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Cinema 16: A Showcase for the Nonfiction Film

AMOS VOGEL

NEW YORKERS no longer have to be school children, "shut-ins," or club members in order to see documentary films. Cinema 16, at first an ambitious dream to create a permanent showcase for 16-mm. documentary and experimental films, has today become very much a reality. More than 3,000 persons crowded into New York's modern Central Needle Trades Auditorium to see one of Cinema 16's shows. Radio stations and magazines carried announcements, and the *New York Times* alone printed releases in three different sections of one Sunday issue.

Organized on a shoestring by people with more enthusiasm than experience, Cinema 16 has validated its original contentions: first, that there were scores of superior nonfiction films gathering dust on film-library shelves; and second, that there were large potential audiences eager to see them.

Cinema 16 offers films that comment on the state of man, his world, and his crises, either by means of realistic documentation or through experimental techniques. It "glorifies" nonfiction. It finds excitement in the life of ants, Hindustan music, microbiology, aboriginal life. It hails a film that is a work of art, but will not hesitate to present a film that is important only because of its subject matter. Its avant-garde films comment on the tensions and psychological insecurity of modern existence or are significant expressions of modern art. Its social documentaries stimulate rather than stifle discussion and controversy.

Incorporated as an educational, nonprofit, membership society, it has, since its inception in October, 1947, presented more than eighty films. They include Julian Huxley's *Monkey into Man*, Grierson's *Night Mail*, *Lamentation* (a dance study of Martha

Graham), Rotha's *The World Is Rich*, Eisenstein's *Death Day*, the Canadian *Feeling of Rejection*, *Seeds of Destiny*, Ferno's *And So They Live*, *Boundary Lines* (International Film Foundation), and such films as *Crystallization*, Lester's *On Time and Light*, *Neurosis and Alcohol* (PCR). The films *Maillol* and *Henry Moore* are examples of the art films shown.

Among the experimental films are *Un chien andalou*, Peterson's *The Potted Psalm*, color abstractions by Francis Lee and Douglas Crockwell, Markopoulos' *Psyche*, the Whitney brothers' *Abstract Film Exercises* with synthetic sound, *Fragment of Seeking* (Harrington), and *House of Cards* (Joseph Vogel). Freed from customary censorship restrictions as a result of its status as a membership organization, Cinema 16 has shown Liam O'Flaherty's controversial *The Puritan* and Hackenschmied's *Private Life of a Cat*, both of which are barred from public showing.

Originally, Cinema 16 presented its films to the general public at the Provincetown Playhouse. Its first twenty performances were sold out; for four months, four performances a week were regularly presented. More than 14,000 people attended. Financial and censorship problems led to the incorporation of Cinema 16 as a film society. Starting with 150 members, the society now has more than 2,200 members and continues to grow. Each member sees one two-hour program a month, consisting of four or five films (usually a social documentary, a scientific, an animated, an experimental, and a "special interest" film). Members are also entitled to free guest tickets and discounts on film books and equipment. Yearly membership is \$10, \$17 for husband and wife, \$8 for students or groups. Performances are held at the Barbizon Plaza Theatre, the Hunter College Playhouse, and the Central Needle Trades Auditorium.

The founders of Cinema 16 included Amos Vogel as executive secretary, Marcia Vogel in charge of organization and membership, Renee Avery, Robert Delson, and David E. Diener. The work of the organization is carried on by three full-time employees

and the many volunteers without whom such a project can never succeed. In spite of its success, financial problems continue. Costs of promotion and advertising are almost prohibitive, suitable and reasonably priced auditoriums difficult to find. Patient recruiting activities, mailings, and publicity work consume a disproportionate amount of time and money.

The benefits of this full-scale, professionally conducted showcase for the 16-mm. industry have been both direct and immediate. Often for the first time, members of the general public are becoming aware of the very existence of films of this type. Program notes and Cinema 16's information service refer them to producers and distributors. Press releases, special previews for the press, and reviews further increase public awareness. Professional, rather than slipshod projection, with new arc equipment (in an auditorium seating 1,600!), gives evidence that 16-mm. projection can be as satisfactory as 35-mm. Representatives of social, labor, teacher, and parent organizations using films in their programs belong to Cinema 16 and thus see important new releases. Hundreds of letters ask for advice on film sources and programming. More and more, Cinema 16 is becoming a clearinghouse for information on documentary films now available in the United States.

Present plans call for a further expansion of membership and increases in membership privileges. Expansion to other metropolitan centers is indicated, and specialized screenings for clubs, unions, and children are being planned.

Increasingly, the nonfiction film is coming into its own in the United States. The work started by the British film societies, the comprehensive and important activities of New York's Museum of Modern Art, and the screenings of San Francisco's Art in Cinema and other societies are now bearing fruit. As the only showcase devoted to the exclusive and regular presentation of such films, Cinema 16 has already made its own modest contribution to the future of the nonfiction film in the United States.