

Introduction

FROM THE END of 1947 until mid-1963, the New York City cultural scene was energized by Cinema 16, the most successful and influential membership film society in North American history. At its height, Cinema 16 boasted seven thousand members, who filled a sixteen-hundred-seat auditorium at the High School of Fashion Industries (in Manhattan's garment district) twice a night, as well as two and sometimes three five-hundred-seat first-run theaters at various Manhattan locations, for monthly presentations. These audiences were presented with a very wide range of film forms, often programmed so as to confront—and sometimes to shock—conventional expectations. Amos Vogel, first with his wife, Marcia Vogel, and later with assistant Jack Goelman, looked at hundreds of films annually, choosing and arranging fall and spring series of events that were meant to function as critiques of the conventional cinema and of conventional relationships between filmmakers, exhibitors, and audiences. Instead of accepting moviegoing as an entertaining escape from real life, Vogel and his colleagues saw themselves as a special breed of educator, using an exploration of cinema history and current practice not only to develop a more complete sense of the myriad experiences cinema makes possible, but also to invigorate the potential of citizenship in a democracy and to cultivate a sense of global responsibility.

By the 1950s, Cinema 16 was not just a thriving exhibitor but an important distributor of films not available from established distribution companies, and a crucial model for a nationwide network of smaller film societies. Further, Cinema 16's large, vociferous audiences became an inspiration for a generation of independent filmmakers whose work traveled this network of alternative screening venues. By the early 1960s, various factors conspired to undermine Cinema 16's financial viability. Nevertheless, the film society remains noteworthy, both as a major historical contribution to film awareness in the United States and as a potential model for film/video exhibition. During periods when financial resources for alternative exhibition are rare, it is well to remember what one small organization devoted to the broadest sense of cinema was able to accomplish in the era before government grants for film exhibition were even a fantasy.

Backgrounds

While its longevity and the scope of its activities made Cinema 16 a new and remarkable phenomenon in the postwar American film scene, the organization—and Vogel's approach to programming, which gave the organization its energy—had historical precedents in Europe and on the North American continent. The ciné-club movement was underway in France by the early 1920s.¹ The first formally organized French ciné-club, C.A.S.A. (Club des amis du septième art), was formed in 1920, originally

as a discussion group, though it soon began to present private screenings to members. Club Français du cinéma was formed in late 1922 or early 1923 by critic Leon Moussinac “to defend filmmakers as artists . . . and to attack the restrictions of the commercial industry.”² One dimension of this agenda was an alternative film series. C.A.S.A. and Club Français du cinéma subsequently merged and began an extensive schedule of monthly public screenings of revivals of impressive but underappreciated earlier films and premieres of new films, including avant-garde work (Dudley Murphy and Fernand Leger’s *Ballet mécanique* [1924], for example), and political films rejected by commercial distributors or the censors (Eisenstein’s *Potemkin* [1925], for example)—precisely the types of film that were to become Cinema 16 staples. Ciné-club activity proliferated throughout France in the 1920s, and while the audience for ciné-club events remained limited—Richard Abel describes it as an elitist audience “of artists, intellectuals, cinéphiles and (to use an unflattering label from the period) ‘boisterous snobs’”³—the growing enthusiasm for a broader spectrum of cinema led to Germaine Dulac’s formation of the Federation Française des Ciné-Clubs in 1930, the first national film organization of its kind.⁴

The film society movement spread quickly throughout Europe, in some instances with considerable success. Most notably, perhaps, the London Film Society was established in 1925 so that the organizers could insist on “the principle of selection and serious study from the widest possible range of film material.”⁵ From the beginning, the London Film Society offered members programs of remarkable breadth, combining avant-garde films, scientific films and other types of documentaries, classic shorts and features, and commercial films of distinction from around the world—an eclectic format that lasted through fourteen seasons, until April 23, 1939.⁶ When the British Federation of Film Societies was re-formed after World War II, it had 46 members (down from before the war) and quickly grew to 267 member societies in 1955.⁷

In the Netherlands, Filmliga began presenting regular programs in 1927 (using a programming strategy much like Cinema 16’s), and supporting its activities with a journal, *Film Liga*, which published discussions about Filmliga programs. According to Tom Gunning, “The whole set-up of the Filmliga informed its audience that these screenings were not ephemeral viewings serving to pass the time” but, rather, “important and unique events, scheduled once a month like a cultural event, in contrast to the consumer friendly continual showings of commercial theaters.”⁸ In general, Filmliga presentations reflected the widespread assumption during the 1920s that both avant-garde film and what we now call documentary film offered alternatives to studio-bound commercial films and thus belonged together—an assumption that was at the heart of Vogel’s Cinema 16 programming.

On this continent, film society movements took a bit longer to form, but by 1936 the National Film Society of Canada was already in existence, promoting the formation of new film societies across Canada. According to Germaine Clinton, writing in 1955:

In Canada . . . the center of genuine interest in the film as art has always been in the film societies. Since the first world war, the visual education field has been constantly expanding and in the years between the wars the resulting growth in film sophistication came to flower in an active film society movement. Spread across thousands of miles of territory, often with hardly any supply of film, societies were started, grew, and prospered. In Edmonton, the film society grew out of the work of H. P. Brown at the University of Alberta; in Vancouver it was founded by a group of enthusiasts who ended up scouring the distributors of the world for unique films to look at.⁹

The Vancouver group seems to have been particularly successful; the Vancouver Film Society had a membership of two thousand at one point during the mid-1930s and showed “programs of great intrepidity.”¹⁰ Canadian film society activity was halted by World War II but resumed once the war was over. In December 1953, a film society division of the Canadian Film Institute was formed; in 1955, it became the Canadian Federation of Film Societies.

Perhaps because of the power and prestige of the Hollywood film industry, film society activity developed more slowly in the United States than in Europe and Canada. But before the film society movement developed momentum in the United States, interest in alternatives to commercial movie houses did produce a short-lived art house movement. The crucial figure here seems to have been New Yorker Symon Gould, who organized screenings for the newly founded Screen Guild and then began the nation’s first regular art film programming, in March 1926, at the Cameo Theater in New York City. These screenings, which focused on European and classic American features, were sponsored by the International Film Arts Guild. In 1929 Gould opened the Film Guild Cinema on Eighth Street, designed by Frederick Kiesler, who claimed it was “the first one-hundred percent cinema in the world.”¹¹ The inaugural screening at the Film Guild Cinema included two avant-garde shorts—*The Fall of the House of Usher* (James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, 1928) and *Hands* (Stella Simon, 1928)—and a Russian feature, *Two Days* (1927). The art theater movement spread thinly across the country during the late 1920s, then seems to have petered out during the 1930s. It was not until after World War II that a substantial American film society movement developed.¹² The leader of this movement—and, indeed, its central achievement—was Cinema 16.

During 1947, as the Vogels were developing the concept of Cinema 16 and getting their project under way, their efforts were inspired not only by their general awareness of European film societies (and by Vogel’s experience of film society screenings in his native Vienna in the 1930s), but also by several American film programs. The daily film presentations at the Museum of Modern Art, which had begun in 1939, were of particular importance. Indeed, Marcia Vogel remembers rushing to meet Amos at five o’clock screenings, and witnessing his growing realization that there might be a larger market for the classics and documentaries the museum was showing.

By the mid-thirties, the Museum of Modern Art—as a result of the efforts of the museum’s first director, Alfred H. Barr—was creating a library with a mandate to preserve and exhibit (and subsequently distribute) a broader range of films than was commercially viable in the United States. Iris Barry, one of the major figures in the London Film Society, was the MoMA Film Library’s first film curator.¹³ In 1936, the Museum of Modern Art Film Library began circulating films to colleges and museums nationwide and in 1937 created the first college credit course in film at an eastern university (Columbia), a course that included lectures by Alfred Hitchcock, Luis Buñuel, Joris Ivens, and others whose work and presence would be important at Cinema 16.¹⁴ Later on, once Cinema 16 was underway, Richard Griffith, then director of the museum’s film department, helped the Vogels in various ways. For example, Griffith got Vogel together with Robert Flaherty, who assisted in Cinema 16’s original membership drive.

Another set of programs that was important for the Vogels was the Art in Cinema screenings instigated by Richard Foster and Frank Stauffacher and presented, beginning in 1946, at the San Francisco Museum of Art. (After 1947 Stauffacher programmed

and ran Art in Cinema himself, with help from volunteers and later from his wife, Barbara Stauffacher [Solomon].) Art in Cinema specialized in avant-garde film. The first Art in Cinema series surveyed the European avant-garde film of the 1920s and 1930s, and then, having developed a historical context, introduced audiences to historical and contemporary American avant-garde work. As would be true of Cinema 16, Art in Cinema's success in attracting hundreds of enthusiasts to its screenings provided an audience for fledgling filmmakers like Harry Smith, Jordan Belson, and Stauffacher himself. As Belson said later, "If that outlet had not been there, there wouldn't have been any incentive to make films. Might as well paint."¹⁵ The success of Stauffacher's Art in Cinema programs in raising consciousness about alternative cinema can be measured not only by the fact that the series continued until the early 1950s, but also, perhaps, by the continued prominence of San Francisco as a center for avant-garde filmmaking during subsequent decades. Art in Cinema seems to have been the first set of programs—at least on this continent—to demonstrate that, taken together, the various forms of avant-garde filmmaking form a reasonably coherent, ongoing, alternative film history.

A final influence on the early moments of Cinema 16 occurred closer to home. Beginning in 1946, Maya Deren—filmmaker, critic, and apologist for an American independent cinema—began to show her films to audiences at the Provincetown Playhouse, the Greenwich Village home for new theater established by Susan Gaspell and Eugene O'Neill. Between February 18, 1946, and May 6, 1947, Deren screened her *Meshes of the Afternoon* (co-made with Alexander Hammid, 1943), *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (by Deren and Tally Beatty, 1945), and *At Land* (1944) to 3,243 paying customers, Amos and Marcia Vogel among them.¹⁶ Vogel remembers:

There was a *point* in my life when I saw Maya's films for the first time at one of those showings, and . . . it was a tremendous experience. I'll never forget it. . . . I was very impressed with the way she handled the whole thing. It didn't seem to be a fly-by-night operation. Money was not the primary concern obviously. She made it very clear in her program notes . . . that you had to be silent during the films, and I think it said something about late-comers not being admitted. . . . It was very well organized. The projection worked fine; the films looked good, in addition to being good films. I realized that there was something there that to me was far more important than the so-called "best" Hollywood films.¹⁷

Deren's importance for the Vogels is suggested by the fact that the earliest Cinema 16 presentations were held at the Provincetown Playhouse; and Deren was later to be involved with Cinema 16 as the founder of the Creative Film Foundation, a collaboration with Cinema 16 that from 1956 to 1961 presented annual awards to independent filmmakers.

The Formation of Cinema 16

Cinema 16 was incorporated in November 1947. The signatories on the Certificate of Incorporation were Amos and Marcia Vogel, Robert Delson (a civil-liberties lawyer who remained Cinema 16's lawyer for years), David Diener (Marcia Vogel's brother), Rene and Ralph Avery (close friends), and Samuel Vogel (Vogel's father). On the Certificate of Incorporation, the three nonprofit purposes of the corporation were defined:

- (a) To promote, encourage, distribute and sponsor public exhibition of documentary, sociological, educational, scientific and experimental motion pictures, and to further the appreciation of the motion picture as an art and as a social force.
- (b) To advance the science and technique of the production and distribution of documentary, sociological, educational, scientific and experimental motion pictures; to further the production of such films by amateurs; and to encourage the production of feature-length film classics.
- (c) To foster interest in and to promote the establishment of motion picture theaters in the principal cities of the United States for the public exhibition of documentary, sociological, educational, scientific and experimental motion pictures.

These goals were detailed in the broadside, "Statement of Purposes" (Ill. 1), which was presented to members and potential members beginning in 1948.

It is evident in the language of the "Statement of Purposes" that Vogel did not see his project as marginal in any way; his goal was to service a "vast potential audience." This determination to provide a public service in the broadest sense had instigated Vogel's attempt to build a community of citizens who would support Cinema 16 not with donations—Cinema 16 was to be self-supporting and entirely independent—but by their presence as members and by their general enthusiasm for the film society's activities. Robert Flaherty agreed to serve as chair of the Committee of Sponsors, and his letter to prospective sponsors (see p. 101) resulted in the list of names in the column on the left edge of the statement—a list that includes such movers and shakers of the New York cultural scene as W. H. Auden, Leonard Bernstein, Van Wyck Brooks, Eddie Cantor, John Dos Passos, Oscar Hammerstein II, John Huston, Yehudi Menuhin, Gilbert Seldes, and Eli Willis, none of whom was identified with avant-garde or documentary film. In recent years organizations devoted to avant-garde exhibition, and even to documentary exhibition, seem to see their precarious tenure on the periphery of cultural life as a necessary evil, and what communities they *are* able to develop are often made up of people who accept, sometimes even fetishize, social marginalization. Vogel had a level of faith in his project that led him, from the outset, to do whatever he could to situate Cinema 16 within the mainstream of New York City cultural life. His success in doing so is evident not simply in the Committee of Sponsors, but in the many accomplished thinkers, writers, and artists who became members of the film society.

However, despite Vogel's success in developing a sense of community around his activities, Cinema 16 was forced to evolve, and quickly, in order to have any hope of accomplishing its goals. While the Vogels understood enough about what they were doing to become a corporation, their business acumen was limited. Cinema 16's first screening was successful well beyond their expectations. Vogel remembers, "It was a huge, smashing, immediate success. We had to repeat this first program for *sixteen* evenings!" (Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations by Amos Vogel, Marcia Vogel, and Jack Goelman are from the three interviews that follow this introduction.) As a result, he and Marcia invested the thousand dollars they had received as wedding presents in the second program, which was turned into a disaster by a blizzard: "Four people showed up at the theater: myself, Marcia, the projectionist, and some crazy person who came through the snow." Broke and befuddled about what to do next, the Vogels realized that all was not lost only when Samuel Vogel explained to his son and daughter-in-law how to use credit to keep a business viable during lean times.

The combination of the need to put Cinema 16 on a reasonably stable financial footing—stable enough to allow the Vogels to devote themselves full-time to the project—

Amos Vogel
Executive Secretary

Committee
of Sponsors:

Robert J. Flaherty
Chairman

Erica Anderson
Kenneth Anger
W. H. Auden
Paul Ballard
Jean Benoit-Levy
Leonard Bernstein
A. A. Brill
Van Wyck Brooks
Henry Seidel Canby
Eddie Cantor
Theodore R. Conant
Jo Davidson
Robert Delson
John Dos Passos
Ernestine Evans
David Flaherty
Waldo Frank
John Gassner
Robert Gessner
John Grierson
Richard Griffith
John Gunther
Oscar Hammerstein, II
Natalie Hays Hammond
Curtis Harrington
Walter E. Harris
Robert P. Heller
Brya J. Hovde
Elizabeth Hudson
John Huston
Horace M. Kallen
Arthur Knight
Dr. Siegfried Kracauer
Albert Lewin
Roy Lockwood
Mary Lossy
Len Lye
Arthur L. Mayer
Allan McNab
Yehudi Menuhin
Gjon Mili
Pierre Montaux
Seymour Peck
Erwin Piscator
Carl Pryor, Jr.
Phillip Rahv
Man Ray
C. R. Reagan
Jean Renoir
Elmer Rice
Hans Richter
Paul Rotha
Juliet Barrett Rublee
Edward R. Sammis
Gilbert Seldes
Elie Siegmeister
Mark Starr
Frank Stauffacher
Roy E. Stryker
Deems Taylor
Francis Thompson
Parker Tyler
Margaret Vallant
Helen Van Dongen
Gordon R. Washburn
Ell Willis
Archer Winston
Basil Wright

CINEMA 16 is a cultural, non-profit organization devoted to the presentation of outstanding 16mm documentary, educational, scientific and experimental films.

CINEMA 16 endeavors to serve a double purpose. By its screening of superior and avant-garde films, it will contribute to the growing appreciation of the film as one of the most powerful art forms. By its screening of documentary as well as scientific and educational pictures, it will provide its audience with a more mature realization of the nature of this world and of its manifold problems.

The complexities of industrial society, the contraction of the world into an interdependent whole, the advance of modern science and technique impel modern man toward greater knowledge and a more profound understanding of his world.

It is to the credit of the documentary film makers that they have attempted to provide this knowledge and understanding. Together with the scientific, educational and experimental film producers, they have given us a comprehensive and multi-colored interpretation of life. Unadorned and free of Hollywood tinsel, they have recreated the stark reality, the poignancy, the brutality of life. By their cinematic dissemination of knowledge about other cultures and peoples, as well as topical social problems, they have aimed at greater international and interracial understanding and tolerance.

Yet their creations are gathering dust on film library shelves, where a vast potential audience—numbering in the millions—can never see them. Shall this audience continue unaware of these hundreds of thought-provoking, artistically satisfying and socially purposeful films?

It is the aim of CINEMA 16 to bring together this audience and these films. CINEMA 16 will thereby advance the appreciation of the motion picture not merely as an art, but as a powerful social force.

SPECIFICALLY:

1. CINEMA 16 will screen at regular intervals outstanding documentary, factual and sociological films. It will present the classics of a Flaherty, Grierson, Ivens and Cavalcanti as well as newest releases dealing with the life of man, be he a Navajo Indian, a Southern sharecropper, a Trappist monk or a "displaced" human being.

2. CINEMA 16 will screen superior educational and scientific films, hitherto made use of only by schools and the medical profession. It will show films dealing with psychology and psychiatry, biology and chemistry, art appreciation and literature. It will present newest releases in micro-photography as well as such classics as Professor Pavlov's film on conditioned reflexes.

3. CINEMA 16 will screen the best in experimental and avant-garde films. It will show expressionist, surrealist and abstract films, presenting such pioneers as Fernand Leger, Man Ray, Watson-Webber, Maya Deren.

4. CINEMA 16 will encourage the production of new amateur and professional documentary and experimental films. First, it will provide an audience for new releases of special interest by both exhibition and distribution. Secondly, by sponsoring film contests, it will provide recognition to individual film producers. Thirdly, by purchases and rentals of prints, by establishing regular booking circuits in various cities for films of this type, it will provide funds for amateur and professional producers to help them carry on their work.

5. CINEMA 16 will invite well-known directors, producers and cinematographers to lecture before its audiences and to participate with them in forums on motion picture appreciation and technique.

6. CINEMA 16 will at all times encourage the presentation of foreign masterpieces of the documentary and experimental screen. The American public must be made aware of the truly international aspects of the fact and art film movement.

7. The final goal of CINEMA 16 is the creation of permanent "CINEMA 16" movie houses in the major cities of the nation, in which the documentary and experimental film will for the first time find a proud home of its own. The existence of such theatres in England and France testifies to the feasibility of this plan.

CINEMA 16 is determined to bridge the gap which exists between documentary film production and the people. By bringing purposeful films to the general public, film groups, labor unions and schools, CINEMA 16 will contribute to a greater realization of the problems facing man in the atomic age.

Statement of Purposes:

cinema 16

Incorporated as a non-profit cultural society under the educational laws of the State of New York
59 park avenue, new york 16, n. y.

Illustration 1. The Cinema 16 "Statement of Purposes."



Illustration 2. A portion of the audience at the Hunter Playhouse, where Cinema 16 presented programs during the spring and fall of 1948.

and the New York City and New York State censorship regulations in place in the late 1940s necessitated a decision to make Cinema 16 a membership film society. By offering screenings exclusively to members, the Vogels could in effect charge admission to all their events in advance (once Cinema 16 was a membership society, tickets to individual events could no longer be made available), which allowed them not only to stay solvent, but also to be more creative with programming.

Also, membership societies could not be the victims of prior censorship. In my interview with him, Vogel describes some of the more absurd results of the censorship system during the months before Cinema 16 became a membership society, when any film shown to the public had to be passed on by the Censorship Board. Members of a film society, however, could see a much broader range of film activity than could the general public, since the films shown at membership societies were only seen by the Censorship Board in the unlikely event that a member complained to the board that a film was obscene. Indeed, it seems clear now that one of the film society's central lures was this access to what would have seemed outrageous in conventional movie houses—for example, Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947), a courageously explicit psychodrama about a young homosexual's sadomasochistic fantasies, which Cinema 16 showed in 1952 and again in 1953, and Stan Brakhage's *Loving* (1957), a romantic portrait of lovers Carolee Schneemann and James Tenney, shown in 1958.

Whatever the precise set of urges that brought members to Cinema 16 screenings, the film society's membership grew quickly, from several hundred in 1947 to seven thousand in the early 1950s.

Programming at Cinema 16

Vogel's announced commitment to the broadest spectrum of cinema he could assemble was enacted in his programming from the beginning. Of course, conventional commercial movie houses in the 1940s also presented audiences with a variety of films—a newsreel, a cartoon, a feature narrative—but the goal of this highly conventionalized and regularized “variety” was always the same: simple entertainment with a touch of current events awareness. Vogel's primary goal was not entertainment, but pleasurable, exciting education: “A film society functions as a viable entity only if it both expresses and satisfactorily fulfills an existing need: to provide a forum and showcase for an increased awareness and appreciation of film as a medium of art, information, and education.”¹⁸

Vogel's focus on education informs his “Statement of Purposes.” Vogel seems always to have assumed that Cinema 16 screenings would include both avant-garde film and various forms of documentary, but his primary emphasis, throughout the statement, is on documentary. Avant-garde film might be educational in the general sense that it reveals to audiences the wide variety of forms cinematic expression makes possible, but the full range of documentary, scientific, and educational films offers the viewer “greater knowledge and a more profound understanding of his world,” and “greater international and interracial understanding and tolerance.” In order to develop a Cinema 16 community, Vogel recognized that he needed to emphasize those aspects of his activities that could be understood by people with no particular commitment to cinematic experiment or to avant-garde film. Having established Cinema 16's educational mission, however, Vogel quickly developed a programming practice that went far beyond conventional assumptions about education through film.

Cinema 16 presented what Vogel judged the most interesting, informative, and challenging instances of those many forms of film produced in North America and abroad that were not available to general audiences in commercial theaters, or anywhere else. Nearly every type of film other than first-run, big-studio Hollywood features and newsreels was regularly exhibited. As often as feasible, screenings at Cinema 16 were premieres. In fact, Cinema 16 was one of the first, if not *the* first, American exhibitor to present the work of Robert Breer, John Cassavetes, Shirley Clarke, Bruce Conner, Joseph Cornell, Brian DePalma, Georges Franju, Robert Gardner, John Hubley, Alexander Kluge, Jan Lenica, Richard Lester, Norman McLaren, Jonas Mekas, Nagisa Oshima, Yasujiro Ozu, Sidney Peterson, Roman Polanski, Alain Resnais, Tony Richardson, Jacques Rivette, Lionel Rogosin, Carlos Saura, Arne Sucksdorff, Francois Truffaut, Stan Vanderbeek, Melvin Van Peebles, Agnes Varda, and Peter Weiss. And while a good bit more research will be necessary before we can be entirely sure which Cinema 16 screenings were premieres, it seems likely that Cinema 16 was responsible for more American premieres of experimental and educational films than was any other organization.

Vogel's concern with using film to enlighten, rather than simply to entertain, was evident in the programming itself, and in Vogel's commitment to helping audiences develop contexts for the films he presented. Vogel's programming principles were clear from the beginning. Most obviously, he was committed to variety. Cinema 16's first program included *Lamentations* (1943), a dance film with Martha Graham; *Monkey into Man* (1938), a documentary on primate behavior, directed by Stuart Legg and supervised by Julian Huxley and S. Zuckerman; *The Potted Psalm* (1946), James Broughton and Sidney Peterson's avant-garde psychodrama; and two animations—*Boundarylines* (1945), Philip Stapp's polemical cartoon on boundaries between people, and *Glens Falls Sequence* (1946), an abstract work by Douglas Crockwell, made by painting designs on several movable layers of glass. The second program included *The Feeling of Rejection* (1947), a psychological study of the effects of childhood emotional ties on the behavior of adults; *Five Abstract Film Exercises* (1941–1944), abstract animations by John and James Whitney; *And So They Live* (1940), John Ferno's documentary on the lives of an Appalachian family; and *Hen Hop* (1945) and *Five for Four* (1945), two animations by Norman McLaren made by painting and scratching directly on film, frame by frame.¹⁹

As varied as Vogel's first two programs were, his selections reveal certain general tendencies. For one thing, all the films in both programs can be seen as supplying evidence about what is usually termed individual personal expression. From the very beginning, Vogel was determined to demonstrate that there is an alternative to industry-made cinema, an alternative that is in touch with the practical and spiritual lives of individuals, whether these lives are represented by committed documentarians or expressed in abstract or psychodramatic imagery. For Vogel, film going was more than a process of experiencing, over and over, the particular codes of genre film, or of worshipping the physical beauty or the dramatic ability of the stars; it was a means of getting in touch with the immense and fascinating variety in the ways people live and with the myriad ways in which individuals express their inner struggles. There was also an economic dimension to Vogel's selections. It is most obvious in *And So They Live*, in Ferno's respect for the dignity of the impoverished Appalachians he documents, but it is also implicit in the relatively inexpensive level of production used in making all the films. One of the aspects of 16 mm that particularly interested Vogel—it helps to account for the focus on 16 mm reflected in Cinema 16's name—was its potential for democratizing the cinematic representation of individuals and social life, and for expressing the problematic realities of class. Of course, 16 mm cameras and film weren't cheap, but from Vogel's point of view, the smaller gauge was at least a step in the right direction.

Those who attended Cinema 16's opening shows could not have left, as most viewers leave commercial films, with the film adventure complete and clear and their attitudes reconfirmed. As Vogel and his collaborators well knew, the puzzling films on the program—*The Potted Psalm*, most obviously (almost half the two-page program note for the opening screening was devoted to the Broughton/Peterson film: see pp. 88–89)—and the troubling social realities demonstrated in *And So They Live* and *The Feeling of Rejection* can only have undercut whatever expectations of narrative and emotional resolution viewers had brought with them from their more conventional film experiences.

Once Cinema 16 had become an established film presenter, specific programs were designed well in advance. Working with assistant Jack Goelman (and often with Marcia Vogel's advice), Vogel would preview films and decide which films should be

screened during each coming year's programs. At first, Vogel needed to search out films in catalogues and by word of mouth. But as Cinema 16's reputation grew, filmmakers sought Vogel out.²⁰ In Cinema 16's later years, Vogel regularly attended European film festivals, searching for films to show in New York. "When we were ready to do the programs," Goelman remembers, "we used a system of index cards. We would lay a deck of cards on the table and play around with them. The problems sometimes started *after* we saw the films and knew we wanted to show them. What is a program? What six films would go together? What about the order of the six? Why would a certain film open a program? Why would a certain film close it? It was fascinating because it was all theoretical."

To some degree, the answer to the question of how to arrange the films within an individual program, and the larger issue of how to design a season-long series of programs, was a function of Vogel's (and Goelman's) politics. Vogel had considered himself a political person, a leftist, long before he came to the United States. During the years before he fled Austria, he had planned to join a kibbutz in what is now Israel, "to build a communal settlement where nobody would own land or private property, and all income would be shared—a real participatory democracy." As the events of the 1930s transpired, Vogel found it impossible to get to Israel, first because of bureaucratic and political difficulties, and later on because he found Israel's movement in the direction of a Jewish state, rather than a binational Arab-Jewish state, ideologically unacceptable.

Once Vogel was established in New York, his desire to function as a political person expressed itself through Cinema 16. Of course, implicitly, the very existence of Cinema 16 functioned as a politicized critique of commercial exhibition—of its predictable subject matter and format and of its conservative tendencies. A more fundamental dimension of Cinema 16's politics, however, was implicit from the beginning, in Vogel's (and later Vogel's and Goelman's) arrangement of the films he chose for individual programs. While some programs or parts of programs revealed particular political positions on specific issues, individual programs and seasonal series were usually structured as if each were a meta-film meant to confront the audience in a manner reminiscent of Sergei Eisenstein's dialectic editing. For Eisenstein, arranging successive shots so that their graphic and conceptual collisions would instigate viewer engagement was a means of providing cinematic interventions into the status quo reflected by and ministered to by traditional entertainment film, and of confirming and expanding cultural revolution. Similarly, at Cinema 16 presentations, one form of film collided with another in such a way as to create maximum thought—and perhaps action—on the part of the audience, not simply about individual films but about film itself and about the social and political implications of its conventional (or unconventional) uses. This similarity to Eisensteinian dialectic is more than accidental; Vogel and Goelman were great admirers of the Russian filmmaker.

Of course, the dialectic within individual programs was extended by the arrangement of each season's set of programs into a series. Indeed, even when Cinema 16 began to present programs organized around very specific topics, the comparative regularity of these programs contributed to the meta-dialectic that characterized the overall history of the film society's offerings. Similarly, the presentation, from time to time, of a classic feature, rather than a grouping of several shorter works, eliminated dialectic on one level merely to enhance it on another.

While dialectically “edited” monthly presentations remained Cinema 16’s mainstay until the film society’s final years, by the early 1950s a second form of programming was becoming increasingly significant, what Cinema 16 program announcements called “Special Events.” The first special event occurred during the fall 1948 season: a special holiday evening with Norman McLaren. But by 1952 special events were being announced in brochures as a separate listing from the regularly scheduled, dialectically arranged programs. Vogel’s interest in hosting special events in addition to his regular programming was a function of a number of concerns. For one thing, while Cinema 16 was regularly presenting films that could be counted on to surprise or offend the sensibilities of many audience members, Vogel was determined to program films likely to go so far beyond the limits of many members’ tastes that special screenings, apart from the regular presentations, seemed called for.

The fall 1951 brochure announced several upcoming special events to be presented at the Central Needle Trades Auditorium only (by this time regular programs were presented at both the Central Needle Trades Auditorium and at the Paris Theater uptown). They included *Childbirth-Normal Delivery* and other medical and surgical films; a breakthrough avant-garde film, Kenneth Anger’s *Fireworks* (1947); and an unusually visceral documentary, Georges Franju’s *Blood of the Beasts* (*Le sang des bêtes*, 1949). The April 1952 program notes explained that *Fireworks* and *Blood of the Beasts* “are, in our opinion, among the most important short films made in the last few years. *Fireworks* is a cinematic recreation of a nightmare and is shocking both in its frankness and in its scenes of physical violence. *The Blood of the Beasts*, unqualifiedly a masterpiece, takes us inside the French slaughterhouses.” In later years, other controversial films—*Witchcraft Through the Ages* (Benjamin Christensen, 1922), for example, and *The Eternal Jew* (a Nazi propaganda film by Franz Hippler, 1940)—were shown as special events.

The separate special-events scheduling also allowed Vogel the leeway to arrange events that didn’t fit comfortably within the regular schedule. From time to time, Cinema 16 hosted distinguished commercial directors at one-time special evenings: Hitchcock, for instance, Fred Zinnemann, Stanley Kramer, Robert Wise, and King Vidor (when Vidor was unable to attend a scheduled screening of *Hallelujah* [1929], he sent a tape for Vogel to play for the audience—the transcript of the tape is reproduced on pp. 250–53). In other instances, the film society presented symposia on particular topics of interest to members. The fall 1953 schedule announced a symposium called “Poetry and the Film” for October 28, with a panel of distinguished guests: Maya Deren, Willard Maas, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, and Parker Tyler. “Are You Really Against Censorship?” was scheduled for February 25, 1959, with special guest Ephraim London, the civil-liberties lawyer who had argued the case of Roberto Rossellini’s *The Miracle* (1948) before the courts.

The special events schedule also allowed Vogel to program long films more often, including revivals of classic features, such as Erich von Stroheim’s *Greed* (1923), Vidor’s *The Crowd* (1928), Todd Browning’s *Freaks* (1932), Mervyn LeRoy’s *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), and Orson Welles’s *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), and unusual features from around the world, for example, *Chandra Lekha* (directed by S. S. Vasan, 1953), “India’s first million dollar musical,” and *Latuko* (directed by Edgar McQueeny, 1952), a feature-length Museum of Natural History anthropological documentary banned by the censors in its entirety because of the nudity of the aborigines. Other



Illustration 3. A still from Georges Franju's *The Blood of the Beasts* (1949), which had its American premiere at Cinema 16.

special events were evenings of short films chosen thematically. "Voyages into the Subconscious" (presented April 21, 1954) included Peterson's *The Lead Shoes* (1940), Broughton's *Mother's Day* (1948), Willard Maas's *Geography of the Body* (1943), Crockwell's *Glens Falls Sequence*, and Curtis Harrington's *On the Edge* (1949); "The Search for Love" (April 26, 27, 1955) included Harrington's *Fragment of Seeking* (1946), Robert Anderson's *The Feeling of Hostility* (1947), Broughton's *Four in the Afternoon* (1951), Maas and Ben Moore's *The Mechanics of Love* (1955), and Gregory Markopoulos's *Psyche* (1947). The annual winners of the Creative Film Awards and the Robert J. Flaherty Awards (both discussed later) were also presented as special events.

In Cinema 16's final years, the distinction between regular offerings and special events became increasingly blurred. Features were more frequently included in the regular series, as were programs of short films arranged thematically; there were programs titled "First Films," for example, as well as programs called "Love in the City" and "Trance, Ritual and Hypnosis," and several programs of prize-winning films from other countries. Until the end, however, Vogel remained committed to the widest possible spectrum of film.

From the beginning, Cinema 16 screenings were accompanied by program notes, in many cases supplied by such distinguished critics and scholars as William K. Everson, Richard Griffith, Arthur Knight, Siegfried Kracauer, and Parker Tyler. These notes provided historical background and raised theoretical issues. In the early 1950s, Vogel considered expanding his educational mission to include the publication of important essays on film. And though only one essay was published by the film society—

Parker Tyler's discussion of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), Cinema 16 Pamphlet Number 1 (see p. 175–83), Cinema 16 maintained its commitment to serious program notes throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Of course, this commitment to education was also evident in the film society's sponsorship of special events such as the symposium "Poetry and the Film" and the presentation "Are You Really Against Censorship."

If the regularity of commercial film exhibition from the 1940s through the 1950s can be said to reflect American society in one of its more conservative periods (the specters of the House Un-American Activities Committee and the McCarthy hearings hover over much of the period during which Cinema 16 was active), Vogel's alternative, firmly grounded in the assumption that we need to know more about the world and to learn to function as global citizens, was a way of advocating change and—at least in theory—of enhancing his audience's capacity to make necessary social and political improvements. In principle, Vogel embraced many economic levels of film production, as well as all nationalities; each Cinema 16 program and seasonal series functioned as a microcosm of this idea. This comparatively international approach had obvious political implications, especially during a period when anything outside mainstream American culture seemed alien, even subversive, to large numbers of Americans.

Reception

One of Vogel's most remarkable accomplishments at Cinema 16 was to sustain his programming dialectic, year after year, with a very large audience in a more-or-less public arena. In fact, it seems very doubtful that in any other instance in the history of film—certainly in American film history—such large audiences have regularly attended film programs of such diversity. Of course, the Cinema 16 audience was not a cross section of the United States, or even of New York City, though a wide variety of people attended Cinema 16 screenings. People could not come in off the street and attend a program unless they became members, and while a year's membership was not expensive, it was well beyond what some could pay. Originally a \$10 fee admitted a member to eight monthly screenings and to infrequent special events; the price of membership gradually rose—as did the number of events it paid for—to a top rate of \$16.50 in 1960–1961 (this in an era when admission to a neighborhood commercial movie house ranged upward from 25 cents). The one thing we do know about this audience is that its members read the Sunday *New York Times*; annual programs were announced in a *Times* ad that generated the majority of membership requests.

At various times, Vogel distributed questionnaires in order to learn something about the Cinema 16 membership. A program note for the fall of 1953 announced the results of that season's questionnaires: 55 percent of those responding were between twenty-one and thirty years old, 23 percent between thirty-one and forty, 18 percent over forty, 4 percent under twenty; 75 percent of those responding were college graduates; 41 percent were "professionals or professionally employed"; 14 percent were in business, 8 percent had clerical or sales jobs, 17 percent worked in the arts, advertising, or publicity, 6 percent were skilled workers, 5 percent were housewives. The questionnaires—as well as viewer response during and after screenings—also revealed that Vogel's audience had varied ideas of what kinds of programming Cinema 16 should be doing.

The April 1951 questionnaire results indicate that while 31 percent of members responding were happy with the current balance between documentary and experimental films, 42 percent wanted Vogel to show more documentaries and fewer experimental films, and another 15 percent wanted fewer documentaries and more experimental films.

While such feedback interested Vogel (and, presumably, Cinema 16 members; many of the results were included in the monthly program notes), he was not committed to changing his programming as a result of his audiences' preferences. Indeed, his mission as programmer frequently required him to show films he knew audiences would have problems with; and one can only assume that whatever their announced feelings about specific films or kinds of film, Cinema 16 members were generally intrigued by their very *inability* to control what Vogel would show them, by their knowledge that Vogel was committed to the idea of using film—in a phrase he was later to employ as the title of a book—as a subversive art. Even if audience members didn't enjoy particular films, they knew that they were privileged to see films almost no one else got to see. Indeed, many of the films Vogel showed are no longer in distribution; one can presume that without Vogel, we have lost access to much interesting work. Of course, Vogel chose to show many films that look unimpressive today. But his dialectical programming offered audiences an opportunity to test the limits of their taste and their understanding in what amounted to a community forum.

In recent years, film audiences have become very specialized. Opportunities for people to be confronted with types of film they would not consciously pay to see are very few. But, from all accounts, large segments of the Cinema 16 audience were regularly entertained, outraged, and bored by turns; and they could be counted on to vociferously demonstrate their approval or disapproval during and after screenings. Carmen D'Avino remembers that the Cinema 16 audience was "marvelous": "They'd boo; they'd walk out; they'd scream for joy. It was a volatile and beautiful audience to present anything to. I was thrilled to have work shown at Cinema 16" (see "Conversation with Carmen D'Avino" on pp. 278–80). Of course, by all accounts, D'Avino was a favorite of the Cinema 16 membership, which could affect filmmakers in more negative ways. Ken Jacobs, who attended as many Cinema 16 screenings as he could afford—"Cinema 16 was very cheap, but I was *that* broke"—recalls:

I wasn't always so happy with the Cinema 16 audience. I saw *The Wonder Ring* [1959, by Stan Brakhage] on a program about the Third Avenue El. The other two movies about the El were terrible, and then Brakhage's gem comes on. And the audience (which I saw mostly as people looking to pilfer the films, use them in advertising) hated it, talked during it, *booed* it! Usually I just stared at the audience, but this time I got into a verbal fight with them. At the time, I was not only hotheaded, I could be physical—though I don't think it happened in that instance.²¹

Cinema 16 was, above all, a large public forum in which individuals could regularly measure their personal sensibilities against those of many other individuals. The dialectical premise of Vogel's programming, in other words, extended into the audience.

Because Cinema 16 was a membership film society that presented programs generally made up of a variety of kinds of short films that were not available elsewhere, press coverage of the films shown at Cinema 16 was limited. The film society had a friend in Archer Winsten, who reviewed the first program for the *New York Post* (predicting that if Cinema 16 can find more films like the "masterpiece" *Monkey into Man*,

“its success will be sensational”) and continued to support the film society until its demise (see Winsten’s “Rages and Outrages” column from March 11, 1963). But generally, the reviews that Vogel’s efforts were able to generate were little more than announcements of a given season’s upcoming programs.

In at least one instance, however, Cinema 16 came under a somewhat more sustained attack. Writing for *Esquire*, Dwight Macdonald (see pp. 398–404) argued that regardless of Vogel’s impassioned claims to the contrary, the “art films” presented at Cinema 16 were simply not “aesthetically enjoyable”—and therefore not really art at all: “From Griffith to Antonioni, all the great films—with only a few exceptions, such as Cocteau’s *Blood of a Poet* [1930] and Vigo’s *Zero de conduite* [1933]—have been aimed directly at the box office.” Macdonald wonders “just who its [Cinema 16’s] four thousand devotees are. Masochists? Psychiatric social workers on a busman’s holiday? Whoever they are, they have taken a lot of punishment.” Vogel’s response, in a letter printed in the subsequent issue of *Esquire* (see pp. 404–5), attacks Macdonald for his “defense of the commercial cinema”: “Art and experimentation . . . are only incidentally ‘entertaining’ and we have never claimed to exist for the sake of entertaining our members; we leave this to the neighborhood houses.” Aside from this minor public skirmish with Macdonald, however, Vogel received rather minimal press response, considering the longevity and the ambition of Cinema 16. Indeed, as my interview with him reveals, Vogel continues to be haunted by the question of what might have happened had there been more response from the press.



Illustration 4. The packed house at the Hitchcock event, March 28, 1956, at the Central Needle Trades Auditorium (the walls of which had been decorated in the 1930s by WPA artists).

Cinema 16 as Distributor

While the presentation of varied programs of difficult-to-see films was the central activity of Cinema 16 from 1947 until 1963, a number of other activities were instituted by the film society. By far the most significant of these was Vogel's entry into film distribution. Individual titles of films available from Cinema 16 began to be listed in program notes at the beginning of 1948. In general, the types of films Vogel chose to distribute tended to echo the types of films he exhibited at Cinema 16; but because the distribution of most forms of avant-garde cinema was less developed than the distribution of documentaries or of educational shorts, Vogel increasingly committed himself where he could make the most substantial contribution. The first films distributed by Cinema 16 were Leonard Stark's *This Day* (1947), "a sensitive film poem on the horror and futility of war"; animator Francis Lee's *1941* (1941), in which "violent color, swiftly changing compositions and a brilliant musical score portray the impact of war [in this case, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor] on the artist"; and Lee's *The Idyll* (1948), another abstract animation; Sara Kathryn Arledge's *Introspection* (1947?), "a series of bold experiments in film-dance, fundamentally different from stage choreography"; and Hy Hirsh and Sidney Peterson's *Horror Dream* (1947), "a choreographic interpretation of a dancer's anxiety before starting her theater routine. Choreography by Marian Van Tuyl, accompanied by John Cage's sophisticated 'noise' music." Even in these early avant-garde offerings, Vogel's dual commitment to formal experiment and social awareness is obvious.

By 1951 Cinema 16 was publishing a foldout brochure entitled "20 Experimental/Rental Films from Cinema 16." While some of the films Vogel chose to distribute are no longer widely known (several are no longer in distribution), others were to become landmarks in the postwar explosion of avant-garde filmmaking. Cinema 16's first catalogue listed Lee's *Le Bijou* (1947), *1941*, and *The Idyll*; Broughton and Peterson's *The Potted Psalm*; Peterson's *The Cage* (1947) and *Horror Dream*; the Whitney brothers' *3 Abstract Film Exercises* and *Film Exercises No. 4 & 5* (1943–1945); Gregory Markopoulos's *Psyche*, *Lysis*, and *Charmides* (all 1948); Stark's *This Day*; Andre Michel's *La Rose et la Reseda* (1945; shown at Cinema 16 in an English version as *The Rose and the Mignonette*); Arledge's *Introspection*; Norman McLaren's *Fiddle De Dee* (1947); Maas's *Geography of the Body*; Jordan Belson's *Improvisation No. 1* (1948); Crockwell's *Glens Falls Sequence*; Emlen Etting's *Poem 8* (1933); and Hugo Latletin's *Color Designs No. 1*. The first catalogue was expanded by the Winter 1951 Supplement, which listed thirty-one films, including Anger's *Fireworks*, Broughton's *Four in the Afternoon* and *Loony Tom, the Happy Lover* (1951), and Peterson's *The Lead Shoes*, *The Petrified Dog* (1948), and *Mr. Frenhofer and the Minotaur* (1949), as well as several documentaries—Paul Rotha's *Shipyards* (1935), the U.S. government's *The Atom Strikes* (1946), and the time-lapse film *Power of Plants* by Paul F. Moss and Thelma Schnee.

The second catalogue, also a brochure (entitled "CINEMA 16 Poetic Surrealist Abstract Experimental Films"), included forty-eight listings (Broughton's *Mother's Day* [1949] and Franju's *Blood of the Beasts* among them). The third catalogue, published in spring 1956, was a twenty-one-page booklet entitled "A Catalogue of the Experimental Cinema"; it included ninety-nine separate listings. The final catalogue, published in 1963, presented forty-seven pages of listings of mostly avant-garde films (including a good many experimental animations), several documentaries, and a number of American and European classics: Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959), Chaplin's *Easy Street* (1917)

and *The Immigrant* (1917)—more than two hundred films by more than a hundred filmmakers. The films were rented by other film societies, by art museums, colleges, religious and cultural organizations, libraries, medical schools, and a variety of other groups.

An examination of Vogel's records reveals the growth of a network of venues and individuals that exhibited alternative forms of cinema. In the early years of the film society's distribution efforts, specific renters are listed on the statements Vogel sent to filmmakers. By the end of 1957, however, the statements indicate only the location of the renting organization. The successive statements chart the trajectory of popularity for particular films. Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks*, for example, was rented three times at the end of 1951 (by a Mr. Sanft in New York City, by the Illinois Institute of Technology, and by Raymond Rohauer for the Coronet Theater in Hollywood); six times in 1952 (three times by Rohauer, by Christopher Bishop in Connecticut, by a Mr. Olkinetzki in Oklahoma, and by an unnamed New Yorker); eighteen times in 1953 (four times by the Society for Cinema Arts in California, by a Dr. Semans in Atlanta, by the U.S. Naval Hospital in Portsmouth, Virginia; by Antioch College, the University of Chicago, the University of Pennsylvania, Middlebury College, and the University of Wisconsin; twice by Jonas Mekas, by the Peninsula Film Society [California], the Long Beach Film Society [New York], the Wilmington Film Society [North Carolina], and by unnamed individuals in New York City and Highland Park, Illinois); six times in 1953 (by Western Reserve University, by Cinema 53 in Bellingham, Washington, by the Film Society of Denver, by the Lee Memorial Journalism Foundation in Lexington, Virginia, by Colonial Williamsburg, and by William Dalzell in Pittsburgh); eight times in 1954 (by the A. I. Dupont Institute in Wilmington, Delaware, by Contemporary Films in New York City, by J. K. Sours at the University of Wichita, by C. B. MacKirahan at the Lake Placid Public School in Lake Placid, New York, by the Independent Filmmakers Association, by the University of Alaska, by Mrs. J. Kummer of Midland, Michigan, and by Mr. C. Grohe in Palo Alto, California); seven times in 1956; ten times in 1957; twenty-one times in 1958; sixteen times in 1959; and twenty-seven times in 1960. *Fireworks* rented for \$15 a screening, though from time to time, Vogel would negotiate a special reduced rate of \$12.75 or \$13.50; a second screening cost an additional \$7.50. Anger received 50 percent of the total rentals. Of course, one can only wonder how some of the renters—the U.S. Naval Hospital, Colonial Williamsburg, the Dupont Institute, Stock Shots to Order in New York (1957)—used Anger's remarkably candid film.

When Cinema 16 ceased distributing films in 1963, Vogel made an arrangement with Barney Rosset at Grove Press. In keeping with Vogel's previous contractual arrangements, filmmakers were offered exclusive contracts with Grove; if they wanted to distribute their work cooperatively, they would be on their own. While some Cinema 16 filmmakers went with Grove, many others decided to take their chances elsewhere.²²

Cinema 16 and the New American Cinema

While Cinema 16 quickly became the leading distributor of avant-garde film in North America, its methods of operation differed from those of the most important present-day North American distributors of such films (Canyon Cinema in San Francisco, the Film-makers' Cooperative in New York, and the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution

Centre in Toronto), where the filmmakers determine which of their films will be available to film renters. As Vogel explained in his introduction to the 1963 catalogue, "No attempt is made in this catalogue to either include all independent filmmakers or to include all the work of any one particular filmmaker; quality and originality remain the sole criteria of selection." In one respect, Cinema 16's distribution was set up along the lines of commercial distributors of the time: Vogel chose the films he wanted to work with, offered filmmakers exclusive contracts for the distribution rights, and to the extent that Cinema 16's means allowed, promoted the films among potential renters. In another respect, distribution by Cinema 16 differed fundamentally from commercial distribution since profits did not accrue to the Vogels; Cinema 16 was a nonprofit organization.

While Vogel's policies as exhibitor and distributor had a major impact on the field of avant-garde film, these policies were also, increasingly, a cause for frustration among some avant-garde filmmakers. On September 28, 1960, a meeting of what became known as the New American Cinema Group was called by Lewis Allen and Jonas Mekas, in large measure to consider alternative forms of distribution and exhibition for a variety of new, alternative forms of film.

Even after the New American Cinema Group had begun meeting, Mekas—who in retrospect seems to have been the group's prime mover—would continue to support Vogel's work, at least in print. In his September 14, 1961, "Movie Journal" column in the *Village Voice*, Mekas bemoans the fact that while European features are finding American theatrical venues, "the avant garde of cinema is as homeless as ever," and he describes Cinema 16 as the one exception:

Meanwhile, as always around this time, I feel it is my duty, both as a critic and as a member of the public, to praise Cinema 16. This unique film society, alone and by itself (and I think it's time that some of the foundations came to its assistance), is trying to do a giant's job, the job that really should be done by our art theatres: to provide the showcase for the avant garde of cinema. It doesn't take much wisdom or daring to revive good old films, but it takes courage and intelligence to see and introduce the best of the new and unknown.

This year Cinema 16 is coming in with another series of new and old films that you can't see anywhere else. . . .

By the way, this is the 15th anniversary of Cinema 16—so don't forget the birthday cake and the candles.

If in retrospect it may seem implicit that Mekas wishes Vogel would place an even greater emphasis on new avant-garde work, it is also obvious in Mekas's subsequent description of Cinema 16's upcoming 1961–1962 season (which included Mekas's own *The Guns of the Trees* [1960], Robert Frank's *The Sin of Jesus* [1961], and Ron Rice's *The Flower Thief* [1961]) that films now identified with the New American Cinema were playing a substantial role in Cinema 16 programming.

Nevertheless, for the New American Cinema Group, the idea that Vogel would continue to be the sole arbiter of which avant-garde films would be available and the primary arbiter of how they were presented was no longer tenable. After a series of discussions, the group became determined to distribute their films through a cooperative, nonexclusive system in which the filmmakers would decide which of their films would be distributed and would be paid directly the bulk of the money earned from rentals. Vogel's contracts called for a standard fifty-fifty split of rental revenues; the New York Cooperative returned 75 percent of rental revenues to the filmmakers. By 1962 the

Film-makers' Cooperative was publishing its own catalogue and was suggesting to catalogue readers that they offer programs of avant-garde films dedicated to individual film artists, "instead of booking, as it is usually done, potpourri programs"—a clear reference to the kind of programming that had become the mainstay of Cinema 16.²³

Vogel was understandably upset by the New American Cinema Group's actions—and in particular, by the fact that, despite his contributions to the field, he had not been invited to be part of the new group—and though Cinema 16's distribution activities continued for several years after its exhibition program ended, the competition from the Film-makers' Cooperative may have cut into his rentals. Further, Vogel came to feel that the New American Cinema Group's "proudly proclaimed policy of showing, distributing, and praising every scrap of film" was self-defeating: "It may be essential to show every single film to filmmakers at internal, workshop screenings so that they can see each other's work; it is suicidal if this is done with general audiences. . . . Unable to judge the works in advance or to rely on somebody else's judgement (since no selection takes place), they ultimately decide to stay away or to stop renting films."²⁴

Essentially, the arrival of the New American Cinema and the Film-makers' Cooperative reflected a change in focus. Vogel was, above all, an audience builder, a teacher, and a political motivator. For him, the challenge was to use the widest articulation of film practice as a means of invigorating viewers' interest in cinema and their willingness to use what they learned at Cinema 16 in their everyday lives as citizens of the United States and the world. The focus of the New American Cinema Group was not the audience, but the filmmakers. While the Film-makers' Cooperative certainly hoped programmers would rent the films they distributed, they were less concerned with audience size than with the integrity of individual film artists' cinematic visions. From the New American Cinema Group's point of view, Vogel's programming privileged *his* vision at the expense of the increasingly articulated visions of the filmmakers. Mekas and the others were gambling that while audiences for avant-garde film might be smaller than Vogel's audiences, these smaller groups would grow enough to sustain the field without compromising the films and the filmmakers.

From our current vantage point, it seems unfortunate that Cinema 16 and the New American Cinema Group could not find a way to combine their efforts. Vogel had proved himself a remarkable programmer, capable of generating large audiences for unusual films. Over the years, the New American Cinema Group's approach of showing programs of works by individual film artists has also proved its value—especially for that relatively small group of viewers who have already developed an interest in avant-garde film. Working together, Vogel and Mekas might have generated a two-tiered system of exhibition. Whatever we may feel the value of collaboration might have been, however, Vogel, Mekas, and the others were unable to compromise in ways that would allow them to function synergically.

Cinema 16's Other Activities

During the years that Cinema 16 was in operation, Vogel and his colleagues were involved in a number of activities in addition to choosing and presenting the film society's regular film series and special events, and putting some of the films they admired into distribution. In general, these activities reflect Vogel's commitment to enlarging

the general awareness of film on the part of Cinema 16's membership, though in some cases, Vogel assisted filmmakers in completing works he was interested in screening at Cinema 16. Perhaps the most influential of these instances involved the film that came to be known as *Weegee's New York* (1954). By the late 1940s, Weegee (Arthur Fellig) was a nationally known photographer; his clear-eyed observation of New Yorkers was popular among the Cinema 16 membership. Weegee himself was a Cinema 16 member, and when Vogel discovered that he had been recording film imagery, he became enthusiastic about the possibility of showing Weegee's film work. As Vogel remembers, Weegee had no sense of how to edit the considerable body of film imagery he had recorded (Vogel remembers two 1600-foot reels) and no particular interest in learning. Not to be denied the pleasure of presenting Weegee-as-filmmaker, Vogel edited the footage himself, supplied the opening credits ("Cinema 16 Presents Weegee's New York" / "A Travelogue with a HEART" / "Photographed by WEEGEE") and the titles of the two sections of the finished film ("New York Fantasy" and "Coney Island"), and saw to the production of the musical track that accompanies the visuals.²⁵ The result was one of the most under-recognized films of the 1950s (under-recognized *now*; *Weegee's New York* was popular at Cinema 16 and at film societies around the country), and perhaps one of the more influential films Cinema 16 premiered. The film's visuals seem an obvious inspiration for a set of New York City symphonies produced during the 1960s, including Francis Thompson's *N.Y., N.Y.* (1957), Marie Menken's *Go! Go! Go!* (1964), and Hilary Harris's *Organism* (1975); and its use of already popular records to accompany the visuals of "Coney Island" pre-dates Kenneth Anger's recycling of rock songs in *Scorpio Rising* (1963).

Vogel's contribution to Cinema 16's presentation of scientist/photographer Roman Vishniak's microphotography, on the other hand, was, he says, "one of my worst experiences at Cinema 16."²⁶ Having discovered that, in addition to his other activities, Vishniak had made scientific films—"the most gorgeous footage of its kind I've ever seen"—Vogel was excited about presenting the material to the Cinema 16 membership but was worried that seeing this semi-abstract microphotography in silence might be confusing. He asked Vishniak to tape-record a personal commentary to accompany the imagery, and Vishniak obliged. But as the screening neared, Vogel realized that because of the vagaries of the electric current available in the auditorium, he was unable to keep Vishniak's detailed remarks in synch with the images on the screen: "I was behind the screen, stopping the recorder when it got ahead of the images (and throwing the auditorium into sudden total silences) . . . and sweating bullets. It was impossible, and I'm sure Vishniak must have been upset—though at the end the presentation received tremendous applause. Amazing and wonderful—but exhausting!"

Other Cinema 16 activities provided the membership with screenings of films that even Vogel, with all his enthusiasm, could not access. In spring 1956, and again in 1957 and 1958, Vogel collaborated with James Card, curator of film at the George Eastman House, to take busloads of Cinema 16 members to Rochester for weekend-long immersions in classic films from the Eastman House archives.²⁷ Also in the spring of 1958, Vogel arranged an excursion to Canada for those members who wanted to see Chaplin's *A King in New York* (1957), when that film was kept out of the United States.

Vogel also attempted to interest a much younger audience in a wider variety of films. During the spring and fall of 1958, two series of films for children ages four