Celebrating Cinema

“Not just entertainment” at the Harvard Film Archive
by NELL PORTER BROWN

Four nights a week, anyone can saunter down to the lowest level of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, buy a ticket, and slide into a cushy seat at the Harvard Film Archive’s (HFA) cinémathèque to view “rare and scholarly works of art, films that would otherwise be impossible to see,” says archive director Haden Guest—or at least see properly, in their original formats, and on a big screen.

On tap this winter are typically disparate films. “Busby Berkeley Babylon” (December 9 through January 23) explores the Hollywood director and choreographer’s musicals, including Depression-era dazzlers like the archives’ own, hard-to-find, 35-millimeter print of Footlight Parade (1933), starring dancer-turned-actor James Cagney. Even now, the film’s “By a Waterfall” song-and-dance number featuring nearly naked “nymphs” and armies of synchronized swimmers forming elaborate geometric and floral patterns—filmed from above and underwater—is a delightful technical feat. “People may be surprised by the strange eroticism of some of these films,” particularly those from pre-Hays Code Hollywood, says HFA programmer David Pendleton. “These dance numbers really push the envelope: you have lines of chorus girls who are bent over at the waist and the camera travels down the line, between their legs.”

No less stimulating are the experimental, diaristic films of Lithuanian-American artist Jonas Mekas (January 20–February 18). The prolific nonagenarian, considered the godfather of American avant-garde cinema, is still producing books and films and is scheduled to discuss his oeuvre in person, in conjunction with showings of Walden (Diaries, Notes, Celebrating Cinema)
and Sketches) (1969) and Out-takes from the Life of a Happy Man (2012), on February 10 and 11.

The last time Mekas was on campus was in 1975, to visit his friend, the film scholar and curator Vlada Petric. At that time Petric was collaborating with anthropologist and documentary Robert Gardner and with Cabot professor of aesthetics and the general theory of value Stanley Cavell to establish the HFA, which officially opened in 1979.

The HFA’s collection has since grown to nearly 30,000 titles, making it among the largest and most important university-based motion-picture archives in the United States, according to Guest. It encompasses “prints from across film history and from around the world, from Soviet silent films to contemporary American indie classics,” he reports, as well as home movies, shorts, animation, and experimental, avant-garde, and documentary films. In addition, there are more than 4,000 vintage posters, a growing store of filmmakers’ personal papers, and miscellaneous artifacts, animation models, technical manuals, and film equipment.

Alumni in the industry—including Terence Malick ’65, Michael Fitzgerald ’73, Edward Zwick ’74, Mia Nair ’79, Darren Aronofksy ’91, Andrew Bujalski ’98, and Damien Chazelle ’07—have contributed to the collection, and appeared over the years for HFA events. In November, during the series “Say It Loud! The Black Cinema Revolution,” the HFA hosted documentarian Kent Garrett ’63 for screenings of his Black GI (1971), a chronicle of combat soldiers’ experiences on and off the killing fields in Vietnam, and Black Cop (1969). The latter, he told the audience, explored “whether blacks should be cops,” and the complex roles they can play, through candid interviews with officers in New York City and Los Angeles during the height of the Black Power movement.

Still sobering and relevant, both films were made for Black Journal, the groundbreaking, public-television program co-developed by University of Wisconsin–Madison anthropology professor William estilo, to document the growing unrest on college campuses. The TV series aired in 1968 and 1969. The HFA is the only North American motion-picture archive to collect these programs.

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by Garrett. On a national level, it represented the “first time blacks had a say in what was going on” in current events and how the media represented them, Garrett told the audience during the post-screening question-and-answer session.

“History comes around,” he said, when asked about Black Cop’s relevance to current debates over the role of police and their relationships with minority communities—although, he added, “the level of brutality then was not at the level, in terms of shooting black men, that it is today.”

Also shown was a stirring clip from Garrett’s work-in-progress, The Last Negroes at Harvard, about his 1963 class of 18 men and one woman who, in 1959, were the largest single group of blacks ever admitted to the College. “They came into Harvard as negroes,” Garrett said of the era, “and left as blacks.” Throughout his career, the news journalist and filmmaker has “always believed” in the power of “the media, video, and news to really change people’s consciousness,” he said, “and that’s what I’ve always wanted to do.”

The point of the archive is, after all, to educate. Its film holdings alone have grown three-fold since Guest arrived a decade ago, and the general archives have expanded through gifts like the Lothar and Eva Just Film Stills Collection, containing about 800,000 items, pledged in 2009.

Meanwhile, Guest recently announced another windfall: the complete papers and films of experimental American director Godfrey Reggio. The documents will be part of the Harvard Theatre Collection at Houghton Library, Guest says, “and people can step next door here to study his holdings alone have grown three-fold since Guest arrived a decade ago, and the general archives have expanded through gifts like the Lothar and Eva Just Film Stills Collection, containing about 800,000 items, pledged in 2009.”

A movie theater, classroom, and library, the HFA’s structure is uncommon among universities. The year-round cinémathèque’s public programs, funded by admission fees and tiered-membership dues, are often paired with visits by guest artists—directors Ang Lee and William Friedkin, actress Angela Lansbury, and Canadian filmmaker Guy Maddin, among them.

Yet its core mission is to support study and teaching at Harvard, and to maintain its resources for scholars everywhere. As such, it was moved administratively from the department of visual and environmental studies to the Harvard College Library; see “Cinema Veritas,” November-December 2005, page 35.

This winter, Guest researched and curated “Ha Gil-Jong and the Revitalization of Korean Cinema” (February 3-27)—the first retrospective of the 1970s South Korean art-
Ditch the car and take the train to Providence. Numerous attractions clustered around the city’s vibrant downtown district are within easy walking distance of the station.

There’s outdoor ice-skating at the huge (and typically uncrowded) rink on Kennedy Plaza—within sight of the historic Providence Biltmore hotel, which was saved from the wrecking ball in the 1970s. Dip into the nearby Ellie’s Bakery for hot chocolate and a chunk of babka, or meander east, across the Providence River, to the RISD Museum.

The ancient Greek and Roman art galleries are open this winter, as is the exhibit “Inventing Impressionism,” which explores the radical nature of paintings and drawings by the likes of Édouard Manet, Georges Lemmen, and Camille Pissarro. (The fifth-floor European art galleries, however, are closed for renovation.) The museum’s Cafe Pearl opened last year; it serves baked treats and the locally coveted Bolt Coffee, and is a quiet place to regroup. Or head back outside and walk two minutes to the Providence Athenaeum, to learn about the library’s role in the ill-fated romance between Edgar Allen Poe and Providence poet Sarah Helen Whitman, and about author H.P. Lovecraft’s love of the place. Take a self-guided tour, or just be inspired by three floors crammed with books and assorted prints, paintings, and sculptures.

From there, walk back down Benefit Street, past the museum, to the first First Baptist Church in America. Join the Independence Trail, a lively and free self-guided tour, accessible by smartphone, to hear about the impressive white structure, with the strongest steeple around, and a bit of Providence’s history: it was founded in 1636 by Roger Williams after he was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for promoting the separation of church and state. The trail, marked by a green line on the sidewalk, is a 2.5-mile circular route that highlights more than 100 culturally significant sites, including the old and new State Houses and the spot from which colonists rowed out to attack the HMS Gaspee in 1772.

It also stops at the Providence Place Mall. Don’t linger there. Instead, for food and shopping, head behind the Providence Biltmore to the locus of the downtown arts and entertainment scene anchored by Washington and Westminster Streets. Check out AS220, an artist-run organization that coordinates rotating galleries, shops, performances, and classes, while managing a restaurant and bar, too. Also worthwhile is Craftland, a gallery of handmade objects, and the excellent Symposium Books and Cellar Stories Bookstore.

Providence is full of innovative restaurants. Downtown, try the Figidini Wood Fired Eatery or The Dean Hotel’s restaurant Faust. On a Saturday night, there’s probably also time to attend a show or concert at the Trinity Repertory Company or the Providence Performing Arts Center; the last MBTA Commuter Rail train to Boston leaves at 10 p.m.—or take the more expensive (but faster) Amtrak train at 10:35 p.m. Either way, a day in this dynamic small city is well spent.

~N.P.B.

Clockwise from top: open-air ice-skating downtown; the first First Baptist Church in the United States; a bibliophile’s dream at the Providence Athenaeum; and the RISD Museum’s modern appeal.

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antino’s homage to her and the tumultuous era.

Guest and Pendleton were also instrumental in organizing “Houghton at 75,” inspired by holdings at that Harvard library. The March series includes Jane Campion’s Bright Star (2009), a fictional account of John Keats’s last years; Peter Ustinov’s Billy Budd (1962), adapted from Herman Melville’s novel; and Warren Beatty’s Reds (1981), based on the life of journalist John Reed, A.B. 1910.

British filmmaker Terence Davies, a past HFA guest, will also be on hand for a screening of his film about Emily Dickinson, A Quiet Passion (2017), for which he made previous trips to Harvard to pore over the poet’s hand-sewn manuscript books and letters at Houghton. The series reveals how “the spirit of the original literature lives in the films,” Guest says. “Cinema is not just entertainment, not just a complement” or a mode of elucidating other disciplines, he asserts. “We are dedicated to presenting, exploring, and breaking new ground, and to showing cinema to be at the same level as great literature.”

CURiosities: the “Scandalous Mansion”

Built between 1899 and 1902, the Ayer Mansion on Commonwealth Avenue is a rare surviving residence designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany. It was an outlier, commissioned by outliers. The textile magnate and marketing savant Frederick Ayer was a self-made man with a sixth-grade education, and his second wife, Ellen Barrows Banning (30 years his junior), an amateur actress from Minnesota. Before buying up mills throughout New England and establishing the largest factory in Lawrence, Ayer also helped develop the charming marketing campaign, featuring heartfelt testimonials and visions of cherubic children and tropical locales, that sold Ayer-brand patented remedies. The Cathartic Pills, Hair Vigor, and Sarsaparilla (it “cured” jaundice, ringworm, carbuncles, dropsy, and syphilis) were concocted by his medical doctor-brother James Cook Ayer, who amassed a fortune.

The Ayers did not fit into Boston society, and probably realized that they never would, notes Jeanne M. Pelletier, preservation adviser for the Campaign for the Ayer Mansion (led by Scott C. Steward ’86), which has been restoring the house since 1998.

Thumbing their noses at neighboring Brahmins, the Ayers hired A.J. Maning of New York City as architect of record, and Tiffany, who by then had developed materials and techniques that had revolutionized the glass industry. Although not a trained architect, Pelletier notes, Tiffany was nevertheless the driving visionary behind some of the era’s most opulent homes. And with the Ayers’s approval, he “plopped down this modern, stark, mosaic-covered façade,” she adds, amid the staid red-brick and brownstone town homes proliferating in the fashionable Back Bay. “It was really scandalous.”

The tallest home on the block, the five-story mansion (part of which has been used as a university women’s residence for decades) is faced with an almost white variety of granite and features glass-embedded stone columns flanking massive, copper-clad front doors with eight-pound knockers, along with bulging bow-front windows topped with elaborate stained-glass panels. Inside, the entrance hall combines Tiffany’s beloved “exotic” architectural elements—here primarily “Oriental” and Moorish—in curving plastered walls painted a buttery tone and covered with shellac, and a marble semi-circular staircase with glass-mosaic risers. They lead to an apse-like “stage” on which Ellen Barrows Banning gave dramatic readings.

Perhaps most remarkable is the wall behind the stage. It features a glass-mosaic trompe l’oeil depicting an ancient Greek temple; the columns are composed of semi-transparent glass backed by gold foil, so when they reflect light, the temple appears to glow from a rising sun. Tiffany started his career as a decorator and interior designer, Pelletier says, although all the houses he designed—including the magnificent Havemeyer House in Manhattan (its suspended staircase was adorned with gold filigree and a fringe of crystals that tinkled underfoot) and his own Long Island estate, Laurelton Hall—are gone. “He would create or specify everything: the architecture, lamps and lighting fixtures, the wall coverings, the floors, even the furniture,” Pelletier says, pointing out the Ayer Mansion’s Favrile green-glass vases and hefty cream-colored dining table with matching chairs. “He was a micro-manager who thought of houses as architectural masterpieces.”

A National Historic Landmark since 2005, the house is open year-round for concerts and lectures; tours (typically on the first Saturday and third Wednesday of each month) highlight continuing preservation projects.

Ayer Mansion
395 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston
www.ayermansion.org

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