

Amos Vogel and the Way Forward:

Looking Back to Find the
Future of Film Exhibition

American cinema stands at the edge of an unfamiliar sea. Film art and film industry are groping their way through a period of bewildering change, perplexed by a cultural environment that's producing expansion and contraction at once. Digital technology has produced opportunities that were often promised in the past but which were never completely delivered. Films are now so cheap to produce and distribute that it has become for the first time a creative medium for the masses. The "independent revolution" of the 1990s created a generation of would-be filmmakers, all vying to command the limited attention of the American viewer. A flood of new films combined with the consolidation of corporate media and shrinking subsidies has created an impossible financial situation. More films than ever have entered the market at precisely the moment when the economy and infrastructure of film culture have been profoundly undermined.

Missing from the scene is the art house cinema, the place that has traditionally provided a home for struggling young filmmakers and for the vast expanses of film culture that rarely find sanctuary at the mainstream commercial cinemas. The art house is a refuge for experimental and avant-garde film, documentary, foreign, repertory and low-budget independent film. The waves of neophytes emerging from the nation's film schools all want to direct, but few of them, it seems, are eager to do the support work needed to provide all these new films with the audiences they deserve. Film exhibition isn't sexy, but it is

crucial to the development of film culture. And never has that development been more badly needed – the glut of easy entertainment and vacuous commercial trash has left us a nation of cinematic illiterates in which even the cinephiles have never heard of Eisenstein. American film culture is at a low ebb, bereft of artistic insight or sophistication.

There's still a sense, though, that at one time things were not this dire. The American cinema has produced some great works of both film and criticism – they couldn't have emerged from a void such as the one we inhabit now. My explorations have led me to an apparent “golden age” of film culture: a time and place in which engaged, curious filmgoers, actively seeking films that would challenge them, supported an independent film society led by a man with unconventional tastes. Amos Vogel's Cinema 16 represents the idea of fully-realized film culture in the United States, a situation to which we in the present might aspire.

This paper, then, aims to use the model of Cinema 16 as a reference point against which to consider the plight of film culture in 2005. Most of the assumptions surrounding the operation of the society are obviously no longer valid, and those differences will be discussed. But somewhere within Vogel's programming philosophy, which was so much more successful than almost any other before or since, there must be some insight that we can use to begin reconstructing a new golden age of American film culture, one that grows naturally from the vast opportunities and uncomfortable limits of our evolving

cultural environment.

From 1947 until 1963, Amos Vogel along with his wife, Marcia, ran what was perhaps the most successful independent film exhibition organization in the history of the United States: Cinema 16. He founded it on the promise of 16mm film, which at the time was a new, exciting, accessible film format with the capacity to create a newly democratic cinema free of the restrictions and conventions of Hollywood. Vogel set out to challenge the assumptions and preconceptions of New York City filmgoers by continually confronting them with the unexpected, the unintelligible, and the unacceptable. Over Cinema 16's sixteen-year existence, Vogel estimates that he screened carefully-constructed programs of cinematic subversion for as many as a quarter of a million filmgoers.

The film society as a model of exhibition was already firmly established long before Vogel founded Cinema 16; the first film societies appeared in Europe in the 1920s. Amos himself cut his cinematic teeth at a Vienna film society when he was no older than fourteen.¹ While commercial cinemas were widespread, film societies devoted themselves to film as art (in the fullest sense of the word) and to the serious consideration of cinema, which many felt to be lacking in commercial movie houses. Austrian, American and German films were common currency in commercial cinemas, so film societies became a place to see foreign

¹Scott MacDonald, *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 37.

films, documentaries, and experimental shorts. There Vogel was able to acquaint himself with the works of Russian masters: Vertov, Dovzhenko, Pudovken, and Eisenstein. But as World War II mounted in 1943, Russian films were banned in Austria. Within a few years Vogel would find himself leaving the country as well, one of the few Polish-Austrian Jews permitted to enter the United States on the eve of the holocaust.

Vogel arrived in America with a well-developed love of film. After several years of frustrating, futile efforts to join a socialist kibbutz in Israel, Vogel and his wife Marcia settled in Greenwich Village, New York. His attendance at art film screenings at the Museum of Modern Art had made him aware of a growing body of film that was inaccessible to the general public: documentaries and scientific films, independently-made features, experimental animation, foreign and avant-garde art films. Enquiries to the distributors of such films proved disheartening – rentals were expensive, far too costly for a private viewer. After seeing Maya Deren's self-presented screening of *Meshes of the Afternoon* at New York's Provincetown Playhouse, Vogel had an idea:

It occurred to me that if I was interested in such films and couldn't see them, there must be other people in a city the size of New York who would be equally interested. Maybe I should get some of these films together and attempt to show them publicly. Maybe enough people would come to see them to pay for the film rental, and the whole thing would take care of itself.²

The Vogels assembled a program and presented it at that same theater in late

²MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 40.

1947. This first 16mm film program included five different films of vastly different forms: a dance film, a documentary, a cartoon, an avant-garde short, and an abstract short. The response was overwhelming. They filled the Playhouse's 200 seats on sixteen consecutive nights; the Vogels had struck a well of unfulfilled cinematic curiosity.

A second screening, coinciding as it did with the worst snowstorm in decades, went less well. Including Amos, Marcia, and a projectionist, the total attendance for the night came to four – Cinema 16 was almost a casualty of inclement weather. Taking advice from Marcia's father, the business novices made a third attempt and financed it on credit. This third program was happily much more successful. Thereafter, they switched to an annual membership structure, protecting Cinema 16 from the risk of future snowstorms.

The switch, however, had also to do with prevailing social mores. On the very first night of Cinema 16's existence, it was greeted by the New York State Censorship Office which informed the Vogels that in the future (the first program being exempted on the censor's good graces) all films would have to be cleared with the censorship board. This process required the submission of transcripts among other things – a difficult order to fill for silent films, or in one specific case a French animation voiced only in jibberish – and created huge additional expense and administrative burdens. The Motion Picture Division of the New York censorship board focused intently on foreign films after World War II, many of which were thought to promote indecent attitudes towards marriage,

love, and sex.³ Many of the films Vogel wanted to show were exactly the same films the censors sought to prohibit.

We decided we couldn't possibly continue this way. I'm a total enemy of censorship in all its forms. Period. Without any reservations. To me this process was absolutely obnoxious -- "obnoxious" isn't strong enough. By submitting the films to the censors, I was betraying something.⁴

To circumvent the censorship board, Cinema 16 became a members-only organization, charging \$10 annually in dues. This fee secured the member's admission to sixteen programs throughout the course of the year. Although the sum was reasonable, the per-screening admission price was high for New York City at the time, coming out to roughly 60 cents per program, compared to the MoMA's admission rate of 25 cents.⁵ The implication was that Cinema 16 intended to treat film as art worthy of the price, not just entertainment. The membership model also allowed Vogel to ignore his box office. His finances didn't require him to please his audience to get them to come back: whether they liked a given film or not, they'd already paid. Vogel was essentially assured of his ticket sales regardless of what he put on the screen.

The programs that Vogel put together for Cinema 16 were designed first and foremost to shake up the audience. An admirer of Russian director and film

³Richard Andress, "Film Censorship in New York State," http://www.archives.nysd.gov/a/researchroom/rr_film_censor.shtml, Nov. 24, 2005

⁴MacDonald, Cinema 16, 42.

⁵ Ibid., 71.

theorist Sergei Eisenstein, Vogel adapted his theory of montage to film programming, putting films together in such a way that each “collision” between films might inspire in the audience a new depth of understanding, not only of the particular films they watched, but of the nature and range of film as a medium. Vogel’s programs were always designed to challenge the audience’s assumptions. He reveled in presenting the audience members with something to disturb them in every film at every screening. Vogel felt that Hollywood films tended to lull an audience into complacency, belying the potential of film art to engage and provoke – its highest calling in Vogel’s philosophy. So he embraced 16mm film as the progenitor of a democratic cinema, accessible to all and by all. He believed that 16mm films could better fill the role of art, and thus could better serve the spiritual and creative needs of the people. His job, then, was to select worthwhile films, make them available, and nurture the understanding and appreciation of the cinema.

Vogel labelled this philosophy “subversion,” and it rated the highest among his cinematic virtues. Film-going itself, he argued, was an inherently subversive act:

Subversion in cinema starts when the theatre darkens and the screen lights up. For the cinema is a place of magic where psychological and environmental factors combine to create an openness to wonder and suggestion, an unlocking of the unconscious. It is a shrine at which modern rituals rooted in atavistic memories and subconscious desires are acted out in darkness and seclusion from the outer world.⁶

⁶Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (New York, Random House, 1974), 9.

What Vogel wanted from his audiences was not so much enjoyment as engagement; he wanted his viewers to react and respond to film, to feel and think, to open themselves to a “change of consciousness.” His programs were designed around this aim, and cinematic confrontation would remain the first criteria for the selection of films at Cinema 16 for its entire duration. “I wanted films,” Vogel says of his selection strategy, “that would disturb you in some way, would add to your knowledge and make you change.”⁷

The experience grew out of the darkness of the cinema. By watching a film there, the audience willingly surrendered to, even embraced an experience based on an optical illusion, watching images formed by light and darkness:

Half of all the time at the movies is spent by the transfixed victims of this technological art in complete darkness. There is no image on the screen at all. In the course of a single second, forty-eight periods of darkness follow forty-eight periods of light.⁸

He goes on to point out that the motion of a motion picture occurs exclusively in the mind of the viewer, dependent upon total darkness to be effective. Watching a film is an act of self-manipulation of the mind through technology; the reality of the experience is vastly different from the perception of it. The significance of film to Vogel, then, was as a demonstration of the extent to which we cannot know the real world, and thus of the need to be reminded of our limitations. Most of all, Vogel argued that the need for subversion – and thus the need for art and artists – is never-ending. Since a new status quo will always arise,

⁷MacDonald, Cinema 16, 44.

⁸Vogel, Film as a Subversive Art, 10.

subversion (including subversion of that which was previously subversive) will always be necessary.

Even so, Vogel intended from the outset that Cinema 16 would be a “mainstream” venture, in the sense that he intended it to become an integral part of the New York City cultural scene. He never believed that experimental, avant-garde, or other “challenging” films were reserved for the cultural elite. Indeed, he hoped that as art, the films he screened would prove useful and beneficial for people from all social classes and walks of life. Vogel regarded film as a singularly powerful medium of expression, and one that could effect profound and concrete changes for the better in society. Cinema 16's “Statement of Purposes” preaches Vogel’s gospel of cinema:

It is to the credit of documentary film makers that they have attempted to provide this knowledge and understanding. Together with the scientific, educational and experimental film producers, they have given us a comprehensive and multi-colored interpretation of life. Unadorned and free of Hollywood tinsel, they have recreated the stark reality, the poignancy, the brutality of life. By their cinematic dissemination of knowledge about other cultures and peoples, as well as topical social problems, they have aimed at greater international and interracial understanding and tolerance...Shall this audience continue unaware of the hundreds of thought-provoking, artistically-satisfying and socially purposeful films?

It is the aim of Cinema 16 to bring together this audience and these films. Cinema 16 will thereby advance the appreciation of the motion picture not merely as art, but as a powerful social force. ... By bringing purposeful films to the general public, film groups, labor unions and schools, Cinema 16 will contribute to a greater realization of the problems facing man in the atomic age.⁹

⁹ MacDonald, Cinema 16, 6.

While the comments presented here refer only to documentary film, Vogel's sentiment applies to all the films he programmed.

Vogel founded Cinema 16, then, to be a powerful force in the cultural landscape, not merely a haven for “artists, intellectuals, cinéphiles, and... boisterous snobs” as they had been tagged in Europe.¹⁰ Vogel knew that his audience would be drawn from certain social circles predominantly – and he sought those patrons out by placing his one annual public advertisement in the pages of the New York Times . But it was also of the utmost importance to him that Cinema 16 be within the reach of anyone who wished to attend.¹¹

Ultimately, this self-imposed requirement led to the financial ruin of the society. But Vogel believed passionately that any challenge to the status quo would have to come from the masses, and so he wanted the masses to find his screenings accessible.

During its peak years, Cinema 16 would receive thousands of submissions per year, some titles gleaned from the catalogs of distributors' collections and others submitted by filmmakers directly. Vogel, along with Marcia and his assistant Jack Goelman, would watch every film, taking notes about each of them. They would then write the titles of likely films on index cards and then “edit” programs together. Vogel decided each year's program in

¹⁰ Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915-1929* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984), 164.

¹¹ MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 74.

advance and parceled it out into sixteen main programs and occasional special events. The membership structure allowed Vogel to enjoy free reign in his programming:

That was another wonderful thing about having a membership set-up. I was able to present programs which I knew in advance would antagonize most of the audience. But that was okay; there were other programs they would like. People soon learned that when they went to Cinema 16, they had to expect to be displeased sometimes.

If they said, 'Give us our money back,' we were delighted to do so. We wanted to get rid of them. We weren't going to have them tell us what to show.¹²

Complete freedom from the demands of the box office made Cinema 16 what it was. Vogel's genius was not so much in organization or marketing, but rather in putting films next to each other in such a way that the influence of each upon the others made them all more compelling. If that goal was best served by showing films that were controversial or offensive, or which transgressed the dominant cultural taboos, then those films were exactly what Vogel screened. The contract of private membership insulated him from the wrath of the censors and from any displeasure in his audience.

This, however, should not be taken to suggest that Vogel didn't care about his audience's response to films – in fact he cared deeply, and took pains to document the general reaction to each film, going so far as to have Goelman standing in the auditorium taking notes during each screening:

¹² Ibid, 45.

Part of my job was to evaluate audience reaction. We tried to understand the audience as much as possible. I'd see these films over and over again with the different audiences, and I'd take notes on a little pad. I would write down how many people left, how much applause during the film and after the film. I would make a note if there was nervousness – coughing, talking – or if people seemed bored. I'd come into the office the day after the screening and immediately take out my notes on the audience, write up a report, and give it to Amos, and we'd talk about it.¹³

Vogel also took regular surveys of Cinema 16's membership to get an idea of who they were, where they came from, and what they wanted from the society. (Others also had their opinions. Dwight Macdonald, writing in *Esquire* in 1962, wondered whether Cinema 16 members were, “masochists? Psychiatric social workers on a busman's holiday? Whoever they are, they have taken a lot of punishment.”)¹⁴ Vogel took note of the ages, educational levels, and professions of his members, and asked them what kinds of films they wanted to see – in 1951, 42 percent wanted to see more documentaries and fewer experimental films; 15 percent wanted to see more experimental films and fewer documentaries; and the remainder were happy with things as they were.¹⁵ Vogel recorded these patterns and shared his findings with his members, but he continued to select films and build programs just as he always had.

Vogel had his method. He promoted the avant-garde, he welcomed emerging filmmakers, he embraced documentary and nonfiction film, and he admired foreign cinema. He believed that all of these cinematic forms had a

¹³ *Ibid*, 75.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 396.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 14.

place at Cinema 16 and he arranged films into programs that included a bit of everything, some of it accessible, some of it shocking, and some of it difficult. The idea was to present the audience with challenges, but with different kinds of challenges over the course of an evening – viewers who disliked one might be more receptive to another, and thus to the program as a whole:

If we had said to the Cinema 16 audience, ‘we’re now going to present an entire program to you of one avant-garde filmmaker... and if I had done this again and again over the course of a year, I would have lost my membership. It was and is difficult for me to sit through an entire program of avant-garde film – and I love avant-garde film. Why would it be different for those who have not developed a strong interest in such work?’¹⁶

Vogel took many avant-gardists under his wing, providing them with both an exhibition space and a distribution service. Through his distribution efforts he created rare financial opportunities for many filmmakers, and in some cases the revenue that he helped generate for them was what enabled them to continue making films. At the time, before the era of home video, films existed only on film stock and prints were owned only by distributors, libraries, and private collectors – the latter two of which often served as de facto distributors. Any person or group wishing to see a given film would be obliged to locate a print (most likely one of no more than three or four) and arrange a rental. Given the high costs of creating copies on film, these rentals were often prohibitively expensive for private individuals. Amos Vogel’s distribution efforts through Cinema 16 were thus a charitable enterprise – he acted simultaneously as an

¹⁶ Ibid, 57.

archivist and an agent for many filmmakers who otherwise would have been left to their own devices.

Given that Vogel was by most definitions an amateur distributor with no preconceptions about how such a business was normally run, he devised an arrangement that seemed equitable to him: Cinema 16 would buy or hold a print of a given film and contract with the filmmakers for the exclusive rights to distribute the film. The title was then published in Cinema 16's annual catalog, and rentals would be negotiated on a more-or-less case-by-case basis. Any money resulting from those rentals would be split 50/50 between Cinema 16 and the filmmaker. To some extent, content was a major selling factor – Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks*, dealing as it did with sexual violence, sado-masochism, and homosexuality, did relatively brisk trade. It found renters ranging from the U.S. Naval Hospital in Portsmouth, Virginia to a regular contingent of "unnamed individuals."¹⁷

For some filmmakers, this money became a significant source of funding for new work, but even in the best cases the income from these rentals was modest. Then, as now, the financial sustainability of the small filmmaker's life was in question. As filmmaker Sidney Peterson (*Potted Psalm*, screened at Cinema 16 in 1947) wrote to Vogel:

One obvious reason for the lack of sustained experimental production in the 16mm field is not simply the lack of profit but the patent charity in giving away not only labor but an actual capital

¹⁷ Ibid, 17.

investment. If the whole thing is ever to achieve a sound basis obviously every break has to be given the exhibitors and the distributors. In return, I think, the exhibitors and distributors have got to think of ways of making the hire at least partially worthy of the laborer. ¹⁸

Vogel's philosophy on exhibition and distribution maintained that audiences wanted and needed someone to be selective on their behalf – the sheer quantity of non-mainstream film being produced was enough to overwhelm an interested seeker if they had no means by which to decide what was worth seeing and what was not. Vogel aimed to create a compelling cross-section of film rather than an exhaustive survey. His goal was not to advocate for any specific aspect of non-mainstream film – he was an advocate of film as an art form and embraced all of the myriad forms it took. Instead, he wanted to expand his audience's awareness of what film can be and do. In some cases, that goal was best served by abstract, experimental, or avant-garde films; in other cases, Vogel decided that scientific or sociological nonfiction works or dramatic foreign films fulfilled his purpose.

But Cinema 16 was always a place where new filmmakers could get a chance to have their work screened for an eager public. Vogel was one of the first American programmers to introduce his audiences to films by John Cassavettes, Joseph Cornell, Norman McLaren, Roman Polanski, Robert Breer, Francois Truffaut, Yasujiro Ozu, Agnes Varda, and George Franju among many others. Among the more established filmmakers to screen at Cinema 16 were Robert Flaherty, Luis Buñuel, John Huston, Alfred Hitchcock, King Vidor, Fritz Lang,

¹⁸ Ibid, 96.

Oskar Fischinger, and Hans Richter. He gave artists and scholars in other fields a chance to work in film, screening films by both Weegee and Margaret Mead, and frequently screened classic repertory films of the time, including Rossellini, Dovzhenko, von Stroheim, Buster Keaton, and Sergei Eisenstein. Vogel also maintained long-term relationships with a number of filmmakers: the films of Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, Willard Maas, James Broughton, Alexander Hammid, and Stan Brakhage were all regularly featured at Cinema 16.

One of Vogel's especially astute discoveries was a young director who was then doing groundbreaking work with film improvisation and *cinéma vérité*, John Cassavetes. In 1959 Vogel premiered Cassavetes' first film, *Shadows*, at Cinema 16. The event became the subject of an early public squabble between Vogel and Jonas Mekas, who had become a regular film columnist at the *Village Voice* and had given *Shadows* a negative review. Mekas warned his readers against seeing the “commercialized version” of the film at Cinema 16 and recommended that they see the “original” version elsewhere. In reality, the “original” was an incomplete cut, and Cassavetes regarded the version screened at Cinema 16 as the definitive cut. It was through Vogel's support that *Shadows* found its way into European festivals and the hands of European distributors, who managed to break the film into the American market as an import.

George Franju's *Blood of the Beast* screened in the very first official Cinema 16 program. This documentary, hailed by Vogel as “one of the great

masterpieces of subversive cinema,” focuses on life and death in the slaughterhouses of Paris. The impact of brutal reality is offered to the viewer unflinchingly. “Unlike Hollywood films, when the butcher raises the hammer to stun the horse there is no 'cutting away'; the camera , objectively and cruelly, stays with the event, making us its shocked accomplices.”¹⁹ The film was something of a favorite at Cinema 16, screening several times in both regular programs and in a special program in 1953, “Les Films Maudits: An Evening of Damned Film”.

Vogel was also happy to screen films that dealt with harsh reality less artfully. This is *Robert*, produced by Dr. Lawrence J. Stone and screened in 1952, documented five years in the life of a “difficult” child.²⁰ *Grief*, produced by Dr. Rene A. Spitz and screened at Cinema 16 in 1953, was a film taken during a psychoanalytic study of infants separated from their mothers for protracted periods.²¹ *Neurosis and Alcohol*, screened in 1949, dealt with the subject of “artificial inducement of neurosis in cats, and their temporary alleviation by alcohol.”²² None of these films was produced with the intention of finding a public audience; in fact, they were restricted from public viewing, and only through Vogel's efforts were they ever seen outside the medical and scientific communities. The ethical status of these films is doubtful; in later years

¹⁹Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, 267.

²⁰MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 185.

²¹*Ibid.*, 220.

²²*Ibid.*, 112.

Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* would be banned treading on similar ground. But Vogel was never one to turn away a compelling film just because its subject or origins might be controversial.

Vogel regularly presented Cinema 16 audiences with abstract shorts, including many by Stan Brakhage. Of the 35 films Brakhage completed during Cinema 16's existence, Vogel screened no less than thirteen of them, including *Desistfilm*, *The Wonder Ring*, *Daybreak*, *Reflections in Black*, *Flesh of the Morning*, *Loving*, *Window Water Baby Moving*, and *Mothlight*. Like many of the filmmakers whose work Vogel screened, Brakhage could be particular about how his films would be seen. Writing to Vogel in 1957 regarding a series of his film, he insists:

I want all three films shown together to give each one a context they couldn't have otherwise. This is especially essential due to the shortness of the films individually. I hope you will agree with me. I must also ask for silence, as three years of intensive search in sound has produced no musical or experimental sound accompaniment for these films which is anything but destructive.²³

Since Brakhage's work was continuing to develop in an increasingly abstract direction, his preferences make sense. All available documentation, however, suggests that Vogel chose his own method over Brakhage's. The two men enjoyed a mutually-supportive relationship for many years, and Vogel was one of Brakhage's earliest and most enthusiastic supporters. Vogel described Brakhage's *Mothlight* thus:

Limbs, wings, and other parts of moths, laboriously 'glued' to the

²³*Ibid.*, 297

film strip with mylar tape, become a luxuriant, brown-tinged abstract animation during projection. No camera is used; the film is 'built' from life itself.²⁴

Vogel screened works by a whole contingent of abstractionists and experimentalists, including Robert Breer, Jonas Mekas, Jordan Belson, Marie Menken, Ed Emschwiller and Stan Vanderbeek. While Vogel didn't cater specifically to the avant-garde and experimental crowd, he felt strongly that they had a place at Cinema 16 and always included experimental films in his programs.

A contingent of the avant-gardists at Cinema 16, however, was growing increasingly discontent with Vogel's selection methods. Feeling that foreign and nonfiction films were finding a larger audience on television and in a new generation of arthouse cinemas while avant-garde film continued to languish in obscurity, they argued that abstract and experimental films deserved more active support. In 1960, Jonas Mekas and a group of dedicated avant-gardists broke away from Cinema 16 and began what would come to be known as the New American Cinema Group.²⁵ Where Amos Vogel was highly selective, the NAC (under the banner of the Film-makers' Co-operative) would screen anything and everything presented to them; where Amos Vogel would pick and choose which of a given filmmaker's works he wished to distribute, the NAC would distribute his or her entire body of work. They also offered a more advantageous split of

²⁴Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, 113.

²⁵ MacDonal, *Cinema 16*, 68.

the revenues, 25/75 in favor of the filmmaker. Vogel lost a number of his catalog titles through this process, but more significantly, he took the split as a betrayal – he had not been invited to participate in the film-arts group, with which he felt he was in perfect philosophical and artistic agreement. Mekas remained nominally supportive of Cinema 16 for several years and he insists that the NAC never intended to compete with Cinema 16.²⁶ Vogel, however, regretted that nobody from the NAC ever came to him with their complaints before leaving and forming their own group.²⁷ It's possible, however, that such an attempt had been made. Robert Breer, speaking about the split between Vogel and Mekas, remembers such an incident:

I have this perfect vision in my brain, but I'm not sure that it isn't just a fantasy... It was in Jonas's office on Sixth Avenue. I remember that Gregory Markopoulos was sleeping on a cot in the back. Amos was sitting on a bench with Jonas next to him, proposing to join forces... and Amos shrugged and said, "Why should I?"... That was one of the things that triggered Jonas to start the Co-op.²⁸

Regardless of who first rejected whom, the end result was that the NAC group split away and took an important part of Vogel's carefully-tended film community with it. After the end of Cinema 16 and the eventual inhabitation of Cinema 16's former offices by the Film-makers' Co-operative, Vogel was left with a bitter taste in his mouth.

The rift occasionally leaked out into the public arena, as both Mekas and

²⁶ Ibid, 416.

²⁷ Ibid, 53.

²⁸ Ibid, 388.

Vogel were regular contributors to various journals and periodicals dealing with film and culture. In 1967, following on the heels of Cinema 16's demise, Amos Vogel wrote a long riposte to years of accumulated criticism from Jonas Mekas and the NAC in the pages of *Evergreen*. He lamented the “over-attention without understanding, over-acceptance without discrimination” that he believed was the primary result of the NAC’s efforts.²⁹ His “Thirteen Confusions” included such pointed items as “confusing historical continuity with immaculate conception” (by failing to acknowledge the roots of one's art); “confusing freedom with formlessness” (by ignoring the obscure, internal logic of abstract film in favor of disorder for its own sake); “confusing non-selectivity with art” (by refusing to acknowledge that some works have more artistic value than others); and “confusing popes with free men,” in the last of which he admonishes:

Blind adulation and hermeticism are the enemies of growth and lead to the repetition of what has already been achieved; the rise of epigones and mediocrities; the progressive narrowing of vision and the cumulative deterioration of taste.³⁰

Mekas played his part in the feud as well. In 1963, when Mekas was writing a regular film column in the *Village Voice*, he insinuated that Vogel believed that experimental film was “synonymous with mental delirium and the escape from reality.”³¹ The statement belonged to French critic Marcel Martin; Mekas simply

²⁹ *Ibid*, 428.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 434.

³¹ *Ibid*, 54.

implied that, based on another piece Vogel had written in *Evergreen* that same year, Vogel agreed with the sentiment. Given that the piece in question was a strongly supportive report on the cinema emerging from Eastern Europe and made little mention of experimental film at all, the insinuation seems bizarre and detached.³² “That was terribly hurtful to me,” Vogel admits. “Such statements meant that anybody who didn’t know me would assume I was totally opposed to avant-garde cinema, and for ridiculous reasons.”³³

Representative of the tensions that resulted in the Cinema 16/NAC split was a dispute over Vogel’s refusal to distribute Stan Brakhage’s film *Anticipation of the Night* (1958). Brakhage, a protégée of Maya Deren, had found his first audiences at Cinema 16, and Vogel continued to regularly screen his often highly-abstract short films over the years. Vogel decided, however, that *Anticipation* didn’t fit into his programming (according to Brakhage, the response from the film community was, “Okay, that’s it: Brakhage has gone completely crazy...”).³⁴ This rejection seems to have acted as a catalyst for Cinema 16’s avant-gardists, who took what they felt to be a rejection and rejected Vogel in return. Tensions mounted between the factions, not only regarding Vogel’s decisions as an arbiter of film culture, but also regarding the kinds of work that he felt to be worthwhile. Brakhage explains:

I mean, all along, Vogel was the one hope. He had an audience of

³² Ibid, 336-45.

³³ Ibid, 54.

³⁴ Ibid, 298.

five thousand people to whom he would show works that my friends and I regarded as art. That was wonderful, but he showed the films we admired in a mix with scandal movies and documentaries of various shocking subjects...

Amos's main concern ... was to show things that you couldn't see elsewhere, and that was what attracted his audiences. They felt very special; they were seeing things that weren't allowed into the local neighborhood theaters and later that you couldn't see on television: censored things, sexual subject matter, dog heads kept alive on tables in Russian laboratories – a mix into which was stirred some of the great American independent films.”³⁵

Any resemblance to these criticisms found in Brakhage's own work – which include scenes of childbirth, explicit sex, and “bodies sliced length-wise, organs removed, skulls and scalp cut open with electric tools, blood drawn; a fly that walks on the sole of a foot, undisturbed,” is doubtless purely coincidental.³⁶

In fact, “films that cannot be seen elsewhere” was the closest thing that Cinema 16 ever had to a slogan. Vogel didn't necessarily select films purely for their inaccessibility – the absence of such films from the marketplace was the inspiration behind the society, but Vogel regularly presented films that he felt were artistically important, regardless of their commercial success or lack thereof. Still, given Vogel's personal artistic emphasis on subversion, a large part of the films he programmed were indeed unavailable outside Cinema 16, whether because they were too impenetrable to find commercial success, too controversial to be shown to the general public, or disapproved of by assorted governments.

³⁵ Ibid, 298.

³⁶ Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, 267.

In some respects, the result of this preference for what Vogel deemed “subversive” was that there was in many cases little more than an attitudinal difference between “subversion” and sensationalism, which Brakhage among others had noticed. Vogel’s desire to push the boundaries of what was socially permissible meant that he often screened films than in another context could easily come across as sordid. Sexually graphic films were common in Cinema 16 programs; nudity, it seems, was practically a given. More interesting are cases like *Kirsa Nicholina* (1970), a film of a woman giving birth not in a medical context, but rather in a “human” and “erotic” context. Vogel attributed the “birth taboo” to the fact that “birth still confronts the viewer with ‘the organ’ and reminds him of ‘the act’.”³⁷ It had, of course, previously been seen in the serious cinema, most notably in Dziga Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera* (in that instance, presented in a rather matter-of-fact way). But films of childbirth had also been the subject of some sensationalistic cinematic attention earlier in the century. The disreputable independent cinemas of the 20s, 30s, and 40s known as “grind houses” had often presented straightforward scenes of childbirth, popularly known as “birth reels.” These were screened in conjunction with salacious “educational” films warning viewers of the results of an immoral life, implicitly promising shocking content but seldom delivering.³⁸ The birth reel was a counterpoint to the “clap reel,” a film graphically depicting the physical effects

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

³⁸ Greg Merritt, *Celluloid Mavericks: A History of American Independent Film* (New York, Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2000), 73.

of advanced venereal disease. In each case, these films could only be shown on the basis of having educational value, but their real value was in supplying the “shock” that the main feature neglected to provide. That these films, like some of Vogel’s nonfiction films, were sourced from medical and scientific film catalogs suggests some common cinematic ancestry. Vogel was technically free of the constraints of “educational value,” which is to this day a common justification for pornography. As a private film society, Cinema 16 could reasonably show anything Vogel pleased – but his insistence on the intellectual value of subversive (often read: shocking) film echoes the demand for educational value. It’s worth noting that, unlike films containing graphic sex (which are abundant today) even now explicit films of childbirth are rare outside sex education and lamaze classes.

Cinema 16 also directed its subversive tendencies at death, war, religion, any and all base physiological processes, as well as less tangible targets: narrative, plot, and structure. In his book *Film as a Subversive Art*, Vogel explains his reasoning:

The dilution or rejection of conventional narrative and straightforward realism is the predominant tendency of contemporary art. The multi-faceted, fluid nature of reality as now understood can no longer be subsumed in the certainties of linear narrative structures... This truth does not deny the 'story' – it only robs it, as Robbe-Grillet put it, of its character of 'certainty, tranquility, innocence.'³⁹

Throughout his career, Vogel had a particularly deep interest in Nazi-era

³⁹Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, 83.

propaganda films, even going so far as to import a print of *The Eternal Jew* from the Netherlands. American customs stopped the film at the border; it required the intervention of two holocaust survivors (filmmaker Seigfried Kracauer and Vogel himself) to convince the customs officials to allow the film into the country, and even then it was granted entry for one showing only.⁴⁰ His purpose was to demonstrate the Nazis' masterful use of film not only as mere propaganda, but as a weapon against the Jews. His message was both a comment on film's capacity to display the reality of our lives, and also a warning against accepting cinematic reality as the truth:

The Nazis, pursuing their dreams of superhuman perfection, banished death from their films altogether, hiding concentration camp corpses, war casualties, and civilian victims...

While the Nazis were in power, the very topic of the camps was taboo, although hinted at in intentionally vague internal propaganda. No film records made by enemies of the regime within the camps survive, nor were any documentaries made by the Nazis for public consumption... but there exists in the archives horrifying footage shot by guards or officials.

Since the fall of the regime, a band of stubborn film subversives in several countries have, from time to time, attempted to recall the horror... and to re-establish a link between our "rational" world and this by now mythological event. They have done this by dispassionate documentation of actual evidence, artistic transmutation of the material, or by the recreation of an "atmosphere."⁴¹

It's tempting to view Vogel's general emphasis on subversion through the prism of the times in which he lived . Having witnessed a great deal of death and

⁴⁰ MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 45.

⁴¹Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, 263-265.

the subversion of all apparent normal rules of civilized society during his youth, as well as a rapid and fundamental change in the way the natural world was perceived, he was doubly aware that the status quo needed to be questioned at every opportunity. And he knew from experience that to do so would not actually bring about the end of the world, contrary to the protests of some.

In return, Vogel didn't demand that his audiences necessarily support the ideas that were presented in any of the films shown at Cinema 16. In reality, the only political opinions embedded in the ethos of Cinema 16 were a kind of socialist awareness of class and an absolute, unequivocal rejection of censorship in any form. All he asked of his audiences was that they sincerely engage with the films they saw in his programs. Vogel had no illusions about the challenge many of his films presented – in many cases, the challenge was the point. They were free to like or dislike, so long as they remained open enough to experience the films genuinely. He had little patience for any sign of connoisseurship in the sense of wanting to be seen to have good or sophisticated tastes. Presented with a complaint from a viewer that a given abstract film gave them a headache, he suggested that what they actually suffered from was an “ideological headache.” Subversion, after all, can't take place without some kind of affront to the status quo and Cinema 16 members were as vulnerable to offense as any other member of the public. But they were hopefully more willing to examine their attitudes and respond with an open mind.

In the end, Cinema 16 fell victim to its own popularity, coupled with

Amos Vogel's absolute rejection of outside help. By 1963, the price of an annual membership had risen to over \$16, and Vogel felt that he couldn't raise the price any more without excluding poorer patrons. But a larger number of members meant that it cost more to serve them all. Even taking them in shifts, no one theater could accommodate the full Cinema 16 membership, which now numbered in the thousands. Cinema 16 programs were being farmed out to other cinemas around town, each bringing its own expenses. Donald Rugoff's new art house cinemas, the Paris theater, the Beekman theater, and later the Murray Hill theater, had already begun to host the excess audience members for some of Cinema 16's programs – for a price.⁴² Factors outside the organization meant that expenses rose faster than income. Publicity was getting more expensive, and rental, import, and shipping costs were also rising. By 1963 Cinema 16 had built up a debt of \$20,000, and Vogel was unsuccessful in his efforts to solicit additional funds from existing members.⁴³

It might have been possible for Cinema 16 to find a private benefactor, someone to smooth the way. But Vogel made himself very plain in stating that theoretical acceptance of government funding would have been dependent on an absolute absence of attached strings. "The ideological, political, aesthetic independence of the project is much more important to me than any support I

⁴²MacDonald, Cinema 16, 76.

⁴³Ibid., 411-414.

could be getting from any outside support.”⁴⁴ Vogel vehemently rejected outside funding for fear that using someone else’s money to support the society would inevitably lead to a compromise of his artistic ethics. Nobody – including his own members – would dictate to Vogel what he should and should not screen for his audiences. In the end, he effectively placed his ideals above the very existence of Cinema 16; if it could not exist according to his ideals, it wouldn’t exist at all. Archer Winsten of the New York Post summed it up at the time:

Had [Vogel] been a self-seeker from the start, he would have had his own theater and shrine by now, magnificently endowed, and with his footprints, hand-shape, and facial bas-relief permanently set in the lobby. But his programs would have been less interesting.⁴⁵

Of course, everything has changed since 1963. Amos Vogel’s beloved 16mm format – at the time the great hope for the democratization of the cinema – has given way to analog video, then to digital video. MiniDV, the favorite choice of low-budget filmmakers in 2005, is less expensive than 16mm by several orders of magnitude and of nearly equal quality (though possessing some different visual properties.) Many of the issues with which Vogel continuously wrestled during the life of Cinema 16 – the tiny number of precious prints available, the expense of making copies of films, the considerable cost of shipping film prints, often across continents and oceans – are no longer significant. Any filmmaker able to get his or her hands on a DV camera is able to make perfect DVD copies

⁴⁴Ibid., 58.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 419.

of their film as needed, in ones, tens, or even hundreds. Increasingly, a hard copy is no longer even necessary as internet transmission becomes cheaper and easier to accomplish. Today, an exhibitor or buyer can request a copy and within moments the film appears on his hard drive. It's a far cry from the weeks that Vogel routinely had to wait for prints of European films to arrive in New York. That aspect of exhibition has been solved and resolved.

On the other hand, Vogel never had to cope with competition as fierce as what exists now. Throughout the 50s and early 60s, screenings of films of the kind that Vogel exhibited were limited to major cultural centers, and within them were generally limited to museums and the few other cinemas like Cinema 16. In later years television began to present some material similar to Vogel's nonfiction selections, and foreign films began to find audiences in more conventional cinemas, but art and experimental films lacked any home outside dedicated cinemas.

At the time, Vogel's work was being newly undertaken by a new generation of film enthusiasts. The art house movement had begun to spread across the United States, and colleges and universities started offering film classes and series to the Baby Boomers. Rugoff, along with other young distributors and exhibitors like Dan Talbot of New Yorker Films and Karen Cooper of Film Forum, entered the field through the back door. Cooper's Film Forum was the direct heir of Cinema 16. It was founded in 1970 by Peter Feinstein and Sandy Miller in an 88th Street loft with one 16mm projector and a

collection of folding chairs. Cooper took it over in 1972, and under her direction, Film Forum came to fill the void left by Cinema 16 as the only autonomous nonprofit cinema in New York. Cooper carried forward Vogel's approach to programming, emphasizing selectivity and curation in her work. That method has again proven to be the most successful, as Cooper has watched her compatriots and competitors fall by the wayside while Film Forum continued to grow.

More than any other cinema, Film Forum continues the work of Cinema 16, and Cooper and her colleagues are Vogel's cultural heirs. Cooper herself has become one of the most powerful and influential cinema programmers in the United States. She is one of only a tiny number of people with the power to lift an unknown film out of obscurity and bring it to an audience. The promise of a New York opening at Film Forum alone is sometimes enough to secure distribution for a new film.

Cooper has benefited from public funding and subsidies, a source of support that wasn't available during Cinema 16's lifespan. With the help of grants and private contributions, in addition to the admissions paid by some 4,600 members and uncounted casual film attendees, Film Forum has survived the kinds of financial strains that led to Cinema 16's collapse. Cooper has successfully navigated the treacherous waters of New York's real estate market, and subsisted in the face of previous shifts in the film industry, and she credits her success to careful, sensitive programming. Along with public funding, it is in

her mind the thing that has made the difference in Film Forum's success.

What genuine competition existed in New York was as likely as not a direct product of Vogel's own influence on film culture. Of all the factors contributing to the end of Cinema 16 listed in Vogel's own final plea for financial assistance from members, competition is the last noted and least significant after rising costs, a plateau in new memberships, the inherent controversy involved in Vogel's programming philosophy, and the lamentable lack of newspaper coverage. None of those present at the end of Cinema 16 cite competition as a major contributor to the film society's demise.⁴⁶

Now, however, competition is an overwhelming force in the film industry, and the effects of that competitiveness are felt throughout the film culture on all levels. On any given weekend, far more films open than did during Vogel's programming years.⁴⁷ And each of those films has to compete not only with all the others, but also with the vast array of media demanding the viewer's attention: television, video games, the internet, and home cinema, not to mention all the other cultural and entertainment possibilities available in most American cities. The film industry's ferocity of competition also leaves smaller distributors and exhibitors struggling to get noticed in the tumultuous marketing carnival set up by Hollywood, which is frequently unprofitable even for major studios. The art houses are left unable to afford commensurate publicity of their own, but

⁴⁶ Ibid., 52, 69, 76.

⁴⁷ Frazier, Interview with Karen Cooper, 4.

frustratingly also unable to afford not to. The box office demands that the price of marketing be paid.

The intensity of this competition has put more money up for grabs, but has also paradoxically diminished access to it. Funding, and the lack thereof, has become a major problem in the arts. Vogel couldn't even dream of government funding for Cinema 16 – the possibility didn't yet exist at the time. Such funding now exists, and New York provides more funding for the arts than most states. But in most of the country, public funding exists only in ridiculously small amounts, and most of that money goes to well-established and high-profile organizations. Cinema 16 might well have qualified for an NEA grant had the NEA existed in 1963, but few cinemas doing similar work today manage find such funding.

At the same time, the number of producers and filmmakers has increased exponentially. Much of the growth is accountable to the explosion of motion picture media in all its forms. The number of television channels available – each requiring round-the-clock content – has climbed into the hundreds, and scattered among the “primary” content are thousands of advertisements. In addition to the established film professionals, there are clamoring hordes of would-be professionals who climb over each other for a shot at relevance. The proliferation of film and media schools has led to a glut of would-be directors. And somewhere in that world of blind optimism and dog-eat-dog competition reside the film artists of our time, working for little recognition and less pay.

In most respects, though, their situation has improved. Working in film art is no longer a guarantee of impoverishment since a good day job can now absorb the cost of production. The huge increase in numbers of potential exhibitors of one's work means that most filmmakers can find access to a small audience. This is hardly less than what Amos Vogel offered his filmmakers. For many, the development of digital video technology has made the difference between making their films and putting them in front of viewers, and not being able to make films at all. Low cost and ease of use put filmmaking within the reach of nearly anyone who wishes to try it, finally rendering film a medium for the masses.

Digital video is also having an impact on the aesthetics of cinema as well. In the 50s and 60s, 16mm film and the advent of portable synchronous sound recording equipment gave rise to the Direct Cinema documentary film movement epitomized by the work of filmmakers such as the Maysles brothers, DA Pennebaker and Richard Leacock, and characterized by intense realism and neutral observation. Now, digital video is giving rise to exceptionally raw, "true" new films, both documentary and fiction. DV was instrumental in the early successes of the Danish-based Dogme 95 movement, and in works by filmmakers like Harmony Korine, Mike Figgis, Rob Nilsson, Todd Verow, and many others. It should also be noted that the spread of digital video as a professional format coincided closely with a sudden increase in the visibility of a new wave of documentary film, much of which is shot and edited digitally. The flexibility and

low cost of digital video are ideal for documentary and “direct” narrative work, so digital video has naturally led to a resurgence of interest in both forms.

It’s worth noting, though, that in every meaningful technical sense, digital video and film are very different media. Many of the visual conventions of film are still compromised in digital video. Film stakes its territory on high-contrast images, more range for the manipulation of depth of field, the high definition of 35mm film stock, and even the flicker of alternating light and darkness (which, it turns out, were more visible on a subconscious level than Amos Vogel or anyone else had thought.) A great deal of time, effort, and money has been spent chasing the “film look:” increasing resolution in DV images and inventing algorithms intended to produce a facsimile of film’s grain and flicker. Digital video is still, to most minds, a low-rent substitute for celluloid, best left to those who can’t afford the “real thing.” An awareness is growing, however, that while DV is unquestionably a part of the “film” family, it may be more useful and more artistically interesting to explore its own innate qualities. Indie maverick Jon Jost affirms, “digital video, for all its hide-bound detractors clutching hard to the virtues of celluloid, fully has the capacity to make full-fledged, real art.”⁴⁸ It’s also worth remembering that at this point it is almost useless to judge the place of digital video. We are at best only half-way through the evolution of the medium, and the only thing we can feel relatively certain about is that future

⁴⁸Jon Jost, Speech at the Rotterdam Film Festival, 1999, <http://www.gplex.com/jonjost/rotterdam.html> (20 November 2005).

developments will have the potential to profoundly alter the conversation.

The flood of new artists taking up filmmaking is producing some quiet controversy. Film schools produce hundreds and thousands of graduates every year; artists trained in other forms and media are now trying their hands at cinema; and amateurs are beginning to experiment with film beyond the outgrown confines of home video. The explosion of independent film, ignited particularly by Sundance and its various alumni, has made independent film look like an attractive door into the film industry, encouraging those teeming masses of would-be future Scorseses, Rodriguezes and Tarantinos to start churning out movies. This, some suggest, may not be the best possible situation. Karen Cooper, director and senior programmer of Film Forum in New York City, explains:

Most of any work produced by human beings is – and I hope you don't think this is cynical, but frankly it doesn't move way above the mediocre bar. So it's really hard to make a really great work of art, or even a very good one. And I think with the market as flooded as it is, people get tired. It's like trying to find the symphony music, you know, the orchestra, with a lot of noise playing in the background.⁴⁹

On the other hand, it's also possible that film has actually enjoyed an artificial restraint on participation by way of enormous cost, a restraint that doesn't exist to anything like the same degree in most other art forms. As British director Mike Figgis puts it, "sure, DV makes filmmaking more available to everyone, but everyone's got the availability to write a bad novel, too, and that

⁴⁹ Amy Frazier, Interview with Karen Cooper of Film Forum, appendix 1, 4.

didn't destroy literature."⁵⁰ Indeed, there's greatly enhanced potential now for new artists to bring innovation and insight with them into the cinema. German director Wim Wenders goes so far as to suggest that the effects will ultimately constitute a revolution in the truest sense of the word:

Auteur films, documentaries, critical essays, B-movies as such, films shot in "foreign languages," films for minorities, etc. With the rise of digital technology, I see a chance for all these (almost) lost forms to come to life again, and even to expand. The tools filmmakers have at hand now are unbelievable, and, for the first time, are compatible with the bigger, "professional" means. I am absolutely sure that we will witness a revolution in this coming decade that will turn the film industry upside down. Potentially, at least, there's a great chance for that democratization, and it's not a utopia. It's already happening.⁵¹

American experimentalist Jon Jost, however, points to the downside of Wender's dreamt-of revolution: "you can and will see genuine and lasting art emerge, though you'll have to wade through an awful lot of awful shit to do so."⁵² He goes on to say:

No, it will not mean no and low-budget valhalla; it will not mean that a great democratic vista of the people's work will be available at your neighborhood Bijou. It will probably mean in fact the opposite: that vested media interests will fight tooth-and-nail to suppress, wipe-out, and destroy such a thing, though most likely via the usual route: buy, literally, with offers most cannot refuse, anyone whose talents show a disposition for the current hot fashions – to say, whatever the going stylistic version of hot, sexy things with a dash of violence, romance, and happy endings,

⁵⁰Sherri Roman, "Mike Figgis: Risking the Future," *Digital Babylon* (Hollywood, iFilm publishing, 2001) 137.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, "Wim Wenders," 185.

⁵²Jon Jost, Speech at the Rotterdam Film Festival 1999, <http://www.gplex.com/jonjost/rotterdam.html> (November 20, 2005)

dressed in the latest digital style...⁵³

Amos Vogel himself expressed similar concerns that society's first response to anything genuinely innovative (or, even better, subversive) would be to swallow it whole via commercial co-option:

There is, in fact, every reason to agree with Marcuse's pessimistic confirmations of present-day capitalism's ability to absorb, pervert and subsume opposition; and to transform the oppositional product itself... into a commodity. If it is not too radical, it can even be publicized, thereby robbing it of its cult appeal while simultaneously neutralizing it ideologically by apparent acceptance. In this sense, the latitude granted to independent showcases to exhibit whatever they wish, implies that they serve as a safety valve for the draining off of radical impulses.⁵⁴

Indeed, the experimentalists and avant-gardists of today may have simply moved onto commercial turf. The techniques used in advertisements and music videos owe an immense credit to the experimental filmmakers of the past. Non-linear narrative, abstract images, and unconventional structures are the bread and butter of these short commercial films; the co-option of the avant-garde may have come to pass without anyone noticing.

So the barriers to the creation of real, meaningful cinematic art are both higher and lower than ever before. Commerce has solved the problem of prohibitive production and distribution costs, but, if anything, has raised new obstacles in the form of ever-fiercer competition and, for those who demonstrate genius and the skill to use it, the seduction of money for only the price of one's

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, 320.

artistic integrity. The film industry as it exists today is unconcerned with the artistic merits of a piece if those qualities don't hold the promise of ticket sales at the box office. According to Jean-Luc Godard:

There was a time when you distributed what you produced. Distribution was at the service of production. You produced and then distributed what you had produced. Nowadays, you produce in order to distribute.⁵⁵

The obvious solution would be to side-step the film industry entirely: filmmakers can interact with their audiences directly or through the person of a dedicated programmer committed to the development of film culture. Technology is making this concept increasingly feasible, and new ideas about how to manage the need for mediation in the digital landscape are being presented to the public on a near-daily basis. Internet services provide showcases of new work and new approaches to searching for video media online – some “programmed” by individuals, and some in which the collective viewership becomes the de facto programmer. For all our technological achievements, the core question remains the same as it was when Amos Vogel wrote his book *Film as a Subversive Art*, asking, “how to reach the masses ‘out there’ with five heavy cans of 35mm film and nowhere to show them?”⁵⁶ For modern independents, pocket-sized tapes and clusters of data have largely replaced the heavy cans. But the search for an audience remains the same as ever.

But how to get the audience to come? Will audiences in search of

⁵⁵Jean-Luc Godard, “The Future of Cinema,” *Digital Babylon*, ed. Shari Roman, 3.

⁵⁶Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, 321.

something interesting to watch even come to the cinema anymore?

The act of stepping into a cinema with the intent to watch a film is the act of stepping out of everyday life and into an extraordinary experience. The filmgoer removes himself from the outside world, retreating into seclusion with a few other people, almost all of them strangers, and joins with them in a shared reverie. The audience sits together in the dark and for a brief time they all live the same life: it may be perceived and interpreted differently in each mind, but the experience itself is something they now share in common. They influence and are influenced by each other – the situation demands one’s best behavior.

Transgressions – talking, eating noisily, or worst of all, becoming a conduit for the intrusion of the real world in the form of beeping phones and crying babies – are met with aggravation and hostility not only because they break the viewer’s reverie, but because they go against the prescribed code of behavior for the cinema. They destroy the isolation and the apartness of the space, and they rupture the cinema’s liminality.

When things go well, the viewer is consumed by the experience. Sitting in darkness, attention fixed on an overwhelming, single source of stimulus, the environment might be compared to a nighttime rally: the darkness, so necessary to the cinematic illusion, nudges the viewer off his everyday equilibrium, making him receptive and loosening up his imagination even as it sharpens his senses. The frequent comparison of the cinema to primitive man sitting around a campfire telling stories isn’t accidental. These stories are acted out by ten-foot-tall

men and women, perfectly beautiful and literally larger-than-life, accompanied by thunderous sound that comes from all directions. The audience actively seeks intensity: a bigger image and louder, clearer, more realistic sound are selling points. As Vogel describes the viewer's experience: "As soon as the lights are lowered, the huge rectangle of the screen – previously noted without interest – becomes the viewer's total universe. What transpires here in bursts of light and darkness is accepted as life; the images reach out to him; he enters them."⁵⁷

The cinema, then, is central to film art; it would literally not be the same medium without the cinematic experience. And for nearly the first century of film's existence, film and the cinema were inextricably intertwined – films were seen at cinemas, with all the significance of that space, and essentially nowhere else. Gradually, though, films began to appear outside the cinema: the advent of cable television brought more films of all kinds into the home and changed everything; not long after, home video arrived on the scene and changed everything again. The VHS machine and the proliferation of movies on tape made it possible to see films – ultimately nearly any film – on demand in one's own home, under conditions of one's own choosing, generally for less money than the cost of a movie ticket. Personal ownership of a film became a perfectly viable possibility, and before long sales of VHS copies of films (both to private individuals and to commercial renters) became a major economic force in the

⁵⁷ Ibid.,10.

film industry.⁵⁸ Just over a decade later, digital video, in the form of DVDs in the consumer market and assorted formats used by film producers, is once again changing the marketplace, this time the revolution is having a bigger impact in film production, permitting amateur filmmakers to produce works of ever-increasing quality for ever-decreasing costs. In addition, the growing power of the internet as a vehicle to transmit films to viewers (legally or not) is looming over the entire industry, including both the powerful studio head and the lowly, unknown DV-experimentalist.

This sense of impending transformation – and the fear that it brings – is hardly new in film. In the 20s, the talkies put many once-powerful stars out of business while giving rise to new ones; in the 50s, there was a similar fear that television might do the same.⁵⁹ In the instance of internet distribution and the DV revolution, as with synchronous sound and television, the fear is not so much about the future of film as an artform, but rather the ways in which these new influences will shift the balance of power. Whose empire will be destroyed, and whose fortune will be made? Studios are going to incredible trouble (and risk of alienating their consumer base) to shore up their position through aggressive anti-piracy measures that often compromise the consumer's rights of ownership. A sense of growing panic in the film industry is obvious, and the studios' anxiety isn't misplaced. While the music industry was going through its early

⁵⁸ Frazier, Interview with Karen Cooper of Film Forum, 4.

⁵⁹ André Bazin, "Will CinemaScope Save the Film Industry?" *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary after Film*, ed. Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2003), 80.

convulsions of unwilling adaptation early in this decade, the film industry's problems were held in check by a lack of processing power, the high cost of bandwidth, and the limitations of dial-up internet connections. Within the last year, however, easy transmission of video images has become more feasible through more powerful consumer computers, the rapidly-dropping price of bandwidth, and the spread of broadband internet access. Peer-to-peer networks based on BitTorrent make it cheap, quick, and relatively easy (not to mention cost-free) to share high-quality digital video files between people. Dozens of internet ventures are offering video services: hosting and promotion for filmmakers, search tools and various methods of weeding-out for film watchers. Floods of new content are appearing online: entire television shows, slick music videos and animations, "viral" advertisements, shorts produced by would-be industry auteurs and home videos shot by teenagers with phone-cams. These films and scraps of video ephemera are being carried around and played on a widening array of devices: computers, mobile phones, PDAs, portable DVD players, DVRs, and the video equivalent of the mp3-player, heralded by the arrival of the video iPod. The number of screens carrying motion picture media of all kinds has increased exponentially in recent decades, and the number of films available to appear on them has increased just as rapidly.

The internet is the catalyst for this chain reaction. Like television and home video in previous decades, its appearance on the landscape cleanly divides cinematic history into "before" and "after," and its effects will be enormous. As

of late 2005, video is only beginning to find a significant presence on the web, but like the first appearances of text in the early 90s and music in 2000, the current stirrings of activity are the harbinger of a rapid shift to come. Combined with cheap and powerful digital technology in production and post-production, the internet has the potential to completely alter the business and art of film.

Some of these changes are economic. More films, made for less money on average, will inevitably drive down the hard value of every independent film made. In a ferociously competitive industry, it will become ever more difficult for smaller films to meet any common standard of financial success in the traditional market. Meanwhile, other films may find enormous cultural success, measured by the depth of their penetration of the culture, without ever spending or making a dime. The nature of “success” itself may ultimately need to be redefined. As motion media become more pervasive in society, there will be more than enough work to go around. Paradoxically, however, the expectation that a filmmaker should be highly paid for his or her art may become a quaint artifact of the Hollywood era.

Creative expectations will also change as film adapts to its new milieu. Films may be designed and shot for visual impact and visibility in a small screen; they may be pitched to a niche audience rather than a mass audience; and interactivity will become a major influence. The possibility of interactivity, in fact, presents the medium with both its freshest possibilities and its biggest challenge. The creative aspects of filmmaking might become more collaborative,

with films being re-cut and re-mixed by second-hand artists. Alternately, films may arise from unexpected sources, edited together from fragments of found media of various kinds. The line between films and games may blur to the point of indistinguishability in some cases. Machinima, which are films patched together from computer games, have barely bubbled to the surface of popular culture, yet they already appear in their own regular online festivals, online and paper magazines, and enjoy the advocacy of the “Academy of Machinima Art and Sciences.”⁶⁰ The ethos behind it – using anything at hand to make films – will be a major influence on film as it propagates across the internet.

Ultimately, the rise of the internet could mark the point at which film art joins literature, live theater, music, the visual arts, and photography as a pursuit at which the average artist labors quietly, supported by a day job, always hoping but never assuming that they might eventually be recognized for their contribution. Cinemas, in turn, may become places concerned primarily with art rather than entertainment, but as such will become as sparsely attended and as heavily subsidized as the opera and the ballet. The opportunities this situation might afford are huge, but the change would be painful for many. Film could also become truly global and thus able to reach much larger numbers of people, but its status as a true mass medium may wane. Indeed the concept of truly “mass media,” or media that completely saturates the culture, may be in decline.

The industry is frantically searching for a way to ride out the storm.

⁶⁰“Machinima”, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Machinima>, Nov. 24, 2005.

Cinemas have suffered in the process, and the industry they serve does little to help them, having noticed that films are now watched more often outside cinemas than in them. On January 27, 2006, Steven Soderbergh's film *Bubble* will become the first film to be released simultaneously in theaters, on DVD, and on cable – an attempt by the film industry to staunch the financial bloodletting that now occurs with every “unsuccessful” theatrical release.⁶¹ Cinema operators fear that if this strategy becomes commonplace, it could decimate their ability to support their businesses; many look at the industry's willingness to take such extreme measures as a wholesale abandonment. Theater-goers, in turn, are frustrated by the declining quality of the cinema experience. This decline is not brought about through any fault of exhibitors, who continue to improve their equipment and amenities; but rather by the practical problems of film-going: growing number of distractions and annoyances found in cinemas, the steep price of admission, and the low quality of many of the films shown. How much simpler it is to rent or buy a DVD, order a film-on-demand through the cable or satellite company, or simply download one from the internet, and watch it in the comfort and privacy of your own home.

The fear of the film studios, then, has become the fear of the cinema itself, resulting in hysterics in some corners:

"If you tell audiences there's no difference between a theatrical experience and a DVD, then that's it, game's over, and that whole

⁶¹ Adam Leipzig, “How to Sell a Movie (or Fail) in Four Hours,” *New York Times*, November 13, 2005, AR1

art form is going to go away slowly," [director M. Night] Shyamalan added. "Movies will end up being this esoteric art form, where only singular people will put films out in a small group of theaters."⁶²

These fearful exclamations echo French film critic André Bazin's statement in 1953:

Everything, then, seems to indicate that a general, deep, and a priori weariness with the cinema on the part of the American public has found in television a visible means of expressing itself. The viewer statistics are therefore all the more alarming, and they indicate that the haemorrhage cannot be checked through a mere cauterization – a CinemaScoping, as it were – of the wound made by television to the film industry.⁶³

The obvious point being that cinema has survived major shifts before, changes that seemed cataclysmic when they first appeared on the horizon. And those changes certainly changed the landscape of American cinema, but they ultimately created as many opportunities as they destroyed. Whether this will be the case with the digital revolution remains to be seen, but the pervasive anxiety, it seems, is based on one fundamental confusion: the content is not the same as the presentation. Jean Cocteau cut to the root of the misunderstanding upon first seeing the wonder of CinemaScope: "The next time I write a poem," he said, "I will use a larger piece of paper."⁶⁴

Will people still go to the cinema in the future? Do they go for the content

⁶²Gregg Goldstein, "Shyamalan: Day-and-date 'life or death to me,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1001391595, Oct. 28, 2005.

⁶³Bazin, "Will CinemaScope Save the Film Industry?" 81.

⁶⁴MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 431.

or for the presentation? Is the experience itself – the seclusion, the dark, the overwhelming image, the sensory union with strangers – of sufficient value on its own to bring in paying customers? Ultimately, is the competition between all the different flickering screens in our modern lives a zero-sum game? And, moreover, is a cinema dominated by digital video still subversive, in Amos Vogel’s sense of the word? The twenty-four frames per second of celluloid is still common in 2005, but for the first time since it became the standard format of the cinema, its dominance is no longer assured. It is entirely likely that in many cinemas, pixels and interlaced lines will become the new standard in the near future. Half the film will no longer be spent in total darkness, but rather in the constant, shifting glow of digital projection. Does it make a difference, artistically?

What about the loss of social union? To some extent, the “cinematic experience” can be approximated in any middle-class home: high-quality digital copies of films, projected onto screens or viewed on large monitors and accompanied by Dolby-surround sound are perfectly possible with some financial investment. The advantages are not about cinematic superiority or even about expense – cinemas still provide a better aesthetic experience for hardly any more money. The price of a high-definition television set large enough to approximate the quality of a cinema screen would alone send two people to a movie theater once a week for a year at least, and the cost of even a smaller, lower-quality television would more than cover the movie-going habit of the

average American. The perceived advantage, then, is the ability to avoid the annoyances of other people. But also given up is any hope of finding the communal seclusion from the real world that only the cinema can provide. For many, the loss would be unnoticed; for others, it would be grievous – and those film-goers will continue to attend the cinema as long as there is still a cinema to attend.

The trick for cinema operators will be to recognize and cultivate their unique contributions of film as an art form. Regardless of the disorienting shifts in the industry, the cinema can perform several functions that can't be reproduced elsewhere: they can provide an ideal viewing environment, they can provide selectivity and knowledgeable curation of fine cinema, and they can provide their patrons with access to other viewers, thus providing a social center for film culture. The content on the screen is still the center of focus and reason for being, but when any given film can be seen in any number of ways, the actual exhibition of a film is no longer the sole province of the cinema. Instead, the cinema must become a purveyor of the “cinematic experience” and all that that entails. What is needed is a new generation of bold programmers who are willing to carry on Vogel's work, promoting a fertile film culture one screening at a time. They may be filmmakers and artists themselves; they will definitely be critics, educators, curators, arbiters of taste, priests in the darkened temples of their art. They will serve as the link between the filmmaker and the film viewer, bringing the participants in the dialogue together through a process of

thoughtful selection. And by virtue of the programmer's taste and skill, each will know that they have found a worthy partner in the other.

Whatever the size and shape of the screen, and wherever that screen is located, in the end film as an artistic medium will continue to evolve, but it will always remain true to its basic nature. More than a century after its realization and in spite of a never-ending series of social and technological changes, which always seem to portend the demise of the art form at the time, film has become an integral and indispensable part of culture. It's often taken for granted and often abused, and it may well be that its place in society changes as the industry changes.

But I cannot help but see any shift that permits such expanded access to the medium as anything other than a great boon to film art and film culture. Innovations in form and style are not made by studios or by overindulged stars and directors, they're made by those who participate in filmmaking because they love the medium and wish to make a contribution, because through film they believe they can affect changes in the world around them, because they can imagine no better way to express themselves. Increased accessibility to the medium will inevitably lead to a much larger pool of work, and most of that work will inevitably be inferior or mediocre. But by the same token, the number of inspired films will also inevitably grow as innovators and artists that would never have had the opportunity to work in the medium otherwise find their way to a camera. Lower costs associated with digital

technology make it possible to run small cinemas successfully, and while a local film community remains the ideal, the internet can accommodate the development of film community and film culture beyond the borders of a specific city, region, or even country. As audiences rely more and more on the good taste and dogged pursuit of the best and most interesting films by dedicated programmers, the work of programming will become harder, but also, perhaps, more rewarding.

The possibilities and potentials of the new cinematic order are intimidating, but immense. We live in a time with many of the same attributes as Cinema 16's heyday: our need for subversion is high, we have in our hands a newly reinvigorated art form, and while our culture remains close-fisted, money need not be an insurmountable obstacle. What we must bear in mind is that the confusion we face in our changing artistic landscape can become the threshold to a new golden age in the American cinema. Success is far from assured; apathy and complacency in the face of this opportunity would rob the American cinema of its deserved place in society. But as threatening as this change appears to those who are invested in the pre-digital film culture, for independents and film artists of all stripes, it can only be something to embrace with enthusiasm. With a status quo so hostile to genuinely independent filmmakers and other lovers of film art, any change can only be for the good.

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