In 1961, the New American Cinema Group, under the leadership of filmmaker Jonas Mekas, made the following announcement: “Official cinema all over the world is running out of breath. It is morally corrupt, aesthetically obsolescent, thematically superficial, temperamentally boring. . . . We don’t want false, polished, slick films—we prefer them rough, unpolished, but alive; we don’t want rosy films—we want them the color of blood.” This statement not only helped set the tone for the vibrant independent film culture that flourished in New York and beyond during the second half of the twentieth century but also strongly validated the equally defensible efforts of numerous independent filmmakers working over the many decades prior. The history of American cinema is rich with examples of vibrant alternative practices from the beginning of the twentieth century onward, and a new Blu-ray/DVD compilation titled *Masterworks of American Avant-Garde Experimental Film 1920–1970* provides us with digital reproductions of some of its most important examples.

Presented by Flicker Alley, a multi-year recipient of the National Society of Film Critics Film Heritage Award for its publications of rare cinema, in association with Blackhawk Films Collection and Filmmakers Showcase, this set offers thirty-seven short films ranging in length from four minutes to twenty minutes. Several have not been previously available in digital formats, and many have been significantly restored or redigitized via 1080p high-definition or 2K digital transfers from their original 35 mm or 16 mm formats. Due to the fugitive nature of film as a medium, stopping the “color of blood” from turning rosy over time often takes a heroic effort. David Shepard, the anthology’s producer, and Bruce Posner, its curator, both have been leaders in the ongoing preservation, restoration, and distribution of historical works of cinema—with Shepard being particularly attentive to silent cinema and Posner aligning himself with American experimental film.

The films included in this compilation cover significant cinematic territory from the last century, with works ranging from *Ballet mécanique* (1923–24), by Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, and *Anémic cinéma* (1924–26), by Rose Sélavy (aka Marcel Duchamp), to *Thimble Theater* (ca. 1938, finished in 1968), by Joseph Cornell; *Meses of the Afternoon* (1943), by Maya Deren; *Eaux d’artifice* (1953), by Kenneth Anger; *9 Variations on a Dance Theme* (1966–67), by Hilary Harri; and an excerpt from Jonas Mekas’s own *Walden: Diaries, Notes and Sketches* (1969). The full selection at times blurs the boundaries of what might be considered avant-garde, American, or even masterful filmmaking, yet each of the films allows the viewer to access an intense state of perceptual awareness that commercial cinema often conceals.

For those interested in the relationship between the history of cinema and the built environment, this collection offers six films, all set in Manhattan, in which the city performs as a subject. According to film historian Bill Nichols, as sites “of strange delights and bizarre discoveries,” city streets filled with automobiles and other new machinery that operated “half way between the animate and the inanimate” emerged as ready-made subjects for both avant-garde and documentary cinema in the early twentieth century. While many avant-garde filmmakers working across different generations explored the ontological nature of film to produce significant works of “pure cinema” that reference no specific context, artists interested in cinema’s alternative political potential often “began with images of a recognizable reality in order to transform it.”

Understanding the role of the city as a critical site for avant-garde practice, curator Bruce Posner begins and ends this collection with two versions of Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand’s *Manhatta* (1920–21), each with a different score (Figure 1). This “study
of modern Babylon on the Hudson” pre-dates later morning-to-night European city symphonies, such as Alberto Cavalcanti’s Rien que les beures (1926), Walter Ruttmann’s Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927), and Dziga Vertov’s Man with a Movie Camera (1929). Although the film transforms “images of skyscrapers and other man-made industrial creations into plays of light and shadow, and studies of geometry and linearity,” no new viewer should expect to find in Manhatta as squarely an avant-garde text as those that followed. Embracing Walt Whitman’s “romantic celebration of Manhattan as a primordial landscape” and ignoring the formal “tenets of modernism’s discontinuous and nonnarrative aesthetic strategies,” the film begins and ends with a transcendental shot of the city surrounded by the calm of nature. As Jan-Christopher Horak concludes, Sheeler and Strand were less concerned with symbols than they were with exploring the philosophical queries of “straight photography” as a means of documenting the world as a set of essential things, and they produced “a heterogeneous text, both modernist and antimodernist” at the same time. In contrast, Robert Florey’s Skyscraper Symphony, shot at the end of that same decade in 1929, delivers a more consistent modernist study of the city. In shooting throughout New York, Florey crops people out of the frame to focus exclusively on architecture as pure form—made manifest through the play of light and dark on building surfaces, registered on celluloid, and ultimately reenlivened on the projection screen.

Charles Wolfe argues that more abstracted works, such as Skyscraper Symphony, purposefully close “down the multiple temporal registers that a work of cinema might mobilize for an image, focusing attention on, and intensifying the spectator’s sensation of, an immediate act of perception,” whereas other early avant-garde films that depict the city as it is “often cued other temporal patterns by establishing, say, a time of day for the action (dawn to dusk was a typical formal structure), or alluding to economic tensions in a modern urban landscape.” Such is the case for one of the collection’s more captivating works, A Bronx Morning (1931), by Jay Leyda. As a young member of the Workers Film and Photo League in New York, in this film Leyda explores the intersection between formal invention and social critique, a subject of inquiry that leading film theoreticians in Russia and broader Europe were discussing at that time. In fact, Leyda made this film with the aspiration of studying with Sergei Eisenstein at the State Film Institute in Moscow, a goal he eventually attained, becoming the institute’s only American student. Balancing richly detailed documentary-style images of the city with equally compelling modes of visual experimentation, A Bronx Morning offers the viewer a multilayered text full of experimental cinematic techniques as well as compelling now-historical references within the frames themselves, with indirect references to the continued economic strains caused by the Great Depression.

In the Street, a documentary from 1945–46 included in the collection, displays film editing techniques that create “allegories of social transformation” in perhaps more overt ways than does Leyda’s work. Shot by still photographers Helen Levitt and James Agee and cinematographer Janice Loeb, In the Street shows the influence of earlier social documentary photojournalism produced during the Depression, such as Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s You Have Seen Their Faces, Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor’s An American Exodus, and Agee and Walker Evans’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. The opening title card for In the Street reads, “The streets of the poor quarters of great cities are above all, a theater and battleground.” The film then explores the fluid, entangled coexistences of people of all ages living in Spanish Harlem. Un-supervised saucer-eyed kids are shown dressing up in Halloween costumes, chasing each other through the streets, throwing rocks, and hitting each other with chalk bags, while older women, young women, and dogs and cats roam...
the streets with equal measures of freedom and peril. From these loose visual juxtapositions of children and animals, old women and young girls, and so on, allegorical narratives begin to form in the viewer’s mind.

Inevitably, in viewing such a work today, architectural historians will find that their attention continually shifts from evaluating the film on its own terms to reading the images themselves for what they reveal about that city’s particular historical moment. By and large, in the viewing of such nonfiction films, history emerges in terms of Bill Nichols’s concept of that which is “always referred to but never captured.” As a type of rhetorical excess in both film and architecture, history often “rebukes those laws set to contain it; it contests, qualifies, resists and refuses them.” Rather than obfuscate this incomplete relationship among form, image, and meaning with narrative and continuity techniques (such as locating shots or sutured scenes) common to commercial cinema, many of the experimental city-based films in this collection embrace rupture as their own raison d’être for creating, as Paula Rabinowitz suggests, “a space for active viewing.”

Experimental films in general are most effective at exploring alternative relationships between the viewer and the film itself. The type of viewing that occurs when one watches a social realist documentary film such as In the Street (where emotions matter more than facts) differs greatly from the type that occurs when one watches an urban spectacle film. Examples of the latter kind of film in this collection are Rudy Burckhardt’s The Pursuit of Happiness (1940), with its innovative Baldessarian split screens and inventive reverse-motion shots of life in Manhattan, or Francis Thompson’s N.Y., N.Y. (1949–57), with its over-the-top kaleidoscopic symmetries of everything in the Big Apple. In these two different but equally mesmerizing films, modern spectacle, as early cinema produced it in works such as Vertov’s Man with a Movie Camera, relies on “an impression of photographic realism the better to convince us of the authenticity of remarkable sights.” Images of things we thought we knew are continually recombined through duplication, manipulation, and juxtaposition to create a visual cacophony requiring us to defer any conclusions about the meaning of the work until after the viewing experience is complete. In both films, but particularly in the postwar N.Y., N.Y., the initial revelry of the city itself eventually gives way to a type of tainted afterimage. As Jon Gartenberg states, “Despite its humorous tone and colorful look, N.Y., N.Y. is a film reflecting the uncertainty of modern-day existence.”

To conclude, it is perhaps meaningful that Thompson’s N.Y., N.Y. is the last of the six city-centric films included in this collection. Thompson started shooting N.Y., N.Y. in 1949—the same year that Jonas Mekas arrived in Manhattan as well as the year that Andy Warhol, who would later collaborate with Mekas, arrived. They and other independent filmmakers of that period would prove to have tremendous impact on how future generations would think about film, about alternative culture, and even about the city of New York itself. Today Jonas Mekas is sometimes referred to as the godfather of American avant-garde cinema—as if such naming marks a foundational moment for alternative cinema. And maybe it does. If there is a single prevailing value to Masterworks of American Avant-Garde Experimental Film 1920–1970, it is that this collection allows us to gain a more complete understanding of the genealogy of American independent cinema—a genealogy that reaches back to the early 1920s and started with the representation of Manhattan, which was for a good part of the twentieth century considered to be a masterwork of American avant-garde cities in its own right.

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Notes

1. This manifesto was first published as “The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group,” Film Culture, nos. 22–23 (Summer 1961), 131–33. Subsequent versions, however, were dated “September 30, 1962,” after Mekas transformed the New American Cinema Group (or the Group) into the Film-Makers’ Cooperative in January 1962.

2. Although today the term film is used loosely to mean any visual work of art with cinematic traits (even if the source material is digital), all pieces in this anthology were true films in their original form—with some quite self-aware of the ontological properties of film as a medium. In the production of this collection, the originals were typically reproduced via 1080p high-definition digital transfers. Several also were restored to various extents using 2K scanning technology. Therefore, the collection raises a whole host of compelling issues regarding originality and the reproduction of original films in DVD format as well as regarding curatorial decisions related to exposure, framing, color temperature, and sound. Through increased digital fidelity, new “information” is now registered and made available to the viewer—both in terms of content within the on-screen diegesis and in terms of the presentation formats of the films (with many presented in full-frame crops). For film historians, such an exponential increase in archival material can be daunting to acknowledge as now part of our understanding of the works themselves. For an interesting discussion in which Bruce Posner addresses the restoration of Manhattan in exploring some of these practical and conceptual conundrums, see Chris Chang, “Don’t Look Back: Bruce Posner Interview,” Film Comment, Nov./Dec. 2008, http://www.filmcomment.com/article/dont-look-back-bruce-posner-interview (accessed 6 July 2016).

3. Questions of preservation loom large over these types of anthologies in terms of the relation of the digital copies to the originals. See Chang, “Don’t Look Back.”

4. Interesting snippets of Los Angeles and Chicago (as well as other locations, such as Villa d’Este in Kenneth Anger’s film Eaux d’Artifice) are visible in several of the included films, but these sites are incidental parts of the mise-en-scène rather than the subjects of the films themselves.


6. Ibid.

7. The first new score was composed by Donald Sosin, who arranged many of the new scores for The Film-Makers Cooperative in January 1962.


our imagination of it. The historical world is something that lies outside and beneath all our representations of it. It is a “brute reality” in which “objects collide, actions occur, [and] forces take their toll.” Documentary is therefore not the representation of an imaginary reality; it is an imaginative representation of an actual historical reality. This aligns Nichols’s definition of documentary more closely with the commonsense definition of [John] Grierson than with those that suggest that documentary is no more than a kind of fiction that denies its fictional status. Of course, our perceptions of and ideas about historical (i.e., actual) reality can only be communicated to others in conventional ways.

—Dirk Etzen, 1995

Rashomon is not a movie about the subjectivity of truth. That there’s no objective truth, just subjective truth. A truth for you, a truth for me. On the contrary, it’s a movie about how everybody sees the world differently. But the claim that everybody sees the world differently is not a claim that there’s no reality. It’s a different kind of claim. What really surprised me on re-watching Rashomon is that you know what really happened at the end. It’s pretty damn clear.

—Errol Morris, 2004

In 1985, director (and erstwhile private investigator) Errol Morris became interested in the trial of Randall Adams, who by then had served almost a decade for the murder of a Dallas police officer. As a product of his investigation, Morris released The Thin Blue Line, a film that documents gaping flaws in Adams’s conviction through a series of revealing interviews that culminate in a taped confession to the murder by the prosecution’s chief witness, David Ray Harris. The evidence presented by the film appears to exonerate Adams and is widely credited with securing his release from prison in 1989 (Figure 1). The Thin Blue Line was one of the most critically acclaimed films of the year in 1988. It won best documentary honors from the New York Film Critics Circle, the National Board of Review, and the National Society of Film Critics. Yet it was barred from consideration for an Academy Award. The reason given for this exclusion by the nominating committee was that because of the film’s use of reenactments, it did not qualify as a “true” documentary.

What constitutes “truth” in documentary films has been debated since the onset of discourse establishing the genre. Most definitions still adhere closely to John Grierson’s characterization of the documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality,” despite the gulf that immediately posits itself between creative treatment and actuality. As film theorist Bill Nichols suggests, “Creative treatment suggests the license of fiction, whereas ‘actuality’ reminds us of the responsibilities of the journalist and historian.”

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences jury barred The Thin Blue Line from consideration for the Oscar because the members judged the use of reenactments as compromising the “actuality” of documentary filmmaking with what Nichols refers to as the “license of fiction.” But is this the case? Are reenactments intrinsically fictive, and does their use necessarily undermine assertions of actuality in a work of nonfiction? Twenty years after the initial release of The Thin Blue Line, Morris addressed his use of reenactments in his online New York Times column:

Critics don’t like re-enactments in documentary films—perhaps because they think that documentary images should come from the present, that the director should be hands-off. But a story in the past has to be re-enacted. Here’s my method. I reconstruct the past through interviews (retrospective accounts), documents and other scraps of evidence. I tell a story about how the police and the newspapers got it wrong. I try to explain (1) what I believe is the real story and (2) why they got it wrong.