

# Independents

*The vital statistics of media centers.*

by Amos Vogel

Ours is a commercial society based on huge production entities creating commodities for profit. It is thus eminently understandable that the commercial film industry dominates production, distribution, and exhibition. Its preponderance and weight, however, is so enormous that it blots out, quite unjustifiably, the existence and activities of the independent cinema movement.

This field deserves better; it is far larger than commonly suspected. In terms of filmmaking and circulation—documentary, avant-garde, political, personal, educational works—it extends literally to millions. It is an essential and significant national resource, it is under-reported, it scrapes nervously in

the shadow of the looming commercial power structures.

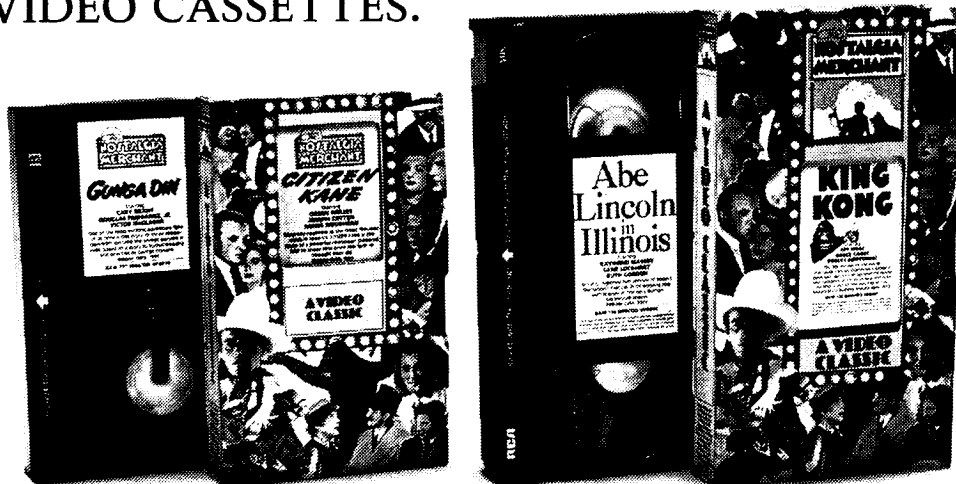
What a pleasure, then, to report an important national development in this area, an event of potentially far-reaching consequences: the first national conference of the more than forty-five largest American Media Arts Centers, held this spring at Lake Minnewaska, New York, and hosted by the Foundation for Independent Film and Video.

These Media Arts Centers are not to be confused with film societies of yore, which existed solely to exhibit films. Today's Media Centers, typically, are public, non-profit institutions that exhibit, bring in artists to talk and teach, often make their own films, have a library and a newsletter, and reach out into their communities by neighborhood film series and events based on local is-

ues. Representing a national constituency of millions, these centers include the Art Institute of Chicago, the Educational Film Libraries Association, the University Film Studies Center, the Northwest Film Study Center, The Museum of Modern Art, the Syracuse Synapse Video Center, Pittsburgh Filmmakers Inc., the Carnegie Institute, the Pacific Film Archives, the Kitchen Center for Video and Music, the Rocky Mountain Film Center, the Philadelphia Neighborhood Film Project, the Media Study/Buffalo.

Fascinating insights into the nature of these centers were provided by a detailed questionnaire. The centers' average earned income is thirty percent of the total income; seventy percent comes from the National Endowment for the Arts, state grants, and gifts. In short,

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these are, and must be, heavily subsidized operations. Programming, production, and distribution for art, education, and information cannot be based on profit considerations. The average total annual income is \$124,000. The average number of programs presented annually is 100. Ninety percent of the centers show avant-garde works, eighty percent show documentaries, and fifty percent show commercial narrative films (including features). Programming format for features: eclectic, fifty percent of all centers; directors' retrospectives, forty percent; historical topics and themes, forty percent; new international films, thirty percent; national cinemas, twenty-eight percent. Seventy-one percent of the centers bring in visiting artists (paid an average of \$200), of which twenty-one are filmmakers, twelve multimedia, and twelve video artists.

The average annual exhibition attendance is 15,000 per center, ranging up to 100,000, or a total of close to a million people per year. Ninety percent of the centers have collections (including self-produced films), of which twenty percent are formal film-video archives. Seventy-one percent provide instruction in production and criticism, with annual participants in the 40-60,000 range. Eighty percent have a book and periodicals library, sixty percent publish regular newsletters with educational and advocacy materials.

Distribution of the media collections (which range up to 500 film and 500 video titles per center) is carried on by seventy percent of the centers to annual audiences of 600,000 per center or a total of 18 million people. Fifty percent distribute programs to public television, local/regional TV stations and cable. Fifty percent of the centers produce works for TV; of these, half are funded by the artist (through grants). The role of the American Film Institute is relatively small: Only twenty percent of the centers subscribe to its magazine, *American Film*; ten percent use traveling A.F.I. programs, five percent use its educational services; fifty percent of all centers did not use any any of the A.F.I. services.

Apart from workshops in exhibition, fund raising, equipment, and advocacy, the conference concerned itself with relations between centers and local TV stations, pending legislation, equipment resources available to independent artists, and public perception (or lack thereof) of independent film and video. At the end, the forty-five

centers—only the tip of an iceberg consisting of thousands of local film-video organizations nationally—decided to form an advocacy organization, or coalition, open to all, to press their interests nationally and regionally in areas of funding and improved public understanding of their cause, activities, and existence. As specified in separate resolutions, minority groups are viewed as an essential component of the new organizations.

A strong potential thus exists for a significant new chapter in the history of independent cinema in the U.S. The success of this new venture will be measured by the realization of the organization's objectives as well as by its ability to withstand co-option or domination by funding sources or Hollywood institutions such as the American Film Institute. Past history indicates that groupings of idealists, if successful, are prone to absorption by existing institutions tending toward aggrandizement and control, "in the best interests of all," naturally. The potential new victims must therefore at all times cling to the realization of their own objectives in action—in this case a cinema that is *independent*, a cinema that remains worthwhile only to the extent that it remains independent.

(Information: Foundation for Independent Video and Film, Inc. 99 Prince Street, New York, NY 10012; or Robert Haller, Pittsburgh Filmmakers, Incorporated, P.O. Box 7467, Pittsburgh, PA 15213.)

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high pitch of enraptured fandom and seems to feel Miss Hayworth's eye on the page from time to time (the book is very discreet), Mr. Kobal is really quite clever and informed, a geyser of details and atmospheric nuggets. He has looked with a fresh eye at all the movies, and talks about them in detail. He appreciates Rita Hayworth. His use of sources makes a good contrast to Miss Linet's; he's not only talked to the family and the friends and the behind-camera co-workers but has the sense and charm to relax them and open them up; he hones them to their sharpest. It's a Valentine, but who deserves one more? One would also imagine that the owner of the Kobal Collection of film stills would have chosen unexpected and sensitive pictures to reveal the eros and the psyche of the Love Goddess. One would be right. Just take a gander at that cover!

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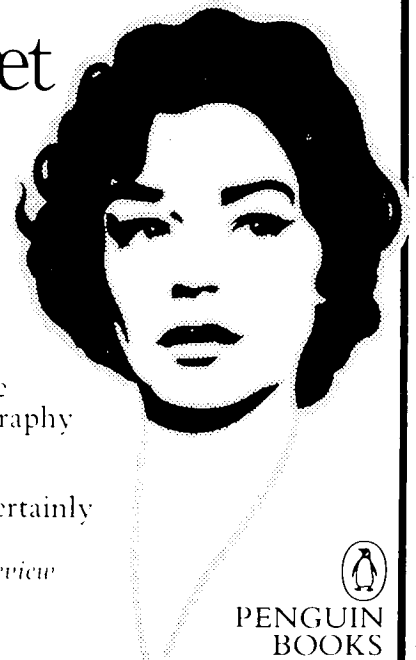
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