

---

# Cinema 16

## Documents Toward a History of the Film Society

By Scott MacDonald. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002. \$79.50 cloth; \$22.95 paper.

Again proving himself to be one of the most informed scholars of experimental film history, Scott MacDonald's latest work rigorously anthologizes an eclectic collection of primary documents surrounding Cinema 16, the largest and most influential of American film societies. MacDonald's elegance as a critic, as demonstrated by his *Avant-Garde Film Motion Studies* (Cambridge, 1993) as well as his latest, book-length reflection on the role of place in avant-garde cinema, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place* (University of California, 2001), is perhaps only rivaled by his skill as an archival historian, interviewer, and editor. Although MacDonald's interpretative insights are limited in this book to his lucid introduction and his direct interviewing style, the book resounds with his extensive contextual knowledge in the unobtrusive form of notes and parentheses, which continually guide the reader through omissions or enigmas in the documents themselves.

From 1947 to 1963, the New York-based Cinema 16 functioned as the primary exhibitor and distributor of experimental film in the United States. Under the leadership of Amos and Marcia Vogel, Cinema 16 flourished as a non-profit membership society committed to the exhibition of documentary, avant-garde, scientific, educational, and performance films to ever-increasing audiences. What emerges in MacDonald's collection of interviews, correspondence, program notes, critical and journalistic reviews of the film society, transcribed conversations, film stills, and graphics is a glimpse into the everyday culture of the postwar avant-garde, as well as a sense of Cinema 16 as *Gesamtkunstwerk*. While many of the included documents inevitably dwell upon material transactions, such as rental fees and shipping dates, the collection gradually reveals the depth of Amos Vogel's project: film programming as a total work of art designed to expose diverse, frequently hostile audiences to the myriad subversive potentials of the medium. Perennially refusing

to cater to the demands of the 7,000 members that belonged to Cinema 16 at its zenith, Vogel consistently labored to shock, educate, transfix, and even bore his audiences by challenging their social, aesthetic, and scientific assumptions through his eclectic selections and dialectical approach to presentation. By including such a wide range of documents, from intimate historical ephemera to more philosophical reflections on the role of the cinema, the audience, the non-commercial artist, and the nonprofit exhibitor, MacDonald's editorial montage captures the political impetus and sweeping aesthetic vision that invigorated Vogel's commitment to Cinema 16.

The competition from newer groups, as well as ongoing financial obstacles, resulted in the closure of Cinema 16 in 1963. In his introduction, MacDonald narrates the ways in which the arrival of both the Film-makers' Cooperative and the New American Cinema Group in the early 60s, as well as the escalating antagonism between Vogel and legendary avant-garde film guru Jonas Mekas, changed the focus of American experimental film culture. For these new groups, it was unthinkable that Vogel should remain the sole arbiter of which avant-garde films were available and how they were programmed. Instead of selecting films based exclusively upon a particular individual's evaluation, as detractors argued that Cinema 16 had, the Coop initiated a policy of accepting all films that were submitted to them by filmmakers. Within the new paradigm, the focus of experimental cinema curating shifted from attracting a diverse audience to showcasing a particular filmmaker. Rather than tempering the exhibition of abstract avant-garde works by inserting them in an eclectic program, as Vogel had done, the Coop dedicated itself to showing entire programs of individual experimental filmmakers. While there is no doubt that this kind of programming has helped audiences to recognize the integrity of an artist's vision, it has inevitably resulted in certain drawbacks. As the popular audience for non-commodity forms of cinema continues to diminish, the Sisyphean task of situating experimental filmmaking within the mainstream of cultural life becomes more onerous. Forty years after the closure of Cinema 16, Vogel's success at exposing simultaneous collective audiences to the subversive potential of the medium remains unparalleled.

What emerges through reading *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* is a profound nostalgia for the generation of cinephilia that Cinema 16 fostered. While the primary value of MacDonald's book is as a resource to be consulted by experimental film theorists and historians, the pleasure of reading it all the way through is tantamount to the best kind of epistolary novel, in which vivid characters emerge through their correspondence. It just so happens that Vogel's interlocutors include many of the most innovative artists of the twentieth century, including Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, Luis Buñuel, John Cassavetes, Joseph Comell, Robert Flaherty, Gregory Markopoulos, Jean Renoir, and Fred Zinneman. In an era where email and the Internet have rendered the written letter a casualty of evolution, the intimacies, insights, and accusations traded in Vogel's voluminous correspondence read as if refracted

through a prism of loss. MacDonald's book gracefully eulogizes this waning sense of community at the same time that it narrates one of the most significant developments in American film history.

**Ara Osterweil** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Film Studies Program at the University of California at Berkeley; her dissertation is entitled *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Avant-Garde 1962-1972*.

© Ara Osterweil, 2003