

# Film

Shirley Hamburg

1967

On opening night of the Fourth Annual New York Film Festival, back in September, there appeared a 'band of outsiders' picketing the fountain on the plaza of Lincoln Center. There were maybe four or five men, dressed in black, wearing gas masks, carrying coffins on their shoulders.

A few days later, people attending the Special Events program on the Independent Cinema at the fest were handed flyers printed on pop-art orange paper entitled Engaged Cinema in the United States. When I read this statement of purpose, I found it to be one of the most compelling and sobering calls to arms to emerge in this country in the area of film. I later discovered that the opening night pickets were affiliated with Cinema Engagé, as they are called.

After mentioning the moral, social and political upheaval which this country is currently facing, the manifesto-like statement laments the fact that no one in film is giving voice and image to today's America. Who is responsible? Not so much the Establishment (Hollywood) but rather the amateurs, the students, the Independents, the Underground. It has historically been their task to act as the sentinels of culture, sounding the alarm of a culture gone wrong (though they usually come off as a footnote to the history of art like Dadaism). Instead, much of the Underground film-maker's potential "has been stunted and wasted in a no man's land of exhibitionistic vagaries and gratuitous exercises in alienation."

Cinema Engagé feels that Underground creations, such as Intermedia Kinetic Environments, McLuhanist happenings, Stan Vanderbeek's Movie-Drome and the like, are a perversion of human perception, "cinematic hoaxes." "From its true meaning as a spiritual and revolutionary perception of reality, VISION ITSELF HAS BEEN REDUCED (my underline), by men impotent to engender it, to an inarticulate, psychedelic expansion of an ungenerous consciousness, to a haphazard and vapid optical titillation."

A couple of years ago this tendency was called creeping Marienbadism in reference to the purely formalistic movies which Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* initiated. The 'creep' which acclaimed style and technique above all, and appreciated the content for being as garbled and indiscriminate as possible, has now via the Underground grown into a stampede. Antonioni's *Red Desert* and Bresson's *The Trial of Joan of Arc* are above-ground examples of it. The Underground consists of it almost exclusively. The result is the rarefication of movies: the emergence of Cinema.

To me, the predominance of style in film appears as a very rich frosting, an "optical titillation," lacking the foundation of a solid content.

To digress a moment: In 1953, Dylan Thomas took part in a symposium on film. After bearing with an extensive display of intellectual fireworks on the poetry of film, little of which Thomas understood, he responded, "I'm not at all sure that I want such a thing, myself, as a poetic film. I think films are fine as they are, if only they were better...I like stories, you know—I like to see something going on."

As an art form, films are eminently unique in that they were a popular art; they were made expressly for the many, not the few. I, for one, enjoy them that way. I would much rather see a movie like *Gambit* displaying Hollywood's craftsmanship and a complete lack of pretention than a film that "presumes" to be high art but is instead an

exploitation—often facile—of content and technique like *Marienbad*. (I realize that in speaking of these two films in the same breath I may be mixing a precarious metaphor.)

Cinema Engagé, then, decries the Underground as “fad artists” in the creation of Hoax Art and absolves Hollywood since the coup d’état cannot come from the inherently Establishment-bound official film industry. They conclude by dedicating themselves to the American public “because we know that only a cinema of vision at once lofty and realistic, compassionate and uncompromising, can alert the American as a by-product of his society to the concrete ultimate of his plight...restore to him his capacities to feel and to aspire, capacities long enough absent from his life and art, to have fallen into disuse and atrophy.”

Cinema Engagé is an organization seeking filmmakers who have a conception of cinema similar to the one expressed in their statement. They give their support to those prepared to act and request that you write them at Cinema Engagé, Box 5, New York, N.Y. 10012.

While glancing through the current issue of *Film Comment*, my eyes caught in the headline: New Film Threatens to Pull America Up By Its Roots. The film is called *La Condition Americaine: The Challenge of an Engaged Film*. It is produced and directed by the Free School (Free University of New York) in collaboration with Cinema Engagé. For my part, I anxiously await its coming.

# fifth Estate

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