



ADEQUATE IMAGERY

PROGRAMMES FOR LIVING:
AMOS VOGEL AND CINEMA 16

By Paul Cronin

“As a race we have become aware of certain dangers that surround us. We comprehend, for example, that nuclear power is a real danger for mankind, that over-crowding of the planet is the greatest of all. We have understood that the destruction of the environment is another enormous danger. But I truly believe that the lack of adequate imagery is a danger of the same magnitude”.

Thus spake German director Werner Herzog in a recent interview. Although he has always been an arch autodidact, I do wonder how much of an influence his conversations with friend and mentor Amos Vogel had on him over the years. Born in Austria in 1922, Vogel has lived in New York since 1938 and is one of America's most innovative film curators and historians. In 1947 he created Cinema 16, a pioneering film club aimed at audiences thirsty for work 'that cannot be seen elsewhere' and in 1967 established the New York Film Festival where, the following year, he screened Herzog's first feature *Signs of Life*. Vogel later published the culmination of his thoughts (along with an extraordinary collection of stills) in *Film as a Subversive Art*, a book

that drives home the notion Herzog states so eloquently above: that most of the images around us are worn-out, suffused with commercialism, pernicious in their banality.

“In the 1940s, it was very difficult, even in New York, to see the kind of cinema I wanted to see”, says Vogel. “I knew there were lots of films that were far more interesting than the Hollywood product most people were seeing. At the time there were lots of artists working on small, personal projects but there was no showcase for experimental and documentary films, short fiction, and abstract animation”. After seeing avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren introduce her own films at a small Greenwich Village theatre, Vogel decided to hire the venue himself and started screening 16mm shorts under the banner of Cinema 16, a membership-only film society “for the adult moviegoer”.

Vogel soon became one of the most important figures in what today would be considered ‘independent’ film. Within two years he was exhibiting an extraordinarily eclectic range of work to over 3,000 people a week. A single programme might contain films such as Deren's masterwork *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *The Garden Spider*, a short featuring close-ups of a spider at work, *New Faces Come Back*, a documentary about the plastic surgery performed on “horribly maimed RAF fliers”, *Living in a Reversed World*, a German science film that documents a singularly bizarre experiment, *Weegee's New York*, the only film made by the legendary New York photographer (and the only film that Vogel himself edited), *The Eternal Jew*, a piece of virulent Nazi propaganda and *Fiddle-De-Dee*, an animation by Norman McLaren.

As Jonas Mekas, the other grand old man of New York underground cinema and founder of America's most important showcase for experimental film, Anthology Film Archives, tells historian Scott Macdonald for his book about Cinema 16, “for some time, it was the only place you could see the American avant-garde. Of course, it affected my whole life. I consider it one of my universities”.

Once people knew that Cinema 16 was a place where their films might be screened, Vogel was flooded with prints from around the country. Every year he spent months working through the hundreds of reels filmmakers sent to his New York office. Vogel's natural curiosity soon took him around the world, to archives and film festivals, in search of interesting new fiction and non-fiction shorts.

Due to his wide reading habits, Vogel was able to seek out films that few even knew existed. “I heard that there was interesting work being done at Lodz film school in Poland”, he recalls. “They sent some of the films over and I ended up screening one, *Two Men and a Wardrobe*, by a young man named Roman Polanski. It was the first time any of his work was screened in America, several years before he made his first feature”.

Vogel, who never saw a distinction between experimentation in mainstream cinema and any other realm of filmmaking, was soon finding space on Cinema 16's busy schedule for classics from Hollywood and elsewhere. As respectful of Chaplin, Eisenstein and Kurosawa as he was of Anger, Brakhage and Broughton, the titles seen at America's largest private-member film club during its 16-year existence include *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *Rashomon*, *La Belle et la Bête*, the first ever screenings of Cassavettes' *Shadows* and, perhaps a little surprisingly, Hitchcock's 1956 version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (followed by a Q&A with the director himself). Vogel also established the first distribution company in America specialising in the kinds of films that made Cinema 16 so unique.

What made Vogel's venture especially exciting was his success in bringing the European film society tradition to the United States. As Scott Macdonald explains, “the most remarkable thing Amos did was to assume that the idea of showing films is to build audiences.”

A film society isn't directed just to a small coterie group which already likes the kinds of films you're showing. What the curator should be doing is trying to show the public that there are other worlds of cinema out there, equally as provocative and interesting as the commercial product they go to see. Cinema 16 was Vogel's attempt to create a true community where people would come together to talk about political issues, to become better citizens. The film society was, for Vogel, an aid to good citizenship in a democracy”.

For the past sixty years, Vogel has been in search of what Herzog would call ‘adequate imagery’. Through his writings and teachings, he has educated several generations of filmgoers about the ‘other’ cinema that exists, the one that doesn't appear at the local multiplex or video store. In this respect, Vogel's contribution to our understanding of experimental, deviant and thought-provoking cinematic art is incalculable. **v**

Paul Cronin (pauljcronin@hotmail.com) is the editor of *Herzog on Herzog* (Faber & Faber) and forthcoming books on Alexander Mackendrick, Errol Morris and Roman Polanski. His film about Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, will be seen at festivals later this year and in a special event organized by the Lux (see www.lux.org.uk for details). Scott Macdonald's insightful study *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* is published by Temple University Press.