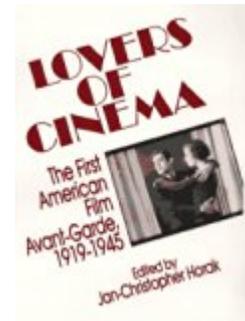


Jan-Christopher Horak, ed. *Lovers of Cinema: the First American Film Avant-garde, 1919-1945*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. 416 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-14680-1.

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## Experimental Films

While much has been written about European avant-garde films produced during the Twenties and Thirties, little has appeared in print on their American counterparts. For most film scholars, even the definition of the cinematic avant-garde in the United States remains vague and its history usually has begun with decontextualized analyses of Maya Deren's 1943 classic, *Meshes in the Afternoon*. Edited by Jan-Christopher Horak, director of the Munich Film Museum, *Lovers of Cinema* is an admirable attempt to both clearly define America's early avant-garde and to "retrieve the history" of these neglected experimental motion pictures and their creators.

For instance, Horak's leading two chapters succeed in clarifying what constitutes an avant-garde film, while also highlighting the near obsessive dependence upon technological advancements of the movement's "amateurs." Furthermore, he provides an informed analysis as well as a rare detailed description on the exhibition and reception of these photoplays by their contemporary audience—an area that begs further scholarly attention.

Both Horak and contributor Kristin Thompson also discuss a number of stylistically challenging full length titles that actually received commercial distribution. Thompson particularly expands the parameters of the silent "avant-garde" to embrace such well-known "naturalist films" as Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1922) and Joseph von Sternberg's *The Salvation Hunters* (1924). It was surprising to read Thompson's lament upon only some fragments surviving of *Beggar on Horseback* (1925),

since a complete 35 mm viewing print of the film, starring the inimitable Edward Everett Horton, has been available at the Library of Congress for many years.

What was especially fascinating to this reviewer were some of the subsequent essays detailing the careers of several early avant-garde filmmakers. While Robert Florey's connection to the avant-garde during the beginning period of his long directorial career is fairly common knowledge, Brian Taves' essay fleshes out this previously obscure stage of the director's professional life—Taves' close analysis of the seldom revived *The Love of Zero* (1928) is particularly informative. Although quite a bit has been written about the linkage between the left-labor Frontier Films unit and the 1930's "social documentary" movement, I had been only vaguely aware of their close inter-relationship with the avant-garde. Charles Wolfe's contribution on this topic puts a whole new spin on the background of such classic documentaries associated with Roosevelt's New Deal such as *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936). And, while the significant roles of Paul Strand and Jay Leyda in the Thirties avant-garde have received a fair amount of attention in the past, William Urrichio's piece on Leyda, that closely ties Leyda's career with those of the lesser known Herman Weinberg and Irving Browning, is a major addition to the subject.

The important and innovative contributions of forgotten filmmakers Theodore Huff and Mary Ellen Bute are restored in two essays written, respectively, by Chuck Kleinhaus and Lauren Rabinovitz. Particularly impres-

sive was the discussion of a 1933 Huff two-reeler, co-directed with John Florey, that satirically indicts Depression America, *Mr. Motorboat's Last Stand*. And Rabinovitz's essay about Bute's "absolute cinema" of the Forties and its electronically generated images would suggest that her work was a precursor to the later film associated with such controversial Sixties-Seventies animators as Ralph Bakshi, as well as to the special effects routinely seen in today's commercial blockbusters.

*Lovers of Cinema's* contributors truly have made an

excellent start in rescuing the nearly lost history of America's early avant-garde film creators.

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