

the lively arts in the New Boston

The Tolerant View Of the Avant Garde

By SARA DAVIDSON
Staff Reporter

"I don't think we give credit to the person who doesn't have enough time to go to avant-garde happenings." It didn't seem possible. That such words were coming from the soft-speaking mouth of a figure who has been integral in the American avant-garde since the late 1940s.

Gregory Markopoulos, branded enfant terrible of underground art by those who do not know him or his work, but who is in reality a gentleman-artist, soft-mannered, tastefully groomed and terribly approachable, sat sipping hot chocolate on a bright Boston Wednesday in the cavernous Hungry Pilgrim.

He gazed about at surrounding tables of businessmen's lunches and pronounced them potential fellow travelers.

"People who come to an avant-garde film for the first time on a lark or a dare often end up being the best friends and the most devoted," Markopoulos said.

There's an element of audience participation in experimental work that doesn't exist in commercial art, he said. "Perhaps this is what you see as an unwillingness to criticize, but what's really happening is that there's a different kind of spectator today as well as a different kind of cinema."

The new spectator will sit through film after film that's just an unsuccessful experiment, Markopoulos said. "We in New York at the New American Cinema Group have never refused to show a film. That way we don't have any censorship."

In Boston and Cambridge there are now several groups offering experimental films, drama and music. At Odd Fellows Hall in Cambridge, Boston University student Tom Chionini runs experimental films every Friday night.

Each week there is a scramble to pay the fairly stiff admission charge to grab folding chairs set up before a small, home-movie type screen. Each week there are grumbles and sour grapes on the way out, laments of "What a waste," or, "I don't get the point." But these laments inevitably come back for more, and more.

Some of them are aspiring film-makers, who, like Markopoulos, say, "I see things even in the worst films that I can apply to my own work." But for the majority there's another motivation—the special feeling of being directly involved in the forefront of art, of participating in the experiment.

The Caravan Theater of the American Friends Service Committee, which brings avant-garde drama to coffee houses, churches and schools around the Hub, raises the audience participation level one notch by inviting comment and discussion after the performance.

A Malden couple who braved the Bohemian atmosphere of a North End coffee house to see the Caravan's revue, "Pause and Begin Again," was surprised and flattered to have its opinions sought and responded to by the cast.

"I'm not really qualified," the man half-apologized as he headed for his car. "I don't think it was a great Broadway-type show, but the kids are doing what



GREGORY MARKOPOULOS

they feel, and we kind of enjoyed seeing what they're up to these days."

This couple somehow intuitively fell into the spirit that is demanded of the audience at an experimental program. The failure or resistance to switch over from the critical eye to the permissive eye is the major cause of dissatisfaction and misunderstanding among spectators.

The normal criteria used to judge whether a performance was "worth seeing" must be set aside when witnessing forms nouveau.

As Markopoulos puts it: "If the person experimenting realizes it isn't a finished work, I'll agree to excuse critical judgment. If it seems competent and has a film form, it's like looking at a painting. You may not like the theme or technique, but you don't criticize it as not being a painting."

Many would argue that this willingness to tolerate all experimentation in art results in the apotheosis of fads and fetishes. Boston, by tradition, has been stand-offish to innovators and gracious when status arrives.

But Markopoulos is anticipating a warm courtship with the New Boston. "I consider this a second home when it comes to showing and making experimental films," he said. He is presently shooting a film on Beacon Hill and along the Charles River, and financing it with the take-ins at local showings of his previous work.

"These people who don't have time to keep up with the avant-garde can become terribly interested in the work no less," he said. When they come to a happening, they realize they won't get the same kind of entertainment they expect from commercial performances. But they may see something in its initial form that will years later be a widely used and accepted form.

"I think," Markopoulos said with a soft grin, "I'll be spending a lot of time in Boston in the future."