

Fidel Castro is a revolutionary. Are you revolting against something?" "Yes I am." "What are you revolting against?" (TV scripts run on this way but at least it's from hunger.) "Against dishonesty, corruption." "What do you want? To change the world? Is that your idea?" "I think everybody wants to change the world, no?" There then comes a blank white screen, which is Mr. Mekas' ingenious transition device, after which we hear the portentous tones of Mr. Ginsberg:

"What do you think of America? You who run America, vote hypocrite, edit school books, make foreign wars, appoint aldermen and football coaches?

"You who therefore are America, the land that opens its mouth to speak with four hundred billion dollars of armaments and two cents' worth of measly foreign aid [anybody checked these figures?] all for bombs and horror, fraud, dope fiends, Syn-gman Rhee, Batista, Chiang Kai-shek, madmen, Franco—who else God knows. I refuse to read the paper."

This is cut into (shot 187): "Frances, somewhere in the fields, standing by a pile of burning autumn leaves." So even that most charming and nostalgic ceremony of American life is twisted into an emblem of our allegedly death-oriented society.

Instead of transitional music, Mr. Mekas uses an electronic squeak of varying pitch. Very *avant-garde* but after a while it gets on one's nerves just like Hollywood's mood music. But he does score one coup: he has dug up from somewhere a line that still haunts me: "Where are the snows of yesteryear?" Now where could he have found *that*?

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Amos Vogel, "Riposte from Cinema 16," *Esquire*, 9/62

It would be nice to begin with some profound observations, but I am afraid your cataclysmic criticisms [in the April issue] of Cinema 16 are largely based on lack of acquaintance with our programs and on 'tendentious selection.' I cannot prove this charge in 500 words: but from about 250 programs presented during fifteen years, you arbitrarily concentrated on films of 'Angst' (omitting large numbers of joyous programs), review in detail three programs you hated (while barely mentioning twenty programs you liked), and criticize so-called 'typical documentaries' (actually representing less than ten percent of our total programs and including feature-length fiction films and animations).

To say that Cinema 16's films are inferior to Off-Broadway, and have not led to the revelation of substantial talents, is quaint, considering that we were the first to introduce to American audiences the films of Antonioni, Robert Bresson, Norman McLaren, Robert Breer, John Cassavetes, Robert Frank, Shirley Clarke, Georges Franju, Bert Haanstra, Hilary Harris, Andrzej Munk, Leopoldo Torre-Nilsson, Yasujiro Ozu, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson, Arne Sucksdorff, Lindsay Anderson, Stan Vanderbeek, Agnes Varda. As to the classics, how, exactly are Dreyer, Welles, Eisenstein, Lang, Dovzhenko, Vigo, Vidor, De Sica, Rossellini inferior to Off-Broadway revivals?

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You dislike the anxiety in some of our films. 'I am in favor of truth, but why is it always depressing?' Because nowadays, Dwight, it is often is. Why attack *us* for this? You seem to have left this kind of anxiety far behind, to be reasonably at peace with a world going insane. But others aren't. Instead of analyzing why so many films are being made about human alienation, race relations, atomic war, you 'deplore' Angst, express your 'opposition' to it and then attack—not its source, but the artist who portrays it and the exhibitor who shows it.

As to the experimental films, we frankly prefer the honest, however imperfect, exploration 'from passion' to the lifeless, technically perfect commercial works made 'to order.' By definition, this also assures that (in searching out the new) we will commit errors of judgement. We prefer the risk of error to the revealed truth of the already established.

You accuse us of not being entertaining enough. Art and experimentation, whether 'committed' or subjective, 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.

The most saddening aspect of your attack is the realization of your own entrapment in the values of the commercial cinema. Without qualification, you claim that 'almost all creative films have been produced in the ordinary course of commercial moviemaking.' This is untrue, or, at best, misleading. Equally revealing is your insistence on 'entertainment' values (that discredited criterion) and your horror at the new *avant-garde* (you do not realize that it is no longer 'daring' to 'recognize' *Blood of a Poet* as an *avant-garde* masterpiece; things have been happening since). And to deplore, of all things, 'Angst' today, Dwight, is socially conservative. Your position implies a (however ambiguous) defense of the commercial cinema and the deprecation of many valuable, creative efforts outside it, of which, I am proud to say, Cinema 16 forms a part.

—Amos Vogel

Dear Amos: Well, you did your best. Your main complaint—that I commented on only a few of the programs you've presented in the last ten years—reminds me of the editor of the new edition of Webster's unabridged dictionary owlishly noting that the reviews, almost all of which (including mine in *The New Yorker*) were hostile, had dealt with less than one percent of the 450,000 definitions in his tome. The reason I reviewed in detail a mere three (out of 250) programs you have presented was, of course, that I naturally concentrated on your current season, in which you present just four feature films, all of which I thought terrible (I'd already paid my respects to the fourth). As to Angst v. Entertainment, this is a false antithesis; art must be entertaining, that is pleasurable, or it isn't art; I have already recorded the pleasure I got from the artistic representation of Angst in such films as *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour*, *The Four Hundred Blows*, and *L'Aventura*. No foe, I, of Angst. But it's got to be aesthetically enjoyable or it just ain't art. "After an evening of art films," Pauline Kael has remarked somewhere, "I often want to see a movie." Me too.

—Dwight.

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Conversations

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Illustration 81 in December 1962 (Club), Gregory I