

Teenage Moviemaking in the Lower East Side

The Rivington Street Film Club, 1966–1974

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In the opening of the eighteen-minute 16mm film *The Growing of a Young Filmmaker* (Raymond Esquilin, 1969), a New York City teenager describes his new passion: “I like shooting a gun.” Over a long shot of a young Puerto Rican male walking away from the Chelsea Vocational School in Manhattan, the narrator goes on to share that he recently dropped out of high school due to difficulties with his classes and teachers, noting that some “wouldn’t even let me wear a moustache.” The introduction of a troubled teen with a penchant for crime is revealed to be deliberately misleading when the young man explains, “And by a gun, I mean a camera. A camera is the best gun in the world.” In the next shot, the same teenager sits on a bed with his prized Bolex camera and offers a friendly greeting: “Hi, I am Raymond Esquilin.” Esquilin, also the film’s director, then discusses his development as a filmmaker by introducing clips of the films he has made with the support of the Young Filmmaker’s Foundation (YFF).¹ His work ranges greatly in style and genre, from a stop-animated fantasy, *The Dream* (c. 1967–68), to a live-action exploration of crime and regret, *The Thief* (c. 1967–68).² Esquilin proclaims that he is most proud of his latest film, *The Camp* (c. 1968), which juxtaposes the clean, spacious grounds of an upstate retreat with the squalor of a Lower East Side city slum, depicted by the young filmmaker as a dangerous cesspool of junk-filled empty lots and lecherous old drunks. According to Esquilin, *The Camp* displays his best camera work, but he is sure that his next project will be even better because, he proclaims, “this is one school I won’t quit.”



FIGURE 13.1. Raymond Esquilin and his Bolex. Frame enlargement from *The Growing of a Young Filmmaker* (Raymond Esquilin, 1969).

Esquilin made *The Growing of a Young Filmmaker* in 1969 along with friends and fellow filmmakers Alfonso Sanchez Jr. (camera) and Jesus Cruz (sound) at a filmmaking workshop founded in 1966 by Rodger Larson in New York City's Lower East Side. With funding from the Neighborhood Youth Corps, a Great Society program that supported education and employment opportunities for low-income sixteen-to-twenty-one-year-olds, art teacher-turned-film instructor Rodger Larson founded the workshop in the kitchen pantry of the University Settlement House, established in 1896, on the corner of Rivington Street and Eldridge.³ The location had been the flagship of the settlement house movement in the United States, boarding wealthy, educated social reformers to help settle impoverished immigrant communities populating the Lower East Side at the turn of the century. By the 1960s, the University Settlement House functioned primarily as a community center, providing recreational facilities and social services to the area's low-income and immigrant populations—or migrants in the case of Puerto Ricans. Prior to taking the position at the University Settlement House, Larson had introduced filmmaking into his art classes at the Mosholu-Montefiore Community Center and the 92nd Street Y, both working-class and middle-class community centers at the time, but he recognized that the goals of his

Settlement House/Youth Corps program were different: “in sharp contrast to my other projects, the emphasis here was on rehabilitation for ‘hard-core’ high school drop-outs through the use of film.”⁴ The young men who made *The Growing of a Young Filmmaker* were part of the first cohort to frequent the Settlement House workshop, which the participants named Film Club. By 1968, Film Club included twenty teenagers from the neighborhood who regularly attended, most of whom identified as Puerto Rican, and ten others from various backgrounds who traveled from other parts of the city.⁵

Defined geographically by Houston Street on the north, Grand Street on the south, Bowery on the west, and Essex Street on the east, the Lower East Side became and remained the locus of Film Club’s identity and its mission throughout its nearly twenty-year life from 1966 to 1984.⁶ With the goal of setting up a permanent, independent youth filmmaking center, Larson teamed with educator Lynne Hofer and Chilean filmmaker Jaime Barrios to found the Young Filmmaker’s Foundation in 1968. They moved the workshop a few blocks from the Settlement House to storefronts at 8 and 11 Rivington Street with financial support from the New York State Council of the Arts and the Helena Rubinstein Foundation.⁷ While Film Club would eventually attract a diverse group of male and female filmmakers to the area from throughout the city, ranging in age from preteen to young adult, its origins as a Youth Corps/Settlement House initiative placed the older Puerto Rican teens like Esquilin, Sanchez, and Cruz at the forefront of the instructor’s mission to prove “that filmmaking meant more to many teen-agers than any of the creative arts being offered to them.”⁸ In turn, these young men became the case studies and the spokespersons for the creative, communicative, and rehabilitative potential of youth filmmaking throughout New York City and state.

Esquilin’s story, as told in *The Growing of a Young Filmmaker*, is personal, yet typical of the first Film Club members: a young man turned off by school, marginalized by his socioeconomic status, and isolated by racial and cultural difference, finding a new source of pride and motivation through filmmaking. Funded by Eastman Kodak, *The Growing of a Young Filmmaker* gave the teens their first opportunity to work with sync-sound in the service of producing “a vivid case study of the impact of filmmaking on a youngster.”⁹ The sponsorship also meant a larger budget for the teens to accomplish their objective, providing a degree of professionalism. Film Club participants usually shot silent, black-and-white, five-to-ten-minute 16mm narrative shorts, like *The Thief* and *The Dream*, which were to be written, directed, and edited by a single filmmaker. Although the films that Esquilin produced at Film

Club are important to his story, it is the transformative effect of filmmaking—an activity that can turn a high school dropout into a skilled movie director—that provided the impetus for the Kodak-sponsored film. *The Growing of a Young Filmmaker* thus offers a generative introduction to Film Club, presenting visual evidence of the program's success through the presentation of one young filmmaker's accomplishments, while its production and funding sources point to the popular discourses and institutional support behind what *Variety* once referred to as the “phenomenon” of “ghetto filmmaking” in the late 1960s.¹⁰

As the YFF grew, assisting with the development of youth filmmaking workshops throughout the city and state, the Rivington Street Film Club would serve as the organization's model for other youth film initiatives to emulate. New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs named Larson as the city's film consultant and commissioned his first book on filmmaking, *A Guide for Film Teachers to Filmmaking by Teenagers* (1968).¹¹ The following year, E. P. Dutton published Larson's expanded mass-market guide for aspiring filmmakers, *Young Filmmakers*, which he coauthored with Ellen Meade. The Film Club members and their works figured prominently in Larson's books, providing examples of filmmaking techniques and production methods for other young people who encountered the films and Larson's books at both a local and national level.¹²

The production and exhibition history of Film Club provides a remarkable example of “useful cinema”—in this case for teens, by teens—which Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson have conceptualized as “a body of films and technologies that perform tasks and serve as instruments in an ongoing struggle for aesthetic, social, and political capital”—a definition that applies fully to the YFF and the works produced at Film Club.¹³ But the story of Film Club is first and foremost about the perceived utility of filmmaking beginning in the late 1960s when, as David E. James has noted, “if only for a moment, the concept of popular culture was redefined from one of consumption to one of praxis.”¹⁴ The YFF promoted filmmaking as an activity that could bridge racial and socioeconomic divides through a common interest, while the Rivington Street Film Club provided an example of how film production could be tailored and adapted to address the needs and concerns of a specific community through its focus on the Puerto Rican youth of the Lower East Side. In this context, Film Club's history broadens our understanding of the way that small-gauge, nonprofessional filmmaking came to be seen as a tool for addressing complex urban and racial problems.

Youth Filmmaking and the Ghetto Arts

The Young Filmmaker's Foundation grew from a small workshop in a Settlement House pantry to a citywide movement that gained national attention because its status as both a youth filmmaking initiative and a minority arts program placed the organization at the intersection of several strands of thought regarding the value of media arts and communications in the late 1960s. The proliferation of youth filmmaking programs during this period stemmed from what Michael Zryd has described as "the powerful and widespread idea that film was the new mode of individual youth expression."¹⁵ While the white, male university student became emblematic of the generation's new film enthusiast—drawn from the countercultural champions of the avant-garde, New Left filmmakers, and Hollywood's so-called film school generation—this popular image overshadows the diversity of the period's youth film movement, which included women, minorities, and children of all ages. During this time, there was a demonstrable concern for the number of hours kids were watching television or the latest "box office smash"—with "pseudo-espionage, beach party, and fantasy" films cited as egregious examples—which motivated the development of media literacy initiatives and production instruction.¹⁶ One of the underlying ideas for this movement was that as media makers, young people would develop a more active and responsible relationship to film and television.

Larson, Hofer, and Barrios stressed the communicative potential of youth media making, and the desire for young people "to make their own statements through film," but the idea of empowering children and teenagers through filmmaking took on an additional significance when programs were implemented for teenagers struggling not only with the generational divide but also with racial, cultural, or linguistic difference.¹⁷ The urgency to find new approaches for reaching minority youth was especially felt in cities at a time when events such as the Watts Rebellion of 1965 and the 1967 civil disturbances in Newark, and the volatile period following Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968, brought national media attention to the economic disparity and the growing frustration of African Americans living in inner cities.¹⁸ In "A Decent and Orderly Society," Marsha Orgeron sheds light on a series of educational films made during this period (1966–70) that revealed "a real desire, perhaps even a sense of desperation, for educational films that would speak to, rather than alienate, a black (and presumably urban) audience."¹⁹ The YFF took the execution of the idea a step further: instead of relying on films produced for this demographic, they addressed

young urban minority audiences through films made by teenagers from within their communities. Making movies offered young people who had been cast as dropouts, addicts, and small-time criminals to both see themselves and present themselves as complex human beings who dealt with the challenges of poverty, identity, and youth with passion, creativity, and humor.

However, the films made by Film Club participants were neither professionally produced nor created with an explicitly educational intent. Although some of the filmmakers made social problem documentaries and politically motivated films, just as many drew inspiration from popular film and television—creating their own versions of the “pseudo-espionage, beach party, and fantasy” films. As first works, Film Club projects frequently left narrative gaps and could be inconsistent in tone. It was up to the YFF organizers, then, to interpret and creatively program the films for nontheatrical venues such as schools, social service organizations, and libraries; city-sponsored screenings; and film festivals. The filmmakers contributed to the programming and exhibition process by introducing their films at screenings geared toward youth audiences, foregrounding their learning process and personal development through filmmaking. The screenings performed double duty when presented for an audience of the filmmaker’s peers: providing relatable content for discussion and a means for recruitment.

Larson, Hofer, and Barrios sought and created exhibition opportunities for the completed works and assisted with the development of new filmmaking programs throughout the city and state, many of which were implemented for minority outreach. Part of this work included joint ventures with New York’s elite cultural institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, and the New York Film Festival to screen films and host filmmaking classes.²⁰ Hofer, the designated liaison to schools and libraries, also spearheaded Movie Bus—a vw bus rigged to project films for young audiences that traveled throughout the city during the summer months, blasting pop songs from its sound system in city parks and streets to attract a crowd. A YFF report claimed that over fifty thousand people were able to see the films and that Movie Bus “brought to the street youngsters who had never seen themselves or their activities as screen-worthy.”²¹ Hofer also introduced Movie Box, a mobile exhibition site in city libraries for films that had been transferred to 8mm cartridges. Movie Box allowed audiences to program, play, and review their favorite films—a novelty and convenience in an era before readily available commercial playback machines.²²

By creating both filmmaking programs and interactive exhibition programs to engage and entertain minority youth, the YFF contributed to and benefited from New York City and state initiatives to decentralize the arts as part of a larger strategy to address inequality and to deter civil uprisings. As Mariana Mogevilich's "Arts as Public Policy" and Susan Cahan's *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* have shown, art decentralization programs became one way that New York City's government and its elite cultural institutions worked to address race- and class-based tensions in the city—by bringing art to underserved areas through mobile exhibition sites and community-oriented art spaces, such as the Studio Museum in Harlem and El Museo Del Barrio, and through exhibitions designed to make Manhattan's central institutions, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Lincoln Center, more inclusive.²³ The YFF not only set up a permanent neighborhood art space geared toward disadvantaged minority residents but also brought a diverse group of films and filmmakers into the city's top cultural institutions. Additionally, Movie Bus and Movie Box brought youth-made art to underserved neighborhoods and the outer boroughs. For the YFF, this mobility gave their current filmmakers a platform and helped to inspire future filmmakers. For the city, programs in city parks and streets helped to "keep the city cool" in the summertime, which officials described in their fiscal reports as a necessary form of riot prevention.²⁴

The Potheads: Making Movies in the Lower East Side

Movie Box, Movie Bus, and other film screenings in schools, libraries, and community centers were organized, most often, for young African Americans and Puerto Ricans throughout the city, but Film Club itself was attuned to the geographic and culturally specific needs of the Lower East Side. The midcentury mass migration of Puerto Ricans to New York City, and the subsequent loss of manufacturing jobs, especially in the textile industry, contributed to high rates of unemployment and poor prospects for economic mobility for the city's Puerto Rican communities by the mid-1950s.²⁵ In this way, Puerto Ricans faced many of the same socioeconomic obstacles as the city's African American population, including substandard housing, underemployment, and neglected neighborhoods. However, Puerto Ricans in New York also experienced distinct challenges due to cultural difference and, for some, a language divide. For many, life in New York also gave Puerto Ricans their first brush with racism.²⁶ City leaders in the 1950s and early 1960s, including Mayor Robert Wagner and urban planner Robert Moses,

blamed the recent wave of Puerto Rican migrants for rising rates of juvenile delinquency, street gangs, and crime, without recognizing how their own policies contributed to economic disparity and slum creation.²⁷ While these officials blamed young males, in particular, for creating what they referred to as “The Puerto Rican Problem,” social services organizations such as settlement houses and Mobilization for Youth, an antipoverty youth organization headquartered in the Lower East Side, worked to find ways to address the problems that New York’s Puerto Rican communities were actually facing.²⁸

DeeDee Halleck ran the neighborhood’s first youth filmmaking workshop from 1960 to 1966 at the Henry Street Settlement House, just a few blocks from the University Settlement House. Her film about the program, *Children Make Movies* (1961), was screened and distributed by Jonas Mekas, champion of the underground film scene, at the Film-Makers’ Cooperative.²⁹ The Ford Foundation purchased a copy of Halleck’s film around the time that it funded Mobilization for Youth in 1962.³⁰ Mobilization for Youth also experimented with a film collaboration between an adult filmmaker, Roberta Hodes, and a group of African American and Latino children and teenagers who acted out a scenario about poverty and social isolation. The resulting film, *The Game*, earned an award at the Venice Biennale. The interest in youth filmmaking from both the area’s avant-garde scene and social service organizations set the stage for Larson’s arrival and the development of Film Club.

According to Larson’s recollections, the University Settlement House workshop began with a group of young Puerto Rican men, each around seventeen years old, who had come to the University Settlement House to play basketball.³¹ Larson asked if they would like to shoot a film. The boys all looked to their unofficial leader, Alfonso Sanchez Jr., who took the camera in hand. After showing them how to thread the film and use the light meter, Larson gave the group a one-hundred-foot roll of film (approximately three minutes) and the freedom to take the camera, unsupervised, to the roof and experiment. They returned thirty minutes later with their first film, completed through in-camera editing. They needed a title, so with a Scrabble set available at the Settlement House, they spelled out and shot the final title card, which reads, “The Potheads in ‘Let’s Get Nice.’”³² They added a soundtrack, and their first 16mm project was in the can. Larson has called *The Potheads*, “not only a film, but a documentation of the beginning of Film Club.”³³

In a loosely *vérité* style, *The Potheads* is an attempt by Sanchez and his friends Jesus Cruz, Ismael Otero, Raymond Esquilin, Rafael Esquilin, Ivan Quilis, Benny Hernandez, Willy Mercado, and Angel Martinez to evoke the



FIGURE 13.2. Frame enlargement from *The Potheads* in “Let’s Get Nice” (Alfonso Sanchez Jr., 1967).

feeling of being stoned through cinematic technique. *The Potheads* also explores the relationship between identity and geography through the juxtaposition and layering of images. Double exposure is used to place the transparent bodies of the young men over the New York City skyline and an American flag, making a subtle commentary about the tenuous relationship between the Puerto Rican males and their status as New Yorkers and as citizens. The use of superimposition, cutaways, and rapid in-camera editing suggests that Sanchez had received at least some training in 16mm production beyond film threading and light reading, but the simplicity of the theme (let’s film ourselves getting stoned on the roof) and the lack of story or structure marks *The Potheads* as a preliminary Film Club project.

As the program expanded, guidelines were implemented that required more planning. After learning the basics of 16mm production, new members were encouraged to write, cast, direct, and edit their first film. The members of Film Club did not pay dues, but they did have to prove their commitment to the workshop by showing up, seeing their films through from start to finish, and assisting other filmmakers on their projects. The teachers would

act as producers and approve projects before turning over equipment; however, Larson emphasized that the only requirement was for the filmmaker to come up with an original idea and a plan for execution, which could range from a “detailed description of the movie to a few hieroglyphics scribbled hastily.”³⁴ Nearly all of the young men who appeared in *The Potheads* completed at least one or two original works. Sanchez Jr., Cruz, and Raymond Esquilin became three of the most prolific Film Club regulars, along with a few others, including Alfonso Pagan and Luis Vale, who joined around the same time.

The works by the first cohort often bear a striking resemblance to one another. This is in part due to technical and aesthetic parameters—the majority of films are short, black-and-white, 16mm works, shot silently with soundtracks composed of popular music (a mix of jazz, rock, and Latin fusion). Most were filmed in close proximity to the workshop: on the street, in nearby parks, on rooftops, and inside the Film Club locations. But in addition to technical similarities, the films by this first group display an unmistakable machismo. Women and girls, when they occasionally appear onscreen, are victims of violence and drug abuse, or the catalyst for a street fight. Due to the location shooting and the prominence of drug use, knife fights, and gang activity, some of the films reproduce negative stereotypes associated with the slums. Still others draw on tropes common to popular film and television depictions of New York City’s rougher neighborhoods and are reminiscent of—if not explicitly derived from—*The Naked City* (both Jules Dassin’s 1948 film and the 1958–63 television series) and *West Side Story* (Jerome Robbins, 1961). Films like Jose Colon’s *Flash* (1968), a sci-fi adventure shot at an upstate location, offer notable exceptions, but the typical film presents a loosely structured narrative, often a day-in-the-life scenario of teenagers on the streets of New York City.

Jesus Cruz’s *A Park Called Forsyth* (1967) exemplifies the mix of social message and pop culture references common to many of the early works. Cruz’s film opens with a title card that reads, “The story you are about to see is about boys who have nothing to do but destroy themselves in the city.” The film presents a tough-looking group of Latino males, all wearing identical white T-shirts and jeans, hanging out on a park bench until a violent dispute over a girl leads to a full-fledged rumble. In his book *Young Filmmakers*, Larson profiles *A Park Called Forsyth* as an impressive work of visual storytelling and describes Cruz’s film as a “nostalgic look at the gangs that have now passed into folklore and myth” that “also demonstrates how boredom can lead to gratuitous violence.”³⁵ The theme, as interpreted by Larson, provided

a social message ready-made for postfilm discussion and offered pursuits like filmmaking as an antidote to the problems of isolation and boredom. The film's stylistic nod to popular films about street gangs made it a popular choice for the young people who saw the film at Movie Bus and Movie Box screenings. For example, Hofer quoted one fan who called *A Park Called Forsyth* her favorite because it was “the *West Side Story* of the Lower East Side.”³⁶ *The Potheads* and *A Park Called Forsyth* were among the films described by Hofer and Barrios as the “crowd pleasers,” particularly with minority audiences, which they attributed to the audience's identification with the people and places that appeared in the films and the familiar generic styles and narrative tropes employed.³⁷ These films often had a moral or topical message—even *The Potheads*, which otherwise celebrates marijuana, ends with an image of a young man hanging from a noose; however, the meanings were often obscured by the more entertaining elements—especially in the case of filmmakers experimenting with fight scenes, car chases, and other stunt work.

In other cases, filmmakers developed an interest in creating explicitly political cinema. Jaime Barrios, who was not much older than his students, may have influenced some to create socially conscious documentaries about the neighborhood, as he did in his own films, *Chileans in New York* and *La Calle*, a film about Rivington Street that he was working on in 1968.³⁸ Commissioned works gave advanced filmmakers additional resources to draw attention to community issues or local services (examples include Homemaker's Association, American Youth Hostel, New York City Parks Department/Sixth Street Block Association). Alfonso Pagan and Luis Vale's *Life in New York*, a rare color sound film funded by CBS, presents the trash-filled streets of the Lower East Side in comparison to the clean, well-manicured sidewalks of Park Avenue, not unlike Esquilin's approach for *The Camp*. The film is a documentary that incorporates a staging of someone shooting heroin on the street and a more fanciful heist scene. Though the filmic re-creations of street crime draw similarities to gang films like *A Park Called Forsyth*, Pagan and Vale make clear that their film is a statement to the local Puerto Rican community. The film opens with a voice-over—first in Spanish and repeated in English—that introduces the neighborhood to the outsider while making a plea to local residents: “this is the ghetto of the LES; one of many slum neighborhoods in New York. This community must unite to do something about this filth.” Using political language familiar to Third World Cinema, Pagan claimed that they wanted to make a film about three of their main concerns—garbage, theft, and drug use—using shock tactics to “inspire his neighbors to take action.”³⁹ Pagan expressed that the discomfiting elements

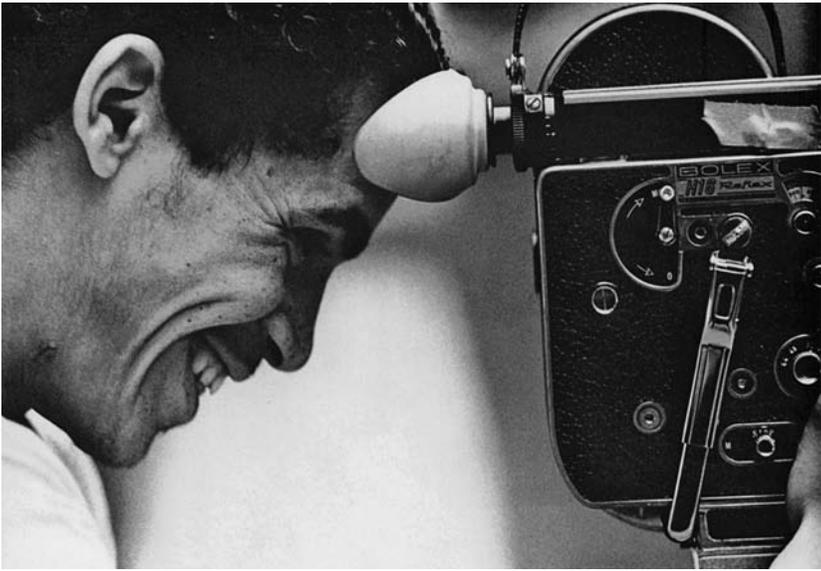


FIGURE 13.3. Alfonso Sanchez Jr. behind the lens. Photo by Michael Fredericks Jr.

of the film were necessary to inspire protests, declaring, “Puerto Ricans should learn a lesson from the blacks if they want a better life.”⁴⁰

Pagan, who received another commission from the city’s parks department shortly after completing *Life in New York*, would become one of the foundation’s great success stories. According to an organizational history, the Puerto Rican-born youth had a passion for filmmaking but showed little interest in learning English, due to his wish to retain his cultural identity and eventually return to Puerto Rico. Through his experiences with YFF, however, he began to improve his English skills and became a salaried film teacher with the organization.⁴¹ Alfonso Sanchez Jr., who directed *The Pot-heads* and shot *The Growing of a Young Filmmaker* for Esquilin, had a history of drug abuse but emerged as Film Club’s most promising artistic filmmaker. Sanchez’s films also explore the neighborhood, revealing its bustling streets along with its less desirable elements of drugs and trash, but he was singular among the group for his more avant-garde approach and counter-cultural themes.⁴² Although he would later fall on hard times (statements by Larson imply a drug relapse), for a brief period Sanchez demonstrated that filmmaking could prove transformative for even the hardest of cases.⁴³

Sanchez’s aptly titled final film, *The End*, called “the true dream” in the shooting script, further developed his subjective, experimental style hinted



FIGURE 13.4. Frame enlargement from *The End* (Alfonso Sanchez Jr., 1968).

at in *The Potheads*. While Film Club works most often screened for young audiences in nontheatrical settings, *The End* crossed over into art house and film festival circuits. In addition to playing in special programs at the Cannes Film Festival and the New York Film Festival, *The End* also won a silver medal at the Tenth Muse International Contest, Amsterdam. Like *The Potheads*, *The End* begins with a celebration of marijuana, but this time firmly rooted in countercultural themes and imagery. The film visualizes a young man's anxieties, stemming from the deadly temptations of street life and the looming threat of the Vietnam draft. Sounds from a motorcycle continuously revving its engine accompany a rapid-cut montage of hand-rendered images of a menacing man on a motorcycle, a Lyndon B. Johnson caricature, protest signs, and drug paraphernalia. A young man lies on his bed smoking a joint and slips into a dream state. A series of episodes unfolds through his reverie, first joyous but increasingly ominous. The protagonist walks through burned-out abandoned lots, filled with a bizarre collection of debris—including two giant stuffed giraffes, simultaneously comic and heartbreaking amid the urban decay and trash. While this slum imagery was typical of what could be seen in social problem documentaries and urban

exploitation films, *The End* creatively makes use of and reimagines urban blight. Sanchez may be the only person in New York who benefited from the infamous garbage strike of 1968, discovering in the excess a visually provocative home for a flashy devil wearing a white tuxedo.

Conclusion

Although Film Club developed and, in fact, thrived as a minority-focused art- and skill-training program during a time when the government (federal and state) and philanthropic foundations actively supported novel and experimental programs created for African American and Puerto Rican youth, Larson and the Young Filmmaker's Foundation would push back against the segregation, and in some cases romanticization, of ghetto filmmaking. In the introduction to his first filmmaking guide, created for the city's Department of Cultural Affairs, Larson wrote, "Too often, because of the newness of the idea, film making is viewed as a panacea for all social ills. 'Telling it like it is' does little to enrich the lives of the young filmmakers. When the novelty of presenting slum conditions in film wears off, the effectiveness of film making with ghetto youth should remain."⁴⁴ Alternately, by promoting Film Club as a model workshop and bolstering its first members as experienced young filmmakers for others to follow, Larson worked to desegregate youth filmmaking by reversing the norm—foregrounding the experiences of a marginalized group to introduce filmmaking to a more diverse community of interested teens who attended screenings in the city, whether on an underserved street or at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. YFF implemented this integrated approach on a national scale with the introduction of the Youth Film Distribution Catalog, which allowed educational organizations across the country to rent Film Club projects alongside films from other New York workshops including the 92nd Street Y, Union Settlement House, Mosholu-Montefiore Community Center, and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

In Larson's mass-market guide, *Young Filmmakers*, stories of Film Club members like Esquilin, Sanchez, Pagan, and Cruz appeared alongside a coed group of white, middle-class filmmakers from the Upper East Side and African American filmmakers in Harlem to demonstrate to other young people how to draw from their own experiences and surroundings for ideas, and employ a range of strategies and techniques for making their personal statements through film—regardless of whether their specific interests were rooted in exposing the conditions of inner-city poverty, protesting Vietnam, or navigating teenage dating rituals. In putting the films

and the filmmakers of Film Club to work, the Young Filmmaker's Foundation reframed the educational use of film as a mode of practice, rather than one of consumption. By emphasizing the value of making movies, while also utilizing the completed works as evidence of the program's success, as teaching and training tools, and as artistic works to be discussed and appreciated, they empowered young people to be students, producers, artists, and educators.

The organization's most visible and well-funded period was 1966 to approximately 1974. However, the Film Club and the Young Filmmaker's Foundation outlasted the ghetto film phenomenon, soldiering on after Great Society funding dried up and remaining a presence in the downtown film scene for the next two decades, in large part by adapting their language regarding the function of filmmaking (from communication to rehabilitation to skill training) without significantly changing their methods or limiting the possibilities available to the young filmmakers.⁴⁵ Today, these films are best viewed within the context of the larger YFF Youth Film Distribution Catalog in order to see a broader picture of amateur and student filmmaking in the 1960s, and the intersections of the youth film craze and minority arts initiatives. But the individual works produced in the early years of Film Club should also be considered on their own terms. Through these short films, we encounter a significant but underseen contribution to New York City's cinematic history, and, in the words of youth film instructor DeeDee Halleck, "some of the best images of the Lower East Side in the 1960s."⁴⁶

FILMOGRAPHY

All available films discussed in this chapter can be streamed through the book's web page at <https://www.dukeupress.edu/Features/Screening-Race>.

The Dream (c. 1967), 7.5 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Film Club. DIRECTOR: Raymond Esquilin. DISTRIBUTOR: Youth Film Distribution Center. ACCESS: New York Public Library, Reserve Film and Video Collection, Young Filmmaker's Foundation Collection (original elements only, no access print currently available).

The End (1968), 9 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Film Club. DIRECTOR: Alfonso Sanchez Jr. DISTRIBUTOR: Youth Film Distribution Center. ACCESS: New York Public Library, Reserve Film and Video Collection, Young Filmmaker's Foundation Collection. Access print available for onsite screening. NOTE: Won silver medal, Tenth Muse International Contest, Amsterdam. Also screened on NET, "Film Generation," in special programs at Cannes Film Festival and the New York Film Festival, and as part of a Cineprobe series at the Museum of Modern Art.

Flash (1968), 11 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Film Club. DIRECTOR: Jose Colon. DISTRIBUTOR: Youth Film Distribution Center. ACCESS: New York Public Library, Reserve Film and Video Collection, Young Filmmaker's Foundation Collection. Access print available for onsite screening.

The Growing of a Young Filmmaker (1969), 18 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Young Filmmaker's Foundation, sponsored by Eastman Kodak. DIRECTOR: Raymond Esquilin. CAMERA: Alfonso Sanchez Jr. SOUND: Jesus Cruz. EDITOR: Jaime Barrios. DISTRIBUTOR: Youth Film Distribution Center. ACCESS: Indiana University, IU Libraries Moving Image Archive—Educational Film Collection.

Life in New York (1969), 6 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Film Club, sponsored by CBS. DIRECTORS: Alfonso Pagan, Luis Vale. DISTRIBUTOR: Youth Film Distribution Center. ACCESS: New York Public Library, Reserve Film and Video Collection, Young Filmmaker's Foundation Collection. Access print available for onsite screening.

A Park Called Forsyth (1967), 10 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Film Club. DIRECTOR: Jesus Cruz. DISTRIBUTOR: Youth Film Distribution Center. ACCESS: New York Public Library, Reserve Film and Video Collection, Young Filmmaker's Foundation Collection (original elements only, no access print currently available).

The Potheads in "Let's Get Nice" (c. 1967), 5 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Film Club. DIRECTOR: Alfonso Sanchez Jr. DISTRIBUTOR: Youth Film Distribution Center. ACCESS: New York Public Library, Reserve Film and Video Collection, Young Filmmaker's Foundation Collection (original elements only, no access print currently available); Internet Archive.

The Thief (1967), 7 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Film Club. DIRECTOR: Raymond Esquilin. DISTRIBUTOR: Youth Film Distribution Center. ACCESS: New York Public Library, Reserve Film and Video Collection, Young Filmmaker's Foundation Collection. Access print available for onsite screening.

RELATED FILMS

Children Make Movies (1961), 9 min., 16mm

DIRECTOR: DeeDee Halleck. DISTRIBUTION AND ACCESS: Film-Maker's Cooperative.

Film Club (1968), 26 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Film Club. DIRECTOR: Jaime Barrios. DISTRIBUTION AND ACCESS: The Film-Makers' Cooperative.

NOTES

I would like to express my appreciation to those who generously offered their time and resources to assist with this project: Elena Rossi-Snook, collection manager at the Reserve Film and Video Collection of the New York Public Library, who provided not only the films but also invaluable insight into their histories; Alex Kelly Barman, who kindly shared oral histories from her personal research; and Mary Ann Quinn, archivist at the Rockefeller Archive Center.

- 1 All official documents from the organization, including grant reports and letterhead, use the spelling Young Filmmaker's Foundation, which I use throughout.
- 2 The Young Filmmaker's Foundation Collection is held at the Reserve Film and Video Collection of the New York Public Library, located at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter New York Public Library, Reserve Film and Video Collection). Several of the titles discussed in this essay are accessible through the New York Public Library catalog. See filmography for more details.
- 3 "Report on the Activities of Young Filmmaker's Foundation, Inc.," December 1968, Taconic Foundation Files, box 169, folder 1680, Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter RAC).
- 4 Rodger Larson, *A Guide for Film Teachers to Filmmaking by Teenagers* (New York: Cultural Affairs Foundation, 1968), 10.
- 5 Larson, *A Guide for Film Teachers*, 20.
- 6 From 1984 to 1996, Larson ran an offshoot of the program under the name Film/Video Arts on Twelfth Street and Broadway. Rodger Larson, "Young Filmmakers," in *Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 5.
- 7 Larson, "Young Filmmakers," 5.
- 8 Rodger Larson and Ellen Meade, *Young Filmmakers* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969), 11.
- 9 "Report on the Activities of Young Filmmaker's Foundation," RAC, 9G.
- 10 The October 9, 1968, *Variety* article "Seedbed for Ghetto Film" discusses "ghetto filmmaking" as a "phenomenon of the past few years." The article briefly alludes to Film Club.
- 11 Doris Freedman, foreword to Larson, *A Guide for Film Teachers*, 8.
- 12 Larson, Hofer, and Barrios also published *Young Animators and Their Discoveries* (New York: Praeger, 1974). However, the first Film Club cohort, who did not work in animation (with the exception of some stop-animation experimentation) are not discussed in that book.
- 13 Haidee Wasson and Charles R. Acland, "Introduction: Utility and Cinema," in *Useful Cinema*, ed. Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 3–5.
- 14 David E. James, "The Movies Are a Revolution: Film and the Counterculture," in *ImagineNation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (London: Routledge, 2002), 193.

- 15 Michael Zryd, "Experimental Film and the Development of Film Study in America," in *Inventing Film Studies*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 184.
- 16 Peter Bradley, "Film Project," *New York State Council of the Arts 1966–1967 Annual Report* (NYPL), 26.
- 17 Lynne Hofer to Mr. Dana S. Creel, director of the Rockefeller Family Fund, January 22, 1970, Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, 1969–70, RAC.
- 18 Similar conditions led to the University of California at Los Angeles's Ethnocommunications initiative, aka the L.A. Rebellion, and what Devorah Heitner has dubbed "Black Power TV," which included public-access black news programs like *Black Camera* and *Soull*. Heitner argues that in addition to answering the call for black media perspectives, these shows were given air time as a way to provide African Americans with "a place to let off steam without rioting." See Devorah Heitner, *Black Power TV* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 11. See also Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015). For an overview of the period's urban history, see Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 19 Marsha Orgeron, "'A Decent and Orderly Society': Race Relations in Riot-Era Educational Films, 1966–1970," in *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States*, ed. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 429.
- 20 For example, Larson designed a student film teacher program for the Whitney Museum and ran a Movies by Teenagers series at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- 21 "Distribution of Workshop Productions," in "Report on the Activities of Young Filmmaker's Foundation," RAC.
- 22 Lynne Hofer, "Films on Demand," *School Library Journal*, November 1970, 27.
- 23 Susan E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Mariana Mogilevich, "Arts as Public Policy: Cultural Spaces for Democracy and Growth," in *Summer in the City: John Lindsay, New York, and the American Dream*, ed. Joseph P. Viteritti (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 195–224.
- 24 Barry Gottehrer, Mayor's Urban Action Task Force Report of the Citizen's Summer Committee, Report to Mayor John V. Lindsay, August 7, 1967, 8, New York Public Library, SASB M2—General Research Room 315.
- 25 Gottehrer, Mayor's Urban Action Task Force Report.
- 26 See Harold Weissman, "Introduction," in *Community Development: In the Mobilization for Youth Experience*, ed. Harold Weissman (New York: Association Press, 1969), 12–30.
- 27 Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 130–39.
- 28 Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 130.

- 29 Halleck's film is available to rent through the Film-Maker's Cooperative Distribution Catalog. See Filmography.
- 30 Weissman, "Introduction," 12–30.
- 31 Rodger Larson, oral history conducted by Alexandra Kelly, recording provided by Elena Rossi-Snook.
- 32 Alfonso Sanchez Jr., *The Potheads in "Let's Get Nice,"* black and white, 16mm, 1968, Youth Film Distribution Center. It was more likely filmed in 1966–67.
- 33 Larson, oral history.
- 34 Larson and Meade, *Young Filmmakers*, 94.
- 35 Larson and Meade, *Young Filmmakers*, 59.
- 36 Hofer, "Films on Demand," 28.
- 37 In his documentary *Film Club*, Barrios mentions that the black and Latino teens did not respond to the more experimental works by many of the white filmmakers. In "Films on Demand," Hofer confirmed that the films by black and Puerto Rican filmmakers had greater appeal to audiences from similar backgrounds.
- 38 "Report on the Activities of Young Filmmaker's Foundation," RAC.
- 39 Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, 1971–73, box 1106, March 29, 1971, RAC.
- 40 Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, 1971–73.
- 41 Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, 1971–73.
- 42 "Case histories of Juan P. and Carlos S., pseudonyms for Alfonso Pagan and Alfonso Sanchez Jr. (identifiable by the films discussed)," Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, 1971–73.
- 43 Larson, oral history.
- 44 "Report on the Activities of Young Filmmaker's Foundation," RAC.
- 45 According to Larson, the organization changed its name to Film/Video Arts in 1984 and moved to Twelfth Street and Broadway. Larson, "Young Filmmakers," 5.
- 46 DeeDee Halleck, "Making Movies with Kids on the Lower East Side," in *Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 3.