of a steel-girder bridge, a crowd waving off a steamliner), for the city where movement, speed, and change has been raised to its apogee. The visceral effecting movement of the hand-held camera and the emphasis on images of flux—one image after another, the abstracted images of the branches shot as a car passes underneath them, shadows on a curtain, the wake left behind a motor-boat, shadows on pavement, grain blowing in wind, waves on rocks, leaves falling, wind rustling leaves, smoke, and steam—serve the quest for the "firstness" of perception. What is more, they establish an emphasis on physicality that would constitute the basis for subsequent filmmakers to recover the primality of perception.

To be sure, the film does incorporate symbolic images as well: we see a woman dancing among statues, a man holding a globe and squeezing it, the woman dropping a flower so that the man might pick it up. It is quite likely that Etting conceived of the film as an allegory of a man searching for a place to lose himself in other, to establish so intimate a relationship with nature or with the archetypal woman that it might be construed as an identity. The dance may even suggest the dance of the cosmos with which the filmmaker longs to be attuned. But what impresses is the dynamics of the work—the combination of the emphasis on subjective imagery and the hand-held camera conveys the flux of perception.

The program note for Cinema 16's showing of the film in October 1959 highlights the combination of symbolic form and concern with representation of direct perception. It read: "The film as a medium of poetry: Symbolic interpretation of a man's love life seen entirely through the protagonist's eyes." The occasion of the Cinema 16 screening, sixteen years after the film was finished and the only Etting film to be shown by that organization, was likely the popularity of *Lady in the Lake*, for the longer note emphasized only the lyrical form of the work and does so with a reference to that popular Hollywood film: "A forerunner by some fifteen years of Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake*, this film shows the action as seen through the eyes of the protagonist who remains invisible. The 'subjective' (if at times unsteady) camera poetically conveys the rush and fervor of love or kindred emotions. Although clearly experimental in treatment, the 'plot' remains on a simple, if obvious, plane." Evidently Etting's contemporaries found his emphasis on the corporeal dynamics of seeing extremely troubling. Perhaps that is why he never repeated that experiment, though that attribute would prove to be the most influential of his cinematic *oeuvre*.

Recognizing the presence of an allegory in the film raises a pressing question, however, *viz.*, "How does this emphasis on subjectivity serve such an allegory?" One answer—a partial answer, to be sure—is simple: at the time in which this film was made (the making of the film corresponds almost exactly with the writing of Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination*, and a time when Levy-Bruhl's ideas commanded wide-

spread allegiance) it was commonly believed that primal consciousness was mythological/archetypal. That explanation goes some distance in accounting for the film's interesting amalgam of allegory and lyric, but it does not go all the way. It does not, for example, explain the film's emphasis on direct, immediate perception (as opposed to the fantasy productions of the unconsciousness). An explanation that takes us somewhat deeper is that in recovering primal perception, the distinction between subject and object is overcome, and one discovers a ground where one truly *is*. This understanding of sensation is deeply embedded in the Emersonian tradition in American poetry and art—it is also the basis for attempting to probe sensation to its “firstness.” Etting was among the pioneers creating cinematic forms that embody that poetic belief. In the combination of mythological/archetypal images with devices that convey the dynamics of subjectivity and its fusion of allegory and lyric, Etting's film foreshadows work that would be done on the West Coast a decade and half later. Other filmmakers of the 1950s and 1960s would take over the physical means that Etting developed to suggest the corporeal dynamics of sensation, but would dispense with the allegorical devices he employed.

Laureate (1940)

As he did with his first film, Emlen Etting refers to this film as “a poem.” It is a poem in the sense that it employs highly condensed, plurisemic images that have a rather enigmatic relation to one another. The following is a typical sequence: a man in a blue leisure suit sits on a rock, writing, and, as he writes, he allows the sheets he has written on to blow away; the next shot presents, in close-up, a field of flowers; the next, a photographic still-life, consisting of a plate of fruits and vegetables (perhaps a lemon, a leek, beets, and half a melon); then a woman dancing in a shawl dance; that shot is followed by a still life with pineapple, grapes, and tomato; after that, the dancer approaches the man in the blue leisure suit, looks at him, and leaves. We then see the dancer's veiled face; four sets of hands squashing fruit, each set in a different quadrant of the screen; legs in water (intercutting this shot with the previous creates a plastic cut); a woman with wings on her head (likely signifying that she is a female Mercury) raising laurel leaves over her head; a man in a loincloth standing on a pedestal in a garden, with a raised hand, as though engaged in oratory (his gesture imitates the gesture of a man at a writing desk seen earlier in the film); another man, presumably a poet, reading from a clipboard and writing on a clipboard who passes in front of this “living sculpture,” crouches down, then continues to write and waves; “the poet” sitting on a window-ledge, writing; and, finally, waving again.

The film's construction resembles somewhat that of a Mallarmé poem. As do Mallarmé's poems, Etting's film employs condensed figures and unorthodox syntax. Mallarmé believed that the point of a poem was the beauty of its language (in Etting's case, the imagery). Mallarmé built each poem on a central symbol, idea, or metaphor, and the development of the poem consists in the elaboration of subordinate images that illustrate and help to develop the idea. The film seems to present an allegory suggesting the vanity of honors—that all the honors we receive, and all that we create, pass away. Only the beauty of nature is important. However, Etting preferred to hint at meanings rather than state them clearly. Stéphane Mallarmé described Symbolism as a means of “evoking an object little by little so as to reveal a mood, or conversely, the art of choosing an object and extracting from it a state of the soul [état d'âme].”

The imagery in the film is condensed and precise—a single, compact image is capable of evoking a range of ideas and associations. In this way, the film's construction is similar to that of Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams' poems, in which the concrete particular evokes the vastness of the particular. In his 1925 essay “Marianne Moore,” William Carlos Williams commented on this feature of Moore's poetry, (though it applies just as well to his poetry and to this film poem): “So that in looking at some apparently small object, one feels the swirl of great events.”

At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the Symbolist means this film employs were associated with the quest for deeper, more primal levels of consciousness—that was one of the beliefs that allied Symbolism with heterodox practices.