

The Lead Shoes

By Kyle Westphal

The fastidiously prissy specialty home video label Masters of Cinema carries a boilerplate statement about TV calibration with practically all of its DVD and Blu-ray releases, imploring viewers to reject picture settings which yield “a distortion and corruption of the original artwork, which travesty the integrity of both the human form and cinematographic space.”

What would they make of Sidney Peterson, a master of cinema whose avant-garde films joyously travesty the human form, cinematographic space, and much more besides?

Peterson (1905 – 2000) was a sculptor, medical student, newspaperman, architectural drafter, and all-around autodidact before becoming a filmmaker in middle age. He began making experimental films at a moment when a previously disorganized mass of eggheads and bohemians had coalesced into an audience and perhaps a polity. The civic-minded 16mm film councils of World War II had evolved into post-war film societies, where diverse audiences gathered together in college classrooms and church basements to view old, uncommercial, and defiantly oddball films.

Peterson found an exceptional reception for his first film (co-directed with the poet James Broughton) “The Potted Psalm” (1946) at Art in Cinema, the film society based at the San Francisco Museum of Art. This unconventional film, with its obscure, threadbare narrative and numerous nods to Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s Surrealist classic “Un chien andalou” (1928), sparked something resembling a riot. The episode was sufficiently striking for Douglas MacAgy, president of the California School of Fine Arts, to offer Peterson a position as an instructor.

Peterson found himself leading Workshop 20, a filmmaking class that turned out a new work each semester. Most of his students had never fancied themselves artists; many were veterans accorded new educational opportunities through the GI Bill. What they lacked in craft and refinement they made up in effort and enthusiasm. Each student contributed a \$10 materials fee, which Peterson pooled into buying raw film stock. (Even as the Workshop 20 efforts began to circulate, Peterson couldn’t afford to protect the films by producing a negative, relying instead upon a succession of reversal prints made di-



A scene from the film. Courtesy Anthology Film Archives.

rectly from the original.) Practically everything else in the Workshop 20 films—costumes, props, pet animals—was loaned or scrounged by Peterson’s students. Some of the actors would drop out of the class or simply disappear mid-production, necessitating a casting change and upping the innate surrealism quotient.

The four films completed under the Workshop 20 banner show a clear aesthetic trajectory, a refinement and purification of technique that demonstrates Peterson’s growing confidence as a filmmaker. He was learning beside his students—and garnering feedback from audiences at the Art in Cinema screenings. The first Workshop 20 film, “The Cage” (1947), built upon the aesthetic of “The Potted Psalm,” utilizing the same strategies in a more comprehensive and narratively-motivated way. The earlier film had a few moments of optical distortion, contrasting perfectly-registered close-ups of mannequins with gnarly shots of human body parts that had been crudely twisted through mirrors. “The Cage” made extensive use of an old anamorphic lens that Peterson had picked up in a camera shop, a one-time novelty adornment originally manufactured for an 8mm camera.

On a literal level, the distortions in “The Cage” approximate its protagonist’s ruptured perspective, but they also suggest something more—a new way of seeing the world that would grow more totalizing and less explicable with each new Workshop 20 film. Peterson himself readily admitted that the effect stirred something deeper than conscious intent: “Mann and Joyce took disjointed fragments of mythological material and organized them to make a kind of sense that was no longer mythological, in which the deformations are merely latent. With an anamorphic lens the opposite is possible. The image is distorted and with the distortion the mythic re-emerges ... I don’t

know exactly how this works. I only know that it does.”

By the time we reach the final Workshop 20 film, “The Lead Shoes” (1949), this device is so intrinsic to the film’s style that it cannot simply be dismissed as a gimmick or assimilated as the representation of a particular point of view. We are left only with the fact of these distortions and their tendency to impede conventional identification with the characters, forcing us instead to regard the world through a prism of frustrated light. The plot itself is likewise ungainly. Harvesting his students’ scholarly interests and material resources (the English ballad, a diving suit, hamsters, etc.) into one not-quite-integrated whole, Peterson concocts a nightmare all the more beguiling for the inscrutability of its terror: a woman pulls a submerged man out of the water, but finds only rats crawling out of his diving suit. She drags the body back home, while her son drips a trail of blood in the street. He later dines on a loaf of bread, which begins bleeding like a ravaged bone.

Complicating “The Lead Shoes” further is its unique soundtrack, a *sui generis* mixture of sacred harp singing and improvised Dixieland backing under the title “The Three Edwards and a Raven.” (The track consists of fragmentary lines from two different English ballads, “Edward” and “The Three Ravens,” often blurted out in a repetitious, trance-like stupor.) This, too, was something of a culmination. When Peterson began as a filmmaker, he hadn’t given much thought to aural counterpoint; “The Potted Psalm” and “The Cage” had no soundtracks at all, as *Art in Cinema*’s organizers typically supplied musical accompaniment. Beginning with “The Petrified Dog” (1948), Peterson began integrating soundtracks, which attracted the curiosity and participation of the school’s music faculty. (One colleague was so enamored that he paid for the recording to be transferred from wire to film on the condition that he receive a copy.) Peterson’s *musique concrète* soundtracks attempt nothing like conventional synchronization with the picture, allowing instead two parallel experiences whose occasional harmony appears all the more felicitous.

Upon the New York unveiling of “The Lead Shoes,” the poet and critic Parker Tyler made a valiant effort to untangle the film’s influences and allusions. He studied the text of “Edward” and “The Three Ravens,” and detected the contours of a Cain and Abel story in “The Lead Shoes.” Tyler’s critical exegesis was very much of its time, when experimental films were understood through the application of literary theory as it might be taught at a prestigious liber-

al arts college. Without quite disavowing his critics, Peterson did suggest that their approach was misguided: “Do you suppose movie audiences will ever learn to take works as experiences instead of merely as expression, what does it mean? etc.?” The filmmaker and lecturer Stan Brakhage later marveled that Peterson “exhausts all classical meaning intrinsic to the situation and thereby leaves the viewer at the mercy of the immediate imagery and language of the film itself. Every attempt at symbolic or historic understanding of ‘The Lead Shoes’ is bound to destruct against the multiplicity of meanings.”

Adventurous audiences have been debating what, if anything, “The Lead Shoes” means for over sixty years—a remarkable afterlife for a film produced as a summer semester experiment in pedagogy. Its slipperiness—between narrative and non-narrative, sound and vision, artifact and art—is entirely emblematic of the richness of post-war American avant-garde film.

Further Reading

- Stan Brakhage. *Film at Wit’s End*. New York: Docutext/McPherson & Company, 1989.
- Scott MacDonald. *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.
- Scott MacDonald, ed. *Art in Cinema: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.
- Sidney Peterson. *The Dark of the Screen*. New York: Anthology Film Archives and New York University Press, 1980.
- P. Adams Sitney. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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