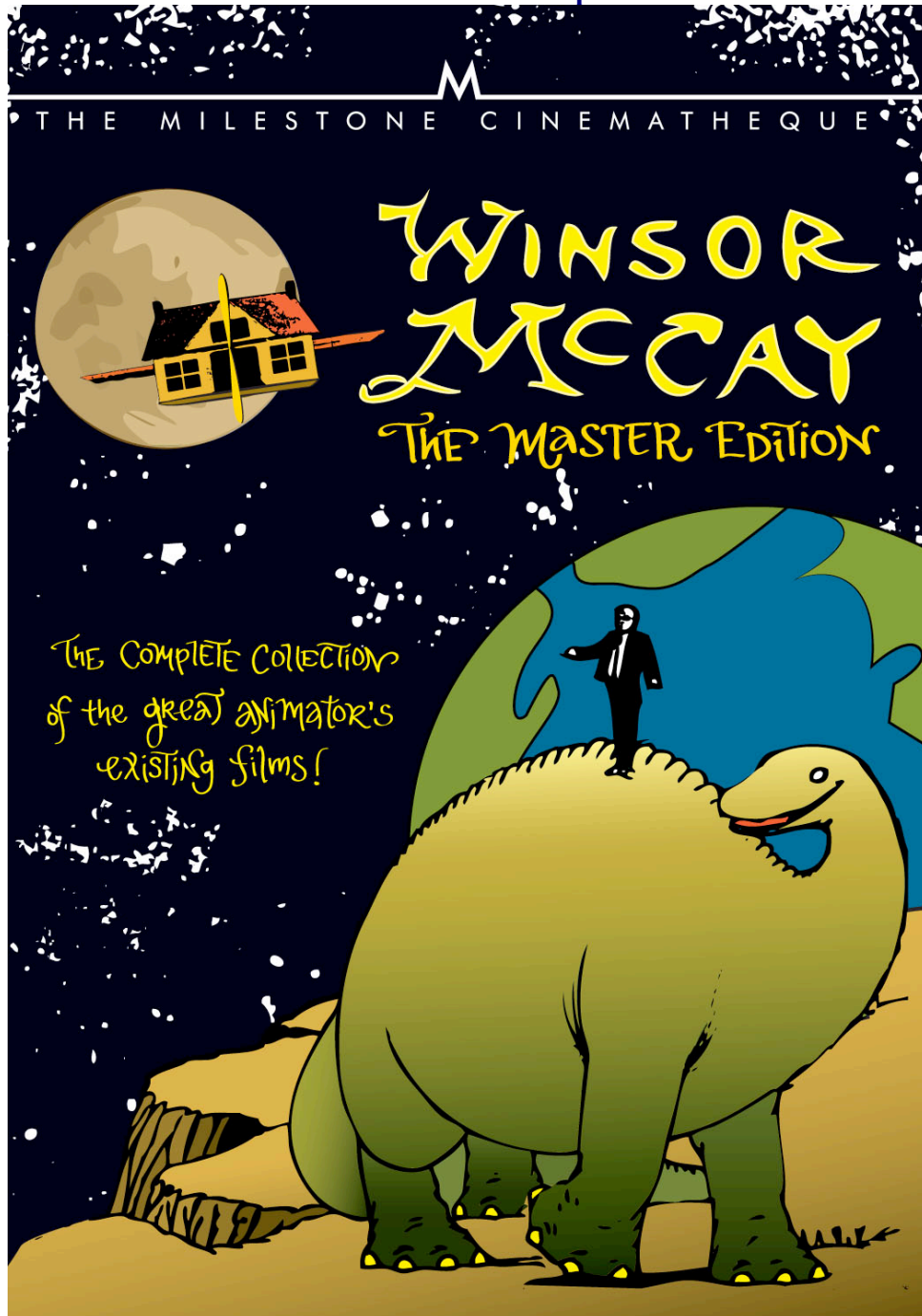


Milestone Film & Video presents



*"McCay combined the abilities of a superb draftsman with the imagination of a master story-teller ... Gertie lives and she exudes the same impish charm today that captivated audiences in 1914."* — Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*

*"The two most important people in animation are Winsor McCay and Walt Disney."* —Chuck Jones

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# Winsor McCay

## The Master Edition

*United States. 1911-1921. 110 minutes. B&W and Hand Colored. Music composed and performed by Gabriel Thibaudau. ©2004 Milestone Film & Video and the Cinémathèque Québécoise.*

### **DVD Bonus Features:**

- 1) “Remembering Winsor McCay” — the life and career of the great cartoonist Winsor McCay is warmly recalled by his former film assistant, John Fitzsimmons, with clips of classic McCay animated films. (18 minutes.)**
- 2) Commentary by McCay historian John Canemaker**
- 3) Extensive Stills Gallery!**

Winsor McCay was the first master of animation and one of its greatest and most influential artists. His films — joyous, hilarious and beautiful —continue to delight and astonish audiences today.

Milestone’s *Winsor McCay: The Master Edition* features brand-new digital transfers of every surviving film by this cinema pioneer, a new piano score by composer Gabriel Thibaudau, and John Canemaker’s wonderful documentary *Remembering Winsor McCay* (1976, 18 minutes).

McCay created a pantheon of beloved characters including Little Nemo, the intrepid traveler in Slumberland; Nemo’s friends Flip and Impie; and the enchanting Gertie the Dinosaur. Highlights in this collection include the stunning hand-colored *Little Nemo* (1911) mastered from the only known 35mm print in existence, and *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) which was recently restored by the National Archives of Canada using four 35mm nitrate prints from the Cinémathèque’s collection.

Other cinematic treasures include the funny and bizarre *How A Mosquito Operates* (1912), the deeply moving *The Sinking Of The Lusitania* (1918), the existing fragments of the lyrical *The Centaurs* (1918-21), the charming *Gertie On Tour* (1918-21) and *Flip’s Circus* (1918-21). McCay’s final three works, all from his surreal and bizarre "Scenes from a Rarebit Fiend" series are featured: *Bug Vaudeville* (1921), *The Pet* (1921) and *The Flying House* (1921).



## WINSOR McCAY AND THE ART OF ANIMATION

by  
John Canemaker

Winsor McCay (1867-1934) is the first master of two indigenous American art forms: the comic strip and the animated cartoon. Although invented by others, both genres were developed into enduring popular art of the highest imagination through McCay's innovative genius.

Long before the public debut of his first film in 1911, McCay was an "animator." His work in print media: reportorial illustration for midwestern newspapers (1898-1903), editorial cartoons (c. 1899) for humor periodicals such as *Life Magazine*, and the ground-breaking comic strips "Dream of the Rarebit Fiend" (1904) and "Little Nemo in Slumberland" (1905) celebrates movement and bursts with kinetic energy.

McCay's Leonardo-like eye captures phases of motion in extraordinarily assured draftsmanship. For example, the epic strip "Little Nemo in Slumberland," a child's version of the mythic theme of "the quest," features continuous sequential changes of characters and settings within the borders of its imaginatively flexible panels. Also roaring through McCay's work is a 20th-century American energy, restless and in love with motion. In his strips, McCay often depicted a high-tech world of space travel, predating wild Futurist fantasies, which spilled over onto the screen, e.g. *The Flying House*. In his ten known films, McCay glorifies physical movement, be it the magical appearances and antics of the cast in *Little Nemo*, the increasingly difficult flight of the protagonist in *How A Mosquito Operates*, Gertie the Dinosaur's ungainly "dance," or the slow, agonizing demise of the luxury liner *Lusitania*.

McCay's animation style — naturalistically designed "realistic" characters made of closed forms, projecting an illusion of weight, and possessing distinctive personalities — predates by over two decades the beginnings of the Walt Disney Studio's mature period in 1934. Commenting on McCay's uncannily advanced style and techniques, Chuck Jones, the celebrated Warner Brothers cartoon director, noted, "It is as though the first creature to emerge from the primeval slime was Albert Einstein; and the second was an amoeba, because after McCay's animation, it took his followers nearly twenty years to find out how he did it. The two most important people in animation are Winsor McCay and Walt Disney."

McCay entered animation early in the art form's history, but late in his own: at age 43 he had already enjoyed a classic turn-of-the century success story in publishing and the performance arts but had yet to try his hand at the infant medium of animated film. Winsor Zenis McCay was raised in and near Spring Lake on the heavily wooded eastern shore of Lake Michigan. (Birth records do not exist, but census reports indicate he was born in 1867 in Woodstock, Canada, birthplace of his parents.)

Young McCay's drawing ability and effortless visual memory for intricate details revealed itself early. However, his pragmatic father, a real estate agent for property owned by large lumber firms, insisted his son study at Cleary Business College in Ypsilanti, a city in southeastern Michigan. McCay never attended classes nor graduated from the school, preferring to play hooky in Detroit, drawing and selling caricatures at a "dime museum" called Wonderland. Dime museums were establishments that combined aspects of vaudeville, funhouses, and circus freak shows under one roof. McCay's lifelong fascination with the grotesque and circus funhouse imagery (distortion mirrors, monsters, eccentric staircases, etc.) was influenced by his dime museum experiences and observations, and forms a leitmotif in all his later work.

McCay briefly absorbed a few private lessons in fundamentals of perspective from Professor John Goodison of Michigan State Normal in Ypsilanti, whom McCay recalled years later as "a great drawing teacher," but the artist was basically self-taught and learned on-the-job and through the exigencies of the commercial marketplace.

In 1889, the footloose young man was employed as an apprentice at the National Printing and Engraving Company in Chicago, helping to turn out circus and advertising posters, and in the process, gained intimate knowledge about mass production printing techniques. Two years later, McCay was the resident artist at the Cincinnati Vine Street Dime Museum, painting garish posters and advertisements. During his dozen years in the Queen City of the Midwest, he married Maude Dufour, with whom he had two children (Robert and Marion), and began working as a newspaper illustrator/reporter for the Cincinnati Commercial Tribune and later the Cincinnati Enquirer, where he developed both a realistic and decorative style that would coalesce later in his comic strips.

From January 11 to November 9, 1903, he drew a proto-comic strip he devised called "The Tales of the Jungle Imps" by Felix Fiddle, a spoof of Rudyard Kipling's Just So Stories for Children. "Jungle Imps" was McCay's first attempt in an extended series format to bring together all of his eclectic talents in a cohesive graphic style: exquisite draftsmanship, dynamic staging, caricature, mastery of perspective, feeling for motion, and his version of the decorative art nouveau style.

In 1903, McCay and family moved to New York, where he was employed by publisher James Gordon Bennett as a reporter-cartoonist on both the New York Herald and the Evening Telegram drawing spot illustrations and experimenting with comic strip ideas. Two child-strips, "Little Sammy Sneeze" (1904) and "Hungry Henrietta" (1905) were sustained efforts that consciously tested principles of animation through subtle sequential changes in the characters movements. The adult-oriented "Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend" one of McCay's longest-running strips (1904-1911, revived in 1913), featured as continuing themes nightmarish alternative worlds with an emphasis on accelerated changes in size and age, as well as metamorphosis.

On October 15, 1905 in the Herald color comic section, McCay introduced his masterpiece, "Little Nemo in Slumberland", arguably the most beautiful comic strip ever drawn. One of the supreme works of fantasy illustration, "Little Nemo" is an exhilarating weekly cartoon adventure of great drama, both visually beautiful and compelling, with a cast of developing personalities, chief among them the boy-dreamer Nemo (modeled on McCay's son, Robert). It represents a major creative leap far grander in

scope, imagination, color, design, and motion experimentation than any previous McCay comic strip (and certainly those of his peers). "Little Nemo" ran in the Herald until McCay joined the Hearst papers in mid-July 1911, where it appeared under another title until 1914, and was revived in 1924 for two years. The strip made McCay world famous; Nemo and friends appeared in product advertisements for toys and clothing (Little Nemo's Barefoot Sandal), and in 1908 a Broadway show version of the strip with music by Victor Herbert played on Broadway for 123 performances, then toured American cities through 1910.

McCay's celebrity was such that, in 1906, he was asked to appear as a quick-sketch chalk-talk artist on the vaudeville circuit. Paradoxically, a shy man who loved drawing in front of admiring crowds, McCay performed in vaudeville houses east of the Mississippi for nearly eleven years. He drew "lightning sketches" on a blackboard, altering the faces of characters rapidly, progressing them from infancy to old age.

During this period, McCay continued to produce a steady stream of comic strips drawn simultaneously (some of his finest works were created on the road in backstage dressing rooms or hotels), as well as page-fillers, spot illustrations, and advertisements. His lucrative drawing assignments were many and varied, and the consistently high technical and imaginative level of the artwork is a tribute to McCay's incredible concentration, organization, and artistry. In April 1911, he introduced something new into his vaudeville act: animated movies he made himself.

McCay credited his son with introducing him to animation in 1909, when the child brought him several advertising flipbooks. However, as noted, the artist had a natural affinity for animation, expressed in motion and sequential action throughout his comic strips and in his vaudeville act. His interest must also have sprung from viewing the films of two contemporaries: James Stuart Blackton (1895-1941), a newspaper cartoonist who later founded Vitagraph Studios, is generally considered to have produced the first film using frame-by-frame animation of drawings *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* (1906)), and Emile Cohl (1857-1938), a French caricaturist considered to be animation's first great artist who, starting in 1908, created over 200 short films full of magical metamorphosis. In 1909, Cohl's short films reached their height of popularity and were regularly imported to theaters in the United States.

McCay borrowed from both of these pioneer animators in his first film. From Blackton he adapted the iconographic motif of a live artist drawing characters that come to life; from Cohl, he used free-flowing abstractions of pencil lines forming into recognizable characters. Where McCay differed from his peers was in his ability to animate his drawings with no sacrifice in linear detail; that, plus fluid motion, naturalistic timing, the feeling of weight, and eventually the injection of personality traits into his characters are qualities that McCay first brought to the animation medium.

McCay worked on his animation drawings for about a year whenever he could find time in his hectic schedule. The artwork was photographed by Blackton at Vitagraph in Brooklyn, a live-action prologue and epilogue starring McCay was added, and each frame of the film was hand-colored to lend even more veracity to the animation. Particularly memorable in *Little Nemo* is a giant dragon-chariot that enters with weighty dignity and exits into the distance smoothly, serpentine tail undulating, in masterful perspective animation.

In his second film, released in 1912, the ambitious McCay went beyond motion-for-motion's sake experiments. He told a moral tale in pantomime by exploring the personality of a character that had neither the cachet of audience familiarity nor the visual appeal of the gang from Slumberland. *How A Mosquito Operates* is the beginning of a special kind of animation, known as "personality animation," that culminates in Walt Disney's feature-length cartoon *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).

When a character has personality — appears to think and to experience emotions — it becomes more than a drawing and seems truly alive to audiences. By his actions, McCay's homely mosquito appears to be an intelligent creature who can think and consider solutions to problems. Like any proper vaudevillian, he constantly establishes eye contact with us and shows an antic side to his personality waving his hat, sharpening his proboscis on a portable stone wheel, and showing off while quaffing a victim's blood and balancing on his nose.

McCay confidently transferred all of his animation discoveries into his third animated film, *Gertie The Dinosaur* (1914), rightfully described by historian Donald Crafton as “the enduring masterpiece of pre-Disney animation.” Determined to make Gertie the finest animated cartoon of its time, McCay painstakingly researched the structure of dinosaurs by studying their bones and he experimented with the timing of specific actions in an effort to make the prehistoric creature super-realistic. The film, which premiered in his vaudeville act in February 1914, is an early example of multi-media performance, for when the live McCay cracked a bullwhip and barked commands, the film dinosaur appeared to respond. The personality traits invested in Gertie make her truly unique; her childish temperament is most endearing — when, admonished for a fit of pique, she cries huge tears, thus revealing the soul of a little girl within the monster's hulk.

McCay's next film, *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918), represents a change in technique for the animator, from inking characters and settings together on delicate rice paper to images inked and painted onto clear celluloid (“cels”) registered over separate opaque backgrounds. More importantly, the film is a monumental milestone in the history of animation. The film's dark, somber mood; the superb realistic draftsmanship and animation; timing of the action; the excellent dramatic choices of “camera” angles and editing; the cumulative emotional effect of these qualities would only reappear years later in certain sequences of Disney's features and some of his World War II propaganda shorts, e.g. *Education For Death* (1943). McCay's magnificent achievement was far ahead of its time and far beyond the sensibilities and capabilities of the men then rapidly turning out series of simple gag cartoon films starring clowns, cats, dogs and kids. McCay envisioned animation as a great new art form in which the “coming artist will make his reputation, not by pictures in still life, but by drawings that are animated.”

In the next three years, McCay made six more films using cels, and while all have their inspired moments, they seem to meander, making one sense that McCay was wandering too, not knowing where to take his formidable knowledge and its potential. He never established an animation studio to mass produce his ideas or to fully exploit the commercial possibilities of animation. He found joy in working by himself slowly on each film (sometimes with a couple of assistants), testing, finding his own way in his own good time, and contemplating the artistic possibilities in the medium.

A modern author once likened Leonardo da Vinci and his achievements to a man who awakens too early, while his contemporaries are still sleeping, a description that could also describe the genius of Winsor McCay. After viewing a 1975 retrospective of McCay's total film output, Richard Eder of the New York Times noted a similarity between McCay's “dead end” and William Blake's vision: “... it was too strange and personal to be generalized or to have children.”

In the last twenty years of his life, the work that sustained McCay emotionally disappeared. His unpredictable boss William Randolph Hearst forbade his vaudeville performances, undermining his interest in creating any new animation, which was previously showcased in his theatrical performances. His fantasy comic strips fell out of vogue, were discontinued, and McCay's great visionary talent was confined to drawing daily editorial cartoons, whose ideology and imagery was dictated mostly by others. By the 1920s, when Felix the Cat reigned supreme on movie screens,

McCay's contributions to the art of animation were already forgotten. Soon after his death in 1934, the artist's reputation fell into oblivion.

In the 1960s, America's reassessment of the cultural legacy of its popular arts inevitably led to a rediscovery and appreciation of the supreme contributions of McCay, one of the world's greatest fantasists. The Milestone video program of McCay's animated films is a significant step in the restoration of McCay's rightful place in the pantheon of American popular art.

### JOHN CANEMAKER

John Canemaker, the key McCay historian and Oscar®-winning director of *THE MOON AND THE SON*, is a key figure in the American independent animation movement. His distinctive style emphasizes emotion, personality, and dynamic visual expression. Beginning with *THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP* (1982), he has communicated sensitive themes through animation. "No subject matter is off-limits or deemed 'too difficult'," wrote Museum of Modern Art film curator Jytte Jensen, while famed animator Chuck Jones has written,

*"To express admiration and affection for the multi-talented Mr. John Canemaker is, and must be, multi-layered, too: he is a writer, artist, historian, teacher, and biographer of the good and the great in animation; and he is, surprisingly and uniquely, an animator in his own right. John is an artist for all seasons and all reasons and it is a pleasure to so announce to the world."*

As a documentary filmmaker and writer for *THE NEW YORK TIMES* and other periodicals, Canemaker has known many key figures in animation, from pioneer artists of the "Golden Age" of cartoons to today's leading talents. He is the author of ten acclaimed books on animation history including *Winsor McCay His Life and Art*; *The Animated Raggedy Ann & Andy*; *Treasures of Disney Animation Art*; and *Felix: The Twisted Tale of the World's Most Famous Cat*, *Walt Disney's Nine Old Men and the Art of Animation*, and his latest, *The Art and Flair of Mary Blair*. His own collection of animation, *John Canemaker: Marching to a Different Toon* is distributed by Milestone on DVD.

As a full professor and the director of the animation program at New York University Tisch School of the Arts, he inspires new generations through teaching and lectures around the world.

<http://www.johncanemaker.com>

[http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales/coll\\_mss/canemake/](http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales/coll_mss/canemake/)

[http://www.awn.com/infovault/archives\\_cane/index.html](http://www.awn.com/infovault/archives_cane/index.html)

### WINSOR McCAY: THE FILMS

1) *Little Nemo* (1911). In a live-action prologue and epilogue, McCay wagers with friends (including cartoonist George McManus and actor John Bunny, a Vitagraph star) that he can make his drawings move. The film stars the cast from McCay's epic comic strip "Little Nemo in Slumberland". In an attempt to make the smooth animation appear even more life-like, McCay hand-colored each frame of the cartoon portion of the film. American architect and author Claude Bragdon wrote of *Little Nemo*, "... it excited me greatly, and no wonder! I had witnessed the birth of a new art."

2) *How A Mosquito Operates* (1912) (a.k.a. *The Story Of A Mosquito*). The first example of "personality" animation, in which an animated character appears to think and exhibits individualism

through his actions. The beginnings of a type of animation that reached its apex in Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) twenty five years later.

3) *Gertie The Dinosaur* (1914) Premiered in McCay's vaudeville act as a multi-media performance with McCay in person cracking a whip while commanding his cartoon dinosaur to obey him. A triumph of personality animation that inspired a generation to enter the movie cartoon field, among them Paul Terry, Walter Lantz, Otto Messmer, and a number of future Disney animators.

4) *The Sinking Of The Lusitania* (1918). One of the greatest animated films ever made. A profoundly moving masterpiece of propaganda, comprised of dark and powerful imagery that is ahead of its time and has rarely been surpassed.

5) *The Centaurs* (c. 1918-21). Fragments of an Arcadian fantasy: a day in the life of a centaur family, predicting the Pastoral sequence in Disney's *Fantasia* (1940).

6) *Gertie On Tour* (c. 1918-21). Intriguing fragments of a comeback starring the irrepressible dinosaur.

7) *Flip's Circus* (c. 1918-21). Bad-boy Flip from McCay's "Nemo" comic strip (and first film in a vaudeville turn) juggling, dancing and attempting to train a hungry, Gertie-like beast.

8) *Bug Vaudeville* (c. 1921). An affectionate parody of the world of the circus and vaudeville, where grasshoppers juggle, cockroaches ride unicycles, and spiders dance. Andrew Sarris' favorite McCay cartoon: "Only a man who knew showbiz to his bone marrow could conceive of the two bugs who pass back and forth a handkerchief with which to dry their sweaty palms before doing their hand-flips. Fellini would be honored by such insight into the ritual of performance."

9) *The Pet* (c. 1921). An apocalyptic tale of a man who eats rarebit and dreams that his wife's new puppy grows into a monstrous beast, roaming through city skyscrapers and attacked by airships like the future King Kong. A precursor, too, of Tex Avery's size obsession in *King Size Canary* (1947).

10) *The Flying House* (c. 1921). McCay's final film, a collaboration with his son, Robert. Painstaking perspective animation of the heavens and outer space, as a man and his wife attempt to escape their creditors. The couple is shot down by a rocket, but "this is not the wild but innocuous plunge that is the staple of cartooning," wrote Richard Eder in 1975. "It is a real nightmare fall by real desperate people."

11) *Remembering Winsor McCay* (1976). Directed by John Canemaker. The life and career of the great cartoonist Winsor McCay is warmly recalled by his former film assistant, John Fitzsimmons (then 84); and clips of classic McCay animated films including *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914).

© John Canemaker 1993

## Milestone Film & Video

Milestone enters its twentieth year of operations with a reputation for releasing classic cinema masterpieces, new foreign films, groundbreaking documentaries and American independent features. Thanks to the company's work in rediscovering and releasing important films such as Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, Kent Mackenzie's, *The Exiles*, Mikhail Kalatozov's *I Am Cuba*, Marcel Ophuls's *The Sorrow and the Pity*, the Mariposa Film Group's *Word is Out* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*, Milestone has long occupied a position as one of the country's most influential independent distributors. In November 2007, Milestone was awarded the Fort Lee Film Commission's first Lewis Selznick Award for contributions to film history. In January 2008, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association chose to give its first Legacy of Cinema Award "to Dennis Doros and Amy Heller of Milestone Film & Video for their tireless efforts on behalf of film restoration and preservation." And in March 2008, Milestone became an Anthology Film Archive's Film Preservation honoree. In 2009, Dennis Doros was elected as one of the Directors of the Board of the Association of the Moving Image Archivists and established the organization's press office in 2010.

In 1995, Milestone received the first Special Archival Award from the National Society of Film Critics for its restoration and release of *I Am Cuba*. Manohla Dargis, then at the *LA Weekly*, chose Milestone as the 1999 "Indie Distributor of the Year." In 2004, the National Society of Film Critics again awarded Milestone with a Film Heritage award. That same year the International Film Seminars presented the company its prestigious Leo Award and the New York Film Critics Circle voted a Special Award "in honor of 15 years of restoring classic films." Milestone/Milliarium won Best Rediscovery from the Il Cinema Ritrovato DVD Awards for its release of *Winter Soldier* in 2006 and again in 2010 for *The Exiles*.

In 2011, Milestone was the first distributor ever chosen for two Film Heritage Awards in the same year by the National Society of Film Critics — this time for the release of *ON THE BOWERY* and *WORD IS OUT*. The American Library Association also selected *WORD IS OUT* for their Notable Videos for Adult, the first classic film ever so chosen.

Important contemporary filmmakers have co-presented Milestone restorations including Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Barbara Kopple, Woody Allen, Steven Soderbergh, Thelma Schoonmaker, Jonathan Demme and Dustin Hoffman.

*"They care and they love movies."* Martin Scorsese

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