

These are notes on some of the films in the Unseen Cinema collection. The films commented on are:

Theodore Case Sound Experiments – *Man with Duck*

Melville Webber and James Sibley Watson Jr., *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928)

Dudley Murphy, *Danse Macabre* (1922)

Charles Bryant, *Salomé* (1923)

Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapich, *Life and Death of 9413 - A Hollywood Extra.* (1928)

Plastigram Stereoscopic films United States, ca. 1927

Emlen Etting, *Oramunde* (1932)

Emlen Etting, *Poem 8* (1933)

Emlen Etting, *Laureate* (1940)

James Sibley Watson, *Lot in Sodom* (1933)

**Theodore Case Sound Experiments – *Man with Duck* (1925) 148 ft.**

### **Program Note**

Theodore W. Case formed the Case Research Lab in 1916, to conduct research in electrical communications technology. Within two years of the lab's founding, Case and his associates had developed an infrared signaling system that the U.S. Navy used in World War I. Later, in the 1920s, Case began collaborating with Lee DeForest; one of the projects on which they collaborated was the DeForest Phonofilms. By 1924 they were producing examples of sound-on-film technology. In 1926, William Fox of Fox Film purchased the Case Research Lab's patents in 1926 and Theodore Case's company joined with Fox to form the Fox-Case Corporation, to produce the Movietone Sound for film system.

In one charming example of sound-on-film, *Man with Duck*, a man sings a simple tune with plaintive lyrics ("Ma, he's making eyes at me"). The point of the exercise is that at certain cadences in the song, the man squeezes the duck, which then emits a squawk: "Ma, he wants to marry me." "SQUAWK!"

**Dudley Murphy *Danse Macabre* (1922) 168m (546 feet).**

Visual Symphony presents Adolph Bolm in

*Danse Macabre* [At first we see only figures, some wearing skeleton costumes and others wearing long dresses (thus the figures intimate the film's theme of Death and the Maiden); the figures then position themselves to form the letters of the title of the film.]

Conception: Adolph Bolm

Direction: Dudley Murphy

Lighting: Francis Brugière

Animation: FAA Dahme

Release: Claude H. Macgowan

168 m.

## Cast

Youth: Adolph Bolm

Love: Ruth Page

Death: Olin Howland

## Introductory titles

"Midnight in plague-ridden Spain – Youth and Love flee from Death who follows their path.

Love feels his uncanny breath and swoons – Youth despairs and prays, – when lo! – the cock of dawn crows and Death fades away into the shadow of his tomb.

## Program Note

The film is based on a dance that tells a story of Death and the Maiden. It opens with a Symbolist animation sequence, representing: first, a midnight tower with a bat soaring near it; next, one portrait of Death; then a second portrait, this time almost in profile and playing the violin. We then see a model of a castle, and a tiny figure of a woman entering it.

The opening establishes an unreal location for the drama. What happens next is therefore surprising: the action moves to the interior of the castle and two characters, whom the credits identify as "Youth" and "Love," perform a dance, reminiscent of the Spanish style (it makes use of a fan and a shawl). The dance tells the story outlined in the introductory titles.

A remarkable feature of the work is its insouciance about combining contrasting cinematic modes – Murphy did not accept the homogenization that we now consider requisite to diegetic illusion. The film combines fantasy elements – realized using animation and superimposition (of the spectral figure of death) – with a resolutely factual presentation of the dance. The first time that Death appears, he is presented as an apparition in the upper left hand corner of the screen. He next appears exactly when the Youth and Love are about to kiss – the timing suggests that Death is at once the enemy of Love and allied with Love. To reinforce that tragic connection, the choreography suggests that while Love is terrified by Death, she also is drawn to him. The theme of that relation between Love and Death is further developed when we see Death put in his ominous appearance, co-inciding with the moment when Youth and Love embrace.

The inclusion of fantasy sequences and sequences that convey Death's omnipresence are motivated by the programmatic dimension of Saint-Saens' music. The artifice of these sequences, however, is not characteristic of the film's predominant style: the formative principles for the dance presentation conform to the observational protocols which American avant-garde filmmakers accepted more frequently than did their European counterparts. But if the film's style integrates antithetical elements, so does the theme of the film, for it concerns the identity of the opposites, love and death.

## **Melville Webber and James Sibley Watson Jr. *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928)**

350 m.

The Fall of the House of Usher

A Film Version of Poe's Story

by

Melville Webber and J.S. Watson Jr.

Actors:

Frederick Usher    Herbert Stern  
Madelaine Usher    Hildegarde Watson  
The Traveller      Melville Webber

### Program Note

Like Dudley Murphy's *Danse Macabre*, Webber and Watson's *The Fall of the House of Usher* exhibits many Symbolist features. This is hardly surprising, as Edgar Allen Poe, whose short story was the inspiration for this film, was a principal influence on the formation of Symbolism. David Curtis wrote about the film in *Experimental Cinema*: "Dr. James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber reduce [Poe's] story to its essentials, the impact being largely transmitted through the careful use of silhouette, multiple exposure and rhythm, which successfully evoke the disembodied atmosphere of the piece . . . Sets are suggested by light and by the patterns made by folded paper rather than by painted or three-dimensional props." The description is basically accurate – what is remarkable, however, is that the terms in which it is couched ("rhythm," "disembodied atmosphere," and "suggested" rather than rendered) are the terms conventionally emphasized in descriptions of Symbolist art. Mallarmé, after all, strived to create a poetry which, like music, was capable of infinite interpretations.

In the Poe story on which the film is based, the narrator visits the crumbling mansion of his friend, Roderick Usher, hoping to dispel Roderick's gloom. Although his twin sister, Madeline, has been placed in the family vault, Roderick is convinced she lives. Madeline arises in trance, and carries her brother to death. The house itself splits asunder and sinks into the tarn. The Webber and Watson film isolates a few moments from the story and develops them suggestively (though in an elliptical and, for the most part, non-narrative fashion)

But where Murphy's film every gives evidence of the effort to imbue straightforward, literal photography (and straightforward narrative dance) with Symbolist significance, Webber and Watson's employs a lavish array of "trick" devices. From the very outset, the film insists that is not simply a reproduction of the external world. It opens with an optical collage of texts, the last of which presents, at the centre of the screen, the words "Alone on horseback." The first image then appears: a dark figure, alone and on horseback, silhouetted against a cloudy sky, approaches a castle. This paradigmatically Symbolist opening leads to an optical collage that introduces us to the inside of the castle – the final view of the castle's interior appears to rip or burn open, to reveal yet another Symbolist image, a beautiful lady carrying a flower – the composition emphasizes that the room encloses her. The ripping conveys that we are penetrating into the inner recesses of the narrator's mind.

The woman takes a drink, then suddenly the quality of the image changes: a serving tray appears to float. The experience sets her off, and she seems first to fall asleep, then to walk in her sleep. A coffin appears, in multiple superimposition, suggest forms swimming in the stream of consciousness. The dark figure we saw on horseback rings the bell (a splendid optical collage reinforces the bells' tintinambulation). A montage of moving stairs emphasizes the hallucinatory character of the film's images. The woman appears with dark shawl draped over her head; and immediately following these we see hands stroking a cloth, suggesting the erotic motives that drive Frederick Usher's behaviour. These scenes reveal the method of the film, which relies on the complex intermingling of perception and imagination – so intricate and total an intermingling that the distinctions between the two cannot be precisely delineated. In "The

Premature Burial,” Poe wrote – and the remark could serve as a gloss for *The Fall of House of Usher* – that “The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends and where the other begins?” The Webber and Watson film is in this Symbolist tradition: imagination and reality fuse as the distinctions between death and life become blurred.

We have seen the film incorporates verbal elements: a collage of quotations was used at the beginning to indicate that the story derives from Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* and to initiate the story. Later uses of verbal elements reveal another purpose for this investment in language. Words haunt Frederick Usher: later in the film, the letters ‘B E A T,’ ‘C R A C K E D,’ ‘S C R E A M,’ and ‘M A S K,’ appear, generally in an elaborate (and possibly chirographic) style, created by photographing the reflections of letters formed on a shiny plate revolving on a phonograph. Here words are used to indicate that what we see on the screen are projections of the protagonist’s mind and reveal what is driving him mad, to the point of hallucination. With their interest in the protagonist’s mental processes, Webber and Watson capture the psychology of Poe’s tales, which so often deal with paranoia, mental debility, obsession, damnation, feverish fantasies, death as source of horror and inspiration, and the imaginative congeries these conditions produce.

The central concern of the Webber and Watson film, the cinematic mimesis of consciousness, would in fact become the principal preoccupation of the post-1942 American avant-garde film. That cinema would strive to present, in cinematic terms, the dynamics of consciousness operating in extreme conditions – or, to characterize the drive somewhat differently, to uncover primal perception, to recover what C.S. Peirce termed ‘the firstness’ of perception. Between the years 1942 and 1967, two forms were widely used in this effort: the trance film, in which the entranced figures convey the intensity of their haunted spirits through their actions, and the lyrical film, in which we are presented directly with the contents of the protagonist’s consciousness. *The Fall of the House of Usher* contains the germ of both forms; and though the stronger emphasis is on the character acting out of his bizarre desires (making the film a precursor of the trance film of late 1940s and early 1950s) the imagery itself, largely because of uncommonly rich optical resources deployed in its making, takes on characteristics of images representing the contents of extreme states of consciousness.

Webber and Watson’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* is often said to be derived from of the Expressionist cinema that emerged in Germany in the late 1910s and early 1920, and especially from Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. Caligari did have an extended run at the Capitol Theater in New York City in 1921, and Watson was enamoured of the Murnau’s Expressionist film. Webber and Watson adapted the plastics of Expressionist cinema for their use in *The Fall of the House of Usher* – like the German Expressionist cinema, the American film made use of stark, geometrical decors, diagonal compositions, discrepancies of scale, impossibly articulated spaces, and the exaggerated depiction of psychological struggle and, as Wiene’s film did, presents both the image of a top-hatted figure and of a somnambulist. What separates *The Fall of the House of Usher* from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, however, is that the images in Webber and Watson’s film, despite the fact that it generally uses shadows on wallboard (instead of sets), and makes use of complex optical techniques and special lenses, have the density and force of reality – the reality that the imagination forms and in which we live. The interest in the direct, intensified experience joins Webber and Watson’s film with William Carlos Williams’ poetry – indeed, Watson was a so great an admirer of William Carlos Williams that he sometimes adopted the pseudonym “W. C. Blum” for articles lauding the works of Williams. Webber and Watson convey the pressure of reality (reality created in imagination, but reality nonetheless) on consciousness, to convey the primal character of raw perception, what C.S. Peirce called ‘Firstness’ in experience. One can formulate a sense of what I mean by “reality” in this context by contrasting Webber and Watson’s achievement with that of Hans

Richter, Walther Ruttmann, or Oskar Fischinger. It would be Webber and Watson's principal legacy to the avant-garde cinema in America.

**Charles Bryant *Salomé* (1923)**

Nazimove in *Salomé* An Historical Phantasy by Oscar Wilde written for the screen by Peter M. Winters

Direction Charles Bryant                      Sets and Costumes  
by Mis Natacha [sic] Rambova    (after Aubrey Beardsley)

Photography by Charles J. Van Enger A.S.C

Herod, Tetrach of Judea . . Mitchell Lewis  
Salomé, Stepdaughter of Herod Nazimova

Herodias, Wife of Herod, Mother of Salomé . . . Rose Dione  
Marraboth, a Syrian Prince, robbed of his throne and forced to serve Herod as the Captain of the garde – Earl Schenk

The Page of Herodias – Arthur Jasmine

Jakannan, the Prophet Nigel De Brulier.

Opening titles:

“Profound was the moral darkness that enveloped the world on which the Start of Bethlehem arose.”

“It is at this point the drama opens, revealing Salomé who yet remains an uncontaminated blossom in a wilderness of evil.

“Though still innocent, Salomé is a true daughter of her day, heiress to its passions and its cruelties. She kills the thing she loves; she loves the thing she kills, yet in her soul there shines the glimmer of Light and she sets forth gladly into the unknown, to solve the puzzle of her own words –

“The mystery of Love is greater than the mystery of Death.”

**Program Note:**

The final title, “the mystery of Love is greater than the mystery of Death” suggests the theme of the film, which concerns the close relation that love has to death. The love the film portrays is a tainted love, a love that resembles death. Debauchery and decadence abound: Herod lusts after his step-daughter, Herodias flirts with banqueters, while Salomé lusts for Jokanaan; Salomé seems erotically stimulated by the observation, “How strange the moon looks – it’s as though she’s looking for dead things”; Salomé becomes aroused by the Jokanaan’s refusal to succumb to her advances, and he responds to her advances by invoking the Angel of Death (an invocation that, proves to be prophetic since, for most of the film we expect, in keeping with the bible story, that Salomé’s lust for Jokanaan foreshadows his execution, it actually foreshadows her own); and, at the end of the film, Salomé explains that it was Jokanaan’s rejection of her

love for him that prompted her to ask for his head; and so it is that love that, in the end, brought death upon her.

But the primary instrument the film uses to develop that favorite Symbolist theme, the identity of love and death, is the suggestion of incest. Herod's incestuous lust for his stepdaughter Salomé lies at the heart of the film. Thus, when Herod implores Salomé to dance for him, he promises her the throne of her mother, Herodias. When he fails to entice her with that promise, he tells her that he has hidden jewels in his palace that her mother has never seen, and that she will be as "fair as queen" when she wears them.

This ambience of debauchery is conveyed with an apocalyptic tone. At one point, a title in the film tells of the eyes of blind being opened and the ears of deaf made to hear – a comment relating to the Last Judgement, when the lowly shall be exalted while the mighty laid low. Jokanaan too condemns Salomé as "the daughter of Babylon," thus evoking the whore of Babylon, chaos, darkness and the Apocalypse foretold in the Book of Revelation. Both the debauchery prevalent in the film and the apocalyptic tone through which it is conveyed are characteristic of *fin-de-siècle* Symbolism and its echoes among the Decadents in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The action of the film is presented in a series of tableaux. Though it was made in 1922, fifteen years or more after such founders of the classical American cinema as D.W. Griffith had developed the protocols for creating an illusory diegetic space, the construction of this film does not adhere to those protocols. The relation of the spaces of successive shots, a key consideration for the post-Griffith illusionism, is not of key importance to this film: Bryant leaves somewhat open the geographic relation of the cage that imprisons Jokanaan to the banquet table, the spatial relation of the moon in the cloudy sky to the cloudless sky into which Salomé gazes, the distance that separates banqueters to the cliff from which the guard jumps, or the relative positions of Herod and the magi at the banquet table. While some of these relations can be intellectually mapped, Bryant does nothing to make the space fuse, by suturing shots with, for example, continuous movement.

In place of the continuity between shots that ordinarily is the basis for constructing a fictional diegesis, Bryant emphasized the relative autonomy of the individual shot – it is that autonomy that enabled Bryant for example to tint shots differently. Bryant's commitment to realizing a work which accorded formal autonomy of each shot had the following formal consequences:

- 1) Developing the relative autonomy of each shot, the individual shots that compose the film are presented as attractions, that is as devices whose effective power is akin to that of circus act or of fairground spectacle. The exotic, Beardesleyan costumes and sets, for example, have the effect of intensifying the impact of the individual shots.

Bryant's use of the principle of attractions reaches its apogee in a sequence depicting Salomé's dance and its effect on her audience – her ability to throw her audience into an erotic frenzy, is conveyed through an extraordinary montage of attractions that presents a series of striking scenes (attractions). We see Herod, possessed by erotomania and approaching orgasm; then Salomé dancing; then a burly black executioner with a long sword, a tall peaked hat and painted face; then the face of a beautiful young man resembling a middle-eastern Adonis; then Herod again, in the grip of erotic arousal. And throughout, Jokanaan calls out from his cage for the death of the decadents above him.

The effect of this intensification reverberates through the film's structure. It changes the status of the image from that of a "window on the world," the status which the classical realist cinema accorded it, to that of an artificial construct. In this film, the frame does not open onto "the world"; rather the frame delimits the space of an artifice the filmmakers construct. We can discern a similar emphasis on the artifice of the image in the films of Webber and Watson that

are presented in this program – in fact, it was widespread in the American avant-garde film of the 1920s and 1930s.

We must be somewhat more precise about the character of this artifice, however. It is not the artifice space of Léger and Murphy's *Un Ballet Mécanique*, or Hans Richter's *Rhythmus 21* or Walther Ruttmann's *Opus 3*. The difference is that the space of the Webber and Watson film relates to the character of mental process – to the filmmaker's effort to capture the elaboration of perception/imagination.

2) Because the shots are relatively autonomous, the style of each individual shot can be slightly different: consider the difference in the visual style of the jail, the banquet table, and the room containing the banquet table. Live action that takes place in an extremely elaborate constructed set is intercut with live action that is played against painted scenery, with animated images, and with live action set against a plain backdrop. Stylistic variation between spaces, rather than that homogeneity required for the construction of a fictional diegesis, provides the film's central constructive principle.

3) Because the suturing of shots through continuous action is not a principal concern, action at the edges of the frame is less important than in most post-Griffith cinema; consequently, the composition of shots can be focussed on the centre of the screen. And, in this film, the action and composition is generally centred at the centre of the screen.

Sometimes this composition is foregrounded, as it is in the shot of Jokanaan in his underground cell, whose design is patterned on a hub and spokes principle. In this case, there is a compelling reason for the foregrounding: at the end of the film, the shot showing Salomé being speared to death is structured similarly, and the similarity of the composition indicates the relation that binds her to him, and him to her.

4) The relative autonomy of the shots allows for the conversion of a shot's content into a symbol. Thus we are presented with an image of the moon that, by its stylistic difference, is isolated from surrounding shots – that isolation helps to turn the moon into a symbol, of fortune, fickleness and fate. Indeed, on two or three occasions, a skull appears as the "face in the moon" and the first time that occurs, a character remarks: "How strange the moon looks – it's as though she's looking for dead things."

Likewise, when Herod promises Salomé jewels that will make her "as fair as queen," we see Salomé sitting on a mountain of jewels. Herodias' taking the ring with the image of a skull and cross-bones off Herod's finger is another example of symbolic conversion. Such symbolic conversion is precluded by the protocols governing spatial illusionism that has regulated the classical American film style. Bryant avoids those protocols, and so is free to use such symbolism to develop the film's theme of the identity of love and death.

5) Because the shots are not joined with one another by suturing space and movement, another principle of connection is required. Bryant found that principle in plastic cutting which presents similar forms on either side of the cut. A remarkable example is Bryant's intercutting Salomé's masked (matted) eyes and a guard's decorated nipples. In this instance, the plastic relation between the adjoining shots provides the "motivation" for the erotic relationship, a relationship on which the plot of the film turns.

**Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapich**

## Life and Death of 9413 - A Hollywood Extra. (1928)

Conceived and realized by Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapich

9413 – raucourt [i.e. Jules Raucourt]

☆ - voya [Georges Voya]

camera-work gregg [i.e. Gregg Toland, who later worked on John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, William Wyler's *Little Foxes* and Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*].

### Program Note:

Flory and Vorkapich's *The Life and Death of 9413 – A Hollywood Extra* everywhere gives evidence that its makers harboured divergent impulses. On the one hand, the film was inspired by the same sort of formal and rhythmical ideals that inspired *Un Ballet Mécanique*, if not by the film itself.

Indeed the two films have many similar elements: the protagonist of the Flory and Vorkapich film, John Jones (who is given the number '9413' by the studio industry) in his quest for success, climbs a set of stairs over and over again, in an apparent loop, just as the washerwoman in *Ballet Mécanique* does; a female is shown smiling, then allowing her lips to fall into a non-expressive position, then smiling again. Flory and Vorkapich even used the device of inserting text into the film as graphic elements, one of *Un Ballet Mécanique*'s most famous devices. Moreover, like *Ballet Mécanique*, *The Life and Death of 9413* incorporates numerals into the film as graphic elements.

Like *Ballet Mécanique*, *The Life and Death of 9413* juxtaposes shots on the basis of the similarity of their rhythms – for example, shots depicting shoes being polished, a mouth forming words and a barber pole spinning are juxtaposed for their rhythmic articulation. An Expressionist composition that includes a film reel spinning along with industrial forms is cut together with a sign stating "No casting today," with a shot of '13' (a female actress) getting up, sitting down, getting up, setting down, while a hand in the foreground directs her activities, effectively making a marionette of her. The net effect of this intercutting is to turn her actions into that of a piston or cam-shaft, and comparing human actions to machine actions, and converting human actions into a mechanical ballet, is one of the visual devices of Léger, Murphy and Ray's film – indeed the idea of "*l'homme machine*" is one we associate with Léger. And, like *Ballet Mécanique*, *The Life and Death of 9413* highlights the urban/industrial character of the cinematic apparatus (especially in its montage sequence of movie cameras being cranked, traffic and urban streetlife).

A materialist thrust is allied with this aesthetic of abstraction. The shadow-play of several segments in the opening sequences of *The Life and Death of 9413* invokes the familiar modernist desire to make a work that conforms to the fundamental conditions of the cinema, its essence understood, in this case, to derive from the fact that it is composed of light and shadow. Near the end of the film, Flory and Vorkapich again draw attention to the material facts of the cinema: when the unsuccessful actor dies, we are presented, first, with a montage of laughing faces, then with a sequence of purely abstract, dynamic forms in richly varied tones (produced apparently with a little mechanical device somewhat like the machine that Lazlo Maholy-Nagy used to similar ends in his film *Grau-Weiss-Schwarz: Ein Lichtspiel*). After his soul seems to arise from the unfortunate actor's dead body (depicted through the use of a superimposition) and ascends in a sort of funicular towards heaven (depicted, in one of the film's most charming moments, through the use of a graphic), the film offers the abstract composition of grey-tones in motion once again.



However, this pure, abstract, modernist aesthetic is not the aesthetic that dominates *The Life and Death of 9413* – its form does not result from a montage of plastic elements of the sort that *Un Ballet Mécanique* used. For a more straightforward aesthetic of the object co-exists in the film with a modernist aesthetic, as a sort of dialectical antithesis to it and, in the end, *The Life and Death of 9413 – A Hollywood Extra* surrenders its structure to narrative, a satiric fantasy about a man who wants to become a Hollywood movie star.

This duality in the film's construction is emphasized right at the beginning of the film: the film opens with a shadow-play of stylized, Expressionistic sets, canted so that successive images contrast with one another; this highly stylized sequence is followed by a straightforward, factual portrait of an ingenuous face. Furthermore, this straightforward portrait is followed by more process shots, presenting canted forms somewhat reminiscent of the German expressionist cinema; this antithesis is then sublated in the following sequence, which integrates an ingenuous, smiling face into a montage of the sort for which Slavko Vorkapich later became famous.

What accounts for this division in the film is not hard to fathom: Flory and Vorkapich were more committed to the actual object than Murphy, Léger and Ray were. Indeed, the very point of Murphy, Léger and Ray's exercise was to demonstrate that a variety of sorts of images – pure abstract forms, pure graphic elements, modified graphic elements (for example, the '0's that are broken into sections), modified photographic elements (images shot through prisms or mattes, or against backlight to convert the photographic image into a "silhouette"), and strictly naturalistic photographs could all play the same role in the nexus of rhythmic relations. The filmmakers demonstrated this, of course, by treating every dynamic image as, first and foremost, a formal and rhythmic element – as a shape in motion. By treating all visual elements as pure dynamism, the individual fragments of which the film is composed are drained of the representational force that realistic images usually possess – an '0', in a given context, can represent a necklace, a mathematical conception, or can simply be a graphic shape, while a woman's smile becomes hardly more than an interesting shape.

Flory and Vorkapich attempted to synthesize the divergent tendencies – the interest in the construction of formal and rhythmic analogies and the interest in the human story – by treating the story almost allegorically. Accordingly in a section near to the end of the film, we see a series of shots of relatively realistic texture: but what strikes one about these images is not their realistic qualities, but rather their role in articulating the allegory the film presents. The narrative advances accordingly to an allegorical principle, extracting a semiotic kernel from each shot which it incorporates into a tale about the crushing of dreams: we see 9413 talking on the telephone and we interpret this to mean that 9413 is looking for work; we see a restaurant sign, posting prices of its menu items and we interpret this to mean that 9413 is hungry; we see rent notices being shoved under a door, and interpret this to mean that 9413 is having trouble paying his rent. This sort of conversion of shots into allegorical units is uncharacteristic of *Un Ballet Mécanique*. While Léger, Murphy and Ray convert the ordinary, real world forms into formal elements (into shapes in motions, and shapes of motion), Flory and Vorkapich convert them into narrative elements. The difference highlights the importance that Flory and Vorkapich attach to the actuality of the shot.

It is said the film was shot for \$96.00, largely shot in Slavko Vorkapich's kitchen using cut-out miniatures.

**Plastigram Stereoscopic films United States, ca. 1927 170m.**

A selection of a number of experiments in red/green stereoscopy conducted around 1927. The film consists of number of images that exploit the illusion of depth. The images belong basically two sets: the first set of images are silhouetted forms, shot against a homogeneous white ground; the second set of images are, if anything, even more impressive for being photographed in natural settings and exhibiting tonal modelling. Images in the first set include a Gaucho who cracks a whip so that it soars out into the audience; a baseball pitcher who hurls a ball; a cleaning-man who mops the floor, then advances towards the audience, carrying his pail and, at the end of the shot, tosses the water towards the audience; and (perhaps the most startling and successful illusion amongst the silhouette figures), a fisher with an object at the end of his line who walks towards the audience, dangling the object before them. Images in the second set include: troops marching down a street toward the audience (in this case, an interesting feature of the illusion is that the figures themselves appear as flat, cardboard figures, but the recession through the rows of soldiers is stunning); a haggard old woman who holds a glass and a bottle marked with a skull and cross-bones – she pours from the bottle, then holds the glass out to the audience; a hand with pasted-on fingernails that reaches out towards the audience; a fencer in Cyrano de Bergerac garb who pokes his sword at the audience; two Chinese executioners who decapitate a man – the head then flies out towards the audience; and a Charlot figure who, first, holds out a pie to the audience, then hurls it at them.

## **Emlen Etting**

Emlen Pope Etting (1905–1993) was well-known as painter and illustrator—he had 30 solo shows in his lifetime and his works were purchased for the collections of Walter H. Annenberg, Helen Hayes, Bernice Wintersteen, Mary Clark Rockefeller, the Pennsylvania Academy, the Addison Gallery in Andover, MA., the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Atwater Kent Museum, and the Whitney Museum. 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 a more than a little 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 *Koheloth - The Book of Ecclesiastes* (New Directions, 1940) and Franz Kafka's *Amerika* (New Directions, 1946).

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

## **Emlen Etting *Oramunde* (259 ft)**

An étude on the theme of Mellissande  
Produced by Emlen Etting 1932  
Interpreted by Mary Binney Montgomery.

### **Program Note:**

Emlen Etting (1905 –1992) was a well-known painter and sculptor. He was also an illustrator, and produced illustrations for a number of literary works. In 1940, he 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*; 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 that text, Etting prepared six erotic water-colour illustrations, of sleeping nudes, wounded and dying nude heros, 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 favourite motifs. Indeed the very idea of the equivalence of visual and verbal form which underlies some forms of illustration is a very Symbolist notion.

*Oramunde* is outgrowth of Etlting's book illustrations, for it is, in a sense, an illustration of the tale of Pelléas and Mellissande. Marina Papini asked Etting about *Oramunde* during an interview she conducted for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art: "Do you want to talk a little bit about your first movie, *Oramunde* . . ." Etting replied that it was "inspired by Pelias and Melisande but that was worked out by a dancing figure that was tied up again with my dancing series. But the local dancer in that was Mary Binney Montgomery, who had her own dance studio in Philadelphia in those days. She's now Mrs. Wheeler, years later, but..."(<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-emlen-etting-12027#transcript>) The story of Pelléas and Mellissande is that of two star-crossed lovers, Mellissande, the wife of Pelleas' older brother Prince Golaud. When she 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 focussing 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. Etlting's film has some of the formal attributes of Maeterlinck's drama. Like Maeterlinck's drama, Etlting's film uses symbols as the principal vehicles to arouse sensations, to breath life into the ephemeral forms that 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 (546 ft)**

Cinema 16 presents

Poem 8

Produced by Emlen Etting, 1933

interpreted by

Mary Binny Montgomery

Agnes Hitchcock

Caress Crosby

**Program Note:**

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, change has been raised to its apogee. The viscerally effecting movement of the hand-held camera and the emphasis on images of flux (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 – one after another the images highlight flux) serve the quest for "the firstness" of perception. What is more, they help establish an emphasis on physicality that would constitute the bases for the efforts of 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. Cinema 16's program note for their 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." Etting's own comments confirm this poetic aspiration. In an interview for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, Marina Pacina asked Etting about what drew him into film. He replied:

Well, because I was working in Paris during Cocteau's reign there, experimentation, and he experimented in Films, and Fernand Léger did a film called *Entr'acte*, I think it was called [it was *Ballet mécanique*; *Entr'acte* is film by René Clair, with Francis Picabia and Erik Satie]. And I became interested in it

because of what was going on around me in Paris at the time was so stimulating, and the films excited me. Dalí was doing one, two in fact, and Cocteau did *The Blood of the Poet*. And I thought, how interesting it would be if we used the film in a different method. So far it had been used like a novel to tell a story, or else as a documentary and there was nothing else in between, and I wanted to use the film as a poetic medium, to do a poem like T.S. Eliot's poems, and do it entirely visually and that's how I came about to do my film I called *Poem 8* and as far as I know it was the first film that experimented in that as a poetic medium. (<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-emlen-etting-12027#transcript>)

Etting likely connected the film's poetic character to his first-person point-of-view—to the fact that the film presents the contents of filmmaker's consciousness (rather as *The Waste Land* does the poet's).

In fact, what likely brought *Poem 8* to Cinema 16's attention 16 years after the film was finished (and the only film of Etting's to be shown by that organization) was 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 15 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 fervour of love or kindred emotions. Although clearly experimental in treatment, the "plot" remains on a simple, if obviously 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 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 widespread 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 phantasy 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.

## **Emlen Etting *Laureate* (396 ft)**

Emglo Productions

1940

A Film Poem

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 closeup, 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 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 stands 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 an clipboard and writing on a clipboard passes in front of this “living sculpture,” crouches down, then continues to write; waves; “the poet” sitting on a window-ledge, writing; and, finally, waves 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 honours – that all the honours 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 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.”

About the early American avant-garde film, Jan-Christopher Horak, remarks “What makes these films specifically American and unique - in contrast to their European counterparts - is that their modernism is often tempered with romantic attitudes. While Europe’s various art movements embraced modernity wholeheartedly, Americans were still mourning the loss of man’s connection to nature. Such remnants of romanticism are certainly visible in films like Weinberg’s *Autumn Fire*, Rodakiewicz’s *Portrait of a Young Man*, Steiner’s *H<sub>2</sub>O* or Newcombe’s *Enchanted City*. . . [I]t is this mixture of modernism and romanticism which also ties the early American avant-garde to later filmmakers, like Stan Brakhage, Robert Breer, Sidney Peterson . . . [and] Jonas Mekas.” Etting’s *Laureate* confirms the general thrust of Horak’s comments.

At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the Symbolist means that 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.

### **Lot in Sodom (1933)**

	Produced by Watson	Wilder
	Webber	Wood
O'Brien		

Sound composed by Louis Siegel

Lot   Friederich Haak  
Lot's Wife   Hildegarde Watson  
Lot's Daughter   Dorthea Haus  
Angel   Lewis Whitbeck

### **Program Note:**

In the years between 1920 to 1929, *The Dial*, edited by Scofield Thayer and James Sibley Watson, was considered the most prominent avant-garde journal of the time. During this decade, it had unparalleled influence on the art, literature, and criticism, both in America and abroad. Among the contributors to *The Dial*, which included, Marianne Moore, who later became editor, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot ("The Wasteland" appeared in the review), William Carlos Williams (who gave the journal the first version of *Paterson* to publish), Pablo Picasso (the review published some sketches by the artist), Marc Chagall, Robert Delaunay (both of whom published reproductions of paintings in the journal) and Ernest Hemingway, was the poet and Greenwich Village figure, E.E. Cummings. The support that Thayer and Watson provided him helped make Cummings' reputation, and Cummings knew it. He wrote to his father, in May 1920: "I need not say that I am extraordinarily that is as usual lucky in having what amounts to my own printing press in Thayer and Watson." Considering that Cummings at the time was twenty-five years of old, and *The Dial* was a leading review of the time, being treated thus was indeed fortunate.

*The Dial* published not only Cummings' poems, but his essays and drawings as well – and did so with staggering frequency. In just the five months preceding the May, 1920 letter, the period since Thayer and Watson had purchased *The Dial* and established its policy, the review had published twelve of Cummings' poems, four of his line drawings, and his long essay on Gaston Lachaise. Cummings appearing in three of the first five issues. His work would appear in eighteen subsequent issues before 1929, when the review was closed; all in all, it published thirty-seven poems by Cummings, excerpts from the play *Him*, four essays, twenty-two line drawings, and reproductions of two oil paintings and four washes. Pound, in his characteristically acerbic tone, referred to Cummings as *The Dial's* "white-haired boy."

Nor did Watson's support for Cummings end when *The Dial* folded – both he and his wife Hildegard continued to hold him in very high esteem, and Hildegard in particular adored as the epitome of the artistic personality. Cummings, for his part, named Sibley and Hildegard

Watson in his will as his best and most constant friends.

The editors' affiliation with Cummings went back to the early 1910s, when the three were at Harvard together; in fact, Thayer and Watson served (among others) as Cummings' aesthetic mentors. Watson directed Cummings' interest towards the French Symbolist poets, while Thayer introduced him to Wilde, Beardsley, Joyce, and Eliot; together they steered Cummings towards that peculiar amalgam of modernism and Symbolism that was to be the hallmark of his style. Cummings was fascinated in particular by Mallarmé's use of the space upon the page.

That same amalgam was the basis of Watson's aesthetic: as evidence of his modernist interests, we know that Watson championed the modernist poetry of Pound over the objections of Thayer (whose great interest seems to have been theories of subjectivity developing from psychoanalytic theory); but it is telling, concerning his Symbolist interests, that he translated Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer* for *The Dial*, that he collected Egyptian and Medieval art, and that his interests in recent French literature (which, for an outsider, usually meant Symbolism) collided with Thayer's enthusiasm for German art and thought.

The same amalgam of modernism and symbolism is evident in Webber and Watson's *Lot in Sodom*. J.S. Watson remarked about his thoughts on filmmaking, "You say to yourself that cinema is not theater or the dance and certainly not the novel, and then you begin to wonder what it is. You think of camera tricks as essential. . . . You decide to play with any number of tricks on time and space. Then you remember the worst picture you ever saw had all of this and nothing else." Such modernist experimentation is required to fashion from the cinema a "piece of poetry." Through their extraordinary elaboration of the image using an optical printer, Webber and Watson fuse perception and imagination fuse. This is one of the hallmarks of Symbolism, a (predominantly French) literary movement which Edgar Allen Poe helped inspire, and in which Watson had deep interests.

The film combines biblical images, images of damnation and the last judgement, and extraordinarily beautiful images of partially clad men – including one seen naked from behind – to tell the bible story about the sinful city of Sodom. The film rises towards its climax as Lot, outraged by the presence in the marketplace of scantily clad homosexuals in Sodom, delivers a sermon extolling the virtues of womanhood and preaching a sexual morality based on the biological function of sex (the thrust of the sermon is suggested though a wonderful, abstract sequence of symbols, of doves, of flowers, and of water during which the highly figurative birth of a child by his own daughter is a featured scene). The men of Sodom take umbrage and stone him.

The film makes extensive use of geometric decor, chiaroscuro lighting, and optical printing. Two optical techniques that Webber and Watson favoured were the use of multiple superimpositions of a displaced version of form with itself, and the superimposition of mirror images canted in opposite directions. The former technique creates the effect of a visual echo of the form – applied to images of the human figure, it multiplies the sensuality of flesh and amplifies the erotic grace of the Sodomites. The latter produces a dynamic effect, through the use of conflicting diagonals. The two techniques together contribute much to endow the film with the tone of a violent erotic fantasy.

But more than that, they have a similar effect as Cumming's typographical experiments do:

ondumonde"  
(first than caref  
ully;pois  
edN-o wt he  
n  
,whyspring



slinkil  
-Y-  
strol(pre)ling(cise)dy(ly)na(  
mite) . . .

The typography – or more exactly, the typographic anomalies together with the various grammatical, morphological, graphological and phonological violations of the prevailing norms – serve to defamiliarize the form (the language) and to revitalize it. Even more importantly, it serves to convey the mind struggling with language, to create a form that conveys the energy of what is being contemplated. At the same time, it adds considerably to the musicality of the work. Webber and Watson's optical defamiliarization also serve to defamiliarize the representation, to convert it into a sign of the imagination's struggle with reality, and, at the same time to enhance the musicality of the pieces.

Here is another example of Cumming's poetic form.

un(bee)mo

vi  
n(in)g  
are(th  
e)you(o  
nly)

asl(rose)eep

The construction of the poem relates to the superimpositions that Webber and Watson use in this film, for in this poem Cummings mingles two images to create a romantic image: the sleeping figure appears as bee nesting in the petals of the only rose – and shows us graphologically just how intimate that nesting is. What is more, the form nests a subjective image and an objective image, a fusion of perception and imagination characteristic of the images of Webber and Watson's film as well.