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Beyond Tinsel-town Traditions: 5 to Watch



By [Michael Fox \(http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/author/mfox/\)](http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/author/mfox/)

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If movies are indeed an escape, there's no better time to disappear into the dark than in the frenetic run-up to Christmas. Of course, many people postpone this particular treat for the gift-giving day itself, as a family outing or, dare I say it, as a respite *from* family. You'll need no help finding the garishly wrapped would-be blockbusters, already blaring at you in television commercials. Here's a selection of more sublime cinematic excursions departing in December to mind-realms unknown.



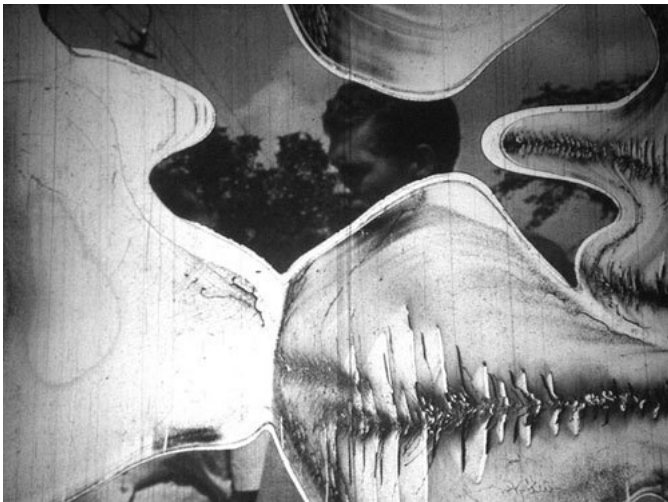
At Berkeley

The uncompromising documentary maker Frederick Wiseman has trained his lens on a vast spectrum of American institutions since his horrific 1967 exposé, *Titicut Follies*), blew the doors off a Massachusetts hospital for the criminally insane. The reigning stalwart of cinema verité, Wiseman eschews narration, talking-head interviews and music — his films are monuments of observation comprised of real-time scenes and the occasional telling shot. His latest opus, *At Berkeley*, is a four-hour immersion into the beleaguered crown jewel of the University of California system. The most convenient way to see this important work is undoubtedly on KQED next year, but the best and certainly the soonest way is at the Roxie from December 6-12, 2013. Wiseman participates in a Q&A via Skype on opening night. For [more information](http://www.roxie.com/events/details.cfm?eventID=A557C1F3-0255-4F98-2069419DCBC72062) (<http://www.roxie.com/events/details.cfm?eventID=A557C1F3-0255-4F98-2069419DCBC72062>), visit roxie.com.



Water City, Berkeley

Education is crucial to the future of our democracy, even as climate change threatens the future of our species. Kim Anno, whose talents extend to a panoply of media, contemplates rising sea levels in *Water City, Berkeley*, a torrential filmed collaboration with local professional musicians and dancers backed by Berkeley High School Arts and Humanities Academy and Dance Productions students, Northgate High cheerleaders and members of Berkeley High's women's crew team (who assuredly know their way around the water). The film is accompanied by a live performance by sfSoundGroup (Matt Ingalls, Monica Scott and John Ingle) and a Greek chorus in a pair of shows on Saturday, December 7, 2013, at the Kala Art Institute in Berkeley. For [more information](http://www.kala.org/artwork/water-city-berkeley-a-film-exploring-leisure-time-after-sea-levels-rise/) (<http://www.kala.org/artwork/water-city-berkeley-a-film-exploring-leisure-time-after-sea-levels-rise/>), visit kala.org.



This Charming Couple

Film performance, aka live cinema, injects the static projection of images with the immediacy — and risk — that attends in-the-moment creation. One of this bubbling genre's most celebrated pioneers, Canadian experimental film manipulator Alex MacKenzie, makes a rare S.F. appearance at the Exploratorium in a co-presentation with SF Cinematheque. Mackenzie employs two 16mm analytic projectors to slow, morph and freeze his imagery, conjuring the kind of ephemeral sensations one rarely encounters at the movies. He presents/performs three films, *Intertidal*, *Logbook* and *This Charming Couple* as part of the wonderfully titled *Teeming and Tenuous/Fleeting and Alive: Film Performances by Alex Mackenzie*, unspooling at the Exploratorium, Wednesday, December 11, 2013 at 7pm. For [more information](http://www.sfcinematheque.org/screenings/teeming-and-tenuousfleeting-and-alive-film-performances-by-alex-mackenzie/) (<http://www.sfcinematheque.org/screenings/teeming-and-tenuousfleeting-and-alive-film-performances-by-alex-mackenzie/>), visit [sfcinematheque.org](http://www.sfcinematheque.org).



Looking back is as important yet often more fun than looking forward, which accounts for the popularity of the *A Century Ago* program staged every year by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the California Film Institute at the Smith Rafael Film Center in San Rafael. This year's smorgasbord bears the alluring title **The Final Reign of One-Reel Films** and recreates a 1913 night at the movies with a batch of shorts by or starring Mack Sennett, Lois Weber, D.W. Griffith, Mabel Normand and Lillian Gish. A perennial highlight of *A Century Ago* is Joe Rinaudo's presentation of vintage movies on his restored hand-cranked projector — what we might call the great-grandfather of the live cinema shows of Alex Mackenzie and his contemporaries. One of the remarkable things about cinema is how often we are reminded of its beginnings, as an art form, as a technology and as a business. The curtain goes up on *A Century Ago: Films of 1913* at 7pm, Thursday, December 12, 2013. For [more information](http://www.cafilm.org/rfc/films/1948.html) (<http://www.cafilm.org/rfc/films/1948.html>), visit [cafilm.org](http://www.cafilm.org).



Children of Paradise

Everyone seems to have a favorite flick they associate with the holidays, typically *A Christmas Story*, *It's a Wonderful Life* or *Bad Santa*. That trio will be all over your TV later this month, while the Castro has kindly booked several other films that have become associated with Yuletide or New Year's. Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert's brilliant and miraculous *Children of Paradise* screens December 14, with the Capra-corn of *It's a Wonderful Life* (for those who accept no substitutes for the big-screen experience) on December 22. The Marx Brothers spread anarchy on December 30 with a double feature of *A Night at the Opera* and *Duck Soup*. Those who like new traditions, and a dash of cheap brandy in their eggnog, have already inked in **Noir City Xmas** on December 22, and the devious seasonal pairing of *Blast of Silence* and *Christmas Eve*. No Bing Crosby, alas. You're on your own to track down *Holiday Inn*. For more information (<http://www.castrotheatre.com/calendar.htm>), visit [castrotheatre.com](http://www.castrotheatre.com).

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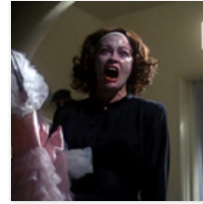
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Michael Fox has written about film for a variety of publications since 1987. He is the curator and host of the long-running Friday night CinemaLit film series at the Mechanics' Institute, an instructor in the OLLI programs at U.C. Berkeley and S.F. State, and a member of the San Francisco Film Critics Circle.

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