

RESTORING EXPERIMENTAL FILMS

by William Moritz

(From Anthology Film Archives' "Film Preservation Honors" program, 1997)

Independent experimental film (animation and live-action) remains the great hardly-addressed problem of film preservation. While million-dollar budgets digitally remaster commercial features, and telethon campaigns raise additional funds from public donations to restore "classic" features, and most of the film museums and archives spend their meager budgets on salvaging nitrates of early live-action and cartoon films, thousands of experimental films languish in desperate condition. To be honest, experimental film is little known to the general public, so a telethon might not engender the nostalgia gifts that pour in to the American Movie Classics channel. But at their best, experimental films constitute Art of the highest order, and, like the paintings and sculptures and prints and frescos of previous centuries, merit preservation, since they will be treasured continually and increasingly by scholars, connoisseurs, and thankful popular audiences of future generations - for the Botticellis and Rembrandts and Vermeers and Turners and Monets and Van Goghs of our era will be found among the experimental filmmakers.

Experimental films pose many special problems that account for some of this neglect. Independent production often means that the "owner" of legal rights to the film may be in question, so the time and money spent on a restoration may be lost when a putative owner surfaces to claim the restored product. Because the style of an experimental film may be eccentric in the extreme, it can be hard to determine its original state: is this print complete? Have colors changed? was there a sound accompaniment? what was the speed or configuration of projection? etc. So the preservationist needs to act as detective, and run the risk of losing the work to some claimant in the future - a kind of Indiana Jones for the FIAF set.

Anthology Film Archives alone among film museums has devoted most of its time and energy to preserving experimental, independent film - but the task is enormous, and one archive alone cannot accomplish it. While working on the book *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945*, we found that 75% of the experimental films listed in early programs and reviews (often rave praises) seem to be missing. Even the classic shorts like **Ballet Mécanique** and **Entr'acte** have never been restored by collecting and collating all existing early nitrates to arrive at a complete print that synchronizes to the original soundtrack. In addition to the problems mentioned above, these films are also hindered by rivalry between some film archives who hoard their treasures and refuse to give them up to a collaborative project.

For independent filmmakers the post-war period was just as treacherous and problematic as the nitrate era. Filmmakers used to be able to shoot films on positive reversal stocks like Kodachrome and ECO, and have prints struck directly from this positive original. When Kodak discontinued many 16mm stocks during the 1980s (as the newsreel business moved over to videotape), this positive reversal process became impossible, so in order to make a new print of such a film (including films made in the 1970s) one would have to strike a new internegative, at the cost of \$1,000 or much more, depending on the length of the film, soundtrack, etc. This is a

sum few independent artists can afford. I myself do not have any prints of some twenty of my early films.

Eastmancolor stock, of which both the negatives and positives fade in color over time, again place thousands of experimental films from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in danger of disappearing. Jordan Belson's films of the 1970s are a classic case of this problem with "going red", for in his sensitive color-based abstractions, all form, configuration and meaning are also lost when the color changes. Yet badly faded (and often scratched and spliced) prints survive in libraries, and young viewers wonder what's so interesting or important about them, not realizing that they are mere debased archeological remnants of a lost glorious vision.

The filmmakers co-ops hold hundreds of films by filmmakers who are dead or vanished, and they have no facilities or budgets to launch restoration or preservation - quite aside from the questions of rights. But living or dead, independent filmmakers need vast and generous financial aid in restoring their art films - and technical assistance from the trained professionals in film archives. Maybe the next MacArthur "Genius" grants should all be to dead filmmakers, or filmmakers like Jordan Belson who could still supervise a new reconstruction of his masterpieces. Maybe the Getty Museum should adopt Experimental Film as the art treasure it really is, and concentrate a few billion on digitizing a canon for eternity. Maybe the National Endowment for the arts will be restored to more than its former glory, and film preservation, even for experimental films, will enjoy a healthy chunk of funding...

William Moritz has been involved in the restoration of dozens of experimental film, including (on a private basis) films of Sara Arledge, James Whitney, Oskar Fischinger, and Hy Hirsh, and under commission from the Deutsches Filmmuseum in Frankfurt, has restored Walter Ruttmann's **Lightplay Opus I** and Oskar Fischinger's **R-1, A Formplay**.

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