Introduction

Since nearly all of us are acculturated to expect certain types of experiences in movie theaters and on television, one of the valuable functions of the multifaceted independent cinema that has developed alongside the popular cinema during most of its history is to challenge our expectations. When we see a film that surprises or shocks us, we are forced to question the implicit assumptions about cinema our expectations encode. Of course, this process is inevitable within any area of film history. Even in the standard genres of commercial film, viewers are inevitably comparing each new instance of horror film, Western, and suspense thriller with previous instances and with the sense of the genre's history they have developed. What gives some forms, and some particular instances, of independent film their "critical" edge is the *extent* to which they force us to question our psychological/social/political investment in the conventional. A new instance of a horror film usually confronts, at most, a limited number of the expectations we bring to the genre—the way in which characters are developed or plots resolved, or the type of special effects used, or the overall look of the events dramatized—but an independent film with a powerful critical edge might challenge our assumption that a film must include characters and plot or must present events within images that confirm Western perspectival conventions or must include recognizable imagery at all. Indeed, one of the signals that one is experiencing a powerfully critical film is the conviction that what we're seeing isn't a *real* movie, even though it is obviously being projected by a movie projector in a movie theater.

A particular critical film can relate to the conventional cinema in

various ways. My distinctions in Volume 1 were determined by the degree to which a particular film, or the work of a particular filmmaker, invokes the conventions in order to challenge them. In some instances, filmmakers use just enough of the elements employed in conventional movies to create an aura of the conventional, but use these elements in a consistently challenging way. George Kuchar's films often reveal characters enacting melodramatic plots, but his articulation of conventional elements—the acting, the costumes and sets, the continuity, the characters' motivations—is so unlike big-budget Hollywood films that for most viewers Kuchar's films are as much about the disparity between the two levels of film practice as about the issues he pretends to explore. Not only do we realize the limits of Kuchar's economic means and see the effects of these limitations in his films—we are also reminded that the very extensiveness of the resources available to Hollywood directors constricts what big-budget directors can express and how they can express it.

Other filmmakers invoke fewer cinematic conventions. Some replace the interest in fictional characters and scripted plots with personal explorations of their own lives, particularly dimensions of their lives usually considered unfilmic—too mundane or too outrageous for a conventional film. Carolee Schneemann's frank, erotic revelations of her sexual interactions with lover James Tenney (in *Fuses,* 1967) exposed—and continue to expose—not only her own personal life, but the limitations of the conventional cinema's portrayal of heterosexual eroticism. Still other filmmakers bring forward dimensions of the conventional cinema that are so fundamental that most moviegoers have rarely, if ever, been conscious of them as conventions. In his films of the early seventies, Taka Iimura eliminates all photographic imagery and explores the impact of durations of time in the movie theater, using a variety of systems of measurement. Iimura's films simultaneously create new, "minimal" forms of film experience, and they focus on the issue of duration in a way that enables us to think more extensively about the nature and implications of the conventional cinema's manipulations of time.

The critical dimension of the films discussed in *A Critical Cinema* is certainly not the only interesting aspect of those films. The long history of independent cinema has produced hundreds of films that can sustain a viewer's fascination regardless of whatever relationships exist between these films and the commercial cinema. While some independent filmmakers admit their interest in critiquing what they've experienced in commercial movie theaters and on television, others see their work as developing out of traditions that have little or nothing to do with the movie industry and its products. In fact, some of the filmmakers I include under the rubric of "critical" have never been regular moviegoers.

My investment in the idea of critical cinema comes from being a teacher. Indeed, "critical cinema" is not meant as a descriptive term that distinguishes some intrinsic dimension of the particular films it is used in connection with; it's a pragmatic term meant to suggest a way of using a broad spectrum of independent films that, in general, remain one of film history's most underutilized educational resources. I cannot imagine teaching effectively without exposing students to an intertextual discourse of the broadest possible variety of film experiences, including those "avant-garde" or "experimental" films that provide the most extensive and deepest shocks to viewers whose definition of cinema is primarily a product of commercial entertainments in the theater and on television. Of course, another practical value of including a range of independent film in film courses at all levels of formal film study (and in the many other sectors of academe that can profit from them) is the maintenance of forms of film production that remain financially marginal: the more often independent films are rented—for whatever reason—the more vital independent film production is likely to be.

My decision to become involved in an ongoing interview project developed from my recognition that those who are interested in using independent film as a critique of mainstream cinema and television are likely to appreciate the historical and ideological context extensive interviews with filmmakers can provide. Because "critical films" are unconventional, they almost inevitably create problems for audiences, even audiences that consider themselves open to new film experiences. And while comments by filmmakers about the particular films they make can never be the final word—as Hollis Frampton says in Volume 1, "It's obvious that there are things that spectators can know about a work, any work, that the person who made it can ever know" (p. 57)—their attitudes about what they've made and their revelations of the personal, social, and theoretical contexts out of which particular works developed can be of considerable interest and use to the viewer trying to come to terms with difficult films. Further, discussions with filmmakers usually reveal the degree to which the critical edge of particular films is the result of conscious decisions by filmmakers interested in cinematically confronting the conventional and to what degree it is a projection by programmers or teachers interested in mining the intertextual potential of the films. And finally, in-depth interviews with filmmakers over several years help to develop a sense of the ongoing history of independent filmmaking and the people and institutions that sustain it.

Volume 2 of *A Critical Cinema* extends the general approach initiated in Volume 1. All the filmmakers interviewed for this volume could be categorized in terms of how fully or how minimally they invoke the conventional cinema and the system of expectations it has created, or to be

more precise—since nearly all the filmmakers I interview make various types of films—each film discussed in this volume could be ranged along an axis that extends from films that invoke many conventions—films like James Benning's *11 × 14* (1976), Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1986), and Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't* (1987)—only to undercut the expectations they've created, to films that seem to have almost no connection with the conventional cinema, but nevertheless explore a dimension of the film experience that underlies both conventional and alternative film practice: Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), which focuses on the cone of light between projector and wall, is a good example.

My method as an interviewer has also remained the same. I have sought out filmmakers whose work challenges the conventional cinema, whose films pose problems for viewers. Whenever it has seemed both necessary and possible, I have explored all the films of a filmmaker in detail and have discussed them, one by one, in as much depth as has seemed useful. In a few recent instances, however, my interest in interviewing a filmmaker has been spurred by the accomplishments of a single film. I interviewed Anne Severson (now Alice Anne Parker) about *Near the Big Chakra* (1972) and Laura Mulvey about *Riddles of the Sphinx* because of the excitement of using these films in classes and the many questions raised about them in class discussions. In most cases, I have traveled to filmmakers' homes or mutually agreed-upon locations and have taped our discussions, subsequently transcribing and editing the discussions and returning them to the filmmakers for corrections. My editing of the transcribed tapes is usually quite extensive: the goal is always to remain as true to the fundamental ideas and attitudes of filmmakers as possible, not simply to present their spoken statements verbatim, though I do attempt to provide a flavor of each filmmaker's way of speaking. The interviews in *A Critical Cinema* are in no instance conceived as exposés; they are attempts to facilitate a communication to actual and potential viewers of what the filmmakers would like viewers to understand about their work, in words they are comfortable with.

While my general approach as an interviewer has remained the same, the implicit structure of Volume 2 differs from that of Volume 1, in which the interviews are arranged roughly in the order I conducted and completed them. In Volume 2 the arrangement of the interviews has nothing to do with the order in which they were conducted. Rather, the volume is organized so as to suggest general historical dimensions of the film careers explored in the interviews and to highlight the potential of the work of individual independent filmmakers not only to critique the conventional cinema but to function within an ongoing discourse with the work of other critical filmmakers.

The audience investigates the projector beam during McCall's Line Describing a Cone *(1973).*

In general, the interviews collected here provide a chronological overview of independent filmmaking since 1950, especially in North America. The first three interviewees—Robert Breer, Michael Snow, Jonas Mekas—discuss developments from the early fifties and conclude in the late seventies (Mekas), the early eighties (Breer), and 1990 (Snow). The next two interviewees—Bruce Baillie, Yoko Ono—review developments beginning in the late fifties (Baillie) and early sixties (Ono). Anthony McCall and Andrew Noren discuss their emergence as filmmakers in the early seventies and the mid sixties, respectively. The Anne Robertson and James Benning interviews begin in the mid seventies and end very recently. And so on.

Another historical trajectory implicit in the order of the eighteen interviews has to do with the types of critique developed from one decade to the next. Of course, the complexity of the history of North American independent cinema makes any simple chronology of approaches impossible. Indeed, each decade of independent film production has been characterized by the simultaneous development of widely varying forms of critique. And yet, having said this, I would also argue that certain general changes in focus are discernible. One of these is the increasingly explicit political engagement of filmmakers. The films of Breer and Snow emphasize fundamental issues of perception, especially film perception. From time to time, one of their films reveals evidence of the filmmaker's awareness of the larger social/political developments of which their work is inevitably a part, but in general they focus on the cinematic worlds created by their films. The focus of the films of Mekas, Baillie, Ono, and McCall is broader: the worlds *in* their films are somewhat more directly engaged with social/political developments outside their work. In several of Mekas's major films, for example, the filmmaker's real homeland (Lithuania) is ultimately "replaced" by the creation of an "aesthetic homeland" that exists within the films themselves and within the social and institutional world documented by the films. Mekas may "really live only in my editing room," but his life there is, as his films make clear, contextualized by the personal/ethnic/political history out of which this current "real life" developed.

With few exceptions, the remaining interviews in Volume 2 reveal a growing interest in national and global concerns. Some interviewees—Benning, for example, and Ross McElwee and Su Friedrich—make films that reveal in some detail how their personal lives are affected by larger social and political developments; Friedrich, in particular, uses the process of filmmaking as a means of responding to these developments. Severson, Mulvey, Yvonne Rainer, and Trinh T. Minh-ha have used filmmaking to explore the gender politics that underlie contemporary life and thus inform much of the popular cinema, and Trinh and Rainer in particular relate the disenfranchisement implicit in these gender politics to other forms of disenfranchisement: to the undervaluing of ethnic heritages within the United States and of the cultural practices of "Third World" peoples. Godfrey Reggio and Peter Watkins explore the possibility of a global cinematic perspective, in films that attempt to demonstrate the interconnectedness of all cultures and their parallel problems and aspirations.

The other general organizational principle that informs *A Critical Cinema 2* is my arrangement of the interviews so that each successive pair of interviews (the mini-interviews with Severson, Mulvey, and Rainer are treated as a single piece) reveals a general type of response to

the conventional cinema *and* articulates a set of similarities and differences between the work of the paired filmmakers. My hope is that the implicit double-leveled interplay will make clear that the contributions of the filmmakers interviewed are not a series of isolated critiques of the conventional film experience but are parts of an explicit and/or implicit discourse about the nature of cinema. For those interested in teaching or programming a broader range of film practice, a brief review of the implications of a few of my pairings might make the complex and simulating nature of this discourse more apparent.

Breer and Snow came to filmmaking from the fine arts, having already established themselves as painters and sculptors (Snow was also a musician). Neither uses filmmaking as a means of developing narratives peopled by characters with whom viewers do and don't identify. There are, at most, references to conventional narrative and character development in their films—in some instances, just reference enough to make clear that the conventions are being defied. The focus of Breer's and Snow's films is the nature of human perception. Breer's animations continually toy with our way of making sense of moving lines and shapes. At one moment, we see a two-dimensional abstraction, and a moment later a shift of a line or a shape will suddenly transform this abstraction into a portion of a representational scene that disappears almost as soon as we grasp it. In *Wavelength* (1967) and *Back and Forth* [←→] (1969), Snow sets up systematic procedures that allow him to reveal that certain types of events, or filmstocks, or camera speeds cause the same filmed spaces to flatten or deepen, to be seen as abstract or representational. Both filmmakers confront the conventional viewer's expectations with considerable wit and frequent good humor.

But while Breer and Snow critique some of the same viewer assumptions in some of the same general ways, their films are also very different. Nearly all of Breer's films are brief animations of drawings and still photographs. Indeed, Breer is a central figure in the tradition of experimental animation, which has functioned as an alternative to the commercial cartoon and its replication of the live-action commercial cinema. With the exception of his first film, Snow has made live-action films, some of them very long. While Breer's films move so quickly as to continually befuddle us, Snow's films often move so slowly as to challenge our patience. Both filmmakers confront our expectations about what can happen in a certain amount of film time, but they do so in nearly opposite ways.

The second pair of interviewees mount a very different kind of critique of conventional cinema. Mekas was a poet before coming to the United States after World War II, and once he arrived here, he trans-

posed his free-form approach to written verse into a visually poetic film style (a style that often includes written text). Baillie, too, came to see himself as a visual poet, translating traditional literary stories and rituals (the legend of the Holy Grail, the Catholic Mass, *Don Quixote*) into new, cinematic forms. Both filmmakers were, and remain, appalled by the conformist tendencies of American society, by what they see as the denigration of the spiritual in popular culture, and by the more militaristic dimensions of modern technology—tendencies so often reflected in the popular cinema. Both have produced a body of films that sing the nobility of the individual, of the simple beauties of the natural world, and of peaceful forms of human interaction. And both have embodied their personal ideologies in institutions (Mekas: the New York Cinematheque, the New York Film-makers' Cooperative, *Film Culture,* Anthology Film Archives; Baillie: Canyon Cinema) that have attempted to maintain the presence of alternative cinema in a nation dominated by the commercial movie and television industries.

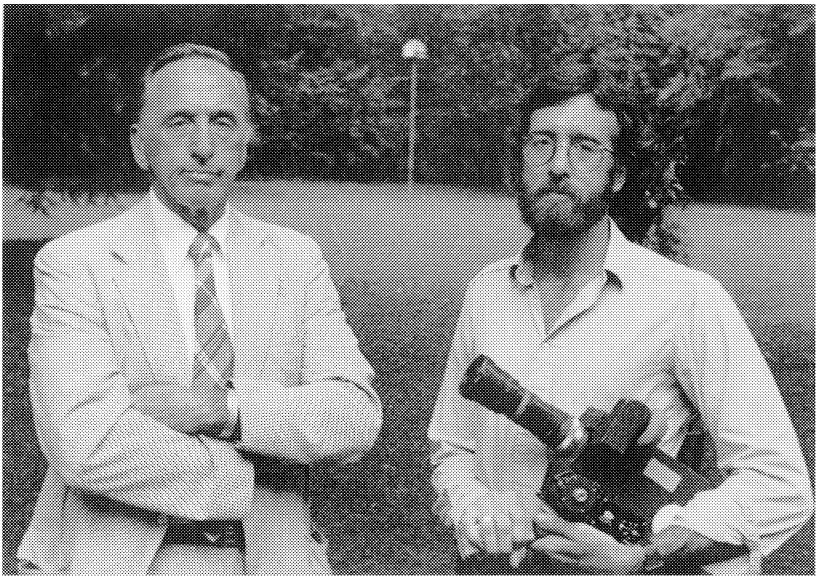
While they have a good deal in common, their work is also quite distinct. Mekas has made a permanent home in New York. His primary influences are European; indeed, one of the central quests of his films has been to maintain his Lithuanian heritage and his contact with European culture. His film style is often wildly free-form; his gestural camera movements, quick editing, and single-framing create a sense of childlike excitement about the people and places he records. His films are sensual but avoid the erotic, and in recent years they have celebrated the joys of the conventional nuclear family. Baillie's filmmaking began when he moved to San Francisco and often reflects the Eastern influences that were so pervasive on the West Coast during the sixties. While he too developed a hand-held personal style, its tendency has always been toward the meditative. Indeed, with Yoko Ono, he was probably the first modern filmmaker to explore the potential of the single-shot film, in *All My Life* (1966) and *Still Life* (1966). Baillie's films are both sensual and erotic; they seem less involved with searching for a homeland and a home than with chronicling the film poet's physical, spiritual, and erotic travels.

Neither Yoko Ono nor Anthony McCall have made films in over a decade, but their films of the late sixties and seventies use minimalist tactics as a means of providing new forms of film experience. Ono's earliest films are either single-shot slow motion portraits of actions that challenge viewers' assumptions about the correct "velocity" of film action, or serial examinations of the body that challenge the commercial film industry's fetishization of "filmic" (i.e., erotically marketable) parts of the body for periods of screen time that conform to conventional audiences' film-erotic "needs." McCall's early films are as minimalist as

Ono's. In *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) and his other "Cone films," as well as in *Long Film for Four Projectors* (1974) and *Four Projected Movements* (1975), McCall focuses the moviegoer's attention on the projector beam (the movie projector is located in the room during these films) for relatively long periods—*Line Describing a Cone* lasts thirty minutes; *Long Film for Four Projectors,* six hours—as a means of calling attention to the cinema environment and its sociopolitical implications: what does it mean that nearly all of our public film viewing involves our sitting in rigid rows of chairs looking up at the shadow products of an apparatus kept out of the view, and control, of the audience? Both Ono and McCall later collaborated with others on films that had quite overt political agendas: Ono and John Lennon made *Bed-In* (1969), a documentation of their Bed-In for peace in Montreal; McCall worked with Andrew Tyndall on *Argument* (1978), a feature-length exploration of the political implications of men's fashion advertising and of mass market media practice in general, and with several women and men on *Sigmund Freud's Dora* (1979), an examination of the gender-politics of a famous Freudian case.

Ono and McCall differ in the specifics of their politics—Ono's films are internationalist, McCall's implicitly or explicitly Marxist—and in terms of the viewership they address in their films. At the beginning of her career, Ono was part of Fluxus, an international group of artists functioning outside the mass media and in defiance of accepted art practice and institutions, but as her resources grew, so did her interest in addressing a much larger audience: *No. 4 (Bottoms)* (1966) was a widely reported happening in England, and the later Lennon-Ono collaborations aimed at the huge pop music audience and beyond. *Line Describing a Cone* and McCall's other early films were designed for small groups in art gallery contexts (indeed, the Cone films and *Long Film for Four Projectors* can be understood as "light sculptures"), and his collaborative films were designed as catalysts for small discussion groups in big-city art-ghetto screening spaces, or in academic settings.

The volume's final pairing reveals similarities and differences in two filmmakers who have worked toward a "global" approach to filmmaking: Watkins most obviously in the 14½-hour *The Journey* (1987) and Reggio in a trilogy of films, the first two of which—*Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) and *Powaqqatsi* (1988)—have been completed. Both filmmakers have explored the relationships of industrialized and "developing" nations and have emphasized the degree to which modern industrialized society has tended to undervalue regional and ethnic heritages, the natural environment, and the meaningful participation of the individual. Both filmmakers have circled the globe to create a far broader spectrum of people and places than the commercial cinema provides and to focus



Ross McElwee and his father (Dr. Ross McElwee) during the shooting of Backyard *(1984).*

their viewers on these people not as backdrops for the fictional adventures of Western swashbucklers, but as individuals with concerns, ideas, and accomplishments worthy of our sustained attention.

Reggio and Watkins differ radically in their understanding of the "correct" production process for such work, and in their assumptions about how their finished films should engage viewers. Reggio functions in the main like a conventional, commercial director: he raises adequate capital to finance his films, then travels to locations with his crew to record the societies that interest him. The individual films are cut so as to fit comfortably into the commercial exhibition system (indeed, he has received distribution assistance from industry luminaries Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas). Reggio does not assume that viewing his films will initiate change in any direct fashion, but assumes that the images he presents and the implicit ideology of this imagery will affect at least some viewers' assumptions about the societies depicted. Watkins's central concern in making *The Journey* was to demonstrate an alternative to current media practice. The film was shot by local crews assembled in locations around the world, with financing raised locally by production groups. And Watkins's hope—a hope that, thus far, has not come to fruition—was that the unusual nature of his film might instigate an international, activist network of those who had produced *The Jour-*

Su Friedrich and her mother (Lore Friedrich), during the shooting of The Ties That Bind *(1984).*

ney and those who came to see it which would directly address the problems articulated in the film.

There is no point in trying to enumerate the similarities and differences between the filmmakers in all eight pairings. Indeed, none of the summaries I have included does justice either to the many ways in which the pairs of filmmakers critique conventional cinema or to the conceptual fertility of the individual pairings. Additional relationships will be evident in the introductions to the particular interviews, as well as in the interviews themselves. And in any case, my pairings provide only one way of thinking through the work of the filmmakers interviewed. Many other arrangements of the filmmakers could instigate similar discussions.

While the interviews in this volume of *A Critical Cinema,* and indeed in the two volumes together, document a considerable variety of filmmaking approaches and offer a composite perspective on a substantial period of independent film history, the limitations of the project are, no doubt, obvious. For one thing, my interviewing has been confined to North America and, with the single exception of Michael Snow, to the United States. This is not to say that no other nationalities are represented: Snow, Mekas, Ono, McCall, Mulvey, Trinh, and Watkins are not of American extraction. Nevertheless, nearly all these filmmakers made most of the work we discuss while living in the United States, and many have become citizens or long-time residents. Further, even if one were

to accept the idea of an interview project that confined itself to the United States, my failure thus far to interview African-Americans remains problematic.

This general limitation of *A Critical Cinema* is a function of the history of my personal development as a chronicler of independent film history. My choice of interviewees has always been motivated by the difficulty I have had, and that I assume others must also have, understanding particular films and kinds of films, or to be more precise, by a combination of fascination and confusion strong enough to energize me to examine all the work of a given filmmaker in detail. That for a time nearly all the filmmakers whose work challenged me in this way were Americans is, to some extent, a function of the limited opportunities for seeing non-American independent cinema in this country and of my limited access to (and energy for) foreign travel, but it is also a result of the remarkable productivity of American independent filmmakers: as consistent as my interest has been, I am continually embarrassed by the many apparently noteworthy films produced in this country that I've still not had the opportunity to see.

That so many of the filmmakers I have finished interviews with are European-Americans does, of course, reflect issues of race and class—most generally, perhaps, the implicit access or lack of access of various groups to the time, money, and equipment necessary for producing even low-budget films (though, of course, some of the filmmakers I have interviewed were and remain economically marginal). Fortunately, the ethnic diversity of independent filmmaking has expanded in recent decades, as has our awareness of earlier contributions ignored or marginalized. Like many people, I am struggling to develop an increasingly complete sense of what has been, and is, going on. This struggle has had a major impact on the final definition of this general project. My assumption now is that ultimately *A Critical Cinema* will be a three-volume investigation, and that the third volume will complete a passage from the local to the international: "international" meaning multinational *and* intranational. In the modern world, after all, every geographic region is international in the sense that it includes people of a variety of ethnic heritages. Currently, several interviews for Volume 3 are underway, including discussions with John Porter (Canada), William Greaves (U.S.A.: African-American), Yervant Gianikian/Angela Ricci Lucchi (Italy), and Artavazd Peleshyan (Armenian). In the coming years I expect to interview filmmakers of an increasingly broad range of heritages and perspectives.

Of course, no survey of critical filmmaking—especially one produced by a single individual—can ever hope to be "complete." The immensity of this field and its continual expansion in so many directions is what

made this project intriguing at the outset and what continues to make it exciting for me. My goals are simple: to share my fascination with some of the many remarkable contributors to critical moviemaking I have had access to, as a means of piquing the interest of filmgoers, film exhibitors, and teachers, especially those who can bring a remarkable body of films to a larger audience, and to provide those who have already developed a serious interest in critical forms of film with a more complete context for this interest.