



SMILES AND TEARS—II

by Amos Vogel

If my last column on the state of independent cinema seemed suffused with copious tears, this one will concern itself with positives. My overall impression remains guarded; but amidst stagnation, there is also hope and achievement.

This includes institutions viewed somewhat critically—thought with compassionate friendship—in my last column. The Whitney in its new series, redresses, to some extent, its preoccupation with formal, minimal cinema and also provides, among unusual documentaries and ethnographic works, a veritable highlight of the season: a unique first retrospective of that neglected American genius Winsor McCay. It confirms McCay as a master of illusionist and anti-illusionist (dig the contradiction) cinema, as important a pioneer of animation as he was of newspaper cartoons. (See his marvellous, recently republished, gargantuan *Little Nemo* compendium: Nostalgia Press, Box 293 Franklin Square, N. Y. 11010). And the Museum of Modern Art deserves our gratitude for its excellent *What's Happening* series (social and other beautifully programmed documentaries by William Sloan of the Donnell Library, where each program is repeated); a forthcoming series of avant-garde films, with the American Federation of Arts; its continuing *Cineprobe* (independents in person); and its annual *New Directors/New Films* series (co-sponsored by the Film Society of Lincoln Center): first works of (often) independent international feature directors (some unaccountably missing from the New York Film Festival).

The Museum also distributes a number of carefully selected independent films of quality. This intelligently supplements continuing distribution efforts by the New York Filmmakers' and Canyon Cinema Cooperatives, whose problem, from the consumer's view, resides in their listing all films by any filmmakers wishing to be listed; a choice of thousands of titles of wildly fluctuating quality, with no guidelines except copy supplied by filmmaker. Other, relatively independent distributors of note: Serious Business

Company (avant-garde: 1609 Jaynes Street, Berkeley, Calif. 94703); New Day Films (women's films, I.F. Stone's Weekly, etc.: P.O. Box 315, Franklin Lakes, N.J. 07417); Tricontinental Films (international political cinema: 333 6th Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10014); Odeon/Monument Films (political: 1619 Broadway, Room 10001, New York, N.Y. 10019).

Avant-garde films and videotapes by well-known (non-film) artists, and works in the performing arts are obtainable from Visual Resources (1 Lincoln Plaza, New York, N. Y. 10023), avant-garde videotapes from the Castelli-Sonnabend Galleries (420 W. Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012), and from Electronic Arts Intermix (84 5th Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10011).

As to showcases, Tom Luddy's Pacific Film Archives continues with extraordinary versatility and taste, and there are series and special events at Gerald O'Grady's showcase at the State University at Buffalo, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Bob Sitton's Northwest Film Study Center in Portland; Peter Feinstein's University Film Study Center in Boston (also a newsletter!); my Annenberg Cinémathèque at the University of Pennsylvania; the annual Flaherty and Public Broadcasting Seminars; the Higher Ground film society (political films) and the Collective For Living Cinema (various), both in New York.

Special mention must be made of Howard Guttenplan's continuing in-person appearances by independents at his Millennium: and particularly Karen Cooper's overviews of the international movement at her Film Forum, now ensconced at a larger, more comfortable theater, where attendance (and press coverage) have risen substantially. Film Forum (as is also true of other highly "visible" institutions), simultaneously serves as an unrecognized and very valuable national clearinghouse for scholars, critics, and programmers, providing source addresses and other information. (The Whitney even has a mimeographed source list for this purpose; and the American Federation of Art now acts as its national distribution source.)

Opening soon is a Film/Video Study Center at New York's Donnell Library, enabling anyone to study their three-thousand films and video cassettes. Such centers—already operating at the Museum of Modern Art and elsewhere—are becoming an every more important resource for students, filmmakers, and scholars.

An incomplete listing of awards or grants for independents includes State Councils on the Arts, as well as American Film Institute and National Endowment grants—a very different situation from even ten years ago. (For further information regarding grants, job opportunities, special events, join the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers, 81 Leonard Street, New York, N.Y.)

At least some American festivals select independents for their programs, including the Chicago, Atlanta (now Virgin Islands) and the Los Angeles-based Filmex festivals; the Ann Arbor and Sinking Creek Festivals are entirely devoted to independents; and the American Film Festival presents many independent films and an entire annual event limited solely to the year's best avant-garde.

Press coverage—an absolute necessity—is spotty or non-existent in the mass media. But in New York, the *Times*, and *Post* cover the Whitney and Film Forum regularly, the *Soho Weekly News* does most of the time, and the *Voice* has simply dropped out.

In the film magazines, the consistently best, most intelligent coverage can be found in *Film Quarterly*, in Paul Cowan's column in *Take One*; occasional coverage in depth in *FILM COMMENT*, *Film-makers Newsletter*, *Jumpcut*, *Cineaste*, and *Sightlines* (also special title lists in particular areas).

For some time now, it has become apparent that the guardians of culture at the public television stations are using more films (if not too disturbing in subject matter to trustees or sponsors); among their contributions as regards independents are the *Animation Film Festival*, often unheralded (and very welcome) women's art or documentary films, and WNET's Television Laboratory (beautiful, original video experiments, worthy of a separate column).

There are also independents (genuine and kinky) crawling unbeknownst to most across public access cable channels. Here, the distance between cinema vérité, drivel, personal document, or pornography is quite short. The occasional finds, however, are startling in their honesty or perversity, a disrespectful counterpart to the somber respectability of public television.

A glowing report? Nothing to worry about? Or is this, rather, a compilation of situations and showcases, whose combined audiences at best are limited, not to be compared to commercial cinema/TV totals, or to the importance and potential of the independent movement itself? There exists, after all, no other film movement in America at present that can claim to produce more rather than fewer films. The majors may be cutting down; the 16mm and super-8mm filmmakers are stepping up. The quality of the product is often another matter; but then so is that of commercial cinema. And, despite BARRY LYNDON's visual beauty and possible philosophical subtlety, one can only wonder what Emshwiller, Sharits, Herzog, Leacock, Jacobs, Myers, Rubbo, Makavejev, Nelson, Rimmer, Varda, Wexler, Arakawa, Herbert, Garrel, Bellocchio, Mehrjui, Oshima, Sembene, Skolimowski, Papadopoulos, Breer would come up with if they were handed eleven (or was it thirteen?) million dollars. ❄️