

Memo to: Arnold Grisman
From: Frank Cucci
Subject: Notes from Underground

*The underground
movie as another
example of a subterranean
cultural development that
explodes upward - perhaps
we are finally catching up - see 2-3
under film segment -*

April 25, 1966

One thing should be clear from the start. I've confined my quest to the underground that is not the domain of the vice squad. (No time.) I'm concerned only with the arty underground, the world of underground movies, fledgling playwrights, egghead reviews, Off Off-Broadway shows, Village cafes, brooding, bearded icons like Allen Ginsberg and real cool cats like Andy Warhol.

This is the underground that's caught on ... aboveground. Bit by bit, the most adventurous New Yorkers have assimilated it. To the point where discussing the underground as such is almost a contradiction in terms. How can the underground be aboveground? Yet there it is. And the fact that people persist in calling it an underground tells a lot about its intrinsic appeal.

1. The Underground Movie. Uncommercial, sexually explicit, more often than not shot without a script, the underground movie has been allowed in the back door of the establishment like a muddy puppy who never stops trying to hump the houseguests. At this moment, three houses specialize in underground movies. Of these the Bridge, in the East Village, and the Bleeker St. Cinema are physically above ground; the Film-Maker's Cinematheque, on West 41st St., operates in the sprawling cellar of a large office building. Copious numbers of college students attend them, as well as the kind of "in" people you would expect to see at a discotheque, schoolteachers, genteel bohemians, and nosy copywriters.

*See some
of Farley's
descriptions
of underground
movie
subjects -*

Their subject matter can be anything under the sun. The films I witnessed included an abstract rendering of rock crystal formations contrasted with flashes of Greek landscape and ending with a goat in that landscape lyrically bugging another goat (nature is wonderful); an arresting color short called "Monopoly," which showed a clutch of sleepy-eyed teenagers playing an endless game of slow-motion monopoly; and a bright and startling film called "El Peccado Original," which was (I quote the poop sheet handed out at The Bridge) "a first film concerned with the complex of a virgin's sensuality vs. the Catholic rite ... Filmed in Puerto Rico, originally banned by the Catholic Church, now represented in the San Juan Film Festival." (Italics mine.) A great many underground movies have won prizes in film festivals all over the world. And a great many underground movie makers are subsidized by foundations.

Just how aboveground the underground movie is comes through in an ad in the East Side Review, Jan/Feb 1966: "You can rent Avant Garde Underground Movies from Film-Makers Cooperative, 414 Park Avenue South, New York 10016. Write for our catalogue." 414 Park Ave. South is a non-descript office building with a slum interior that looks as if it had been caught in the act of collapse. On the third floor, past a sad sad club for octagenarian Armenians (I think they were Armenians), is the Film-Makers Cooperative. Dingy offices, invoices all over the floor, cans of film stacked untidily to the rafters. While someone rattled cans in a part of the room I couldn't see, a hungry-looking young man plunked at a typewriter. He seemed fiercely proud of the place, and as I talked to him, a certain dignity came across. (For all I know, he could have

been Jonas Mekas himself, whom the New Yorker movie critic calls the Napoleon of the underground movie.) I received a surprisingly *comme-il-faut* catalogue, and was informed that orders came in in a steady stream from all kinds of clients, from educational institutions (they run underground movies on many campuses) to private customers in Scarsdale. Nights in Scarsdale must be getting livelier.

Last fall, no less an establishment than the Museum of Modern Art ran a cycle of underground movies. It was practically impossible to get in without having a membership card for the series. (I know. I tried.) Does this prove that America has accepted underground movies as readily as, say, Dean Martin? I don't know. I do know that no culture-vulture worthy of the name can afford to be ignorant of them.

2. The curious case of "Scorpio Rising." "Scorpio", by Kenneth Anger (his real name) is considered by many the chef d'oeuvre of the underground movie. It is an opiate study of the black leather motorcycle cult, with a witty pop score which reveals more about how Anger feels about his subject than any script. For example, in the first few minutes of this handsome color film, a young man obsessively gets his motorcycle ready. What's the sound track doing? Floating a gentle rock version of "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." During the relatively long sequence where the fetishest-cyclists get their gear on, you hear the softly-sung strains of "She wore blue velvet." As the cyclist, dressed to the nines in boots, black leather and chains, saunters off his doorstep into the night world, the film cuts to an old DeMille snip from "King of Kings," showing Christ entering Jerusalem. "Scorpio Rising" has some of the wildest flashes of pornography I've ever seen, though I wonder if pornography is the right word, since these scenes never stimulate, never tease. Last week, in the New Yorker of April 23, 1966, Brandon Gill devoted a full review to Scorpio. And a rave review at that. When as plushly established a magazine as the New Yorker can say, "Mr. Anger has produced a strong, and, despite its unpleasant subject matter, beautiful movie ... at a single blow, he justifies the notion of an underground," then the underground has found a place in the sun it perhaps never wanted.

3. The Mad Show. Here is black humor gone pink with respectability. Utilizing strong pop elements in the decor, a bouncy, attractive cast, and an eclectic patter score, the Mad Show is a mild satire on American mores, made palatable for middle-class Americans. The establishment audience took it to its collective bosom. And why not. The show is fun and good-humored. It flogs fairly dead horses: Mom, aggressive American women, TV sports announcers, group therapy, Madison Avenue, beatnik marchers, kiddie TV. None of the sketches has much bite, but for unfocussed satire, it was pretty funny all the same. Far-out graffiti are flashed on two cartoon clouds between sketches: "In case of atomic attack, the Haddasah meeting will be cancelled"; "Betray a friend today"; "Batman loves Robin"; "What does Clay Cole really do for a living?"; "Throw away that truss"; "J. Edgar Hoover sleeps with his night light"; "Ralston sticks to your ribs"; "Take a eunuch to lunch"; "Report obscene mail to your postmaster. He loves it"; "How about a Leo Gorcey Festival?". Nobody seemed puzzled by this whacky brand of humor; audience response was fast and appreciative. They had come expecting something way out. The humor turned out to be comfortable.

According to the Establishment Theatre (interesting name for an Off Broadway house), the Mad Show is the only Off Broadway show playing to capacity every night.

4. The Evergreen Review. This avant-garde magazine recently launched a subway and newspaper campaign under the theme "Join the Underground." Though conculsive figures are still unavailable, Evergreen's circulation department contends that circulation and readership have picked up noticeably, as a direct result of this campaign. (A readership survey is under way, and JWT will see a copy in two weeks time.) It's tempting to make much of the underground theme as used here. But as this campaign is the first I know of by a little magazine to use relatively costly media, it is quite possible that Evergreen's circulation would have increased as a result of any serious advertising venture. This is conjecture, however. What is curious is that the concept "underground" attracted the general reader. Perhaps the restless American is now ready to take part of something as tribal, secretive and evocative of danger as "the underground."

5. Andy Warhol's New Discothèque. As advertised regularly in the entertainment section of the NY Times, this is "the Inevitable, with the Velvet Underground and Nico. Films & Lightworks. No minimum. 23 St. Mark's Place." The Village Voice ad is a touch more succinct, "Do you want to dance and blow your mind to Andy Warhol's New Discothèque THE EXPLODING PLASTIC INEVITABLE live ANDY WARHOL THE VELVET UNDERGROUND & NICOLE. Superstars ... ON FILM ONSTAGE ON VINYL ... Celebrities and movies including: Vinyl, sleep, eat, kiss, empire, whips, faces, harlot, hedy, couch, banana, etc. etc. All in the same place at the same time... 'New Pop Shrine' - NY Times."

The Inevitable is the new "in" discotheque. The flimsiness with which it was slapped together suggests that Mr. Warhol, or whoever put up the money, has no illusions about its permanence. Take away the projectors, the discotheque machine and the "lightworks," and in three hours the Inevitable could revert to the cavernous Polish music hall (the Dom) it always was. (The Velvet Underground, by the way, is also the name of a popular paperback that exposes some authentic American underground activities, namely the fetishist crowd - hetero & homo - who operate through ads in pulp magazines, through the mails, and chain [so to speak] telephone calls.) In Warhol's shrine (not underground at all, but three flights up) mink brushes vinyl and no fur flies. The crowd runs the full social gamut, from a hard core of sharply-dressed young mods jerking their elbows off on the dance floor (they could be anybody from any social background; the clothes and the dance democratizes them all) to sleekly dressed swells who seemed basically to have come to watch the show. Their polite interest in the proceedings, as they sipped drinks they had to get themselves on mead-hall tables covered with red and white cafe tablecloths, was something to behold. (Who was watching me, I wonder.) In any case, it wasn't Andy Warhol, who graces the palace with his presence, and seemed lost in some cool, sun-glass-protected world of his own. Nico, a beautiful German blonde in a suede slack suit drifted on stage and croaked unconvincingly three or four tired rock songs. The rest of the music, computer-fed, was a good deal better. Earsplitting, in fact, but that seems to be par for the course in discotheques. As the kids jerked, bottomed and philadelphia^d, three films were projected on the walls above the stage. One of them was solely concerned with an extreme close-up of a girl kissing a boy. This friendly movie continued for close to two hours. A second movie concentrated on a man sleeping. The center, largest panel was even more curious. In it, four people on the fringes of some mysterious get-together just sort of did nothing. An elegant girl in a black dress seems to feel threatened by the presence of a hovering male sex pot. Now and then this action is interrupted by two nearly-naked young men who come on and wrestle affectionately with each

other. The girl smokes distractedly. The sexpot opens her pocketbook; there seems to be a dead chicken inside. Sexpot wrestles with one of the bare-chested boys. He does this sadistically, in an off-hand kind of way. Girl smokes... What this movie was all about beats the hell out of me. In any case, you were not expected to be riveted to it, for a spotlight bounced off a silver reflecting ball occasionally shot flecks of light over the auditorium, over the movies, over the ceiling, over the dancers, obliterating any concentration on one single effect. I guess the total effect was supposed to be a total saturation of all the senses. With the music screeching, the dancers giving their all, the lights flashing and the movies running on unconcernedly through it all, this velvet underground seemed as perfect an example of the media being the message as anything I've ever seen.

Warhol's Inevitable seems almost exclusively frequented by flagrant heterosexuals. Two homosexuals in off-the-pelvis hipster pants arrived, downed a beer, studied the place, and left shrugging.

6. Off Off-Broadway. This catch-all can take in almost anything in the way of theatre. A far-out dialogue in a Village coffee house like the Café Cino. A play-cum-happening like the Automobile Graveyard in a Bowery loft. Performances of Saroyan, Chekhov, O'Neill in pocket theatres and studios from Riverside Drive to East 54th St. to Delancy Street. A happening Saturday night in a Brooklyn Heights church. Last week's Village Voice lists 24 Off Off-Broadway offerings; the week before, 21. They arrive on the scene, flash like fireflies, and disappear. Their one common denominator, now that Off Broadway has steadily grown commercial, is their extraordinary freedom of subject matter. This they can afford, being basically independent of audience support. Few tickets, when tickets are required, cost over \$2.00. (Off Off-Broadway favors the contribution.) This independence leads them to take great liberties with their audience. At the Bridge recently (which also runs underground movies), a man walked on stage, strung up a live chicken, and requested the audience to clear the seats and take positions in the aisle. They balked. He said the show wouldn't go on until they moved. They moved. Then, to the tune of "The Ballad of the Green Beret," the actor proceeded to set fire to the American flag. Present in the audience was a man in a dinner jacket, who shouted "Pinko ... fag!"; Nancy Weber of the New York Post, who, according to a reporter in the Village Voice, was "physically, spiritually, morally and aesthetically oppressed," (and left immediately); and a business executive who said, "I really don't know how I feel about this." Many enthusiastic Vietniks were noticeable in the audience. The lady who runs The Bridge has recently been summoned into court to explain why her license shouldn't be revoked.

Before the performance of the "Automobile Graveyard," at Bowery and Bleeker Street, the audience is asked to assemble on the staircase leading to the loft. All 17 of us waited patiently while a bearded gentleman scrutinized us mysteriously, and then one by one requested us to open the door, slip through the black curtain to the left, and find a seat somewhere. I was last to be chosen. I entered a huge black room encircled with folding chairs. A black-shirted, black sneakered tough holding a revolving red flashlight snarled menacingly as I felt my way through the curtain and to my seat. In the center of the loft stood a huge pile of automobile carcasses, bed posts, lamp posts, mattress springs, revolving searchlights, chicken wire, gear shafts and some unidentifiable objects that looked as if they had been fished out of the East River. I gathered, from what subsequently took place, that this junk heap was supposed to be a metaphor for

*More on
Attempts of
recreation
chamber to
about
pop culture -
Ent. morning
Hoffman,
etc.*

modern civilization, which was all right by me. It was an O.K. idea until they got pretentious about it. Aside from keeping your toes out of the way of circling motorcycles and ducking the exhaust fumes, the "Automobile Graveyard" was harmless enough, but by time the last earnest Christ symbol had been flogged and strung up by the belly over an automobile tire, my only thought was of escape.

At the popular Café Cino, on Cornelia Street in the Village, the entertainment was a lot more entertaining. On a tiny platform in the middle of a charming mess of a pop art coffee house, a woman and a young man act out "Why Hannah's Skirt Won't Stay Down." Hannah is a ticket taker in a Broadway movie house, a sad old whore in search of the handsome American smile she lost when she was an innocent thing in the Middle West. She meets this smile several times in the course of the evening in the form of a young swimmer who strips down to his bathing suit the second he hits the stage, and stays that way until curtain. (Actually, there is no curtain. He just picks up his trousers and leaves.) "Hannah" is a nice bawdy dialogue that fails, like the "Automobile Graveyard," when it goes pretentious with the big statement. An understandable temptation, since playwrights, I guess, are supposed to have something to say. In any case, the audience ate it up.

So far as I can tell, Off Off-Broadway is what Off Broadway used to be. An inexpensive method of exposing new dramatists to their own and each other's plays. The audience, except when it is involved in the working out of the play itself, isn't so very important. I'm not proposing that Off Off-Broadway dramatists do not write plays to be seen by the public, but that the present independent atmosphere lets them write the kind of plays they really want to write.

7. Marat/Sade. This production falls outside the purview of the underground, but it shares certain characteristics with Off Off-Broadway theatre. One is its total irreverence of the audience. No longer is the ticket holder the inviolate patron who must be coddled and amused. Marat/Sade assaults him, hoots him down, deafens him, dumps five disgusting scenes all occurring at once in his lap, sings dirty ditties to him, swears at him, talks over his head, and ends the barrage with an annoyingly sanctimonious message. And, insult upon injury, it doesn't even let him applaud this breathtaking piece of total theatre. The cast claps you down at the end, rather contemptuously. It's as if they were saying, "You are not the audience, you are in this, you are responsible for this play."

The second common characteristic is Marat/Sade's clear intent to shock. Marat gets out of his bathtub completely nude and walks with his buttocks to the audience upstage, where he finally, and daintily, wraps his blood-stained towel around him. Apparently, Marat was not nude in the London performances. Was New York shocked? Glenda Jackson, who plays the girl who assassinates Marat, discusses the audiences in the NY Times, "The matinee ladies are best, I think. Last week, during the scene in which Marat gets out of his bathtub stark naked, a group in the first row took out field glasses. It broke up the whole cast." Nobody can deny that this black-hearted play is an overwhelming success in New York. The night I saw it, on New Year's Eve, Barbra Streisand was sitting in the next row.

8. LSD, Peace-Marchers, Pot Parties. These areas I did not, for one reason or another, explore. In the case of LSD and pot parties, their exponents have presently gone underground. But when the political temperature is not hot, they are freely practiced on the campus and in the living room. My one presently respectable source indicated that where you'll find a Vietnik, LSD is but a whisper away. But present police crackdown or no (which doesn't seem a real moral reaction as much as new-broom-sweeping-clean), LSD and pot are easily obtainable in the Village, especially in the East Village.

9. Underground buttons. They abound. "Save water, shower with a friend." "Hands off Tim Leary!" "Dump Johnson in '68." "Make love, not war." "Pornography is fun." "I'm for sexual freedom." "Tax the churches." "Let's legalize pot." "Anarchists unite." "Equal rights for males." "Equal rights for homosexuals." What is most interesting about them is that these pins are sold as "underground buttons." The idea that they come from the underground has just as much appeal, if not more, than the actual message. And the people who sell them have recognized this.

10. Sex. No doubt about it, the young undergroundling takes sex for granted. Maybe this is what Henry Miller resents so much. The kids simply do not make a big thing about it. They practice it; they talk about it with wit; they are, in a manner of speaking, on top of the situation. In Henry Miller's day, sexual freedom, as he defines it, was pretty much underground. He helped ferret it out. Maybe what he misses so much now is the lost furtive quality. And nobody likes to have his fire stolen by a generation of cool teenagers.

11. Camp. I won't even attempt to define the word. Post-Sontag camp must mean all things to all men by now. I do know that it used to be the exclusive property of fairies, and in that sense, was an underground way of looking at things. Now everybody talks camp. It's an instant telegram that informs your audience that you're with it.

I am forced to conclude that the underground has caught on ... aboveground. But that the movement would have had considerably less impact without that intriguing tag "underground." Call it Theatre of Cruelty, and only the avant garde goes; call it an underground happening and people flock to it. The Evergreen Review is at heart an egghead magazine for the far-out literary few; as an underground entertainment it has a new cachet, a new lease on life. Andy Warhol's discotheque is a drafty, unappealing Polish music hall; add underground movies, get a rock group called the Velvet Underground to chant a weird song about black leather, and you've got the "innest" public establishment in New York. The magic lies in the word "underground."

Mystery, perversity, a confident discontent with the Establishment, an incredibly cool view of sex and drugs - you can find it all in the underground. And people are in a mood to flirt with the idea.