

Film as a Subversive Art

Amos Vogel and Cinema 16

DIALOGUE TRANSCRIPT

EXT. WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK, NEW YORK

AMOS VOGEL

You know, there's something I call visual sensibility. A sensibility for form, shape, abstract images. And this is really what made me love these very odd films: surrealist films, abstract films, and many other types. All kinds of *avant-garde films*. I was very taken by them. I always felt that if I have this sensibility, obviously I'm not unique, and I would think that there would be other people who would like to see these films too. So out of this came the idea of Cinema 16 – to have a film society, a film club, where these films would be shown, and thereby do something about the independent cinema in America. Looking back at that whole period, I feel I succeeded in doing that. And that gives me great pleasure.

TITLES: *FILM AS A SUBVERSIVE ART: AMOS VOGEL AND CINEMA 16*

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK

AMOS VOGEL

You know, when I think back at how somebody like me came to this whole idea of Cinema 16, this membership club, I have to go back to when I was really a kid in Vienna, because both my parents were quite conscious in their being political. I arrived at the notion of, "Yes, it would be a good idea for the Jews – you know, Hitler was already in power in Germany, so I had an idea of what the Nazis were like – it might be a good idea for the Jews to live again in a country in which they'd already lived, namely in Palestine." So I joined a socialist-Zionist youth club in Vienna, and spent several years with them.

My whole development, of course, was interrupted by the arrival of Hitler in 1938, when he took over Austria. What we had to do then was really to see what we could do to save our lives, and out of that came the idea that we had to leave Austria as soon as possible, because if you stayed you were in danger of being killed. So I knew I had to go to America, and from there to try to go to Israel. What happened then was that when I came to America and I prepared myself in various ways for living in a kibbutz and working as an agricultural worker, I began to read more and more about Zionism, and I came to the conclusion that this was not the solution to the problem of the Jews. When I reached that point, of course, then I decided I would stay in America and make my living here, and I did. But of course you have to understand that this entire political background was with me at all times. It was a very strong force, and has remained a very strong force all throughout my life.

EXT. GREENWICH VILLAGE, NEW YORK

AMOS VOGEL

When I decided to stay in the “Land of Golden Opportunity,” I also decided to stay in New York. I found the city very exciting. So I went to the New School, got a degree in economics, participated in civil rights marches, met the girl of my dreams, and married her. That seems to have been a good choice, since now it’s nearly sixty years later, and I’m still married to her.

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK

MARCIA VOGEL

We picked out this beautiful synagogue to get married in because it had a beautiful staircase you could walk up. But what we didn’t know was that it was a very orthodox synagogue, and my poor mom who was a big apple strudel maker and wanted to bring apple strudel to the wedding was not allowed to do that because they didn’t think she was kosher enough. She couldn’t bring her apple strudel into the synagogue... So I said pretzels.

AMOS VOGEL

We had a good time anyway.

MARCIA VOGEL

We got up in the morning and Amos went to buy the *New York Times*. Amos buys *The New York Times* every day of his life, no matter where we are in the world, in whatever country. He would look for it. And there it was, I remember the newsstands next to Carnegie Hall. And there were the papers that said...

AMOS VOGEL

New type of bomb dropped on Hiroshima. 1945. Yep... We’re children of our century. Our glorious century.

MARCIA VOGEL

Sad day... But a happy day for us.

AMOS VOGEL

Right.

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK

AMOS VOGEL

It was very difficult, in the early 1940s, to see the kind of films that I was really interested in and that I knew existed somewhere. Everybody was going to see Hollywood films, but they weren’t seeing other films. They weren’t seeing enough foreign films, or if they did see foreign films they would be sexy comedies. I knew from my reading at the time that there were all kinds of fascinating films I really wanted to see, but there was no way for me to see them in New York: there were psychological studies, political films, experimental films. Even documentaries were not easy to be seen. Don’t forget there was no television then. At a certain point the thought came to me, “Well, why don’t I try to get these films myself and find a place in New York to show them?” I was very affected, I remember, by Maya Deren, one of the true founders of the American *avant-garde*. Her films had a tremendous influence at the time on other filmmakers and on critics, and she showed her films at the Provincetown Playhouse, and I went to see them. In fact, my first performance of the film society I founded, Cinema 16, was at the same place at which Maya Deren showed her films.

EXT. PROVINCETOWN PLAYHOUSE, NEW YORK

Here we are at the Provincetown Playhouse. We started showing films here in 1947, and it was a big success from the very beginning. Soon we became the biggest film club in America with 6,000 members. Like me, the audiences were what you might call “questioning people” who were interested in looking at the same kind of crazy stuff that I was interested in. Crazy stuff that was so different from Hollywood productions. We also know that the success of Cinema 16 spurred on many filmmakers who would not have otherwise picked up the camera, because they realized there was a place where their work would be shown and seen and appreciated. I should also add that my comrade in programming, membership and general procedures was my wife Marcia. Without her love and support, Cinema 16 would never have happened.

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK

On the evening when we had our first performance at the Provincetown Playhouse, with all the people who had come to see the programme, already seated, all of a sudden a strange character appeared at the door and introduced himself as a representative of the New York Film Censorship Office. Well, I didn't know what I had to do with this man. First of all, I'm against censorship. Nevertheless, he represented a certain kind of force. He came to tell me that you cannot show films in New York, publicly, single admissions, without the seal of the censorship authorities. “We approve certain films and we disapprove other films.” I listened to that very carefully because I realised immediately there would be films that they would not approve of.

They said that in order to get the seal, not only do we have to show them the films we want to show, but we have to give them a copy of the soundtrack. Now, that's very easy to do with a Hollywood film because it's a home-produced product. But what do you do with a cartoon for children from France which we had contemplated showing on the second programme? They said, “You have to hire a stenotypist and he will transcribe what it says, and then you give it to us and we either approve it or don't approve it.” So, the script we made up for them with a stenotypist consisted largely of things like “Whooo!,” “Haaah,” “Pooh-Pooh!” Whatever that was in French. That was the soundtrack of the film, so we submitted it to them. To me this was a typical example of the stupidity of the censorship set-up altogether.

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK

Now we're moving into the most orderly part of the apartment, namely my archives. I'll turn the light on so you can see them better. This goes back to 1945... Actually that's not true. There's a filing cabinet with things that I did in Europe as a kid. Books I wrote, pictures I did, things like that. Anyway, it goes all the way back here.

This is a master file – it's kind of hard to get to at the moment – a master file of Cinema 16 materials. Look, this for example is programme number three at the Provincetown. We showed several films there: *Fragment of Seeking* by Curtis Harrington, *Seeds of Destiny*, an American documentary, *Underground Farmers*, about ants in equatorial South America.

This would be the programme if you became a member in 1953. I got a very good artist, Federico was his name, to design these things because I've always been a great believer in good design.

Then we also had a distribution set-up, but only for *avant-garde* films, because nobody else was doing that. This is the brochure we put out for the experimental films: “Catalogue of the Experimental Cinema, available for rental from Cinema 16: narrative, expressionist, symbolic, abstract, poetic, surrealist.” Without this kind of distribution it would have been practically impossible for people who made experimental films to get them seen elsewhere unless they starting writing letters to individual colleges, or what have you. This was a great help to them, because it became known very quickly that there was one place in the United States where you could get experimental films and show them on your campus. You see here at the end we have a ‘Utilization Guide,’ where there is the name of the film: *Adventure of Jimmie*. And that seems to be good, in our opinion at least, for 3, 5, 9, 11 and 14. Then you go up here: 3 is a poetic film, 5 is recommended as an introductory film of its type, 9 is recommended for students of psychology and psychiatry. This is for people who find, perhaps, the descriptions not sufficient, and we want to draw their attention, if they are interested in surrealism, to surrealist films.

This is a drawer full of stuff I did as a kid, before the age of ten. These are books I wrote as a kid. I have no idea what we’re looking at here. Aha! It’s all in German. So this is called *Between 15 and 17: A Diary*. It’s in my original name, Amos Vogelbaum, Vienna 1937, one year before Hitler came in. This was all typed by me, after it was written. And it’s very interesting, I must say. It’s about a young man, between the ages of 15 and 17, and it’s of course largely autobiographical. It’s about his political education and his sexual education. It has interesting discussions in it, and my beautiful girlfriend in Vienna, etcetera. I’d love to read it again. I haven’t read it in years now.

SCOTT MACDONALD

What Vogel did was so broad and so far-reaching in terms of the audience it built and the experience it created nationwide that it really had no precedent, no real precedent in the United States. He brought the European film society idea to the United States. He articulated it with a programming strategy built perfectly for post-war America in which he would show the broadest possible selection of kinds of films: documentaries, medical films, all kinds of *avant-garde*, all kind of experimental animation, classics that had been forgotten and were no longer seen. And he would put them together on evening programmes of two hours of so, in which when you went in you had no idea what kind of work you were going to see. All you know is that something was going to happen to you, and that when you came out, you would have food for thought for days.

The most remarkable thing he did with this programming strategy is that he assumed that the idea of showing films is to build audiences, that a film society is not just directed toward a small coterie group that already likes the kind of films you are showing, but that what you should be doing is trying to show people that there are other worlds of cinema that are equally provocative and interesting as the commercial stuff that they go to see.

I think on some level that his development over time of Cinema 16 was his attempt to develop a true community of people who would come together to talk about political issues, to become better citizens, knowing more about the world and more about where they lived and more about each other, and then move back out into the world with this understanding to make a difference. I think he always saw Cinema 16 as an aid to good citizenship in a democracy.

EXT. VARIOUS NEW YORK SHOTS

AMOS VOGEL

It is well to keep in mind the difference between a commercial movie theatre and a film society. A commercial movie theatre aims to entertain. The film society aims to further the appreciation of film and of new experiments in the medium. The commercial movie theatre steers clear of controversy, the film society welcomes it. If the films shown by the film society are entertaining, so much the better. But entertainment value cannot be the sole criterion for film society programming. Nor can audience approval or disapproval. Film societies must remain at least one step ahead of their audiences and must not permit themselves to be pulled down to the level of the lowest common denominator in the audience, a very easy, common and dangerous occurrence in the mass media.

It is a catastrophic fallacy to assume that running a film society involves nothing more than an idealistic concern with good films, coupled with their lackadaisical presentation to willing audiences. On the contrary, the individual brave enough to venture into this troublesome field must be, no matter what the size of the audience, an organiser, promoter, publicist and copywriter, businessman, public speaker and artist. A conscientious if not pedantic person versed in mass psychology. He must have roots in his community, and he must know a good film when he sees it.

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK

AMOS VOGEL

The regular performances took place in the Fashion Industries Auditorium, which had 1,600 seats. That was on 27th Street and I think it was 8th Avenue. I'm not sure.

INT. FASHION INDUSTRIES AUDITORIUM, NEW YORK

JACK GOELMAN

Where are we?

MARCIA VOGEL

We're in the High School of Needle Trades. It seems in much better condition than when we were here.

JACK GOELMAN

The auditorium was part of the Central Needle Trades High School. The name has been changed now. It's the Fashion Institute High School?

AMOS VOGEL

The Fashion Industries High School.

JACK GOELMAN

The Fashion Industries High School that's been changed. Basically it's the same auditorium with structural differences – add-ons or subtractions.

AMOS VOGEL

This is where we had our Cinema 16 screenings for a period of about fifteen years. We started here in 1948 – we had been in different places before that. But this became the main place where we showed our films. There were 1,600 people at one show, and we had two showing in one evening: 7.15 and 9.30.

JACK GOELMAN

The way to get to the projection booth here is by going out through these doors, finding the staircase, running up to the next floor, and running along the hallway to the doorway of the projection booth. However, Amos – in his wisdom – established the fact that we had an intercom.

MARCIA VOGEL

Rigged up a system.

JACK GOELMAN

An intercom that we could use to speak to the projectionist. However, there was a danger in that. If it was a silent film and we spoke to the projectionist, everybody would hear us. So we rigged another thing, an ancillary help, a buzzer system which we buzzed very low. One meant “Put the sound up,” two meant “Lower the sound,” three meant “Look at the screen *immediately!*”

AMOS VOGEL

You’re a projectionist: look at the screen!

JACK GOELMAN

Four meant “You’re out of focus” and five meant “You’re off the screen.”

MARCIA VOGEL

So you rigged it up?

AMOS VOGEL

We rigged it up every time.

JACK GOELMAN

We tested it, we had extra batteries, we had a fail-safe system, a fall-back position. And if that didn’t work you ran up the stairs very quickly and quietly and said...

MARCIA VOGEL, AMOS VOGEL AND JACK GOELMAN

The murals!

AMOS VOGEL

Well, when we selected the place we certainly looked at them.

MARCIA VOGEL

We didn’t know that they would be famous.

AMOS VOGEL

No, but they were something.

MARCIA VOGEL

In fact they’re quite nice.

JACK GOELMAN

This is the history of the American labour movement. The history is there, from the Haymarket riots in Chicago up in the corner, to the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, Amos, which is in your neighbourhood, is up there.

MARCIA VOGEL

These are famous people from the labour movement?

JACK GOELMAN

Yes, I can go over and identify them.

MARCIA VOGEL

But we really did not refer to them or did anything about them.

AMOS VOGEL

But I think people felt honoured.

MARCIA VOGEL

To be here?

AMOS VOGEL

Oh yes.

JACK GOELMAN

When the audience liked the film, and it was full, and 1,600 people started applauding, I always felt that the building was getting off the ground and rising. It was a really unbelievable sound. Unbelievable. I mean, they would applaud with their feet, with their hands, they would make noises, whistle. I couldn't understand people getting that excited about it. It made up for the other end. It was a wonderful feeling, just a wonderful feeling. We watched carefully for the responses, we listened very carefully. We wanted to know what they were thinking and how they felt. And we found out.

AMOS VOGEL

Marcia sat outside at the membership table, and of course she had to bear the brunt of dissatisfaction that sometimes occurred. People would walk out in the middle of a film. As soon as they got outside and saw Marcia sitting there, they'd say, "Why do you show this crap here?" And they'd leave.

MARCIA VOGEL

It took Amos a number of years to create an audience that really enjoyed *avant-garde* films, and then they said only nice things about him. But it was tough, because sometimes I didn't like them either. But what really was bad was when I loved something very much and knew it was good and beautiful, and they didn't understand it.

AMOS VOGEL

Well, you know what our attitude was toward people who didn't like *avant-garde* films? "Oh, you don't like it? We'll show it again."

SCOTT MACDONALD

Vogel was an admitted leftist. He leaned left. But his defiance of convention was not just a defiance of Mr. and Mrs. Front Porch across America and their love of Walt Disney, and a kind of Disnified film experience. If he felt that his own world was in lockstep-march toward a certain viewpoint, he would immediately go the other way.

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK

AMOS VOGEL

There's the story of another film that was only shown at Cinema 16, has only been shown at Cinema 16. Many people might feel that it should not have been shown, but I believe that "The Truth Shall Prevail," whatever that means, since this film was full of lies. It was a film made by the Nazis, a documentary, called *The Eternal Jew*, that outlined their case for why the Jews should be exterminated.

FILM EXCERPT: *THE ETERNAL JEW*

JACK GOELMAN

The film was a Nazi propaganda film which the Nazis decided the German people must see, because it told them how they should think about the Jew. The Jew was dirty, filthy, ugly and a threat to the country. They would show a Jew with a beard, and the next thing they'd shave him. They showed what the hook nose meant. They showed how they lived in dirt. It was the most horrible expression of anti-Semitism. It was shocking. And Amos said, "Let's show it."

AMOS VOGEL

I saw this in Europe and I decided that I had to show this film here, because I think that even when the message of a film is evil, if it represents the ideology of a particular political group – in fact one that was strong enough to not only take over a country but start a world war – then it was important to show it. So I arranged to get the film sent here to me. We announced it, and then the film arrived in the United States and was promptly stopped by the customs people who said, “Well, you can’t show a film like that.” We had some civil rights lawyers and we went in well-prepared and said, “This is a membership group, it’s not even subject to the New York State censorship law.” So they finally released it, and said “Yes, OK: for this one showing we will allow you to show the film.”

JACK GOELMAN

He needed programme notes, and he went to Siegfried Kracauer, who was the expert on German film. He said, “I’ll write the programme note.” It was a six-page programme note! It cost a lot to print it. It was a marvellous essay on the Nazi propaganda film. You could say this was typical of Cinema 16’s programming. It was exactly what Amos set out to do, and he did it.

AMOS VOGEL

It was a very exciting evening, I must say. There were many members who were absolutely opposed to us showing the film, but they didn’t speak up as an organised group and they didn’t throw any stink bombs or something like that during the show. I’m very pleased and proud to have been able to show this film. You’ve got to know what your enemies are like. Of course the people who made this film are my enemies. Of course they would have liked nothing better than to see me dead. I didn’t do them that favour.

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK

AMOS VOGEL

I wanted to show you one of my offices. It’s kind of crazy because it’s so crowded. It shows you something about me, maybe. It’s not an ordinary kind of office, I guess. I’m a picture man, after all, so here’s my home picture album. This is a very important part of my life, I must say, because this is something that has built up over the years. It represents something about me, there’s no doubt about that.

This is Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin.

These are some of the leaders of the Sixties in the United States – they were important to me.

This statue came from Mexico and has one arm missing already, and the other one is damaged, but still an imposing presence, I think.

John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman, people who I disliked intensively, and I think if you look at them carefully you might see why I disliked them.

This is an important statement made by a post-war German writer: ‘Be sand, not oil, in the machinery of the world.’ I like that very much. It’s a very important statement, as far as I’m concerned. That’s what I tried to do at Cinema 16 and throughout my life, in my teachings and my writing. In short, I guess I have to confess that I have remained a radical.

Here's something interesting in relation to what I told you about Zionism and my being a Zionist at one time. This picture upset me very much. It's an Arab man and his son who are under attack by Israeli military. The kid is very frightened, and so is the father. Then there's a later photograph here: the father is OK, he's wounded. The son is killed... I don't like that picture.

There's Mussolini playing a violin. I think he liked killing people better.

This is Egon Schiele, a painter whose work I like very much.

This man speaks for himself.

This is a Vietnamese. The picture is as damaged as he is. He has been exposed to a firebomb. I was not very happy about the war in Vietnam, as you can imagine.

This is a beautiful picture, I don't know by whom any more. Very peaceful, very nice.

Now, this is Freud, you know. One of the central figures of our century. I don't entirely agree with everything he came up with, but I think he's a very profound man, and I have read a lot of his books.

Oh my God, that fly! Tremendously enlarged, of course. This was made either by God – I don't know who that is, and I don't know what to do about him – or it was made by nature. But anyway you look at it, it's a fantastic achievement to have something like that in a tiny little animal. And then it's another fantastic achievement that we human beings have been able to produce machines and mechanisms that take this kind of photograph.

Now there's something here that shows you the very special interest I have in cosmology, in the cosmos. I'm fascinated by it. These are pictures I got directly from NASA. This is the famous spot on Jupiter. This thing looks like an illustration drawn by somebody, but it's real. That's what you see. I hope on my next trip to the universe I'll see these in person.

And here we have, by the way, the most meaningful of all the pictures on this wall, to me. And it's a picture that's full of mystery, and I don't know why it's meaningful to me. But it explains, to some extent, my interest in *avant-garde* films: the door opening, a hand, the light around the hand. It's obviously a mystery. But to me it speaks fully... and very strongly.

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK

AMOS VOGEL

There's a question as to why many people object to *avant-garde* cinema or can't really absorb it, while I more than welcome it. This has to do with the fact that it's much more comforting to see things in the way in which you have always seen them, rather than to try to see them in a new way. There is something very comforting about dealing with the conventional, and with the conventional way of seeing, and something very disturbing about seeing unusual things, and things that may shock you. Hollywood and television are constantly giving us things that we've already seen. The most interesting films are precisely those that show things that have never been seen before, or show things in a completely new way. This is something that upsets many people, or prevents them from appreciating what is being shown to them. I, on the other hand, prefer to be upset. One of my main criteria when looking at films and in writing about them is the unpredictability of what I'm seeing.

SCOTT MACDONALD

Cinema 16 rises to prominence simultaneously with the most conservative moment, probably, in modern American history. He's a rebel, he's politically aware, so to look around and see people that could only go to genre films, every Disney film led the year in audience attendance. For him, that was appalling. For that to be the whole ballgame was ridiculous. And I think what united all the stuff he showed was this interest in critiquing what he saw in commercial cinema, subverting the kind of audience that commercial cinema had built.

EXT. GREENWICH VILLAGE, NEW YORK

AMOS VOGEL

Ah yes... Popular culture.

SCOTT MACDONALD

I think it wasn't so hard in the late Forties to shock an American audience because, remember, we're coming out of twenty years when the Hays Office had really repressed every serious tendency in American cinema. The film audience in America had been almost soporific in terms of its ability to deal with realistic things. So Amos arrives on the scene with a powerful political consciousness, and his programming strategy – and Jack Goelman, too, when they worked together – they were both very conscious of Eisenstein, with the idea of juxtaposing of one kind of thing with the other to create energy in the audience and maximum thought in viewers.

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK

AMOS VOGEL

When I showed five or six films on a Cinema 16 programme, they were always selected from the point of view of how they would collide with each other in the minds of the audience. On one programme there would always be an abstract film, a scientific film, an *avant-garde* film, and a political documentary, because my intention at all times was to subvert audience expectations by showing such diverse and different films on one and the same programme.

SCOTT MACDONALD

A lot of the allure of Cinema 16, especially in its early years, was that it was the only place where you could see anything that would be censored in the commercial population. And I think it's interesting that when Amos came to do *Film as a Subversive Art*, it's exactly the same strategy. When you look through that book, he's trying to show you things that in normal academic books or normal popular culture movie magazines you would never be able to see.

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK

AMOS VOGEL

Many of the films I showed at Cinema 16, and the films discussed in this book, show reality in ways we have not previously anticipated. This is how I use the word 'subversive': anything that changes or undermines previous ways of thinking and feeling. Subversive art makes you look at things in a new and very different way. It disrupts, it destroys, and thereby builds up new realities and new truths. I think that's very wonderful, and very exciting.

SCOTT MACDONALD

One of the interesting things that often gets lost when we talk about Cinema 16, because we focus on the major directors that Amos premiered or the powerful films that knocked people out, was his commitment to science films. Amos knew that science films, in the context he would present them in, would simultaneously function in the way they were meant – that is, as informational science films – but would also be seen by this audience as having other kinds of resonances that they could never have within a classroom. I think one of the interesting things is to see what at one time felt like an educational movie, which now can for many viewers seem like a comedy, that depending on when you see something and where you see it, its meaning completely changes. Amos was very aware of this, I think.

One of the science films – and Amos showed dozens of science films of all kinds – was a German film called *Living in a Reversed World*, where a variety of experiments are done in which the person puts on a pair of glasses that either reverses right to left or up and down, and he learns to live wearing these glasses, and then has to re-adjust to the real world when the glasses come off. It's a film that's all about context and how we make sense of context over time. In its way it's a metaphor for Cinema 16 itself, because Cinema 16 wants to reverse your expectations of film, and see – once you adjust to that – if it can help you develop a greater consciousness not just of film, but of everything else.

FILM EXCERPT: *LIVING IN A REVERSED WORLD*

Here is the subject in his everyday activity... But he does not give up. From the very beginning he tries to practice. One has to learn to see the hand where one feels it. And also the whole body as represented by a shadow image... Now he begins to get it. Exercises like these are the road to success.

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK AMOS VOGEL

And then, of course, there was the film by Alexander Hammid and his then wife, Maya Deren, *The Private Life of a Cat*, a documentary about a cat family – he and she, how they love each other, and how she then gives birth to little kittens, one after the other, with close-ups. Very beautiful. This was still at the time when Cinema 16 was still not a membership society and therefore was subject to the New York State censorship law. And, of course, when they first saw that film – our beloved censors, I'm glad they're all gone – they said that this film cannot be shown because it's obscene, because it shows the birth of kittens. Isn't that ridiculous? So we showed it later on when we had the film society, and it was a big success.

FILM EXCERPT: *THE PRIVATE LIFE OF A CAT*

SCOTT MACDONALD

Once people knew that Cinema 16 was not just one possible place where you could show films, but a very exciting place to show films, and a place that would probably lead to other screening venues, Amos began to be flooded with information. And since he's a naturally curious person anyway, he continues to go to everything. He keeps a folder for every film he sees – the man is the ultimate cinéaste.

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK
AMOS VOGEL

You might ask how I found out about some of these films. Well, you know, I did a lot of reading in those days, and I found out, for example, about a number of very exciting and interesting-sounding student films made at the very famous film school in Poland. I decided I should do something about that. I got in touch with the director of the school at the time. I just wrote him a letter and I said, "Look, this is what we're doing here, and I'd like to get these films." One of them was *Two Men and a Wardrobe* by somebody called Roman Polanski. I got an answer and he said, "Yes, I'll send them to you." Well, we showed them, and they were a big success. I'm very happy that I was, in my own way, instrumental in introducing somebody like Polanski, before he even made his first feature film, to American audiences.

FILM EXCERPT: *THE ROOM*

AMOS VOGEL

I was very pleased to present films by Carmen D'Avino, particularly *The Room*, which was really a riot of colour and sound, music. Very playful.

FILM EXCERPT: *LAND WITHOUT BREAD*

INT. VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK
AMOS VOGEL

Then we showed *Weegee's New York*. Weegee was a very famous press photographer.

JACK GOELMAN

He looked like he came out of Hollywood: a long coat, an old cigar in his mouth, and a Rolex camera – a big one – in his hand. All of a sudden, he got a film camera... And he went wild.

AMOS VOGEL

When we met, he showed me his film, which I loved from the very beginning. The only thing was I felt it was somewhat too long and contained sequences that didn't contribute to the success of the film. At which point – I didn't say this to him – he said to me, "You know, I think this film is too long. I've tried to edit it and I can't. I just don't know anything about editing. Would you like to try it?" So this became the first and only film in my lifetime in which I exercised my talents as an editor, which I had never done before and haven't done since. I took out entire sequences and showed him the film as I thought it would be best. He was absolutely enthralled. He said, "This is wonderful. I could never do it. I'm so happy you have done it for me. Thank you very much."

SCOTT MACDONALD

At Cinema 16, Amos was one of the people – if not the first person – to show Ozu in the United States, to show Alain Resnais, Jacques Rivette, Agnès Varda, some of the Rossellini films that couldn't otherwise get here, Bresson, and

Cassavetes – he showed *Shadows*. He never made a distinction between experimenting in commercial film and experimenting in other ways. He was as deeply respectful of Chaplin or of Keaton as he is of Stan Brakhage. For him, whoever is experimenting and confronting the status quo is interesting.

AMOS VOGEL

We also had events with well-known Hollywood or mainstream directors when there was a film we felt was worth showing. I remember, of course, Hitchcock. He had agreed to appear. He was working on a new film and he wanted to show two reels of it. The night of the show the theatre was packed. Everybody was there. He came in a chauffeur-driven car, no less, and he met me in the lobby, and he said, “You know, I told you that we would bring two reels of the film I just finished, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. But instead I’ve brought the entire film. Is that OK with you?” What do you think I said? “Yes, it’s OK with me.” Then he not only showed the entire film, he answered all the questions from the audience, religiously and beautifully. It was really one of our most successful evenings.

EXT. NEW YORK TIMES BUILDING, NEW YORK

JACK GOELMAN

Cinema 16 got many of its members from advertising in the Sunday *New York Times*. Of course it was the costliest place to advertise, but we got the largest amount of members from it. And I wish we would have got the same response from the people who ran the film department of the *New York Times*. But that wasn’t so. The critic of the *New York Times* at that time was Bosley Crowther, and he was the most important critic in New York City. We were always waiting and hopeful that Bosley Crowther would wake up and smile at us by giving us a column, a notice, a recognition that he would attend one of the showings and react. We sent him a press pass. We would have let him in without a press pass. We would have let him in if he’d come naked, because we needed him. He didn’t show.

AMOS VOGEL

We did not exist. I sent all the releases to him that I sent to everybody else, all the information. The *Times* did not do anything and never had a review of any film. I think this is a very interesting comment on cultural affairs. I also have no doubt that if they had really handled us properly, that Cinema 16 could have existed much longer than it did. We ran into difficulties, mainly financial difficulties at the end, even though we had so many members, but our expenses had gone up as well. I made a fund drive where I tried to get some extra money. That worked, but it worked in a very minimal fashion – it was not enough. Now, if we’d had that many more members, we could have continued to exist. And then, of course, film history – or at least my film history – would have been different, because if Cinema 16 had continued, I would not have become the founder and first director of the New York Film Festival. So... that’s the way it goes.

SCOTT MACDONALD

Cinema 16 ended for several reasons, one of which was its own success. Because Cinema 16 created an audience for European art film, because it proved to

audiences that all nudity was not pornography, that you could look at films as art in the same way that you look at painting, as being able to represent things that we don't see in conventional life, other theatres opened up to show art films, there were suddenly *avant-garde* screening rooms. Censorship laws were being done in. It was a financial matter: Vogel was adamant that he not take money from any institution. He thought government sponsorship brought with it inevitably a certain kind of control. He wanted the audience to provide the money so that he could provide them with a service. He wanted to be truly free to choose the films he thought his audience would be interested in, and the only way he would know he was successful was if the audience came back and paid for the experience of seeing the films. At the moment when that was no longer financially possible, Cinema 16 ends.

INT: VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK
AMOS VOGEL

All good things come to an end.

INT: VOGEL APARTMENT, NEW YORK
AMOS VOGEL

You know, when I think back at what I attempted to do at Cinema 16, I must say that I feel very comfortable about it, and very happy because I believe that the entire evolution of art and of society proceeds through a series of, you might say, revolutions. The question that everything is based in our society on, "Will it be profitable or not?" chokes off real creativity. I think that the commercialisation of art and of entertainment is a negative factor in human development. When you see how art does progress, it is always by the revolutionary deeds of a few individuals who come up with totally new ideas, totally new means of expressing themselves. Picasso would have been declared insane in, say, the early Middle Ages. That's what I'm interested in: to support these kinds of people, the Picassos of film. I believe that everything Cinema 16 attempted to do in those days remains as valid today as when I first started.

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In 1974 Vogel wrote *Film as a Subversive Art*, a "book about the subversion of existing values, institutions, mores, and taboos," which briefly profiles roughly 600 films that Vogel considered to have subversive power. Vogel was a rare type of aesthete, equally interested in material, artistic and sexual revolution, and his book has become a sort of cult bible for those interested in the agit-prop potential of film as a political tool, as well as for those in search of the strange, the shocking, the liberating and the transcendent in their myriad forms. Vogel, who fled Nazi-occupied Austria, is a professor at the Center for Collaborative Studies of Arts, Media and Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

[Vogel_Amos_Film_as_a_Subversive_Art.pdf](#) (file size: 78.52 MB, MIME type: application/pdf). File history. Click on a date/time to view the file as it appeared at that time.

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