

The Cinephile

Shirley Hamburg

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Having surveyed the recent New American Cinema products, one might easily be tempted to remain silent until an achievement of greater substance presents itself for evaluation. Yet, since an authentically New American Cinema is the concern of any conscious film artist, he must accept what is available as a concrete basis and subject it to a definite scrutiny, before he can discard or transcend it. For, assuming the existence of talent, it has precisely been a view of life without ideas, and a conception of art without theory that has prevented most of the New American Cinema film-makers from becoming true artists and thus the true spokesmen for their generation.

Despite the diversity of genres and the varying levels of technical and artistic quality manifest in the New American Cinema productions, one can, from the thematic point of view, reduce them to one paradoxical common denominator: an alienation from reality. While the New American Cinema film-makers have claimed a revolution in realism for their films, their propensity toward either literal representation, or distortion has removed these films from the historical realities of our age.

THE FLOWER THIEF, a film which sufficiently epitomizes these tendencies, and whose director, Ron Rice, has been acclaimed as "the most promising film-maker," offers an adequate syndrome—its protagonist—for evaluation. It is apparently of this that Jonas Mekas was speaking when he said that they expressed the "soul of modern man." What exactly is this budding soul, this "new man?"

THE FLOWER THIEF, a 70-minute feature film, shot on 16mm, and not devoid of strikingly felicitous imagery, follows the "new man," a somnambulant figure, on his voyage through a phantasmagoric universe. But, both filmically and morally, this man is hardly new: he is old as are absurdity and feeble-mindedness. He is a willess simulacrum of a man, an ambivalent migrant addicted to juvenile gags, heavily symbolic actions, and ephemeral human contacts.

Thus, while Mekas and most of the New American Cinema film-makers claim that their films are a return to life, that they "listen to the true voice of man," the hero of THE FLOWER THIEF is an example of the exact contrary: a bewildered and irresponsible escape from life.

The creation of a new man can come about only through a lucid and courageous engagement in life and action. THE FLOWER THIEF may be the extrapolation of a dream-world, of lay beatitude. But to turn reality into a dream is to escape. The real challenge is to transform a dream into reality, for that alone is creation.

The object here is not to depreciate "improvisation," but to bring out the margin of rhetoric and fancy that has been added by the New American Cinema film-makers and spokesmen. For while many of these film-makers profess an aversion to theories and ideologies, they contradict this modesty by making reiterated statements at public screenings and in the press. In a sense, the NAC has, over a period of time, developed and proclaimed an ensemble of precepts, tenets, and even injunctions which have obscured the need for a genuine and serious ideology.

Yet, to deduce from them a consistent set of principles might prove an unrewarding task. Fortunately, Mekas has provided us with an industrious compilation of the thoughts and aspirations of the New York school. His *Notes On The New American Cinema* may not necessarily represent his own viewpoint: "I will leave it to the critics to... judge the artist from behind the stools of Culture." Mekas not only endorses some of the other film-makers' statements,

but himself makes forthright assessments and pronouncements, taking an unequivocal stand of his own. No doubt, he intended these statements to be instructive and liberating, and it is for that reason they should be discussed point by point:

Mekas intimates that, to assert himself in the face of an antagonistic society, the film artist must do so “even at the cost of open anarchy and nihilism.” One presumes that what he really meant is that the artist cannot be merely a fugitive and chaotic rebel if he is to have an effective function in society. If this was not his purpose, his statement can be reduced only to beatnikism. And beatnikism is nothing new and revolutionary: its sense of protest is velleitary, and defines itself by an attitude of fearful flight on the part of those who lack the courage to face society in an open contest of values.

Symptomatic also are the repeated denunciations of “the Big Lie of Culture” for we learn “to the new artist the fate of man is more important than the fate of art.” This false dichotomy between man and art is revealing. It denotes an attempt to eschew the difficult truth; that the only way for an artist to better the fate of man is to be a good artist.

In proposing “That new artist cannot be blamed for the fact that his art is in a mess; he was born into that mess.” Mekas has obscured himself to a simple realization; if the new film-maker were to assume, rather than succumb, to the chaos around him, order it, and make films that would show his audiences how they might do the same, he would, by freeing others from oppression, free himself. Thus, the film-maker would no longer feel compelled to reject “form, content, art structure, clarity and importance” as “existing social, political, and ethical standards,” because he would constantly be “creating new standards, more acceptable to his conscience.

Coupled with a fear of culture is a fear of its representatives—the critics. To this I would say simply that without a criticism that posits a norm, there can be neither valid assessment or inappreciable advancement in quality.

A logical extension of such dread of being evaluated is expressed in the statement that, Film Culture is “a publication which takes an A PRIORI stand FOR the new cinema.”

While, in truth, to protect the NAC a priori from criticism is to be a priori against it. It is because we are FOR the development of the New American Cinema, that we should not justify its productions a priori, but rather give them the benefit of our critical demands.

Another manner of forestalling is the reversal implying that, since the NAC is “primarily an existential movement,” it is therefore aloof from criticism; and that, “It is not a question of films being good or bad artistically. It is a question of a new understanding of man.” Again, the best way to understand man is through art: life does not express itself. Therefore, film-makers should spend their screen time proposing a man for audiences to understand.

As a last resort against being held to any conclusive statement about themselves, many New American Cinema film-makers complain that they are chronically “misunderstood.” There is a simple remedy for this: they should use, both in writing and film-making, “form, content, art, structure clarity and importance.” Moreover, in most cases, one understands them only too easily. In some other cases, the desire not to be understood provides a convenient excuse for a lack of expressiveness.

Perhaps one can best grasp the NAC’s dilemma-when, distressed, Mekas exclaims: “What’s the use of cinema when man’s soul goes rotten?” Rather we should ask him: What better way is there to prevent man’s soul from going rotten than through conscious cinema? I hope that, ultimately, this question will answer his.

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