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AVANT-GARDE FILM: CINEMA AS DISCOURSE

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During the past couple of years, the talk in avant-garde film circles has centered on the question of whether the "movement" is dead. The two most prominent recent obituaries are Fred Camper's "The End of Avant-Garde Film" and Jim Hoberman's "Avant to Live: Fear and Trembling at the Whitney Biennial." Both authors begin their assessments in a similar and revealing way.

> Camper: In 1963, when I was 15 years old and growing up in New York City, a friend of mine read a Jonas Mekas column praising a new 'underground' film, went to see it, and was very impressed. He told me about it, and I went to the next screening of it with him. There was a certain adventure to all this for an adolescent: going to what seemed then like an out-of-the-way part of the city, sitting in an audience of older, somewhat strange-seeming people; seeing a film of a type I'd never even heard of before. But the real adventure began when the film was screened. I had never before imagined that the colors and shapes of the seen world, whose sensuality and texture had fascinated me since childhood, could be arranged into such a perfect expression. Every color, every object, every image seemed to gain energy from all that surrounded it. The time-crossing editing form was likewise unlike anything I had yet encountered. A whole new possibility for seeing and thinking, and most importantly for understanding that seeing and thinking could be intimately related, interdependent acts, was opened. I came to see, feel, and understand my own capacities for eyesight, perception, thought, and imagination, far more deeply than I had before. My life was forever changed (99).

> Hoberman: The French call adolescence the age of film-going, and it may be that the movies you discover then set your taste forever. Certainly, my own life was altered in 1965, when I began frequenting a cruddy storefront on St. Marks Place and the even weirder basement of a midtown skyscraper. I knew movie-movies, but this was another world: oceanic superimpositions and crazy editing rhythms, films made from bits of newsreel and Top 40 songs, 'plots' ranging from the creation of the universe to the sins of the fleshapoids, real people (often naked) cavorting in mock Arabian palaces and outer borough garbage dumps. Determined to learn more, I took out a subscription to *Film Culture*. That the first issue was half devoted to the grandiose schemes of a mad beatnik named Ron Rice only confirmed my sense that anything was possible (25).

Part of me envies the experience shared by Camper and Hoberman (and presumably hundreds of others); and I can empathize with their disappointment that the cinematic adventures of their adolescence

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no longer seem possible. There *was* a moment in the mid-sixties when some American cultural centers—and, to a degree, people outside these centers—were discovering a range of non-conventional forms of cinema. Filmmakers who had been making films for a decade, and in some instances for two decades, were achieving recognition in areas of North American society that had previously not heard of them, and a host of new filmmakers were emerging. New York and San Francisco seemed the hubs of a cinematic movement in a manner analogous to the way Paris was the literary hub for experimental poets and fiction writers in the twenties. And then in the early seventies the excitement seemed to peter out. Jonas Mekas stopped writing his influential "Movie Journal" column in *The Village Voice*, and while experimental cinematic forms found some institutional homes, the social ferment which surrounded the celebrated screenings of the mid- to late-sixties evaporated.

If one defines the avant-garde movement as that special moment in the sixties when social excitement about alternative forms of cinema seemed greatest (especially in New York and San Francisco), then the movement *is* dead. But such a definition ignores a number of important realities. The most obvious, perhaps, is that that moment may not have been as special as it now seems to Camper and Hoberman.

Much of the history of earlier periods in the development of alternative cinema remains to be written, but we do know that a vital film avant-garde was underway in Europe by the mid-twenties and that, from the beginning, the influential London Film Society was offering its members opportunities to view avant-garde films in a context of other forms of cinema.[1] An American avant-garde movement was underway by the mid-forties: Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid, the Whitney Brothers, Sidney Peterson, Kenneth Anger, James Broughton, and others were making important films which were featured in the seminal "Art in Cinema" series held at the San Francisco Museum of Art, and subsequently, by Amos Vogel's Cinema 16, which presented film programs of remarkable diversity—programs which consistently included avant-garde films—to membership audiences in New York City.[2] At Cinema 16's height, audiences regularly filled a 1500-seat auditorium twice a night, as well as several commercial theaters, for monthly presentations. It is doubtful that at any other point during American film history—including the supposed heydays of the sixties—audiences of such size have ever been exposed to avant-garde work.[3] Large segments of the Cinema 16 membership may not have been enthusiastic about seeing early Anger, Peterson, Deren, and Brakhage, but they saw the films, and in contexts designed to keep them coming back. Like the London Film Society, Cinema 16 became a model for a nationwide network of film societies, many of which included avant-garde cinema in their programs.[4]

By the sixties, when Camper and Hoberman entered the scene, the exhibition climate already was changing. Along with new kinds of film came new approaches to exhibition, including the one-person show of films by the individual film artist—an approach promoted by the New American Cinema group.[5] The one-person show was useful in drawing attention to the achievement of many film artists, and yet, one could argue that the tendency of avant-garde screening rooms to adopt this exhibition model ultimately narrowed the public audience for alternative cinema. Thanks to federal and state subsidies during the seventies and eighties, some forms of avant-garde film have remained regularly available to paying public audiences in some cities and at some colleges and universities; yet, these screening rooms appeal to only a fraction of the audience which might have seen an avant-garde film

at the London Film Society or at Cinema 16.[6]

It does seem clear that the mid-to-late sixties was *one* of the crucial periods for the production of alternative cinema; and it was an important period of discovery for many viewers. Nevertheless, the fact remains that for many of us who did not live in New York, San Francisco, and selected other urban centers, what seemed a movement to Camper and Hoberman was only one element in a changing film scene. My own first experiences with avant-garde cinema occurred during the same period as theirs, but that contemporaneity may be the only similarity. I did not experience my first avant-garde films as an adolescent (the films that had an impact on my adolescence were *A Summer Place*, *The World of Susie Wong*, and *Sundays and Cybele*!), but in my mid-twenties, when I saw a traveling program or two of "underground 'films" as a graduate student of American literature at the University of Florida. I was so entirely unimpressed with the films that I no longer recall an image or a title. And I remember being closed out of a screening of *Chelsea Girls*, only to hear later that I'd not missed much. For me the late sixties brought the discovery of European and Japanese film, and via Andrew Sarris's *The American Cinema*, of Keaton, Lubitsch, Ford, et al.

My first important experiences with avant-garde film came later, at a weekend film symposium at the State University of New York at Binghamton and at a three-week seminar at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, sponsored by the University Film Study Center. In Binghamton I saw, on a single afternoon in the spring of 1972, Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity*, Stan Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, and Larry Gottheim's *Barn Rushes*. With the exception of *Barn Rushes*, which seemed related to Monet, I understood nothing of what I saw, except that there was a good deal more to be understood about film than I had realized. By the end of another year, I'd begun to use all three films in my courses, and by the time I arrived at Hampshire College in the summer of 1973, I was already enthusiastic about this "new" field. My excitement was fueled by Ed Emshwiller, at that time a good-will ambassador for avant-garde film, by filmmaker John Marshall (who began his seminar on ethnographic film with Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer*), by Sheldon Renan's fascination with Jordan Belson, and by seeing a sophisticated, "film educated" audience walk out on the first three sections of Hollis Frampton's *Hapax Legomena: nostalgia*, *Poetic Justice*, and *Critical Mass*, films which simultaneously bored and annoyed me *and* put me in a state of thrilled receptivity which I can only call ecstatic. I was up half the night deliriously writing notes on the Frampton films.

My excitement with the avant-garde films I was seeing was largely a function of my teaching. As the field revealed its contours, each new curve of the terrain made possible new kinds of interaction with my students. Before I'd known about avant-garde film, I'd been in the position of delivering landmark commercial features and classic documentaries to classes and doing my best to enlighten students about the histories of these films and about their implications. Once I added avant-garde films to my courses, I found that my classroom became more fully a theoretical space, where all of us could directly confront the question of what a film *is* fundamentally and how popular cinema constructs us as viewers and as people. From the beginning, much of my admiration for avant-garde films was a function of what they were capable of revealing about conventional film experiences, by using strategies fundamentally different from the popular cinema. Or to put this another way, once I began to explore avant-garde film, the commercial cinema which

had dominated my awareness became a set of cultural texts, and avant-garde film became an ongoing critique of those texts.

2

We can forget sometimes that film history is not simply a subject, or a series of cultural facts to be written about in essays and books. Film history is itself an ongoing discourse. The contribution of the long history of avant-garde cinema has been to increase the complexity and sophistication of this overall cinematic discourse. The North American avant-garde has produced its own pantheon—Brakhage, Conner, Snow, Gehr, Mekas, Rainer— and a variety of recognized genres—dada and surreal film; abstract animation; the psychodrama and other forms of visionary cinema described by P. Adams Sitney; structural film; the diary film; the (usually sexually political) New Narrative—representing tendencies in which a cinematic discourse is developing (or in some cases has ceased to develop—at least for the moment). Each of these discursively interacts with other areas. For example, the New Narrative a la Rainer, Raynal, Mangolte, Mulvey/Wollen, Akerman, Potter, and Benning has developed partly in reaction to *and* through assimilation of the structural cinema of Snow, Gehr, and Frampton. And this complex avant-garde history has a similar relationship with the popular cinema. By the late fifties, George and Mike Kuchar had internalized Hollywood film of the forties and fifties and were transforming what they had learned into tiny avant-garde trash epics which

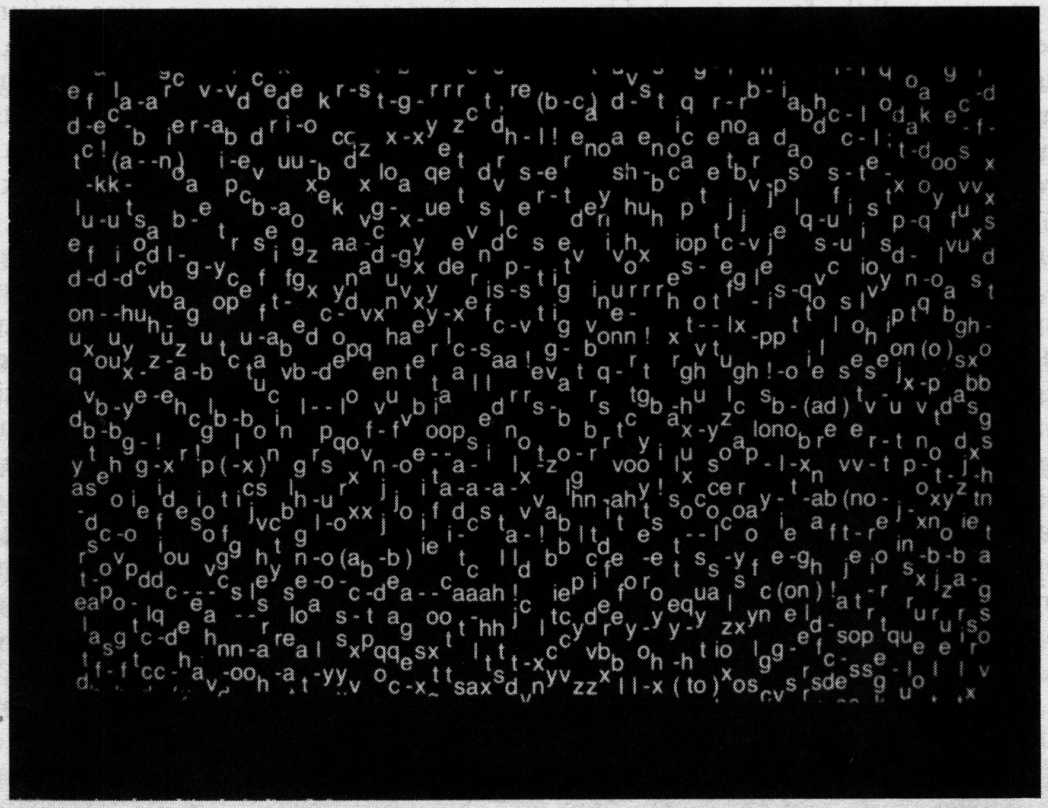
Still from Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't* (1987). Courtesy: Su Friedrich.

"commented on" the forms they had borrowed from and which influenced John Waters and a whole generation of "punk" filmmakers, whose design sense has had an impact on commercial cinema and television.[7]

Even if one were to agree that Camper's and Hoberman's experiences were the most dramatic way of discovering avant-garde cinema, there's no point in defining a cinematic movement according to the excitement viewers experienced during their earliest exposure to particular films. The question of the moment is whether the eighties represent a diminishing of the power and complexity of the discourse of alternative cinema or a productive extension of what has gone before. From my very limited vantage point, I would argue that, regardless of one's sense of the state of alternative film *exhibition*, the *production* of avant-garde cinema has continued at a very high level. It may be true that the eighties have not produced a new pantheon, or a single filmmaker as remarkably inventive and prolific as Brakhage, but a number of the filmmakers who became well-known in the fifties and sixties have continued to make interesting films (Brakhage is a good example), and impressive filmmakers and films continue to appear on the scene (for example, Su Friedrich: *Gently Down the Stream*, 1981; *The Ties That Bind*, 1984; and *Damned if You Don't*, 1987).

In any case, there's no reason to assume that the achievements of the eighties are developing, or should develop, in the pattern that characterizes the innovative work of earlier decades. Up through the sixties, avant-garde cinema was pioneering work. For the most part, the individuals whose visions we so easily recognize now were moving into virgin territory. They had—or at least knew about—very few antecedents, and, since they rigorously avoided the approaches of the commercial cinema, it was almost inevitable that what they produced would be very different from any other films audiences would have had the opportunity to see. By the seventies the situation was changing. Filmmakers interested in working outside the commercial mainstream entered a territory in which a good deal of filmic exploration had already occurred, and not surprisingly, their admiration of or frustration with the kinds of avant-garde cinema already available became a major factor in their development. As suggested earlier, a mixture of frustration with the limitations of structural film and excitement about the new rhetorical options offered by structural filmmakers is implicit in the feminist New Narrative. Other recent developments have grown from a recognition of the potential of other previously discovered forms. For example, Bruce Connor is usually credited with establishing "recycled cinema" (films edited from other films), a form which a number of recent filmmakers have explored with considerable ingenuity: for example, the Raffertys and Jane Loader (*The Atomic Cafe*, 1982) Morgan Fisher (*Standard Gauge*, 1984), Alan Berliner (*City Edition*, 1980; *Myth in the Electric Age*, 1981; *Natural History*, 1983; *Everywhere at Once*, 1985; *The Family Album*, 1987); Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi (*Karagoez—Catalogo 9.5*, 1981; *From the Pole to the Equator*, 1986); William Farley (*Tribute, 1987*).

In other instances, avant-garde filmmakers have extended the use of particular visual elements common in conventional and experimental cinema to such a degree that these elements become the foci of new forms. One of the most fully articulated of these forms is what might be called text-image cinema: films in which the act of reading printed or written texts is a (or *the*) central viewing experience. Early examples include Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1926), Len Lye's *Musical Poster No. 1* (1939), and Carmen D'Avino's *The Big "O"* (c. 1953). Recent instances include Patrick Clancy's *Peliculas* (1979); Su Friedrich's *Gently*



An example of "text-image cinema," from Peter Rose's *Secondary Currents* (1983). Courtesy: Peter Rose.

Down the Stream and *The Ties That Bind*; Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1982); David Goldberg and Michael Oblowitz's *The Is/Land* (1982); Rick Hancox's *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)* (1982); Leslie Thornton's *Oh China Oh* (1983); Peter Rose's *Secondary Currents* (1983) and *Spiritmatters* (1984); James Benning's *American Dreams* (1984); and Peter Watkins' *The Journey* (1987).[8]

There is no space here to provide a justification for the films, filmmakers, and tendencies I've mentioned, or for others that could be mentioned. But it does seem useful to say that since 1980 I've been unable to keep up with all the interesting avant-garde work I see, much less catch up on the past, much less explore the many films other critics I respect have found impressive. And there is also a sizable body of recent commercial and semi-commercial films with obvious historical and aesthetic ties to avant-garde cinema: for instance, Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1986), Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), and Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1985). If the movement *seems* dead, I'd guess it's because the urban social surroundings for alternative cinema and the energy of traditional independent screening rooms seems to have diminished, not because of any paucity of interesting films.

3

I have always felt that the primary potential for alternative film rests with academe. One can attack the system of North American higher education in all manner of ways, but the fact remains that, despite the frequently conservative, potentially oppressive sources of capital that maintain our system of higher education, the academic environment remains one of the few substantial institutional frameworks

within which serious discourse of any sort is at least intermittently encouraged. And it is the primary institutional home for the study of a number of subject areas roughly similar to avant-garde cinema. "Serious" poetry, short stories, novels, and plays have always had a rough time in the marketplace. Yet, not only have these forms found a home in academe, they remain—for those people who study them—vital discourses. Film, especially "serious" alternative forms of film, should be functioning in a similar way. From my experience as a teacher it seems clear that avant-garde cinema can be remarkably stimulating in the college classroom. But for the most part, so far as I can tell, the potential for a fully sophisticated film discourse, one that includes *cinematic* discourse on the cinema, has as yet not been realized in many colleges and universities.

Why hasn't it been realized? I have a number of suspicions. For one thing, the specialization of screening venues for the maturing North American avant-garde film was occurring simultaneously with the entry of serious film study into colleges and universities across the country. Since the increasing articulation of avant-garde film was less accessible—in both availability and comprehensibility—than the influx of foreign commercial cinema or the redefinition of Hollywood according to auteurism, the avant-garde tended to remain, for the most part, on the fringes of the burgeoning academic film establishment.[9]

The marginalization of even those areas of alternative cinema that "researched" crucial elements of the cinematic apparatus was confirmed during the seventies and early eighties by the incursion into academic institutions of new ways of reading mainstream cinema inspired by French theoreticians. Before cinema even had an opportunity to get its bearings in academe, to establish itself in a form analogous to other, roughly similar disciplines in the arts and humanities, film academics were besieged with a wealth of new, difficult theoretical texts whose potential for revealing interesting dimensions of popular cinema were considerable. Of course, there's no turning back the clock. And who would want to? Who hasn't profited from Barthes, from Foucault, from Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"?

But while I have learned from some of those texts I've had an opportunity to read and understand, and while I often take pleasure in the brilliance of their insights, my pleasure is mitigated by a nagging feeling that to an extent what is happening, as these hundreds of primary and secondary writings absorb the attention and energy of academics, is that a new mode of literature is consuming cinema (or the limited time people have for experiencing cinema and thinking about it)—that an essentially *literary* discourse is substituting itself for a *cinematic* one. Of course, I understand that people who write about film (or at least very few of them) want their writing to be a substitute for seeing film. Who could understand their writing then? And yet, there is a professional/economic/social value to writing and reading theory about film that does not seem to inhere in filmgoing or film exhibition.

Originally, I was drawn to film—and I assume this is true for most people who come to care about cinema—because it provides an experience fundamentally different from reading literary texts. It was, and usually still is, a public experience during which a group of people enter a darkened room where their attention is focused on a specific set of visual/auditory stimulae which they experience together. For me, this experiencing of film in the dark together is the issue. Since cinema takes place in time, we have become accustomed to the presence of narrative as a means for maintaining this experience of togetherness, but it is not for narrative alone that we pay our money. If it were,

I'd argue that our dollars would be better spent on books: the great novels articulate narrative at a level considerably beyond film's current capabilities. What we pay admission for, really, is to experience certain pleasures, shocks, and frustrations, and to be able to define the nature of our responses, immediately and directly, in relation to those of other people. And since film distorts whatever it presents in ways peculiar to its own apparatus, the imagery we watch inevitably confronts our sense of reality. Film provides a forum within which we must continually test our vision of things. It follows that if we only experience one kind of film, our testing of our sense of reality is very limited, but if we are present with audiences at a wide variety of types of cinema, the potential is there for the development of a much deeper sense of cinema, of self, and of the communities in which we live.

Reading a written text which explicates or theorizes about a film or a set of films can be interesting and useful, even very exciting. But, no matter how ingenious the text, it cannot provide the same sort of direct revelation that occurs when an audience (student or otherwise), accustomed to a very limited cinematic discourse is presented with a *film* which stands in an aggressively analytical or theoretical relationship to conventional cinema. Over the years I've screened a variety of films by Japanese avant-garde filmmaker Taka Iimura. It's a rare written text about film that can galvanize the level of energy produced by even a relatively brief Iimura film. Much of Iimura's work during the early seventies (he began as a surrealist filmmaker, and is working now primarily in video) dealt with the filmic experience of time. Generally, Iimura eliminated the usual sorts of film imagery, substituting various sign systems for measuring duration. The resulting films can function in a variety of ways: as meditative experiences (Iimura is much influenced by Zen) or as "durational sculptures" which shape time within the theater space. I've normally used them in my courses as cinematic "rulers" that measure out intervals of time in a regular, simple system. Several years ago, as part of an Introduction to Film course at Hamilton College, I showed Iimura's + & -, a 26-minute film (shorter Iimura films have the same effect) in which durations of darkness are added to one another: we'll see one bit of darkness, a + sign, then a second interval of darkness, then an = sign, and finally a duration of darkness equal to the first two. The equations proceed regularly, in a system which is quickly understood by the viewer. Once the 45 additions are accomplished, Iimura—with Zen irony—moves through a set of 45 equations during which durations of white leader are "subtracted" from durations of darkness.

Within five minutes of the beginning of + & -, Iimura's simple equations had catalyzed my students into a rage. People yelled, stood up and stomped out of the room slamming the door (this was a class that in all other circumstances was entirely quiet and orderly, maybe even a bit too elaborately respectful), and they continued to do battle with the film in their formal journals for weeks. Seeing + & - had demonstrated the size and something of the nature of the emotional stake these people had in the normal pleasure-giving functions of cinema, quickly and directly, from *within* the institution of cinema. The issues—cinematic and otherwise—raised by this experience haunted the classroom for the remainder of the semester, and allowed for a more alert perception of the more conventional films shown.

If the discourse of cinema—as distinguished from the literary discourse *about* cinema—is to remain vital, if it is to have ongoing productive impact, the theater must remain a dynamic space, if not in all sectors of the culture, at least in some. There's nothing very romantic about the recognition that the primary location where dynamic cinema programming remains possible is in academe. A vibrant

"underground" in a mysterious corner of a great city is far more intriguing. But as with so many of our cultural traditions, the best present hope for much of alternative cinema remains the classroom. Of course, if we really want to maximize the potential of cinematic discourse, we will need to revise our priorities a bit. I cannot claim to have traveled very widely in academic circles, but judging from the conferences I have attended and the colleges and universities I've taught at and visited, dynamic programming—for the public or in the classroom—remains far less common than one would wish. Even at film conferences screenings often are viewed as a perfunctory fringe benefit, and sometimes are held in spaces totally unsuited for the presentation of important films. Further, it seems obvious that in the field of film teaching, a published article counts for substantially more than the experience of creative film exhibition. Academe remains the avant-garde's best hope, but at this point it is only a hope. For those of us convinced of the value and potential importance of the broadest articulation of cinema, the challenge is to demonstrate the excitement and value of using avant-garde films in a wide range of academic contexts, not simply on the fringes of academic film activity, but as one of its essential components. Hundreds of avant-garde films—old and brand new—are available, but unless we see a change in our priorities, much of this remarkable work may not be available to the next generation.

Notes

[1] In the Society's third program (December 1925), a silent comedy was shown with excerpts of a science film, with Robert Weine's *Raskolnikov*, and with *A quoi revent les jeunes films* (production: Comte Etienne de Beaumont; direction: Henry Chomellte; "cineportraits": Man Ray). This last film is described in the program notes in a manner reminiscent of Camper's and Hoberman's descriptions of their first avant-garde screenings: the film apparently had "no plot, its interest centres in the shapes, value, rhythm and speed of the perspectives. All romance is banished, leaving place entirely to cinematography. By turns, arabesques and mirror reflections produce shapeless human forms, chaste as clouds, which emerge at last as faces of alloyed beauty, for which women well known for their charm and talents have consented to pose. One recognizes the Comtesse do Noailles, the celebrated French poet, the Princesse Bibesco, author of 'Seven Paradises' and 'The Green Parrot,' Mrs. Fellowes, Lady Abdy, etc. These faces fuse little by little into landscapes, crystal parks, frolicking lights in the night. Suddenly one bursts out of the dark to rush full speed round Paris, first by land and then on the water—vision becomes obscure—and finally the dream vanishes in a dazzling light." See *The Film Society Programs: 1925–1939*, p. 11.

[2] For more information about the "Art in Cinema" series, see Frank Stauffacher, Ed., *Art in Cinema*. Censorship restrictions required that Cinema 16 be a membership society, but the only requirement for membership was buying a (reasonably priced) season pass.

[3] One possible exception is mentioned in passing by Germain Clinton, in "The Canadian Federation of Film Societies," (71–2). In the thirties, Vancouver boasted an immensely successful film society, which according to one report, showed "programs of great intrepidity."

[4] According to George Amberg, in the "Introduction" to *The Film Society Programs*, the London Film Society "established the prototype for all the subsequent cine clubs and societies that are now proliferating . . ." For information about Cinema 16's influence on North American film societies, see *The Film Society Primer*, especially Armine T. Wilson, "Film Perspectives" (18–21). For more information on Cinema 16, see my "Amos Vogel and Cinema 16," and "Cinema 16: An Interview with Amos Vogel."

[5] In 1960 the New American Cinema Group (called together by Jonas Mekas and Lewis Allen) explored alternative types of distribution and exhibition for avant-garde and other non-mainstream forms of film—alternatives, specifically, to the procedures developed by Cinema 16. This development was both understandable and healthy in some ways. Mekas and other members of the New American Cinema group (Brakhage in particular) had bridled at Vogel's insistence that avant-garde films be presented as part of what they called "potpourri programs" (see the "First Statement of the New American Cinema Group"), and at Vogel's assumption that he should continue to choose which of their films got distributed.

[6] I remain deeply grateful to the little theaters which showed and in some cases continue to show avant-garde film, and to the dedicated

enthusiasts who have kept them running (the combination of box office revenues and government grants rarely supply decent salaries for the administrators of avant-garde screening rooms). Without these theaters, the serious study of avant-garde film would be even more difficult than it is. Nevertheless, I would argue that this system has solidified the tendency since Cinema 16 to ghettoize avant-garde film. In some cases, the growing isolation of avant-garde film has produced a form of elitist pretension: only those films shown in avant-garde screening rooms are considered truly "serious," and those filmmakers (J.J. Murphy can serve as an example) who have moved toward narrative forms reminiscent of Hollywood are considered sell-outs by some, even when (as in the case of Murphy) their new work is in keeping with the filmmakers' basic commitment to the medium and is probably more financially and psychologically strenuous than their previous, "serious" filmmaking.

[7] Of course, even the discourse of mainstream commercial film develops through an interaction between commercial films. For example, each new horror film we see either reconfirms or extends the experience and implications of previous horror films. *Nightmare on Elm Street* either does not frighten us, *compared to previous frightening films* or it frightens us *despite our previous horror training*. Each new experience more completely articulates our sense of cinema horror. And each genre discourses with other genres: a horror film *is* a horror film precisely because it is not a musical, a comedy, a western, or a film noir—though inevitably some experimenters within the commercial industry will attempt to make the situation more complex by combining elements usually thought to be characteristic of separate genres.

[8] For a more detailed discussion of text-image film, see my "Text As Image in Some Recent North American Avant-Garde Films."

[9] Obviously there are exceptions. Avant-garde film has a distinguished place in some film departments at major universities (at N.Y.U., for example). Nevertheless, I'd guess avant-garde cinema remains less familiar to film teachers across North America than any other major film tradition.

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