

# The Projector: A Journal on Film, Media, and Culture

## Winter 2018 Issue, Vol. 18, no. 1

### Reinvestigating Art House Exhibition in an Era of Convergence



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## Reinvestigating Art House Exhibition in an Era of Convergence



**Sarah E.S. Sinwell**

This Special Issue of *The Projector* reinvestigates art house exhibition in an era of media convergence. Focusing on the changing modes of exhibition at art house theatres, these articles examine their audiences, marketing strategies, programming, fundraising, technologies and industrial practices. In 2007, the Art House Convergence Conference partnered with the Sundance Institute to address the future sustainability of community-based art house theatres in the United States. In this context, representatives from art houses cinemas across the United States travel to Midway, Utah just before the start of the Sundance Film Festival as a means of supporting the regrowth of art house cinemas and responding to technological and industrial trends in the current media climate. This special issue celebrates the Tenth Anniversary of the Art House Convergence Conference with interviews and scholarly articles that analyze both the histories and the future of the art house in the digital age.

### Special Issue Articles

#### **Building Cinema Community: An Interview with the Founder and Managing Director of the Art House Convergence**

**Sarah Hanssen**

This interview with the Art House Convergence Managing Director, Barbara Twist, and Founder/Director, Russ Collins, examines how art house theatres have become a vital part of the

film viewing and filmmaking community. In order to better understand the impact of community-driven film programs, their best practices, and the obstacles ahead for filmmakers, distributors and exhibitors, this interview investigates the ways in which the survival of brick and mortar cinemas is crucial for the future of collective film exhibition.

### **From Auditorium to Art House: The Many Lives of the Hiway Theater**

**Joan McGettigan**

This essay traces the 103 year history of the Hiway Theatre in Jenkintown, PA. Taking a historical approach to theater exhibition, it maps out the popularity of the theater during the silent period (when it featured film screenings, concerts and vaudeville shows), to its incorporation of luxurious upholstery seating and improved ventilations systems, to the coming of sound in the studio era, to the growth of youth audiences in the 1960s and 1970s. In this way, the author traces a history of moviegoing and exhibition via the changes in the Hiway theatre.

### **Downloading Soon to a Theater Near You: Digital Film, Local Exhibition, and the Death of 35mm**

**Alicia Kozma**

This essay examines the implication of digital theatrical projection on local, independent, art house theaters. Highlighting exhibition as the “weak link” in the evolutionary chain of digital cinema, this article contends that the financial burden on local exhibitors has forced theaters into precarious business and operational models that further erode the already-diminished local independent theater community. By placing digital projection conversion within a chronology of industrial and technological change, and articulating the impact of these changes through an

ethnographic study of the first cooperatively owned for-profit local independent theater, The Art Theater in Champaign, IL, this paper concludes that the impact of digital exhibition must be considered past its technological components.

## **Excavating the Brick and Mortar: Reinvestigating the Art House in the Digital Age**

**Sarah E. S. Sinwell**

Using case studies of three individual art house theatres (the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor, the Salt Lake Film Society in Salt Lake City, and the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Boston), this essay looks at how art cinemas are responding to the digital age by examining their audiences, marketing strategies, community-driven programming, alternative content (such as pop concerts, opera broadcasts, sports events, and Broadway shows), fundraising, technologies and industrial practices. Through interviews with programmers, development officers, executive directors, board members, and others, this essay focuses on how these art houses cinemas have responded to technological and industrial trends to help improve the quality and effectiveness of community-based art house cinemas in the digital age.

### About the Guest Editor:

Sarah E. S. Sinwell is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Film and Media Arts at the University of Utah. She has published essays on Kickstarter, *Green Porno* and *Mysterious Skin* in *A Companion to American Indie Film*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, and *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*. Examining shifting modes of independent film distribution and exhibition on YouTube, Netflix and SundanceTV, her current book project redefines

independent cinema in an era of media convergence.

**Building Cinema Community: An Interview with Art House Convergence Founder, Russ Collins, and Managing Director, Barbara Twist**



Photo Credit: Sarah Reimink

**Sarah Hanssen**

At a time when media consumption is on the rise, but theatrical film exhibition seems often out of date, the survival of brick and mortar cinemas is crucial for the future of collective film exhibitions. However, forging a place for film screenings amongst the powerful distributors and megaplexes that dominate film exhibition is not easy. Independent festivals, theaters and venues are faced with many obstacles. Rather than replicate what theatrical chains have established, these smaller organizations are setting themselves apart. They offer a wide variety of film programs, from independent and archival to international and avant-garde, in doing so, they have created wildly different relationships with the communities they are part of. Recognizing the challenges faced by these frequently isolated venues, the Sundance Film Festival invited fourteen art house theaters to come to the festival and begin networking with one another in 2006. Two years later they founded the Art House Convergence.

The Art House Convergence is a thriving community-based organization fostering independent art house cinemas and film festival exhibitors. Their mission is to increase the quantity and quality of Art House cinemas in North America, and they've had tremendous

success already. Since 2012, they have published annual reports on theater operations and a national audience survey, looking at art house patrons and their movie-going habits. This data is a great resource for any research into the current status of art house convergence in the United States. Additionally, the Art House Convergence annual conference, held shortly before the Sundance Film Festival every January, brings together exhibitors, film programmers, community leaders, service providers and suppliers. The many panels, educational sessions and workshops provide a crucial look at the day-to-day management and procedures employed by contemporary art houses. Most recently, they founded Art House Theater Day, a day to recognize and celebrate the cultural role of the art house theater across the country.

In order to better understand the impact of community-driven film programs, their best practices, and the obstacles ahead for filmmakers, distributors and exhibitors, I conducted an interview with the Art House Convergence Managing Director, Barbara Twist, and Founder/Director, Russ Collins. A recipient of a 2016 Knight Foundation grant, Twist is a filmmaker and film educator. She has produced and directed many shorts, as well as an independent feature, *Consideration* (2013). Twist's expertise on contemporary film exhibition issues is regularly called upon in the press by outlets such as Bloomberg News, Deadline, and MSNBC. In October 2015, she was featured in BoxOffice's trade publication, *Women in Exhibition and Distribution* issue. Collins is Executive Director and CEO of the Michigan Theater, the historic Art Deco cinema in downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan. A longtime member of the Michigan arts community, and founder of the region's film festival, Cinetopia, Collins served on the Michigan Humanities Council board of directors, appointed by the governor. In 2013, Collins was named to Indiewire's inaugural list of "influencers" in the independent film industry. Collins and Twist work to foster the growth of a vibrant Art House community across

America, and they are not deterred by changes in the industry, or audiences. In the *Art House Convergence 10th Anniversary Magazine*, Collins notes, "We are in a period of dynamic change. Audiences seem overwhelmed with media arts options – megaplex theaters, cable TV with hundreds of channels, nearly unlimited Internet options, Netflix, very compelling video games, DVDs available for sale everywhere, etc. ... However, I truly believe the era we are now entering can be an era of growth for community-based, mission driven film culture institutions."

**Interview** (conducted via email during spring 2017)

**Sarah Hanssen:** The mission of the Art House Convergence is to increase the quantity and quality of Art House cinemas in North America. Can you begin by defining some of those terms? What makes an Art House an Art House? And what contributes to the quality of an Art House?

**Barbara Twist:** An Art House is a cinema that is community-based and mission-driven. Many Art Houses show independent and foreign films but that is not a requirement. The key is community-based programming - if your cinema is the only one in your community, you may find your programming balance with both mainstream and independent titles. Art Houses can be in a range of spaces, from a single purpose movie theater, to a multipurpose venue, to a museum, to a university cinema.

The quality of an Art House is reflected in its customer service, projection quality, programming diversity and quality, and diversity of revenue generation (economic sustainability). Key quality questions include: Is it serving the customer? Is it provoking dialogue? Is it fulfilling your mission? Art Houses that focus on the customer as a whole human are the most successful: thoughtful programming for the soul, delicious concessions for the taste buds, excellent projection for the

eyes & ears, and engaging conversation for the intellect.

**SH:** With that type of broad definition, many film events and venues would fall under the art house umbrella. It's clearly not just about great film programming, it sounds like Art House customers want a lot from their entire viewing experience. Can you point to a specific Art House that has been particularly successful? What makes them such a hit?

**BT:** The Coolidge Corner Theatre in Boston, MA, the Belcourt Theatre in Nashville, TN, and the Hollywood Theatre in Portland, OR, have all been very successful. They clearly project a community-based, mission-driven dynamic in their programming, marketing, fundraising, and audience development. Each has expanded outside of their existing venue (Coolidge with Science on Screen grants program and outdoor screenings on the lawn; Belcourt with its mobile cinema to schools and its series at Third Man Records; and Hollywood with its airport pop-up cinema), which is only possible because they've so clearly articulated their missions. Within their own venues, they offer a cohesive experience in branding, marketing and customer service. They each have a distinct "vibe" that you feel when you're at their theater.

**Russ Collins:** Four other theaters that I would add to Barbara's list of successful Art Houses are:

- Jacob Burns Film Center, Pleasantville, NY – leader in media literacy education, good film programming and successful fund raising.
- State Theatre, Traverse City, MI – runs two good Art Houses in a small town in Northern Michigan and presents a very successful annual Film Festival.
- Michigan & State Theatre, Ann Arbor, MI – college town Art House that has grown aggressively, beautiful quality venues, successful fund raising, and started the Art House Convergence.

- Renew Theatres, metropolitan Philadelphia, PA – central non-profit organization operates four historic theaters in four communities programmed with Art House films with solid business and creative management.

**SH:** With such a wide variety of art house theaters across the country, I wonder what makes these locations fertile ground for the growth of a successful film venue. Is it the communities that inspire the founding of an Art House, or does the Art House cultivate communities to support it?

**BT:** Communities tend to inspire the founding of an Art House, though an Art House must continue to cultivate the community after its initial support. Often, the first wave of community is organized around the historic nature of the cinema or are passionate cinema lovers. These communities are great because they get the cinema going, but then the Art House must reach out and engage the regular movie going public too.

**SH:** While brand name venues and museums seem to be expanding, it can seem like smaller cultural events and venues arise and fade away quite quickly these days. Small screenings and pop up galleries are great, but the type of lasting community presence you describe takes time and money to establish. Are there Art Houses that have pioneered new programs, particularly community-driven programs?

**BT:** The Coolidge Corner Theatre with the Sloan Foundation began the Science on Screen program, which has created a national sense of community through its shared programmatic vision. Two or so dozen theaters participate each year through a grant from the Science on Screen program to show four films and bring a scientist (of any kind) to discuss the science aspects of the film during a post-screening Q&A. Everything from climate scientists to physicists discussing baseball has been done.

Many Art Houses are hosting community-driven programs throughout the year - from outdoor screenings to collaborations with community partners. The more interesting programs to develop have been spontaneous pop-up national Art House community screenings like the recent screening of 1984, Art House Theater Day, 3/5 Day, and the upcoming Stop Making Sense tribute screening on July 19th. Art House Theater Day and 3/5 Day were more formally organized in partnership with the Art House Convergence, whereas 1984 and Stop Making Sense have been organized by individuals and theaters reaching out to the national network via our Google Group.

**SH:** Getting more than 200 theaters involved for Art House Theater Day is quite an accomplishment for its first year in 2016. The event seemed to employ social media as a main mode of promotion. In terms of innovations and developments, I wonder if the advent of social media had an impact on the Art House?

**BT:** Social media has certainly had an impact on the Art House, like most cultural institutions over the decade. With the decline of newspapers and the rise in Facebook membership, the majority of Art Houses use Facebook ads for their weekly advertising, eschewing digital versions of their newspaper (if they even have one). Twitter and Instagram ads have not been as popular and remain to be seen if effective. The Roxie Theater in San Francisco uses Facebook very effectively, creating an event for every screening and film, using this as a free method of advertising. When people click “interested,” it spreads to their newsfeed so their friends see it as well. Far more effective than a traditional post on your theater page, which may only be shown in 30% of your followers’ newsfeeds.

Social media is seen as more of an advertising platform rather than a dialogue platform for many Art Houses simply because of the algorithms that make your content less visible to your followers.

Art Houses still aim to update regularly and post things of interest, but anecdotally, it appears that ads are more effective. Contrary to this, however, is the customer service aspect: social media is a quick and effective way to respond to customer service issues and questions. So in that way, social media is like an online extension of our own information booths/guest services desks: we share information about upcoming programs, customers tweet problems and complaints at us.

**SH:** This is an academic publication and I wonder if there is any way institutes of higher education can support or partner with art houses. Is there information that would be helpful? What type of research would be useful for exhibitors? I am particularly interested in the changing modes of exhibition and how research might inform the ways in which art houses expand their programming. Basically, how can academia, and academics, support your mission?

**RC:** The Art House can be helped in a thousand ways. However, two key things institutes of higher learning could focus on to help Art Houses are studying the dynamics of 1) community and 2) discovery. These key dynamics also aligns with the nature of institutes of higher learning.

To be successful Art House cinemas need to be more about community than anything else – a local community of movie lovers build around cinema art passion. However, each community is different, consequently how cinema passion is expressed or realized in each community will be different. An Art House must lead their community in embracing and enhancing the community's appreciation and support of the art and craft of cinema, but this cinema passion needs to be rooted in community not imposed upon a community. Understanding how community is built around film passion or how to assess a community's interest in cinema could be very useful information.

The discovery dynamic will also vary community-to-community. A focus on discovery encourages Art Houses to expand their community's appreciation of the diversity of film produced through

time and by diverse film artists from around the world. In an ideal scenario the dynamic of cinema discovery will work to encourage and support new filmmaker, because the number of community-based, mission-driven Art Houses grow to a scale and market size to make the collective of Art Houses capable of supporting the early careers of emerging filmmaking talent.

## **Conclusion**

It is interesting to end this interview focusing on filmmakers, rather than film viewers. Filmmakers understand that the audience are the final collaborators, the ones that finish their film, but they are not always at liberty to create relationships with those viewers, especially with so much streaming media viewed in private. Art houses are filling that space. While the media industry is on the frontier of many new exhibition options, from mobile devices to online streaming, the art house continues to be a vital part of the film viewing and making, community. In the *Art House Convergence 10th Anniversary Magazine*, Stephanie Silverman, executive director of the Belcourt Theatre in Nashville, TN, summarized the role of the art house as follows, “a great film house is as important on any community’s cultural map as a symphony hall or a museum. And in some communities where symphony halls and ballet companies are not possible, it’s the film house that can step up and bring great symphonic music and world-class ballet to those communities.”

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## From Auditorium to Art House: The Many Lives of the Hiway Theater



Image Credit: <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/5234/photos/178490>

### Joan McGettigan

On July 10, 2017, the Hiway Theater in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania sent its e-mail subscribers a message with the subject line: “We’re gonna need a bigger theater! *Jaws* encore screening just added.” The first showing, part of the Hiway’s “Classic Thursdays” series, had sold out and those turned away had clamored for another opportunity to see the 1975 Steven Spielberg film on the big screen. For the Hiway, and for any community art house, this is a good problem to have. The 330-seat venue on the main street of Jenkintown, a first-ring suburb approximately three miles from the northern edge of Philadelphia, currently offers viewers a combination of classic, independent, and international films as well as community-related events: Q and As with local filmmakers, Saturday Family Matinees, kids’ birthday parties, and Academy Awards celebrations. The Hiway has even earned a small measure of celebrity: first, Oscar-nominated actor Bradley Cooper, who grew up in the area, has frequently discussed being inspired by the films he saw at the Hiway; and second, the Hiway is regularly mentioned on the ABC TV show *The Goldbergs*, which is set in Jenkintown.

In its 103 years, the Hiway has survived multiple owners and managers, half a dozen closures and grand re-openings, at least five major renovations, and six names. In its latest incarnation as a non-profit art house, the Hiway proudly advertises itself as an alternative to the multiplexes just a few miles away, emphasizing not only the variety and quality of the movies it plays but also its status as place for local residents to socialize. Like most art houses today, the non-profit Hiway relies on donors for its financial survival and is in a constant state of self-promotion and membership-building; it has also benefitted from its participation in an unusual management arrangement through which it cooperates with several other art houses rather than competes with them. Renew Theaters, itself a non-profit, handles booking and operations for three historic theaters in Pennsylvania and one in New Jersey: the Hiway, the Ambler in the town of that name, the County in Doylestown, and the Princeton Garden.<sup>1</sup> As Renew Theaters Co-Director Christopher Collier explained in an interview with me, each theater maintains its independence with its own board, its own finances, and its own community identity, and at the same time benefits from Renew Theaters' "umbrella of resources," which provide streamlined management and programming.<sup>2</sup>

Though the Hiway, the Ambler and, to a lesser extent, the County once competed for audiences, Renew now carefully programs them to complement one another. Membership in one theater gives donors privileges such as discounted tickets at others; website and Facebook announcements frequently explain why a movie is playing at one venue as opposed to another and encourages attendance at all the Renew cinemas. The emphasis is on community and the value of small local theaters offering movies which rely on character development and dialogue (even when it is sub-titled) rather than superheroes and special effects. Examining the history of the Hiway and, to some extent, its Renew partners, provides us with a long-term view of how

movie exhibition has changed since the turn of the twentieth century—and how, in some ways, it has come full-circle. It also gives us a clearer understanding of the roles art houses play—and the challenges they face—in the film industry today. By documenting the Hiway's past through newspaper clippings and records, and analyzing its present through interviews with moviegoers and theatre management, I hope to provide insight into the importance of the main-street movie house in the lives of those who have supported it.

Much has been written about media convergence and its effects on those who consume media as well as those who produce it. Looking at the current operation of an art house such as the Hiway means examining a particular kind of convergence through which viewers have the opportunity to see films from all over the world and from all time periods, and share them with others in their community. In the history of the Hiway, one can see the history of the American movie theater as a business and also as an expression of the desire to be part of a community. While the Hiway faces significant challenges, with its limited seating capacity and its aging infrastructure, it has been embraced by local moviegoers who enjoy, as one Hiway member expressed it, the “community experience,” and who want to ensure that the theater management can continue to “satisfy the interests of film goers” and “not worry about filling every seat.”<sup>3</sup>

### **From “Jenkintown Auditorium” to “The Embassy”: Creating a Community of Moviegoers in the Silent Film Period**

When the Jenkintown Auditorium was constructed on Old York Road in 1913, it was intended not only as a venue for movie screenings, but as a multi-purpose community center. By that time, there were many nickelodeons and converted-store theaters in downtown Philadelphia, easily accessible via public transportation. Moreover, Jenkintown residents had seen moving

pictures in programs at the Masonic Hall and at a local candy- and cigar-store called Clayton's Hall.<sup>4</sup> Jenkintown residents wanted more than just a nickelodeon; at the Jenkintown Auditorium, motion pictures shared the bill with local dance recitals, educational lectures, and performances by the “Paint-and-Powder Club.”<sup>5</sup> The Auditorium was a place for residents to gather, for local talent to show off. On opening night in January 1914, for example, the Jenkintown Auditorium featured a welcome by local luminaries and a concert by the Jenkintown Chorale Group in addition to the first segment of the Selig Company's serial *The Adventures of Kathlyn*.<sup>6</sup> Over the next several years, the Auditorium, with amenities such as steam heating in winter and “cooled air” in the summer (generated by fans blowing air across blocks of ice), continued to host events such as lantern slide shows, benefit concerts for the Pioneer Fire Company, and vaudeville performances.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the 1910s, however, the Auditorium seemed to have shifted to an all-movie policy, and in 1921, it was taken over by Hunt's Theatres, Inc., a chain of movie houses in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.<sup>8</sup> As a chain theater, it lost some of its value as a community venue; it showed movies that were distributed all over the state of Pennsylvania, and the theater less frequently hosted local cultural events.

By the mid-1920s, moviegoing had become an activity separate from educational lectures or vaudeville performances, and in suburbs close to Jenkintown, purpose-built movie theaters were opening with raked floors, permanent seating, and side aisles rather than one central aisle. In 1925, the Jenkintown Auditorium was transformed by a new owner from community center to picture house, and the building experienced its second grand opening—as the Embassy. An advertisement in the *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* boasted that the Embassy featured a “Distinctive . . . Architectural Motif,” which seems to have been influenced by Italian Renaissance Revival architecture.<sup>9</sup> By this time, it was clear that atmosphere and movies meant

everything. The building's name no longer announced that it was in Jenkintown, and hundreds of “Embassy” Theatres existed across the country. There were no local choral groups or benefits on opening night, just “Gloria Swanson in *The Coast of Folly*” and “Our Gang in *Mary Queen of Tots*.” An advertisement in the *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* promised that, for 35 cents in the evenings and reduced rates for Saturday matinees, moviegoers would enjoy “Comfortable Upholstered Seats . . . [and a] Most Improved System of Ventilation;” moreover, with its “Mammouth [sic] \$25,000 Unit Organ . . . and Ladies' and Gentlemen's Retiring Rooms,” the Embassy would be “A Photoplay Theatre You will be Proud of.”<sup>10</sup>

The Embassy was by no means a movie palace—at least in part because it was much smaller than the extravagant houses built in the 1920s by entrepreneurs such as the Mastbaums, who came to dominate exhibition in the Mid-Atlantic states with the Stanley chain of theatres. Yet the Embassy in Jenkintown, even with its limited seating,<sup>11</sup> could book Gloria Swanson's first-run movie as its opening attraction and, the following week, the new Lon Chaney feature *The Unholy Three*.<sup>12</sup> With its chandeliers, marble drinking fountains, and uniformed ushers, the Embassy offered the best and newest amenities.<sup>13</sup> In 1928, the *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* reported in a page one article, “Embassy Adds Improvements,” that there were renovations including safety devices to prevent fires, and in November of 1929, sound equipment was installed.<sup>14</sup> Moviegoers at the Embassy got everything they expected in a movie house experience: posh surroundings, good ventilation, attention from ushers, the first-run films, and the newest technological developments.

## “The Embassy” and “The York Road Theatre”: Moviegoing in the Studio Era

In the late 1920s, Warner Bros. purchased the Stanley chain of theaters. As a consequence, business became more difficult for suburban theaters like the Embassy in Jenkintown. Unless owned or operated by the Stanley Company, they were relegated to the status of second- or third-run theaters. During the 1930s, Warners operated a variety of movie houses in towns surrounding the Embassy. Jenkintown moviegoers accustomed to seeing first-run features in their own town would now be forced to go into the city to see them at movie-palace prices. The management of the Embassy, however, made consistent efforts to distinguish this theater from others, and to emphasize its commitment to the community. A 1931 article in the *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* demonstrates the lengths to which he went, staging marathon events for local children every week. In addition to a program including Fox Movietone News and a western, the theater invited kids to participate in shows and contests, producing a four-hour bill of entertainment.<sup>15</sup>

The Stanley Company increased the pressure on the Embassy when, in 1934, it built a new theater, the Yorktown, just over a mile away, slightly closer to the northern edge of Philadelphia. The Yorktown featured newer movies, continuous showings and free parking.<sup>16</sup> The Embassy had trouble competing, and in 1936 its owner of 10 years lost the building to foreclosure. Another entrepreneur bought the venue, invested in significant renovations and updates, and held a contest inviting the Jenkintown community to choose a new name for it. In December of that year, the newly-christened York Road Theatre held its “Gala Opening” to show off what the local newspaper described as its “new spacious lobby, softly carpeted [foyer]. . . [its] scheme of decorations and lighting effects . . . [and] new heating and ventilating

equipment.”<sup>17</sup> It seems telling that the new name for the venue was “York Road Theatre;” it represents a kind of claim on the ownership of the movie house. As it had been when it was called the Jenkintown Auditorium, the theater was once again linked to a particular location and community.

Throughout the late 1930s, as it competed with the Stanley-owned Yorktown, the York Road Theatre identified itself as a local treasure. In *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* ads the York Road described itself as “Jenkintown's Palace” and criticized the Yorktown for giving away premiums such as dishes. One large ad stated, “The York Road Theatre bases its community value upon its own reputation . . . and its cinema presentations alone. It [t]herefore does not indulge in any 'premium inducements' to attract its audiences but makes its appeal to the public on the basis of entertainment value alone.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the York Road celebrated the annual community carnival, inviting viewers to see “the exclusive showing of the 1938 June Fete pictures” in addition to the regular feature film.<sup>19</sup> The Yorktown countered by advertising its children's matinees and became the first venue in the area to show *Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*: “School Children's Matinee Every Day at 4 P.M. No Advance in Prices. Continuous Performances Every Day.”<sup>20</sup> Between *Snow White* and the “Mammoth Air Conditioning System,”<sup>21</sup> it appears that the York Road Theater could not compete with the Stanley-owned Yorktown; it closed in the summer of 1940. Renovations and updates were made, the decor was streamlined, and the theatre emerged as the Hiway, now owned and operated by the Stanley Company.<sup>22</sup>

Despite its recent renovation and new management, the renamed Hiway was still a small-town house, and it courted its audience. Downtown palaces did not have to provide door prizes or double features to attract moviegoers; neighborhood and suburban theaters did. The “Gala

Opening” ad for the new Hiway Theatre promised “Hiway News Events” and a color cartoon and “novelty” in addition to the feature, *My Love Came Back* starring Olivia DeHavilland and Jeffrey Lynn; to entice even reluctant viewers, the theater also gave away “FREE School Supplies To all Kiddies.”<sup>23</sup>

The 1940s seems to have been a period of relative calm for the Hiway—at least in part because it underwent no dramatic closings and grand re-openings. No one changed its name, and column-long ads to promote the latest films gave way to smaller ads and double features. Warners/Stanley continued to manage the Hiway throughout the 1940s, but the movie business had changed. Following World War II, the major studios were ordered by the Supreme Court to sell off their theaters, and cultural changes such as the baby boom kept former moviegoers at home. As Barbara Wilinsky points out in *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema*, “All factions of the film industry, from independent film producers to mainstream theatre operators, faced . . . [new challenges] as they attempted to attract audiences.”<sup>24</sup> Filmmakers and exhibitors who once tried to appeal to all viewers now calculated that the most dependable audience consisted of teenagers. The Hiway, which had fought the Stanley Company valiantly and eventually been swallowed up by it, was once again on its own to formulate a plan for attracting audiences.

### **“The Hiway” in the 1960s-1970s: Survival in Changing Times**

Most American movie theaters felt the effects of postwar economic and cultural change. In Philadelphia, as in most industrial centers, downtown and city neighborhood movie houses suffered the most; palaces built by the major studios in the 1920s and 1930s were now neglected

and half-empty. Warner Bros., unable to find buyers for some of their first-run houses, closed them altogether. The business of making movies changed as well. Studios reduced their own financial risk by backing away from investing in major motion pictures, preferring to rent their studio facilities rather than use them, and to “pick up” already-completed films for distribution.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, as Lester Friedman observes, “film attendance in the United States fell to an all-time low at the start of the [1970s] while production costs were rising,” and by the end of the decade, “the prevailing wisdom . . . was that seven out of every ten films lose money, two out of ten break even, and one will be a gigantic success.”<sup>26</sup> This was hardly the kind of economic reality that would comfort an independent theater operator.

The Hiway, however, did not close, and by the 1960s and 1970s it experienced a strange if limited renaissance as a \$1 theater. Newspaper ads for the Hiway in the 1970s look like an art-house lover's dream, with titles such as *Taxi Driver*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *Nashville*, *Day of the Locust*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Annie Hall* appearing week after week. These were not, of course, art-house titles at the time; they were films distributed by the major studios. The real art houses were primarily in downtown Philadelphia rather than in the suburbs; that was where you could see Federico Fellini's *Amarcord*, for instance. The daring New World cinema featured the re-released 1940s Basil Rathbone-Nigel Bruce Sherlock Holmes movies. Newspaper ads for the latter dramatically boasted about the films' "explicit" treatment of drug addiction (which I believe was limited to one line in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, “Watson—The needle!”).<sup>27</sup> At the Hiway, there were occasional gimmicks intended to draw a few more customers. In July of 1975 the theater was rented by a group promising to explore “Outer Space Connections” (for which the \$1 policy was temporarily suspended).<sup>28</sup> Give-aways, such as those frowned upon by the management of the York Road Theater back in the 1930s, made a weak comeback. Late in

1975, newspaper ads promised that those attending the shark documentary *Blue Water, White Death* would receive a “free Gillette Trac II Razor.”<sup>29</sup>

The Hiway remained a mainstream, if discount, theater, and certainly benefitted from the fact that houses in nearby suburbs faced even greater challenges. The Ambler, only nine miles away and owned by Warners during the competitive 1930s, was sold in the 1960s and closed; it was reopened in the 1970s by a Christian organization sporadically showing 16mm films. The mighty Yorktown, which the Stanley-Warner Company had built to compete with the Embassy-then-York Road Theatre, became a porn theater. Even when showing the triple-X-rated *Black Socks* and *Super Salesman*, however, the Yorktown optimistically addressed its prospective audience as “Ladies & Gentlemen Over 21” and still advertised “Free Parking.”<sup>30</sup> The Yorktown ceased operations in the 1970s and was later demolished.

### **Temporary Re-Branding, and the Re-Emergence of “The Hiway”**

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Hiway struggled. It closed sporadically and went through two brief identities, as The Merlin (when owned in the late 1980s by Irvin Merlin) and The Chas III (when owned in the 1990s by Charles Peruto, Jr.). In the Merlin and Chas III years, shopping-mall twin theaters constructed post-World War II mushroomed into multiplexes with as many as 22 screens, and the future looked bleak for small venues such as the Hiway. There was, however, a groundswell of interest in saving the theater, and its size and location, on a long, narrow lot in the middle of a block, may have saved it, since no one could think of practical alternative uses for the space. In the early 2000s, Jenkintown residents made several efforts to establish a non-profit to purchase and run the theater. In 2003, they succeeded, and chose to re-open it as The

Hiway.

Nearby communities were also working to save, revitalize, and re-purpose their theaters. The Ambler (which would later become a member of the Renew Theaters organization) was just re-opening as a non-profit; others were being developed as performing-arts venues. The Hiway Theater Inc. started a newsletter, obtained county, federal, state, and local grants, and set out priorities for the renovation and enhancement of the building.<sup>31</sup> To raise funds and awareness of the theater's needs, the organization held screenings, among them an ambitious 2006 program called “Hiway Through the Years” which included, among other titles, *Casablanca*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Godfather*, and a Tim Burton All-Night Movie Marathon.<sup>32</sup>

### **“The Hiway” as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Art House: Creative Management and Digital Conversion**

Years before the Hiway, the Ambler, and the County Theaters became partners in the art house management operation run by Renew, each was the site of local residents' efforts to revive a struggling economy and redevelop a sense of community. All three movie houses, in suburbs just north of Philadelphia, had gone through the cycle described here: success in the studio-era 1930s and 1940s, followed by periods of stop-and-start renovation, temporary closures, multiple owners. By the 1980s and 1990s, volunteers worked to fix air conditioning and broken seats, to rope off the most dangerous parts of shabby foyers, and to lure moviegoers with an occasional holiday-themed movie at Christmas. The County Theater in Doylestown was the first of the three to find some success as an art house; the community launched a capital campaign in the 1990s which yielded enough money to make major improvements. When Ambler residents interested in re-opening their theater saw those results, they approached the County's management for help.

And so did the Hiway Inc., a non-profit which had been established to try to save and revitalize the Hiway in Jenkintown. All three of these theaters are north of Philadelphia, the Hiway approximately three miles outside the city limits; the Ambler, approximately ten miles farther north; and the County in Doylestown, approximately fifteen miles north of the Ambler. Each of these towns now has its own restored, digitally equipped theater offering a full slate of international, independent, and classic films. All three are managed by Renew Theaters, as is the Princeton Garden in New Jersey (which was added to the group in 2014). Through this unusual arrangement, each theater is its own non-profit and retains its own board of directors, but Renew, also a non-profit, manages all of them. Their websites explain how Renew works and include links to the other theaters' sites. Each community supports its own movie house with donations and memberships, but members of any theater get ticket discounts at the other affiliated venues as well.

These are not, however, the same kinds of art houses which developed across the country after World War II. As Barbara Wilinsky states in *Sure Seaters*, “the meaning of the term *art cinema*, or the terms *art house* and *art film*, are not static.”<sup>33</sup> In the 1940s, “. . . the increased availability of reissues and the increased production and distribution of independent and foreign films made it practical for . . . theaters . . . to fill their screen time with nonmainstream films.”<sup>34</sup> After the Supreme Court had ordered the major studios to divest themselves of their theaters, the ownership and management of movie houses became more localized. Since these theater operators were independents, and could do their own programming, they promoted themselves to moviegoers in those terms, targeting audiences who saw themselves as “more discriminating, more sophisticated” than those who attended traditional Hollywood movies.<sup>35</sup> Art house operators cultivated that image, advertising in upscale magazines and selecting theaters in

trendy urban areas and near college campuses.

Art houses today, however, tend not to be for-profit businesses. They are much more likely to be non-profits established by local communities trying to preserve and revitalize their downtown business districts. All of the Renew theaters, funded by grants and donations, fit that description. This is a fairly recent development, as scholar David Bordwell points out in a 2012 blog entry. He quotes Russ Collins, Executive Director of the Michigan Theater, as saying, “‘New model’ Art House cinemas are community-based and mission-driven . . . non-profit organizations managed by professionals who are expert” in fund-raising, “in community-based cinema programming . . . [and in] volunteer management.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the audience has changed. No longer can the art house depend upon university students; as Bordwell remarks, “even in art houses near college campuses, students tend to make up a small fraction of the audience.”<sup>37</sup> The current art-house audience is “well-educated, comparatively affluent, and above all older.”<sup>38</sup>

In its latest incarnation as an art house, the Hiway has already faced some difficult challenges, including the wrenching transition to digital projection. In 2012, film scholar Lisa Dombrowski published “Not If, But When and How: Digital Comes to the American Art House,” in which she examined the dire circumstances facing local art houses as they attempted to convert to digital projection. She started her article by quoting the President of the National Association of Theater Owners, who had announced at the 2011 CinemaCon convention, “[I]f you don't make the decision to get on the digital train soon, you will be making the decision to get out of the business.”<sup>39</sup> The *Philadelphia Inquirer* put the situation in local terms in a January 2013 article by Jeff Gammage, who wrote, “The venerable Hiway Theatre in Jenkintown needs to come up with \$100,000—and fast.”<sup>40</sup> With the major film studios planning to phase out 35mm

prints by year's end, independent houses worked to educate moviegoers about the problem and raise money. In an interview with me (conducted after the digital conversion of the Hiway), Renew Theaters Co-Director Christopher Collier described the installation of digital as a “life or death” crisis for the Hiway, recalling that it took “over two years and the community coming together to raise the funds needed.”<sup>41</sup>

The fund-raising effort to convert the Hiway for digital projection required imagination as well as hard work. In his blog on art houses, David Bordwell describes the kind of creativity and enthusiasm required to run an art house. “If you wonder where old-fashioned movie showmanship went,” he writes, the place to look is the local art cinema. “These folks mount trivia contests, membership drives, singalongs. They help out with local film festivals, They bring in filmmakers and local experts for Q & A sessions. They offer . . . special events for children, teenagers, and other sectors of the community.”<sup>42</sup> An example of the kind of creative thinking required to run an art house is the way that the Hiway was able to use Jenkintown-raised actor Bradley Cooper in its go-digital campaign. Donors were asked to take photos of themselves holding a “Screen Savers” flyer on which they had written the name of their favorite movie. In December 2013, as Cooper was promoting *Silver Linings Playbook*, he filmed part of an interview with CBS at the Hiway. Before long, moviegoers could pose in the Hiway lobby with a poster of Cooper holding his flyer which proclaimed that his favorite movie is *Network*.

### **“Everything is Localism”: Working with the Community**

While it is easy to focus on a dramatic issue such as the introduction of digital equipment, the reality is that small community theaters face more fundamental and complex problems every

day. In 2015, Jeff Berg examined the state of art-house exhibition in *Film Comment*. He described the experience of working at two such venues as “exciting and fun while also being headache-inducing because of the unique set of challenges I encountered . . . . Financial stability,” he pointed out, “is always an issue.”<sup>43</sup> Berg quoted one manager as saying, “Every art house is different, but we all show the movies that [the mass audience does not] want to see. If everyone wanted to see them, they'd be selling out at the multi-plexes and there would be no art-house theaters.”<sup>44</sup>

Creating a successful strategy requires recognizing the art house's limitations and exploiting opportunities when they arise. As Christopher Collier points out, “As is likely the case with most art house theaters, our biggest period of the year is Oscar season (Thanksgiving through the Oscars) and we rely on that period and end of year donations and gifts to balance our budget.” With a minimal (actually, “effectively zero”) marketing budget, “We need [the] bigger films and their marketing campaigns and crowd awareness to survive.”<sup>45</sup>

Operators and owners of art house theatres such as the Hiway and its affiliates have found strength in numbers through the The Art House Convergence, which describes itself as “an international consortium of independent, community-based, mission-driven movie theaters.” According to Christopher Collier, “AHC has been invaluable to Renew . . . and the four theaters.” Collier and Renew Director John Toner are very active in Art House Convergence; in addition to attending the annual conference eight years in a row, Toner is a member of the AHC Provisional Board and Collier serves on the Conference Program Committee. According to Collier, “Just the best practices alone that have been learned from the conference have pushed us to be better at our business and to find ways to ensure our continued success and future sustainability.” In his January 2012 blog, David Bordwell wrote about his own experiences at the

Art House Convergence annual meetings, which are held just prior to the Sundance Film Festival. “In its first year, 2008, the Art House Convergence attracted twenty-two people. This year [2012] it drew nearly three hundred,” he wrote. “My three and a half days at the Convergence . . . filled me with information and energy.” For Collier, “It is the personal connections that are the most valuable” from the Art House Convergence experience. “We now have connections to other theater operators around the world with whom we share knowledge, ideas, suggestions, tips and camaraderie. The network is crucial to navigating the ever-changing world of theatrical exhibition and for developing advocacy efforts to keep theatrical presentation a viable entertainment and artistic business.”

As Collier and Toner see it, Renew is “currently at [an] equilibrium with operating four theaters,” having taken on the Hiway (2013) and the Princeton Garden in New Jersey (2014). There are no plans to add any theaters. “However,” Collier points out, “we are looking to expand in other ways. The County and Ambler Theaters . . . [having] purchased the adjacent properties are both in the beginning stages of Capital Campaigns to expand . . . adding a new screen to each.” The Ambler, which once seated 1200, already underwent a major renovation in which the main house retained its proscenium arch and architectural detail on the walls, while two “black box” theatres were built in the rear of the original seating area. While there are currently no plans to expand the Hiway, its HVAC and facade will require work in the near future, and the non-profit which owns the Hiway hopes to develop a more substantial capital fund for future developments.

In his email interview with me, Renew's Christopher Collier addressed some of the details of booking for a community theater that seats 330 people. “We often program the Hiway slightly different than the other theaters due to its single-screen. It needs to hit 'home runs' in

order to stay open,” he explained. Therefore, “[W]e often look for cross-over films that bridge the gap between art house/independent and commercial. For example, the Hiway was the only Renew Theater to play *Argo*, *Inside Out*, and *Fences*. Finding acclaimed, high-profile films like these has helped the Hiway to stay open and also led members of the other theaters to make the trip to the Hiway to catch those films (at the member rate).”

While the Renew Theaters share resources, each one must be handled individually, and even though they are fairly close to one another geographically, the three Pennsylvania theaters do serve different demographics. “The Hiway,” Collier points out, “sits in a unique location on the border of the first-ring suburbs of Philadelphia. We have a great opportunity to engage with people from many different backgrounds, communities, religions, and cultures.” For each theater, contact with its own constituency is critical. The Hiway and the other Renew Theaters make significant efforts to address moviegoers' questions and educate them about the industry. The Hiway website introduces its audience to some of the realities of booking movies. For example, on the “Classic Thursdays” page, the Hiway management announces: “How It's Scheduled: Fixed Dates, But Subject to Change” and follows up with “Why? Because That's How the Movie Biz Works.” And that “biz” is becoming increasingly difficult. The Hiway must compete not only with the local multiplex, but with the DVR, the cable/satellite package, and the computer. In his *Film Comment* article, Jeff Berg notes, “Of course, drawing any audience is a huge challenge, since movie fans now have many more delivery options to choose from than they did 40 years ago.”<sup>46</sup> Collier also explains that “[l]onger-range plans for all of the [Renew] theaters are tied to the future of the theatrical exhibition industry. There has been a lot of change recently with the rise of Netflix and Amazon . . . The On-Demand options coupled with shrinking theatrical windows ha[ve] us on our toes and doing our best prognosticating about

what the future holds.”

The digital conversion of the Hiway was not an end in itself. While in the short run, the technology “saved” the Hiway and many other venues, it may also, as Lisa Dombrowski points out in “Not If, But When and How,” have longer-term benefits. As she argues, “Many low-budget independent features and documentaries that regularly screen in art houses are shot on digital video and never blown up to 35mm due to the expense of a digital-to-film transfer.”<sup>47</sup> Moreover, digital exhibition can “increase programming flexibility,” making it easier to book classic films and also to include trailers and other supporting materials.

In *Sure Seaters*, Barbara Wilinsky states that those in the art-house business have historically tended to define themselves by what they are not. “In fact, it often seems,” she writes, “that art films are not defined by their thematic and formalistic similarities, but rather by their differences from Hollywood films.”<sup>48</sup> But that may be changing. Certainly, some Hiway patrons say that they prefer art films and classics to the current Hollywood action films. What keeps people going out to the movies, however, is not necessarily the interest in a particular film, but the desire to be part of a community. When digital conversion was imminent, reporter Jeff Gammage interviewed Fred Kaplan-Mayer, then-executive director of the Hiway Inc. Fred Kaplan-Mayer admitted that raising the money for digital equipment was a daunting task, but he expressed confidence. “One of the things that's unique about the Hiway,” he said, “is people feel this is their theater . . . People don't go to a . . . [multiplex] and feel it's their theater.” Donald and Marcia Pizer, for instance, are listed on the Hiway's website in the “Angels and Moguls” category for their financial support of the theater and they go to the Hiway frequently. In response to my questions, Donald wrote that he and his wife have lived in Jenkintown for 41 years, “so this is home.” “We both like communities with a 'main street' feel. Our financial

support of the Hiway project arose mostly from the belief that the Theater was a valuable property for the community and was important to the economic wellbeing of Jenkintown.”<sup>49</sup>

Donald went on to explain that he and Marcia enjoy traveling and that seeing international films at the Hiway can sometimes “give us a glimpse of somewhere we have been or may want to go.” As for the classic series the Hiway schedules, Donald says they are “a reminder that good storytelling has been around for a long time!” Yet Donald does not consider himself and Marcia to be “film buffs” or preservationists—just good neighbors. For them, the Hiway is a community center. “We did go to this theater in all of its iterations,” he wrote, “but support it much more regularly and strongly now that it is a community asset.” For the Pizers, a movie at the Hiway and then dinner at a local restaurant is about enjoying their home town. “We often see someone we know [when we go to the Hiway] . . . it is a very comfortable feeling.”

It seems that this “comfortable feeling” is, after all, what the Hiway Theater and other art houses are about. Having interviewed exhibitors who ran art theatres in the 1940s, Wilinsky writes that even though “[b]usiness motivations existed . . . the warmth with which the interviewees spoke of the art film culture suggests the bond formed by their participation in this unconventional and marginalized community.”<sup>50</sup> This echoes Bordwell's comments after attending the Art House Convergence meeting in 2012: “. . . I've been a patron [of art cinema] . . . for fifty years. But I never really met the people behind the scenes. This bunch is exuberant and committed to sharing their love of cinema. They want to watch a movie surprise and delight their audiences.”

“We see these local connections,” Renew's Christopher Collier explained, “as a key to our future and success. We can't just be 'any old movie theater' but need to be the theater for the

local community. The more connections we make with community members, the stronger we become.” This approach seems to be working, although the success of an art house like the Hiway is still precarious. Current Hiway membership stands at over 2,900, which represents 65% of the population of Jenkintown (4,445).<sup>51</sup> Those members are expressing their hope that the Hiway will continue to be “their” movie theater, and are sharing in the responsibility of keeping it that way. Furthermore, just as the Jenkintown Auditorium of 103 years ago identified itself as both a place to watch movies and a place to celebrate the local community, the Hiway is doing the same: in December of this year, Hiway patrons will have a chance to see the 1947 *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*—after a Holiday Singalong led by the Old York Road Symphony.

The author thanks Christopher Collier, and Donald and Marcia Pizer for their help, as well as Mary Washington and Eileen Koolpe of the Old York Road Historical Society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Since the Princeton Garden is an outlier here, in New Jersey rather than Pennsylvania, and also the newest client of Renew Theaters, I will not include it in my analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Collier, email to the author, August 23, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Pizer, email to the author, June 22, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Harper. “Jenkintown's Hiway Theatre.” *Old York Road Historical Society Bulletin* LX (Jenkintown: Old York Road Historical Society, 2004), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Jenkintown Auditorium Program (March 6, 1919). Old York Road Historical Society file: “Hiway Theater.”

<sup>6</sup> Harper. “Jenkintown's Hiway Theatre,” 20.

- <sup>7</sup> Harper. "Jenkintown's Hiway Theatre," 20.
- <sup>8</sup> Harper. "Jenkintown's Hiway Theatre," 21.
- <sup>9</sup> "The New Embassy." *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* September 12, 1925, 7.
- <sup>10</sup> "The New Embassy." *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* September 12, 1925, 7.
- <sup>11</sup> Alicoate, Jack, ed. *The 1928 Film Daily Yearbook*.
- <sup>12</sup> "The New Embassy." *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* September 12, 1925, 7.
- <sup>13</sup> Harper. "Jenkintown's Hiway Theatre," 23-24.
- <sup>14</sup> "Embassy Theatre Adds Improvements." *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* April 26, 1928, 9.
- <sup>15</sup> "Embassy Continues to Please Children." *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* March 26, 1931, 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Cinema Treasures. <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/14089/photos>
- <sup>17</sup> "Gala Opening." *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* December 3, 1936, 7.
- <sup>18</sup> *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* January 27, 1938 Section B p.1. Advertisement for York Road Theater.
- <sup>19</sup> *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* June 9, 1938. Advertisement for York Road Theatre.
- <sup>20</sup> *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* April 28, 1938, 7. Advertisement for Yorktown Theatre.
- <sup>21</sup> *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* June 9, 1938, 7. Advertisement for Yorktown Theatre.
- <sup>22</sup> Harper. "Jenkintown's Hiway Theatre," 28.
- <sup>23</sup> *Jenkintown Times Chronicle* August 29, 1940. Advertisement for York Road Theatre.
- <sup>24</sup> Barbara Wilinsky. *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 2.
- <sup>25</sup> Lester Friedman. Introduction to *American Cinema of the 1970s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Lester Friedman. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 4.
- <sup>26</sup> Friedman. Introduction to *American Cinema of the 1970s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Lester Friedman. 2, 6.
- <sup>27</sup> *Hound of the Baskervilles*. Neighborhood Movie Guide. *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* August 6, 1975, 31. Advertisement for Bryn Mawr and New World Theaters.

<sup>28</sup> “Outer Space Connections.” Neighborhood Movie Guide. *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* July 23, 1975, 30. Advertisement for Hiway Theater.

<sup>29</sup> *Blue Water, White Death*. Neighborhood Movie Guide. *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* November 9, 1975, 30. Advertisement for Hiway Theater.

<sup>30</sup> *Black Socks*. Neighborhood Movie Guide. *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* November 5, 1975, 30. Advertisement for Yorktown Theater.

<sup>31</sup> “Reel to Real: Campaign to Save a Jewel of Local Heritage” (2006). Old York Historical Society file: “Hiway Theater.”

<sup>32</sup> “Hiway through the Years: A Celebration” (June 23-29, 2006). Old York Historical Society file: “Hiway Theater.”

<sup>33</sup> Wilinsky. *Sure Seaters*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Wilinsky. *Sure Seaters*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Stern, quoted in Wilinsky *Sure Seaters*, 93.

<sup>36</sup> Russ Collins, quoted in David Bordwell. “Pandora's digital box: Art house, smart house.” January 30, 2012.  
<http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2012/01/30/pandoras-digital-box-art-house-smart-house/>

<sup>37</sup> Bordwell. “Pandora's digital box: Art house, smart house.”

<sup>38</sup> Bordwell. “Pandora's digital box: Art house, smart house.”

<sup>39</sup> John Fithian, quoted in Lisa Dombrowski. “Not If, But When and How: Digital Comes to the American Art House.” *Film History* 24 (2012), 235.

<sup>40</sup> Jeff Gammage. “Small PA Movie Theaters Scramble to Stay Open.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. January 22, 2013.  
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<sup>41</sup> Christopher Collier, email to the author, August 23, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Bordwell. “Pandora's digital box: Art house, smart house.”

<sup>43</sup> Jeff Berg. “Sure Seaters Tough It Out: Checking in on the State of Art-House Exhibition.” *Film Comment* 51:1 (Jan/Feb 2015), 60.

<sup>44</sup> Berg. “Sure Seaters Tough It Out,” 60.

<sup>45</sup> Christopher Collier, email to the author, August 23, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Berg, "Sure Seaters Tough It Out," 60.

<sup>47</sup> Dombrowski. "Not If, But When and How: Digital Comes to the American Art House," 237.

<sup>48</sup> Wilinsky, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Donald Pizer, email to the author, June 22, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Wilinsky. *Sure Seaters*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Population.us. <http://population.us/pa/jenkintown/>

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## Downloading Soon to a Theater Near You: Digital Film, Local Exhibition, and the Death of 35mm



Image Credit: used with permission of Meghan Grosse

### Alicia Kozma

On a cool evening in November 2013 in the town of Champaign, Illinois, about 130 miles south of Chicago, a small movie theater was celebrating a milestone: 100 years of continuous operation. The Art Theater—a single screen, 250-seat theater—has been a critical locus of the community's cultural life almost as long as the town itself existed. A testament to independent exhibitors, the theater has weathered censorship challenges, changing local populations, the opening of two nearby cineplexes, the proliferation of home viewing technologies, and an overall decline in theater audiences. 2012 brought what the theater assumed would be its biggest challenge: the implementation of digital projection. Projection transition, as it turned out, would not be that difficult; rather, it was the precarious business model of for-profit cooperative ownership the theater was forced to adopt to finance the transition that would leave a lasting impact. The unique cooperative model, which sold ownership shares to community members, would prove to be a continuous obstacle.

The Art Theater exemplifies the risks that independent theaters took in order to survive the digital exhibition revolution. These risks, although initially perceived as solutions, eventually represented an entire new set of problems—ones that could not be overcome with a simple equipment upgrade. By historicizing digital conversion and its place within the chronology of industrial and technological change, and exemplifying those historical trends through a case study of The Art Theater, we can understand the turn to digital as a portent for the increasing precarity of local independent exhibition. This precarious state is wrought, as ideological and technological concerns about the digital future are sublimated to the very real financial and operational risks of the business models adopted to accommodate the financial repercussions of digital projection, models which threaten to further erode the already diminished number of independent, local exhibitors.

The digital turn in the cinematic arts over the last two decades has transformed filmmaking praxis, distribution, exhibition, theory, and analysis at an incredible speed. Although all these changes are often collectively referred to as “the digital,” there are in fact a number of different iterations of digital technologies and practices that encompass various aspects of film as an industrialized art form. As John Belton notes, digital cinema is “a term that properly encompasses the digitization of each aspect of the filmmaking chain from production and post-production (editing) the distribution and exhibition (projection).”<sup>1</sup> Although given equal definitional weight, the move toward the “digital sublime”<sup>2</sup> has been primarily discussed—and fretted over, decried, and celebrated—primarily around modes of production and distribution, with special attention being paid by film theorists to the way digital may or may not force theoretical rearticulations of the image<sup>3</sup> and the role of special visual effects.<sup>4</sup> The impact of digital cinema on exhibition, outside of the role of 3D technologies<sup>5</sup>, has been overlooked,

particularly in the context of the effects on the business and operational practices of theaters themselves. This is doubly true when one considers the lack of attention paid to the ways in which the digital turn reverberates in the world of local, independent exhibitors.

The massive transformative shifts necessitated by digital projection have mutated the everyday operations of theaters—in some cases threatening their very viability. The working assumption around theatrical exhibition and the digital future seems to be a foregone conclusion: convert or close. Exhibitor industry responses to this “choice” have focused on strategies to aid theaters, but these conversations around conversion exempt small, local, independent exhibitors from the dialogue. This has left independent exhibitors in an unenviable position—too small to be of concern to the broader industry and too integrated into the cultural lives of their local spaces to close without significant impact. This is the space in which the Art Theater found itself.

Independent theaters have employed a number of strategies to adapt to the move to digital exhibition, a process that primarily revolves around generating the necessary funds to convert 35mm projection booths to digital-capable booths. Russell Collins, the Executive Director of the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor, MI, and member of the leadership of the Art House Convergence—an influential organization that supports community-based, mission-driven film exhibitors and community cinema programs—has propagated the “new model Art House” as a potential solution to projection conversion. For Collins, this model transforms theaters into non-profit organizations run and managed by professionals with experience in philanthropic solicitation, volunteer management, and community-based programming.

A second option, direct solicitation, has been used by small theaters that are local and independent, play mainstream rather than art house programming, and in many cases are the only accessible movie theaters for their communities. The Rio Theater in Monte Rio, CA, the Lory

Theater in Highland, IL, and the Catlow Theater in Barrington, IL have all funded digital conversion through successful Kickstarter campaigns. Indeed, the *LA Times* reported that Kickstarter campaigns have raised more than \$1 million for theaters in thirteen states to buy digital equipment and convert their capabilities.<sup>6</sup> But what happens when a theater does not have the resources—financial or human—to convert a for-profit business into a non-profit, when a theater cannot claim to be the only option for movie-going in a town, or when a theater is dedicated to alternative cinematic experiences and non-mainstream programming? How can such a theater survive, and at what cost?

The Champaign, IL Art Theater attempted to solve these issues through a third model: for-profit cooperative ownership. In 2012, The Art Theater became The Art Theater Co-Op, the only cooperatively owned for-profit art house theater in the country. A volunteer board, a general manager, and approximately 1,500 owners replaced the former single operator. Their seeming success in funding the projection transition through cooperative ownership was held up by the industry as a model for how independent art house theaters could ensure their survival. The Art Theater was profiled in *BoxOffice Magazine*, the official publication of the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO), and was featured on David Bordwell's widely read "Pandora's Digital Box" blog series. Following the publicity, the theater received inquiries from other small cinemas across the country about how to initiate similar cooperative ownership campaigns. However, the apparent success of cooperative ownership masked an insidious issue: the precarious financial and operational system that emerged as a result of the move to cooperative status. Utilizing an examination of the Art Theater's business and operational responses to forced project change, this work examines the radical financial and operational changes that

independently owned art house theaters have experienced as a response to the financial burden of the transition to digital exhibition formats.

Highlighting exhibition as the “weak link” in the evolutionary chain of digital cinema, I contend that the financial burden on local exhibitors has forced theaters into precarious business and operational models that further erode the position of local independent theater communities in a globalized and conglomerated Hollywood. By placing digital projection conversion within a chronology of industrial and technological change, and articulating the impact of these changes through an ethnographic study of the Art, I conclude that the impact of digital exhibition must be considered past its technological components. Rather, it must be understood for the implications it has in warping, and potentially erasing, the local exhibitor landscape by demanding the adoption of increasing risky, unknown, and untested business models as a base mode of short-term survival.

### **Methodological Framework**

Existing work on exhibition does not offer many models for uncovering the day-to-day lives of independent theaters as a way to understand their role within the broader film industry. David Bordwell is one of the few contemporary scholars to address how the digital revolution has affected the independent model of film exhibition, although his work has tended to address more large-scale changes. Studying trends in exhibition can be a difficult endeavor, especially when cinema studies has found it difficult to reconcile the tensions between social and industrial history, and in many ways it has lacked consideration of the impact of trade practices in the everyday life of theaters and exhibitors.<sup>7</sup> Exhibition, particularly on a local level, is often overlooked as a critical node in the industrial study of the film. Literature on exhibition is often produced in a way that “effectively separates exhibition from production-distribution, or

otherwise reinforces the perception that it is the junior partner in the industry.”<sup>8</sup> The marginalization of exhibition has largely erased the exhibitor from film history, a particularly perplexing move when one considers the critical role that theaters play in the life of film as industrialized art. The 40,174<sup>9</sup> movie screens across the United States are final battlegrounds for the industrial and social clashes around the evolution of film in form and content. This space can provide some of the most interesting insights around development of film as an economic, artistic, and public product.

Methodologically, I foreground a political economy approach to industry studies in order to trace the technological, economic, and industrial changes around digital theatrical projection’s impact on independent theaters. Following, I provide an ethnographic accounting of the Art’s first year as a co-op, combining large-scale industry studies with small-scale ethnography to allow the micro level of the Art Theater to complicate the narrative of macro level industrial changes. By doing so threats to the operational viability, financial stability, and operational precarity of independent exhibitors are highlighted. My research at the Art was conducted in 2013-2014, the theater’s first full year of cooperative ownership and digital projection. I conducted semi-structured interviews with four critical stakeholder groups involved with the theater: volunteer board members, non-board member volunteers, staff, and management.<sup>10</sup> From across these groups a total of eleven individuals were interviewed. All interviewees are referred to using pseudonyms. Additionally, during my research period there were a disproportionate number of men rather than women involved with the theater; all interviewees are referred to using male pronouns to ensure an additional level of anonymity.<sup>11</sup>

As major studios (under the guise of their conglomerated corporate parent companies) move back into the realm of theater ownership, the sustainability of alternative theatrical spaces

is central to staging any offensive against a hegemonic Hollywood system. It is necessary to steer the discussions of digital film away from the rhetoric of the death of cinema and toward a more complete understanding of the impacts of the digital evolution on local exhibitors. Cinema has “died”—and been reincarnated—multiple times.<sup>12</sup> But, when each iteration of cinematic industrial form leaves behind fewer and fewer local independent exhibitors, it is necessary to focus not on what has been *lost*, but on what we are in the process of *losing*, and why.

### **The Digital(s) and Its Discontents**

As the mobile privatization<sup>13</sup> of entertainment technologies evolved, alternate exhibition systems like VCRs, home computers, game consoles, and portable electronic devices reiterated the challenges exhibitors had faced—and overcome—in the past. However, the expansion of video on demand (VOD) services and other electronic delivery models has provided theaters with an entirely new set of hurdles in soliciting audiences. In the past, theaters were able to maintain one critical advantage over home technologies—the ability to showcase new films first. Multi-platform day-and-date release and digital non-theatrical distribution have rendered that benefit virtually obsolete in the domestic market. Theatrical exhibition has become tertiary to the revenues that same product can generate through platform mobility<sup>14</sup>, a term that refers to the ubiquity of access to content on a range of mobile, non-theatrical, devices. Indeed, box-office revenues make up less than 18% of studio profits.<sup>15</sup>

Platform mobility conflates distribution and exhibition: the same technology that allows for digital distribution (through non-theatrical systems) also dictates its space of exhibition (non-theatrical spaces), leaving theaters further marginalized. Digital distributors use electronic sell through, VOD, and SVOD, which are necessarily connected to non-theatrical exhibition.<sup>16</sup> These

distribution models move exhibition into private spaces, shifting the revenue paradigm away from public exhibition and theatrical release. As Caetlin Benson-Allot observes,

Most films fail to earn back their negative costs at the box office; instead their theatrical run provides the advertising and media buzz they need to generate income through DVD and Blu-ray sales and rental, cable and Internet VOD downloading, premium cable channel licensing, and network syndication.<sup>17</sup>

A result of the rapid integration of digital technologies into modern filmmaking practices, the digital transition had flowed through the industry by 1999 with the digital distribution and exhibition of *The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas).<sup>18</sup> In 2002, Disney, Fox, Paramount, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Universal and Warner Bros. came together to form the Digital Cinemas Initiative, LLC (DCI), the consortium which would be responsible for establishing and documenting “voluntary specifications for an open architecture for digital cinema that ensures a uniform and high level of technical performance, reliability and quality control.”<sup>19</sup> If digital cinema was going to be the inevitable future, these were the people who wanted to determine the trajectory of its evolution and adoption.

The responsibility of the DCI was to provide the industry with a set of parameters for the implementation of digital theatrical exhibition. The DCI spent its time producing information within four major areas: 1) specifications for DCI equipment and compliance test plans, processes, and testing entities 2) a list of which compliant equipment was provided by which companies 3) recommended practices for high frame rate digital cinema and 4) best practice guidelines for exhibition. Although a significant component of this work revolved around exhibition, NATO, the exhibition industry’s largest trade organization, was not involved in the coalition.<sup>20</sup>

## Exhibition Revolution

While the rhetoric of digital technologies has become entwined with the idea of the radical rebirth, rather than the evolution, of cinema, there are scholars who correctly point to the emergence of digital technologies as new ways of mirroring the old. John Belton observes that digital filmmaking technologies have the ultimate aim of replicating the experience of 35mm film. He notes, “Digital film technology—from that used in production, post-production, and exhibition—is designed to simulate analog film technology.”<sup>21</sup> Nigel Culkin, Norbert Morawetz, and Keith Randle<sup>22</sup>, while considering digital cinema as disruptive technology, assert a similar position. Indeed, as Philip Rosen argues, digital cinema is not a rupture or radical break within film history, but rather a hybridization of new and old representational modes.<sup>23</sup> Digital exhibition, however, may be the exception. For, while the end goal of images and sound projected onto and around a theatrical screen for audience consumption does not vary from the traditional exhibition model, the practices and systems that enable this are now explicitly constructed *not* to mimic the 35mm delivery system.



Image Credit: the DCP projector at the Art Theater (used with permission of the author)

Since The Art Theater first opened its doors as the Park Theater on November 12, 1913, its projection was celluloid-based. After running successfully as a first run movie house until the late 1950s, in 1958 the Art was bought by Louis K. Sher, who was the owner and operator of the Art Theater Guild, a company that bought local, single-screen theaters and transformed them into what would come to be understood as “art theaters.”<sup>24</sup> Under Sher’s Art Theater Guild management, the Park reopened as The Art Theatre, screening *Le rouge et le noir/The Red and the Black* (Claude Autant-Lara, 1954) and joining the burgeoning trend toward screening independent and foreign cinema in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>25</sup>

Like many art house theaters in the 1960s and 1970s, Art Theater features quickly began to trend toward the erotic.<sup>26</sup> By 1970, the theater’s programming was almost entirely adults-only fare.<sup>27</sup> The theater would eventually distance itself from its grindhouse-like reputation in the 1990s and 2000s, as it passed through a variety of individual owners after the Guild sold it in 1987.

In 2010, Robert Drake became the owner and principal operator of the theater.<sup>28</sup> Drake promoted the autonomous nature of the theater, showing independent features, performing arts showcases, and establishing a regular late night program. Drake established the theater as a cultural touchstone in the community, increasing the number of film festivals co-sponsored with the nearby University of Illinois, and initiating an annual, weeklong documentary festival. He hosted the New Art Film Festival (NAFF), a celebration of homegrown filmmakers, which would become an annual event, and encouraged collaboration with local filmmaking organizations.

Drake understood the delicate balance of independence with economic stability. He began renting out the theater for special events and brought big-name visitors as special

performers to the theater. Drake was also attuned to programming balance, showing more traditional “big budget” art house fare like *Moonrise Kingdom* (Wes Anderson, 2012) along with the Columbia/MGM co-production *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (David Fincher, 2011). Indeed, Drake has publically credited the extended run and success of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* as providing him with his first profitable year.

Despite the successes Drake had, he knew that as an independent owner-operator he could not afford the transition to digital projection that the industry was heralding—or more accurately, demanding—as the future of exhibition. The industry made clear that by 2012 they would effectively end the production of new 35mm prints, and would cease striking 35mm prints of older films. In 2013, Paramount became the first major studio to go to fully digital releases. 2013 also saw Fuji halt production on technology related to celluloid film production, narrowing focus to digital equipment.<sup>29</sup> Celluloid film faced an equally diminishing future. Kodak, the largest producer of celluloid film stock, filed for bankruptcy to absolve its debts and in its current incarnation produces limited amounts of celluloid stock.<sup>30</sup> If the Art wanted to stay in business, it would need to go digital.

Digital exhibition depends on the installation of a digital theater environment made up of several components: a digital projector and its corresponding server, which store the films, trailers, and other material; the Theater Management System, the all-encompassing unit that coordinates servers, projectors, curtains, lighting and sound technology; the digital cinema package (DCP), a hard drive that stores a collection of digital filmic files; and the key delivery message (KDM), an electronic key which unlocks the files for screening.<sup>31</sup><sup>32</sup> Theaters can also supplement their DCP with i-cinema (also called e-cinema), where companies like Emerging

Pictures, Specticast, Proludio, and Storming Images, provide downloadable filmic content via the internet.<sup>33</sup>

The specific and conscious move away from mimicry of 35mm exhibition technologies was spearheaded for a significant reason: substantial cost savings. Digital distribution and exhibition eliminates the need for physically printing and shipping movies. Releasing films through the DCP system costs approximately \$150 per film. In contrast, printing and shipping one 35mm film print costs around \$1,500. That \$1,500 is factored into the number of films produced each year, and then combined with the number of prints needed to fill the screens in the United States, leaving the film industry spending approximately \$850 million annually for release prints and about \$450 million to deliver them to theaters.<sup>34</sup> Eliminating these expenses through the switch to digital represents an estimated \$1 billion in savings for Hollywood.

Digital distribution represented substantial cost savings for Hollywood, but exactly the opposite for exhibitors. Upgrading to digital projection can cost anywhere between \$50,000-\$150,000 per screen. Outside of the conversion costs, the NATO Technology Committee estimated that maintenance of DCP systems would cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per auditorium annually, as opposed to \$1,000-\$2,000 per auditorium for 35mm upkeep.<sup>35</sup> These can be staggering costs for exhibitors, especially for independent theaters like the Art. This led NATO to carve out a leading role for itself in the digital discussion. In 2004, the NATO Board of Directors released a resolution on digital projection that outlined the four major concerns regarding the switch to digital including quality; standards and competition; security and operational control; and financing, equipment selection, roll-out and ownership.<sup>36</sup> To minimize as much as possible the conversion costs for theaters, NATO took up two primary initiatives:

advocacy of virtual print fees and the development of their own entity, the Cinema Buying Group.

The virtual print fee (VPF) was developed by the DCI to help offset the cost of conversions for theaters. For a period of ten years, studios will pay theater owners a VPF for every digital new release shown. In this way, VPFs can help “pay back” the theater for purchasing digital projection outright, but they can also act as a subsidiary for renting digital equipment. Although seemingly solving the problem of the cost of conversion, VPFs are usually only \$600-\$800 per film against a six-figure conversion cost.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, they are only available from the major studios involved in the DCI. Exhibitors who sign VPF deals are subject to non-disclosure agreements, disallowing exhibitors from comparing terms to ensure fair and equitable treatment. Lastly, VPFs are optimized for theaters with at least four screens playing mainstream studio films on the break (a film’s release date) and up to six weeks after the break. A single screen art house theater that does not play films on the break, or plays them seven or more weeks after—such as the Art—cannot take advantage of VPFs as a way to recoup their conversion costs.

While NATO advocates the use of VPFs for a majority of its theaters, it also understands that a significant portion of its theaters would not be able to take advantage of them, especially when fees were in large part determined by screenings on or around the release date. The current structure of VPFs also dictates that they be managed by a third party, for-profit company whose services require payment. In this case, a small independent exhibitor could be paying more in fees to this third party than it did in rental fees for 35mm prints, as well as incurring the costs of digital conversion. To accommodate for this lack, and to work toward both across the board

conversion and advocacy for exhibitors, NATO formed the current incarnation of the Cinema Buying Group.

The Cinema Buying Group (CBG) is a NATO affiliated initiative for independent theater owners and operators. Originally formed in the 1990s as a way for independent exhibitors to negotiate group discounts on theater supplies, in 2006 the CBG dissolved that mission and reformed around the issue of digital cinema/projection conversion. The CBG acts as a semi-autonomous buying program for independent theaters working toward digital conversion. The CBG, in essence, was convened to represent those theaters outside of the large, chain exhibition houses—theaters whose value is not only measures in box office receipts.<sup>38</sup> As explained by a NATO White Paper: “What remains is a core of passionate and committee independent exhibitors, the best and the brightest, who contribute so significantly to our continental culture of movies in ways that *cannot* be captured simply by box office gross and VPF-earning potential.”<sup>39</sup> As part of its work the CBG is advocating that studios restructure VPFs to cover theaters that play films seven or more weeks off the break, to allocate VPFs for sub-run theaters, and to encourage theaters to use digital projection to play movies earlier on the break, a move that would increase revenues and guarantee VPFs but which would also seriously dictate theater’s programming choices.<sup>40</sup> The CBG is also interested in stabilizing the 35mm print market for those theaters unable to convert, asking the theaters to guarantee 500 film prints per title for seven years to be made available by the studios.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the work of NATO and its CBG initiative, theaters like the Art fall outside of the purview of these financial and advocacy networks. Although the Art is a member of NATO it was unable to take advantage of either of these cost-offsetting programs, primarily because of the way NATO defines “independent” theaters: regional chains with screen holdings in the double-

digits. Single-screen local art houses are not represented by their own trade organization. Yet, they are still held accountable to the demands of the industry. This is the economic bind the Art found itself in 2012. Faced with the overwhelming financial burden of digital conversion, the theater was forced to venture into unknown, and risky, territory in an attempt to keep its doors open.

### **Cooperative Cinema**

In 2012, Art Theater owner Robert Drake had limited options in securing the theater's future. As a break-even theater, there was no money for projection conversion, and the idea of transitioning to non-profit status posed as many financial and logistical burdens as did the necessary conversion. At this point, a local businessman intimately involved in a successful grocery cooperative approached him. He asked, why not make the theater a co-op as a way to raise the money needed? Drake held a public presentation at the theater to explain the state of the theater and to pitch cooperative ownership to the community. The idea took off with little pushback. An interim board determined that the theater needed to raise \$100,000 to assume ownership of the theater and provide for the conversion, and it settled on \$65 per ownership share, with a limit of nine shares per person.<sup>42</sup> The owner drive began in December 2011, and by July 2012 the full \$100,000 had been raised with approximately 1,200 owners recruited. The co-op bought-out Drake with a loan he himself provided. Indeed, Drake's willingness to continue to invest in the life of the theater is the primary reason the co-op was able to take over. Between the loan he provided for the purchase of equipment, the initial inventory, and providing sublease liability, Drake stood to lose almost \$260,000 if the theater failed.<sup>43</sup>

Financially, the move to cooperative ownership was a success. The money was raised in less than a year and the conversion was set for August 2013. Yet this success belied the tenuous

and precarious nature of the financial and operational position the theater had put itself into through cooperative ownership and operation. Quickly, the solution became the problem. Three overarching themes emerged as threats to the viability of cooperative ownership and operation: unfamiliarity with cooperative business and governance structure; a murky case for cooperative growth; and difficulties navigating the widening divide between art and commerce. Examining these themes demonstrates why digital projection conversion must be understood as more than a onetime financial burden. Rather, conversion needs to be seen as implicated in the ways theaters are forced into adopting radical and precarious business and operational models whose repercussions reverberate far beyond a simple swap of projection equipment.

### **Into the Unknown**

The Art was venturing into unknown territory with no analogous model for guidance. As board member Scott recalls: “We are going through some issues because we were the first. I mean, a classification of a theater was not even in the rules for Illinois co-ops. We are kinda blazing that trail a little bit.” Compounding this, what “cooperative ownership” meant was unclear; several board members I spoke with admitted that they do not think the board has a good understanding of exactly what it means.

With no direct model, they followed the pattern of a local grocery co-op as the blueprint to get the theatrical cooperative up and running. Based on this, the board was constructed in a policy governance capacity only, and the day-to-day operations of the theater were delegated to a newly created general manager position. The board was composed of members elected from the ownership pool. Their responsibilities were restricted to setting operational policies, the mission and vision of the theater, and overseeing the general manager. This defies many of the expectations that some board members had around the idea of collective cooperative ownership.

As board member Kurt recounts about joining the board “I wasn’t thinking about the business aspect, or distribution, or legal considerations, I was thinking ‘yippee we are gonna own a big screen.’ What can we play with?” As it turned out, not very much. The reality of a policy governance board restricts them from involvement in the day-to-day operations—including programming, community positioning, branding, or any other activities the theater undertakes.

Of course, these restrictions do allow for streamlining daily operations and restricts the number of cooks in the operational kitchen. However, it also leads to the bottlenecking of progress. Unlike a grocery co-op, which can have levels of available management and staff to facilitate projects and progress, the theater has one manager.<sup>44</sup> The manager is responsible for the entirety the theater’s operations: programming, marketing and public relations, finances and compliance, owner liaison and ownership growth, board relations, and so on. The projection and box office staff is responsible for ticket and concession sales, operating the concessions counter, projection, and theater cleanliness. The general manager is expected to accomplish all other duties in 30 hours per week. Slow or stalled progress and growth is inevitable.

Cooperative ownership, and its effect on the daily life of the theater, seems to be misunderstood in the community as well. Staff member Erik reports that patrons—owners and non-owners alike—will come into the theater and assume that the staff is all volunteer. He continues: “There are people that feel like they own the theater now, and they come in and try and boss you around. It happens every couple weeks.” Additionally, there is an assumption that because the co-op transition was successful in installing the new projection system that the theater is financially secure. Today the theater is primarily supported through concession sales, much as it has been in the past. Erik notes: “The only way we really make money is on concessions. People think it’s the cool place to go when they don’t have money, but we really

need your money.” To date, the Art is still a break-even theater, and all revenues go directly to operating expenses and repaying their loan to Drake.

### **Art for (the) Art’s Sake: Or, What Does it Mean to Be “Special”?**

One of the more important issues to grow from the misunderstandings of cooperative business structure is post-conversion owner recruitment. Consistent owner recruitment was positioned as a viable auxiliary income source for the theater, but it has been a point of significant consistent underperformance for the theater. The initial ownership drive had the compelling message of convert or close; it was not difficult to get people to invest. Owner recruitment and community building after the initial threat of closure has been marginalized, and both functions have been operating primarily on autopilot. During my interviews the board was still unsure exactly whose job owner recruitment was, theirs or the general manager’s. Additionally, the benefits of ownership remain unarticulated. When asked what those benefits consisted of, most interviewees were unable to say. In fact, outside of being able to run for the board and vote in board elections, there are no material benefits. Board member Scott notes “I think that most people have a sense that, yeah, they just paid some money to keep us open. I think that’s fine, but I think we could definitely do more to help owners understand that being an owner of the Art is special.”

The rhetoric of “specialness” has emerged as the only real selling point of owner recruitment. It builds on two discrete ideas: that the theater operates as a curatorial and educational space for and about film in the community, and that the ability to see non-mainstream films in a brick and mortar theater, with a like-minded audience, is a unique experience. “Specialness” also extends to the idea that patronizing the Art is something more than just seeing a movie; it is supporting an experiential venue for people who love film, and

have a commitment to non-mainstream cinema. As staff member Erik states: “A lot of people are going to want to see *Iron Man 3*, and we don’t show that stuff.” Volunteer Hank also expounds on the experience of alternative programming: “To see a film that somebody made for nothing and can put all these emotions and ideas in you. That’s amazing.”

The physical space of the Art as a conduit of congregation for its audience community is also emphasized. The Art’s manager connects the space of theater to the “classic moviegoing experience.” He continues, “People see it as a place where film is taken a little bit more seriously. Where there is an attempt to play quality film.” Board member Scott concurs:

If I see this movie at the Art at least I know people aren’t going to be talking, I know that for sure. I know the concessions will be good, I know the prices will be fair. I know the staff will be friendly, I know the theater will be clean, I know that the projection will be in focus and things like that. I know it’s not run by a high school student making \$5.50 an hour.

Emphasizing the materiality of seeing film at the Art also increases the currency of “specialness” while nodding to the experience of collective moviegoing. Board member Scott continues:

I don’t think we’ve gotten to the point where everyone is happy staying at home and watching Netflix. I think it’s definitely an issue, but there will always be a sense that doing something with a group of people is different. [...] there is always a sense that people want to watch something together. I think the cinema experience is not dead; it’s not even close to being dead.

While the rhetoric of specialness can serve as compelling testimonials for the support of the theater through ownership, it speaks more to the audience who already frequents the theater than to casual or non-attendees. In this sense, “specialness” resonates only with the already-committed theater audience, many of whom are current owners. Without a clearly articulated case for support that can reach multiple target groups, and without injecting the pre-existing ownership pool with new opportunities and possibilities for owner involvement, the Art risks wearing their supportive community thin.

## **Art or Profit?**

Of course, the theater is a business and it would be naïve not to acknowledge that profit is always a motivating factor—the move to cooperative ownership to finance the projection conversion was a business decision first and foremost. The Art is caught up more than ever in the enduring and divisive relationship of art and commerce. This is especially true when one considers that the theater's financial standing has to satisfy a board of directors and 1,500-person membership pool, as opposed to a single owner-operator. Mark Banks contextualizes the primary tensions within ever-contentious relationship between art and commerce:

Indeed, the history of cultural and creative industry production is marked by the tension between the need for artists to create an independent nexus of creativity, labour freedoms and skilled, artisanal production while serving commercial masters, and, in the opposite direction the necessity for managers of ensuring that those artists freedoms are not destroyed, but appropriately harnessed and managed, sufficient to ensure the free flow of new and original cultural commodities.<sup>45</sup>

The Art Theater as art house is a creative force serving a commercial master, and as such must negotiate the fraught spaces between autonomy, independence, and profit. This has been a particularly difficult divide for the theater to straddle. The general manager—who has worked hard to integrate truly independent and experimental film into the theater's offerings—has needed to compromise programming philosophy to bring in mainstream independent films, often just to meet payroll. As for the board, they struggle with balancing their commitment to the theater's artistic ideology with their accountability to the ownership pool around the Art's finances. This pressure is represented well by board member Warren:

Moving forward we also have to look at what are the options to make us profitable. Because everybody would like the ability to continue to show art films in town. But if it's not a sustainable model then what other options can we bring to the table that can help make us profitable and allow us to show these films which are important and don't have other venues in town.

The strained relations between the business and artistic model of the theater have been most visible in the increased precarity and workplace alienation of the theater staff. Financial uncertainty in the film industry, especially for below the line workers, is not a new phenomena.<sup>46</sup> For frontline staff working in independent theaters, however, it is particularly salient. The theater employs approximately 10 staff members at any given time, and all are part-time hourly workers with the exception of the general manager, who is full-time and salaried. Demographically, they have a median age of 27, are in various stages of higher education, are artists, and/or work at other local businesses; starting salary is \$9.25 an hour.

The staff is the consistent public face of the theater. It is not the board or the general manager who greets patrons night after night, but the staff. They are, in large part, responsible for cultivating an “alternative” atmosphere within the theater, one that has become synonymous with the Art and its role in the cultural landscape of the town as a curatorial institution. This important role, however, masks their marginality in the corporate life of the theater, and the workers’ increasing precariousness. I invoke precarity here in the vein of Ergin Bulut who understands it “as an increasingly hegemonic form of employment that has been ‘rediscovered’ by the capitalist class to respond to the crisis of capitalism.”<sup>47</sup> In this way, the financial pressures of balancing a profit business against the ethos of independence manifest itself through the staff, most vulnerable nodes in the corporate chain.

For staff, the theater’s finances are a consistent topic of discussion. They report they are both confused by and hyperaware of the theater’s financial position at any given moment. Some staff members report that they believe the theater is financially safe, some have no idea of the financial status, and some, like Erik, say they are consistently reminded of their precarity: “When I was interviewed I was told I had no job security. Then once it became a co-op I was told I

could be fired at any moment.” Staff report feeling as if they are always under threat of having “hours cut” depending on the how well—or not—ticket sales are for each booking. In fact, many staff I spoke to said that as soon as box office receipts dip below expected for any particular film, talk of reduction in hours is usually invoked as management’s first solution to try to even out the net for the month.

This type of precarious work environment has a significant effect on the relationship between management and staff. Issues like this are, of course, not unusual in any workplace. A for-profit art house theater spans contradictory space where art and commerce meet, making it unsurprising that blending a communal atmosphere with a corporate financial end goal is difficult. Compounding this is the idea of a job at an art theater as a type of “funemployment.” Staffer Remy says: “It’s a lot of fun, cause it super laid back, we are all very individual, which is nice and kind of hard to find.” The idea of work as fun/fun as work gestures to the idea that “In the society of enjoyment, we are interpellated as subjects that consider work not as toil but as fun and passion.”<sup>48</sup> This logic is particularly apparent at the Art, where tensions between staff and management are, in part, a byproduct of working in a bifurcated space between creativity and commerciality. For example, the manager both chastises his staff for thinking their job is “just a job” and simultaneously bemoans that some staff are too casual and forget that it “is a job.” The manager’s conflicting boundaries around how he expects that staff to approach their work, both ideologically and practically, speaks to the difficult pairing of art and commerce.

Staff also pinpointed the move to collective ownership as a spot of increased alienation from the life of the theater itself. Employees report that formally, in relation to the board and the general manager, they feel shut out of the communal environment of theater life. Some staff interviewed wondered why they were not represented on the board, or reported talking amongst

themselves how to be able to bring concerns and issues directly to board members. This betrayed the staff's misconceptions about the board as a management board, striking similar chords to the confusions of the board itself. However, the staff's desire to have a voice in the large-scale discussions of the theater echoes the rhetoric of collective and community embedded in the cooperative structure, a situation that often left employees wondering why they could not be considered part of that congregation.

Informally, however, the staff believe that they have a tremendous impact on the theater's day-to-day operations. Staff member Erik noted that since the establishment of the co-op and the removal of the single owner-operator, the daily life of the theater has become more employee-driven than it was before. He explains that this has given employees more room to grow and direct their own work lives. This seems to be a peculiar turn given the dispersal of a formal single owner-operator to a layered management system, where collective ownership has forced the increased corporatization of the theater. However, it can explain the investment that employees continue to feel in the theater—and the *idea* of the theater—itsself, if not in the management and board. As staff member Lucas summarizes:

I'd say its pretty prefect. It is its own little niche. And we all care about the theater ... Even if people have issues with management, I mean that's everywhere. At the end of the day we all care about the theater and we all care about film, and the community cares. People care about the business and the Art ... I like the theater. It opened my eyes to film, like, in a way that I never really looked at it .... If I did not work at the theater, I would volunteer there.

## **Conclusion**

These recurring themes highlight the salient fact that the Art theater, like other local independent exhibitors, have been forced to adopt risky and precarious business and operational models to adapt to the forced digital projection conversion. Here, projection conversion reverberates in the world of local exhibitors well beyond the simple scramble to raise the funds

necessary for new equipment. It is forcing fundamental change on the most marginal and vulnerable theater group, potentially hastening the demise of a vibrant independent theater scene. In this sense, digital projection must be understood beyond its technological components and initial costs and reassessed as a lynchpin of wide-ranging change in operations of local independent exhibitors.

Although this case study has focused on the for-profit cooperative business model, I must emphasize that all of the transitional models have downfalls. Transitioning a theater to non-profit status is a costly endeavor that requires lawyers, start-up funds, and significant staff resources; that is just the initial costs to get it up and running. The direct goodwill-fundraising model taken by some theaters also involves risks, particularly when one factors in the rate of technological change and obsolescence that surrounds digital projection technology. How many times can a community be asked to finance the equipment necessary to fund the cost savings of the multi-billion dollar conglomerates that operate Hollywood studios? The impact of digital exhibition, therefore, must be considered past its technological components and understood for the implications it has in warping, and potentially erasing, the local independent exhibitor landscape by demanding the adoption of increasing precarious, unknown, and untested business and operations models as a base mode of short-term survival.

Despite its past issues around cooperative ownership, the Art is not out of options. The Art Theater board recognizes the problems that the cooperative model has brought. As a result, in the summer of 2017 the Art's owners voted to dissolve cooperative ownership and merge with a local 501(c)(3) foundation under the paradigm of comprehensive fiscal sponsorship. This merger will allow the Art to operate as a non-profit without the burden of costly start-up and implementation fees. The non-profit transition, however, is not a panacea for the Art's financial

or organizational precarity. It brings along with it a host of new operational, fundraising, and staff challenges. The challenges, however, are welcomed by the Board and management, as the charitable status offers far greater avenues for financial stability than the cooperative model ever could.

The task of keeping the doors of a single-screen independent art theater open will seemingly remain a continuous problem. In the face of the spectacularization of film technology like 3-D, IMAX, and D-Box seats, independent theaters are fighting battling for smaller and smaller audience shares. In the end, the Art and other theaters of its ilk have only the “experience”—the specialness—of their theater, of art, of community, of difference, to sell. This may be both the greatest burden and asset to the continuing success of local exhibitors. As the Art’s general manager says, “The secret of the Art is that it’s a better experience than sitting at home or being at another theater.” For the Art Theater in Champaign, Illinois, that cannot remain a secret for much longer.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Belton, “Digital 3D Cinema: Digital Cinema’s Missing Novelty Phase” *Film History: An International Journal* 24 no 2 (2012): 187.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press): 2005.

<sup>3</sup> See: Tom Gunning, “Moving Away From the Index: Cinema and The Impression of Reality,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18 no. 1 (2007): 29-52.; Garrett Stewart, *Framed Time: Towards a Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).; Aylish Wood, *Digital Encounters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).; Lisa Purse, *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> See: Kristen Whissel, “Tales of Upward Mobility,” *Film Quarterly* 59 no 4 (Summer 2006): 23-34.; Kristen Whissel, “The Digital Multitude,” *Cinema Journal* 49 no 4 (Summer 2010): 90-110.; Kristen Whiseel, *Spectacular Digital Effects: CGI and Contemporary Cinema* (Durham,

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<sup>5</sup> See: John Belton, "Digital 3D Cinema: Digital Cinema's Missing Novelty Phase," *Film History: An International Journal* 24 no 2 (2012): 187-195.; Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko, *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* (London: Blackwell, 2008).; Thomas Elsaesser, "The 'Return' of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century" *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Winter 2013): 217-246.; Ariel Rodgers, *Cinematic Appeals: The Experience of New Movie Technologies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Ricahrd Verrier, "Small-town movie theaters threatened by shift to digital cinema." *Los Angeles Times*, accessed January 26, 2014 [www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/cotown/la-et-ct-last-picture-show-20130504,0,2581142.story](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/cotown/la-et-ct-last-picture-show-20130504,0,2581142.story)

<sup>7</sup> Richard Maltby, "The Standard Exhibition Contract and the Unwritten History of the Classical Hollywood Cinema," *Film History* 25 vol 1-2 (2013): 139.

<sup>8</sup> Deron Overpeck, "Blindsiding: Theatre Ownership, Political Action and Industrial Change in Hollywood, 1975-1985" in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, eds. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011): 186.

<sup>9</sup> National Association of Theatre Owners, "Number of U.S. Movie Screens," [natoonline.org](http://www.natoonline.org), accessed November 10, 2017 <http://www.natoonline.org/statisticsscreens.htm>

<sup>10</sup> This ethnographic research was approved by the Human Subject Review Committee of the Institutional Review Board of the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. All subjects were informed of their rights during the interview process, signed consent forms agreeing to be recorded, and agreed to having their statements represented in multiple areas including in published material, albeit anonymously.

<sup>11</sup> It is necessary for me to disclose my personal relationship with the theater. In addition to being a patron, I have worked as a volunteer, assistant manager, interim general manager, and board member at the Art Theater.

<sup>12</sup> Janet Wasko, "The Death of Hollywood: Exaggeration or Reality?" in *The Handbook of Political Economy of Communications*, eds. Janet Wasko, Graham Murdock, and Helena Sousa (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York and London: Routledge 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Chuck Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship From VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013): 150.

<sup>16</sup> Electronic sell through is when a customer can buy a digital download copy of a film, for example, through iTunes. VOD are one-off rentals subject to viewing time constraints, and SVOD services are companies like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon that often access to a library of titles for a monthly fee.

<sup>17</sup> Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship From VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013): 14.

<sup>18</sup> John Belton, "Digital 3D Cinema: Digital Cinema's Missing Novelty Phase," *Film History: An International Journal* 24 no 2 (2012): 187-195.

<sup>19</sup> DCI, Digital Cinema Initiatives, LLC, "Digital Cinema Talking Points" accessed July 27, 2013 [http://www.natoonline.org/pdfs/Talking%20Points/TP\\_Digital%20Cinema.pdf](http://www.natoonline.org/pdfs/Talking%20Points/TP_Digital%20Cinema.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> The National Association of Theatre Owners was founded in 1965 and is the world's largest cinema exhibition organization, representing 30,000 movies screen in all 50 United States and additional cinemas in 50 countries worldwide.

<sup>21</sup> John Belton, "Digital 3D Cinema: Digital Cinema's Missing Novelty Phase," *Film History: An International Journal* 24 no 2 (2012): 189.

<sup>22</sup> Nigel Culkin, Norbert Morawetz and Keith Randle, "Digital Cinema as Disruptive Technology: Exploring New Business Models in the Age of Digital Distribution," in *Information Communication Technologies and Emerging Business Strategies*, eds. Shenja van der Graaf and Yuichi Washida (Hershey, PA: The Idea Group, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Sher was not only a pioneer in developing art house theaters in the Midwest but also a tireless opponent of censorship. Indeed, it was Sher and his Art Theater Guild that appealed obscenity decisions around his Art Theatre in Cleveland all the way to the United States Supreme Court. Sher's legal advocacy resulted in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, in which the court ruled in his favor and Justice Potter Stewart gave his famous proclamation on pornography; Justice Stewart attempted to define pornography by saying, "I know it when I see it." He voted in Sher's favor, concurring that nothing he "saw" in the offending films in the suit read to him as pornography.

<sup>25</sup> Perry C. Morris, Joseph Muskin, and Audrey Wells, *The Art Theater: Playing Movies for 100 Years* (Urbana, IL: Champaign-Urbana Theater History, 2013): 91-92.

<sup>26</sup> Although art houses flourished as fashionable moviegoing in the 1950s and 1960s, by the end of the 1960s they were on the decline as the novelty of foreign film began to wear off the U.S.

public. At approximately the same time censorship and obscenity rules were slackening, the popularity of exploitation films was on the rise, and pornography was becoming mainstream. As a result, many art house theaters began to program more sexually explicit films, including pornography, to stay in business.

<sup>27</sup> Perry C. Morris, Joseph Muskin, and Audrey Wells, *The Art Theater: Playing Movies for 100 Years* (Urbana, IL: Champaign-Urbana Theater History, 2013): 107.

<sup>28</sup> The theater is housed in a building that has been historically landmarked and is owned by a property company, which also owns four residential apartments above the theater. The property owner has no stake in the theater as a business and serves only as its landlord.

<sup>29</sup> FUJIFILM Corporation Press Release, "Discontinuation of Motion Picture Film Production," accessed April 2, 2013 [www.fujifilm.com/news/n130402.html](http://www.fujifilm.com/news/n130402.html)

<sup>30</sup> Kodak Press Release, "Kodak Motion Picture Film is Still Rolling," accessed April 29, 2013 [www.motion.kodak.com/motion/About/The\\_Storyboard/429497/index.htm](http://www.motion.kodak.com/motion/About/The_Storyboard/429497/index.htm)

<sup>31</sup> David Bordwell, "Pandora's Digital Box: At the Festival," *Observations on Film Art*, accessed March 13, 2013 [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2012/01/05/pandoras-digital-box-at-the-festival](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2012/01/05/pandoras-digital-box-at-the-festival)

<sup>32</sup> The DCP ranges in size from as small as a UBS drive to the size of a standard external hard drive. It is mailed to theaters and then inserted into the server, where the files are ingested for use. The files can only be accessed and played once they are unlocked using the KDM, which controls not only how many times a film can be screen but can also be programmed to work only in specific theaters, on specific machines, and/or at specific times. KDMs are usually transmitted via email or phone.

<sup>33</sup> David Bordwell, "Pandora's Digital Box: Art House, Smart House," *Observations on Film Art* accessed March 13, 2013 <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2012/01/30/pandoras-digital-box-art-house-smart-house/>

<sup>34</sup> Gendy Alimurung, "Movie Studios are Forcing Hollywood to Abandon 35mm Film, But the Consequences of Going Digital are Vast, and Troubling," *LA Weekly*, accessed March 17, 2013 [www.laweekly.com/content/printVersion/1647632/](http://www.laweekly.com/content/printVersion/1647632/)

<sup>35</sup> National Association of Theatre Owners, "12 Important Questions About Digital Cinema," accessed July 27, 2013 <http://www.natoonline.org/12%20Digital%20Cinema%20Questions.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> National Association of Theatre Owners, "National Association of Theatre Owners Board of Directors Digital Cinema Resolution," accessed July 23, 2013 <http://www.natoonline.org/DigitalResolution%2011-18-04.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Therese Poletti, "Hollywood's Move to Digital Will End an Era," Market Watch of *The Wall*

*Street Journal Online*, accessed March 1, 2013  
[www.marketwatch.com/Story/story/print?guid=842945EC-46E2-11E1-8F6F-002128040CF6](http://www.marketwatch.com/Story/story/print?guid=842945EC-46E2-11E1-8F6F-002128040CF6)

<sup>38</sup> The digital conversion for corporate theater chains was primarily carried out under the Digital Cinemas Implementation Project, which was formed in 2007 as a joint venture of the AMC, Cinemark, and Regal Theater chains. According to the project's website, they have raised \$880 million for digital conversion and as of May 2013 have successfully deployed 14,327 digital projection systems. For more information, see <http://www.dcipllc.com>.

<sup>39</sup> National Association of Theatre Owners, "CBG White Paper," accessed July 27, 2013  
<http://www.natooonline.org/pdfs/PDF%20Digital%20Cinema/CBGNATO%20Digital%20for%20Independents%20Essay-Jan-Apr%202009.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Sanford Hess, *The Art Theater Co-op Business Plan v3.1*, August 16, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Figure drawn from author's personal conversation on August 26, 2013 and *The Art Theater Co-op Business Plan v3.1*, August 16, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> The theater, on occasion, has an assistant manager position. Their role was primarily to supervise staff and over see front of house operations. This is not a recurring position and the responsibilities change depending on the skills of the person in the position.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Banks, "Autonomy Guaranteed? Cultural Work and the 'Art-Commerce Relation,'" *Journal for Cultural Research* 14 vol 3 (2010): 260.

<sup>46</sup> See John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Ergin Bulut, "Playboring in the Tester Pit: The Convergence of Precarity and the Degradation on Fun in Video Game Testing," *Television & New Media* (March 2014): 6.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 2.

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## Excavating the Brick and Mortar: Reinvestigating the Art House in the Digital Age



**Sarah E. S. Sinwell**

Historically considered a key venue for the exhibition of independent films often marginalized in the multiplex, art house cinemas are currently in crisis. Beginning in 2007 the Art House Convergence Conference has partnered with the Sundance Institute to address the future sustainability of community-based art house theatres in the United States. In session just before the start of the Sundance Film Festival, the Art House Convergence Conference focuses on programming, marketing, fundraising, technology, and industry trends. Though it might be imagined that the Art House Convergence Conference began due to the threat of digital projection, it was actually the Sundance Institute's desire to partner with art house theatres across the United States following the year of its own 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary that initiated the Conference.

This essay examines the ways in which art houses cinemas can be reimagined in the digital age. By focusing on auteurs, international films, and award-winning films, art house cinemas reinforce a form of cultural legitimacy that differentiates them from the

Hollywood fare at the multiplex. As Michael Newman notes in his book, *Indie Cinema: An American Film Culture*, “art houses are cultural sites and social spaces, and they generate and benefit from a rhetoric of distinction. They function to set apart both cinematic forms and the audiences that consume them.”<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, theatres such as the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema in Austin, the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor, the Salt Lake Film Society in Salt Lake City, and the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Boston have been screening shorts, programming film festivals, and showing other alternative content such as pop concerts, opera broadcasts, sports events, and Broadway shows. As David Bordwell notes, this type of exhibition presents film as a mixed media event, wherein movie houses present many programs, including theatre, revues, films, and so on, much as they did in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup>

By examining art house audiences, marketing strategies, community-driven programming, alternative technologies, industrial practices, and content (such as pop concerts, opera broadcasts, sports events, and Broadway shows), this essay analyzes how art house theatres have employed a variety of strategies for success as a means of both competing with and differentiating themselves from the multiplex. Through interviews with programmers, development officers, executive directors, board members, distributors, film bookers, and others, this paper will focus on how art houses cinemas have responded to technological and industrial trends to help improve the quality and effectiveness of community-based art house cinemas in the digital age.

In a time when the multiplex is often seen as the primary mode of cinema exhibition, this paper illustrates how art house theatres across the country are drawing attention to their histories, encouraging local community engagement, and curating

alternative forms of content as a means of supporting the regrowth of art house cinemas. Investigating the interrelationships between the brick and mortar art house theatre and its audiences, I argue that as art house theatres struggle with promoting themselves in the digital age, their future depends upon how these cinemas address their own histories, communities, and content.

### **Analyzing the Art House Convergence Conference**

My interest in the Art House Convergence Conference stems not only from my love of art house theatres and my research on independent cinema, but also from my role as an Executive and Governing Board member of the Salt Lake Film Society, which runs two art house theatres (with seven screens) in Salt Lake City, Utah. The Executive Director of the Film Society, Tori Baker, is one of the Founding Board members of the Art House Convergence Conference in Midway, Utah (located just outside of Park City). My connections with Tori and other staff of the Salt Lake Film Society enabled me to attend the conference in January 2016 and January 2017. The research included in this essay extends from the panels, presentations, and informative sessions with media industry professionals that I attended at the Conference, as well as the twelve video interviews I conducted in 2017.

The session topics on the conference agenda include everything from programming and accessing independent art house films, to the importance of fundraising, to digital conversion, to film festivals. Perhaps the most significant sessions beyond the keynote addresses by such figures as Ira Deutchman (Co-Founder and Managing partner of Emerging Pictures, a New York-based digital exhibition company),

James Schamus (co-founder of Good Machine and CEO of Focus Features), and Cheryl Dunye (director of *The Watermelon Woman* (1996)) are the Art House Tales.

These Art House Tales have become an essential part of the conference. Over the last three years, the Art House Tales have included presentations from thirty-seven art house theatres across the United States. Each presentation includes twenty slides at twenty seconds per slide for a total of six minutes and forty seconds per theatre. These Art House Tales serve as an entertaining means of introducing the specificities of each art house to the entire community. However, they also serve as a valuable archive of the histories and idiosyncrasies of the art house. This wide variety of art house cinemas across the country becomes visible when one considers just three Art House Tales: the Salt Lake Film Society in Salt Lake City, the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Boston, and the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor.

### **Interviewing at Art House Convergence**

The following is a list of questions that I asked during the interviews:

- 1) How did you get introduced to Art House Convergence?
- 2) How long have you been attending the Conference?
- 3) How long have you worked with Art House Theatres?
- 4) Tell us about your earliest experiences with Art House Convergence.
- 5) How has the Conference changed over time?
- 6) How has it impacted your involvement with art house cinemas?
- 7) What do you find most valuable about Art House Convergence?

- 8) How has Art House Convergence been impacted by changes in the film industry (for example, digital distribution, streaming technologies, etc.) and vice versa?
- 9) How do you think Art House Convergence has impacted the filmgoing experience in Art house Theatres?
- 10) What do you see as the relationship between Art House Convergence and Film Festivals? Distribution? Community? Networking?
- 11) What do you see as the relationship between for-profit and non-profit theatres?
- 12) What do you see as the future of the Art House?

After completing these interviews over four days at the Conference in January 2017, three common themes began to emerge: 1) History, 2) Community, and 3) Curation. Many of the interviewees referenced the significance of both moviegoing as well as the history of the art houses themselves. They also pointed out the need to focus on community as a means of promoting the art house. And, finally, they argued that the future of the art house is tied to curation.

### **Excavating Art House Histories**

As historians such as Douglas Gomery, Michael Newman, Barbara Wilinsky, and others have noted, art house theatres have been vital to the circulation of independent cinema in America.<sup>3</sup> As Wilinsky argues in her history of the emergence of art house cinema in the postwar decades, since art house cinema exhibition functions within “the capitalist commercial film industry, art cinema is in constant negotiation with mainstream cinema.”<sup>4</sup> In 2012, art house cinema’s existence in a larger industry became especially clear when many art house theatres were forced to make the transition to digital video

and digital projection systems in order to avoid closing their doors forever. As CEO and President of the National Association of Theatre Owners, John Fithian, repeatedly put it at the time, “convert or die.”<sup>5</sup> In the years following 2012, art house cinemas turned to their communities and crowdfunding sites such as Kickstarter as a means of raising the \$50-\$100,000 (per screen) it costs to transition to digital projection.<sup>6</sup> However, by 2016, when I first attended the Art House Convergence Conference, the discussion had shifted to how best to use digital projection for the purposes of marketing, advertising, and screening film festivals, since many theatres closed down when they could not afford the transition. Instead, in 2016 and 2017, the Conference focused on how other changes in the industry were impacting the art house (including environmental concerns, archiving, fundraising, and even data security).

When I asked Ira Deutchman, Co-founder and Managing partner of Emerging Pictures, how the art house has changed in relation to the film industry, he noted three ways in which the art houses have had to respond: 1) the Transition to Digital Projection, 2) the Desire to Keep 35 mm Alive, and 3) the Focus on Event Programming. He notes,

I’m a big believer in the fact that the attraction of going to see a movie in a movie theatre as opposed to on a phone, or at home, or even on a big screen at home, has a lot to do with the experience, the audience, the communal experience. No matter what the technology is, the biggest appeal[s] of seeing a movie in a movie theatre are all the analog things: which are people, food, drink, conversation. None of that happens if you’re sitting at home.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, Deutchman recognizes the necessity of acknowledging the history

of moviegoing. However, he also points out the ways in which moviegoing has always been impacted by its audiences. Perhaps not surprisingly, the history of Art House Convergence is tied not only to film history, but also to the history of the theatres themselves. Deutchman notes,

This is not the first time the movie business has been threatened by an outside force that in theory was going to compete with and take the place of people's time that they were going to spend in a theatre...The first time around in my lifetime was back in the 50s and into the early 60s when....television first became a mass medium and when Hollywood was having a really hard time figuring out what to do to have audiences come into the theatre.<sup>8</sup>

In response, theatres experimented with such technologies as widescreen, 3D, and stereophonic sound. Now, with the advent of online streaming and digital distribution, art house theatres are responding by creating community-driven and educational programming, showing alternative content, and promoting filmmaker visits, live music, parties and other festivities.

Part of the widespread popularity of the Art House Tales at Art House Convergence stems from how these presentations explore the ways in which the art house theatres' histories are intertwined with their audiences.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the Salt Lake Film Society (which serves 250,000 people annually) was founded in 2001 to save the crumbling historical Tower Theatre from closing down forever. It now includes the Tower Theatre (which was built in 1928 and renovated in the 1960s), as well as The Broadway Theatre (which was converted from a Loews cinema chain in 1989).<sup>10</sup> The

Coolidge Corner Theatre in Boston was originally built as a church in 1906, but was redesigned as an art deco movie palace in 1933. Facing such challenges as the loss of its marquee, the need for new seating, and the transition to digital projection (a not uncommon fate of many art houses across the United States), the Coolidge Corner Theatre has been continuously running since 1933.<sup>11</sup> A movie palace focusing on silent exhibition in the 1920s, the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor was threatened with demolition in the 1970s, but was saved by a concerned community and restored in three phases over the course of the next thirty years.<sup>12</sup> Even the phases of restoration of these theatres (the creation of stages and orchestra pits, new concession areas, and multipurpose and functional educational spaces) speak to the art house theatre's role not just as film exhibitor, but as historical preservationist, cultural curator, community leader, and educator.

In examining the variety of art house tales (both via the posted video slideshows on the Art House Convergence website and via my own interviews with the various attendees at the Conference), I noted that the histories of these theatres and their persistence in the current climate are dependent on the local communities. But, they are also dependent upon the sheer love of cinema (and its history). Gary Meyer, cofounder of Landmark Theatres and founder of Eat, Drink, Films, first exhibited films in the hayloft of his barn at age twelve and continues to work as an investor and advisor to various art houses across the country to this day. For Meyer, "the motivator in this business is mostly passion...whether it is education or entertainment or both, the way we like to challenge our audiences, the way we like them to become part of our family....We do it because we believe in it."<sup>13</sup> Executive Director of Renew Theatres in Doylestown, PA, John Toner,

saw that his local theatre looked like it was going to be converted into another use and thought, “What would it be like to run a movie theatre?”<sup>14</sup> These stories of passion and concern for the continued survival of art house cinemas are quite typical of the people I interviewed, and their observations illuminate the historical meaning of cinema for the larger art house community.

Stephanie Silverman, Executive Director of the Belcourt Theatre in Nashville, TN, argues that the role of the art house is not just to advocate for the theatres themselves, but for the canon, for repertory (i.e., classic and cult films like *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) that are often already familiar with audiences) stating that “We are places not only for new voices, but [we must] continue to share the past.”<sup>15</sup> For many art house theatres, this focus on history comes in the form of not only “Best Musical” or “Greatest Women Directors” series or silent film screenings that include live musical accompaniment. It also involves Midnight screenings, Family Screenings such as Sing with Maria (a sing-along *Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965) event), or REwind series for Millennials that include films such as *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) or *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995). Nevertheless, many interviewees pointed out that their theatres could not survive just by doing repertory. Instead, the continued success of these theatres requires them to branch out beyond traditional exhibition to include more educational, community and alternative programming (such as live events, theatre, Broadway shows, operas, etc.).

Sponsored by such organizations as Amazon Studios, Warner Archive, and Magnolia Pictures, the newly commemorated Art House Theater Day (September 23,

2016/September 24, 2017) celebrates the historic and cinematic experience of the brick and mortar art house theatres. Featuring special screenings, parties and other community events, Art House Theater Day promotes the idea that art houses across the nation are much more than the films themselves. As Adam Sorensen of Lionsgate Premiere states, “An art house theatre is not just a place where someone buys a ticket to see a movie, it’s a place where there is a dialogue happening.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, most art house theatres across the country are expanding into these kinds of programming (often shared with other theatres at the Conference) as a means of bringing audiences out of their homes and into the theatres.

### **Focusing on the Local and Building Community**

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Art House Convergence Conference is how it intertwines the local, the national, and the international. When asked about how the Art House Convergence Conference has impacted their own work with art houses, multiple interviewees pointed to the building of community as one of the primary advantages of the Conference. The ability to network with other art houses across the country enables everyone who attends the conference the opportunity to see best practices (everything from theatre insurance, to emergency procedures, to candy counters).

Founding Board member of the Conference, Connie White, a film booker for Balcony Booking, pointed out that when the Conference began, it had only 25 members.<sup>17</sup> By 2017, this number had grown to over 600. In the ten years since its inception, the Art House Convergence community has grown to include members beyond Executive Directors (many of whom are members of the Founding Board), to Technical

Staff, Operations Staff, Programmers, Bookers, Ticketing Sales Associates, Concessions Vendors, and Distributors (among others). In addition to serving as a location for art houses to network and learn best practices, the Conference has also become a place of advocacy, industry, lobbying, and outreach.<sup>18</sup>

In this context, the larger art house communities in cities such as Salt Lake City, Boston, and Ann Arbor have grown to include over 200,000 people annually at each theatre location. Connie White calls the art houses “the heartbeat of their community.” Stephanie Silverman says, “It’s not just the film first, but what that film can provoke and bring into the community.”<sup>19</sup> She notes that one of the most significant aspects of Art House Convergence is the need to “frame who we are as community-based film centers.”<sup>20</sup> She states,

The narrative for independent film houses has always been struggling, about to close down, barely making it, and when you sit in that room in the Matterhorn and it is filled to the gills all the way to the back with people who are working in this field successfully, you realize how wrong that narrative has been, how wrong that narrative has been for years.<sup>21</sup>

Adam Sorensen sees the art house as “an opportunity for people to engage, not just with film, but with each other and with the community.”<sup>22</sup> He believes that is how the art house will continue to set itself apart from the multiplex.

This focus on both community and local histories extends to programming. For instance, the Salt Lake Film Society incorporates Film Festivals and Special Screenings such as the Global Lens film series, the Filmexico Tour, and the Czech Film Tour, the largest film festival of its kind within the United States. It also fosters local film

initiatives such as the Utah Screenwriters Project and Local Open Screen, which allows local filmmakers to exhibit their work in a poetry-slam style night of screenings. The Coolidge Corner Theatre in Boston collaborates with Berkeley College of Music for its The Sounds of Silents series, and it has created a Science on Screen series that has spread to 47 cinemas across the country.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor features a stage, organ, and orchestra pit to support live shows and is now in its seventh year of supporting the Cinetopia International Film Festival.

These programs appeal to local communities by focusing on the cultural, educational, and social experiences of their audiences. As Nicholas Mason of the Manhattan Short Film Festival notes, “Without the art house, and without the university, there is no culture. So, they’re the cultural meccas.”<sup>24</sup> By organizing educational programming, community events, and film festivals, art houses across the country are fostering local and cultural initiatives such as the Salt Lake Film Society’s Big Pictures, Little People (which facilitates the availability of artistic children’s films to daycare, low-income, under privileged, shelter and foster children). This program buses in children from area shelters and programs, offers t-shirts, surprises, concessions and an afternoon at the movies, including such films as *My Neighbor Totoro* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1988). In this way, the art house not only appeals to underserved populations, it also attempts to grow its audience by providing cultural and community experiences.

### **Curating the Future of the Art House**

In answer to the question, what is the future of the art house, I received a variety of responses. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the interviewees expressed hope, passion

and determination with regard to the future of the art house. For Ira Deutchman, “Curation is the key to the future.” “People who run art houses, people who run film festivals, people who run film societies, critics (even though they may not have anyone left to write for), all of these are curational mechanisms that really cannot be replaced with algorithms.”<sup>25</sup> Dylan Skolnick, Co-Director of the Cinema Arts Center in Huntington, NY, argues that “Going through the enormous mass of movies that are made every year and telling audiences you should see this, this is special”<sup>26</sup> is what the art house offers that the multiplex does not.

In an era of digital convergence, it is community and curation that will set the art house apart from the multiplex. Too much content in the movie marketplace has made curation not only an advantage of the art house, but also a necessity. In 2016, there were 718 films released in the United States, nearly twice as many as ten years ago.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the numbers of releases are expected to continue to grow. James Schamus, co-founder of Good Machine and CEO of Focus Features, expresses concern over “the encroachment of online, digital, televisual cultures that are distracting audiences away from the communal experience at the local theatre and also drawing them away from the pleasures and benefits of long form and wholly formed unique works of film as art.”<sup>28</sup> He points out that one hundred years ago (in 1916-1917), smaller distributors and exhibitors were also concerned about serialization, variety of programming, and the death of cinema. He argues that film distribution and exhibition have not changed that much from a century ago. Schamus explains, “The history shows we’ve always been working in hybrid spaces. There’s always been mixed media and new media, sing-a-longs and glass

slide shows, and vaudeville events. I think that for exhibitors today, the idea that there is 'an other' is wrong."<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the art house's role in curating film festivals such as the Coolidge at Midnight Series or the Filmexico Series at the Salt Lake Film Society should not be overlooked. As the Managing Director of the Art House Convergence, Barbara Twist notes the desire for more screens, a mixture of film and digital projection, and multipurpose spaces that enable Q&A sessions and media arts education sessions indicates that theatres are taking their mission-driven, community-based identities very seriously.<sup>30</sup> John Toner is hopeful about the future of the art house. He points out,

I am not particularly worried about streaming and video on demand, it feels like one more way in which the movies and storytelling are delivered, just like television was, just like VHS was, just like cable was...I think that being event-driven, having special programming in which people come to experience something together is always going to be of interest.<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, the Art House Convergence Conference brings art house theatres from across the United States and abroad into Midway, Utah every year in order to share ideas about marketing, publicity, fundraising, programming, etc. But, the future of the art house in an era of convergence lies in its continued ability to make these local and global connections and foster them. By drawing on film and art house histories, encouraging local community engagement, and continuing to focus on curating alternative content, brick and mortar art house theatres will continue to thrive even in the digital era.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Newman, *Indie Cinema: An American Film Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 53.

<sup>2</sup> David Bordwell, *Pandora's Digital Box: Films, Files, and the Future of Movies* (Madison, WI: Irving Way Institute Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> See Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), Emmanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), Michael Newman, *Indie Cinema: An American Film Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), E. Deidre Pribram, *Independent Film in the United States, 1980–2001* (New York: Lang, 2002), Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), Gregory Waller, *Moviegoing in America* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), and Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Hurley, “We’re about to lose 1000 small theatres that can’t convert to digital. Does it matter?” *Indiewire*. February 23, 2012. <http://www.indiewire.com/article/were-about-to-lose-1-000-small-theaters-that-cant-convert-to-digital-does-it-matter>

<sup>6</sup> Sarah E. S. Sinwell, “Go Digital or Go Dark: Crowdfunding, Independent Financing and Art House Exhibition on Kickstarter.” In *A Companion to American Indie Film*, edited by Geoff King (Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2017), 452-468.

<sup>7</sup> Ira Deutchman, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 17, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Ira Deutchman, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 17, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, these Art House Tales presentations are consistently better attended than the premieres of Sundance films that are screened at the Conference before the Festival begins.

<sup>10</sup> Tori Baker, Salt Lake Film Society, Art House Tales, Video slideshow, 2016, <http://www.amblertheater.org/arthouse>

<sup>11</sup> Kathy Tallman, Coolidge Corner Theatre, Art House Tales, Video slideshow, 2016, <http://www.amblertheater.org/arthouse>

<sup>12</sup> Russ Collins, Barbara Twist, Sultan Sharrief, Ruth Lednicer, Michigan Theater, Art House Tales, Video slideshow, 2016, <http://www.amblertheater.org/arthouse>

- <sup>13</sup> Gary Meyer, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 18, 2017.
- <sup>14</sup> John Toner, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 17, 2017.
- <sup>15</sup> Stephanie Silverman, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 17, 2017.
- <sup>16</sup> Adam Sorenson, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 18, 2017.
- <sup>17</sup> Connie White, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 17, 2017.
- <sup>18</sup> Ira Deutchman, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 17, 2017.
- <sup>19</sup> Stephanie Silverman, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 17, 2017.
- <sup>20</sup> Stephanie Silverman, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 17, 2017.
- <sup>21</sup> Stephanie Silverman, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 17, 2017.
- <sup>22</sup> Adam Sorenson, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 18, 2017.
- <sup>23</sup> Science on Screen creatively pairs screenings of classic, cult, and documentary films with lively introductions by notable figures from the world of science, technology, and medicine.
- <sup>24</sup> Nicholas Mason, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 18, 2017.
- <sup>25</sup> Ira Deutchman, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 17, 2017.
- <sup>26</sup> Dylan Skolnick, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 17, 2017.
- <sup>27</sup> Motion Picture Association of America, MPAA Theatrical Market Statistics, 2016.  
[https://www.mpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2016\\_Final.pdf](https://www.mpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2016_Final.pdf)
- <sup>28</sup> James Schamus, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 19, 2017.
- <sup>29</sup> James Schamus, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 19, 2017.
- <sup>30</sup> Barbara Twist, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 18, 2017.
- <sup>31</sup> John Toner, Interview with Sarah E. S. Sinwell, January 17, 2017.

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