

**A READER'S DIGEST
 OF THE AVANT-GARDE (IV)**
 by Amos Vogel

Did you know that LAST YEAR IN MARIENBAD is not an avant-garde film, and that Jean-Luc Godard not an avant-garde filmmaker? Did you know that one can discuss the history of the American film avant-garde without mentioning Maya Deren? Well, folks, it's all there *and more* in the swinging essay by Whitney Museum's film curator John Hanhardt, which accompanies the nationally distributed American Federation of Arts series, "A History of the American Film Avant-Garde." Considering the illustrious additional supporters of this event (Museum of Modern Art, New York University, National Endowment), a new generation may indeed accept it as history. My task is to expose it as myth.

To make an earlier era conform to a preconceived, sectarian thesis, it is necessary to truncate it, telescope periods, erase institutions, inflate tendencies, and introject retroactive fantasies into the defenseless past. The patient is the avant-garde movement; the merciless surgeon is a partisan of structural cinema. Since this particular tendency is still recent and only one among others, utmost concentration on it leaves huge gaps in history and creates a myth by implosion, temporal condensation, and liquidation of entire classes of important directors.

Purportedly, the Hanhardt essay deals with the movement's 1942-1972 evolution. However, the immensely important 1942-1958 period (sixteen years) is collapsed into half a *paragraph* while thirteen *pages* are devoted to the next fourteen years, a period more "amenable" to pro-structural manipulation. Such condensation of older history may appear irrelevant or justified only to those unaware of what has been omitted in the process. Since the vast majority of major talents of the late Sixties were already fully at work in the Forties and Fifties (Peterson, Broughton, Conner, Brakhage, Vanderbeek, Breer, Emshwiller, D'Avino, Anger, Markopoulos, Maas, etc.), and since hundreds of films were being produced, the period was one of the most vital in avant-garde history. By

a sleight of hand, Hanhardt eliminates it in favor of an aggressively erroneous apologia for structural cinema as the movement's immanent essence and manifest destiny. Here is his method in action, as he pretends to deal with this 1942-1958 period while simultaneously erasing it.

"Every year, more and more films were produced, some screened at Cinema 16 or at the Filmmakers' Cinematheque." The deliciously tiny "or" hides nothing less than a seventeen-year gap. Cinema 16 started in 1947; the Filmmakers' Cinematheque in 1964. During this "erased" (and most fertile) period, Cinema 16 premiered (not "screened") all (not "some") of the leading avant-gardists. The Filmmakers' Cinematheque could not very well do that, since it did not exist. Undaunted, Hanhardt continues:

"The Cinema 16 screenings were attended by the new generation of filmmakers. In addition, writings on and by these filmmakers appeared in Film Culture magazine, which became, in the late 1950's, the houseorgan of the independent New American Cinema."

The delicate phrase "in addition" deftly implies a simultaneity between Cinema 16 and *Film Culture* which is entirely fabricated. Eleven years are condensed into two words. Cinema 16 started in 1947, *Film Culture* in 1955—remaining, however, anti-avant-garde until 1958. (Mekas denounced the movement as a homosexual conspiracy, attacking its leading directors by name in a famous *Film Culture* essay.) Here is what this collapsing of an eleven-year period manages to sweep under the rug (besides Cinema 16's activities detailed in the last issue):

1. **Frank Stauffacher:** Filmmaker, founder of the catalytic 1947 "Art in Cinema" avant-garde film series at San

Francisco's Museum of Modern Art. ABSENT.

2. **Parker Tyler:** The one American critic who was part of the avant-garde, championed it tirelessly in essays, program notes, books, pamphlets; mentor and moral conscience of the avant-garde. ABSENT.

3. **Maya Deren:** The single most important catalyst of the movement: filmmaker, exhibitor, distributor, lecturer, publicist, author, scholar, organizer, cajoler, passionate fighter—the person who transformed events into a movement. On Page 23 of Hanhardt's essay appears a quote, only subsequently identified as by "Deren." Who is *she*? It is a measure of the cultural scandal of this essay that this represents the first and only mention of Maya Deren or her role. (Instead, two structural theorists rate nine *pages*; three structural filmmakers rate for *more*.) But though Maya is not mentioned, she is co-opted. The first, most important still in the book (a full-page still directly facing the title page) shows Maya in MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON, arms outstretched, palms turned out, in effect "blessing" the book and the exhibition.

4. **The Creative Film Foundation:** the first and only foundation ever in America entirely devoted to the avant-garde; created by the afore-mentioned "Deren." Only she could have assembled—as its directors and judges—Meyer Schapiro, Rudolf Arnheim, Joseph Campbell, Barney Rosset, Parker Tyler, myself, Alexander Hammid, James Johnson Sweeney. For several heart-breaking years, she devoted most of her time to fund-raising for filmmakers; in vain. A true pioneer, she was "too early." Nevertheless, the foundation served the extremely important purpose of choosing the best American avant-garde films of the year, with Tennessee Williams, Salvador Dali, Clement



Godard: Not an avant-garde filmmaker? Jean-Pierre Léaud in LA CHINOISE.

Greenberg, *et al.* presenting the awards at special annual Cinema 16 events to young filmmakers; Emshwiller, Conner, D'Avino, Breer, Menken, Brakhage, Maas, Vanderbeek, etc. ABSENT.

5. **Amos Vogel:** For thirty years, a participant in the unfolding drama of the movement, whose role as founder-director of Cinema 16 must be left to others to evaluate. ABSENT

6. **David Bienstock:** the final, most unforgivable "liquidation." Though belonging to a later period, here is someone who never denied the past, drew sustenance from it, and built upon it. He does not exist for Hanhardt, for Willard Van Dyke (chairman of the American Federation of Arts Film Committee who wrote the book's introduction crediting Hanhardt for everything at the Whitney), for those who composed a page of acknowledgments thanking everybody except Bienstock. After all, he was only Hanhardt's predecessor at the Whitney, only its first film curator, only the founder of the entire film program there. ABSENT.

This entire debacle could have been avoided. Here are some suggestions: Keep the exhibition as is, but rename it "Hanhardt's Metaphysical Fantasy." Or: Do not place historical surveys into the hands of one-eyed sectarians. Do not let the catalog be written by an institution nationally known as fountainhead of one (the structural) tendency: New York University. Increase the number of programs from seven to about twenty. Create a selection board representative of all tendencies. Do not drown your essay in lists of names—Peckham, Butor, Robbe-Grillet, Duras, Pleynet, Sarris, Kracauer, Cavell, Michelson, Wollen, Vertov, Duchamp, Boulez, Foreman, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Piaget, Bazin, Atget, Lawder, Daguerre, Fry, Sitney . . . as *piece de resistance*, Husserl . . . I mean, what *else?* While their (ever so casual) mention does not necessarily elevate the reader into a state of culture, it does testify to the author's insecurities.

The world is full of misunderstandings, and so I repeat that my opposition to this exhibition does not signify opposition to its many excellent (often excellent structural) films—or to Hanhardt, whom I continue to consider a serious film person capable of growth. My opposition has to do with absent action, crimes behind the screen, "betrayed" truth. A part of a movement is touted as all of it; all else is liquidated; and we are left with a torso brutally squeezed into a Procrustean bed instead of with the far richer, far deeper originality and beauty of the "real" movement in all its complexity and splendor. ❄️

A reply by John Hanhardt appears on page 62.

THE IN-DUS-TRY

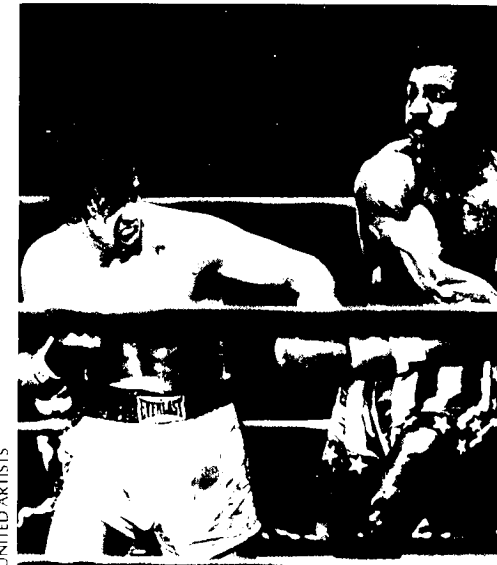
ROCKY AND HIS FRIENDS by Stuart Byron

Industry was puzzled. He had observed all of the advance stories on the motion picture *ROCKY* with curiosity and admiration, and he had assumed that his colleagues in the film-oriented press had done the same. Now Industry discovered that he was wrong. Whether rave, pan, or what *Variety* calls "no opinion," review after review of *ROCKY* tore into the crescendo of advance comment which this low-budget story of a two-bit Philadelphia boxer had received. In *The New York Times*, Vincent Canby devoted almost half his unfavorable notice to the publicity question; on New York's "Channel 2 News," Pat Collins gave *ROCKY* her highest rating (a "perfect 10") on her Scoreboard, but warned her viewers to forget "the ridiculous publicity campaign"; in *New West* Stephen Farber, as casually as a Pacific breeze, began his *mezzo-mezzo* write-up by calling the movie "lively and likable, though it fails to live up to all the excessive advance hype."

Industry was chagrined. He well understood, perhaps even sympathized with, the animus against what Hollywood usually means by "a publicity campaign." Such campaigns were/are based on hypothetical elements, and the *loci classici* had been *CLEOPATRA*, *THE GREAT GATSBY*, and now *KING KONG*. The hype for those pix took off from big budgets, production elements, stars, "properties." But Industry pondered that the *ROCKY* situation had been different. Had, in fact, been exactly the opposite. None of the above-named critics—not Film View, not Scoreboard, not L.A. Journal—could claim that he or she had read a word about *ROCKY* beyond routine press releases while it had been in production. All of the "hype" had been based on the completed movie—had come from people who had *seen* the completed movie. And was this not what these scribes and others had long called for? Had they not loudly complained that low-budget films of quality from the past had *not* been accorded studio campaigns? Had they not issued *cris d'alarms* over the indifference of the major com-

panies to such as *PRETTY POISON*, *THE CONVERSATION*, and *THIEVES LIKE US*? Had they not seen many a well-reviewed low-budget movie wither on the box-office vine because not supported by studio hoopla? Finally, Industry was moved to ask himself the ultimate question: Should not, indeed, the critics have congratulated United Artists for a job well done on behalf of *ROCKY*?

He thought, in fact, that the UA campaign deserved chapter-and-verse documentation in his January-February col-



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umn as a model for the future. Industry was sure that UA would welcome this idea, would feel it deserved a pat on the back. With bold resolution, he telephoned Contact, his man at UA's New York publicity department. And within two minutes Industry was chagrined anew. Contact's department was far from self-adulatory, far from boastful of how it had turned *ROCKY*, a nowhere man, into a contender, Oscarwise included. Indeed, Contact was defensive. UA disclaimed responsibility. It was hurt and offended by all of the suggestions that it had twisted the arms of writers. It was pre-Pasteurian, claiming that the *ROCKY* "hype" was a product of spontaneous generation. Nonetheless, Industry was persistent. Surely UA would tell him *what* had happened if not *how*. Contact, in the parlance of the trade, promised to "go to bat" for Industry, pledged to ask his ultimate boss, the Big Cheese, to give Industry a half-hour of his (Cheese's) time.

Industry, upon reflection, was not really surprised about all this. If the motion picture industry obsessed him above all others, it was partially because you could not always say that it followed the principle that nothing succeeds like success. This made it unique in the American corporate system. Almost a decade ago Industry found a dovish Warner Brothers regime which had inherited *THE GREEN*