

THE UNDERGROUND RENAISSANCE

With the advent of discotheques and drag Superstars, with the hyper-publicizing of Camp, the glamour of Underground Cinema, at least for the poor little rich girls and their magazines—and even for most film people—faded. The *avant-garde* is always a tough row to hoe: how long could it have been fun to trek around downtown, following the film makers in their bedraggled search for the Promised Land? How many ill-conceived, half-baked, technically incompetent, faggoty, poetic films can anyone see before announcing, "I've made that scene. And never mind about the art form of the age."

The Underground, which can be dated from the founding of *Film Culture* ten years ago, or from the exposition of New American Cinema at Spoleto five years ago, has produced a little good work and a few substantial directors: Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, Robert Breer, Bruce Connor, the brothers Kuchar, Jonas Mekas, Jack Smith, Stan Vanderbeek, Andy Warhol and a few others, including Gregory J. Markopolous, who does not consider himself Underground.

Yet, as Pauline Kael said with such grace: "The underground cinema is largely a fabrication of publicity parodies of Maria Montez movies, Andy Warhol spoofs of experimentation and variants of exploitation films."

The Museum of Modern Art, under the progressive leadership of the new Film Library head, Willard Van Dyke, offered a weeklong exhibition of un-

derground classics last month. However, the tone of the museum's seminar on the Underground matched Miss Kael's for pious disapproval of the dimly perceived. Judith Crist and Susan Sontag scratched at each other and alternately faint-praised and belittled the Underground. Robert Osborn, cartoonist, said he had seen more exciting stuff in Paris decades ago.

Osborn's comment is almost perceptive. Independent films have changed so little in the past forty years because film makers are, literally, still working in the silent era. Sound equipment rents for \$100 a day, a moviola costs \$12 a day. Plus lighting, processing, sound transfer, mixing, and so on. A rule of thumb for industrial film production figures a budget at \$1,000 per minute of finished film. So that even with foundation grants of as much as \$10,000—the sum the Ford Foundation gave to each of twelve film makers last year—sound is barely feasible. As a consequence, the most exciting Underground work is done in animation, frame by frame, no crew, little unused footage. Live-action film poems have moments in the Underground, but cutting and photography, except for Ed Emshwiller, are not Underground strong points. At one stage, Andy Warhol had developed the perfect solution to the Underground dilemma by never moving his camera, never cutting—that is, Warhol made the most of the most primitive conditions: he did as little as possible.

If the Underground film makers have thus made a virtue of technical incompetence, who can blame them? "Any sophomore with a pencil," says

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all these many years, whatever the new renaissance brings—and there's a chance of big money from you know where—it will be in large part due to the opportunistic arrival of Brockman.

In Brockman, for the first time, the Underground is represented and organized by someone with business sense. He has tried to eliminate bohemian sloppiness, clubhouse paranoia and *avant-garde* incest. Shows at the Cinematheque now start on time. They are properly projected. Film makers are admitted free, but everyone else must have a Cinematheque membership or pay. The press is kept well informed. And a new, one hopes permanent home, one which is truly underground, has been found at 120 West 41 Street in New York. It is convenient, neat and comfortable. Even the lobby soft-drink machines work.

Further, Brockman has already earned a page in cinema history by explaining that the Underground film makers are not, after all, making movies. Whereas Mekas has consistently refused to acknowledge the constraints of necessity, Brockman says, straight out: "The Underground film makers are artists. And they happen to use

film. But they are not even trying to duplicate Hollywood. Film is just the most appropriate medium for what they want to say."

Brockman documented his understanding of the new possibilities with the November-long Expanded Cinema Festival which featured a couple dozen experiments with multiple projections and with film-plus-live-action. Of the pieces of expanded cinema that I saw, the following remain with me (experiments can never be adequately described, as spectacles they are frequently boring even when their ideas are intriguing).

• Nam June Paik's manipulation of the video image on a dozen old TV sets. Paik changes internal circuitry and uses magnets to roll up the image, press it into a single line, invert it, shimmer it, make it go negative.

• Don Snyder's psychedelic film-plus-slide show which beamed sometimes hallucinogenic, sometimes "optical" images onto a translucent net screen in front of a screen wall made of whitewashed cardboard boxes which black vinyl clad dancers built and dismantled, sometimes waving the boxes to catch and disperse the images. All this was in front of a shredded or venetian-blind screen. Many levels, very beautiful.

• Arthur Sauer's film-loop which, in hyphenated form, showed 'action which was spelled out in greater, if not complete, lucidity by actors and a dancer on stage. This idea of a double level, of film-mimicking stage action, is around in plenty. Some day, as Robert Edmond Jones suggested in 1941, a director will use film to display the unconscious background to what will be played out, normal style, on stage.

• Standish Lawder, an art instructor at Yale, used slide-sandwiches filled with paint, plus Unguentine, butter, lipstick, which melted under the heat of the projector, causing the colors to run, burble, pop. Very biological.

• Stan Vanderbeek, now on a junket to a Berlin cine-seminar with Amos Vogel, Shirley Clarke, Brakhage and Carmen D'Avino, is still working on his movie-drome or planetarium theatre in which he will present a multiple-projection image-bath. At the festival, Vanderbeek had people carrying portable 8 mm movie boxes, flipping the image wherever they wanted.

• Aldo Tambellini projected fantastic slides onto a balloon which was slowly inflated, bobbing and tossing the image around, until, at about 6 feet in diameter, it burst.

• USCO (see *The Nation*, July 5) used several slide and film projectors,

strobe light, diffraction hexes in a psychedelic/McLuhan manner to achieve an image-deluge, an enormous number of images to look at all at once.

• Andy Warhol, who showed a single-screen film, made this statement: "Everyone is being so creative for this festival that I thought I would just show a bad movie. The camera work is so bad, the lighting is awful, the technical work is terrible—but the people are fantastic." The cast included: Baby Jane Holzer, Mario Montez, Mar-Mar, Jack Smith (who had a presentation of his own that I didn't see), Donyle and Gerard Malanga.

• Robert Rauschenberg offered a happening which included a film-mimics-live-dancer piece and a marvelous piece of electronic music—two men walked around with their feet in old tires smashing against and upon a bed spring wired for sound. Very Cagey.

• Robert Whitman covered a girl clad in white with a same-size film image, against a background screen covered with another image. The film-image girl matched the real girl perfectly, so the reality was blended and multiplied. When the film image was that of a nude girl, it was hard to believe your eyes. This piece and Snyder's were the best of the festival.

Just as the festival was ending, who should appear but Murray the K and Michael Myerberg, the producer. Looking for ideas! It seems that *Michael Myerberg presents Murray the K's New World* will open sometime this spring at Roosevelt Field. And this total-theatre-discotheque will have top talent plus at least nineteen screens for film and slides and closed circuit, and several other media. Murray the K counts five altogether.

So this is what's happening—the expanded cinema. Even the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts library has a multi-screen film wall. Even NBC has tried split-screen video for the Gemini launch/football game. And just wait until Montreal's Expo '67. Francis Thompson of the Johnson's Wax film, Disney, the National Film Board of Canada etc., are busy preparing cinema dreams.

Single-screen movies are well and good, but the art form of the age is something else. Too much is happening, we have too great a data-processing capability, for the single image to monopolize our eye. We need something bigger, more complex, more satisfying to the total sensorium. And whatever stimulation the Expanded Cinema Festival may have given the Underground, it also pointed the way to the spectacle of the future.

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