

Letter To Jonas

Jan 6, 1972

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Dear Jonas,

Okay, I managed this morning (again) to 'clear my throat' with you in that phone conversation; thus I can (once again) write -- straight, like they say . . . (and that IS the reason I occasionally have to run-up these phone bills -- that at least our voice tones have mingled sufficiently to permit me to imagine you humanly being reading this.)

I've maintained a 2½ year 'cool' (for me at least) apropos The Anthology Cinema. When you published that lie as to my reasons for resigning from the selection committee, I understood it as political expedient and let it pass. When various reports of P. Adams version of that series of events, which led to my resignation, came to me via friends and strangers, I essentially let those pass too. (The only major exception to this are some comments in those letters to Willard Van Dyke; but I had not imagined those letters would be published at the time I wrote them; and I had unfortunately forgotten those comments specific to Anthology Cinema until I saw them in print in Caterpillar.) For 2½ years I've avoided publicly telling the truth of those Anthology Cinema matters because I didn't want to in any way hurt Anthology or any of the people involved in it. I still don't. I consider it 'in the family' quarreling -- NOT the business of 'the neighbors', let alone 'the public'. If P. Adams had kept his 'cool' as well as I (who am supposed to be the hot tempered one), ~~the~~ things could have gone along right merrily 'underground' for years. He did not have to give any reason for my resignation from The Anthology Cinema; but he chose instead to print, in that opening brochure, a lie. You know very well that I did not resign because the voting procedure changed from unanimous to majority vote; in fact you know the opposite to be true: that change could never have occurred if I hadn't (albeit reluctantly) agreed to it. You know that I resigned because of P. Adams' insistence (with your 'backing' and everyone else's approval) that the film-makers be paid very much less for their films than had originally been agreed-upon, that thus The Anthology Cinema behave toward artists very much as every other son-of-a-bitching cultural institute in this society. I could not be, nor ever will be able to be, a party to such a scandal.

I do not think you meant to be a party to it either; but you felt harrassed by immediate 'practicalities' (as is your forte') and were not sufficiently committed to that aspect of The Anthology Cinema, at the time of my resignation, to support my stance. If you had, I don't think the quarrel between P. Adams and myself would ever have become as ultimate as it has. I let all that pass, too; because you did then become director of The Anthology Cinema and did change those contracts to film-makers according to the original intentions. But you did also 'read' me as too much 'the bad guy' of that situation and/or, most kindly in a later letter, as too much obsessed artist for board of directors meetings or institutional involvement, etc. Okay -- that's the general 'truth' which everyone swallows these days . . . that The Artist is too "crazy" or some-such, too "personally involved" etcetera, to function normally in the society -- NUTZ, I say: The Society, as they call it these days, is simply too corrupt to properly countenance the only members of it who canNOT play politics (that game of lies) and who do, yes, obsessively, insist upon The Truth (as is the traditional necessity of Artists in the whole recorded history of Man).

I have to take this matter up in detail with you, Jonas, because we

met head-on, in Maya Deren's apartment, quarreling over this issue: you had just published an article in Film Culture which suggested that you could not imagine how I, and other independent film-makers, even managed to buy groceries, etc. . . . remember? Then around a decade ago I had to write an angry letter to you in answer to your insistence we were all happy Fools, as Artists, together in some rollicking bedlam of your friendly imagination . . . that letter published in "Metaphors On Vision". Well, I think it's time again for you to re-think this rather sub-conscious proclivity of yours. I think it's a piece of European brain-washing, recent as The Industrial Revolution, and specifically designed to exclude The Truth from public affairs, thus to exclude The Artist from all possible practical usages of him. I think we have a REAL chance to defeat that lie on this continent; and I think that if we DON'T defeat it, then the coming revolutionaries have every right to chop our heads off along with those of the opposing political party, for we will simply have become the adornment of fascism and our works but the trappings of sensibility.

Which brings us to the soap-opera-like question: can any institute in this country actually operate to the benefit of The People? -- can the Anthology Cinema, for instance? . . . My experience is that an institute can only benefit the people in general when it is sufficiently opposed by an equally strong institute -- as for instance in a 'price war', etc. The current trouble with The Anthology Cinema is that it is not sufficiently opposed. Oh, I know it is OPPOSED alright, but by institutes that have essentially nothing to do with what The Anthology Cinema is doing. You remember from the first how opposed I was to the word "The" in front of "Anthology. In fact, it is a distinct 'white hope' of mine that in the renaming of the institute, "The" was dropped altogether -- "Anthology Film Archives" its hopeful name. Why then do I continue to refer to it as The Anthology Cinema? . . . because, of course, I am dealing with problems of that earlier time which have not yet been resolved . . . and because it is sadly THE only institute of its kind. It needs to hatch 'children' who can effectively oppose it. Otherwise we have created a monster worse than Hollywood to sit on future generations.

I remember very early in this 'game' of Anthologizing saying that if The Anthology Cinema accomplished nothing else it would at least exist as a more worthy enemy of the young film-maker than Hollywood, that film-makers were trapped in a social and aesthetic position as mediocre as would be the case if young painters only had Hallmark Greeting Cards to set themselves in contradistinction-to or 'off-from' -- and that sentence is bound to hang on a preposition as surely as the whole art-sensibility of this nation . . . Castelli getting to operate more and more like Hallmark Greeting Cards -- Poets up against The Academics being like playing ping-pong with an armless man who's bought the referee. Okay, Anthology Film Archives as young film-maker's Public Enemy # 1 . . . except that to accomplish this it must be seen as such; and it must be strong enough to maintain its position ^{against} youthful or any other onslaught. A war of words is what's currently needed; and let me, who helped bring this institute into being, be among the first to fire an effective salvo against its temporal stance. Let me be the first to declare that it, like all institutions in this society, was bound from its beginning to become and has by now very MUCH become A Political Machine

Now I know you think all this outburst is due to the fact that (with one 3 min. exception) all my films of the last 2½ years has been 'tabled' (as you so politically put it) by The Selection Committee. Let me surprise you by acknowledging that this is certainly TRUE -- I am thus fussed by that form of rejection to have awakened from the torpor acceptance always engenders . . . DO take these matters personally -- that I am tired of being polite and politic with respect to an institute that has caused me more agony these last several years than all the others put together. In fact the whole purpose of this letter, Jonas, is to defend The Personal Approach (what you may call Artist's/Fool's crazy obsessive behavior, etc.) as the only reasonable one on earth. All my experiences are, yes, PERSONAL. I have no other way to react than PERSONALLY; and I do know that any other supposed way of reacting is a LIE, as dangerous as that Journalistic evasion wherein newspaper reporters, editors, etc., purport to give us Facts IM-personally -- an obvious impossibility and therefore a 'lie in the teeth' of the whole endeavor . . . which conveniently forgets that Journalism begins, as a form in history, with the private journals and diaries of men so personal as Boswell -- bah humbug to all those lofty ideals of above-it-allness, beyond morality IMPishness, which simply serves to hide the most outrageous selfishness in Man and to screen Judges of all kinds, and to permit moral irresponsibility. P. Adams Sitney obviously hates me; and this hatred is certainly going to influence his judgement of my work, however well he may manage to conceal it (conceal it from himself, in fact). New Yorkers are obviously going to be biased toward aesthetics native to their region. The films which are created thru me do come into being through every interstice of my living. They do not float down from some heavenly loft beyond person. They are exercises of "my faculties at large", as Robert Duncan puts it. Similarly, there IS an east coast aesthetics; and it is essentially alien to its west coast counter-part.

You vehemently assert that it is not true that Anthology Film Archives has favored east coast film-makers to west; and you use as your argument that there are as many or more west-coast films, as east, in the Archives. And right there, in that argument, you show your contempt for the situation. It did not even occur to you that perhaps a much greater number of filmic works-of-art were being made on the west coast, now did it? You assumed that a balance of numbers would achieve the correct proportion, would in fact demonstrate more than fairness. It is a typical New Yorker attitude. It is sadly true that most U. S. artists flee the mid-country, finding life too hostile to their endeavors, and run to one coast or the other. I am of the opinion that a greater number of them settle west, settle there more free of the market considerations (which dominate even underground Manhattan behavior) and thus accomplish a great deal more. I have spent about an equal amount of living time on both coasts and thus feel my opinion backed by some experience in the matter. The art-inhibiting drive to push one's camel thru the needle's eye of manhattan does not seriously shape west coast aesthetics. You'll have to take my word for that; but what you won't have to take my word for, what is aside from either your or my opinion on the subject, is the simple fact that Anthology Film Archives is shaped by an effective 'bloc' (subconscious or not) of three New Yorkers as distinct from and/or against one Austrian and one American westerner. It is an imbalance; and the selections demonstrate it. It does not even manage a polar perspective on this nation, let alone The World.

Do you understand, Jonas? (for if anyone ^{is} to understand I trust it will be you), it does not snow in either L.A. or S.F. Men and women there do not feel thrust of death-threat along their skin surfaces, do NOT huddle

by the stove with their books (at least not in that extremely intellectual sense winter's wrath provokes). They look toward The Orient, rather than Europe. They are up against The Pacific. Their cultural push, like every other westward American drive, has been stopped in its tracks. Their backs are up against young mountain ranges and/or Death Valley. Those who run there and stay there, the same as those who are born there, do not tend to spell culture with either a capital "C" or "K". You can manage to vote fairly easily for a New York orgy film, all cozy in its symbols and thought-patterns of European structure; but you find it impossible to vote for its outdoor west coast equivalent. Am I being clear enough? -- perhaps too simple in the way I'm putting it; but words can anyway never suffice to give you or any other man the equivalent of living in and around San Francisco and learning its aesthetics in your bones.

The simple fact of this matter IS that ORIGINALLY The Anthology Cinema was supposed to be composed of at least two west-coast representatives in addition to yourselves. I was asked, for economic reasons, to be one of those representatives (that in itself being rather silly considering where I live); but since my necessary resignation, James Broughton is clearly outnumbered (and he does complain to me about it continually). It is of course fashionable in your group to consider yourselves so UNIVERSAL in your approach to The Arts that such regional^{ism} considerations as I'm suggesting are ~~above/below consideration~~ beneath the dignity of aesthetic judgement -- bah humbuggery, I say to that. You are not able to stand in the eye of The Cosmos when you propound your theories and cast your votes. You do, like every other man and woman alive, stand rather firmly rooted to a specific place of your living on this earth. Best keep that always foremost in mind. Well, Jones, you do have it better in mind than all the others, having been up-rooted yourself. Thus there's more than usual hope you'll hear my plea. I would specifically request you to look at reproductions of the cave paintings of Tun-huang, boarder town of the Chinese empire, yet located on The Silk Road to The West, etc; and compare these paintings from, say, first century A.D. thru, say, The T'Ang Dynasty with paintings from ANYwhere else in China of comparable period. This is a fair test of the east/west coast situation in The United States today. You'll find the influence of whatever current Emperor's city strongly reflected in those cave paintings; but you'll also find a mix, in those caves, with Indian art, naturally enough, as well as Mongol and even the far west eventually. You'll also find Tun-huang art often oddly reactionary (in comparison to, say, the discoveries of certain 'court' painters of Ch'ang-an of the 7th and 8th centuries.) The Tun-huang painters seemed almost to turn their backs upon the great T'ang Renaissance and to draw rather upon the colors (certainly) and shapes of India. The Tun-huang caves did not hatch historical names such as Li Ssu-hsun, Li Chao-tao and Wang Wei; but they rather formulated (through their work) various aesthetics in contradistinction to the more advertised discoveries of 'the capital'. They did NOT benefit from the PR job of The Emperor; and thus we did not benefit historically from THEIR discoveries until very recently. I think as you look at reproductions of these caves you'll see that the landscapes of the Tun-huang painters are more comparable (7th, 8th centuries) to the late works of Jackson Pollack than to those of Wang Wei. Thus, no one (however universal) aesthetic will serve to judge the qualities of both.

The historical weaknesses in selecting films for Anthology Film Archives are Documentary and Comedy. I have touched on these in previous letters. In fact, much of my life these last three years has been directly prompted by aesthetic confusions I discerned when I was voting along with the rest of you. I have picked up loose threads in my earlier films (such as "Window

Water Baby Moving" and "Lovemaking") and centered my concentration upon the creative possibilities of Document In Art (to give it a ~~name~~ term which relates the endeavor to say Pound's "Cantos", Stein's "Stanzas In Meditation", Ives' symphonies, etc., the collage, Charles Olson and so forth); and the bulk of "Scenes From Under Childhood", "The Weir-Falcon Saga", "The Machine of Eden", "The Animals of Eden and After" have all increasingly reflected this consideration. The three Pittsburgh films are the most obvious recent flowering of some sense about Document which excludes the "ary" usually tacked onto film examples of such. "The Peaceable Kingdom" is perhaps the most perfect example. "Door" might almost be called an emblem of this endeavor. I have also taken up the topic "Comedy Tragi/Comedy" for this whole year's series of lectures at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. Within a year, I hope to do a series on Document from The Lumiere Bros. right straight thru to your Diaries. I am working on it now.

Okey, I think the board of directors of Anthology Film Archives are 'tabling' a lot of works recently made, notably Ernie Gehr's, Andrew Norin's, Frampton's recent films and mine, along with Ricky Leacock's, etc., because you never DID get an historical fix on Document which was worth a damn. You're losing the drift, one of the most exciting film-making drifts of the moment, and one of the most traditional American drifts from the very beginning. If you've got to come at it via Levi-Strauss, you've got the cart before the horse; THUS you've got Jacob's "Tom Tom..." but not "Soft Rain". You've still apparently got Comedy 'for the laughs'; THUS you can't really vote at all (viz: "Selected Features" or "shorts" "one cycle per program"). You can't apparently see Hindle or Schofill at all, leaving no hope for Michael Stewart or Myron Ort . . . (and here I could go on and on naming names representing west coast sensibility totally opaque to the ice of the east). Even you know that your view of even Japan is a disaster . . . (not to more than mention the rest of The Orient? -- etcetera?)

Ah well, you'll say it's easy for Brakhage to talk. He sits on his mountain (I'm actually in a valley, or gulch would be more accurate) and doesn't realize the actual practicalities (I'm actually eye-deep in them, I mean in the specific sense of getting the car started 40 degrees below zero, living daily battling The Public School System without bringing it down on my kid's heads, soothing rightists, defending hippies, hating both, raising five children -- how's that for practicality ... I mean, feeding and clothing and helping and letting 'em go take their risks, being continually torn to pieces by all of it yet somehow holding it together, loosely, loosely, yet carefully --) ah well . . . I tried to play politics with you guys on that board of directors; and I did surely fail at that. But I think you, Jones, do actually respect the quality of that failure too. Whether you do or not, I think I've at least earned the right to say my say about Anthology Film Archives. I've taken 2 1/2 years of malicious slander very privately -- i.e. that I was only part of Anthology long enough to get my own films well voted in . . . how MUCH that lie hurt! -- or this most recent one reported of P. Adams, that I was kicked out of Anthology because I wanted more money for my films than the other film-makers # . . . when in fact you know the opposite to be true -- and on and on. I'm tired of it all. I want at least the rights of the down-trodden outsider. Those are my OLD films you have in Anthology. I've moved on. P. Adams balked at "Lovemaking" years ago, voted against it, the same as Parker Tyler balked at "Anticipation of the Night". I want to stop pussy-footing around about it. I want to lecture on The Document In Art at the one or two Elgin shows; and I want specifically to attack the short-comings of criticism (P. Adams and Anthologies included) at the Millenium show (to keep it 'in the family',

-- i.e. among film-makers who do so much have to DEAL with the trouble Anthology and current criticism will be giving them . . . that is I want to give my backing, and every piece of 'front' I've got too, in support of much that you've 'tabled' and that recent film writing has totally ignored -- but that is to say NOT aid enemies of all of us in so doing, NOT fuss the god damn mud slinging public); and anyway, that seems the sensible way for me to go about it . . . I mean, the Millennium IS a specific haunt of film-makers, right? -- I'm asking you.

Do you realize, Jonas, that I received more critical attention, and more specific pieces of fine criticism, of my early ~~films~~ in the first five years (when we were supposed to be suffering a drought of it) than I have on my last five year's work? I had more new films shown in New York City in those first five years than I've had of new work these last three. Somethings terribly amiss, amidst all this complacency, that no one seems to be noticing. The needle's STUCK. I want to point this out; and I want to suggest specific remedies. I care most about the films of my making, YES!; but you know me well enough to understand that's just a beginning. My attentions have always immediately branched out to embrace every film-maker whose works I could possibly stomach, and to worry about those whom I didn't seem able to appreciate. It is the same with me today, except that I feel curiously hamstrung somehow apropos Anthology Film Archives. I loved it too much, P. Adams too much too apparently. This is a tangle I've got to break. HOW in the HELL is a young film-maker going to break through all this FRONT? In the old days it was at least common knowledge that the film artist was suppressed. Today people seem to think that problem has been solved -- oh my GOD . . . we haven't so much as scratched the surface yet.

I don't think you ever understood why I put so MUCH energy into the question of payment to the film-maker. P. Adams reads it as outright greed on my part. Let me try once again to be specifically clear. I want every artist to have the normal possibilities tangent to or within middle-class American living; and I want him or her to HAVE those possibilities as an artist -- yes, with a small "a" . . . (if we can but ONCE knock that statuesque CAP off the term, that "A" reserved only for the lamented dead, THEN we'll have something); and I want this MOST specifically and simply to give us all a chance at a flowering of the arts such as ONLY this country can evolve -- want something, in other words, TOTALLY free of all that damned courtliness and patronage systemization out of Europe. I want artists to have the peculiar possibilities of being variously sunk-INTO (and/or ONLY personally sticking out of) the mainstream of living on this continent. That's my dream; and it is the only practical solution I can imagine to avert the catastrophe inherent in this cultureless/headless monster The United States has specifically become. And I want this because, of course, I want it for myself -- do you hear me?: I want the same possibilities of any plumber, candle-stick maker, whatever . . . and do NOT want the dangling carrot of Art Riches, dead or alive . . . do NOT hanker after the powers of the court painter, etc. The truth still is that I make most of my living from lecturing, teaching, etc., and most of even my rentals from the fact that I play The Artist for all these culture-conscious creeps who wouldn't know a vision OR a hole in the ground. And we manage, out of all this 'extra-curricular' effort, a lower middle class income. It CAN, yes, be done; but now how to give this to ALL the artists AS ARTISTS! . . . that's the question.

Well, you've followed my track of living all these years; and you do surely know something of my dedications; but I feel slandered too much these days to resist reminding you. A lot of young people, these days, assume (from my reputation, etc.) that I'm rich; and they do write demanding money. It is sad. They will learn. I remember very well the day when I was told that Stravinsky had to conduct, which he hated, in order to maintain a middle-class living; and I had just finished reading a book which called him "the most pampered Western Artist".

Well, this letter is running out of steam; and Jane has just come home all blossoming with cheer that I want to go and join in; but it has been great 'talking' at you like this all day. You at least know rather thoroughly my intentions for coming to New York; and I have the hope (as always with you) that this letter will be personally useful

Blessings,
Stan

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