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Rare Art Films Surface Online

By Ian Mount

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A groundbreaking experimental Man Ray film, made in 1923, is now available for anyone to watch free online. It isn't on the Web sites of the Library of Congress or the Internet Moving Image Archive. But you'll find it at both YouTube and Google Video, two amateur-video-sharing sites.

Increasingly, rare and avant-garde films are showing up on sites like these, best known for hosting homemade video spoofs. On YouTube, there are 1969 art videos by Nam June Paik, a 1967 student movie by George Lucas and an iconic 1930 film by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, as well as a clip of Dalí in a chocolate commercial (pictured).



It's the latest reflection of an online culture where fans can function as curators of digital entertainment, bypassing libraries and museums with their own collections of music or movies. In many cases, these rare film clips are posted by amateur film buffs who've scooped up film reels or rare VHS tapes from eBay or local sales, and then digitized them for online viewing. A handful of Web sites and blogs, such as the Greylodge Podcasting Company (www.greylodge.org/gpc), link to the clips, many of which aren't available on DVD.

The posting of these rare films can raise legal issues, however. Some of the films are still under copyright, and will be taken down if a copyright holder objects. Two short films by director David Lynch, for instance, were recently removed from YouTube when Mr. Lynch's production company complained.

People who post these films say they're only trying to increase awareness of overlooked cinematic gems, and say they receive few complaints.

Because the posters generally aren't profiting from the film clips, and aren't cutting into anyone's profits in cases where the films aren't sold commercially, lawsuits over these film clips are rare. "Is George Lucas going to spend money chasing down his grad-school films? Probably not," says attorney Daniel Harris, who heads the intellectual-property group at the law firm of Clifford Chance in Menlo Park, Calif.

HOW TO FIND IT: For an index of rare films on YouTube, go to www.greylodge.org/gpc and choose "link dump" under "categories." -- Ian Mount

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