

More than Movies: Art House Cinemas in the Digital Age

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A Thesis

In

The Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Film and Moving Image Studies) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

November 2021

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ABSTRACT

More than Movies: Art House Cinemas in the Digital Age

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This thesis offers a cultural and industrial mapping of US-based art house cinemas—small theatrical exhibitors specializing in foreign, independent, documentary, repertory, or non-commercial studio film—since the digital transition in projection technology near the turn of this century. For much of their history, art house cinemas offered so-called “sophisticated” film-going experiences catered to appeals of cultural distinction and cinephilia. But in reaction to the challenges posed by the costs of digital projection, which threatened to and in some cases did close small exhibitors, the sector sought to re-imagine itself. Many art houses restructured under nonprofit organizations with operational mandates far different from those of their predecessors. This study attends to these reconfigurations.

The following chapters draw from a rich tradition of exhibition scholarship, theories of cultural taste-making, and on-the-ground discourses among art house administrators. I consult film programs, promotional material, newspaper articles, personal interviews, and industry data reports in positing a reconceptualization of art houses as multi-purpose cultural institutions, not mere receptacles for leisure and encounters with foreign-language film. Central to this reworking has been Art House Convergence, a resource network of art houses and their allies that has promoted professionalization, non-profitization, and politicization of the art house space since 2006. I also focus on two case studies: The Hollywood Theatre in Portland, Oregon, and FilmScene in Iowa City, Iowa—theatres whose transformations over the last 15 years speak concretely to the larger trajectory of the sector. Where distinction and cinephilia once reigned as

pillars of these exhibitors, dynamic and diverse approaches to programming, community-centric services, and left-liberal cultural projects have ascended to the fore. By creating an aggregate portrait of a new industrial common sense, comprised of changing practices and ideas about cinema's place in cultural formations, this project points to a pressing need to view art houses differently than previous models allow and to provoke a rethinking about their role in film culture today.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Haidee Wasson should have a wing of the university named for her. Or at least a bronze bust in her likeness somewhere on campus. As a supervisor she lent her sharp eye, broad expertise, and supportive voice with generosity and patience. I was lucky to have her in my corner during intellectual and personal crises. Thank you, Haidee. Deep appreciation also goes to Dr. Masha Salazkina and Dr. Charles Acland for their time, energy, and insights as committee members from the earliest days. The Lyric Theatre Singers, a musical ensemble in Montreal, deserve full-throated praise for providing a fun, creative outlet during the lonely years of this project. Thank you also to my parents for keeping books in the house when I was a kid—I trace whatever success I achieve to that fundamental gift. Jean Lee, a true friend and confidant, has been a rock of support amid very dark times. I owe her so much more than acknowledgement in a doctoral thesis. Finally, thank you to all those who motivated me to see this through.

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Chapter 1 | Introduction: More than Movies

“We sell tickets to theaters, not pictures.”¹

Travelers on layover at Portland International Airport had a head-turning new option for passing time starting in February 2017. Across from a long moving walkway, wedged between Gates C3 and C5 of the concourse, sits the PDX Hollywood, a 17-seat microcinema-outpost of Portland’s Hollywood Theatre art house cinema. The free-of-charge walk-in theatre invites ticketed passengers to settle down with one-hour programs of short G-rated films commissioned from Pacific Northwest filmmakers, run on a loop, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Its parent cinema, operating miles away in northeast Portland since 1927 as a vaudeville theatre, second-run cinema, and now nonprofit art house, has built a national reputation among theatrical exhibitors for its zany programming and locally targeted curation. But the new airport site goes a step further by integrating the theatre’s well-established brand into a sphere of consumer-transit culture. Situated within an airport known for its local business outlets and unique Portland flavor, the state-of-the-art theatre, complete with a 28-foot marquee and top-notch sound system, seems both appropriate and novel in its setting. Traveler Leslie Galvin captured the enthusiasm of many for the airport’s new amenity: “I think it’s awesome: I mean, how Portland is that? It goes along perfectly with all the other artisanal things we have going on here.”²

Across the country, another art house cinema pushes the usual contours of speciality exhibition. From afar the Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville, New York, looks like an everyday venue for foreign, documentary, and independent films. But “the Burns,” as it is called,

¹ Early exhibition pioneer and MGM studio mogul Marcus Loew, quoted in *Exhibition, The Film Reader*, ed. Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 2002), 6.

² Aaron Scott, “Dinner and a Movie and a Flight: Hollywood Theatre Set to Open at the Portland Airport,” *Oregon Public Broadcasting*, February 2, 2017.

is no mere projection box. In 2009 it opened a 27,000-square foot Media Arts Lab complete with classrooms, an animation studio, editing suites, recording studio, soundstage, and a workshop for designing film sets. Operating under its own “Learning Framework” with the goal of “[articulating] the foundation of literacy for a visual culture,” the Lab offers an impressive slate of courses for pre-K through 12th grades, teachers, and community organizations, instructing on topics ranging from the fundamentals of film production to customized professional development for media educators. Regular film screenings across its five auditoriums are but one aspect of this diversified slate. Jonathan Demme, an Oscar-winning Hollywood director with ties to the facility, called it “a force for social change disguised as a movie theater.”³ Profiled by the *New York Times* in 2011 for its rehabilitative impact on the Pleasantville area, the Burns center exposes intriguing new triangulations among art houses, education, and community.

Meanwhile, down in Miami, a third art house shines in the city’s eternal sun. Founded in 2011 as part of a \$60 million grant to revitalize Miami’s arts district, the O Cinema emerged as all movie theaters waded through the costly transition to digital projection. Unlike larger theatres that invested fully in the new industry-standard equipment, O Cinema threw its weight behind more flexible formats like Blu-Ray and DVD (known collectively as e-cinema). These options allow the theatre to nimbly and creatively arrange its “funky programming” with independent distributors to suit its central audience—“20-something hipsters, artists, and punks.”⁴ With this target in mind, the O Cinema partners with national and local organizations to present several regular series of interest to Miami crowds. Highlights include *Lift Every Voice*, featuring “films that highlight the experience of People of Color, the LGBTQ community, and the Caribbean

³ “About,” Jacob Burns Film Center.

⁴ Kareem Tabshe, quoted in Lisa Dombrowski, “Not If, But When and How: Digital Comes to the American Art House,” *Film History* 24 (2012): 245.

diaspora,” and Climate Change Cinema, “screenings and conversations to illuminate and explore environmental issues with tangible impact on our lives” in South Florida, which rests precariously between the Everglades and the Atlantic.⁵ By embracing the economics of e-cinema in service of diverse and dynamic curation, the O Cinema shows how such theatres can “think outside the box [in targeting] a demographic—young people—[that] many in the art house community find difficult to attract.”⁶

These three expressions of specialty film exhibition—an airport micro-cinema, a well-established education lab, and a kaleidoscopically local film program—would have been hard to imagine even 20 years ago. When theatrical exhibitors started to convert *en masse* to digital projection in the mid-2000s, many small, independent cinemas—of which art houses are a subset—worried about sheer survival. Costs ran anywhere from \$65,000 to \$100,000 per screen to install new digitally compliant equipment.⁷ A range of publications signaled the danger that digital conversion posed to such theaters without the financial backing of parent companies.⁸ These accounts came tethered to studies about changing media consumption habits among audiences who are increasingly turning to at-home delivery platforms like Netflix for their movie fix.⁹ More recently, other challenges to indie exhibitors have arisen, including on-going adjustments to or flat-out eschewals of theatrical exhibition windows. As more streaming companies venture into the production of their own feature-length films, the prospect of studios

⁵ “Climate Change Cinema,” O Cinema.

⁶ Dombrowski, “Not If, But When,” 245.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁸ Stephanie Garlock, “Why the Switch to Digital Projectors Means the End of the Small-Town Movie Theater,” *City Lab*, August 28, 2013; Gary Susman, “How Digital Conversion is Killing Independent Movie Theaters,” *Rolling Stone*, September 4, 2013; Nick Leiber, “For Small Theaters, the Digital Future is Dark,” *Bloomberg*, February 17, 2012; Michael Hurley, “We’re About to Lose 1,000 Small Theaters That Can’t Convert to Digital. Does It Matter?” *IndieWire*, February 23, 2012.

⁹ Among other studies, see Chuck Tyron, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

bypassing theatres altogether in favor of stream-releasing looms like a storm cloud. It might appear that art houses are an aging outpost fighting for relevance in a media-saturated world.

Yet these hand-wringing reports are at odds with a very different set of developments that have catalyzed this project and opened this introduction: undeniable signs of a resilient, even robust art house culture. Instead of art house marquees going dark, new ones keep lighting up.¹⁰ The same media outlets professing “danger ahead” for art houses have been forced to note the tenacity of such theaters to carry on—even excel—in precarious times. Just a year before a 2012 doomsday article on the demise of small theatres, *IndieWire* published a notably different take on the situation titled “How to Create a Thriving Art House Cinema (Almost) Anywhere.” The article conveys a can-do attitude among art house operators who have innovated ways to rebrand themselves as “more than movie theaters.”¹¹ Jeff Berg’s extensive 2015 *Film Comment* article, “Sure Seaters Tough It Out,” backs this up, describing the art house as undergoing a “slight revival” owing to the flexibility of content delivery made possible by digital formats and dynamic, community-minded programming. Berg’s report highlights the institutional support lent by Art House Convergence (AHC), a consortium of art house operators and their allies founded in 2008. Both Berg and AHC stress that per annum attendance to North American art cinemas has held steady over the last 50 years.¹² Defeatists about the fate of art houses may be conflating change with decline.

For most of its history, art house exhibition, with some detours along the way, was dedicated to presenting so-called “sophisticated” films or upscale experiences to paying

¹⁰ “The Indie-Film Boom Is Fueling a Rise in Art-House Theaters,” *Crain’s New York Business*, September 25, 2017.

¹¹ Anthony Kaufman, “How to Create a Thriving Art House Cinema (Almost) Anywhere,” *IndieWire*, May 2, 2011.

¹² Jeff Berg, “Sure Seaters Tough It Out: Checking in on the State of Art-House Exhibition,” *Film Comment* 51, no. 1 (January/February 2015): 54.

consumers—and to be clear, that remains the case today. Moviegoers still visit art houses to catch the latest festival hit or discover obscure filmmakers or exemplars of national cinemas. Outings to art houses, whose ornate auditoriums, elegant lobbies, and fancy concessions comprised of organic or locally made treats often confer a refined touch, are still understood as different from large chain theatres replete with the markings of commercial, popular culture. In the United States and Canada, people still visit art houses out of a fundamental interest in cinema defined beyond current, industrial entertainment; they want to re-watch dusty classics, catch a critical hit, or take in a character piece untouched by the Marvel universe.

But the exhibition arm of what we might call the “art cinema industry” has changed dramatically over the last 20 years. Broad forces along technological, industrial, and cultural lines have compelled art houses to re-imagine themselves to remain fiscally viable and culturally relevant. Instead of relying on their previous foundations of appeals to cultural distinction and cinephilia, many have charted new ground as multiuse media arts centers repositioned for a digital landscape. Some of these changes constitute significant migrations away from the small-business model qualities of the mid-century art house boom in the United States. Others display a (some would say worrying) accommodation of commercial practices out of step with the aura of independent arts organizations. Still others mark a return, in spirit if not exact detail, to vaudeville or silent movie-era attractions of live entertainment, showmanship, and audience interaction. What is clear is that since roughly 2005, when digital projection began to foment among the nation’s movie theatres, art houses have been using the flexibility of digital delivery systems to their advantage, programming a wider variety of media (both filmic and non-filmic) on their screens to as many audience demographics as possible. To afford the high costs of installing digital projectors, or simply because market conditions for exhibitors are so fraught,

scores of art houses have transitioned into nonprofits to be eligible for tax breaks, grants, and philanthropic support. Using digital delivery of media as a fulcrum and nonprofitization as a business model, many cinemas have initiated education programs and filmmaker-support enterprises in tandem with community or academic partners, making them influential centers for local film production and knowledge-creation. Communications directors, development officers, and event managers work alongside ticket-takers and popcorn-sellers in theatres restructured as mission-driven service providers with clear goals for community impact. A pronounced turn toward social justice action, inclusive content quotas, and racial/gender parity on screen and on staff has risen in tandem with social movements like BlackLivesMatter and MeToo. Dedicated trade conferences and workshops spotlight best practices in the biz, stressing nonprofit professionalization, data management, and new operational norms. A culture of start-up entrepreneurialism and camaraderie, boosted by the networking potential of AHC, has fueled coordinated change across otherwise independently managed theatres and contributed to an integration of art houses into wider arenas of social and cultural practices. Art houses no longer define themselves chiefly in oppositional terms to the megaplex industry; more often they exist *for* something, not in reaction to it.

This thesis charts a number of these practices and developments—some radically new, some mere recasts of old phenomena. In doing so it reconceptualizes art houses as multi-purpose cultural institutions, not mere receptacles for leisure and encounters with foreign-language film. Where distinction and cinephilia once reigned—and, ok, a healthy dose of red-light prurience—community-centric practices, dynamic programming, and left-progressive projects have ascended to the fore, producing a number of questions about how cultural institutions project and accomplish their missions in contemporary neoliberal economies. These practices across

increasingly connected art houses reverberate with what scholar Charles Acland, in speaking about the rise of multiplex cinemas and associated business strategies in the 1980s, dubs an “industrial common sense,”¹³ that is, practices and discourses promoted and realized by enough actors to become commonplace. My thesis does not seek to dwell on or even celebrate the idiosyncratic actions of a few theatres like the Hollywood or the Jacob Burns. Rather, by creating an aggregate portrait of a new industrial common sense, comprised of changing practices and ideas about cinema and its place in cultural formations, this project points to a pressing need to view art houses differently than previous models allow and to provoke a rethinking about their role in film culture today.

1.1. Situating My Study

My project is an exhibition study that draws on the New Cinema History turn in the discipline of film studies. This analytical movement, ascendant near the end of the twentieth century, decenters film texts as objects of study in exchange for alternative ways of approaching film history. Film Studies is a young discipline that early on was shaped by the primacy of aesthetics, great directors, national sensibilities, or apparatus theories of the relationship between spectator and screen.¹⁴ As the field has grown and diversified, several pioneering scholars have examined the material history of film and the social experience of cinema-going as part of a wider economic and cultural infrastructure. Movie theatres, their itinerant precedents, audience

¹³ Charles Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹⁴ For example, see Sergei Eisenstein, “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form,” *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), 45-63; François Truffaut, “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema,” *Cahiers du Cinéma* (January 1954); André Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968); Jean-Louis Baudry and Alan Williams, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” *Film Quarterly* 28 no. 2 (Winter 1974-1975): 39-47.

reception, cinema-going practices, programming, and extra-textual discourses became more central.¹⁵ This shift toward wider historical, or micro-local, conditions is expressed by Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes as the “distinction between what might be called *film* history and *cinema* history: between an aesthetic history of textual relations between individuals or individual objects, and the social history of a cultural institution.”¹⁶ New Cinema History approaches also draw from political or economic realms that impact movie-going practices. Such areas include state film censorship, demographic statistics, and labour movements.¹⁷ Robert Allen underlines the importance of de-isolating film exhibition from wider cultural study, favoring *reception* as an “inclusive category of issues ... [with] at least four overlapping but theoretically and methodologically distinct components.” These include the industrial dimensions of exhibition and exhibition sites; the study of movie audiences as both a social and discursive phenomenon; the “immediate social, sensory, performative context of reception”—in other words the varieties of performance occurring at a cinema besides the projection of images; and the activation of particular meanings of a text to particular audiences and contexts.¹⁸ My thesis follows this line and analyzes a discernible institution—art cinemas—as inextricably bound to phenomena in economics, technology, politics, and social relations in our digital

¹⁵ Among others, see Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1985); Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Gregory Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Kathryn Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Charlottesville/London: University Press of Virginia, 1996); and Barbara Klinger, *Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Richard Maltby and Melvin Stokes, *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008), 2.

¹⁷ *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New Perspectives on European Cinema History*, eds. Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2-3.

¹⁸ Robert Allen, “From Exhibition to Reception: Reflections on the Audience in Film History,” *Screen* 31, no. 4 (December 1, 1990): 347–56.

setting. In my case this also involves urban revitalization efforts, historical preservation projects, nonprofit business models, entrepreneurialism, and the politics of taste and countercultures.

Art houses comprise the exhibition branch of what may be termed the “art house industry.” This is less clearly demarcated than the mainstream Hollywood industry whose ownership of production, distribution, and exhibition holdings constructs a more tangible, everyday sense of a sector that one can speak about with greater precision. Nevertheless it is possible to perceive the art house industry as an interconnected global web that includes production companies, distributors, festivals, publications, and other stakeholders in the business—and it is a business—of creating or disseminating so-called art films for paying audiences. As such my project also interfaces with the discipline of media industry studies. This line of inquiry, with several antecedents throughout the twentieth century, has surged in the last 20 years under the efforts of scholars like John Caldwell, Jennifer Holt, Alisa Perren, and Charles Acland. Scholarship in this vein covers “an extraordinary range of texts, markets, economies, artistic traditions, business models, cultural policies, technologies, regulations, and creative expression”¹⁹ in pursuit of understanding how media industries operate within global and local settings. One thread of media industry studies that my thesis intervenes with is empirical, on-the-ground discourses circulating among “below-the-line” production workers on film sets or at events where movers and shakers shape common realities and practices for a media industry.²⁰ Whereas Caldwell in his book *Production Cultures* examines the “industrial self-analysis” of film/TV production crews working in Los Angeles, for example, my study

¹⁹ Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, “Introduction: Does the World Really Need One More Field of Study?” in *Media Industries: History, Theory, Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2009): 1.

²⁰ John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Charles Acland, “Theatrical Exhibition: Accelerated Cinema,” *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, eds. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008); *Media Industries: History, Theory, Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2009).

brings the “contact zones” of an art house trade group, Art House Convergence, into greater relief for how they inform art house practices. Particularly in an era of transformative change around the theatrical exhibition industry wrought by digital projection technologies and the urgent need to compete with mobile delivery of media, peering into the self-reflexive understandings that art house stakeholders have for their industry, their labor, and their missions as cultural institutions provides useful insights into the sector.

Within film exhibition studies in the New Cinema History turn, much ink has been spilled about the cultural significance of movie theatres. The majority of these accounts have dealt with commercial theatres in cinema’s first half-century. Scholars have examined the social functions of theatres in early twentieth century urban life,²¹ and case studies have documented theatres as an important nexus point for understanding gender, race, class, urbanity, and leisure during the decades of Classic Hollywood and postwar era.²² Scholars such as Ross Melnick have internationalized the Hollywood exhibition story by examining large US-owned circuits in operation overseas and the political, cultural, and legal tensions involved.²³ Studies have likewise explored the multiplex/megaplex trend among mainstream theatres since the 1980s when AMC, Cineplex Odeon, and other chains expanded their screen dominance considerably into malls and

²¹ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Kathryn J. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small Town Audiences and the Creation of Fan Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001); Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire, *The Place of Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption* (London: British Film Institute, 2003).

²² Waller, *Main Street Amusements*; Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion-Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era*, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: British Film Institute, 1999); Ross Melnick, *American Showman: Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908-1935* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

²³ See Ross Melnick, *Hollywood's Embassies: How Movie Theatres Projected American Power around the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022); Melnick, “Hollywood Embassies, Labour and Investment Laws and Global Cinema Exhibition,” in *Hollywood and the Law*, eds. Paul McDonald, Emily Carman, Eric Hoyt, and Philip Drake, 154-180 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017); Melnick, “Hollywood’s Muddle East: Political Change in Egypt and Israel and the Consequences for Hollywood’s Middle Eastern Movie Theaters,” *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 27 no. 2 (2017): 272-294.

suburbs. These works have stressed the transformations of commercial movie theatres, for example, and the increasingly rapid circulation of media through them.²⁴ In the last two decades, as movie-watching has shifted to locations outside of the theatre, attention has understandably turned to past and contemporary alternative exhibition settings like microcinemas and pop-up cinemas; “useful” cinema, educational, and museum films; the expansive global film festival network; and mobile, at-home, or on-demand viewing of media.²⁵ We might explain the present-day dearth of studies on theaters generally (and art houses in particular) as the result of an impression among scholars that theatrical movie-going has not changed that much since the megaplexing of commercial theatres in the 1990s, or what Acland calls the “physical theming of theaters into theme parks.”²⁶ John Belton, for instance, sought to downplay the hyperbole about the digital switch in his 2002 article “Digital Cinema: A False Revolution.” Belton saw the turn to digital less as a new way of watching movies than as a lucrative avenue for media conglomerates to sell products to consumers at home. With regards to the average person’s visit to a theater, he argued that “digital projection as it exists today does not, in any way, transform the nature of the motion picture experience.”²⁷ Though as Acland points out, Belton’s argument about the “faux” digital revolution pertains only to the *textual* experiences audiences have in theaters—the act of sitting in a dark auditorium peering up at images on a screen. The move to

²⁴ Acland, *Screen Traffic*.

²⁵ Donna De Ville, “The Microcinema Movement and Montreal,” (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2014); Donna De Ville, “The Persistent Transience of Microcinema (in the United States and Canada),” *Film History* 27 no. 3 (2015): 104–36; Rebecca Alvin, “A Night at the Movies: From Art House to ‘Microcinema,’” *Cineaste* 32 no. 3 (2007): 4–8; Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds. *Useful Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007); the *Film Festival Yearbook* series published by St. Andrews University; Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong, *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011); Tyron, *On-Demand Culture*; Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

²⁶ Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 199.

²⁷ John Belton, “Digital Cinema: A False Revolution,” *October* 100 (2002): 104.

digital did not fundamentally disrupt this ritual, especially for those uninitiated to the nuances dividing celluloid and digital imagery.²⁸ But digital possibilities certainly changed, as Acland notes, its temporalities (the “when” of cinema), the accelerated circulation of media through theatres “that would replicate programming scheduled by television broadcasters.”²⁹ Belton’s scope could also not anticipate the operational shake-up many theaters went through in reaction to digital projection. One crucial impact on art houses of re-equipping theaters with digital projectors was their common legal restructuring into nonprofit organizations. While ostensibly a financial strategy for operating within a certain beneficial tax structure, nonprofitization has compelled more involvement with local communities (sometimes as part of neighborhood revitalization efforts) that theaters now increasingly depend on. Programming and other operations changed to become more community-centric, and as a result, art houses now fill civic roles and political mandates they were not initially intended for. The digital switch thus reordered the fundamental structure of many art houses by virtue of other industrial realities.

So where do art houses fit within literature on exhibition? Scholars have generally talked about these cinemas as alternative venues for film culture in distinction to major commercial theatrical exhibitors or the Hollywood industry. In programming terms these cinemas foreground foreign-language, niche, repertory, independent, or taboo movies for audiences seeking artistically challenging or provocative films. Such theaters have tended to be designed to supply upscale atmospheres removed from the din of megaplexes, a strategy that involved ornate theatre space, policies encouraging respectful audience behavior, sophisticated promotional material,

²⁸ Dylan Skolnick, co-director of the Cinema Arts Centre in Huntington, New York, claims as much: “For the vast majority of our filmgoers, the transition to digital projection would have been essentially imperceptible if it wasn’t for the elaborate fundraising campaign to finance the change. [...] In fact, some viewers were still asking when we were going to buy the new projectors months after they had already been installed.” See Berg, “Sure Seaters,” 56.

²⁹ Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 218.

and other practices differentiating them from mainstream theatres. In other words, art house scholars have focused on the cultural value-making built on high taste that movie-goers helped construct when visiting art houses, often located in large intelligentsia areas like New York or Chicago. Exhibition studies from Douglas Gomery and Barbara Wilinsky are the most preeminent in this strand. They each focus on the “golden era” for art houses in North America, which they note begins with the end of World War II and continues through the 1950s and 60s.

Gomery’s *Shared Pleasures* is a canonical text on the history of movie presentation in the United States, and he devotes one chapter to the rise of art houses. These venues emerged in the postwar era in large part due to industrial conditions impacting the largest commercial theatrical circuits. Though this may seem counterintuitive, a majority of commercial movie theatres before World War II were not affiliated with major studios. The studios simply controlled the best theatres in the best markets as part of the vertically integrated grip they held on production, distribution, and exhibition. Since the late 1920s the five largest Hollywood companies—Paramount, Loew’s/MGM, Warner Bros., Fox/Twentieth Century-Fox, and RKO—sought to secure ownership of the circuits with the theatres that would provide the best returns: “The so-called Big Five controlled the vast majority of all first-run movie palace theatres in the ninety-two largest cities in the United States, those with cities with populations exceeding 100,000 citizens.” Smaller circuits or independent theatres comprised a larger percentage of total theatres yet operated in less lucrative markets. Studios arranged for their popular features to screen in their own theatres first and then distill down to other theatres as subsequent-run films months later. Independent or unaffiliated exhibitors were thus at a marked disadvantage in this

environment “and often had to compete with a picture palace down the street, with its air conditioning, stage shows, and grand service and architecture.”³⁰

The network of exhibitors that became known as art houses only appeared in widespread fashion after the 1948 *Paramount* decision, an antitrust ruling that forced the studios to divest themselves of their theatre holdings. With Hollywood without many of its exhibition sites, production of new films slowed, filmmaking costs rose, and studios released fewer, more expensive features to cover their losses. This reduced the number of features the studios could release each year, which led to fewer films available for exhibitors to book. On the exhibitor side, the thousands of theatres once affiliated with studios were sold off to successor corporations that themselves could not acquire new theatres without first petitioning district courts to prove that they wouldn’t violate antitrust laws. These petitions often created jurisdictional backlogs in the courts and had little clear standard.³¹ Other divested theatres came under new ownership of individual proprietors now adrift on their own in uncharted exhibition waters. Gomery shows how small theatres—whether independent businesses or select theatres of the successor circuits—capitalized on the financial turmoil facing the studios by pivoting their business model away from A-level Hollywood features toward reissues, low-budget B-movies, and, particularly, foreign films from European distributors eager to export their national film cultures after only a trickle of output during World War II. Rather than go head-to-head with other exhibitors vying for an increasingly small number of major studio releases, independent theatre owners or smaller successor theatres worked around the film shortage and created their own niche for audiences by leaning into available foreign films and cultivating sophisticated experiences for serious film-viewing. These circumstances helped create an American audience

³⁰ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 59-60.

³¹ Michael Conant, “The Paramount Decrees Reconsidered,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 44, no. 4 (1981): 79.

appetite for foreign films among theatres newly freed from the most restrictive trade policies plaguing unaffiliated exhibitors for decades.

Gomery's account details the successes of theatres that transitioned into art houses among large enclaves like New York and Chicago but also college towns like Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Madison, Wisconsin, where students found refuge from mainstream theatres and enjoyed an intellectual rigor associated with ascendant film appreciation. The number of theatres showing art films on a full- or part-time basis rose dramatically between 1947 and 1955, aided by film critics, cinephile magazines, and repertory houses devoted to Hollywood classics. Art houses were a bright spot in an otherwise stagnant exhibition industry struggling to cope with the *Paramount* fallout and competition from television. But at the end of his chapter, Gomery (writing in the 1990s) abruptly declares "the end of the art house" owing to "the conservative 1980s"³² and the rise of VHS home video and basic or subscriber cable channels. He cites the closures of several repertory houses that no longer seemed viable when cineastes could access classic films at home. While he labels the art house phenomenon dead, Gomery also anticipates with optimism that "entrepreneurs will seek to devise special theatres for special audiences as long as going to the movies continues to hold sway over Americans."³³ His prediction has been borne out in the years since his study, as this thesis shows, though not in ways he could have pinpointed at the time.

Adopting a more targeted approach to the social implications of art houses than Gomery, Wilinsky published *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* in 2001, a detailed account of how changes in the American film industry, world-wide distribution deals, and

³² A reference to the federal deregulatory policies and social conservatism associated with this decade in the United States.

³³ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 195.

domestic social conditions contributed to an emergent infrastructure for theatrical art house exhibition in the late 1940s, building on pre-war precedents. Her book's central message echoes Gomery: art houses rose as an alternative exhibition culture to mainstream, Hollywood dominance, and this ascension had as much to do with economic imperatives and commercial interests as it did with audience desire for new film experiences provided by European suppliers.³⁴ Using the ideas of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Wilinsky situates art house viewers as involved in a class-based cultural politics seeking differentiation from an era they perceived as turning individuals into a "mass" of undifferentiated consumers. Art houses of the time consciously courted this distinction among American audiences who sought ways of standing out from the herd by participating in "legitimized" culture.³⁵ She further details the "theatre operations, theater environment/services, and theatre promotions" that art houses adopted to cultivate sophisticated movie-going experiences for their clientele. These practices included programming art or "specialty" films, naturally, but also foreign-language newsreels and fare like live stage shows that tied in thematically to a film. Outside of programming, many art houses furthered their distinction through elegant interior design and designated areas for pre- or post-film discussions, often accompanied with coffee or tea. Children were barred from many art houses or otherwise downplayed as prospective audiences in an effort to maintain a refined atmosphere. Many theatres printed and distributed program notes that detailed a film's production or announced upcoming titles, a "procedure [that] connected art film attendance to the attendance of highbrow events such as the legitimate theatre, the symphony, and the opera, which also handed out programs."³⁶ The promotional efforts of art houses also differed from

³⁴ Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2001), 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

those of mainstream theatres. Whereas the latter leaned heavily on large, flashy displays or photographs to attract audiences, art houses were more likely to send out mailers to patrons with the faith that mentioning a director's name or a brief plot synopsis would be enough to attract the highbrow crowd art houses aimed at. The simplicity of their advertisements was designed to "connote sophistication and elegance."³⁷ Like Gomery, Wilinsky is careful to qualify the interlocking commercial and artistic interests of art houses during a period of industrial instability and technological revolution: "Viewing the highbrow image of art houses as a construction with its basis in socioeconomic and industrial conditions highlights the role of monetary interests behind the creation of art cinema. Despite art house operators' attempts to focus attention on art cinema's refined artistry, the rise of art cinema following World War II was an industrial reaction to changes in film industry and US society."³⁸ So though art houses are often positioned as "counter-programming" and "counter-culture" to Hollywood hegemony and much later to multiplex networks, both Wilinsky and Gomery have nuanced this understanding by pointing out the economic necessities and manipulations of taste that complicate the "refined" values that art houses have historically circulated.

Much of the remaining scholarship on art houses takes the form of case studies exploring their social relevance for expressions of class or taste. Consider Jim Lane's article on the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a long-running art house on the fringe of Harvard University's main campus. Opened as a movie theatre in 1953 after decades as a vaudeville and public speaking venue, the Brattle became the go-to cinema for its upper-crust, Harvard-centric community at a time of spiking appreciation for art films around the country. Theatre promotions and press coverage situate the Brattle as "an alternative film exhibition program with the

³⁷ Ibid., 121.

³⁸ Ibid., 129.

expressed intention of countering mass tendencies in the market”³⁹ by focusing on foreign films and recovered Hollywood classics. University students praised the chance to hear foreign languages outside of their classroom lectures. Reports in *The Harvard Crimson*, the student-run newspaper, cite the theatre as an indispensable space to the area’s cultural life, the kind of place “endowed with such cultural and intellectual freedom [that] the Brattle/Harvard film-goer gained a certain measure of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the ‘profit of distinction’.”⁴⁰ Though the Brattle’s operations are in some ways particular to its geography and target audiences, it reflects how art houses have traditionally capitalized on satisfying customer desire for a certain kind of cinema and an associated value system. But you didn’t need to be a New England blueblood to participate in art house distinction throughout the twentieth century. These cinemas constituted a sizable institution in the field of alternative cultural consumption: the number of first-run art houses in the United States surged from 80 in 1950 to 450 in 1963.⁴¹

Gomery’s chapter, Wilinsky’s book, and Lane’s case study represent prevalent scholarly approaches to art house cinemas as purveyors of distinction and satisfiers of cinephilia in settings designed for the serious contemplation of film as art, but which partly resulted from industrial conditions that necessitated small theatres look outside of Hollywood film and its distribution systems for product. These foundational studies, though, only account for the immediate postwar moment of art house ascension and tend to skip over the ways in which art houses were sites of hybridity, not pureness, as regards the high art/low art dichotomy. Other scholars have filled in the gaps by stressing the art house as a more complicated stage for articulations of taste and specialty programming. Daniel Metz and Jack Stevenson have written about the transformation

³⁹ Jim Lane, “Critical and Cultural Reception of the European Art Film in 1950s America: A Case Study of the Brattle Theatre (Cambridge, Massachusetts),” *Film and History* 24 no. 3/4 (1994): 48-64.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴¹ *Film Daily Year Book*, quoted in Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 2.

of art houses into grindhouse or sexploitation theatres between the years 1957-1973, a period that saw the incremental loosening of Hays Code censorship restrictions on sexual or violent film content in the United States.⁴² As Metz summarizes, “the period after the Golden Age of the art house is characterized by a turn away from high-standards [sic] art films toward American sexploitation and hardcore pornography. Beginning with a boom in the market created by the sexually liberated body of Brigitte Bardot, these theatres found that exploiting sex was a path to financial success.”⁴³ For some theatres, particularly those in urban areas, sex or nudie films compelled wholesale transformations into a new adult model, while others merely expanded their “arty” programming to accommodate films that more brazenly toed the line between liberal European expressions of sex and outright sleaze. Other scholars such as Mark Jancovich and Tim Snelson,⁴⁴ Eric Schaefer,⁴⁵ and Joan Hawkins have complicated the image of “refined” art houses by focusing on “the degree to which high culture trades on the same images, tropes, and themes that characterize low culture”⁴⁶ vis-à-vis programming strategies, marketing promotions, and conditioned theatre atmospheres. Hawkins, in her monograph about film cultures at the intersection of avant-garde and horror, describes a New York art house scene in the 1950s and 60s where the city’s cultural elite mingled with (though more often were bothered by) droves of uninhibited counterculture youth smelling of marijuana who booed or yelled at films, creating in

⁴² Daniel Curran Metz, “Prestige and Prurience: The Decline of the American Art House and the Emergence of Sexploitation, 1957-1972,” (Masters thesis, University of Texas, 2010), 61; Jack Stevenson, “Grindhouse and Beyond,” *From the Arthouse to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transgression in Cinema’s First Century*, eds. John Cline and Robert Weiner, 129-152 (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press: 2010).

⁴³ Metz, “Prestige and Prurience,” 61.

⁴⁴ Mark Jancovich and Tim Snelson, “Horror at the Crossroads: Class, Gender, and Taste at the Rialto,” *From the Arthouse to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transgression in Cinema’s First Century*, eds. John Cline and Robert Weiner, 109-125 (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press).

⁴⁵ Eric Schaefer, “*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*”: *A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

⁴⁶ Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3.

Hawkins's words "a loud and unmediated carnival spirit [that suggests] one way in which art house, avant-garde and horror audiences were linked in this period."⁴⁷ Jancovich, meanwhile, sees art films of the 1960s and exploitation movies "not simply as parallel alternate modes of film practice, but as shared discourses and means of address,"⁴⁸ with precursors across the ostensibly more "pure" art film scene of the immediate postwar era. Ad slicks, posters, and other forms of promotion available to exhibitors frequently conflated sentiments of sex and art, often by displaying women in licentious ways or constructing the impression that a film would reveal socially taboo material. As Jancovich sums up, "Clear cut distinctions between high and low are difficult to establish in most marketing materials for European art films in this period. They are quite fluid and porous texts."⁴⁹ Narratives about art houses as purveyors of high art have persisted to some degree, but it's also clear that such theatres have been willing to jettison all upscale pretense to pursue business. Some have managed to do both simultaneously.

As the three theatre anecdotes opening this chapter suggest, our foundational understandings of what these cinemas do and mean for film culture need updating. With recent upheavals to exhibition markets and major shifts in consumption patterns, pundits are starting to reconsider the art house according to new digital coordinates. Researchers like Alicia Kozma and Lisa Dombrowski have written about the transitional moment for art houses from celluloid to digital projection, accounting for the technical nuances and financial implications of moving beyond celluloid for new formats.⁵⁰ Other pundits have noted new organizational resources

⁴⁷ Hawkins, *Cutting Edge*, 59.

⁴⁸ Mark Jancovich, "Art, Exploitation, Underground," *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, eds. Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer, and Andy Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 204.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵⁰ Dombrowski, "Not If, But When.," Alicia Kozma, "Downloading Soon to a Theater Near You: Digital Film, Local Exhibition, and the Death of 35mm," *The Projector: A Journal on Film, Media, and Culture* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 39–69.

(namely the AHC) and new business structures (namely nonprofitization) that have emerged as steady-if-not-safe harbours for art houses in recent years. Trade journals, entertainment outlets, and local newspapers have spotlighted individual art houses across North America, stressing their ingenuity and perseverance in a hostile mediascape. *The Projector*, an interdisciplinary academic journal of media and culture, dedicated a two-part special issue to these venues in 2018-2019 featuring interviews of key stakeholders in the art house sector, close studies of theatre operations, and overviews of trends in the business of specialty exhibition.⁵¹ Art houses are enjoying a moment again. But few treatments go beyond discussing the hardships faced by indie theaters in transitioning to digital. The work on this that does exist is partial and inadequate to fully assess the key changes in the sector.

By contrast, this thesis advances new formations of art houses as institutions for film culture that showcase events and activities that include but expand well beyond film-watching. No longer an automated public viewing box where one can expect little else than a flat image on screen, art houses have entered into a new phase of their history no less pronounced than the salacious slide into grindhouse that scholars have documented. This project fills a gap in existing understandings about a newly imagined and integrated theatrical network for art films, weaving strands of film studies (theatrical exhibition, art cinema, cinephilia) with those of cultural studies (distinction, taste, and cultural intermediaries) to map out the new iterations of today's art houses. As suggested before, a good deal of writing on art house cinemas tends to be localized case studies. What my thesis does is work toward a more holistic approach, striving to map more broad changes across the entire sector. This is important if we are to establish a common sense about a particular exhibition form that has endured since the 1920s but seen tumultuous change

⁵¹ "Reinvestigating Art House Exhibition," special issues, *The Projector: A Journal on Film, Media, and Culture* 18, no 1&2, (Summer/Winter 2018).

in the last 20 years. Before turning to the main body of this project, I need to establish definitions of key terms and theoretical underpinnings pertinent to my study.

1.2 Establishing Concepts

1.2.1 Art Cinema

Corralling a subject like art house cinemas prompts us to get clear on a few things. First, what do we mean by “art cinema” or “art film”? As a categorizing term, art cinema is notoriously messy; there is no shortage of colourful or stuffy definitions, though at the end of the day, “scholars will likely never produce an acceptable philosophical definition; the relevant criteria are too complex and contested.”⁵² A knee-jerk reaction, such as the one offered partly in jest by Peter Lev in his study of the Euro-American art film, suggests that “art films is what is shown in art theatres.”⁵³ This definition abandons all pretense to have anything to do with film content or style and ultimately favors programming decisions made theater to theater. Setting aside the question of theatres for the moment, we might instinctually conceive of art cinema as one half of a binary, defined by what it is not. Art cinema is not mainstream cinema. Art cinema is anything “foreign” or with subtitles; popcorn films have star actors easily recognizable to American cinemagoers. Other loose ascriptions include stylistic differentiations such as that art cinema is slow and meandering; mainstream cinema has quick cuts and action. Art cinema aspires to something edifying; non-art cinema lets people escape into entertainment. These oppositions, while containing kernels of truth for everyday use, also leave much to be desired. I don’t traipse too far into art film taxonomy, finding it ultimately futile, but it’s important to have a sense of

⁵² Todd Berliner, “Legally Independent: The Exhibition of Independent Art Films,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 38, no. 1 (2018): 54–72.

⁵³ Peter Lev, *The Euro-American Cinema* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1993), 4.

how scholars have understood this hazy category of films because it clarifies the discourses that art houses have constructed to differentiate themselves from the majority of movie theatres.

One starting point is Wilinsky's note that art film must be approached as both a "theoretical construct" and "pragmatic industrial commodity," that is, an idea and a product that is embedded in a certain historical context (the postwar US market). She writes that "art films, and the discourse surrounding art films, focused on high culture and intellectual engagement to reflect shifts in US taste cultures and class hierarchies" in the late 1940s and 1950s. As these themselves are slippery concepts, Wilinsky goes on that the creation of an "art film categorization" depended a great deal on a larger art cinema infrastructure in the form of distributors, theatres, film societies and, later, film publications and academic attention. These pillars "set boundaries around art films and provide them with the desired meanings and values in the postwar US film market."⁵⁴ While this highly targeted approach to history serves Wilinsky's postwar study well, my survey of twenty-first century art houses requires a rather different framework.

For years discussions about art film were centered in textual features as critics sought to distinguish the aesthetic or thematic characteristics of this category from mainstream films. Influential scholars such as David Bordwell and Peter Wollen leaned on such approaches. Bordwell sets art film in contrast to Hollywood's devotion to cause-effect narrative structures, proposing two frameworks for art cinema analysis: realism and authorship, or "a commitment to objective or subjective verisimilitude." Bordwell's conceptualization also required the discernible presence of an author who breaks down the cause-effect logic of the narrative.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 13.

⁵⁵ David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," *Film Criticism* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1979): 57.

Wollen too theorized art cinema as a style counter to Hollywood commercial cinema, though his schematic breakdown goes further than Bordwell's and positions art cinema specifically within the terms of European auteur Jean-Luc Godard. Wollen's listing of "seven deadly sins" in dominant filmmaking (narrative transitivity, pleasure, closure, etc.) is opposed to "seven cardinal virtues" of alternative, counter-cinema (narrative intransitivity, unpleasure, aperture, etc.).⁵⁶

Going beyond textual features, Stephen Neale considered art cinema as an institution, "a complex system of interdependencies among filmmaker, films, governments, private companies, national and international distributors, and exhibitors."⁵⁷ One way that art cinema marks itself in opposition to commercial industries is as initiatives among European nations to resist American cultural hegemony and foster films of artistic quality. Postwar French art film, perhaps the main body of work that lent momentum to art film appreciation in the United States at the time, was facilitated by French state funding agencies aiming to protect film culture from the massive import of American and other films; quota systems and levied taxes on imports were redirected in support of domestic productions. A similar belief in the state's role of fostering national cinemas led to later interventions in the 1950s designed "to encourage the production, distribution, and exhibition of 'quality films'."⁵⁸ These and similar situations in Italy and Germany point to the broad institutional and state support that national art cinemas "under the pressure and presence of America and Hollywood in Europe"⁵⁹ enjoyed. Even as art cinema addressed "national problems" caused by Hollywood encroachment, it also appealed to international values of art and culture on the international festival circuit: art cinemas often are amplified on international stages in ways that foment their status as national cinema.

⁵⁶ Peter Wollen, "Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est*," *Afterimage* 4 (Autumn 1972): 6-17.

⁵⁷ Berliner, 62.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

Neale's approach to art cinema brought out the nation- and region-level industries involved in distributing and promoting art films, but his understanding of art cinema as an institution lacked one key thing: art house theatres. David Andrews updates Neale's canonical text by examining how the institutions that Neale omits are in fact crucial for shaping what art films are today. Andrews believes that a vague term like art cinema—beset by slippery formal criteria established by Bordwell and others—is better served by institutional theories “that [understand] the formal heterogeneity implied by the term [art cinema] ... through a supple cultural schema that relates the genre's diversity to its institutions, including the art house, the festival, and the discipline of film studies.”⁶⁰ But Andrews devotes nearly all of his attention to these latter two entities, offering only two paragraphs recapping the broad history of an art house apparatus that thrived in the 1950s, fell on hard times in the 1980s owing to cable television and VHS, and stabilized again in the 1990s in tandem with the American indie film movement. Though he mentions “new art houses, multi-screen art-plexes, and even a range of microcinemas” as new institutional outlets for art film, he does not go into much detail about these new venues. Andrews argues that art houses lack the “cultural significance” of film festivals because the latter get to dictate which films show in the former's auditoriums.

As a necessary aside, I disagree with Andrews here. That art house cinemas function as year-round institutions (unlike the temporal, sometimes financially prohibitive nature of film festivals) challenges his assertion that first-run theaters are not significant parts of film culture. Also, Andrews's metrics for cultural significance is anchored to an exhibitor's ability to circulate films as product—in other words, he doesn't consider the ancillary services and value-making that takes place in and around art houses, such as community-building or civic functions.

⁶⁰ David Andrews, “Art Cinema as Institution, Redux: Art Houses, Film Festivals, and Film Studies,” *Scope* 18 (2010): 15.

Elements like these have transformed many art houses from exhibitors to crucial generators and preservers of film culture. Finally, Andrews omits the fact that many art houses now not only host film festivals but *originate* festivals themselves. This is one important way how art houses are adapting; they now often operate as central hubs for local cultures in ways that are more accessible and less cost-prohibitive to attend.

Perhaps a final, most useful understanding of how to grapple with art film is supplied by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover. In their anthology *Global Art Cinema*, they claim that whatever art cinema means is best approached with an eye to its complexities of what they call “impurity”—the perversion of the usual frameworks for understanding film. They delineate five ways of thinking about art cinema’s impure essence: as an impure *institutional space* built around exhibition settings and extra-textual discourses; as ambivalent to *location* given its cosmopolitan movements and national identity-building; as ambivalent to *critical and industrial categories* of film history because it opposes but also collaborates with dominant entities like Hollywood; as troublesome to *genre* since the parametrics used to describe film types are hard to apply to the corpus of art film; and as a producer of impure *spectators* because its audiences have historically included both the sophisticated purveyors of taste and those seeking taboo depictions of adult material.⁶¹ Art cinema defies categorization, they claim, and can only produce more speculations than answers. This reading is ultimately in line with the reasoning that Lev lands on when compiling definitions from other prominent art film scholars:

...we can say that the art film as a category is pulled toward standardization by the need of the viewer for a relatively stable system of interpretation and by the unifying institutional network; yet it is also pulled toward diversity by the idea of art as something new, unique, surprising. The art film’s “space” is defined by this tension. The notion of the art film will never be entirely

⁶¹ Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, “Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema,” *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, eds. Galt and Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7.

stable, but will be created by the tension between standardization and diversity, as worked out in specific historical circumstances.⁶²

Since my thesis centers on the exhibition of the art film, I am focusing on but one of the complex strands of the agglomeration that scholars like Galt and Schoonover group under the very broad category of art cinema. What follows expands thinking on this one subarea by including not just the showing of films but the whole of the discourses, ways of knowing, operating, organizing, and the politics that are currently thriving in and around and nearby films-on-screens. For my purposes, I use the term “art film” or “art cinema” knowing full well their imperfections as descriptors yet seeing no way around it for talking about the operations of organizations that call themselves “art house cinemas.”

1.2.2 *Art House Cinemas*

Without going down too many rabbit holes, I also need to distinguish art houses from mainstream, independent, grindhouse, and small exhibitors. Again, instinctually, we likely understand art houses as fixed-site exhibition venues designed or imagined in distinction to a dominant, hegemonic film exhibition culture. There were multiple articulations of this throughout the twentieth century. In the 1920s and 30s cinephiles in the United States sought avant-garde cinema from Europe in small, refined atmospheric theatres dubbed “little cinemas.” Later theatres prioritized showing foreign-language cinema from European and Japanese auteurs during the foreign film craze on North American screens in the 1950s and 60s. Art houses have also long specialized in repertory screenings of Hollywood classics—films deemed valuable to film history and culture—and not just first-run releases. The second half of the century saw more

⁶² Lev, *The Euro-American Cinema*, 6.

elastic versions of the art house. The social movements of the 1960s and 70s brought out a barrage of experimental, politically conscious, non-commercial films that needed outlets, and smaller independent venues often played host. During the same decades, many art houses capitalized on relaxed attitudes toward sexually graphic or violent content and grew to include grindhouse or sexploitation flics. When the multiplex trend swept across North American exhibition in the 1980s, the independent single- or twin-screen downtown first-run cinema (those still standing) seemed like aging relics, and some became outposts for art cinema. Select “boutique” cinema chains emerged in the 90s, such as Alamo Drafthouse, promising upscale atmospheres, in-theatre dining and beverage options, and highly curated programs. As the new millennium approached, many small theaters sat dormant, victims of the megaplex era and the rise of VHS and then DVDs. By the year 2005, it was clear that digital technologies would have a pronounced impact on the business model for art houses.

For the purposes of this study we can conceive of twentieth-century art houses as exhibition venues that encouraged appreciation for films as art, though this art was “impure” and in the United States often imbued with cultural and class associations that suggested a degree of privilege, higher education, cosmopolitanism, and “distinction” in the sense that Pierre Bourdieu defined it. It was also impure in the sense that “art cinema” too was never just one thing and shifted since its naming, taking multiple forms according to particular industrial and social constraints. Most art houses at some point screened mass-friendly Hollywood fare. Others dabbled in “nudie” movies or outright pornography (more on this in later chapters). This flexibility in meaning has increased in the digital age. Given the relative ease and low-cost of transferring and downloading digital files for projection (which is how it’s done now), not to mention the large number of screens in megaplexes, mainstream theatres have been able to

justify programming more films that would normally play at a designated art house. Art houses, for their part, have proven more than willing to program films one would associate more with commercial Hollywood filmmaking than sentiments of “independence,” “foreignness,” or “art”—whatever those words mean.

All of that said, the key understanding of contemporary art houses for my thesis comes from Art House Convergence, which describes art houses as any theatre “that is community-based and mission-driven. Many art houses show independent and foreign films but that is not a requirement. ... Art houses can be in a range of spaces, from a single-purpose movie theatre to a multipurpose venue, to a museum, to a university cinema.”⁶³ Crucial to this understanding is the de-centered role that *specific kinds of films* play in the designation. According to the most prominent trade group of art house operators in North America, exhibiting foreign-language or niche films are no longer a defining or even qualifying feature of their theatres. Nor does it seem to matter that an art house operates exclusively in a traditional theatre setting: a commitment to local audiences and a clear mandate for mission-based service makes art houses art houses.

Despite obvious hurdles to nailing down a definition of art houses, attempts have been made to catalogue these cinemas. A 2015 report listed over 300 “independent movie theatres in the US that primarily screen art-house movies,”⁶⁴ while AHC, which maintains a running database, declares that around 300 of the 5,869 theatres in the US are either “community-based and mission-driven” or erstwhile make a habit of screening “fringe, vintage, or foreign-language films.”⁶⁵ Art houses comprise the main street one-screener with a retro marquee; the university-

⁶³ Barbara Twist, Managing Director of Art House Convergence, quoted in Sarah Hanssen, “Building Cinema Community: An Interview with the Founder and Managing Director of the Art House Convergence,” *The Projector: A Journal on Film, Media, and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2018): 8.

⁶⁴ Berg, “Sure Seaters,” 55.

⁶⁵ Anuoshia Sakoui, “Tarantino Shows Art Houses Can Still Live Happily Ever After,” *Bloomberg*, September 9, 2019.

affiliated media arts center with filmmaking studios and academic speakers; the quirky converted space with die-hard fans lining up for midnight movies; and indie multiplex chains like Landmark Cinemas and Alamo Drafthouse that offer reclining seats and dine-in options. As this diversity of venues and settings suggests, landing on a definition of art houses is not as relevant to my study as articulating what dynamics are borne out in this range of spaces—both as physical sites for media consumption and for the symbolic currencies they generate among audiences who, after all, have chosen to go out to a theater over Netflix on the couch. Microcinemas, pop-up cinemas, museum installations, and other ephemeral media do not come under consideration here, unless those efforts are satellites of an established art house theatre, such as the Hollywood Theatre’s PDX airport microcinema. For my own purposes, I limit my application of the term to the distinction articulated by AHC above: theatres that are mission-driven as opposed to commercially driven or that otherwise emphasize alternative or foreign-language films.

1.2.3 Distinction and Taste

More than any other theoretical framing, notions of distinction and taste in consumer culture dominate scholarly approaches to art house theatres. Art house culture ascended in postwar North America in tandem with sociological interest in how people perceived or realized their class status. In the US-American context, the rise of a robust middle class after World War II, fueled in part by the G.I. Bill and “white flight” to sprawling suburbs, brought about widespread participation in leisure activities. On the one hand, the emergence of a strong middle class helped reduce perceived class divisions, as wide swaths of citizens bought into “the American Dream” and economic stability. On the other hand, the ascension of a strong middle-class compelled individuals to seek out other ways of standing out from the crowd. Sociologists

examined the intersection of economics, class, and leisure culture in this redrawn cultural milieu, leading to a rich tradition of scholarship on the desire for alternative cultural experiences.

Theorists began to question the forces undergirding the formation of social stratification, realizing the importance of understanding how people activate their class status through their behaviors, associations, or acquired tastes. One touchstone for conceiving how society generates difference, and thus distinction, is symbolic capital, of which there are several subsets, including cultural capital and social capital.⁶⁶

Until the 1960s capital was mainly theorized in economic terms—it was something to be counted and measured, like income, property, and investments.⁶⁷ Social and political scientists examined the transfer of monetary capital to the value represented by social contacts or cultural associations, with the most sustained conversations emerging in the 1980s and 90s. The common argument across these accounts is that power in society cannot be reduced solely to material, economic goods, but rather that capital includes the benefits one gleans from relationships, associations, education, and cultural activities. For sociologists interested in economic and social inequality, symbolic capital represented a starting block for unpacking a wide range of cultural and subcultural phenomena. French social scientist Pierre Bourdieu stands as the most comprehensive examiner of the intersection between capital, culture, and inequality. His body of

⁶⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J.G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986); James Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988-1989): 95-120; Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

⁶⁷ There is an important exception to this: capital was discussed explicitly as “community” as far back as 1916 in regard to how the ‘goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse’ among farmers in rural America contributed to collective economic prosperity. See L.J. Hanifan, “The Rural School Community Center,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 67, no. 1 (September 1916): 130–38.

work was “concerned with the processes by which social stratification is reproduced, vis-à-vis forms of economic and cultural capital, and the pursuit of social prestige.”⁶⁸

References to Bourdieu’s writings on symbolic capital recur across studies on the values associated with trips to cultural institutions defined as alternative to the popular. According to his seminal study of the relation between class and culture, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, tastes are socially constructed according to a person’s social upbringing and education.⁶⁹ Differences in taste—what we like and don’t like—separates and sorts people based on these predispositions that align with inequalities in economic standing and access to “elite” institutions of “high taste.”⁷⁰ Constructs of “good taste” or “good culture” are “oriented around the dominant group, but—in being socially constructed rather than inherent—are subject to negotiation by groups seeking to improve or defend their social position.”⁷¹ In short, taste results from a set of constructed formations that reinforces hierarchies between class groups. These hierarchies are enforced in part because those with access to objects of “good taste,” or those whose role is to limit access or “gatekeep” said objects, create a canon of culture that reinforces the division of classes via restricted access to said culture. Institutions of art have been designed or imagined to “legitimate social differences” by marking some objects as superior to others, which those of “higher taste” can access and appreciate.⁷²

⁶⁸ Jennifer Smith Maguire, “Bourdieu on Cultural Intermediaries,” *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, eds. Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Mathews (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 16.

⁶⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁷⁰ “The inequalities associated with cultural capital reflect inequalities in capacities to acquire capital which themselves reflect prior inequalities in the possession of cultural capital.” Robert Moore, “Capital,” *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), 109.

⁷¹ Maguire, “Bourdieu,” 16.

⁷² Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Mathews, “Introduction: Thinking with Cultural Intermediaries,” *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, eds. Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Mathews (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 7.

The social differences that taste makes readable help explain how art houses have historically positioned themselves relative to dominant exhibition culture. Scholarship situates art house cinemas as places where audiences actualize cultural distinction via experiences with objects of “higher taste.” Wilinsky employs Bourdieu to reason how art cinemas of the postwar era generated long-term economic gains by appearing “above” the commercialism of its mainstream sibling. Disassociating the art house from crass Hollywood fare and commercial theatres courted favor among those seeking a different experience, or those wishing to bolster a counterculture identity through association with independent or alternative theatres. Investment in such symbolic capital shows long-term returns in economic capital for theatres, since customers ultimately purchase more than a movie ticket—they buy into a way of life or habits that realizes a social distinction they desire: “It was to the benefit of art film industry participants to support the discursive separation between commercial entertainment and art through a disavowal of economic interests and a focus on artistic excellence.”⁷³ Art houses cultivated this distinction in several ways. Programming films from Europe was a key selling point for art house exhibitors throughout the 1950s and 60s to pitch themselves as different. Operators were keen to complement the sophistication on screen with that of their lobbies, adorned with modern, tasteful décor. Wine or coffee were standard concession choices. Such amenities did not come cheap, nor did admission to the movies—the upscale experience meant a steeper price, which many were happy to pay as the cost of cultural distinction.

But art houses have historically compromised their “refined” market brand for the sake of business. The ability of a subculture industry (like art cinemas) to subvert a dominant body (like mainstream exhibition) depends on the stability of the basic principle of the major industry

⁷³ Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 34.

(commercial capitalism) to which it inextricably belongs. The systematic denial that symbolic capital does not eventually transubstantiate into economic capital was a blind spot Bourdieu dubbed misrecognition, a “symbolic violence” that imposes interest upon supposedly disinterested systems.”⁷⁴ Symbolic capital “[denies] and [suppresses] its instrumentalism by proclaiming itself to be disinterested and of intrinsic worth,”⁷⁵ even as monetary gain underlines all for-profit business. Art houses are still businesses and must bring in dollars, and even appeals to the non-commercial “purity” of artistic exhibition is itself a market strategy of differentiation. Art houses have long staged complicated negotiations of taste cultures often within for-profit systems. Scholars have demonstrated the many ways in which “high culture” films and exhibitors throughout the twentieth century leaned on the same discourses that characterized “low culture,” thereby complicating the impression of art house audiences as sophisticated or elite, or of soft-core audiences as sexual voyeurs.⁷⁶ One example here is the conscious marketing of European art films (largely to American audiences) as risqué glimpses of forbidden material. I should acknowledge here the nuances between how European film industries marketed their films to their own audiences as art and the American distributor discursive regime of framing foreign films in other particular ways. French filmmakers and directors of the 1950s and 60s often genuinely exported their films as “art,” leading to the emergence of the highly intellectualized *nouvelle vague*. This is to say that while noting how European exporters often marketed their films as “legitimate,” I am focused here on the American positioning of these films for art house crowds, which often flirted with or flat-out committed to sentiments of social transgression or taboo.

⁷⁴ Moore, *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, 104.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷⁶ Hawkins, *Cutting Edge*, 3; Schaefer, *Bold!*, 331.

The tendency to associate foreign films with perversion or obscenity was a strategy of the US film industry as far back as the 1930s to differentiate Hollywood from European films.⁷⁷ Art cinemas, for their part, catered to licentiousness and secretly (or not so secretly) hoped their films would cross over into mainstream appeal. Mark Betz's research frustrates the assumption that the popularity of imported European art film had to do with consumer appetites for more artistic content; many audiences were instead drawn to the "tastefully visualized sex or nudity" that became in some cases synonymous with "Europe" in American eyes.⁷⁸ The promotional material for European art film in the United States often adopted "low-brow" exploitation tactics to concentrate on female sexuality "as iconic markers of the films' purported content."⁷⁹ In such materials, buxom starlets became more central to advertising materials than the films could reasonably justify. Names of European auteur directors were relegated to the background. Some art house exhibitors of the twentieth century claimed that they avoided titillating marketing material and films in an effort to keep their refined clientele happy.⁸⁰ But the point remains that many art house exhibitors catered to audience desires not to see prestige films from abroad but to see some skin. As now, there was never a pure kind of art house exhibition strategy. That said, art houses should not be collapsed too closely with other modes of exhibition devoted to sexual titillation or cheap gore, such as grindhouse or pornography theatres, both of which developed in the 1960s and 70s in part because art houses did not satisfy audience demand for the provocative content newly allowed on screens at that time. Most art houses, even as excessively sexual or violent films have occasionally "filtered up" to their screens, have sought discursive separation

⁷⁷ Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 37.

⁷⁸ Jancovich, "Art, Exploitation, Underground," 212.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁸⁰ Tino Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946-1973* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 123.

from grind or porn theatres. Art houses use their cultural position as upscale institutions to frame their exhibitions of sex or violence as tasteful transgressions rather than what might otherwise be labeled exploitation for kicks.

To this point about differentiation of transgressive content exhibitions, in recent scholarship art cinema and questions of taste have intertwined with theoretical considerations of what's been dubbed "extreme cinema." Mattias Frey, author of *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture*, loosely defines this as "an international production trend of graphically sexual or violent 'quality' films that often stoke critical and popular controversy,"⁸¹ drawing from filmmakers like Lars von Trier, Takashi Miike, and Gaspar No . As Frey points out, echoing others like Hawkins, art cinema has often been "ontologically connected to, or has legitimated and 'reclaimed,' subversive or controversial content,"⁸² and extreme cinema "depends on this image of difference" to distinguish itself from other forms of media. Extreme cinema needs to be perceived as different from sheer pornography or violent exploitation in order to find cultural legitimization. To do so this cinema depends on two distinctions: "the creators' intentions to (or pretensions) to produce something more sophisticated than horror or pornography; and critics' and consumers' belief to have the rarefied taste to appreciate large, deeper meanings beyond the obvious or graphic violence or sex."⁸³ In other words, discourses of extreme cinema have worked to strike a balance between transgressing beyond the mainstream handling of a subject while gambling that audiences will ascribe enough signification of meaningful art to their film. Extreme cinema shows the variegated levels of distinction contained within a broad category like art cinema: "Just as

⁸¹ Mathias Frey, *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 7.

⁸² Frey, *Extreme Cinema*, 17.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 21.

consuming art and foreign-language films constitutes one way to distinguish oneself from others in middle-class society, the ability to ‘appreciate’ sex and violence on an aesthetic rather than prurient, physical, or psychological level becomes a means of establishing oneself as part of a discerning taste culture.”⁸⁴ For Frey, extreme cinema, aside from its provocative content and art cinema style, generates its particularities from its institutional setting within alternative art house, festival, or independent markets where such films get signified as transgressions to an established and respectable cultural marketplace. Showing an extreme film in an art house confers modicum of legitimacy that might otherwise not be ascribed. Some contemporary art houses, such as Brooklyn’s Nitehawk Cinema, have consciously programmed entries of extreme cinema in order to lure in younger audiences desiring NC-17 material, and there is a long legacy of repertory or art house theatres showcasing explicit sexual or violent content.

In summation, art houses have always expressed varied taste discourses working to enfold very different kinds of films. Bourdieu himself predicted that film would tend toward various positionings within taste culture “because of its relative novelty as an art and concomitant need to compete for cultural legitimacy.”⁸⁵ He was clairvoyant on this point; art houses are microcosms for the enduring balancing acts pitting “high class” experiences against “popular” leisure within a distinct industrial formation. Still, art cinemas have often tried to define themselves in opposition to mainstream, commercial exhibitors, and wider Hollywood culture, even if some of their programming runs afoul of the perceived “high class” status of art house culture. The shaping of cultural taste and consumer need does not occur at random, however. The figures and institutions nudging culture along down the conveyor belt of society

⁸⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 20.

operate in various forms at various levels. These forces, known as cultural intermediaries, are important to address for their role in producing and promotion certain cultural formations.

1.2.4 *Cultural Intermediaries*

If distinction and taste are socially conditioned, who or what does the conditioning? Bourdieu posed this question in *Distinction* and pinpointed cultural intermediaries as key forces for the construction and perpetuation of taste formations. His original research, conducted in France during the 1960s, identified intermediaries as the result of fractions among the French middle-class near the middle of the century. He described this “new petit bourgeoisie” as a development associated with the “professionalization of occupations ... [mediating] between the fields of production and consumption,”⁸⁶ including but not limited to “the directors and executives of firms in tourism and journalism, publishing and the cinema, fashion and advertising, decoration and property development.”⁸⁷ These job-roles reflected a new economic structure predicated on the creation of symbolic needs and wants rather than material items or services—in other words on attempts to satisfy cultural capital in response to a perceived lack of economic capital. Consumer economy in the latter half of the twentieth century, Bourdieu theorized, reorganized itself around a professional class of needs merchants and tastemakers.

Theorists of cultural economics have regularly invoked Bourdieu’s work in investigating how professional intermediaries foster cultural value. In their anthology *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, editors Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews present intermediaries as “the taste makers defining what counts as good taste and cool culture in today’s

⁸⁶ Maguire, “Bourdieu,” 19.

⁸⁷ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 310-311.

marketplace. Working at the intersection of culture and economy, they perform critical operations in the production and promotion of consumption, constructing legitimacy and adding value through the qualification of goods.”⁸⁸ Allowing for the inherent vagueness of the term, Maguire and Matthews further map out intermediaries according to two criteria. The first is their role in *value formation*. “Cultural intermediaries are market actors who construct value by mediating how goods (or services, practices, people) are perceived and engaged with by others (end consumers, and other market actors including other cultural intermediaries).”⁸⁹ As this criteria can apply to any daily interaction in which people influence how others regard goods or behaviors, one needs a second layer of definition, namely *expert orientation and market context*:

In the struggle to influence others’ perceptions and attachments, cultural intermediaries are defined by their claims to professional expertise in taste and value within specific cultural fields. ... And they are differentiated by their locations within commodity chains (vis-à-vis the actors and stages of cultural production they negotiate with and between, and the goods that they mediate), and by the autonomy, authority and arsenal of devices and resources that they deploy in negotiating structural and subjective constraints to accomplishing their agendas.⁹⁰

Intermediaries must appear trustworthy and compelling if they are to sway consumers into buying their values or goods, so their pitches must come with requisite authority: “Cultural intermediaries are not simply taste-makers; they are *professional* taste-makers” whose existence depends on conferring legitimization onto goods or services. Bourdieu argued that professional intermediaries developed strategies to establish (symbolic) sentiments of authority in contrast to the authority enjoyed by members of an established bourgeoisie. For example, intermediaries pursue “channels of professionalization” that make possible the rebranding of “secretary” into “personal assistant” and “bartender” into “mixologist.” In addition, intermediaries work to promote their cultural field as a whole as legitimate: “Cultural intermediaries work to canonize

⁸⁸ Maguire and Matthews, *Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, 1.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

the ‘not-yet-legitimate’.’⁹¹ By conferring “hallmarks of established authority” (such as mastery of abstract knowledge and the theoretical criteria for assessments of quality) onto cultural forms, and inviting those without sufficient cultural capital to partake in the appreciation that such contact allows for, intermediaries raise the collective status of their cultural field.

Cultural intermediation frequents scholarship at the intersection of economics and culture. Studies abound of cultural workers in fields like advertising and marketing; fashion retail; arts promotion; and museums and curation, but also in less obvious occupations, such as personal training and fitness; music production; journalism; comic book shop ownership; and food and drink establishments. Media exhibition outlets too have been frequent subjects of study as cultural intermediaries. These sites frame experiences for consumers and add value to regular consumption. Film and media scholars have deployed Bourdieu’s ideas to chart how value accrues in the different life stages of media content. Marijke de Valck has written about the value-forming role of film festivals on the global market, examining how they symbolically create and gatekeep specialized varieties of cinema marked as different from regular exhibitors.⁹² Others, such as Tamara Falicov, have focused on the tertiary structures around festivals themselves and how North American or European funding mechanisms that support “festival films” from the Global South have shaped the exhibitory market and media presence of films from those countries’ area.⁹³ Outside of the festival setting, scholars have noted the intermediary role essential to specialty distributors of at-home media, which have increasingly begun to compete with theatrical exhibitors. James Kendrick and Daniel Herbert have cast looks at

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Marijke de Valck, “Film Festivals, Bourdieu, and the Economization of Culture,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 23 no.1 (Spring 2014): 74-89.

⁹³ Tamara Falicov, “The Festival Film”: Film Festival Funds as Cultural Intermediaries,” *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, eds. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (London: Routledge, 2016), 227-247.

distributors such as The Criterion Collection, Kino International, Facets Multimedia, Zeitgeist Films, and Mubi to understand their “creation and dispersal of notions of value and ‘quality’ in the home video arena.”⁹⁴ Each of these distributors, to varying degrees, facilitate discourses of “quality,” writes Herbert, functioning “analogously to the publishers of ‘classic’ literature described by Bourdieu, by having actively fostered exclusivity, cosmopolitanism, intellectualism, and social activism.”⁹⁵

As venues signified as different from commercial theatres, art houses are natural cultural intermediaries, though they have not often been addressed as such. Wilinsky’s study, for instance, accounts for the sociological and industrial backdrops for the emergence of art houses after World War II, but it doesn’t consider art houses as cultural intermediaries for anything beyond alternative cinematic products. There are no references to cultural intermediation in her study despite undergirding it with Bourdieuan notions of taste and class distinction to explain the social dynamics that encouraged art houses to thrive. My study, in contrast, accounts for the newer job roles, operational philosophies, and cultural value-making that takes place at art houses today. Many of these developments signal a new professional turn in art house management since the digital transition—a tidy circling back to a classical Bourdieuan understanding of intermediaries as a new stratum of occupations in the culture industries. The cultural intermediation I have in mind involves programming in the classic sense of art house scholarship, but it also accounts for a fuller range of cultural activities. Art houses generate spaces, events, ways of talking and thinking, modes of organization, and affinity-building. Under this purview falls things like such as community organizing, civic partnerships, data analysis,

⁹⁴ Daniel Herbert, “From Art House to Your House: The Distribution of Quality Cinema on Home Video,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

nonprofit professionalization, neighborhood revitalization efforts, and extra-cinematic events that bring audiences together in particular spaces. AHC stands as a prime example of this new intermediary role given its documented attempts to understand art house audiences better, maximize their audience reach, construct brand identities, and pitch the symbolic gains of attending their theatres. As such, my study reconsiders today's art house network as an intermediary not just for feelings of distinction within leisure culture but as conveyors of cultural habits, political ideologies, and moral stances indicative of new turns in cultural economies.

1.2.5 *Cinephilia*

Art houses do much more than screen films—they cultivate passion for film culture by celebrating filmmakers, exposing diverse brands of cinema, and encouraging critical discourses about film as artistic enterprise. One concept lurking just off-screen so far is cinephilia. As an organizing concept to describe an intense, personal interest in films and film culture, cinephilia is too broad an idea to capture succinctly. But it demands clarification in relation to my study since I contend that appeals to cinephilia play a more nuanced role in the relevance of contemporary art houses than before. Art houses have been crucial for the infrastructure of cinephilia (and vice-versa) since the little cinema movement of the 1920s, even if the word “cinephilia” only touched English tongues in the 1960s via France.⁹⁶ Discourse on art films and high film culture, however, remained largely concentrated with select purveyors of taste throughout the twentieth century. The *Cahiers du Cinema* crowd, major American critics like Andrew Sarris, Pauline Kael, and Vincent Canby, and a handful of film magazines and journals fueled widespread interest in

⁹⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, “Cinephilia or the Uses of Disenchantment,” *Cinephilia: Movies, Love, and Memory*, eds. Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 27.

movie-going and reflection, but sustained cinephilic discourse on film remained bound to these specialized gatekeepers and, until recent decades, the theatre. The Internet changed all of that.

Today's film culture is characterized by "the new cinephilia," a term ushered into usage to describe the changing practices of cineastes in an age of the Internet and DVDs, a proliferation of specialized film festivals, the ascension of many national and regional cinemas to global audiences, and other transformations of the prior models that supported film appreciation. Girish Shambu writes that "pre-Internet film culture was characterised by a particular economy of production and consumption: there were relatively few critics writing for a large number of cinephile readers. ... [But] the low economic barriers of entry into the Internet have permitted large numbers of passionate generalists—amateurs—to enter the cinema discourse in a serious and engaged fashion."⁹⁷ The immediacy, low cost, and convenience of DVDs and streaming platforms made reviewers and scholars less dependent on single-location, scheduled theatre screenings. Blogs, YouTube channels, vlogs, and Twitter feeds have become hosts for reviews, analyses, and news on the world of film. If yesterday's cinephilia was associated with "going out," today's cinephilia increasingly means "staying in."⁹⁸ The reach and elasticity of the Internet has furthered exposure to cinemas from around the world historically on the margins of American film culture. Finally, the explosion of film festivals in recent decades signals what de Valck sees as the institutionalization phase of festival history. Since the 1990s, festivals have professionalized and standardized their practices in the name of a specialized, global film culture. This global network of festivals has begun "cooperating on the shared mission to screen great films and support a more diverse cinema culture, [a side effect of which is] that festivals'

⁹⁷ Girish Shambu, *The New Cinephilia* (Montreal: Caboose, 2014), 20-21.

⁹⁸ Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener, "Down with Cinephilia? Long Live Cinephilia!" *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 13.

programming models became self-referential, responding to what people had come to expect of festivals and keeping the system, which legitimized their social function, up and running.”⁹⁹ All of these developments have created a more inclusive, decentralized canon of film culture away from the grip of a few established gatekeepers and toward disassociated audiences with vastly varied interests. “New cinephilia,” summarized *New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis,

simultaneously embraces old and new, avant-garde and mainstream, live-action and animation, drama and documentary, celluloid and video. It supports modernist snobberies and promotes postmodern egalitarianism, worships dead masters alongside the living and take’s film’s aspirations to art as a matter of course. Its adherents use the Internet to track down cult directors and post reviews of films famous and obscure. For these new movie lovers, old divides like trash versus art, Hollywood versus the world have given way to an expansive inclusion of films from around the globe.¹⁰⁰

Where do today’s art houses fit in with this newly defined cinephilia? On the one hand, all theatres have surely suffered from the proliferation of on-demand streaming technologies. Would-be movie-goers have become home-dwellers with subscriptions and home theatre equipment. Younger generations have more options for entertainment than their parents and grandparents, leaving a void of interest for physical movie theatres across the board. Cinephilia is easy to quench outside of the theatre. On the other hand, the democratization of discourse production and dissemination that the Internet has brought on has contributed to the kind of robust and diversified film culture that Shambu and Dargis celebrate—and art houses remain a persistent part of that cosmopolitan film culture. While they may no longer be easily deemed central, they plainly continue to support film culture, albeit in a transformed environment. Cinephilia remains fundamental to any movie theatre, but it is no longer enough for art houses to generate the cultural relevance they need to survive when cinephilia can be so easily satisfied

⁹⁹ Marijke de Valck, “Finding Audiences for Films: Festival Programming in Historical Perspective,” *Coming Soon to a Festival Near You: Programming Film Festivals*, ed. Jeffrey Ruoff (St. Andrews, Scotland: St. Andrews University, 2012), 33.

¹⁰⁰ Manohla Dargis, “The 21st-Century Cinephile,” *New York Times*, Nov. 14, 2004.

elsewhere. Thus while we might say that art houses are less central to film culture, and are one part of an expanding group of films, platforms, and discursive and taste configurations, it is also true that film is similarly less central to the art house. This dissertation works to map these changing constellations.

1.3 Methods and Scope

My study continues the New History tradition of focusing on discourses that inform exhibition contexts rather than film content itself. My specific interest rests in pinpointing how a network of alternative exhibition venues—art house cinemas—have changed their cultural formation practices in accordance with shifting conditions in the business of projecting audiovisual content to audiences. My study chiefly covers the years since 2005, when Digital Cinema Initiatives (DCI) released their specifications for digital projection in commercial theatres. Going forward I will refer to this moment and resettling of the exhibition sector as “the digital transition.” This marks a natural starting point for my project since many of the dynamics I’m tracking resulted from the threat posed by the digital transition for art houses and the possible benefits it provided. The geography of my study, meanwhile, resides mostly within the United States for reasons both personal and logistic. As a US citizen with one-time aspirations to work in the art house industry, I thought a project geared toward US national-industrial contexts most beneficial. Logistically there are also more art houses operating in the United States than Canada. The Art House Convergence, the trade group whose actions to redefine contemporary art houses I cover in this thesis, are comprised almost entirely of US theaters, with a smattering in Canada and Europe. Finally, regarding the theatres I have selected for case studies in chapter 5, I have sought a combination of theatres set in metropolitan and rural areas. Art houses were

once predominantly an urban phenomenon centered in a few key cities like New York City and Chicago, and the majority of scholarship, such as Wilinsky's study, neglects small-town or rural art houses. These days, small, independent theatres operating in an art house spirit are not uncommon in smaller cities or college towns, and I account for these in this project.

One clear advantage I have over scholars of the twentieth century is the sheer amount of online coverage devoted to alternative exhibitors and trends in movie theatres. Within this study I rely on a number of types of sources, especially trade publications, newspaper or magazine articles, theatre promotional discourse (often websites), reports and data supplied by AHC and other associations, and personal interviews with executive directors or other art house administrators. Publications such as *IndieWire*, *Variety*, and *Boxoffice* are irreplaceable as industry news outlets with late-breaking information about exhibition markets. As many art houses are ensconced in their communities, local newspapers provide sharpened perspectives on particular theatre practices. I've also benefited from reports published by AHC as part of their administrative data-keeping, not to mention the cache of resources that AHC members trade freely over their Google Group, which I've monitored for five years. AHC as a whole is the single-most important source of information for my study (I've dedicated a whole chapter to it). At its annual conference, for example, AHC spotlights art houses old and new in a popular series titled "Art House Tales." In these 7-minute presentations, recorded and posted to the AHC website, exhibitors tell stories about the founding of their cinemas, timelines of their operations, architectural or design oddities of their theaters, trends in their regular or special programming, business or cultural partnerships, their community interactions, and other inside details. These presentations are excellent sources of information about the nitty-gritty of everyday theatre life. I've also drawn extensively from reports commissioned by AHC breaking down large-scale

programming and operational trends, as well as audience demographics and habits, among hundreds of North American cinemas. These and other resources bring greater clarity to operational trends and audience feedback—data that is otherwise hard to come by in such a decentralized network of largely independent theaters. Indeed a built-in challenge to my study in contrast to those examining mainstream exhibition sites is the relative paucity of standardization among independent art house operations, their lack of centralized record-keeping, and their relatively scant (though increasing) popular press coverage. AHC helps counterbalance this problem but it remains a disadvantage to all researchers of independent theatres.

I chose theatres for analysis in this study largely based on their involvement with AHC, as this the easiest way to locate art cinemas and gather information about them. AHC-associated theaters are in many ways (but not all ways) representative of the sector's shift to nonprofitization. Virtually all of the theatres mentioned in this thesis have each featured in AHC panels and workshops, and their programming, marketing, and community engagement efforts may have caught the eye of media outlets and exhibition scholars. While I sporadically mention theatres that are not members of AHC, the art houses I focus on as case studies in chapter 5 are regular participants at the group's conferences. There are art houses that prefer not to join AHC, possibly out of ignorance for the association (though this is getting harder to believe). Though AHC funneled my research to specific theatres, I have not limited my interest to its membership.

Applying discourse analysis to these forms has helped me understand, theatre by theatre, what art houses offer by way of regular programming, special series, or alternative content in association with outside cultural groups. Many of these theatres have detailed, up-to-date websites with information on their mission statements, histories, education programs, film preservation efforts, and special programming. Examining art houses' promotional discourse also

helps me gauge how theaters position themselves as multi-purpose community venues invested in values beyond cinephilia and distinction. My research also leans on primary and secondary interviews with the directors, programmers, or community liaisons of theaters. As contemporary art houses have ventured more into the public sphere rather than retreat into the enclaves of elitism, their operators have become more self-reflexive. It is easy to find printed interviews with administrators of today's art houses in any number of entertainment or trade publications.

Academically my study draws extensively from scholars who have established foundational ideas about film exhibition, cultural taste values, and whose work defined and/or transformed the shifting articulations of art cinema across the twentieth century and beyond. These scholars include Barbara Wilinsky, Douglas Gomery, Marc Betz, Pierre Bourdieu, Yannis Tzioumakis, Charles Acland, Chris Horak, Haidee Wasson, Ross Melnick, Eric Schaefer, Scott MacDonald, Tino Balio, Joan Hawkins, Sarah Sinwell, Lisa Dombrowski, Daniel Metz, Karl Schoonover, Rosalind Galt, John Caldwell, and many others.

In the middle of the twentieth century, art cinemas, situated somewhere between mass culture movie palaces and avant-garde experiments, developed an identifiable set of internal logics and an infrastructure for delivering films to paying customers hungry for alternative experiences. Qualities of prestige—in the form of intellectualism, artistic sophistication, middlebrow behavioral norms in theatres, and discourse associations with Europe—generated feelings of distinction that drew audiences in. When market and social conditions shifted in subsequent decades, this model tilted into the territory of sexploitation or outright pornography, complicating the refined legacy of many of the nation's art house cinemas. In more recent decades, with the continued blurring of high and low cultures and the commodification of the culture industries, scholars must take stock of how cultural institutions are shaped by new

cultural intermediaries. Acland’s call for scholars to “re-think the specificity of the cultural activity of the motion picture theatre”¹⁰¹ in the wake of the emergence of megaplex culture is thus echoed in my own project’s goal to understand today’s art house network. My study, though, begins from a very different starting block: instead of the accelerated screen traffic in global, commercial theater chains, my project looks at the community-oriented indie theater invested in cultivating local audiences with different cultural projects in mind than just profit. Whereas mainstream theaters, linked to Hollywood distributors, are tethered to the business decisions of their global conglomerates, choreographing content amid top-down decision-making, indie art houses veer the other way, toward local tastes, economies, and communities. This community-minded, multilayered, and inclusive approach to curation—dubbed “slow curation” by scholar Megan Johnston¹⁰²—informs art house operations at a time when cultural gatekeepers like theaters are more sensitive to the representational politics of their programs and the need to serve community interests. Perhaps the key reason that art house cinemas have survived the digital transition is because they embraced rather than eschewed their local-ness, even as they broadened their programming to appeal to new audiences—an interesting tension point between capital and community values.

This dissertation puts art house cinemas in dialogue with observations of shifts in other exhibition sectors since the digital transition. For instance, Acland has questioned how cultures of commercial movie-going changed with the advent of the megaplex boom in the 1980s and 90s when theatres reimagined their services to emphasize multiple consumption options for the whole family. What follows explores, among other things, the ways in which this insight applies

¹⁰¹ Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 221.

¹⁰² Megan Johnston, “Slow Curating: Re-Thinking and Extending Socially Engaged Art in the Context of Northern Ireland,” *On Curating* 24 (December 2014): 23-33.

to art cinemas, wherein “family friendly” has become a recurring organizing principle. Also important, de Valck and other festival scholars and stakeholders have lamented a creeping commercialization of the global festival circuit. Have art houses followed suit? If so, what does the commercialization of the art house look like by comparison? Many art houses have gone into survival mode, making highly commercial moves at odds with the “distinction” model of prestige exhibition. Art houses may shun Marvel blockbusters, but their programming certainty invites the “popular” onto its screens. These days you are just as likely to see Hollywood’s most high-profile film, the annual Best Picture Oscar winner, at an art house as you are in a chain cineplex.¹⁰³ Examples like these prompt us to also consider how mainstream American cinema (i.e. Hollywood) has changed and impacted today’s art house logic. I contextualize recent developments to the industry in later chapters and situate art houses in relation to this evolving industrial form. For instance, one reaction against homogenized Hollywood culture has seen art houses double down on a highly politicized patterns of cultural progressivism to appeal to subcultural associations. If art houses have typically promoted themselves as bastions for the obscure or artistically daring (or the sexually titillating), the last twenty years have shown us different expressions as they become purveyors of indie-left progressivism in context to the unfolding Culture Wars. My thesis digs deeper into the different triangulations linking commercialism, “indie,” and prestige to get at the heart of where art houses sit within these shifts—or if such a finding is even possible.

If the mid-century years saw the cementing of an art house infrastructure in the form of theatres catering to appeals of distinction, I contend that today’s art houses are producing cultural

¹⁰³ Recent Best Picture winners like *The Artist* (dir. Michel Hazanavicius, 2011), *Spotlight* (dir. Tom McCarthy, 2015), *The Shape of Water* (dir. Guillermo del Toro, 2017), *Moonlight* (dir. Barry Jenkins, 2016), and *Parasite* (dir. Bong Joon-ho, 2019) crossed liberally between art house and megaplex screens.

capital in new ways: they are no longer solely about bringing together like-minded cinephiles around obscure or high-art films. It's not enough to screen Godard classics at midnight, nor to screen the latest Cannes festival sensation (though these things still go on). Showing movies with a twist of difference or sophistication is not enough to stay in business: "If the mid-twentieth-century arthouses relied on distinctions from mainstream movie theatres and television, today's cinemas have many more possible consumer activities with which to contend. Correspondingly, if red wine and European-style coffee formerly sufficed to furnish a unique evening out, today's operations must provide much more."¹⁰⁴ The following chapters tell the story of the "more" that art houses offer by addressing issues raised in this introduction. Starting with a survey of art house exhibition throughout the twentieth century, Chapter 2 orients readers to the fuller history of theatres (and other models) delivering art films to paying customers. Stressing that an infrastructure for art houses emerged out of particular economic conditions that proved willing to bend to commercial demands, this chapter documents the foundational values that shaped an understanding of art cinemas in the last century. My subsequent chapters then gradually home in on contemporary art houses. Chapter 3, an establishing shot from afar, contextualizes the current environment for art houses, covering formative industrial conditions, digital developments, and a crucial new business model—nonprofitization—that shape art house operations today. Chapter 4 dollies in to examine the contributions of an industrial trade organization, Art House Convergence (AHC), on the reconfiguration of art houses since 2005. AHC has been at the vanguard of revisioning these movie theatres into nonprofit, community-minded cultural institutions. By considering the AHC in the context of other trade groups for independent exhibitors, we will get an inside track into the values and strategies that precipitated many of the

¹⁰⁴ Frey, *Extreme Cinema*, 89.

practices that my final chapter tracks. Chapter 5 zooms in to two specific case studies to concretize how cinemas are enacting the practices promoted by AHC and shaped by the digital and industrial contexts untapped in chapters 3 and 2. Moving beyond foundational attractions of cinephilia and cultural distinction that art houses developed (and sometimes betrayed) in the twentieth century, these case studies reveal the new dynamics circulating in today's independent theatres. Finally, my conclusion diagnoses how art houses have reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises of the last two years. As the pandemic emerged while I was drafting this thesis, my project is ideally suited to take stock of whether art houses have followed through on their nonprofit mandates at a time when pandemic-related hardships have underlined the disproportionate hardships faced by marginalized or underserved communities.

Expanding the work by Gomery and Wilinsky, whose focus on the postwar arena of 1950s taste culture form the backbone of art house scholarship, this thesis widens the aperture away from art houses as urban enclaves of foreign-language cinephilia in the name of standing out from the crowd. The changes taking place at art houses over the last 20 years are no less worthy of close study than the postwar effervescence of art theatres or their piecemeal slippage into grindhouse venues. Gomery's study prematurely declared "the end of the art house" in the 1990s, though not without valid reason. The classically conceived art house that introduced Americans to global film was clearly in decline. Wilinsky's monograph, released a decade after Gomery's, concluded by speculating on further research directions in light of then-recent gains by art house cinemas in the form of specialty cinema chains. Her study is subtitled "The Emergence of Art House Cinema," and that's what it documents—an emergence. This thesis extends our understanding of art houses, which are very much alive and kicking, into the wide new terrain of a digital century.

Chapter 2 | “Commercial but Not Enough”: Historicizing Art House Cinemas

*“No longer is the art film a delicacy for the palates of a few connoisseurs. ... [As] the art film emerges from the small screening rooms of a few specialized film societies and art-film theatres and reaches for a mass audience, a greater understanding of both its peculiar appeal and its potential market becomes essential.”*¹⁰⁵

Barbara Wilinsky opens her study of the post-World War II art house with an anecdote on the term “sure seaters.” Originally a pejorative for specialty cinemas where one was “sure to find a seat” in the 1920s, by the 1950s the phrase had gained the opposite connotation—as venues that were sure to fill their seats by showing foreign films.¹⁰⁶ “Sure seaters” became anything but a sure thing as the century progressed though. Shifts in consumer demand and the industrial marketplace for art films changed the cultural relevance of these small exhibitors. Venues that only two decades prior had been at the vanguard of a burgeoning art film culture were by the late 1960s increasingly in the business of screening nudie, sexploitation, or outright pornographic movies in rundown theatres where the cineaste intelligentsia would blush to be spied at. As mainstream chains turned to new forms of exhibition—the multiplex and later the megaplex—in the latter half of the century, the diminishing number of small exhibitors of foreign, independent, repertory, or alternative films wondered if they were merely an exhibition fad headed for antiquation much like nickelodeon cinemas of the 1910s and 1920s. There were industrial, economic, and social forces at play to encourage the rise of an art house infrastructure in the postwar period and also to feed its gradual demise in ensuing decades. We need to account for these developments in order to appreciate the recent and current contexts of the art house.

¹⁰⁵ John E. Twomey, “Some Considerations on the Rise of the Art-Film Theater,” *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 10, no. 3 (April 1, 1956): 239–47.

¹⁰⁶ Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 1.

In doing so I should again clarify that the terms “art house” and “art cinema” have never been pure categories. They have been inconsistently applied to a range of products, practices, and venues that sometimes overlap, often contradict, but rarely settle completely; they are mutts of signifiers. Some of these applications within North America include films made outside of the restrictions of Hollywood’s production code and the norms of mainstream studio cinema. Others contain the exhibition of foreign films made expressly for the American market to sell European or liberal sensibilities about sex or relationships. Still others expand to include Hollywood’s calculated appropriation of qualities of “refinement” or “intellectualism” in certain of their films. Major American studios have long promulgated discourses of quality and prestige, but such uses were by and large descriptors to market films to as many audience segments as possible. Tony Guzman writes that in the 1920s “Hollywood tossed the word ‘art’ around as if it were synonymous with profit.”¹⁰⁷ Moreover, nobody today would argue that Hollywood hasn’t and doesn’t produce artistically accomplished films. For good reason did Galt and Schoonover suggest thinking about art film (and by extension in some respects, art houses) as “impure,” as troubling to stable taxonomical fields of film culture. I acknowledge the blurred boundaries I am working within. But from these applications of the term I hope to sift out a notion of art houses as a coherent exhibition infrastructure in the United States that rose in earnest after World War II within urban markets and aimed, with some caveats, to serve moviegoers desiring artistically complex or provocative films in atmospheres distinct from most commercial cinemas.

With that preamble, this chapter surveys iterations of art house exhibition throughout the twentieth century until the digital transition, marked here as the Hollywood industry release of specifications for digital cinema projection in 2005. A series of questions rise to the surface:

¹⁰⁷ Tony Guzman, “The Little Theatre Movement: The Institutionalization of the European Art Film in America,” *Film History* 17, no. 2/3 (June 2005): 263.

What initial artistic values or economic needs helped build an infrastructure for the theatrical exhibition of art films? What social dynamics circulated around and through these theatres? To what extent and in what forms have art house theatres promoted distinction and satisfied the wily demands of so-called cinephilia? How have art houses historically compromised their claims to high-class prestige for the sake of complex taste formations or the imperatives of good business? What have been some alternative models (both inside and outside the theatre) for delivering cultural distinction and catering to sentiments of cinephilia? By addressing these questions through a historical survey, we can appreciate the legacies against which new models of art house cinemas today can be grasped.

2.1 A Survey of Art House Exhibition

2.1.1 Precursors

The theatrical exhibition of films deemed of artistic value as opposed to mere entertainment has had many permutations across cinema history. One entry point into this legacy is the perceived need for films and venues outside of a hegemonic commercial culture. European and American avant-garde circles of the 1910s and 20s attempted to produce and screen films that reflexively challenged aesthetic norms and industrial status quos. These movements defined themselves against nascent practices of commercial filmmaking and sought to break ties with newly established traditions of narrative moviemaking. Malte Hagener's research into early European avant-garde culture reveals a network of transnational nodes (cities, institutions, societies, special events) containing ambivalence about "what the avant-garde was meant to be and the self-positioning of the artists" working within it.¹⁰⁸ This quest for self-definition among

¹⁰⁸ Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 35.

avant-gardists involved a wobbly relationship to artistic canonization: was their goal to elevate film to the level of other high arts like painting or literature, or to break away from the bourgeois values associated with them? Artists and filmmakers working in this epoch experimented with formal aesthetics of the medium in attempts to work out this aporia. An early collection of avant-gardists including Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter, and Viktor Eggeling, advanced *abstraction*, or the maximum elimination of references to outside reality, and *non-narrative schemata*, as formal qualities to explore through their work. At the same time Hagener finds it a mistake to equate the avant-garde with apolitical personal expressions or formal experiments in line with *l'art pour l'art*. Many avant-gardists identified themselves counter to traditional institutions of art and their means of production and presentation, not as vanguards of new artistic language for the sake of its newness: “The avant-garde viewed itself more as a radical socio-political revolutionary movement than as purveyors of an aesthetic style.”¹⁰⁹ But as an undefined assemblage of diverse individuals and groups across separate settings working at different times, the avant-garde did not wholly buy into the crude dichotomy dividing it from the mainstream. For some, *commercialism*, not filmmaking industries per se, whose resources and employment benefited many avant-garde artists, comprised their target of scorn. The European avant-garde worked with mainstream industries in mutually beneficial ways: the former needed the latter’s resources and technologies, while industries depended on the avant-garde’s innovative discoveries. For example, the most common avant-garde break from the normative frameworks of commercial cinema was a disavowal of plots progressed in clear, linear narratives. But some of the hallmarks of the avant-garde, like anti-narrative abstraction and poetic symbolism,

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 233.

contributed to many now-classic examples of art cinema.¹¹⁰ The composite avant-garde movement had one foot in and one foot out of industry.

In time, some urban moviegoers and film theorists wondered if there was something to be had in this position—a compromise between the narrative-based cinema that studios churned out for maximum profit and the counter-culture disruption of avant-garde experiments. By the 1920s films like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1920) stood as exemplar cases of this intermediate cinema that contained an air of seriousness and stylistic adventure but embodied the narrative conventions of commercial cinema more than the formal abstraction of the avant-garde. This form was acknowledged at the time by critics but not marked as a separate body of film until much later. French film theorist Germaine Dulac was among the first to speak of the potential for this intermediate cinema to become its own institution that would offer an alternative to purely commercial movies. She defined “art film neither as a quality nor as a genre (filmed theater adaptation), but as a category of film ‘that want to be commercial but not enough to pander to nervous ignorants’.”¹¹¹ By this Dulac suggested a distilling of two related threads of commercial filmmaking: art film should seek more integration into mainstream culture than its avant-garde forbearers had, but not at the expense of its aesthetic and narrative complexities necessary to differentiate it. The goal was not to alienate middle-class leisure-seekers but to coax them into an appreciation for alternate methods of filmmaking. Art film wanted greater institutionalization into commercial culture precisely in order to bring audiences in contact “with works it would otherwise not tolerate in other theatres.”¹¹² An entire infrastructure would later emerge based on this proposed compromise between avant-garde disruption and commercial

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 41.

¹¹¹ Andras Balint Kovacs, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 23.

¹¹² Germaine Dulac, quoted in Kovacs, *Screening Modernism*, 23.

integration, as “distributors and exhibitors realized that the contradiction between the industrial character of the cinema and the artistic use of this industry could be resolved by a special institutional network that gathers and concentrates paying audiences for a specific kind of cinema.” This cinema would find its niche among urban, educated clientele.¹¹³

On the other side of the pond, Jan-Christopher Horak accounts for an American avant-garde between 1919 and 1945. This avant-garde, emerging as a major movement later than its European counterpart, concretized only when budding film studios established a dominant method of moviemaking in the mid-1910s, which for Hollywood tended to embody cause-and-effect logics, continuity editing, and self-contained narratives with satisfying resolutions. Avant-garde filmmakers formed film clubs and societies to produce and exhibit their own films out of passion for the formal and aesthetic possibilities of the form. Unlike the American independent filmmakers of the 1950s who sought ways to professionalize their crafts autonomously, these earlier avant-gardists “viewed themselves as cineastes, as lovers of cinema, as ‘amateurs’ willing to work in any arena furthering the cause of film art” and thus were highly invested in cultivating “structures for distribution and exhibition” for their work.¹¹⁴ According to Horak, the first serious mention of what we today would call art houses appeared in 1922 in the magazine *Exceptional Photoplays*, a publication of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, which foresaw the potential for alternative exhibition sites catered to the avant-garde. The article suggests that “showing experimental pictures in a special theatre or special theatres” would necessarily inspire would-be filmmakers to attempt avant-garde work.¹¹⁵ Sporadic film clubs and

¹¹³ Kovacs, *Screening Modernism*, 24.

¹¹⁴ Jan-Christopher Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 15.

¹¹⁵ O. Spearing, “A Valuable Service,” *Exceptional Photoplays* 2 (March 1922), quoted in Horak, *Lovers of Cinema*, 20.

societies trading in ethnic cinema, newsreel presentations, and private film screenings helped promote this nascent brand of art film culture during this time to a degree, but the “little cinema” movement offered the first organized, uniquely devoted alternative to mainstream cinemas.

Emerging in the mid-1920s, the little cinema movement served a small urban moviegoing public growing more discerning in its tastes for film. These cinemas sprang up in large US cities (the majority in New York) and were designed as intimate spaces for the thoughtful appreciation of film and theater. Tony Guzman’s research into little cinemas describes them as a “movement [that] rejected Hollywood’s formula of a disposable, mass-produced and impersonal cinema of entertainment designed to appeal to the broadest possible audience in favor of a personal cinema that sought to explore the boundaries of film art.”¹¹⁶ American avant-garde and unconventional European titles screened in little cinemas regularly, congealing the two types of films as distinct from classical, narrative Hollywood cinema. Highly educated, often wealthy urban moviegoers valued these “more artistic” movies in contrast to what they viewed as the vulgar or simplistic American mainstream cinema. The first theatre to adopt regular art film programming was the Cameo Theatre near Broadway in New York, leased by an organization called the International Film Arts Guild in 1926. Symon Gould, the Guild’s leader, dubbed the Cameo “The Salon of the Cinema” in its promotional materials. The theatre found success showing revivals of American films but also imported European movies—the first antecedents of what would become a swarm of foreign-language imports into American theatres in later decades.

These foreign films proved valuable not just to audiences demanding different content but to the growth of an alternative cinematic structure. Mike Budd writes that a film like *Caligari*, which showed in large palaces, only became an international hit when it screened

¹¹⁶ Guzman, “The Little Theatre Movement,” 261.

extensively in little cinemas several years after its release in 1920, “demonstrating that certain films found their niche within the industrial organization of the art cinema.”¹¹⁷ In other words an infrastructure of exhibition venues catering to prestige was instrumental in generating the success of art films—perhaps more so than the films themselves. The success of films like *Caligari* in little cinemas fueled desire among major studios to recruit films and filmmakers from Europe, marking not the last time that art cinemas and major commercial enterprises worked in synergistic ways. But the studios’ gusto for European films was scattershot at best. These films were generally seen as box office risks compared to bankable studio system fare. Little cinemas, working with a small number of independent distributors and kept afloat by the sheer entrepreneurial spirit of figures like Gould at the Cameo, became crucial exhibition sites for films but remained well outside of Hollywood.

Equally as important as the films that little cinemas screened was the atmosphere they created for audiences. Newspaper and industry reports from the 1920s describe efforts by little cinema proprietors to cultivate elegant experiences for patrons, moving away from the noisy and crowded ambiance common at large movie palaces or nickelodeon cinemas. Guests enjoyed coffee and cigarettes in plush lounges and found settings congenial to dignified post-show discussions. Talking or moving about during films was discouraged, rendered distracting from the purist intellectual engagement with the screen. Small children were frequently banned from little cinemas entirely. An aura of undisturbed focus on the film became paramount for little cinema operators whose clientele demanded a sophisticated experience at the movies. “Nothing was to come between the viewers and their films, neither the dead hand of the theatrical past, nor the architectural distraction of the movie palace such as twinkling lights resembling stars in the

¹¹⁷ Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 47.

ceiling, nor fellow cinephiles.”¹¹⁸ Many little cinemas required ticket-buyers to become members, which helped cinemas pitch themselves as exclusive havens for the elite moviegoer. Such practices prefigure the cultural taste formations for audiences that would later emerge in the postwar efflorescence of art house theaters.

Little cinemas as such enjoyed only a brief run. Operating with low overhead and geared toward a niche intelligentsia crowd, they never became giant profit-makers or widely recognizable cultural phenomena outside of urban scenes. When audiences caught word of new sound technologies in the larger movie palaces near the end of the 1920s, their interest quickly waned in the quirky houses showing silent foreign films. Still, the little cinema movement made “American dissatisfactions with Hollywood and exhibition circumstances of 1920 and 1930s”¹¹⁹ apparent and anticipated postwar demand for an entire infrastructure—theaters, critical movements, journals—to cultivate alternative cinema-going in the United States.

This alternative infrastructure had another important forebearer in institutions and societies promoting films as works of art to be taken seriously. Haidee Wasson’s study of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA’s) Film Program begun in 1935 details the museum’s initiative to transform films “from ephemeral entertainment to enduring cultural monument”¹²⁰ by exhibiting them in a stable museological space or disseminating them nationally with the MOMA seal of approval. Previously there existed only haphazard attempts to preserve films beyond their brief commercial lives, and the Film Library emerged before core structures of art film circuits—theaters, festivals, clubs—concretized in the country. The Film Program stored

¹¹⁸ Anne Morey, *Hollywood Outsiders: The Adaptation of the Film Industry, 1913-1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 242.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹²⁰ Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

movies as an object worthy of formal analysis and historical consequence. It also took up preserving production materials, film publications, and exhibition materials—a sign that the discourses informing films were key for understanding wider mechanisms of this art form “with a history that matters to its public in a differentiated field of cultural practice.”¹²¹ The institutionalization of cinema at MOMA did not assume a single set of textual features, national origins (though the Euro-American canon was favored), auteur directors, or relational status to major industries: “Self-consciously artistic European films were programmed with select literary adaptations as well as bawdy populist fare.”¹²² While not articulating a simple or necessarily coherent body of film as art cinema, MOMA’s institutionalizing efforts were among the first significant, national, and lasting endorsements of cinema as an art form.

Concurrent to the work of MOMA to set down a cultural foothold for cinema as art, private film societies, ethnic cinemas, and newsreel cinemas around the country contributed in more scattershot fashion to alternative exhibition forms and the viability of a future art cinema market. As mentioned via Horak earlier, avant-gardists in the United States had formed a select few cinema clubs as far back as the 1920s in resistance to commercial production values and exhibition venues. Many of these clubs screened experimental works from around the world or workshopped their own avant-garde filmmaking. Other groups organized themselves out of a desire to screen artistic films that larger cinemas neglected. Still other groups of amateur cinematographers formed clubs for the sheer enjoyment of producing and viewing their own moving pictures. The Amateur Cinema League, to take one example, was founded in New York in 1926 as a non-commercial organization but opened local chapters across the country. Members helped each other master cinematography and “photoplay” writing, and even published

¹²¹ Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 5.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 17.

a monthly magazine, *Movie Makers*, for its thousands of amateur filmmaker subscribers.¹²³ Other film societies with more overt political agendas sprang up too. In 1930 arose the Workers Film and Photo League, an organization allied with the Community Party, USA, which set up national distribution networks for 16mm prints of Soviet features, left-wing newsreels, and avant-garde films considered at odds with mainstream capitalism. These collective efforts were “instrumental in developing an audience for art films.”¹²⁴

Ethnic theatres and newsreel theatres also became important urban gathering points for audiences seeking foreign films or non-fiction and documentary cinema. Foreign film distributors leaned heavily on ethnic theatres in large cities throughout the 1910s and 20s; they became even more popular after the advent of sound projection and the ability for German, Italian, Greek, and other immigrant populations to hear their native languages rather than just read subtitles. These cinemas, numbering approximately 500 during the 1930s, helped keep the distribution lines for foreign films to the United States active, though research by Douglas Gomery indicates that ethnic cinemas aimed at immigrant diaspora audiences were much more successful than foreign-language theatres outside of ethnic neighborhoods, suggesting that the appeal of foreign films to urban audiences before the war was limited.¹²⁵ Newsreel cinemas, which screened news programs and shorts in smaller settings, were another staple, though mainly in New York. One of the largest newsreel chains in the city, Trans-Lux, actively catered to high-class clientele who were curious to see footage about different world cultures. (They also didn't shy away from salacious celebrity gossip stories or disaster footage.) Noteworthy about Trans-Lux newsreel theaters was the importance they placed on creating a refined atmosphere for

¹²³ Alan D. Kattelle, “The Amateur Cinema League and Its Films,” *Film History* 15, no. 2 (June 2003): 238–51.

¹²⁴ Horak, *Lovers of Cinema*, 25.

¹²⁵ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 172-175.

filmgoing. Reviews from the time rave over their theatres' ultra-modern design and elegant decoration. The chain was among the first to install rear-screen projection, spacious leather seats, and air conditioning, lending newsreel theatres a sophisticated touch.¹²⁶

All three of these alternative models—private film clubs, ethnic theatres, and newsreel theatres—reflect iterations of how exhibitors diversified screen programming before World War II. In some of these cases such venues catered to distinction or elements of cosmopolitan voyeurism into foreign destinations. In other cases such as ethnic theatres, these values were secondary to filling a market demand from immigrant populations. While largely concentrated in New York and a few other urban markets, “these nonmainstream exhibition sites...laid the groundwork for the growing association between cinema, art, and high culture. Art house operators used and transformed the ideas and the frameworks established by these models to find space for themselves within the competitive market of film exhibition in the late 1940s”¹²⁷ in a more widespread fashion.

2.1.2 *The Art House Rises*

If efforts like those of MOMA in the 1930s made the case for film's status as art, and if smaller, diverse venues for moving-picture consumption suggested the viability of alternative types of theatre-going, subsequent developments accelerated a new commercial market for the exhibition of films flagged as artistic or sophisticated. Scholars widely agree that the high point for art house theatres in the United States occurred from the late 1940s through the early 60s, a period that saw the ascension of alternative or art film culture on many fronts. According to a

¹²⁶ Herbert Scherer, “Marquee on Main Street Jack Liebenberg’s Movie Theaters: 1928-1941,” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 1 (1986): 62.

¹²⁷ Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 61.

January 1952 edition of *Nation's Business*, the number of art theatres in the country doubled to 470 between 1950 and 1952, while an additional 1,500 theatres “had a policy of booking ‘art’ pictures.”¹²⁸ Crucially this surge of theatres took place outside of New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, hitherto the central markets for art film. American cities like Seattle, Denver, Boston, Washington, D.C., and San Diego, among others, all opened art houses in the 1950s, and scores of others shifted their operations from second-run or repertory to art film programming. Gomery spotlights one such theatre, Chicago’s Esquire Cinema, which devoted itself to “a combination of Hollywood sophistication and foreign fare” starting in 1949. The Esquire began mailing fancy announcements to its regular customers and hired clean-cut college students as ushers and dressed them in simple tan uniforms to promote an air of elegance as part of this rebranding. It also erected an art gallery off its mezzanine and advertised its films not with garish posters but with a simple card announcing the title and stars of the feature. By the mid-1950s the Esquire was booming and influencing other proprietors to switch over to an art house model.¹²⁹ Across the country, independent and small-chain operators decided it was worth it to rebrand into cinemas devoted to screening films that only ten years ago would have been relegated to the most niche cinema in Manhattan. This increase in theatres showing art films on a full- or part-time basis marked a “distinct change in motion picture appetites in America”¹³⁰ that tapped into what *Variety* dubbed the “the lost audience”—wide swaths of Americans “who read good books and magazines, who attend lectures and concerts, who are politically and socially aware and alert, [and who have been] literally driven out of the motion picture theatre by the industry’s insistence at aiming most of its product at the lowest level.”¹³¹

¹²⁸ Ibid., 65.

¹²⁹ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 185-186.

¹³⁰ Twomey, “Some Considerations,” 240.

¹³¹ Alfred Starr, “The Lost Audience Is Still Lost,” *Variety*, January 6, 1954, 61.

Why did art houses take off at this time after decades of dormancy? It is worth recalling both the industrial-financial and social-cultural contexts that catalyzed the growth of smaller theatres seeking the “lost audience,” since exhibitor demand for cheaper films was just as important as audience interest in certain films. In a 1956 article John Twomey examines the rising interest among American cinema-goers for “more artistic motion pictures” in the decade following World War II.¹³² Noting that 226 theatres were devoted full-time to showing foreign, repertory, documentary, or independent films, and another 400 did so on a part-time basis, Twomey sought to understand how, during Hollywood’s greatest economic crisis, art-film or “specialty” cinemas were sprouting up across the country. Circumstances in the United States certainly didn’t seem amenable to such an upswing. Exhibitors everywhere were reeling from a seismic US Supreme Court case, the *Paramount* decision, that shook up business as usual in Hollywood. A series of eight antitrust actions brought against the major movie studios by the Department of Justice throughout the 1930s and 40s, the 1948 *Paramount* decision effectively forced the then-Big 5 studios (Paramount, MGM-Loews, RKO, 20th Century-Fox, and Warner Bros.) to divest themselves of the theatre chains they owned or had affiliations with. As I mentioned in my introductory chapter, since the consolidation of major Hollywood studio control in the 1920s and a series of collusive actions on their part, the Big Five studios had gradually built a monopolistic hold on feature film production, distribution, and exhibition in the country. This stranglehold crucially included ownership of the most lucrative theatres in the best markets and the ability to impose favorable licensing terms onto exhibitors they did not own. According to Thomas Schatz, in 1940 the Big Five outright owned or held controlling interest in approximately 2,600 of the nation’s 17,500 theatres—a mere 15% of the total nationwide yet

¹³² Twomey, “Some Considerations.”

over 80% of first-run theatres in major urban markets where the lion's share of profits lay.¹³³ But after the *Paramount* decision, when studios had to sell many of their domestic circuits (though not their vast international holdings in Canada, South American, Europe and elsewhere),¹³⁴ scores of successor corporation chains or individual independent cinemas emerged. Many of these cinemas became subsequent-run theatres for a time. The headline here is that hundreds of exhibitors were now out from under the wing of Hollywood studios and free, in theory, to program content that their studio-owners wouldn't have before divestiture.

The immediate result of the *Paramount* decision was confusion for the entire industry. Subsequent court decisions and appeals regarding the antitrust strictures disrupted the assembly-line efficiency of Hollywood. Some forty million fewer people attended commercial cinemas between 1948 and 1952, a figure compounded by the advent of television and its rising place in middle-class households.¹³⁵ To cut costs after losing their theatre holdings, major studios dialed back their outputs of cheaper B movies, shorts, cartoons, and newsreels in favor of fewer, more expensive A features. This increased per-film production costs and compelled studios to seek more lucrative distribution deals for their biggest films. As a result, mainstream studio films became more expensive to rent and thus difficult for theatres to book, creating two lasting effects: 1) Smaller independent theatres, some of them former studio-affiliated theatres, turned to foreign distributors, in ascendance since the end of World War II, for more of their programming; and 2) the studios' new budget shortfall compelled them to make up for losses by turning to smaller theatres and markets to exhibit their less expensive products. As a

¹³³ Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 17.

¹³⁴ Melnick, "Hollywood Embassies," 154.

¹³⁵ *The Film Daily Year Book* (New York: The Film Daily, 1955), 141, quoted in Twomey, "Some Considerations," 240.

consequence, “alternative films such as independent US films, classic reissues, and foreign films became more accessible, making them popular with smaller theatre operators.”¹³⁶

World War II and its aftermath also complicated the situation for major Hollywood exhibitors in ways that aided smaller theatres. The years following the liberation of Europe from Nazi Germany saw concerted efforts among European nations to rebuild their national infrastructures and economies. Many countries balked at the cost of importing US films at a time when basic services went wanting. In response such nations took steps to bolster their own film economies by enacting quota laws and taxes to stem the flow of Hollywood films. These measures, some of which imposed steep customs duties on imported films, compelled US producers to raise their film rental prices domestically and to lower their production budgets and overall output. Despite efforts by the Motion Picture Export Association to combat such restrictive trade policies, Hollywood took a hit from its foreign market loss and again turned to smaller domestic theatres to make up for it.¹³⁷ The turmoil generated by *Paramount* thus had a sum positive effect on smaller cinemas: with major studios devoid of their usual clout to stipulate which films screened in their theatres and under what circumstances through chokehold policies like block-booking, small theatres saw their relevance grow.¹³⁸ There was now a sizable number of exhibitors, and not just in New York, in a position to distinguish themselves within the market from the larger mainstream theatres.

Such industrial conditions were only one reason for the ascension of alternative exhibitors after the war. Immigration played a large part too. Lauren Rabinovitz has written of

¹³⁶ Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 70.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹³⁸ Block-booking was a popular practice in which studios sold several films as a unit to exhibitors, forcing theatres that desired one particular film—usually a star vehicle—to purchase several others—usually lower-grade product—as a bundle.

the rise of experimental and independent film cultures in the United States in the postwar period, spurred by the exodus of European artists and filmmakers to the country in the years surrounding the war. An influx of immigrant or refugee creatives, many of them abstract or expressionist artists, found work in or helped found the nation's emergent grid of film institutions, such as Hollywood studios, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Film Institute of the City College of New York. Figures like German animator Oskar Fischinger and abstract painter-animator Hans Richter caused a stir in urban-artistic circles for their abstract animated films, for example. In this milieu, museums and colleges began to offer film appreciation or independent filmmaking classes to satisfy demand among curious moviegoers or nascent filmmakers for cinema opposed to the Classical Hollywood narrative form that had been cemented in the country for the last thirty years. In addition, the prevalence of documentary footage during World War II that screened extensively in theatres as newsreels, not to mention the increased circulation of low-cost technologies like 16mm film cameras, fostered interest among cineastes and filmmakers for the aesthetic and social capacities of nonfiction and experimental film.

These emerging interests frequently took shape on a grassroots level in the form of private film societies or clubs, which exploded in number after the war. Whereas only a handful of film societies had operated across the United States prior to 1939, by 1949 more than 200 film societies served approximately 100,000 members.¹³⁹ The most renowned postwar film society, Cinema 16 was founded in New York in 1948 by Amos and Marcia Vogel, who were inspired to start their club in part by their regular trips to MOMA's Film Program screenings. Sensing that a wider interest in films of a certain artistic panache was waiting to be tapped into, the Vogels set up their nonprofit society with the intent to screen a wide range of independent, documentary, or

¹³⁹ Lauren Rabinovitz, "Experimental and Avant-Garde Cinema in the 1940s," in *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, ed. Thomas Schatz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 447-448.

experimental films, renting out auditorium space in several sites across Manhattan for monthly screenings for its thousands of dues-paying members. “Nearly every type of film other than first-run, big-studio Hollywood features and newsreels was regularly exhibited,”¹⁴⁰ and the film group soon developed a reputation for publishing program notes on films, organizing university courses, and distributing foreign and documentary cinema, contributing to an “increased intellectual interest in film” generally.¹⁴¹ Cinema 16 ended in 1963, the victim of rising operational costs and the siphoning of members by television, new university film courses, and the art houses that it helped create an audience for. But the club became “a crucial model for a nationwide network of smaller film societies,” made great strides toward popularizing avant-garde or aesthetically provocative films for urban audiences, and furthered general appetites for “artistic” movies within and outside of New York.¹⁴²

While the aforementioned film-cultural developments had an acute impact on appetites for cinema outside of the mainstream among North Americans in the late 1940s and early 1950s, one particular subset of screen content—foreign-language films—had an outsized effect on the rise of art houses. Small exhibitor demands for screen content coupled with American interest in filmmaking apart from Hollywood gave “foreign films...new status in a volatile film market” and contributed to what Tino Balio dubs the “foreign film renaissance” in American cinemas.¹⁴³ Balio’s account of this postwar development begins with the surprise American success of Italian director Roberto Rossellini’s *Open City* in 1946, the first in a long line of European (and in fewer cases, Japanese) films that found their way into art house cinemas and whetted US appetites for

¹⁴⁰ Scott MacDonald, *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 8.

¹⁴¹ Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 60-61.

¹⁴² MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 1.

¹⁴³ Lane, “Critical and Cultural,” 51; Tino Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946-1973* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

films deemed innovative, mature, or exotic. Rossellini's picture, a hallmark of Italian neorealism, which favored on-location shooting, non-professional actors, and narratives built around precarious material conditions, was miles away from the glamour of Hollywood studio filmmaking. The film duly impressed top-drawer film critics like Bosley Crowther at the *New York Times*, whose opinion could decide whether a film languished in New York for a few weeks or spread outward to other cities. In general release, *Open City* ended up grossing a reputed \$5 million at the US box office, a record for a foreign film at the time.¹⁴⁴

The market for foreign-language films burst open after the success of *Open City*. New York was far and away its epicenter, a hive of independent distributors who in some cases had been importing films since the 1930s, and in other cases comprised new companies that sensed the nascent demand for foreign fare. Ilya Lopert, a veteran of MGM's foreign distribution wing, formed his own Lopert Pictures in 1946 and went to work distributing and producing European classics throughout the 1950s and 60s. Janus Films, a distributor of specialty cinema still in operation today, was founded in 1956 by two exhibition proprietors. Bidding wars broke out among US distributors looking for the next art house hit. Scouts scoured the film festival circuit, then on the ascent, to ink fresh deals with European talent.¹⁴⁵ Names of filmmakers like Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut, and Akira Kurosawa broke out across art house screens in the ensuing years, becoming fixtures on marquees. Hollywood would of course get in on the action by coaxing some of these international stars to make studio movies in the United States.

For filmgoers, foreign films represented an alternative cultural product to generate consumer distinction. The end of World War II opened transatlantic cultural trade between North

¹⁴⁴ Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance*, 3.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 83-85.

America and Europe in ways that expanded discourses about cinema as an art, which fed into these appeals of distinction. In the years following the war, French critics associated with the *Cahiers du Cinema* promoted films as subjective expressions of individuality in attempts to legitimize select films as art, distinguishing all films from the persistent taint of technology and commercialism, and to break from the literary roots of popular French film. This “birth of the auteur” period became the analytical touchstone for art film discourse. Auteurist critics claimed that a director’s aesthetic predilections and thematic worldview elevated films from mere entertainment to artistic expression, and contributed to the “psychological emphasis” of art cinema and its stylistic tendency to violate “real time” (a slowness of pace rooted in long takes, or fast cuts or jump cuts) and express the subjectivities of characters.¹⁴⁶ This foregrounded sense of authorship (and individualism) facilitated a “great, white, Euro-American genius male” paradigm (with a spattering of Japanese auteurs) that associated the exceptional, visionary director with art cinema. Auteurism became a shorthand to explain directors whose individuality transcended the production confines of major studios, adding more appeal for consumers seeking films from “maverick” or “genius” individuals who stood apart from the system. The heroes of the art house like Vittorio De Sica and Ingmar Bergman were celebrated by critics as vanguards for bold and daring cinema. Select urban audiences valued these films for the intellectual distinction they conferred on products relative to a mainstream industrial complex that in the 1950s was still reeling from the collapse of the classical studio system.

The renaissance that *Open City* ushered in helped accelerate and also hugely benefitted from the rise of the American art house. Yet Balio underscores that while surprise successes like Rossellini’s film and headstrong auteurs made it *possible* for an art house market to flourish, the

¹⁴⁶ Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle*, 11.

expansion of that market had more to do with “harsh economic realities” among exhibitors that I documented previously. In the 1950s many small theatres that had depended on Hollywood B-movies, shorts, cartoon, and newsreels transformed into art houses out of necessity when these distribution streams dried up in the wake of the *Paramount* decision. Foreign films represented a lifeline to hundreds of theatres in need of product to exhibit. Some movie theatres proved themselves more than willing to negotiate their own purist identities for the sake of business. As the novelty of foreign-language dialogue and unconventional film forms began to wear off by the mid-1960s, many art house exhibitors proved just how willing they were.

2.1.3 *Sex Sells*

A generous portion of art film audiences in the postwar boom were not necessarily shopping around for sophisticated cinematic experiences to elevate their cultural standing. Many art film promoters and distributors catered to the more licentious elements of a film’s content in attempts to lure audiences with the promise of sex or nudity. The dual threads of exploitation and quality have often intertwined in the art house theatre via foreign films. Peter Lev argues that starting in the mid-1950s “explicit sexuality became expected in foreign films to such an extent that ‘foreign film,’ ‘art film,’ ‘adult film,’ and ‘sex film’ were for several years almost synonymous.”¹⁴⁷ To what degree audiences ventured into art houses because they craved lurid subject matter demands a digression that accounts for the years between 1957-1973, or a period that Daniel Metz writes is “distinguished by its convergence of practices related to prestigious and prurient signs, merging art and sex in ways unique to the era.”¹⁴⁸ Metz argues that the nation’s art houses gradually began to transform from theatres screening prestige European films

¹⁴⁷ Lev, *The Euro-American Cinema*, 13.

¹⁴⁸ Metz, “Prestige,” 3.

with sexually suggestive material (1957-1962), to more mixed-programming houses that straddled the line between high-art films and “nudies” (1960-1965), and finally to outright sexploitation theatres (1964-1972) that abandoned all pretense to prestige. When the novelty of art houses began to decline in the late 1950s, and the shock appeal of Italian Neorealism, so formative for the rise in international art cinema, started to wane, many art houses needed something new to generate business. Programmers found that hawking the sexual content of European films brought in crowds. Though this period is often associated in the popular imagination with the high-art intellectualism of the French New Wave, Metz shows that these artistically daring films only “achieved success by marketing simultaneously to the art and the sex interests,” and that foreign films that were popular in the US “tended to feature sexual themes.”¹⁴⁹ Metz highlights movies like ...*And God Created Woman* (1956, Roger Vadim), *Blow-Up* (1966, Michelangelo Antonioni), and *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1967, Vilgot Sjöman) as examples of European product that tilted art cinemas towards venues accommodating to prurient sex. ... *And God Created Woman*, showcasing soon-to-be international sex starlet Brigitte Bardot in a series of pearl-clutching poses, was especially impactful as the highest-grossing foreign film in the US since the silent era.¹⁵⁰ “Bardot’s epochal unveiling,” writes Thomas Doherty, “proved the market for foreign art was not limited to eggheads,”¹⁵¹ a sentiment echoed by the success of “nудie” films that often showed in art house cinemas.

“Nudies” delivered what so many other films would not: flat-out nudity, albeit with a veneer of respectability. They became a staple of art houses in the 1960s as these theaters embraced sexploitation programming, or “movies that focused on nudity, sexual situations, and

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 73.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 66.

¹⁵¹ Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 32.

simulated (i.e., nonexplicit) sex acts, designed for titillation and entertainment.”¹⁵² Forerunners like Russ Meyer’s *The Immortal Mr. Teas* (1959), in which an awkward salesman gains the magic ability to see through women’s clothes, was an art house hit, proving to Meyer that audiences wanted more than pretentious European movies “in which there’s a lot of promise [of sex or nudity] but never any real fulfillment.”¹⁵³ These films managed to fit within an art house ethos by “using high-cultural markers like [signifiers of European sophistication or coolness]. prestige advertisement, and high-art aesthetics,”¹⁵⁴ providing modicums of moral cover under the sheen of respectability. That said, it didn’t take long for art houses to flip from sexually suggestive films to outright pornographic ones, ending the golden era of art houses as institutions associated primarily with upscale style. This came about in large part thanks to incremental changes to US censorship laws across the 1960s that enabled “obscene” films to emerge from underground and play in public cinemas—what’s been called the decade’s “liberalization of the screen.”¹⁵⁵ After roughly two decades of wildly inconsistent federal and state court rulings on the relationship between free speech and obscenity, in 1968 the Motion Picture Association of America, the film industry’s governing body responsible for upholding the Production Code, abandoned its decades-old censorship system and replaced it with a voluntary ratings system based on a viewer’s age. While many theatres still flinched at exhibiting “adult” or “obscene” movies, the advent of the ratings system effectively opened the theatre doors to the “porno chic” era of film exhibition. As Metz points out, the pornographic classic *Deep Throat* (1972), “a film about a woman who can only achieve an orgasm through performing immersive fellatio, opened

¹⁵² Schaefer, “*Bold! Daring!*”, 338.

¹⁵³ Kenneth Turan and Stephen F. Zito, “Uncertain Innocence, Part One,” *The Very Breast of Russ Meyer*, ed. Paul A. Woods (London: Plexus Books, 2004), 16.

¹⁵⁴ Metz, “Prestige,” 80.

¹⁵⁵ Elena Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 27.

at the Globe Theatre [in New York], the same venue that premiered the Italian Neo-Realist classics *Open City* and *The Bicycle Thief* (1949) in the late 1940s.”¹⁵⁶ The great art house epoch had come to a red-cheeked finale after its dressed-up sashay into film culture. Jack Stevenson sums up the situation well in writing that “In the early 1970s, many a failing art house began to book porn, bringing a snicker to the lips of those who had always seen a dubious double message in the phrase ‘art cinema.’ Grindhouse—porn being a form of it—had moved in to possess the corpse of arthouse, the final and most ironic disfigurement of its precious memory.”¹⁵⁷

2.1.4 *Trouble Ahead*

The import of foreign films onto North American screens led to a relative boom for art houses from the immediate postwar era through the 1960s. By the 1980s, however, the commercial art house (those that had not “gone grind”) fell on hard times. The popularization of VCRs and cable television had a lot to do with this, as casual moviegoers could increasingly get their movies at home. The mainstreaming of more violent or sexually graphic subject matter as a result of the end of the Production Code’s influence on studio-made films also diluted the taboo appeal of independent theatres. On the exhibition side, many aging, single-screen art houses built in the 1920s needed expensive repairs amidst the urban decay that befell numerous large US cities in the 1980s. Those theatres that could afford repairs had to contend with skyrocketing real estate prices and growing competition from multiplex exhibitors in the nation’s suburbs and shopping malls. In contrast to the postwar zeitgeist that received with open arms the potentials of experimental or alternative cinema, the 1980s largely lacked an industrial infrastructure for

¹⁵⁶ Metz, “Prestige,” 95.

¹⁵⁷ Jack Stevenson, “Grindhouse and Beyond,” *From the Arthouse to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transcendence in Cinema’s First Century*, eds. J. Cline and R.G. Weiner (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 205-206.

independent or speciality film at a time when blockbuster franchises and digital spectacles began to dominate studio releases. The sum result for art houses was not good. Several prominent small cinemas in New York, the bastion for alternative theatres, closed their doors during the 80s, reflective of national trends. A 1987 *Newsweek* article reported that revival houses, especially, were going bust around the country.¹⁵⁸ *The New York Times* lamented the closures (or conversions) of art houses like The Bleecker Street Cinema, The Cinema Studio, and the Embassy, Regency, Metro, Thalia, and New Yorker theatres in the late 80s, all of them “[succumbing] to a combination of real-estate pressures, the growing popularity of videocassettes and the desire of large theater chains to convert single-screen "art" or "revival" theaters into more profitable multi-screen complexes showing new Hollywood movies.”¹⁵⁹

Exhibitors specializing in foreign or independent films approached the new century with trepidation yet not without glimmers of hope. An optimistic view might say that art house found new purpose tied to developments within the independent film sector, proving itself a flexible institution capable of adjusting to the shifts of consumer tastes. New low-cost digital technologies emerging during the 1980s and 1990s allowed budding filmmakers to shoot and edit their work outside of major industries at an unprecedented rate, creating scores of new media to play in small theatres for limited audiences. Ascending studio subsidiaries to distribute so-called independent film, which I break down more in my next chapter, also lent valuable new circulation streams to these artists on the fringes of the cinema market. But twenty years of consolidation among the largest exhibitor companies put the squeeze on smaller exhibitors who couldn't compete on the same terms. In a 2001 article named “The Disappearing Movie House,” proprietor Rick Winston, co-owner of the one-screen Savoy Theatre in Montpelier, Vermont,

¹⁵⁸ Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 75.

¹⁵⁹ Andrew L. Yarrow, “Another Prized Theatre for Art Films is Closing,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 1990.

bemoaned how the consolidation of more screens under fewer companies created a market averse to the risk-taking necessary to produce art house hits. Mini-majors like Miramax, which rose to prominence in the early 1990s, now had the industrial clout to get their films shown in any number of multiplex theatre chains, which can shift titles around from large to small houses depending on a film's performance. Small theatres, lacking this screen space, lost out on many lucrative films because distributors preferred business with the large chains—even for films considered art house fare. For Winston, only “scrappy and committed independent distributors” were willing in this environment to invest in obscure or specialty pictures, an investment that had to be equaled by the passion and steadfastness of independent exhibitors devoted to “challenging foreign and American films.”¹⁶⁰

Though repertory film houses and deteriorating single-screen art houses suffered at this time, other exhibitors of independent or specialty media organized themselves around new trends in exhibition. Some, like the Alamo Drafthouse and Landmark Theatre chains, expanded the number of their screens, echoing the practice of multiplexes. A handful of the most established art houses avoided closure by reorganizing themselves under nonprofit associations—the first suggestions of a widescale trend that picks up considerably in the current century, which I unpack later. But this quasi-revival was tenuous at best. The loss of campus film societies—a driving force of the initial art house boom—and the growth of at-home delivery mechanisms for films had an undeniably negative impact on specialty exhibitors. Douglas Gomery, writing in the 90s, went so far as to declare “the end of the art house” in his history of American exhibition.¹⁶¹ The art house did not die, of course—more accurate to say that it limped across the finish line of cinema's first 100 years. But the revolution in film production toward digital promised that

¹⁶⁰ Rick Winston, “The Disappearing Movie House,” *The American Prospect*, November 14, 2001.

¹⁶¹ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 195.

exhibitors would soon have to follow suit and transition to digital projection technologies, a daunting prospect for small theatres. Art houses would need to rethink their standard business model and philosophical mission if the sector wanted to prove itself an institution for the ages and not simply an exhibition trend lasting the better part of half a century.

In summation, the rise of art houses in the 1950s largely “grew out of certain conditions in US society and the film industry that encouraged some film exhibitors to seek alternatives to exhibition of conventional films,”¹⁶² along with consumer desire to differentiate their leisure experiences from the mainstream at a time when Transatlantic discourse fed appetites for provocative visionary filmmakers. Many art houses, however, showed a fickle commitment to refined experiences by flirting with or outright committing to lurid sex films as the decades wore on. Add onto this the rise of commercial multiplex cinemas and the effects of at-home entertainment options in the 1980s and 90s, and it’s clear that the future of art houses was an open question. What’s safe to say is that art houses over a few decades went from an east coast-centered smattering of cinemas, repertory theatres, museums, university cinemas, or film society screenings to a “more prolific, profitable, and organized circuit ... exhibiting a range of foreign art films as well as exploitation movies by foreign and domestic producers.”¹⁶³ In the postwar period, art houses staked out territory in the film-cultural imagination. Yet critic Arthur Murray lamented that the (largely urban) trend toward showing films of artistic merit had not translated across the nation more substantially: “Until we have art theatres in the Fargos as well as in New York and Pittsburgh the movement will never be built on a solid national foundation.”¹⁶⁴ Murray

¹⁶² Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 65.

¹⁶³ Andrews, “Art Cinema as Institution,” 6.

¹⁶⁴ Arthur Mayer, “Hollywood Verdict: Gilt but Not Guilty,” *Saturday Review*, October 31, 1953, 44-47, quoted in Twomey, “Some Considerations,” 247.

might take solace that art houses have never been the sole exhibition outlet for art films; a range of other models emerged in the twentieth century and sustain today.

2.2 *Other Models*

2.2.1 Film Festivals

Any survey of theatrical art cinema exhibition must account for the parallel role of film festivals, which rely on a different economic and organizational structure than movie theatres. Rather than pure distribution economics of runs-zones-clearances, they operate across global space economies of cities, countries, and regions, with festival promoters competing to secure advantageous spots in the calendar year and/or prime geographic “real estate.” Established festivals such as Cannes, Venice, and Toronto are entrenched as A-level events in the hierarchy of festivals, while other smaller or newer festivals vie for increasingly small windows of opportunity. Festivals also easily appeal to crowds with niche interests. Examples abound of documentary, animated, or horror-themed festivals, as well as festivals organized around race, nationality, gender or sexuality, or other identity-forming categories. In Montreal alone, the Montreal International Documentary Festival (RIDM), the International Festival of Films on Art (FIFA), le Festival du nouveau cinéma (FNC), the South Asian Film Festival, and the Fantasia Film Festival, which programs a wide selection of science fiction and horror films, are examples of the diverse interests that festivals court.

Both festivals and art houses reinforce to audiences that certain films deserve to be seen. Since the first festival, the Venice Film Festival, was held in 1932, festivals have functioned to initiate the process for generating distinction for movies that art houses then capitalize on and perpetuate in commercial release. Scholars have described the ritualistic performance that

festivals perform in transferring films to a higher level as cultural product by invoking Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital. Both Dina Iordanova's and Marijke de Valck's research into the spatio-temporal nature of festivals as "sites of passage" point out the added value they generate for films and audiences. Films traveling through festivals, "differentiated from other film practices, especially commercial film exhibition,"¹⁶⁵ acquire symbolic capital associated with "distinction" and "selection." The glamour of the biggest, most renowned festivals—from red carpets to star sightings to end-of-fest accolades—stamp films that circulate through them with a (symbolic) currency that only becomes fully (economically) realized when they proceed to other stages of their media lives, i.e., theatrical release. Film festivals have become "so important to the production, distribution, and consumption of many films that, without them, an entire network of practices, places, people, etc. would fall apart,"¹⁶⁶ among them, art houses. Whereas at-home media consumption options could threaten the appeal of theatre-going in general, de Valck hypothesizes that festivals have continued to thrive alongside conventional exhibition venues because they constitute a "liminal zone" of temporary exhibition that feeds into rather than competes with the theatrical complex. Adjusting this frame to art houses in particular, David Andrews reiterates the shared goal between festivals and art houses in their "reverential exhibition of art films," claiming that both forms of exhibition serve to install art cinema not as a category of formal features but as an institution in its own right through their "evaluative functions" based on distinction.¹⁶⁷

To Andrews's point, more than a few art houses partner with festivals to exhibit films or, going further, originate festivals themselves, weaving the festival form into the branding identity

¹⁶⁵ Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 127.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁶⁷ Andrews, "Art Cinema, Redux," 6.

of a theatre. For example, the Portland EcoFilm Festival was launched by the Hollywood Theatre in 2013 to showcase and support the eco-conscious lifestyles common to the Rose City. The festival's mission "to showcase the very best environmental films, help filmmakers by building support for their films and use the art of cinema to help inspire environmental advocacy,"¹⁶⁸ underscores how art houses can take proactive measures to address important issues while retaining the innate symbolic currency that de Valck sees in larger festivals. The Roxy Theatre in Missoula, Montana, a one-screen art house that closed down in 1994, only reopened in 2002 when the International Wildlife Film Festival (founded in 1977) purchased the building as its new headquarters. The festival's success subsequently allowed the Roxy to reopen as a full-time exhibitor in 2013. In this way festivals and major theatrical exhibition are intertwined for the mutual benefit of media deemed alternative or supportive of specific causes.

2.2.2 *Microcinemas and Pop-Up Cinemas*

Alternatives to art film exhibition have also arisen out of a perception among certain cineastes that art houses are no longer the subcultural enclaves for independent, experimental, or politically activated films (to the extent that they ever were). One example in this respect is the ephemeral exhibition of non-commercial films, known as the microcinema movement. Donna de Ville defines microcinemas as "small-scale, do-it-yourself (DIY) exhibition venues [that provide] noncommercial, nontheatrical options for exhibition by independent programmers and are often cultivated as alternatives to the well-established and economically hegemonic commercial movie industry."¹⁶⁹ Arising at first in the early 1990s at a time "ripe for DIY ethos" owing to emergent indie subcultures and an economic downturn across the United States,

¹⁶⁸ "Portland Eco Film Festival," The Hollywood Theatre.

¹⁶⁹ De Ville, "Persistent Transience," 105.

microcinemas are generally fixed-site, makeshift theatres in business for a few years, setting up shop in vacant spaces around a city or town, like cafes, bars, church basements, or empty warehouses. They are often organized by a handful of individuals or a local film society, operate with virtually no budget, and make little aspirations to profit. Films screened at microcinemas, frequently of the underground variety, usually have no distributor, so any income from screenings gets split between filmmakers and exhibitors. Spin-offs to microcinemas called pop-up cinemas, operating for individual screenings like traveling roadshows of early cinema, have also emerged, making ephemerality and transience the defining feature of the microcinema form. As an example, de Ville chronicles the touch-and-go lifespan of the Blue Sunshine microcinema on the third floor of a mixed-use building on St-Laurent street in Montreal from 2010 to 2012. The converted venue, named after an underground horror exploitation film (*Blue Sunshine*, dir. Jeff Lieberman, 1978), was denied the requisite city operating permit a week before its scheduled opening. Yet it managed to remain off the city's radar long enough to screen two years' worth of trash, avant-garde, art house, and music-related documentaries to loyal followers.¹⁷⁰

While an obvious alternative to mainstream theatre chains, microcinemas also position themselves as needed alternatives to art houses. De Ville perhaps hastily calls them a “post-art house alternative venue” whose practitioners see themselves as carriers of cultural exchanges and sociality that larger, commercial institutions—among them museums, universities, and art houses—no longer serve. Rebecca Alvin likewise argues that microcinemas in the 2000s filled an artistic-political void left by art houses since the 1980s owing to changing spectator habits and difficult distributor licensing circumstances for commercial exhibitors. She claims that demand for microcinemas arose because art houses have increasingly “intertwined mainstream and art-

¹⁷⁰ For fuller coverage of microcinemas generally and Montreal's history of them in particular, see Donna de Ville, “The Microcinema Movement and Montreal” (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2014).

house audiences” by exhibiting fewer small films for devoted film buffs in favor of “Indiewood” fare with crossover appeal. What gets lost, Alvin argues, is what she fondly remembers as the magic of discovering obscure films with likeminded cinephiles: “The sense of adventure and discovery has been diluted as films of broader appeal attract audiences less interested in the art of film and more interested in the trendiness of art cinema.”¹⁷¹ For Alvin, and others sharing this personal proposition, microcinemas make up this deficit by focusing on cult or independent films without the commercial pressures that have wrung art houses of their artistic or political dynamism. As informal spaces that often operate for short-term without licenses or regulations in appropriated or abandoned venues, microcinemas are light on infrastructure and more performative as counter-culture institutions in their ethos than fixed-site art houses. They are by design precarious ventures with limited cultural standing. For my purposes, microcinemas and their pop-up cousins help bring into relief the spectrum upon which art houses sit between commercialized theatres and the noncommercial impulse of ephemeral community exhibitors. As Alvin says of the relation between the two exhibition forms: “While the strategies of the art houses seem focused on bringing more people to their cinemas, the microcinema exhibitor has a different concern—the need for a subculture, for an alternative to the alternative.”¹⁷²

2.2.3 *Cable TV*

Paid cable television channels devoted to art or repertory films have been few and far between. For cineastes, the thought of commercial breaks interrupting a cherished movie is hard to swallow, as are the mutilated aspect ratios many films endure for television presentation. But some cable outlets have demonstrated television audience interest in movies usually reserved for

¹⁷¹ Alvin, “A Night at the Movies,” 4.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 7.

alternative cinemas. The trajectories of the two largest cable channels for classic or repertory movie-watching, staples of the art house, in the United States, Turner Classic Movies (TCM) and American Movie Classics (AMC), are instructive for how values of distinction and cinephilia have lived (or died) in the cable form.

TCM was launched by Time Warner in 1994 as a movie-oriented pay-TV network specializing in feature films from the vaults of major studios (mostly Warner Bros. and MGM, the latter of whose library Ted Turner, CEO of Time Warner, bought in 1985). The channel presents films released before the 1980s with an emphasis on Hollywood classics of the 1930s and 40s, but occasional programming allows for recent movies or uncovered gems. What endeared TCM to its early fans were its efforts to preserve a respectful treatment of films on a channel geared toward discerning cineastes. The network doesn't show commercials during features and only presents uncut versions of original theatrical releases. Jeff Gregor, general manager of TCM, says that the decision to shun profit-making ads produced short-term losses in revenue yet wielded long-term gains when devoted film fans formed ranks around a highly curated cable program that took film seriously.¹⁷³ TCM also installed film historian Robert Osbourne as its primetime feature host, who introduced films with remarks on their historical significance, authorial signatures, or aesthetic features, not unlike program notes disseminated in art houses. Osbourne, dressed in a suit and tie and speaking from a chic apartment set, also shared personal anecdotes about film history gleaned from his time as columnist for the *Hollywood Reporter*. A well-spoken, amiable conveyor of encyclopedic insights into classic Hollywood, Osbourne helped confirm TCM as the serious movie buff's cable enclave during this tenure on the network from 1994 to 2015.

¹⁷³ Tim Halloran, *Romancing the Brand: How Brands Create Strong, Intimate Relationships with Customers*, Chapter 6: Deepen the Connection (Jossey-Bass, 2013), n.p.

Even before but especially post-Osbourne, who anchored TCM around its television presentation structure, the network has evolved from a cable channel to a gold-plated “lifestyle brand” with “a wide assortment of branded objects and experiential brand activation.”¹⁷⁴ Some of these branding moves include TCM’s Classic Film Festival at Grauman’s Chinese Theatre and Grauman’s Egyptian Theatre, two prominent classical movie palaces on Hollywood Boulevard, as well as its partnership with Disney to offer screenings and events on the entertainment giant’s cruise liners. The network also maintains an official fan club, The Backlot, which provides members with behind-the-scenes specials and other perks. “Backlot” as a name signals insider-ness and reinforces that TCM retains its discursive constructions around distinction, its Disney affiliations notwithstanding. This extension of the TCM brand from television viewing to a range of other consumer activities amounts to a complex “exercise in taste-making” in which watching movies has become but one way to activate a wider TCM lifestyle built around cinephilia.¹⁷⁵

TCM’s only rival in the cable realm has been AMC, which dates back as a premium channel to 1984 when it focused on movies made before 1950. Like TCM, AMC originally aired films without commercial interruptions, edits, or colorizations, hoping to appeal to the same cineaste demographic that TCM would later lure. By 1989 AMC was a common channel in many American cable packages, earning praise for its programming of silent films and its film preservation efforts.¹⁷⁶ But AMC soon adopted a less hardline approach than TCM to film presentation that mimics uninterrupted theatrical presentation in the name of “serious” movie-watching. In 1998 the channel began running traditional advertising between features, and by

¹⁷⁴ Caetlin Benson-Allott, *The Stuff of Spectatorship: Material Cultures of Film and Television* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), 94-95.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Susan King, “Save That Movie!: After a Slow Start, AMC’s Film Preservation Festival Has Raised \$1.3 Million. The Fifth Gala Begins Tonight with ‘The Killers’,” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1997.

2001 the network went a step further by allowing commercials during movie telecasts—what it tried to pass off as “intermissions.”¹⁷⁷ This led gradually to an entire rebranding. AMC pivoted away from pre-1950s classics to movies from all eras, and eventually onto original television programming, including poorly received reality series. Described by the trades as a “moribund movie channel,” AMC took drastic action in the mid-2000s by greenlighting their first two scripted dramas, *Mad Men* (2007-2013) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2015), two shows with no connection whatsoever to films. The hard-right turn worked: both shows were verifiable hits and brought AMC back from the brink, albeit far from its roots. While movie broadcasts continue to be central to AMC programming, the network’s current presentation of films—replete with commercial breaks, dubbing of profanity, and time or content edits—aligns it much more with basic network telecasts than the prestige branding of TCM. Both cable channels, offering varying levels of distinction and cinephilia, rose to prominence just as new digital methods for consuming art or repertory films arrived at customers’ fingertips.

2.3.4 *Boutique Streamers*

Though Netflix and Amazon dominate the marquee of streaming platforms (more on this in my next chapter), online distributors of “quality,” “art,” or “independent” films offer other models of art or specialty film exhibition outside of the theatre. As highly curated alternatives to the major platforms, boutique streamers differentiate themselves by the film vaults they have access to, their particular generic slant, their models of subscriptions or access, and ancillary services. While there is lot of crossover between video-on-demand (VOD) streamers of art films, there are also interesting nuances. Some of the most encompassing platforms, such as Mubi and

¹⁷⁷ Louis Chunovic, “AMC Inserts Ad Breaks in Movies,” *Electronic Media* 20, no. 43 (October 22, 2001): 8.

the Criterion Channel, rely on voluminous libraries of independent, foreign-language, or documentary cinema, while others like Shudder, a streaming site for horror films, and Dekkoo, for gay men, orient toward niche interests. All of them, however, navigate the “difficulties of acquiring content streaming licences, the unmet ideals of content ubiquity, the challenges of maintaining subscribers, and the need to manage a variety of corporate partnerships.”¹⁷⁸

The first substantial boutique VOD platform was The Auteurs (since renamed Mubi), perceived by many scholars of online distribution as the “quintessential art film streaming site.”¹⁷⁹ It was launched in 2008 by entrepreneur-cineaste Efe Cakarel in partnership with the Criterion Collection, the long-time speciality distributor of laserdisc, DVD, and Blu-Ray releases known for their accompanying notes, commentaries by filmmakers or film scholars, and other bonus material in attempts to elevate their product beyond the mainstream and create a community of cinephile collectors.¹⁸⁰ The Auteurs secured partnerships with renowned distributors of art house fare, giving the platform extensive access to thousands of titles. Its association with Criterion also lent it an air of authority and distinction. Like Netflix and most other streamers, The Auteurs at first offered users subscription-based access to its entire library of content. But unlike other streaming sites, The Auteurs developed a robust social networking community where users could make profiles, share film lists, follow other users, and dialogue with others on forums covering topics from extremely obscure Top Ten Lists to favorite cinematographers. Director of Content Daniel Kasman explained that the company’s initial strategy was to position the site as not just an online movie theatre, but a “kind of

¹⁷⁸ Jennifer Hessler, “Quality You Can’t Touch: Mubi Social, Platform Politics, and the Online Distribution of Art Cinema,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 82 (Fall 2018): 13.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ For more on the Criterion Collection, Daniel Herbert, “From Art House to Your House: The Distribution of Quality Cinema on Home Video,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 20, no. 2 (2011): 2-18.

cinematheque—a space beyond the theatre, a gathering space, a place for discussion, for criticism, for community.” The very name “The Auteurs” marked a discursive throwback to mid-century art-film culture which highlighted certain filmmakers as individual artists whose idiosyncratic styles and worldviews rewarded close textual analysis and serious post-film discussions with fellow cinephiles. With access to its partner distributors’ film vaults and a pronounced dedication to fostering online interaction, The Auteurs began as a platform based around the discursive frames of dialogue and discovery.¹⁸¹

In May 2010 the Auteurs changed its name to Mubi. Ostensibly a move away from elitist connotations associated with auteurism, the change was also a more pessimistic gesture toward launching a global-friendly brand akin to Sony, according to Cakarel.¹⁸² The name change was soon followed by Criterion’s exit from the group (positioning itself for later VOD options) and a new subscription model, “moving away from offering transactional and subscription access to its entire library of content and instead offering subscription-only access to a rotating selection of thirty films chosen by Mubi staff.”¹⁸³ This highly curated model significantly cuts down on the number of titles users have access to on a daily basis. 30 hand-picked films are offered each month, with a new “Film of the Day” entering circulation every 24 hours in place of a film leaving the rotation. This basic structure connotes a selective algorithm of film connoisseurship that relies on “constant permutation” in the face of “content ubiquity”—in other words Mubi works against the “anytime, anywhere” model of digital distribution by installing a rotating cycle of films that come and go, reintroducing scarcity and temporal pressure to their availability. Much to the annoyance of its loyal members, Mubi did away with its popular forums, Mubi

¹⁸¹ Hessler, “Quality,” 5.

¹⁸² Anne Thompson, “The Auteurs Is Now Mubi,” *IndieWire*, May 13, 2010, accessed June 19, 2020.

¹⁸³ Hessler, “Quality,” 4

Social, in 2015. As Hessler points out, while Mubi Social drew cineastes together for interactive conversations about film culture, only one-third of its forum users actually paid for a subscription to the streaming platform. Since Mubi couldn't find a way to monetize the forums, "they ultimately didn't fit into Mubi's platform strategy."¹⁸⁴ Even though disgruntled Mubi fans migrated to other film-centric social sites, enough subscribers remained to maintain Mubi as the preeminent streaming site for art films, boasting over 10 million members as of 2020.

Other platforms for streaming art film have risen to fill out the marketplace alongside Mubi; the differences among them show the jockeying of online distributors as each tries to stand out from the crowd. Turner Classic Movies and the Criterion Collection teamed up to launch FilmStruck in 2016, a subscription service boasting "a thoughtfully curated experience around hard-to-find, critically acclaimed, independent films from the most celebrated libraries in the world."¹⁸⁵ With dozens of refreshed programming themes, extensive bonus content, rare archival footage, and interviews, FilmStruck intended to replicate the added-value prestige experience that both TCM and Criterion instilled. Despite the platform's popularity, FilmStruck fell victim to corporate reshuffling in 2018 when AT&T, which had just acquired Time Warner Inc., the parent company of TCM, decided to cease FilmStruck operations.¹⁸⁶ Criterion was quick to announce that it would start its own standalone service, The Criterion Channel, a year later, bringing its formidable distribution access to the streaming universe with the unmistakable Criterion seal of approval and many additional services, including a 15-Minute-a-Month Film School, pairings of shorts to features, and guest curators. TCM, for its part, entered the streaming

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸⁵ Jennifer Dorian, quoted in Ellie Hensley, "Turner's Video on-Demand Service FilmStruck Debuts Oct. 19," *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, October 6, 2016, accessed January 11, 2021.

¹⁸⁶ Michael Koresky, "Outside the Main Stream," *Film Comment* (January/February 2019).

arena with Watch TCM, a subscriber-authenticated service for its classical Hollywood holdings, as well as live east and west coast network streams direct from its TCM cable channel.¹⁸⁷

Just as Criterion and TCM both spun off streaming sites dedicated to their brand identities, other platforms have carved out niches within the increasingly crowded boutique streaming scene. Fandor, billed as “Netflix for the Indie Crowd,”¹⁸⁸ launched in 2011 to focus on independent, documentary, and obscure films. In keeping with its emphasis on supporting media outside of the industrial pipeline, Fandor shares 50% of a film’s revenue with its right holders and also receives direct submissions from independent filmmakers looking to distribute their work.¹⁸⁹ As with FilmStruck, Fandor found the streaming sector difficult to navigate. It was forced to fire its entire staff and restructure under a new entity in 2018, though the service is still operational as of time of writing. A final boutique platform worth noting is OVID, a “different lens” whose films “fall roughly into three categories: powerful films addressing urgent political and social issues; in-depth selections of creative documentaries, animation and experimental films by world-famous directors; and the best of global cinema, independent art-house feature and genre films by contemporary filmmakers as well as established masters.”¹⁹⁰ A combined initiative among eight independent film distributors, OVID launched in 2019 to fill the void left by FilmStruck and Fandor (even as the latter seems to remain operational), casting itself as a thoughtful counter to streaming giants’ onslaught of content. With a focus on independent documentaries hard to find elsewhere, OVID’s 800 titles as of June 2020 comprise a fast-growing addition to the crowd of boutique platforms. Specialty online distributors and curators

¹⁸⁷ R. Thomas Umstead, “Watch TCM to Launch on Roku Devices,” *Multichannel News*, December 9, 2018, accessed January 11, 2021.

¹⁸⁸ Anthony Ha, “Fandor Prepares to Launch Netflix for the Indie Crowd,” *VentureBeat*, October 21, 2010.

¹⁸⁹ “About Fandor,” Fandor.

¹⁹⁰ “OVID.tv,” OVID.

have established themselves in alternative film culture by providing cineastes with outlets for quenching cinephilia and generating distinction outside of the movie theatre.

As this survey has shown, iterations of art cinema exhibition have risen (and fallen) according to industrial, social, or technological changes. Qualities of distinction and cinephilia transferred freely between these exhibition forms and evolved according to the complex traffic in market conditions, new platforms, particular clusters of repertory, independent, foreign, and difficult films, and the supposed sanctity of film as art. To understand the changes occurring in the contemporary art house market, we now turn our attention to contextualizing the present moment. This requires multiple strands of discussion, including the gradual, painstaking shift to digital projection technologies that exhibitors had to take since the 2000s, as well as other industrial or techno-cultural developments in North American society.

Chapter 3 | Around the Corner from the Megaplex: Contextualizing Art Houses Today

“The key to the revival of arthouse cinema came about ‘when independent cinemas started thinking like cultural institutions rather than traditional movie theaters’.”¹⁹¹

My interest in art houses dates back to my undergraduate years at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where I split time working at two movie theatres. On weekends I peddled popcorn at a two-dollar second-run multiplex called the Starship 9, a relic from the 1980s theatre building boom. The Starship was on its last legs and looked it. But it remained popular with low-income families and bargain-hunters tolerant enough of scratch-laden film prints that had already passed through projectors hundreds of times. After matinee shifts at the Starship, I hustled across the street to my second job at the Mary Riepma Ross Media Arts Center, a two-screen art house cinema affiliated with the university. “The Ross,” as locals know it, showed first-run art films, hosted retrospectives or festivals, housed resources for the university, and partnered with local organizations for special events as part of its mandate to engage and enlighten the university and Lincoln communities. Though only a block away, the two theatres were worlds apart. Their sole overlap was apprehension about the opening of the Grand Theatre, a new 14-screen megaplex going up two blocks away, slated to open in 2004. “The Grand” represented a threat to the Starship, in particular, given that the shiny new megaplex would show similar Hollywood fare. Sure enough, a few years later the Starship was demolished to make room for a parking garage. The Ross, one of the few small exhibitors in the country at that point with digital projectors, arguably benefitted from the even stronger differentiation it enjoyed from the megaplex around the corner.

¹⁹¹ Stephanie Silverman, Executive Director of the Belcourt Theatre in Nashville, Tennessee, quoted in “In Columbus Suburb, a Nonprofit Arthouse Cinema Thrives,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, March 20, 2018.

This anecdote is less a targeted point than theatrical backstory for how art houses are positioned in the marketplace relative to dominant theatrical exhibition culture. As my introductory chapter suggested, art houses over the last twenty years have been both marked for extinction and heralded for a renaissance-level rebound in opposition to commercial theatres. But in some ways today's art house theatres are no different from those operating during the twentieth century. These venues still cater to ticket-buying customers desiring films outside of the mainstream. However, art houses also now exist in a highly complex and synergistic industry of filmed entertainment dramatically different from the heyday of art house exhibition. Seismic developments in mainstream media production and consumption have led to fraught conditions for exhibitors. Some of these challenges have been shared by theatres everywhere, such as the impact of digital technologies, while others expose the specific precarities confronting smaller venues. To appreciate the practices of contemporary art houses to differentiate themselves not merely as alternative movie theatres but as cultural institutions in their own right, we need a clearer picture of the industrial terrain, technological shifts, and new business model—nonprofitization—that art houses have operated with in recent decades.

3.1 Industrial Contexts

3.1.1 Mainstream Exhibition in the Digital Age

In the late 1940s, the period featured in Barbara Wilinsky's book *Sure Seaters*, the film industry in the United States was dominated by the so-called Big Five and Little Three studios. The former, comprised of Paramount Pictures, Loew's-MGM, 20th Century-Fox, Warner Bros., and RKO, were vertically integrated companies that controlled their own production, distribution, and exhibition branches. The Little Three were United Artists, Universal, and

Columbia, none of which owned major theatre chains.¹⁹² Collectively these companies exerted tight control over the landscape of motion picture consumption, pushing independent or art house exhibitors to the fringes of the market from where they in turn courted distinction from Hollywood by screening foreign films and cultivating refined atmospheres for serious filmgoing. Though the monopolistic trade practices among studios that defined Classical Hollywood are no longer in place, today's exhibition market is similarly oligopolistic, dominated by a small number of major theatre chains (AMC, Regal, Cinemark, and, in Canada, Cineplex). These chains are largely comprised by thousands of "megaplexes," a type of multi-screened theatre that ascended near the end of last century and runs contrary to the modest scale of art houses, which remain a marginal sector of the film exhibition market.

Commercial chains today constitute the exhibition wing of what has been dubbed "Conglomerate Hollywood."¹⁹³ Roughly aligning with the tenure of US President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, whose Republican administration lobbied for widespread economic deregulation, major media empires acquired or merged with other companies to consolidate controlling interest of consumer-driven markets. Hollywood was no exception. These mergers went largely unchecked by antitrust regulators at the United States Department of Justice, which by ignoring this trend "encouraged cross-ownership of film, television, cable, music, publishing, and other media and entertainment interests, thus propelling the rise of a cadre of media giants that would integrate several once-distinct media industries...into a worldwide entertainment industry with film studios at the epicenter, and with 'filmed entertainment' as its key commodity."¹⁹⁴ Revenue

¹⁹² Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 42.

¹⁹³ Thomas Schatz, *Conglomerate Hollywood and American Independent Film* (Milton Park, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁹⁴ Thomas Schatz, "The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood," in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 27.

streams were generated by a growing assortment of distribution branches for this “filmed entertainment.” As movie studios evolved within media empires, they fixed their sites on the arena they had ostensibly been barred from since the late 1940s—movie theatres. In the 1980s US studio-distributors began to substantially re-establish influence over theatrical exhibition almost 40 years after divesting themselves of their theatres in the wake of the *Paramount* decision in 1948. At the 1986 ShoWest conference, the annual gathering for members of the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO), distributors aired grievances with how their films were being treated by exhibitors. Theatres needed to smarten up their customer service and step up efforts to sell the movie-going experience at large, the studios chided. Some threatened to play a more hands-on role if theatres didn’t change course. Later that year they made good on their word when MCA-Universal acquired 48% of Cineplex Odeon, the largest Canadian exhibitor, which was not subject to American monopoly laws.¹⁹⁵ Though major US-owned studios were still technically banned from exhibition at this point, the Department of Justice showed little interest in preventing reintegration of distributors into the theatre business, reasoning that cable and VHS diversified the distribution market enough to avoid monopolizing trade (a justification that would reappear in updated form in 2019, to be discussed later). Once Universal breached the theatre doors, albeit with a Canadian-based partner, other studios poured through. Paramount, Tri-Star/Columbia, and Warner Bros. all acquired large numbers of theatres during the rest of the decade. By 1990 major studios owned 10.7% of the 23,000 screens in the United States.¹⁹⁶ Encouraged by their new foray into theatrical ownership, studio-distributors looked to assert more influence over the theatrical experience itself.

¹⁹⁵ As Charles Acland in *Screen Traffic* points out, Universal was never bound to the *Paramount* decree in the first place because at that time, the studio did not own theatres in the United States. Still, its acquisition of theatres was a gateway event for other studios to reintegrate with exhibition.

¹⁹⁶ Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 91-92.

Enter the megaplex. Under pressure from studios and distributors, major theatre chains began to refasten their venues according to logics of grandeur, leisure, and acceleration. As detailed by Charles Acland in *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture*, Disney was the conceptual touchstone for this transformation, suggesting theme parks “as a model of efficiency and service oriented primarily toward family use [...], an enclosed entertainment space founded on an idea of ‘total entertainment,’ that is, a location combining a variety of activities.”¹⁹⁷ With this logic, the solution to sluggish exhibition sales wasn’t to do with films; one had to rethink cinema-going itself by situating it as one of many leisure options in “entertainment centers” offering amenities like arcades, party areas, restaurants, virtual reality kiosks, and expanded concessions items. Theatres became “a space for the consumption of not just food or concessions but other kinds of associated goods or services designed to boost revenue—so-called ancillary entertainment—which steadily assumed a great financial importance in the profitability of the cinema itself.”¹⁹⁸ The presentation and frequency of films changed too. Many megaplexes outfitted theatres with widescreen IMAX capabilities, improved digital surround sound, reclining seats, stadium-style seating for improved eyelines, and price-tiered seating arrangements complete with VIP zones—all efforts to highlight the spectacle or exclusive perks of an outing to a large theatre. Also, with dozens of screens available, megaplexes could offer multiple, staggered start times for major releases, giving moviegoers virtually unrestricted access to the biggest releases in shorter timeframes. Once a megaplex model was established by AMC’s Grand 24 in Dallas, Texas (a 24-screen complex opened in 1995 billed as “the future of movie-going!”), the 1990s saw a building frenzy of these

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹⁹⁸ Stuart Hansen, *Screening the World: Global Development of the Multiplex Cinema* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 65.

entertainment center-theatres. Within three years of opening the Grand 24, AMC “had 38 megaplexes that contained 800 of the circuit’s 2312 screens,”¹⁹⁹ a pattern echoed by other exhibitors as the decade unfurled.

Today’s major exhibitor chains owe their supremacy over the theatrical market in large part to the industry logics of the megaplex initiated in the 1980s and 90s. The concentration of more screens in fewer sites, and the ancillary entertainment attached, has sustained as a defining feature of mainstream exhibition. In 2017 a whopping 87 percent of all screens in the United States were in theatres housing eight screens or more. AMC, Regal, and Cinemark collectively “owned 1548 sites, which accounted for 49.7 percent of total screens and an average of 12.9 screens per site.”²⁰⁰ Regional chains outside of the biggest exhibitors also comprise a large percentage of mainstream movie theatres. Chains such as Bow Tie Cinemas, a four-generation family-owned company that operates around 400 screens in 50 locations across the east coast and Colorado, exemplifies this brand of exhibitor.²⁰¹ Many of these chains own megaplexes showing first-run mainstream releases in consumption-driven venues complete with bars, restaurants, or other leisure options. In scholarship, these mid-level exhibitors are often ignored, perhaps since they fall somewhere between the conglomerate-owned chains and alternative models represented by art house cinemas. But they wield tremendous collective clout as theatres apart from the AHC-Regal-Cinemark triumvirate and remain firmly in line with mainstream exhibition practices that collect the vast majority of profits.

The rise of megaplex culture handed small exhibitors new ammunition by which to differentiate themselves in the cultural marketplace. The idiosyncratic, neighborhood art house

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 61.

²⁰⁰ Hansen, *Screening the World*, 76.

²⁰¹ “About BTC,” Bow Tie Cinemas.

had an even bigger foil in the corporate, homogenized chain of escalator-laden entertainment centers. Indeed if commercial theatres have embraced the logics of grandeur and acceleration (this latter term referring to the faster rates at which media circulates through and between different formats of consumption), art houses have by and large taken up the opposite stance as local venues for community-making. But contemporary practices dividing mainstream exhibitors and “distinctive” art houses are not always stark. Large circuits have sought to capture portions of the alternative cinema audience by devoting screens to “specialty” releases from studio subsidiaries,²⁰² foreign-language films, or ethnic programming aimed at South Asian diaspora populations. By the same token, theatres showing art house fare adopt practices of mainstream megaplexes. “Indieplexes” such as Alamo Drafthouse and Landmark Cinemas, multiplex chains that show art, indie, or foreign films, have found success by embracing expanded concessions and dine-in items, VIP in-theatre service, and “other amenities of the big modern chains.”²⁰³ So when considering what mainstream exhibition looks like today, we should keep in mind the nuanced differentiation between megaplexes and art houses.

3.1.2 *Indiewood and Specialty Distributors*

Art houses have long been associated with alternative film cultures courting distinction from the Hollywood industry. But this separation only went as far as it was good for business, and specialty exhibitors often also share discursive qualities with commercial industries. In recent decades the contours defining nebulous notions “independent,” “quality,” and “mainstream” have blurred even more as major companies venture into the business of niche

²⁰² Examples include AMC*i* (AMC independent), the mega-chain’s program of devoting roughly 60 of its theatres to art house films. See Amy Nicholson, “The Independent Giant,” *Boxoffice* 146, no. 7 (July 2010): 50.

²⁰³ Jesse McKinley, “The House Filmgoers Love to Hate,” *The New York Times*, August 10, 2003.

filmmaking and distribution. A good deal of today's art house programming is characterized by media formed at a nexus between Hollywood and independent aesthetic-industrial logics, a phenomenon dubbed "Indiewood," or what Geoff King calls a fusion of practices "comprising features associated with dominant, mainstream conventions and markers of 'distinction' designed to appeal to more particular niche-audience constituencies,"²⁰⁴ namely the art house crowd. The set of meanings that Indiewood embodies has been a frequent subject of study.²⁰⁵ Yannis Tzioumakis, documenting the rise of Indiewood and the conflation of Hollywood industrial practices with independent film, sketches out three phases of recent American independent cinema with implications for the art house.

Phase 1 of this history, "The Independent Years," took shape in the 1980s when many well-produced and well-received independent features propelled independent film into public renown. Buoyed by new technologies and infrastructures of support (including grants from the National Endowment for the Arts) and a cadre of new distribution companies (like United Artists Classics, the first of many specialty studio divisions mandated to focus on foreign films, vault re-releases, and independently produced films), independent filmmakers had access to "a viable commercial distribution network that on many occasions allowed [them] to earn profits from the commercial exploitation of their films and therefore continue pursuing filmmaking as a full time occupation."²⁰⁶ Independent filmmakers used new distribution outlets to forward a number of

²⁰⁴ Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2009), 2

²⁰⁵ In addition to Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture*, see Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012); Yannis Tzioumakis, *Hollywood's Indies: Classics Divisions, Speciality Labels and the American Film Market* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2012); *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Malloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis (London: Routledge, 2013); and Thomas Schatz, "Going Mainstream: The Indie Film Movement in 1999," *A Companion to American Indie Films*, ed. Geoff King (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017): 257-278.

²⁰⁶ Yannis Tzioumakis, "'Independent,' 'Indie,' and 'Indiewood': Towards a Periodization of Contemporary (post-1980) American Independent Cinema," *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Malloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis (London: Routledge, 2013), 32.

low-budget quality films dealing in mature themes to play in art houses and not multiplexes with its highly commercial logics. Films such as *Northern Lights* (dirs. John Hanson and Rob Nilsson, 1979), which won the Camera d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, and *Best Boy* (dir. Ira Wohl, 1979), winner of the Academy Award for Best Documentary, exemplified early iterations of this direction in independent movie-making that eschewed spectacle in the name of social or moral complexities.²⁰⁷ Highly successful independent features that found wide theatrical release were the exception; the majority struggled to see the light of day. But their mere existence gave a pulse to independent film as a subsection of American film in the nation's art houses.

The second phase that Tzioumakis marks out, "the indie years," differs from the "Independent Years" in the sector's integration with major studios that began to see the profit potential contained in a film market designated as "arty." This period produced "a new era in American independent cinema, when the label 'independent' ceased to signify economic independence from the majors when it came to questions of production; instead, the label became a signifier of a particular type of film, the 'indie' film."²⁰⁸ Scholars widely cite one film in particular, Steven Soderbergh's 1989 *sex, lies, and videotape*, as a gamechanger in initiating the "indie years." Soderbergh's film became a sensation among film devotees and industry number-crunchers alike when it played at the US Film Festival (later the Sundance Film Festival), then a modest also-ran on the festival circuit. Building enormous audience buzz owing to its deft portrayal of sexually charged subject matter, the film was acquired by independent

²⁰⁷ "Countering big stars with fresh faces, big deals with intimate canvases, and big studios with regional authenticity, these filmmakers treat inherently American concerns with a primarily European style." Annette Insdorf, "Ordinary People, European-Style: Or How to Spot an Independent Feature," *Contemporary American Independent Film*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (Abingdon, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 29.

²⁰⁸ Yannis Tzioumakis, "'Independent,' 'Indie,'" 34.

distributor Miramax²⁰⁹ and ended up grossing \$25 million domestically from a \$1.2 million budget—the kind of profit that made studio bosses sit up in their seats. Sundance emerged in the wake of *sex, lies, and videotape* as the vanguard festival for young, hip filmmakers whose work could generate excitement—and dollars—for distributors. The film’s success, meanwhile, convinced Hollywood of the profit potential for modestly budgeted films signified as edgy, quirky, or otherwise off the mainstream studio pipeline. Independent distributors such as United Artists Classics and Orion Pictures had been operating for decades prior to fill a quasi-independent niche within Hollywood. But the aggressive acquisition, distribution, and marketing practices of Miramax accelerated the growth of specialty divisions within major studios looking to replicate the success of *sex, lies, and videotape*. Some of these new boutique divisions included Fine Line Features (1991; launched by New Line Cinema, itself a subsidiary of Time Warner); Sony Pictures Classics (1992; started by Sony Pictures); Fox Searchlight Pictures (1994; launched by 21st Century Fox); and Paramount Classics (1998, renamed Paramount Vantage; started by Paramount Pictures). Miramax was purchased by Disney in 1993 and became that company’s in-house boutique distributor. Specializing in “pricey, mid-range releases appealing primarily to those with greater cultural capital ... that synthesize independent and Hollywood aesthetics,”²¹⁰ these “mini-majors” provided “safe haven for Hollywood’s indie auteurs,” such as Joel and Ethan Coen, Sofia Coppola, and Gus van Sant to make films with relative creative freedom within the cogs of a conglomerate-driven industrial system.²¹¹ Unlike the divisions of the 1980s devoted primarily to acquisition-distribution, the 1990s saw boutique

²⁰⁹ Miramax was founded by Harvey and Bob Weinstein in 1979 as an independent distributor before branching into production. In 1993, The Walt Disney Company purchased Miramax as its speciality division for “indie” films, and since then, the company has been shuffled between various media conglomerate parent companies.

²¹⁰ Perren, *Indie, Inc.*, 13.

²¹¹ Thomas Schatz, “New Hollywood, New Millennium,” *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, ed. Warren Buckland (New York: Routledge, 2009), 28.

divisions venture increasingly into finance and production as well,²¹² churning out films geared toward discerning viewers of subject matter that employed aesthetic, textual, or extra-textual characteristics of mainstream releases. Such releases often showcased star actors and robust marketing campaigns, generating major industry awards and widespread exposure. “Indie blockbusters” like *Pulp Fiction* (dir. Quentin Tarantino, 1994) *Fargo* (dirs. Joel and Ethan Coen, 1996), and *Good Will Hunting* (dir. Gus van Sant, 1997), each grossing more than \$150 million at the global theatrical box office and garnering several Academy Awards,²¹³ helped thin the division between independent and mainstream fare in the popular imagination. They also became crossover hits and lucrative bookings for art houses.

The third phase of American independent cinema that Tzioumakis describes, “Indiewood,” becomes harder to distinguish from the preceding phase owing to the already hazy boundaries between independent and Hollywood infrastructures. Miramax’s continued mainstream success (and controversial marketing) with big-budget, star-studded award-darlings like *The English Patient* (dir. Anthony Mingella, 1996) and *Shakespeare in Love* (dir. John Madden, 1998), two Best Picture Academy Award-winners that could not by any metric be considered independent, furthered the “Boutique Hollywood” form. Running with the tide of mini-major success, a new group of specialty distributors rose to prominence at this time. They included Artisan (1997), USA Films (1998), Lions Gate Films (1999), Warner Independent Pictures (2003; started by Warner Bros. Studios); and Picturehouse (2005, launched by HBO Films)—examples of “production and distribution companies that were much better capitalized than the smaller boutique companies that had emerged in the early 1990s.”²¹⁴ A key difference

²¹² Tzioumakis, “‘Independent,’ ‘Indie,’” 34.

²¹³ Yannis Tzioumakis, “Between ‘Indiewood’ and ‘Nowherewood’: American Independent Cinema in the Twenty-First Century,” *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 10, no. 3 (2014): 292.

²¹⁴ Tzioumakis, “‘Independent,’ ‘Indie,’” 37.

between Indiewood and indie films, according to Tzioumakis, is that the latter focused more of their attention on acquiring films, not producing them:

One could suggest that the period from the late 1990s onwards represents a distinct phase in contemporary American cinema; one that has been marked by the domination of the studio divisions and their increasing emphasis on film production. As subsidiaries of global entertainment conglomerates, these divisions are by definition integrated into the structures of global media and finance and therefore are fully equipped to play ‘the independent film game’ better than the traditional stand-alone distributors, whose levels of integration into global finance are much less deep.²¹⁵

Indiewood releases surged through the early 2000s when “more than a dozen conglomerate-owned indie divisions were turning out some 80 films per annum and capturing a 15-20 market share.”²¹⁶

But by mid-decade a number of new blockbuster franchises (often comic book-inspired) re-demonstrated to studios the greater profit potentials of high-concept spectacles derived from known source material. Particularly after the financial collapse of 2008, studios flinched at the prospect of investing too much in quirky speciality divisions churning out risky personal projects. Many of the original boutique divisions started “falling by the wayside later in the decade as the cost of production and distribution of independent filmmaking had started increasing.”²¹⁷ Closures came fast: Fine Line Features in 2005, Paramount Vantage in 2006, Warner Independent Studios and Picturehouse in 2008. Miramax was sold by Disney in 2010, after which it shuttled among different parent companies. Fox Searchlight, Sony Picture Classics, and others continued to operate, but they’ve seen their stake in indie distribution diminished owing to a number of smaller, upstart distributors that continue negotiating commercial-artistic interests for a niche audience (discussed more below).

²¹⁵ Ibid., 37.

²¹⁶ Thomas Schatz, “Conglomerate Hollywood and Independent Film,” *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, ed. Geoff King, Claire Malloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (London: Routledge, 2013), 137.

²¹⁷ Tzioumakis, “‘Independent,’ ‘Indie,’” 37.

Art houses have been the key channel for Indiewood films in the exhibition marketplace. In reciprocal fashion, scores of art houses have been powered by their new programming regular, the Indiewood flic. While data indicating the prevalence of boutique or specialty division fare in art houses is hard to come by, anecdotal evidence suggests that such films account for disproportionately high amount of first- or second-run art house releases. Art house booking agent Adam Birnbaum calls specialty division films his “bread and butter,” emphasizing that “Indiewood productions have become a financial boon for art house exhibition because they sometimes cross over from the small indie market to a larger audience.”²¹⁸ Indie hits like *Juno* (dir. Jason Reitman, 2007) and *Little Miss Sunshine* (dirs. Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, 2006) found initial success in limited, staggered art house platform release before moving into wider release in mainstream cinemas, a distribution strategy for films hinging on word of mouth from critics rather than saturation releases. In classic platform release fashion, many commercial and critical hits get their start in art houses before positive buzz convince distributors to screen them widely. This says nothing of the recent slate of the Academy Award Winners for Best Picture, the industry’s biggest accolade. These days one is just as likely to see Hollywood’s most celebrated film in art houses as megaplexes. In this configuration, the indie-trend of studio filmmaking has nominated art houses as a kind of test market that helps distributors gauge a film’s potential before deciding to take chances with a title in wider release. Such porous boundaries between commercial distributors and art houses have helped so-called art films (both domestic US films and foreign films with heavy cross-over audience appeal) achieve a popularization among general filmgoers not matched since the postwar boom.

²¹⁸ Todd Berliner, “Legally Independent: The Exhibition of Independent Art Films,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 38, no. 1 (2018): 61.

The Sundance-Miramax-Indiewood era changed the exhibitory direction of art houses in that “[they] became a site not necessarily for ‘art films,’ and less and less for foreign-language ones, but increasingly for what the Hollywood trade press calls ‘offbeat,’ ‘niche,’ and ‘specialty’ fare.”²¹⁹ As sentiments of “high art” (to the extent that they were ever pure) gave way to discursive constructions like “quirky” or “edgy,” art houses have seen their position within film culture morph from exclusive bastions of so-called high intellectualism to venues providing media whose narrative and aesthetic features resemble Hollywood features and whose structures of production and distribution are entwined with mainstream industries. This marks an important refiguring of art house cinemas. While these cinemas sparingly screen the kind of tentpole, mass appeal blockbuster that studios lean on in their release calendars, they have committed to the mid-level “prestige Hollywood” picture whose institutional affiliations, budgets, or textual material may have little in common with alternative film culture. What’s more, art houses appear not to care; Indiewood films have become reliable money-makers and can help fund other, less lucrative bookings more in line with an art house’s core programming identity. Still, some pundits lament the changes across the festival, distribution, and art house exhibition sectors as a commercial turn away from the “pure” legacy of independent film culture. This is the worry described by Donna de Ville’s article on microcinemas as an alternative subculture to an art house sector dependant on a pipeline of homogenous “indie-lite” fare from studio subsidiaries. So, depending on your perspective, art houses have either benefited enormously from the concretization of Indiewood as a well-oiled conveyor of crowd-pleasing content (art lite, perhaps), or been the begrudging recipient of an increasingly market-driven pipeline of media that only tangentially resembles a filmmaking ethos at odds with Hollywood.

²¹⁹ Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture*, 76.

But the glory years of Indiewood as understood by Tzioumakis may be waning. I mentioned that in recent years many original studio specialty divisions shut down as comic book tentpole blockbusters ascended and filmmaking costs rose. The 2008 recession and rise of VOD platforms have essentially “torpedoed” the mid-budget prestige film since these are seen as the riskiest projects for studios: “Suddenly, in order to become financially viable, a project has to cost less than \$2 million or more than \$200 million. Anything in between is dead in the water.”²²⁰ If conditions like these mark the industrial demise of Indiewood prominence, the arrest and conviction of Harvey Weinstein for rape and other sexual crimes and the subsequent collapse of The Weinstein Company may mark its symbolic equivalent. In place of the likes of Miramax and Fox Searchlight, a new cadre of speciality distributors has risen, including Oscilloscope (founded 2008), Bleeker Street (founded 2014), A24 Films (founded 2012), and Neon (founded 2017). Some of these distributors were started by former executives of the speciality studio distributors who wanted greater autonomy from parent organizations to pursue more personal distribution strategies and brand identities.²²¹ These newer distributors, to my knowledge, have not been formally distinguished by scholars as a separate iteration of contemporary specialty distribution. They can be loosely characterised by their pronounced separation from the studio-affiliated structure and broad-audience marketing that solidified Indiewood decades ago. *The Hollywood Reporter* picked up on something in the wind in a 2018 article remarking that “upstarts...with offbeat projects and savvy marketing” are starting to fill the void left by the demise of Weinstein and other mini-majors. The article contrasts the model of Summit Entertainment, the distributor purchased by Lionsgate in 2012 that perfected the “studio-sized

²²⁰ David Ehrlich, “Can A24, the Scrappy Company Behind *Room* and *Spring Breakers*, Save Film?,” *Slate Magazine*, September 30, 2015.

²²¹ Andrew Karpen, founder of Bleeker Street, was the former CEO of Focus Features, for example.

independent film...that could play to the broadest audience possible”²²² to that of the “post-Summit world” where niche distributors “succeed by targeting audiences outside the traditional theatrical mainstream...through social media and word-of-mouth and not by spending huge amounts of P&A.”²²³ Dozens of these artisanal distributors have emerged in the last 10 years, some with average theatrical distribution releases in the single digits and others with the resources to distribute dozens of titles a year. Outside of the purview of the major studios, they collectively rival the specialty divisions that rose to prominence throughout the 1990s and 2000s and mark the resettling of niche-minded distribution companies onto the terrain of independent cinema. And they are racking up large industry awards while doing so, as recent Best Picture Academy Awards for *Moonlight* (A24 Films) and *Parasite* (Neon) attest.

In the spirit of Tzioumakis’s taxonomical approach to recent American independent film, I term this most recent iteration “Hipwood.” Perhaps the marquee Hipwood distributor in the last decade has been A24 Films. Founded in 2012 by three veterans of the film distribution sector, A24 has become a major player on the prestige indie landscape, earning the company a sizable fanbase among cineastes who see it as the natural torch-bearer for a new iteration of Indiewood logics.²²⁴ Echoing the specialty distributors from the 1990s, it has ventured into financing and production itself. Noteworthy surprise-hit releases like provocative crime spree flic *Spring Breakers* (dir. Harmony Korine, 2013), science-fiction robot thriller *Ex Machina* (dir. Alex Garland, 2014), kidnapping-survival drama *Room* (dir. Lenny Abrahamson, 2015), and the surprise Best Picture Oscar-winner *Moonlight* have “cemented the one-time fringe company as

²²² Scott Roxborough, “Niche Distributors Fill Gap Left by the Demise of Weinstein,” *Hollywood Reporter*, November 2, 2018.

²²³ Fabien Westerhoff quoted in Roxborough, “Niche Distributors Fill Gap.”

²²⁴ Zach Baron, “Hollywood, Disrupted: Inside the Scrappy Film Company That Made ‘Moonlight’ and ‘The Witch,’” *GQ*, May 9, 2017.

the film industry's most forward-thinking company [that releases] the kind of midsized, stylish, quality films that seemed on the verge of going extinct, transforming them into a collective theatrical experience, and aiming them squarely at a demographic that would rather watch movies on their phones."²²⁵ For art house exhibitors, A24 and other Hipwood outfits don't signal a fundamental shift in first-run programming norms established with the rise of Miramax. If anything, Hipwood offers the prospect of continuity. As major Hollywood studios persist in cutting back on niche- or mid-level prestige pictures with crossover potential in the specialty market, upstart distributors with a sense of flair are proving "there's still an audience for the kind of challenging and essential medium-budget movies that most in the business left for dead."²²⁶

3.1.3 *Paramount Overturned*

In August 2018 the United States Department of Justice, as part of a review of thousands of preceding antitrust judgements, reopened its file on the movie industry's biggest legal landmark: the 1948 *Paramount* decrees. A series of rulings that ordered major Hollywood studios to divest themselves of their movie theatre holdings, thus capping their control on the production, distribution, and exhibition of the industry's films, the decrees also curtailed distribution practices deemed unfair to exhibitors, including block-booking and circuit-dealing. Officially the *Paramount* decrees remained on the books for decades despite clouded enforcements of its strictures over the 1970s and 1980s when consolidations between major studios and theatre chains went virtually unchecked by the Department of Justice. Even NATO, the main association for large exhibitors, lent its support to studio efforts to acquire more theatres in the 1980s, signaling little if any industrial resistance to keeping studios out of exhibition.

²²⁵ Ehrlich, "Profile of the Independent Film Distributor A24."

²²⁶ Ibid.

Underlining the inefficacy of the decades-old decrees to restrict unfair trade practices is the fact that many now-major film studios and distributors were not around in the 1940s and thus never bound to the original enforcements. Disney, for example, only formed a distribution branch in 1953. In more recent years streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon have likewise enjoyed broad leeway from antitrust constraints. Yet despite the spotty regulation of the nation's studio-distributors, exhibitors have long regarded the decrees as a valuable shield against the most aggressive practices securing unfair advantages against non-affiliated theatres.

The basis of the 2020 DOJ challenge was antiquation. It contended that the environment for today's film industry no longer resembled the era of movie studios' vertical integration in the 1940s. The decrees "failed to predict the complex ways that various forms of entertainment are made and distributed"²²⁷ in our highly fragmented media environment in which studios contend with streaming, shifting consumer habits, and new business models that have reduced their ability to form cartels for the sake of monopolizing trade. This wasn't the first time this argument had been used. When Tri-Star Pictures acquired Lowe's Theatres in December 1986, the Justice Department gave its blessing to the move by arguing that the popularity of cable television and VHS technologies diversified the streams of distribution enough to justify the kind of merger.²²⁸ The 2020 challenge, however, did not involve a film studio petitioning the government but the government's anti-trust agency itself arguing to sweep aside the decrees.

Given the clouded impact of the decrees to begin with, the DOJ announcement that it was reviewing the decades-old ruling produced equal parts shrugs and consternation among exhibitors. A public comment period saw trade groups such as the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO), the Writers Guild of America, West (WGA), and the Independent

²²⁷ Brent Lang, "Judge Approves Ending Paramount Antitrust Consent Decrees," *Variety* August 7, 2020.

²²⁸ Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 95-96.

Cinema Alliance (ICA) pen letters in support of retaining the decrees. The ICA went a step further in January 2020 by filing a lengthy amicus brief imploring the District Court assigned to the case to rule against the DOJ. Comments also came from independent theatres, drive-ins, and smaller exhibitor chains worried about what loosened antimonopoly policies would mean for their businesses. Fears ranged from the prospect of major studios outright purchasing their own theatre chains (though this has effectively been happening since the 1980s) to concerns that the re-allowance of block booking would disproportionately damage smaller exhibitors whose limited numbers of screens would prevent them from booking the titles a distributor would demand in exchange for accessing a particular title. For example, the Bow Tie Cinemas chain suggested that doing away with the decrees would cause small cinemas to “lose the ability to curate their own programming” and become the “de facto exclusive exhibitors of a particular studio’s content.”²²⁹ Naturally, large studios supported the elimination of the decrees or otherwise stood by silently.

After extensive review, the DOJ filed a motion with the United States Southern District Court of New York in November 2019 to terminate the over-70-year-old ruling. The decision to uphold or deny the motion fell to US District Judge Analisa Torres, who ruled on August 7, 2020, in favour of the Government, officially terminating the legislation that had defined the legal contours regulating distribution-exhibition practices in the United States for well over half a century. While the decision was immediate, the DOJ’s motion, addressing concerns raised by NATO and the ICA in their public comments, stipulated a two-year “sunset period” for preserving a ban on block-booking and circuit-dealing “which would provide movie theaters a transitional time period to adjust their business models and strategies to any proposals to change

²²⁹ A Bow Tie Cinema representative quoted in Dana Harris-Bridson, “No, Studios Won’t Buy Theaters, but Small Exhibitors Fear Destruction While DOJ Touts Innovation,” *IndieWire*, November 20, 2019.

the film-by-film, theater-by-theater licensing regime.”²³⁰ This period further allows studios and exhibitors to hammer out master agreements for licensing deals going forward.

Reactions to the overturning of *Paramount* were largely overshadowed by the deleterious effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the movie industry. Some exhibitors wondered whether major studios would purchase one of the three main theatrical exhibitors in the North American market, AMC, Regal, or Cinemark, while others thought it more likely that a streaming giant like Netflix or Amazon would grab up more venues.²³¹ (Disney already owns the historic El Capitan movie theatre on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles; Netflix purchased the nearby Egyptian Theatre in 2019, and a year later added The Paris Theatre in Manhattan. Rumours swirl around how much more the streaming companies may venture into movie theatre ownership.) Some specialty distributors of art house fare thought that art houses stand to gain under the new conditions. Richard Lorber of Kino Lorber, a central art film distributor, called art houses

a resilient and feisty bunch who [...] are so close to their customers, who are often subscribers or members of the theaters film societies, that they won’t be bullied and don’t need to block book crappy films to get presumed blockbusters which they typically don’t want in any case. ... I think the salutary effect of this will nudge indie arthouses closer to year-round festival programming models and encourage them more cogently to build their membership base. Being closer to their customers arms them against economic bullying.²³²

Since the majority of cinemas remained closed for the bulk of 2020, providing “virtual cinema” streaming options via select distributors, the post-decrees atmosphere is not a valid environment from which to make sense of the ruling’s impact. And with the above-mentioned exception for block-booking and circuit dealing set to expire in two years, it may not be until 2022 for a fuller scale of the decrees’ reversal to come into focus.

²³⁰ United States of America v. Paramount Pictures Inc., Case 1:19-mc-00544-AT, August 7, 2020, (United States District Court Southern District of New York), 16.

²³¹ AHC Google Group thread, “Paramount Decision Reversed,” August 7, 2020.

²³² Quoted in Harris-Bridson, “No, Studios Won’t Buy Theaters.”

3.2 *Digital Contexts*

3.2.1 *d-cinema and e-cinema*

Whether neighborhood art houses or skyscraper megaplexes, all theatres in the new century have united around the transition from celluloid to digital projection technologies, a change that reveals the uphill battles art houses face relative to commercial exhibitors. The digital transition comprised several steps to delivery systems that impact what theatres can show on their screens and in what frequency and ease. The prospect of widespread digital exhibition gained ground after the release of George Lucas's *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* (1999), the first feature to screen digitally in a handful of specially equipped theatres. Given the ongoing competition to theatregoing represented by paid cable TV, video games, DVDs, and other at-home or mobile media, the film industry was keen to champion digital film projection as the next big thing in the theatrical experience. In 2002 the then-Big Six movie studios (Disney, Fox, Paramount, Sony, Warner Bros., and Universal) propelled the industry into digital terrain by launching Digital Cinema Initiatives (DCI), an entity designed to “establish and document voluntary specifications for an open architecture for digital cinema that ensures a uniform and high level of technical performance, reliability, and quality control”²³³ across the film industry. These standardizing specifications detailed how films would be mastered, compressed, and encrypted onto foot-long hard-drives called Digital Cinema Packages (DCP), the new “film reels” shipped to theatres. Working with a variety of experts, DCI published its uniform specifications for first-run commercial theatres in July 2005 with a clenched fist of accomplishment, and larger chains, mainly, began the conversion process. Though the writing had long been on the wall, 2011 was the first year that more scripted features were shot digitally

²³³ “Digital Cinema Initiatives (DCI) - Digital Cinema System Specification,” accessed September 8, 2020.

rather than on celluloid,²³⁴ a shot across the bow to theatrical exhibitors to stop dragging their feet and convert. These days the majority of digital films are delivered to theatres from online platforms in which encrypted files of content are downloaded from secure satellite feeds directly to cinema servers, eliminating physical media altogether. Digital Cinema Distribution Coalition, founded in 2013 by major theatre chains and studios AMC, Regal, Cinemark, Universal, and Warner Bros., is North America's preeminent digital platform distributor that provides DCI files of first-run features to mainstream theatres. Whether cinemas used DCI hard-drives or simply clicked a download link, the "rush to convert" became a through-line in industry conversations, with NATO president John Fithian warning in 2011 that "if 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."²³⁵ The threat was real: following other studios, Twentieth Century-Fox announced it would no longer distribute 35mm prints as of the end of 2013. Art houses wanting to screen product from that studio's specialty division, Fox Searchlight, would need to convert before then.²³⁶

Even before such ultimatums reached fever pitch, major theatre chains welcomed d-cinema (the shorthand for DCI-compliant cinema) more than art houses. They had reason for doing so—the large exhibitor narrative of *bigger, louder, brighter* benefited from what digital projections promised to add to the theatrical experience: sharper images and louder sounds, not to mention the prospect of 3D or IMAX screenings. Major studios also profited from attractive financial assistance programs earmarked for the purpose of becoming digitally compatible. Virtual Print Fees (VPF) were introduced as arrangements between exhibitors and third-party digital integrators (some of the largest being Cinedigm and Digital Cinema Implementation

²³⁴ David Cohen, "2011: The Year Digital Surpassed Film," *Daily Variety* (July 2011).

²³⁵ J. Sperling Reich, "CinemaCon 2011: Fithian Urges NATO Members to Begin Digital Transition," *Celluloid Junkie*, March 30, 2011.

²³⁶ Ira Deutchman, "The Digital Transition and What It Means for Indies," @nyindieguy, March 1, 2012.

Partners) who, for a fee from both the distributor and exhibitor, secured bank loans to purchase, install, and maintain d-cinema equipment. Under this system a distributor might save thousands of dollars on a single DCP, since celluloid prints cost much more to produce and ship, and then extend those savings to exhibitors for the cost of installing the new projection equipment. To spur conversion along most VPF arrangements mandated that exhibitors finish installation of d-cinema equipment by the end of 2012. The deadline seems to have worked: as early as January 2012, 64 percent of the near-40,000 screens in the US were DCI-compliant, spearheaded by the three major theatre chains, AMC, Regal, and Cinemark.²³⁷

Art houses, already disadvantaged because of smaller cash reserves and little corporate support, lagged behind major chains during the conversion years owing to prohibitive agreement terms with integrators. VDFs generally were only granted to exhibitors who “played at least 85 percent of their films from major studios ‘on the break’”—a term to describe a film’s initial release in a given market—and which “average a minimum of thirteen showings per screen each week for at least two consecutive weeks,”²³⁸ a high bar to meet for most small cinemas with reduced showtimes. Also, whereas VDFs could be arranged between digital integrators and entire theatre chains, streamlining the process, art houses had to negotiate on a case-by-case basis. VPFs were also typically paid out for only the first six weeks that a film played at a theatre, and terms were only reached after integrators reviewed an exhibitor’s finances. For small cinemas barely in the black, such oversight was stressful if not downright prohibitive. As a result, “the booking and box office requirements that [were] standard under most VPF agreements [disqualified] the vast majority of art houses from receiving distributor-assisted

²³⁷ Dombrowski, “Not If But When,” 236.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

financing for DCI-compliant equipment.”²³⁹ Overall, cinemas with smaller audience reach were deprioritized as conversion partners. Industry players and integrators did acknowledge the hardships for small theatres in the transition, and some created initiatives designed to ease the burden on independent exhibitors. But the majority view according to members of the Art House Convergence was that even the most generous VPN arrangements were rarely worth the hassle. Repertory houses were especially vulnerable (those still operating), as DVD and Blu-ray screenings led legions of classic movie-lovers to invest in their own home theatres or entertainment. High estimates warned that as many as 2,000 screens in the US, the majority in small cinemas, were in danger of going dark in the 2010s.

Independent exhibitors struggling to afford DCI-compliant technologies explored cheaper options to screen content, a strategy that has seen mixed success. One alternative to d-cinema was e-cinema technologies—non-DCI-compliant digital formats like Blu-ray and DVD shown on high-quality HD projectors. Independent, foreign-language, and repertory films are extremely common in non-DCI-compliant formats. Unfortunately for cinemas trying this approach, key distributors for art house films, such as Fox Searchlight and Focus Features, refused to distribute first-run films in these formats due to their inferior quality.²⁴⁰ As the divide widened between DCI cinemas and non-DCI cinemas, forward-thinking integrators sought ways to help smaller cinemas access digital content without DCI projectors. Platforms like Proludio, which caters to art house cinemas, partnered with independent distributors like Sony Pictures Classics, A24, and Roadside Attractions to deliver 1080p files of content to theatres, bypassing the need for DCI-

²³⁹ Ibid., 237.

²⁴⁰ Sarah Sinwell, “Go Digital or Go Dark: Crowdfunding, Independent Financing, and Arthouse Exhibition on Kickstarter,” *A Companion to American Indie Film*, ed. Geoff King (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 457.

compliant projectors altogether. Small art houses and microcinemas have found such platforms invaluable for accessing content outside of the studio-controlled DCI pipeline.²⁴¹

Whether through crowdfunding efforts (more on this soon), generous benefactors, or the rare feasible VPN agreement, the majority of art houses eventually did join the digital era. The shift happened quickly once it started. According to the 2013 Art House Convergence National Theatre Survey, a polling of 83 art houses revealed that just 24% had converted all of their screens to DCI by the end of 2012, and another 8% had converted some screens, “but that nearly all are raising funds for this purpose.”²⁴² The following year’s poll of 86 theatres reflected the push to convert; 70% had converted all of their screens and another 6% had converted some. (2014’s figures were predictably higher, at 74% and 11% respectively.) By 2015 it was assumed that the majority of small cinemas had converted all or the majority of their screens to DCI. Those who haven’t continue to operate with less expensive e-cinema formats or brokered arrangements with platforms like Proludio. Many art houses, it’s worth noting, retained 35mm or even 16- or 70mm projection capabilities. Reasons for this include maintaining the means to satisfy celluloid fanatics among art house crowds embodied among celebrity directors like Quentin Tarantino, Christopher Nolan, and Martin Scorsese, who are known to organize celluloid screenings. Art houses also trot out their celluloid projection capabilities as markers of their value as vaults for film history.

What has digital conversion meant for art houses? In simple terms, it was not the apocalyptic ending that many feared. Underscoring that “digital conversion means different things to different exhibitors,” Lisa Dombrowski has accounted for the specific impacts of digital

²⁴¹ “A Naive Question about Digital Delivery to Cinemas,” AHC Google Group thread, November 18, 2016.

²⁴² “Art House Convergence 2013: A National Survey,” conducted and presented by Bryn Mawr Film Institute, 2013 Art House Convergence Annual Conference, slides 42-45.

on art houses and how the industry has harnessed its creative possibilities. While an untold number of small exhibitors did shut down in the years following the DCI specifications release, for those theatres that survived, digital opened the doors to programming practices that would have been impossible under celluloid. Digital systems allow art houses to nimbly choreograph more diverse brands of content through their screens at a faster rate than before: “For theatres that wish to screen shorts, program film festivals, or show other non-feature-length material, digital projection systems permit an easier means of programming (since the switch to digital no longer entails the time-consuming and labor-intensive process of assembling 35mm film reels).”²⁴³ This is a crucial benefit to art houses whose small screen count and mandate to serve different audiences and social causes through programming depends on the rapid and agile cycling of titles in and out of theatres over the course of a week (a tension known in the biz as “screen crunch”). Digital servers allow for alternative content—the streaming of non-filmic content into theatres, such as live music, theatres, sports, etc.—to be easily integrated into a theatre’s program. This basic fact echoes what Acland observes about commercial exhibition as channeled by megaplexes. These entertainment complexes formalized an industrial common sense around multiple, staggered screenings spread out among dozens of screens, allowing exhibitors to circulate titles through differently sized auditoriums and then on to ancillary formats with new speed and convenience. As Acland says,

the digital coordination of distribution and exhibition sets in motion added flexibility to scheduled presentations, which would affect temporal parameters of cinema culture. Whether satellite or cable delivery, the less expensive distribution in digital formats means that there is an added incentive to replace films faster. . . . Ultimately, nothing would stop exhibitors and distributors from providing variety in their slate of offerings that would replicate programming scheduled by television programmers.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Sinwell, “Go Digital or Go Dark,” 457.

²⁴⁴ Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 218.

This fundamental shift in commercial cinema logics from the end of last century has manifested in the art house sector thanks to the ease and cost benefits of digital projection. After a period of adjustment, small specialty exhibitors are now largely equipped with digital servers and the know-how to navigate a burgeoning network of digital content suppliers clamoring for screens to broadcast on. Many art houses use a combination of DCI and non-DCI formats, like DVD, Blu-ray, or server-downloaded systems, to juggle their curation. A single-screen theatre might project a first-run feature as a DCP download in the afternoon, switch over to an HD Blu-Ray projection of a local filmmaker's collection of short films, and finish the evening with an HD broadcast of live opera direct from New York or London. The art house penchant for kaleidoscopic programs comprised of regular screenings, special series, and one-time-only events is thus well-matched to the flexibility of d- and e-cinema options. It stands to reason that this flexibility will continue to benefit the art house industry with its relatively modest scope of operations and ability to improvise programs with local content creators.

The digital transition has also shored up one of the sector's main characteristics in the new century: the connection to local communities. Art houses faced an uphill battle in transitioning to digital projection. Costs for upgrading ran anywhere from \$50,000 to \$100,000 per screen,²⁴⁵ not counting the maintenance required in the long term and the troubleshooting theatres could expect while projectionists acclimated to the new systems. To survive conversion, many theatres turned to fundraising drives and donor solicitations to raise money. Kickstarter in particular became a lifeline for art houses for its ability to connect community members to the urgent business of conversion. Kickstarter was launched in 2009 and has become the most popular way "to encourage individuals to pledge money to support the work of artists,

²⁴⁵ Sinwell, "Go Digital or Go Dark," 452.

filmmakers, writers, designers, musicians, and inventors and to help get their projects made,” the first in a small wave of crowdfunding platforms that include IndieGoGo and GoFundMe. Scores of art houses and small exhibitors launched Kickstarter campaigns to develop communities of supporters.²⁴⁶ By March of 2014, 48 projects to revamp art houses for digital projection had been launched through the site, including cinemas such as the Denver Film Society, the Lyric Cinema in Fort Collins, Colorado, and the Eaton Theatre in Charlotte, MI, with the majority of these efforts ending successfully.

The Kickstarter campaigns helped cinemas enact a discourse of differentiation from mainstream exhibition. The Kickstarter profile home pages for conversion projects often detail lengthy histories about the theatres, stressing their legacies as long-time entertainment venues for local populations. Introductory videos feature content about theatres as part of wider community history of film culture and exhibition: “Appealing to their audiences’ sense of nostalgia, cinephilia, and history, the theatres also often incorporate photographic images of their antiquated marquees, film projectors, movie posters, and even audience members from more than a century ago, as a means of further addressing what is positioned as the historical necessity of the digital transition.”²⁴⁷ Some campaigns wove community members and a grassroots ethos into their marketing efforts. The Maiden Alley Cinema in Paducah, Kentucky, produced a parodic video in the vein of 1950s educational films called *Digital Conversion and You!* that spells out to a classroom of hand-raising “students” what digital conversion means and what they can do to support its funding for the good of the Paducah community.²⁴⁸ Digital conversion efforts via Kickstarter underlined the multiple uses art houses are put to as community resources

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 459.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 461.

²⁴⁸ “Digital Cinema and YOU!,” Kickstarter project, Maiden Alley Cinema.

and gathering spots, making possible live musical acts, lectures, film classes, and fundraisers for local causes. In this way, local audiences were “supporting the arts [and] the sustainability of highbrow culture within their community, as well as actively marking their own status as members of a particular and distinctive constituency.”²⁴⁹ The crisis represented by the high costs of digital conversion was thus a beneficial call-to-arms for art houses in the sense that conversion focused community support around their venues at a time when megaplexes were seen as the default mode for cinema exhibition. It also generated a series of discourses about community, local history, and the shared pleasures that movie theatres offer. Far from shutting down the majority of small cinemas, “the switch to digital instead marked the community’s support of the arthouse itself.”²⁵⁰

3.2.3 *Alternative Content and Event Cinema*

The digital conversion within theatres has naturally led to new distribution channels to get content other than films to cinemas. A 2012 *Boxoffice* article titled “What’s the Alternative?” rejoiced that events as eclectic as “a rock concert by Korn; the *Ring Cycle* operas by Wagner; and a performance by noted diva Anna Netrebko” had recently been made available to moviegoers as part of “a major trend in the cinema industry” known as alternative content.²⁵¹ Increasingly referred to as “event cinema,” alternative content is the shorthand for digitally streamed broadcasts of live (or in some cases, recorded) performances and presentations, including opera, theatre, music concerts, ballet, Q&A sessions, sporting events, and television broadcasts like The Oscars. As such, alternative content is “defined by its methodology of release rather than by the content,” and typically operates on “one or two nights only” release

²⁴⁹ Sinwell, “Go Digital or Go Dark,” 464,

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 458.

²⁵¹ Gary Klein, “What’s the Alternative?,” *Boxoffice* 148, no. 10 (October 2012): 10–11.

strategies rather than full theatrical runs.²⁵² Alternative content goes back as far as the 1930s when the possibilities of “theatrical television” were probed by television companies to broadcast events like boxing matches, horse races, speeches, and even the 1936 Olympic Games to select theatres in New York or London. These early attempts did not solidify into a viable business model given high costs, cumbersome equipment installation, and limited audience interest.

But once theatres converted to digital projection, a viable infrastructure for alternative content established itself. Companies such as Fathom Events, Specticast, and Cinedigm are some prominent content providers that began partnering with cultural institutions in the early 2000s to beam select events live to specially equipped movie theatres, mostly in large urban markets. Two of the foundational footholds for alternative content in North America were the *Metropolitan Opera Live in HD* and *National Theatre Live*, which broadcast their professional opera and theatre performances from New York and London, respectively. In 2006-2007, the *MET Opera* launched its first season of high-definition livestreamed performances, starting with Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. The first season saw enough success that the MET expanded its streamed performances from six in 2006-2007, to eight in 2007-2008, to 11 in 2008-2009, and then to 12 in 2010-2011, selling nearly 5 million tickets across 1,500 venues scattered amongst 46 different countries.²⁵³ Seeing the success of its sibling institution, London’s Royal National Theatre launched its *National Theatre Live* broadcasts in 2009, starting with the French tragedy *Phèdre* starring Helen Mirren and expanding in similar fashion to the *MET Opera*’s broadcasts in subsequent seasons. While opera, theater, and music comprised the majority of early alternative cinema presentations, other events such as ballet, art gallery exhibitions, television specials, and

²⁵² “About Us,” Event Cinema Association.

²⁵³ Florin Vladica and Charles H. Davis, “Value Propositions of Opera and Theatre Live in Cinema,” paper presentation, World Media Economics & Management Conference, Thessaloniki, Greece, May 23–27, 2012.

eSports soon gained traction in the sector as well. Between 2011 and 2016, alternative cinema profits grew over 500% and was projected to hit \$1 billion in worldwide profits by 2019.²⁵⁴

Alternative content seems less alternative now. The term “event cinema,” underlining the heightened marketing of these screenings, has ascended. From its early days as a novelty offering for theatre and opera broadcasts, event cinema has become big business for movie theatres and central to mainstream theatrical filmgoing. At the 2018 CinemaCon conference in Las Vegas, the Cinema Buying Group of NATO announced a major deal with NAGRA, a provider of digital content and distribution, to bring event cinema to CBG-NATO members via a broadband program titled myCinema. This platform, described as a “one-stop shopping experience for exhibitors,” would offer a large catalog of event cinema titles (both live and recorded) for theatre circuits of any size, though with an emphasis on independent cinemas. At that same conference, Fathom Events announced plans to increase the number of theatres it would partner with for live digital broadcasts over the next two years by 200 in pursuit of their goal to reach more than 1,100 cinemas in the United States alone.²⁵⁵ The Fathom deal in particular signals the mainstreaming of event cinema given that in 2013 the company restructured its ownership under the major American theatre chains, AMC, Regal, and Cinemark, whose approach to event cinema brings more varieties of content into the fold. Because Fathom “seems to consider nothing at the fringe of event cinema, [whether] live or recorded, whether high-brow, popular, or niche,” event cinema as a taxonomy of media will continue to expand into the mainstream.²⁵⁶ A further sign of event cinema’s staying power is reflected in the increasing use of recorded

²⁵⁴ “Making the Case for Event Cinema,” conference session moderated by Jonathan Ross, Art House Convergence Annual Conference, January 21, 2016.

²⁵⁵ Annlee Ellingson, “CinemaCon 2018: Event Cinema Not so Alternative Anymore,” *L.A. Biz*, April 25, 2018.

²⁵⁶ Leo Rubinkowski, “From Experiment to Industry: What Company Histories Can Tell Us about Event Cinema,” paper presented at the Media Industries Conference, King’s College London, London, England, April 18-20, 2018, 2.

performances. Whereas live performances comprised the initial model for alternative content because, among other reasons, “marketing that emphasizes *liveness* can generate a sense of urgency among potential viewers,”²⁵⁷ it is common for exhibitors to offer recorded performances at more times of the day to give patrons more viewing options. Encore presentations of shows that sell out likewise satisfy customer demand and inch event cinema programming closer to the megaplex paradigm that offers multiple chances to see a film.

At first alternative content in North America was more likely to appear at select large chain cinemas or prominent independent ones in New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, as they were the first theatres to have installed the necessary equipment to receive and project HD digital streams. But small exhibitors and art houses soon also became prominent sites for event cinema. As the cases of the MET and National Theatre suggest, alternative content often evokes qualities of high-class culture or upscale leisure that stands out from the blockbuster or franchise sentiments of mainstream exhibition. This is especially valuable for small exhibitors located far from major urban centers where moviegoers can’t easily hope to see professional stage or music performances in person. “Can’t make it to New York? We’ll bring New York to you,” is the mantra behind much alternative content marketing. For small exhibitors and art house cinemas, event cinema also has the benefit of expanding audience reach to diverse crowds who may not generally attend films. As Matthew Liebmann, global president for Movio Cinema, a data analytics and campaign management firm for the cinema industry puts it, “If you’re an independent exhibitor and you’re not taking advantage of event cinema, you’re fighting with one arm. There is the ability to draw people into the theater who wouldn’t otherwise consider it as an entertainment option.”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Matthew Liebmann, Global President of Movio Cinema, quoted in Ellingson, “CinemaCon 2018.”

It's difficult to say if or how event cinema shown at art houses differs from that of commercial megaplexes. Given the sheer variety of content that event cinema contains (everything from museum exhibits to eSport tournaments), as well as the wide buy-in it enjoys across the industry, the differences between art houses and commercial cinemas may be more a matter of degree along a spectrum of "high" or "low" cultural taste. Outside of the aforementioned *National Theatre Live* and *MET Opera* broadcasts, many event cinema offerings seem on the surface a natural fit for art house sentiments of alternative cultural content. One example of this was the "Art and Architecture in Cinema Series," a 2016 partnership between Specticast and Fathom Events comprised of curated films allowing "unprecedented access" to some of the world's most famous art museums, curators, and artists. But given that this series broadcast to over 500 theatres around the world, it's clear that megaplexes were also exhibition partners for the series.²⁵⁹ Event cinema—including content like tours of art museums—crosses liberally between the art house and commercial cinema sectors, even if art houses may foreground such events with more pomp.

Much of what we know about the prominence of event cinema in art houses relative to commercial chains is anecdotal. The Event Cinema Association, the premiere lobbying group for event cinema producers and distributors across North America and Europe, led a panel at the 2016 Art House Convergence conference to promote the successes and impacts of event cinema in the sector. One headline from the panel read that while event cinema includes things like rock concerts, professional sporting events, and video game competitions, art houses are far more likely to book theatre and opera broadcasts. Major cinema chains also exhibit these latter forms,

²⁵⁹ "'Art & Architecture in Cinema' Series to Bring World Renowned Works to Select U.S. Movie Theaters in 2016," *Business Wire*, November 30, 2015.

but evidence suggests that event cinema as a composite category disproportionately occurs at art houses. The Moviehouse, an independent art house in Millerton, New York, revealed that event cinema made up 17% of its box office sales in 2015. Considering that the global average across all exhibitors is only 3-4%, it's highly likely that art houses overall depend more on event cinema intakes than commercial cinemas.²⁶⁰ On the one hand, event cinema such as opera, theatre, and music concert broadcasts fit the art house *modus operandi* to pitch their distinction from mainstream theatres. But on the other hand, as alternative content becomes more integrated into mainstream exhibition circuits, art houses risk losing out on a lucrative niche market similar to how mainstream chains siphoned audiences for independent or art films by devoting more screens to crossover specialty distributors starting in the 1990s.

3.2.4 *On-Demand Media and Shrinking Theatrical Windows*

As with transitioning to digital projection, all exhibitors have had to grapple with an exhibition environment chock full of on-demand streaming platforms for at-home or mobile entertainment. A slew of new acronyms describe the nuanced brands of direct-to-consumer (DTC) media: VOD (video-on-demand) is the catch-all for streamed digital media made available to consumers; PVID (premium video-on-demand) is an upmarket feature specifying titles that become available to stream while still playing in theatres; SVOD (subscription video-on-demand) describes platforms like Netflix or Amazon Prime that offer libraries of circulating titles available for users who pay for subscriptions; and TVOD (transactional video-on-demand), typified by Apple's iTunes and Google Play, is the one-time purchase of individual digital titles, sometimes for permanent download (called electronic sell-through [EST]), sometimes for short-

²⁶⁰ "Making the Case for Event Cinema," Event Cinema Association, Art House Convergence Annual Conference, Midway, Utah, January 21, 2016.

term rental (called download to rent, [DTR]). Unlike the fixed-site theatrical era of the twentieth century, the preponderance of VOD options linked to any number of electronic devices at our fingertips comprises “a culture characterized by media mobility”²⁶¹ where theatres are no longer default venues for movie consumption at all. Younger people are as or more likely to view movies on their phones or tablets than in a theatre. Even the traditional cable TV model seems a platform increasingly gone with the wind: in 2019, for the first time, a higher percentage of US households subscribed to at least one digital streaming service than traditional pay television.²⁶² “Streaming Wars” has become an industry shorthand to describe the competition between a pool of video-on-demand platforms seeking to capture some of the market lassoed by Netflix and Amazon starting in 2006 when they launched their streaming services. On-demand sites and theatrical exhibitors have been jockeying with one another on this playing field ever since.

Despite fears that the convenience of streaming would imperil movie theatres, its impact has been more nuanced. A report commissioned by NATO in 2018 found a strong correlation between those who see more movies in theatres and those who watch more streaming content at home. Inversely, those not inclined to subscribe to streaming services are already far less likely to see movies in theatres to begin with. In other words, “the message here is that there’s not a war between streaming and theatrical. People who love content are watching it across platforms and all platforms have place in consumers’ minds.”²⁶³ (Cable and broadcast television, though, are demonstrably bleeding consumers to streaming platforms.) If nothing else the rise of streaming has nudged exhibitors to rearticulate the appeals of their venues for film presentation.

²⁶¹ Tyron, *On-Demand Culture*, 3.

²⁶² “Digital Media Trends Survey, 13th edition,” *Deloitte Insights: A Report from the Center for Technology, Media and Telecommunications* (2019), 3.

²⁶³ Phil Contrino, quoted in Brent Lang, “Netflix Isn’t Killing Movie Theaters, Study Shows,” *Variety* December 17, 2018.

While for large chain exhibitors this could mean doubling down on the spectacle of IMAX or the widening number of concessions options, art houses have revived a sense of “showmanship” and “place-making.” In contrast to a “culture characterized by mobility,” art houses have emphasized their exclusivity as multipurpose spaces for event cinema arranged not around the convenience of personalized media viewership but around fixed gatherings and communal bonding.²⁶⁴

This is not to suggest that streaming has not affected movie theatres. Its ascension has broadened one of the main fractures between exhibitors and distributors: release windows. This term refers to the amount of time that a film must contractually play exclusively in theatres before moving on to other formats like pay-television, DVD/Blu-ray, and TVOD. In the 1980s studios devised the windowing system as a means to avoid their own films competing with each other across different platforms (at that time paid cable and VHS). Theatres value the system so that consumers have ample time to pay for the big screen experience before a film migrates to at-home viewing. Finetuning this distribution choreography to the benefit of both theatres and studios has long been a point of contention. In earlier decades theatres enjoyed generous window periods hovering around six months or more, and exhibitors generally held the line against diminishing release windows for years. But the rise of at-home entertainment formats, not to mention media piracy and the sheer amount of new content being produced, have incentivized distributors to cycle their films through cinemas more quickly to maximize ancillary profits at a faster rate. This was especially the case in the early 2000s when DVD sales reached an all-time high. Disney boss Bob Iger sparked panic among theatres in 2005 when he suggested that recent sluggish box office returns across the industry might precipitate “the complete collapsing of

²⁶⁴ Rachel Koning Beals, “Independent and Art-House Movie Theaters Double down on Anti-Netflix Vision,” *MarketWatch*, February 27, 2017.

theatrical-to-DVD release windows”²⁶⁵ if exhibitors couldn’t produce better returns. Iger’s threat never came to pass, but it was clear that distributors would begin to chip away at theatrical windows despite exhibitor protests that long exclusive theatrical runs were of ultimate benefit to ancillary profits down the line. In 2000 the average time a major studio release spent exclusively in theatres was 170 days; by 2013 that number had dropped to 120, and by 2016 it was 90 days, a length that more or less sustained as the norm into 2020.²⁶⁶

At the intersection of digital transformation and industrial evolution, the skirmishes around release windows intensified with the rise of streaming services, particularly when Netflix and Amazon began feature film production and distribution in the 2010s. Studios with in-house streaming platforms naturally have fewer incentives to bother with long theatrical releases if they can meet consumer demand through their own channels. While Amazon has generally granted the usual theatrical demands for windows, Netflix has clashed with exhibitors on this issue. Rather than conforming to the usual 90-day window, Netflix has opted for a case-by-case approach. Netflix brass even floated the prospect of shortening windows from 90 days to 45 or 30 depending on the film. More aggressively, the streaming giant has started pushing “day-and-date” releasing—the simultaneous release of a film in theatres and through streaming and other platforms. In 2015 Netflix raised ire by announcing that its *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Sword of Destiny* (dir. Yuen Woo-ping), a sequel to Ang Lee’s hit film from 2000, would release this way. Most major theatre chains refused to show the film out of protest.²⁶⁷ Similar standoffs peppered the decade, often resulting in begrudging exhibitor agreements to highly reduced runs

²⁶⁵ Wade Major, “Window Pain,” *Boxoffice*, 142 no. 11 (2006): 64.

²⁶⁶ Andrew Wallenstein and Ramin Setoodeh, “Exhibitors Explode Over Netflix Bomb,” *Variety* 321 no 18 (November 5, 2013): 15-16.

²⁶⁷ Yvonne Villarreal, “Why so Many Theater Chains Are Refusing to Screen Netflix’s ‘Crouching Tiger’ Sequel,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 2016.

for Netflix films. In 2018 Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (which went on to win the Academy Award for Best Picture) played in theatres exclusively for just three weeks, while *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (dirs. Joel and Ethan Coen, 2018), played two weeks and *Bird Box* (dir. Susanne Bier, 2018) was in theatres for only one week before consumers could catch it on-demand, where it broke the Netflix record for the most streamed film in its opening week with 45 million views.²⁶⁸ *The Irishman* (2019), a Netflix production directed by Martin Scorsese, was a particularly fraught case. Netflix wanted a 45-day exclusive window to screen the highly anticipated gangster drama with AMC, Regal, and Cinemark. The chains balked at this and negotiations broke down. In the end the film opened in select cinemas in Los Angeles and New York for a week before expanding to other markets (though not via the major chains) and became available for streaming after a month. Given broad interest in *The Irishman*, its contentious theatrical release brought the subject of windows into wider awareness among moviegoers. It also held symbolic weight that a film directed by a legend of Hollywood (and a champion for celluloid film preservation) wasn't released in the market's three largest chains. The film essentially used mid-level circuits as a step ladder to VOD release—a body blow to the presumed centrality of theatrical exhibition. (It didn't help that Scorsese only turned to Netflix to make the film after major studios refused his financing requests.)

Independent and art house exhibitors have long found themselves on the outside listening in to industry debates about release windows. The impact of reduced windows on specialty exhibitors seems mixed. By and large studios want their tent-pole productions (the lucrative blockbusters that distributors build their release calendars around) to play in theatres long enough to extract as much money from paying customers committed to big-screen shows. Epics

²⁶⁸ Sarah Perez, "'Bird Box' Breaks a Netflix Record with 45M+ People Watching in Its First Week," *TechCrunch*, December 28, 2018.

and action movies naturally enjoy longer and more profitable runs in theatres than dialogue-driven dramas. It follows that the films more likely to be targeted for day-and-date (the release of a film in theatres and VOD services on the same day) are the “starry, prestige pics with commercial potential”²⁶⁹ classified as platform releases—films unveiled in a select few markets whose positive word-of-mouth triggers wider release in contrast to the saturated release pattern of major blockbusters. These crossover hits are highly lucrative to art houses, and thus the prospect of day-and-date releasing might be worrisome. What’s more, small, specialty exhibitors are unlikely to be able to broker the PVID revenue-sharing deals with distributors that AMC was able to secure with Universal. In a more positive spin, if major theatre chains exclusively focus on studio blockbusters in this new environment, art houses may become the de-facto outlet for the niche distributors of quality pictures recounted earlier. The exact ripple effects of recent shake-ups to release windows will likely not be understood for several years. But what is certain is that indie theatres and art houses will have to work even harder to distinguish themselves as places worthy of patronage at a time when large movie theatres are ceding release window ground to major studios in an effort to retain their own relevance as places to watch spectacle-driven cinema.

3.3 The Nonprofitization of Art Houses

“Independent Movie Houses Take Nonprofit Route”; “Boutique cinemas veer toward nonprofit scenes”; “Niches go nonprofit.” As these headlines suggest, a significant number of art houses have transitioned into nonprofit organizations in recent years. This development touches old and new theaters in urban and rural settings alike. In 2015 the long-running Osio Theatre in

²⁶⁹ Gregg Goldstein, “The Amazing Shrinking Window,” *Variety* 427 no. 2 (May 21, 2012): 11.

Monterrey, California, closed down under mounting debts in the wake of its shift to digital projection only to relaunch as a nonprofit in 2019 after a successful Kickstarter campaign.²⁷⁰ San Francisco's Roxie Cinema, one of the oldest continually operating cinemas in the world, became a nonprofit in 2009 to take advantage of grants and fundraising streams after years of diminishing box office returns. Other art houses transitioned well before the move to digital. The Hollywood Theatre in Portland reformed as a nonprofit in 1997 to help restore its rundown venue, placed on the National Registry for Historic Places in 1983, to its former glory. New art houses too are starting from scratch as nonprofits with the help of local stakeholders wanting to sustain alternative venues to megaplex culture. When the last art house closed down in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2020, the Charlotte Film Society, a long-time nonprofit organization of film enthusiasts, stepped forward with fundraising efforts for a new community cinema showing foreign, independent, and art house movies.²⁷¹ Whatever the specifics, the for-profit-to-nonprofit transition has become more than a passing trend—it's an established norm that heralds new organizational goals and management methods for art houses at a time when the free market, apparently, isn't enough to sustain them.

Some see this as long overdue. The founder of Art House Convergence (AHC), the trade organization for art house exhibitors across North America, began the group in 2006 with an eye toward the nonprofit form. Russ Collins views the transition as a natural evolution given that most fine or performing arts institutions became nonprofits during the twentieth century.²⁷² Art houses were simply late to catch on. The 2011 AHC annual conference featured several

²⁷⁰ Steve Dubb, "The For-Profit to Nonprofit Transition: A Movie Theater as Cultural Phoenix," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, February 27, 2019.

²⁷¹ Katie Peralta, "Life after the Manor Theatre: A nonprofit art house cinema is planned for a fast-changing part of NoDa," *Charlotte Agenda* July 29, 2020.

²⁷² Tatiana Siegal, "Niches Go Nonprofit," *Variety*, January 17, 2011.

informative sessions about nonprofitization and was described by *Variety* as a “watershed moment in the world of indie exhibition” where there was “less talk about popcorn sales and more about the ins and outs of 501c3 tax loopholes.”²⁷³ By the next year, in a compilation of three nation-wide surveys released by AHC, approximately 75% of art houses in the United States were operating as nonprofits. Today they comprise more than 80% of the participating theatres at AHC conferences. Nonprofit art houses have become so common that major exhibition groups have taken notice and are starting to seek their expertise. In June 2018 the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO) approved an amendment allowing nonprofit theatres to enjoy full benefits of NATO membership, something the assembly had previously resisted. Ostensibly a means to “have exhibition, all of exhibition, work together towards common goals” amid threats from streaming outlets and changing theatre-going habits, NATO’s announcement expressed hope at benefiting from nonprofit theatres’ “innovative ideas,” “commitment to the communities they serve,” and “extraordinary talents in guest relations.”²⁷⁴ Clearly NATO thinks it stands to learn from their nonprofit colleagues, but it’s worth wondering if its invitation indicates something deeper than mere camaraderie. A pessimistic reading might suggest that NATO saw an opportunity to ally itself with independent, grassroots organizations for the positive optics that such affiliations could lend. NATO’s announcement celebrates the “cool local eats” from neighborhood restaurants and microbreweries that many art houses offer, as well as the historic preservation efforts of theatres that many nonprofits have spearheaded.²⁷⁵ Tethering themselves to nonprofit theatres with particular social capital as community centers is a sum positive for NATO; it can point to the nonprofit members among their ranks as an

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Kathy Conroy, “Nonprofits Bring a Unique Perspective to NATO,” *Boxoffice* (October 2018): 24, 26.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 26.

indication of their benevolent, dynamic role as a trade group that backs both the biggest megaplex and the mom-and-pop art house. Far from fringe oddities, then, nonprofit art houses are catching the eyes of large theatre networks for how they can affect change in (for-profit) mainstream exhibition. And it appears that these two spheres of the exhibition sector will continue to merge. In October 2018, a few months after NATO began allowing in nonprofits, only nine nonprofit art houses had joined. By July 2020, around 50 had signed up,²⁷⁶ though this number likely soared that summer due to the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic and the perceived need for all theatres to rally together in support of shuttered exhibition venues. NATO's lobbying clout and access to resources were attractive selling points for small exhibitors to join the trade group (more on this in my conclusion).

How did art houses get to the point of nonprofitization? And what does this business model mean for them? A cursory sense of nonprofit arts funding will help address these questions. Nonprofits in the United States (designated by the Internal Revenue System tax code 501c) are exempt from most federal and state income taxes and pay no taxes on donations. Said donations and some memberships or annual dues are tax-deductible for donors or members. Nonprofits are also eligible to receive funds from private foundations, corporations, sponsorships, individual philanthropists, and government grants, offering multiple possible streams of revenue. They are not, however, allowed to support political candidates or engage in substantial lobbying. Now many art houses, like other arts organizations, fall under the 501c3 designation, which includes charitable, educational, literary, religious, or scientific groups or causes. Since nonprofits do not generate profits for shareholders, they ostensibly operate "because the government and many of its citizens believe that some important social goals

²⁷⁶ "Fwd: Save Your Cinema!" AHC Google Group thread, July 23, 2020.

[cannot] be achieved through the market.”²⁷⁷ In my research I have not been able to pinpoint when movie theatres first began to qualify for nonprofit status, or if they were always eligible for this designation yet simply didn’t understand themselves this way. Presumably art houses have always in theory qualified for 501c3 status as long as performing arts venues, museums, and dance companies have. From what I can tell, it was not until the 1990s, when many specialty and repertoire houses started to go out of business, that small exhibitors started to pursue this tax designation. Likely the long-ingrained US association of movies with commercial business has had a lot to do with this. In fact the earliest examples of nonprofit art houses that I have been able to locate are the Hollywood Theatre, one of my later case studies, and the Colonial Theatre in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. Both of these theatres incorporated as nonprofits in 1997 due to the historical and architectural significance of their vaudeville-era buildings. Additional targeted research could paint a broader picture, but it’s safe to say that movie theatres have not historically conceived of themselves as nonprofits until market conditions for them—and I’m speaking of small, independent art houses—swayed them to seek this designation.

All that said, substantial institutional arts funding in the United States dates back to the 1920s via prominent philanthropic outlets like The Carnegie Foundation and The Rockefeller Foundation, but tax-supported state and federal assistance has a spottier legacy. Widespread government support for arts groups began during the Great Depression as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the agency designed to put millions of Americans back to work and create funding streams for social projects.²⁷⁸ Such initiatives often met with scrutiny by fiscal and social conservatives who worried about funding radical leftist art or who bemoaned

²⁷⁷ Paul DiMaggio, “Can Culture Survive the Marketplace?” *Nonprofit Enterprise in the Arts: Studies in Mission and Constraint*, ed. Paul DiMaggio (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 85.

²⁷⁸ Peter Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 166.

direct federal intervention into the culture industry.²⁷⁹ This resistance intensified in the postwar era thanks to McCarthyistic disdain for avant-garde artists whose politics and loyalty to the country fell under suspicion. During this era, modern art itself was branded “a communist conspiracy” by high-ranking members of Congress as part of a domestic cultural politic.²⁸⁰ The 1960s saw a gradual thawing of this Cold War-era resistance. President John F. Kennedy’s administration lent positive optics to the cause and helped kickstart Lyndon B. Johnson’s subsequent administration’s initiatives, including the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965, a burst of state arts agencies, and a budding culture of corporate arts philanthropy.²⁸¹ Because of these new mechanisms, the explosion of higher education, and a surplus of baby boomer artists who matured into a culture more excited about the arts, nonprofit arts organizations in the United States skyrocketed in the last third of the century in step with nonprofits broadly, despite stagnating levels of federal support owing to Republican-led efforts to defund arts agencies.²⁸²

Movie theaters, as I suggested earlier, have never been natural candidates for charitable giving. Fine and performing arts such as orchestras, ballets, chamber music groups, live theatre, art studios, and museums have historically garnered most forms of public and private funding.²⁸³ This may be because these venues struggle less to legitimize themselves as venues of cultural prestige or as social services and thus worthy of financial patronage. Movie theatres in the popular imagination—even art houses—remain largely understood as for-profit businesses

²⁷⁹ Elizabeth Cavendish, “Public Provision of the Performing Arts: A Case Study of the Federal Theatre Project in Connecticut,” *Nonprofit Enterprise in the Arts: Studies in Mission and Constraint*, ed. Paul DiMaggio (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 140.

²⁸⁰ Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite*, 166.

²⁸¹ Paul DiMaggio, “Introduction,” *Nonprofit Enterprise in the Arts: Studies in Mission and Constraint*, ed. Paul DiMaggio (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4.

²⁸² DiMaggio, “Can Culture Survive the Marketplace?”, 80-81.

²⁸³ Paul DiMaggio, “Nonprofit Organizations and the Intersectional Division of Labor in the Arts,” *The Non-Profit Sector: A Research Handbook*, second edition, eds. Walter W. Powell and Richard Steinberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 432.

peddling commercial entertainment. This reputation may cause prospective donors to direct their charitable contributions to more “cultured” enterprises. One nonprofit art house administrator acknowledged that “It’s been hard at times to get the community to see us as an arts institution. People wonder why we’re a nonprofit if we’re selling tickets. There’s a dividing line in many people’s minds between popular art like movies and art like ballet.”²⁸⁴

Art houses are slowly working to change this impression as they recast themselves as direct bearers of distinct community value. But this transformation depends on the labour of various stakeholders to revamp cinemas in the absence of government support. Starting an art house or rescuing one from disrepair today has taken on the air of community start-up ventures in which volunteers and investors articulate (and devote funds or unpaid hours to) a set of values or functions that a local cinema can satisfy. Obtaining nonprofit status often encourages more volunteers or investors to get behind these early efforts. When a small exhibitor is threatened with closure, or if intrepid stakeholders want to start a new art house, it is often left to local associations or individuals to invest the time and resources into forming a 501c3 organization, galvanizing community investments in a long-term project, arranging for the purchase or renovation of a theatre, and overseeing the transition of bureaucratic operations to a staff and board of directors. These efforts are often fueled by crowdfunding outfits like Kickstarter, as mentioned earlier. Trade publications in both the nonprofit and exhibition sectors started to pick up on these efforts around 2012—the same time when film industry honchos began seriously warning exhibitors to transition to digital projection. *The Wall Street Journal* spotlighted the national trend in a 2012 article in which AHC founder Russ Collins claimed that then-recent

²⁸⁴ Brent Lang and Matt Donnelly, “Inside Indie Theatres Battle to Survive,” *Variety* March 26, 2019.

surveys found that roughly 75% of small movie theatres (not defined in the article but presumably he's referring to art houses) had by that time become nonprofits.²⁸⁵

In short, nonprofitization has been a matter of survival for art houses. This shift is an embrace of a tax model and operational ethos that opens the door to crucial fundraising. Paul DiMaggio echoes the well-known concept that “market failure” among arts organizations—that the arts cost more to produce/exhibit than the public is willing to pay—necessitates indirect subsidization via tax benefits, grants, or philanthropic support.²⁸⁶ Over the twentieth century many public arts venues faced market failure and needed these forms of funding. The art house sector trudged through its own market failure in recent decades owing to changes in media consumption habits and the expenses of digital projection technologies. This put the squeeze on small exhibitors whose only options were to adopt more commercial programming or shut down. With the zest of cultural distinction that once defined art houses via foreign films and upscale atmospheres on the wane since the 1970s, it has become harder for these theatres to attract audiences through their traditional model. Nonprofitization is an attempt to make up for this deficit. Rachel Hart, Administrative Director at the Roxie Theatre in San Francisco, says that going nonprofit “is becoming the new way to stay open because it's hard to convince the public to buy tickets to art documentaries.”²⁸⁷ Ned Hinkle and Ivy Moylan, employees at the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts (highlighted in my introduction as an exemplary model of twentieth century art house distinction), incorporated as the nonprofit Brattle Theatre Foundation in 2001 to secure new funding streams when ticket sales fell owing to DVDs. Says Hinkle: “We

²⁸⁵ Ian Sherr, “Boutique Cinemas Veer Toward Nonprofit Scene,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 12, 2012.

²⁸⁶ DiMaggio, “Nonprofit Organizations,” 437.

²⁸⁷ “Independent Movie Houses Take Nonprofit Route,” *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, September 7, 2012.

would not have lasted the last 20 years if we were not a nonprofit. ... We would have had to change our programming model, and we didn't want to do that."²⁸⁸

For some art houses, nonprofitization fits snugly with neighborhood economic revitalization efforts or the preservation of culturally significant theatres. This lends greater civic impetus to a theatre's operation and identity. Many theatres built in the first decades of the twentieth century shut down in the 1990s and 2000s owing to badly needed repairs that they could not afford. Partnering with neighborhood development or preservation groups gives nascent art houses the time and resources to find investors, recruit feasibility studies, conduct market research, and draft architectural studies while also attracting financial backing from local organizations with simpatico interests.²⁸⁹ The Colonial Theatre in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, a performing arts venue that opened in 1903, went out of business as a for-profit movie theatre in 1996. Community members joined with the Phoenixville Area Economic Development Corporation to incorporate as the Association for the Colonial Theatre in 1997 as part of its goal to save legacy buildings and revive economically struggling areas of the city. This move prompted other local organizations, even a community health foundation, to donate money because of perceived economic, health, and civic benefits a restored Colonial Theatre would bring the city of Phoenixville.²⁹⁰ San Francisco's Roxie, Vogue, and Balboa Theatres;²⁹¹ the County Theatre in Doylestown, Pennsylvania;²⁹² the Ambler Theatre in Ambler, Pennsylvania;²⁹³ and the Hollywood Theatre in Portland are other examples of art houses whose transition into nonprofits were underwritten by civic or preservation organizations.

²⁸⁸ Lang and Donnelly, "Inside Indie Theatres."

²⁸⁹ Brian Real, "Revitalizing Historic Movie Theatres as Community Nonprofits," (Masters thesis, Johns Hopkins University 2008), 17.

²⁹⁰ "History", The Colonial Theatre.

²⁹¹ "Independent Movie Houses."

²⁹² Real, "Revitalizing Historic Movie Theatres," 33-35.

²⁹³ "Success Stories – Historic Theatres," Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission.

The trend toward nonprofitization has wide implications for the art house sector from economic, organizational, and cultural standpoints. Chiefly, nonprofitization opens up multiple possible revenue streams beyond ticket and concessions sales. Nonprofit art houses receive the majority of their contributed revenue from individual patrons, not federal, state, or foundational funding agencies, so incentives are strong to cultivate long-term relationships with as many audiences as possible. Annual memberships, a key source of income for all nonprofit arts organizations, have become vital to art houses. Usually tiered in price, offering members different perks according to their level of buy-in, such as free or discounted tickets or concessions items, VIP access to special events, preferential seating, or exclusive newsletters, memberships provide theatres with a baseline of revenue while providing members with feelings of altruistic social capital. Unlike one-time grant contributions linked to specific criteria or projects, memberships compel purchasers to frequent a theatre in order to feel the exchange-value of their contribution. Best practices of how to maximize membership development and retention is a recurring theme at art house management conferences, as my next chapter lays out.

While providing some protective financial cover, contributed revenue makes theatres accountable to a larger base of people and social causes. As a result, nonprofitization has ushered in a new community-centric era of art houses in which cinemas must demonstrate their value to one's locality. Just showing movies is insufficient as a singular or even primary principle. Scholars have long noted the ways that communities benefit from local exhibitors. Gomery and Forsher, for example, have described how eager retailers were to set up shop near nickelodeon and small cinemas in the early years of theatrical exhibition for the increased foot traffic they generated.²⁹⁴ Many small exhibitors also boosted their benevolent images by assisting with local

²⁹⁴ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*; James Forsher, *The Community of Cinema: How Cinema and Spectacle Transformed the American Downtown* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003).

charitable causes or hosting war-bond efforts, but “as the ownership of the theatres passed out of local hands, these activities largely ceased.”²⁹⁵ When multiplex and later megaplex theatres emerged across malls and suburbs, single-screen, small exhibitors struggled to sustain the community prominence they once held as gathering places for socializing and outreach. Nonprofitization has set the conditions for a renaissance of this model. Unlike large arts organizations with a few key institutional benefactors, nonprofit art houses live or die by their local contacts. “If you’re a nonprofit [art house], you are kind of owned by the community,” says Connie White, an art house booker.²⁹⁶ Nonprofits thus construct discourses of communal relevance as grassroots businesses that provide a social good. It’s common to see carefully crafted mission statements on art house websites claiming devotion to functions beyond the screening of hard-to-reach foreign films. This perspective affects all rungs of a theatre’s operation, from programming (screening films that aren’t commercially viable but fulfill part of a core organizational identity) to collaborations with outside groups devoted to specific causes, to campaigns or events targeted at specific social issues. Art houses are thus increasingly sites for “mixed goods,” a term to describe the combination of real market products (tickets to a movie) and the intangible “collective consumption goods” that the wider population gains from the existence of a venue (stronger social ties, a sense of civic pride).

Education services are the most obvious way that today’s nonprofit art houses activate social value. Many theatres no longer think it satisfactory to exhibit films and documentaries in the name of edification; instead they situate media in socially relevant contexts that promote reflection about their moral or artistic import. The more active theatres in this regard have

²⁹⁵ R.K. Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2006), 37.

²⁹⁶ Siegal, “Niches Go Nonprofit.”

developed entire infrastructures—trained educators and staff, appropriated building space, satellite properties, etc.—for pedagogic purposes. Examples run the gamut from conventional activities, like hosting post-screening Q&A sessions with invited experts and community members, to more elaborate efforts like classes in visual literacy, film history, or film production. These initiatives are often in collaboration with public schools, universities, other nonprofits, or civic organizations. The Belcourt Theatre in Nashville, Tennessee, provides a good instance of this. Its Education and Engagement Program hosts frequent “Q&A, post-screening discussions with critics, academics and professional experts, and panel discussion with community partners”²⁹⁷ in its devoted Jackson Education and Engagement Space to converse about the relevancy of filmic content to off-screen social issues. Its Mobile Movie Theatre, meanwhile, partners with area educational groups to build pop-up cinemas in classrooms and libraries throughout middle Tennessee to teach visual literacy to students.

The impetus for art houses to serve their communities has gained added relevance in the highly fraught social and political environment that the United States and much of the West has found itself in over the last 20 years. As the exhibition industry regained its footing after the digital transition, art houses stumbled headlong into the Culture Wars, a popular shorthand describing, among other things, a public atmosphere characterized by contentious personal and policy conversations, high levels of political and social tribalism, the rise of extremist doctrines across all ideological persuasions, and an inability to cohere around a common reality owing to deleterious misinformation platformed through social media and fueled by, among other sources, the office of US president Donald Trump. The current socio-political climate can best be described as fractured to the point of exhaustion. A number of events we needn’t detail mark

²⁹⁷ “About the Program,” The Belcourt Theatre.

this,²⁹⁸ but some pressure points include the rise of and kickbacks against social justice movements like BlackLivesMatter and MeToo, debates about the limits of free speech on college campuses and the associated settling of “Cancel Culture,” and the storming of the US Capitol Building by insurrectionist Trump supporters, spurred on by the president himself, claiming election fraud without evidence. Public controversies and moral outrages have become fodder for citizens and politicians to score points for one’s team in this vaguely defined battle for the ideological soul of the country. I find it uncontroversial to say that everything has become politicized, and “every decision about where to shop or what to drive or what to watch is now an opportunity to express our political identities.”²⁹⁹

In this atmosphere it’s no surprise that cultural sectors have come under more scrutiny for their political allegiances or performances. The nonprofit arts sector has not always been associated with advocacy since most of these organizations exist for a reason unrelated to civic causes (as is the case with art house movie theatres). But as more research on arts nonprofits accrues, it’s clear that in recent years they “have sought to make themselves more relevant to community issues by engaging in advocacy.”³⁰⁰ Neutrality under the banner of commercial entertainment for its own sake no longer appears a viable option, particularly as many nonprofits operate in left-leaning university towns or large urban areas where calls for civic involvement are highest. Nor is it enough for many nonprofit arts organizations to justify their existence merely as vessels for cultural enlightenment. In the case of art houses, though nonprofits cannot endorse

²⁹⁸ For example: The controversial awarding of the 2000 presidential election to George W. Bush; the 9/11 Islamist-extremist terror attacks in 2001; the subsequent US invasion and occupation of Iraq; an ongoing War on Terror that moved terms like “enhanced interrogation” and “waterboarding” into the vernacular; the elections of US presidents Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden (each of which, to vastly different degrees of veracity, were cast as illegitimate); and instances of excessive police brutality against black citizens and associated national protests and riots.

²⁹⁹ Michael Grunwald, “How Everything Became the Culture War,” *Politico* (November/December 2018).

³⁰⁰ Mirae Kim and Dyana P. Mason, “Representation and Diversity, Advocacy, and Nonprofit Arts Organizations,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2018): 49–71.

political candidates or lobby government officials, nonprofitization has clearly nudged many art houses (and made it fiscally viable) to reconsider long-held approaches to programming norms, initiate new policies in the name of equity, diversity, and inclusion, and promote political agendas as left-leaning institutions of cultural progressivism.

Among specialty cinemas, where the link between showing movies and political activism has rarely been obvious, advocacy can take multiple forms. I go into greater detail on these in my next chapter, but to build a general picture, one of these strands of advocacy, what I call “screen service,” suggests how art houses make concerted efforts or outright quota dedications to screen media featuring historically marginalized or underrepresented populations, or simply to show films whose social or political messages fall in line with their values. Outside of the screen itself, nonprofit art houses find ways to directly interact with community groups and stakeholders, often other nonprofit organizations or public schools, to provide services that otherwise may go unfulfilled. Education programs, financial support for filmmakers, and outreach programs to disenfranchised youth, for instance, have become common dimensions of the nonprofit art house. Finally, the transition to nonprofitization, in tandem with wider cultural events such as the MeToo and BlackLivesMatter movements, have spurred some art houses to reconsider their internal organizational policies. This might include issues in regard to hiring, employee-employer relations, workplace harassment, unpaid volunteer labor, the race- and sex-based composition of executive boards and staff, content warning considerations, disability access, and a host of other workplace issues. As reflected in the industry conversations I will break down in my next chapter, as well as the first-hand descriptions of art house operations from administrators in chapter 5, advocacy (both on and off the theatre screen) has become a staple element of art houses’ self-understanding as cultural organizations.

In sum, in addition to helping with revenue, nonprofitization provides art houses with a framework for presenting to the public as both grassroots businesses and as cultural institutions with civic purpose. Nonprofit status further enables theatres to activate greater social capital as institutions worthy of patronage. This capital is based not on the distinction of “foreignness” or “high class” that art houses of the past traded on but rather on feelings of social or political cohesion and participation. In the best light, as art houses continue to pitch themselves as forces for social change, they further displace the traditional art house model of “exclusive distinction” for the culturally elite in favor of a model of multi-purpose service-providers whose screening of art films is secondary to other concerns.

Lest this view appear too rosy, there are skeptical perspectives on the ascension of the nonprofit sector. Some see in recent decades the rise of a “nonprofit industrial complex” that applies hegemonic business practices to the nonprofit ethos in order to compete with the for-profit sector. Critics argue that this undermines the potential for social good and inclusion (like tax dodges which inadvertently create other kinds of capital that ultimately feeds inequity rather than addresses it).³⁰¹ The extreme growth of nonprofits over the last decade, even as public and private funding to the sector dipped,³⁰² has led to more competition for funding from fewer sources of revenue. This explains new degrees of bureaucratization and management professionalization in the nonprofit sector, harnessed to efforts to navigate complex tax policies and maximize sources of income. With this ingrained imbalance in place many nonprofits have “started expanding commercial ventures and applying business principles to their operations.”³⁰³

³⁰¹ *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, ed. Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

³⁰² Some estimates claim the US nonprofit sector grew by as much as 25% during the 2000s. Mirae Kim, “Characteristics of Civically Engaged Nonprofit Arts Organizations,” *Nonprofit and Volunteer Sector Quarterly* 46 no. 1 (2017): 175-198.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 176.

Examples of this might include more benign forms like merchandizing, represented by things like gift shops hawking T-shirts or coffee cups, or more serious allegations of mismanagement of funds or excessive salaries for executive officers. One specific complaint argues that nonprofits have fallen too far into the “patronage model,” an obsession with membership and donors, comprised mostly of the upper-middle class with expendable income, at the expense of the most underserved and marginalized members of the community.³⁰⁴ Obviously art houses differ wildly in the resources they have available for outreach and the needs of their communities; a one-screen art house in Montana can’t be expected to provide the same service as a multi-million-dollar charitable nonprofit in Chicago. Art houses, which until recent years were virtually all for-profit, are also not likely the kind of institutions that the harshest critics of the nonprofit sector have in mind when leveling their critiques. That said, as some art houses grow out of the one-screen specialty cinema model, they have started to professionalize their operations in ways more reminiscent of commercial businesses. Many have also made lofty public commitments to their communities, so they now bear the responsibility of following through as public service providers. Not nearly enough scholarship has considered how nonprofit organizations strike a balance, if they do, between market and civic functions.³⁰⁵ DiMaggio encapsulates this nicely when he writes: “We need to better understand the nonprofit enterprise in the presentation and exhibition of art forms that have in the past been largely commercial: Who are the pioneers, what causes them to choose the nonprofit form, and how do their organizations’ structures and missions differ from their for-profit counterparts?”³⁰⁶ As the nonprofitization of arts houses is a

³⁰⁴ Mirae Kim, “Balancing Civic and Market Functions: A Study of Nonprofit Organizations,” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2014); Doug Borwick, *Building Communities, Not Audiences: The Future of the Arts in the United States* (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Arts Engaged, 2012).

³⁰⁵ Kim, “Balancing Civic and Market Functions,” 9.

³⁰⁶ Paul DiMaggio, “Nonprofit Organizations and the Intersectoral Division of Labor in the Arts,” *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, eds. Walter W. Powell and Richard Steinberg (London: Yale University Press: 2006), 454.

relatively new trend, scholars and administrators are saddled with similar lingering questions: How do art houses navigate the complex negotiations between their civic and market functions as nonprofits in a decidedly for-profit media marketplace? What are the tension points among commercial, artistic, and civil mandates in this environment? Who or what is ultimately served by this reorganization within the sector? While my following chapters address these questions indirectly, it's clear that more targeted research will be needed.

The nonprofitization of art houses occurred due to financial pressures at a culturally receptive time for service-oriented theatres. While select theatres had transitioned to the nonprofit form at least as far as back as the 1990s, this business model decision became a verified trend within the industry thanks in large part to the founding of a small group of administrators at the Sundance Film Festival just after the digital transition in the 2000s. My next chapter, a deep dive into the Art House Convergence trade group, builds a focused picture of the work art houses have done to rebrand themselves as more than movie theatres since this point.

Chapter 4 | The House that AHC Built: Art House Convergence, Industry Work, and Nonprofit Rebranding

“When it's late into the evening and you're the last one left in the office answering just one more e-mail, it's nice to know there are others out there who share the same passion and level of commitment to sustaining the art house.”³⁰⁷

A March 2019 *Variety* article struck a long-standing nerve among art cinema operators. “Inside Indie Movie Theatres’ Battle to Survive” paints a grim picture for the viability of small, off-mainstream theatres in the age of home-based entertainment and eye-grabbing blockbusters. The piece spotlights the closures of theatres like Cable Car Cinema in Providence, Rhode Island, and Varsity Theatre, in Des Moines, Iowa, as well as the herculean efforts of other cinemas to stay afloat, as worrying signs of a slow, steady decline for the art house theatre.³⁰⁸ Proprietors are depicted in the article as industrious yet stressed-out miracle workers who have to “get creative” and “wear many hats” to generate patronage. Some benign efforts include dressing employees as famous film characters to draw crowds, or fundraisers to install new leather seats and improved décor. Other small chains like Cinergy Entertainment Group have gone more commercial in step with practices that mainstream multiplexes have integrated since the 1980s by investing in leisure options well beyond film screenings, such as bowling alleys, escape rooms, and virtual reality games. By its end the article evokes precarity and indicates gloom: operating art house theatres comes with serious hurdles and question marks—so enjoy such venues while you can before the marquee lights go off for good.

³⁰⁷ Jordana Meade, administrator of the Enzian Theatre in Maitland, Florida, quoted in Tara Schroeder, “Art House Alliance,” *Film Journal International* (April 2011): 70-74.

³⁰⁸ The National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO) counts theatres or chains with 75 screens or fewer as “independent.” “Small” theatres, with between 1 and 4 screens, comprised 11% of all screens in the United States in 2018. Brent Lang and Matt Donnelly, “Inside Indie Theatres’ Battle to Survive,” *Variety*, March 26, 2019.

The article faced blowback from exhibitors fighting in the trenches. Leading the charge was Art House Convergence (AHC), a consortium of independent exhibitors, distributors, and their institutional allies founded in 2008 to encourage networking and best-practice strategies among North American art houses. Amidst a barrage of online complaints about the one-sided pessimism of the piece, AHC Managing Editor Alison Kozberg fired off an open letter to *Variety*, writing that while art houses face the same difficulties as many arts institutions, they are doing “far more than just keeping the lights on.”³⁰⁹ Today’s art houses, she stresses, are dynamic places for mixed-media presentations, education opportunities, community outreach, arts partnerships, and cross-cultural dialogue at a time when social and political divisions strain public discourse, underlining that “independent cinemas that prioritize community engagement and ambitious programming are thriving.” Rather than dwell on unfavorable industrial conditions or suggest commercial strategies to compete with larger chains, her letter reinforces that successful art houses “aren’t merely trying to ‘out-hustle the bigger circuits’.” Kozberg instead articulates art houses through the prisms of cultural enlightenment and civic activism. Whereas *Variety* touts them as places to catch “obscure foreign language movies,” AHC dubs them “screenings that are indispensable invitations to encounter diverse perspectives while enlarging one’s understanding of the world.” Buttressed by anecdotes of theatres that have recently doubled audience attendance, raised funds for renovations, ensured programming quotas for gender parity, or launched education initiatives, Kozberg’s letter garnered dozens of supportive comments from independent exhibitors at odds with *Variety*’s doomsday appraisal. Art houses aren’t dying, the crowd clamoured, they’re simply thriving in new ways—ways that *Variety* had clearly failed to mark with its biases toward Hollywood metrics of success.

³⁰⁹ Alison Kozberg, “A Letter to Variety,” Art House Convergence, March 28, 2019.

AHC's return volley to *Variety* points to the group's central place in promoting art houses as more than mere bastions for cinephilia and distinction—or simply as poor cousins to Hollywood's megaplex network. Founded as an gathering for small exhibitors under the shade of the Sundance Film Festival, AHC has stepped out as a full-fledged association “dedicated to advancing excellence and sustainability in community-based, mission-driven media exhibition ... [by defining] best practices for hundreds of theatres and festivals located throughout North America.”³¹⁰ AHC carries out this mission through an annual conference, featuring dozens of informational sessions, workshops, and networking events, as well as secondary conferences and data-driven resources it makes available to members. Its annual conference in Midway, Utah, designed as a “pre-game” to Sundance,³¹¹ attracts high-profile figures in film including historian Leonard Maltin, former Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences President Cheryl Boone Isaacs, and documentary filmmaker Michael Moore, not to mention a large number of sponsors, vendors, and insiders to independent production and distribution. AHC membership and press coverage continue to expand as it helps art houses navigate new exhibition quandaries. By 2020 the AHC conference, billed by *Filmmaker Magazine* as “a crucial voice on the cinema landscape,”³¹² had ballooned into a 4-day occasion with over 750 registrants, comprising representatives from single-screen cinemas, art house chains, film festivals, museums, microcinemas, university cinemas, distributors, buying groups, vendors, and others—a truly wide range of stakeholders invested in the future of independent media. If the art house is dying, nobody told AHC.

³¹⁰ “About Art House Convergence,” Art House Convergence.

³¹¹ Josh Leake, “Art House Convergence 2015: Conference Pumps Blood into Indie Theatres,” *MovieMaker*, March 25, 2016.

³¹² Tom Hall, “2015 AHC Learning from *The Interview* at the 2015 Art House Convergence: Sundance's Keri Putnam Calls for New Distribution System,” *Filmmaker Magazine*, January 21, 2015.

Part support group for battle-fatigued exhibitors, part resource center for prospective art house entrepreneurs, AHC is an important marker of something that had been formulating for years in the independent exhibition sector: the need for coordinated strategies to recast art houses for the new digital century. As my previous chapters detail, Barbara Wilinsky writes of art cinemas in wake of the 1948 *Paramount* decision as a necessary alternative to the mainstream film industry. With a shortage of new films from major studios, whose divestitures of theatres had thrown business into flux, small cinemas turned to reissues, B-movies, and especially foreign films to fill their screens. In doing so these cinemas courted distinction from mass culture at a time of emerging class realizations among American audiences who sought ways of standing out from the herd by participating in “legitimized” culture. Art houses arose at an advantageous time for smaller exhibitors whose attention to “art films” (what Wilinsky describes as those “more adult, intelligent films than those produced by Hollywood”)³¹³ complemented a wider interest in European intellectualism and the academic study of film.

But as my last chapter claimed, art houses operating since the digital transition and the streaming revolution have had to rethink the appeals that brought its twentieth-century forbearers to life. AHC emerged just a year after the Hollywood industry released its Digital Cinema Initiatives specifications meant to standardize the delivery and projection of digital films across the nation’s theatres. The group formed to help shepherd small, art film theatres through this period of hand-wringing and self-reflection, producing a collective reckoning about the traditional for-profit art house model based on cultural distinction, cinephilic discoveries, repertory adventures, or prurient desires—the stuff of twentieth-century art houses. Now roughly

³¹³ Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 4.

fifteen years after the adoption of digital, AHC, “an informal trade organization” of art houses,³¹⁴ has installed itself at the vanguard of a reworked model stressing one thing above all else: nonprofitization. The majority of art houses have transitioned into this business structure in the last twenty years to survive the precarity of the free market diagnosed by *Variety*’s article. This migration has changed how art houses do business under the banner of specialty exhibition. Whereas in postwar years they courted symbolic distinction generated by differentiation from commercial theatres within the exhibition market, art houses today largely pursue strategies associated with content diversification, community connections, and political activation. In one sense this might be a tacit acknowledgement of the art house’s surrender to megaplex culture. Not able to compete with the consolidation of more screens within fewer theatres and associated logics of grandeur and spectacle of corporate exhibition chains, art houses have responded by contracting back into community as a distinct form of exhibition that eschews overt profit motives altogether. In another sense AHC’s work to refasten art houses offers a fresh understanding of small exhibitors as local resistance to mainstream exhibition culture—ways vastly different from those represented by art houses in the postwar boom. Either way, AHC has clearly raised the profile of art houses within film culture. It marks a concerted effort among a league of changemakers and stakeholders to reimagine this exhibition form after decades of precarity stretching back to the grindhouse turn among many in their ranks.

To account for this key organization within the story of digital-age art houses, this chapter maps AHC as a discourse community predicated on an expanded definition of art houses within the frame of nonprofit professionalization. As Kozberg’s letter to *Variety* suggests, this work departs from the traditional role of trade groups for independent exhibitors. Rather than

³¹⁴ David Bordwell, “2012 AHC Pandora’s Digital Box: Art House, Smart House,” *Observations on Film Art*, January 30, 2012.

prioritizing governmental lobbying or industrial negotiating, AHC directs its members inward toward reflection about art houses as mission-driven cultural centers, proposing a variety of best practices to achieve a spectrum of objectives. To appreciate these objectives within film-historical context, we need an idea of preceding organizations devoted to supporting theatres other than the largest mainstream circuits. The first part of this chapter recounts such efforts, hovering in particular over the Allied States Association (1921-1966); the National Independent Theatre Exhibitors Association (1975-1985); and the International Society of Specialty Film Exhibitors and Distributors (1998-1999). These examples provide a telling contrast to AHC's efforts at redirecting art houses away from market-industrial concerns and toward nonprofit and arts administrative strategies. I then survey AHC itself, accounting for its origins and basic services as an organization before analyzing AHC discourse via its conference activities. I conclude by setting AHC in the context of contemporary associations for independent exhibitors and describing recent crises that have threatened its longevity.

In analyzing the work of AHC and its annual conference I am drawing upon the work of John Caldwell, who helped popularize the study of labor performed by industrial professionals and tradespeople historically omitted from the purview of film studies. His bottom-up approach to media production brought clarity to the everyday work and discourses circulating “on the ground level” that contribute to macro-level industrial actions “up the ladder” of production and consumption. Caldwell focuses on cultures of production such as television networks, film studios, and trade groups for equipment and technology specialists; this chapter applies his broad tactic to AHC, an administrative body that gathers together professional stakeholders from a web of otherwise unaffiliated organizations. AHC conferences can be read as what Caldwell dubs “semi-embedded deep texts,” described as “forms of symbolic communication between media

professionals [that] help to facilitate ‘inter-group’ relations ... [but which are] simultaneously designed to spur and stimulate ancillary discussion and eventual awareness in the public sphere of the consumer as well.”³¹⁵ However, the self-reflexive labor practices that Caldwell documented didn’t have the same political/cultural engagement in mind as AHC does. There is intellectual work going on within AHC to create a conceptual frame for how to make the art house sector more “common,” and this specificity is important to draw out. As Kozberg’s letter and her subsequent interviews point out, AHC focuses on the internal work of art houses to fasten a distinct exhibition form, not as a subset of theatres that merely react to larger industrial trends that it has little say in. AHC conferences are “charged sites” where the contours and goals of the art house industry are proposed and debated “in order to collectively re-imagine a common future or contested present.”³¹⁶ The group has a particular common future in mind for art houses—a nonprofit model based on diversification, community, and activism—which gets formed and tweaked among its administrators in AHC spaces. No other trade group for independent exhibitors has been able to approach the sustained, in-depth industrial reflexivity that AHC has managed over the last fifteen years.

Before going too far ahead, it is worth recalling how to think about “independent” exhibitors to sharpen the relation between dominant Hollywood studios and the smaller theatres operating alongside. To return to a clarification from my introductory chapter, independent theatres are not synonymous with art houses. In Wilinsky’s study of the postwar moment, art houses are understood as venues catering to audience interest in films deemed of artistic merit in exhibitory contexts favoring intellectual engagement over spectacle-escapism. This designation

³¹⁵ John Caldwell, “Cultures of Production: Studying Industry’s Deep Texts, Reflective Rituals, and Managed Self-Disclosers,” *Media Industries: History, Theory, Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2009): 203.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

has nothing to do with whether a theatre is perceived as *independent*, however. Then and now, independence among exhibitors is a complex concept that shifts over time according to the contours of industry and culture. The periods before and after the *Paramount* decision in the late 1940s produced different articulations of independent theatres. In chapter 2 I discussed the dominance of major Hollywood studios and their theatre holdings prior to the 1948 *Paramount* case. Studio-owned or affiliated theatres operated in the best urban markets but comprised a mere 15% of all theatres in the country. Those theatres unaffiliated with major studios could be construed as independent given the industrial context of the time. These lines were not always stark, however. Some of the largest unaffiliated chains contained hundreds of theatres and enjoyed bargaining clout more akin to the Big 5 studios than with smaller unaffiliated theatres. Still other chains dominated particular geographical zones at the expense of smaller exhibitors.

After studios began divesting themselves of their theatres, however, the notion of an independent theatre became murkier. It was no longer a matter of ownership under or affiliation with one of the Big Five. Major studios sold their theatre holdings to successor corporations that themselves were subject to specific divestiture orders passed down by the Department of Justice. For example, National General Corp., the successor to the theatres owned by Twentieth Century-Fox, operated 549 theatres in 1951 when its consent decree was finalized. By 1957, when its specific divestitures had rolled through the courts, it owned just 321.³¹⁷ Are these successor theatres, or the surviving theatres subsequently sold off by successors, automatically considered “independent” strictly on the basis of separation from the Big Five? Trade discourse of the time suggests widespread ambiguity about how to designate independent from non-independent theatres in the wake of *Paramount*. Screen count and industrial clout for securing positive

³¹⁷ Michael Conant, “The Paramount Decrees Reconsidered,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 44, no. 4 (Autumn 1981): 102.

licensing terms seemed to be the broad criteria for drawing the line, but again, this lacked uniformity. Theatres designating themselves as art houses were more likely to adopt the independent moniker partly for reasons of discursive differentiation from mainstream culture—a shrewd business decision to take in the 1950s. But the vast majority of theatres belonging to the trade organizations featured in this chapter (before AHC) were more likely to be small or mid-sized theatre chains whose moderate screen count or industrial influence formed an impression of economic marginalization. These conditions necessitated trade organizations whose lobbying efforts could work against the most restrictive policies favoring more dominant exhibitor chains.

Whatever the exact contours, in the 1940s the majority of the nation’s theatres were classified as “independent,” according to Schatz, and had been “systematically relegated to the weakest and least profitable position in the movie marketplace”³¹⁸ owing to less- than-favorable trade conditions imposed by the major distributors and largely ignored by antitrust regulators. These practices included block-booking (in which studios sold several films as a unit to exhibitors, forcing theatres that desired one particular film—usually a star vehicle—to purchase several others—usually lower-grade product—as a bundle); blind-bidding (a tactic requiring theatre owners to place bids on films upfront before seeing them, in effect guaranteeing that theatres took on more financial risk); and other policies. Headstrong theatre owners or regional trade group reps organized offshoots of trade associations in order to advocate for changes to these conditions. By sheer numbers alone (over 75% of theatres in the country were “unaffiliated”), independent exhibitors could bring enough pressure to bear on the antitrust branch of the US Department of Justice, and had been doing so since the 1920s, when the first of the independent exhibitor trade groups formed. These organizations fought against cumbersome

³¹⁸ Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, 18.

licensing conditions, lopsided percentage shares on film rentals, convoluted contracts passed down from distributors, and other practices that the studios used to maintain an advantage over exhibitors. Such independent trade groups considered themselves part of the film industry yet also opposed major studios and larger theatre circuits that dictated licensing terms.

It's hard to say what level of involvement the postwar art house had with trade organizations devoted to independent exhibitors. Trade coverage of these associations tend to feature representatives from regional affiliates rather than individual theatres. Wilinsky's study omits this question; in fact she does not clearly distinguish between art houses and independent exhibitors at all, casting them as one collective in opposition to a dominant exhibition culture. Thus it remains unclear if the single-screen cinemas at the heart of the postwar art house movement were actively involved in the trade efforts of large associations, or if those efforts were chiefly the domain of larger exhibitor chains that did not specialize in art house fare. This is an area for further research. We can recall that Wilinsky's study limits itself to art houses in the New York and Chicago markets—the prime markets for theatres, in other words, and not representative of the conditions for art houses in more rural areas that may have more need of national organizations for independent exhibitors. What will become clearer, though, is that AHC differs from these foundational trade groups in that its main goal is to promote the *art house* sector in particular as a new nonprofit iteration rather than advocating for changes to rental contracts for *independent* exhibitors writ large.

4.1 Industry Advocacy among Independent Exhibitor Organizations

AHC is not the first organized attempt at serving the interests of art houses or independent exhibitors. Associations representing independent theatrical exhibitors have existed

almost as long as theatrical exhibition itself. One of the earliest trade groups in this vein was the Allied States Association (ASA), a consortium of theatres founded in 1923 by frustrated members of the Motion Picture Theatre Owners of America (MPTOA), the group formed in 1920 to work against Famous Players-Lasky Corp.'s (soon to be Paramount) policy of acquiring theatres. In response to the formation of ASA, MPTOA, wanting to preserve its numbers, committed anew to serving the interests of independent exhibitors in 1926, at which point ASA was reabsorbed back into its parent organization. But the reunion didn't last long. Dramatic changes in distribution and exhibition norms precipitated during this period, many of them detrimental to the independent exhibitor, including "block-booking, enforced arbitration, and what was regarded as an unwieldy standard exhibition contract, plus the continued invasion into exhibition by the producer-distributors."³¹⁹ In early 1929 ASA, deciding once and for all that MPTOA's close ties to major studios constituted an insurmountable conflict of interest, again broke away from the main body, formed a board of officers, and began to woo smaller assemblies of exhibitors back into a reformed association. By 1932 the organization counted more than 6,000 theatres across 36 states, and it wasted no time advocating for better industrial conditions for independents, most notably changes to the standard exhibition contract and many other events "preliminary to the filing of the government's antitrust suit...and several anti-block booking bills in Congress," showing its commitment "to go to bat against inequities and unfair trade practices."³²⁰

Trade journal coverage details conversations at national ASA conventions reflecting the association's resistance to mainstream trade policies. At the 1948 ASA conference, speakers debated the merits of boycotting films contracted out with highly unfavorable percentage

³¹⁹ "A Refresher Course on Allied States Ass'n," *Boxoffice*, October 21, 1963: 7.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

arrangements (the revenue divided between distributor and exhibitor), arguing that these deals unfairly hurt smaller theatres with lower seating capacities.³²¹ Heated discussions about block selling to small theaters, competitive bidding problems, and film print availabilities also characterized ASA gatherings. These meetings were frequented by executives from major studios like Twentieth Century-Fox, RKO, MGM, and Paramount, suggesting that independent trade groups like ASA were formidable entities whose concerns mattered (to a degree) to the major industrial players.³²² Once the slow-moving and disruptive effects of the *Paramount* decree began to take hold in the 1950s, and especially once television and changing leisure habits among middle-class Americans manifested, the different exhibitor groups in the United States began to see the logic behind setting aside policy quarrels in the name of uniting for a common good. After years of tense negotiations, in 1966 ASA decided to merge with the Theatre Owners of America (the association that years ago had formed out of the remnants of the MPTOA) to create the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO), making it the one major organization representing both studio-affiliated and independent cinemas in the country. While NATO installed an ASA figure, former chairman Marshall Fine, as its first president, independent exhibitors were now without their own advocacy group for the first time since 1923.

Only a decade later a new body of theatre owners emerged to supplement (and in many cases challenge) the work carried out by NATO on behalf of independent exhibitors. The National Independent Theatre Exhibitors Association (NITE) formed in September 1975, a mere three months after the release of *Jaws* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1975) and the heightened distributor-exhibitor tensions that followed in the blockbuster era of saturated release patterns and multiplex exhibition. NITE's short-lived run had profound impacts on exhibition in the

³²¹ James Jerauld, "Allied to Go All Out in Fight Against Forced Percentage," *Boxoffice*, December 4, 1948: 8.

³²² James Jerauld, "Allied Fights Forced Deals," *Boxoffice*, October 7, 1950: 8.

United States, and its actions were covered extensively in industrial trade magazines. The association emerged out of exasperation among independent theatre owners who felt that NATO, representing the majority of the country's movie screens, was ignoring their economic interests or, worse, conspiring with the studios to maximize profits at the expense of smaller exhibitors. NITE was comprised of modest circuits numbering between 5 and 50 theatres and formed out of a consolidation of two regional exhibition groups from California and the American South amounting to around 700 members. Throughout the mid-1970s, thanks to the efforts of Tom Patterson, NITE's first president, the group absorbed several regional or state-level exhibition assemblies, casting itself as national resistance to "abuses" against independent theatres. Within a few years NITE emerged as a legitimate foil to its NATO brethren. Many disaffected theatres either left NATO for NITE or acquired dual membership, begging the question of "how long such disaffected groups will be content to go on flying two flags."³²³

The most pressing concern for NITE were the practices of blind bidding and splitting. Blind bidding, as mentioned, was one strategy for studios and distributors to secure an advantage over terms of film exhibition. To counter this, exhibitors had long practiced splitting, in which theatres in a given zone agree beforehand which would bid on rights to a film's first theatrical run, thus avoiding bidding wars with one another that would drive up licensing costs. Exhibitors would often "split" films between each other in cooperative fashion. Even though this theoretically helped all exhibitors, in reality splitting benefitted larger chains over independent theatres because, "since they no longer had to compete against one another, larger theatres merely had to ensure that their bids could compete against their smaller colleagues who had

³²³ "Could NITE Swallow NATO?" *Variety*, February 23, 1977: 3.

fewer resources.”³²⁴ Independent exhibitors had been filing lawsuits against splitting since the 1960s, arguing that it effectively froze them out of fair chances at acquiring first-run features. But the Department of Justice had showed little interest in prosecuting such practices, prioritizing the economic well-being of large theatrical chains over independent exhibitors.

That all changed in the mid-1970s. “NITE’s mission, according to Patterson, [was] to concentrate principally on trade practices on behalf of small and independent exhibitors,”³²⁵ and its main efforts consisted in lobbying the DOJ to investigate blind bidding and splitting. Reporting on the group’s actions after one year, Patterson vaunted NITE’s lobbying of the Senate Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly; its hiring of a Washington D.C. law firm to help with the legalese of antitrust cases; and its personal courting of DOJ brass whose support Patterson thought highly useful to exhibitor’s causes.³²⁶ NITE came out against both blind bidding and splitting as they existed, but its hope was not necessarily to end splitting (unless blind bidding also was eliminated) so much as to secure a more equal playing field with the larger chains who benefited most from it.³²⁷ Patterson hoped that by coaxing the DOJ to investigate splitting, it would open the door to further antitrust prosecutions against trade abuses by distributors and larger chains. NITE’s attempts to draw federal attention to the film industry worked, and by 1977 the DOJ reversed its previous findings that splitting did not per se constitute an antitrust violation. Lawsuits against exhibitors proceeded, and after a parade of court cases and appeals, splitting as a practice was effectively banned by 1985. But much to

³²⁴ Deron Overpeck, “Splitsville: Independent Exhibitors Court Federal Intervention in the American Film Industry, 1975–1988,” *Film History* 26, no. 1 (2014): 140.

³²⁵ “Patterson Asks Small Exhibitors to Unite,” *Boxoffice*, July 26, 1976, 4.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, “Patterson Asks.”

³²⁷ “[Patterson] was aware that a complete ban [on splitting] was as likely to harm the independents as it was to harm them; even if the members of his organization felt largely excluded from splitting agreements, in theory at least they could join them. As such, he stressed that his organization objected to splitting only in the context of other trade abuses.” See Overpeck, “Splitsville,” 144.

Patterson's chagrin, the hoped-for continuation of investigations into improper trade practices amongst distributors never materialized. The DOJ "took little action other than to pursue civil cases against splitting arrangements." As early as 1978 Patterson began warning fellow theatre owners against inviting government scrutiny of exhibitor practices, even those of larger chains whose actions Patterson wanted to spotlight in the first place.³²⁸

It became clear that NITE and NATO needed to unite for their mutual benefit. An amalgamation of the two groups had been in the air since at least 1977, but after its lobbying efforts backfired, NITE's momentum as an organization took a hit. Its anti-splitting campaign had irritated NATO, though the latter group also saw strength in numbers and made itself available to a merger. In February 1980 Patterson and NITE leadership convened a meeting to vote on dissolving the group and merging with NATO "in order to unite under the banner of NATO for the good of exhibition in particular and the good of the industry in general."³²⁹ This merger appeared likely, but the rival groups could not agree on the terms by which NATO would absorb its independent sibling. Patterson resigned from NITE when the merger fell through, leaving Robert Hutte in charge of the beleaguered association, whose only action appears to have been a *Boxoffice* editorial in 1983 bemoaning the usual crimes against independent theatres and promising "an intensive campaign to introduce trade practice legislation in the congress" aimed at issues such as "purchasing procedures and clearances, vertical integration, and a sensible ratings system."³³⁰ These efforts never got off the ground, and NITE dissolved in the mid-1980s,

³²⁸ Ibid, 145.

³²⁹ "NITE proposes plan to merge with NATO," *Boxoffice*, February 4, 1980: 1.

³³⁰ Robert Hutte, "NITE calls for a fight: small theatres may go to Congress for help," *Boxoffice* 117, no. 3, March 1, 1981: 29-30.

signaling that “in its attempt to protect the weaker members of its industry, NITE merely managed to reinforce how vulnerable they really were.”³³¹

NITE represented the last trade group positioned to substantially protest against trade policies at odds with the *Paramount* decree. Its dissipation left a vacuum only partially filled by NATO, where many NITE members eventually migrated. There was, however, one final attempt at organizing movers and shakers in the small exhibitor business before AHC: ISSFED, or the International Society of Specialty Film Exhibitors and Distributors. As this group did not last long and trade journal records are sparse, little is known about it. It was conceived in 1998 by Brenda Benthien, a film festival organizer and scholar based in Michigan, and Russ Collins, operator of the Michigan Theatre in Ann Arbor and the future founder of AHC. Designed to include theatre owners, distributors, festival organizers, archivists, and figures from niche areas like silent and documentary films, ISSFED was a first attempt “to draw together the different branches of the specialty film industry” through conferences, industry events, and monthly newsletters.³³² The timing for ISSFED was advantageous: the boom in specialty distributors during the 1990s spurred the need for an art film infrastructure in distribution and exhibition. Theatre proprietors like Bill Coppard of The Little Theatre in Rochester, NY, hoped that the group would steer organizations like his through this new terrain, noting that mainstream screens were increasingly acquiring films with lucrative crossover appeal with specialty houses. Exclusive first runs for art houses were fast disappearing, caught up in the blurred boundaries between art fare and films for mass consumption that characterised industry trends like Indiewood. Other causes that ISSFED vowed to address were strengthening ties between US

³³¹ Overpeck, “Splitsville,” 152.

³³² Melissa Morrison, “‘ISSFED’: Pronounced ‘Indie’,” *Boxoffice* 135, no. 4, April 1, 1999: 162-163.

theatres and distributors of foreign films and lobbying efforts to raise the public profile of specialty films and their venues.³³³

On paper ISSFED represented a departure from groups like NITE in that it sought to unite exhibitors with distributors to produce best practice management for on-the-ground art house proprietors, not to lobby the government or advocate for better business terms. While some prospective members welcomed the chance to carve out space for themselves away from the megaplex-centric ShoWest conference (the trade show and conference put on by NATO, since renamed CinemaCon), others worried that trying to satisfy so many different interests of the art film market was easier said than done. Indeed all of these conversations and possibilities came to naught. Though board members convened in spring 1999 to plan for an inaugural national conference, ISSFED never came to fruition for reasons that remain unclear. But the prospect of a national organization for the art film industry remained on Collins's mind. Nearly ten years later, he would have another chance to realize the potential contained in ISSFED.

The Allied States Association began foundational advocacy work for independent exhibitors caught up in disadvantageous environments of pre-*Paramount* decree America. NITE emerged decades later to affect industrial policy changes at a precarious time for small exhibitors when large studios were adjusting to conglomeration and the terrain of blockbuster Hollywood. ISSFED articulated the possible contours for a group of speciality exhibitors and distributors during the rise of boutique studio divisions devoted to niche audience interests in artistic-mainstream film. AHC, as we will see, carried out the vision of ISSFED by coordinating theatres through the digital transition and developing the camaraderie and resource-sharing to rebrand the art house into a new cultural institution.

³³³ Ibid.

4.2 AHC: Origins and Overview

Far from the disgruntled offshoot of a pre-existing industry group, AHC grew from an independent-minded film festival. In 2006 the Sundance Film Festival launched Art House Project, a small gathering of art house exhibitors from around the country. Ostensibly a “thank you” from Sundance to smaller exhibitors for their support of independent film, the inaugural event, in the festival host city of Park City, Utah, also marked Sundance’s attempt at broadening its reach into theatrical exhibition outside of the festival circuit.³³⁴ Representatives from 12 theatres gathered to discuss issues facing art house cinemas, including the imminent transition to digital projection. Among the original conference attendees was Collins, whose first attempt at a professional society for American art houses, ISSFED, as we’ve seen, sputtered out quickly. With the organizational backing of Sundance, though, Art House Project’s first conference was successful enough to warrant a second installment the next year. After seeing the successive growth of Art House Project across two years, Collins and the small group of exhibitors who had stayed in touch since that first meeting in Park City seized the chance to once again start an association for art house cinemas.

Officially housed under the Michigan Theatre Foundation as a tax-exempt corporate charity, Art House Convergence, as Collins and its founding board renamed the group, held its first conference in 2008, welcoming 25 attendees to a basement room in the Peery Hotel in Salt Lake City.³³⁵ From its beginning AHC has espoused a mission that departs from prior trade

³³⁴ AHC emerged primarily because the Sundance Institute, coming off its 25th anniversary, wanted to develop a partnership with art house cinemas around the country as a means of extending its reach into the exhibition sector. See Sarah Sinwell, “Re-investigating Art House Exhibition in an Era of Convergence,” *The Projector* 18, no. 2 (2018), online.

³³⁵ Russ Collins, quoted in Jeff Berg, “Community Theatres: Art House Convergence 2013,” *Film Comment*, January 30, 2013.

groups whose major mandate was to lobby for their industrial interests. The group's name even eschewed the usual formal nomenclature of trade groups—no *association*, *federation*, *guild*, or *society* here—in favor of the hot-topic *convergence*, a term suggesting the intertwined interests of disparate quadrants of independent culture and/or non-corporate exhibition that AHC would bring together. AHC began as informal discussions and networking opportunities “to get to know one another and share our successes, our challenges, our anxieties, and, most importantly, our hopes and dreams,”³³⁶ but it quickly gained formal traction as a cache of exhibitors around the US interested in art house management. 2009 conference attendance numbers rose to 75 delegates when it was then “decided that the meeting needed to be more formalized”³³⁷ into a bigger event and expanded into multiple days at a larger venue. AHC moved 30 minutes down the road from Park City to a small skiing town named Midway where the conference has been held in the spacious Homestead Resort ever since. The 2010 conference welcomed 125 guests and for the first time counted non-exhibitor allies such as distributors, bookers, vendors, and other industry professionals among their ranks—a true convergence of separate stakeholders in the exhibition marketplace. Attendance and organizational contours of the conference continued to expand. “By 2012, the Art House Convergence felt like a genuine movement,” says then-Managing Director Barbara Twist, who recalls 300 conference members and a “very active online forum”³³⁸ at that year's assembly. The 2013 edition unveiled the banner “Brave New American Art House” even as the conference welcomed European partners for the first time (Euro trade group counterpart Europa Cinemas). By this time AHC was undertaking more substantive reflection of art houses as a particular kind of film institution with the need for new

³³⁶ Barbara Twist, “Art House Convergence: The First Ten Years,” *Boxoffice*, January 17, 2017.

³³⁷ Collins in Berg, “Community Theatres.”

³³⁸ Twist, “The First Ten Years.”

cultural logics in the face of hegemonic mainstream practices. Art houses had good cause to rally around each other in 2013; AHC members had many “difficult conversations about the financial and aesthetic ramifications of the industry-wide migration to DCI/DCP digital cinema.”³³⁹ 2014 saw the conference add Film Festival Alliance, a nonprofit organization for festival organizers, into the AHC conference schedule to collaborate on session panels about festival operations. By 2015 over 500 participants attended the AHC conference. Subsequent years saw additional partnerships and programs emerge to foment the networking and resource-sharing potentials of the association. Conference attendance increased to 750 in 2020.

Setting aside the central quality of the annual conference for a moment, AHC connects and supports art houses throughout the calendar year in other ways. Since 2013 AHC has sponsored one or two regional seminars each year (usually during the summer) at select theatres across the US. These smaller conferences, designed to increase outreach to those who cannot attend the January event, essentially mirror what goes on in Midway, though on a more intimate scale that weaves in physical tours of host art houses or nearby film attractions. In 2016 AHC also launched Art House Theatre Day, “the cinephile’s answer to Record Store Day,”³⁴⁰ an occasion for communities to celebrate their local art houses. Participating theatres, numbering between 150-200 every year, offer moviegoers a small slate of specially arranged prerelease or repertory screenings from partner distributors that reflect the diversity of art house programming. In the name of further connection, AHC also maintains a Visiting Members Program, a reciprocal membership arrangement among art houses that offers art house employees discounts and advertising opportunities at other participating theatres.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Katie Rife, “Art House Theatre Day 2019 Keeps It Weird with *Putney Swope* and *In Fabric*,” *AV Club*, August 30, 2019.

But the most active element of the association—and a repository for much of its discourse—is its member-driven Google Group forum. Numbering around 2,000 subscribers and overseen by volunteer moderators, the forum has become a highly trafficked channel for everyday questions and comments about art house theatres, distributor pitches, and industry news. Given the decentralized nature of the art house network, the Google Group is the sector’s best tool for rapid information-sharing and discussions. Often the forum receives questions from prospective or new art house operators seeking out expertise. At other times veteran exhibitors get into debates about best practices for programming or management policies. In November 2018, for instance, subscribers argued over the merits of a proposed Bernardo Bertolucci retrospective, an event deemed controversial given the filmmaker’s reported sexist attitude and provocative directorial methods.³⁴¹ Quainter conversations have involved hive-minding the best equipment and methods for popping popcorn,³⁴² or how to keep on-screen advertisements before shows local and tasteful.³⁴³ From a research standpoint, the Google Group is an invaluable resource because it makes available the everyday conversations of independently managed theatres, niche distributors, festival organizers, technology vendors, and others in the exhibition business—a cache of Caldwell’s “semi-embedded textual activity” described earlier.

While I weave these components of AHC into this chapter, my primary interest is its annual conference, a flagship event that has grown to resemble those of most large trade associations in that it constitutes the one chance for in-person professional development, knowledge-sharing, and networking-building among members. Researchers of trade shows for corporate entertainment companies have described these conferences as important “industrial

³⁴¹ “Bernardo Bertolucci Retrospective – Please respond,” AHC Google Group thread, November 29, 2018.

³⁴² “Popcorn, once again,” AHC Google Group thread, Nov. 29, 2019.

³⁴³ “on-screen ads,” AHC Google Group thread, Jan. 8, 2014.

consensus-forming gatherings; as group self-reflection; ... and as socio-professional networking rituals”³⁴⁴ that “build momentum and set agendas”³⁴⁵ for industry players. AHC’s conference, though not devoted to production, is no different. As Taylor Chang, Head Programmer of the Doris Duke Theatre in Honolulu, Hawaii, reinforced, the AHC conference’s main feature is pedagogical: “By defining the field, creating a shared vision and vocabulary, and identifying best practices, the educational components of the conference strengthen efforts to sustain art house cinemas of various sizes, operating structures, and programming philosophies.”³⁴⁶ Noteworthy within Chang’s description is the organization’s attempts to cement common ground for an art house industry even as she signals the range of differences in their ranks. AHC seeks to embroider certain practices and goals while celebrating the multiple iterations of art houses that include downtown relic cinemas, university-affiliated media labs, and art house chains.

At the conference, dues-paying delegates choose from dozens of sessions (over 50 in 2020) with sessions split between *what’s next?* Topics on trends in art houses and refresher presentations for the budding exhibitor. The number and names of conference tracks have changed often, but as an example, at the 2016 conference, an occasion I was able to attend, AHC organized the following categories for its sessions: Art House 101, “designed for new staff or theatre operators,”; Best Practices, aiming to “provide case studies, advice and ideas for different topics,”; New Ideas, citing how “innovation and passion are two necessary traits of an Art House exhibitor”; Audience Development, because “as the typical Art House crowd grows older, exhibitors are looking to draw in the next generation, and their children”; and Film Festival,

³⁴⁴ John Caldwell, quoted in Charles Acland, “Consumer Electronics and the Building of an Entertainment Infrastructure,” in *Signal Traffic*, eds. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski (University of Illinois, 2015): 254.

³⁴⁵ Acland, “Consumer Electronics,” 255.

³⁴⁶ Taylour Chang, “Curator’s Notes: How Art Houses Can Win,” Honolulu Museum of Art, February 18, 2018.

focused on “a range of issues...from the perspective of a film festival.”³⁴⁷ In 2017 AHC updated its “track system” with new, more targeted labels, including Education, Programming, Film Festival Alliance, Marketing, Development, Operations, and Alliance for Action (formally added in 2019 as a track after being labeled “Inclusion” or “Equity” in prior conferences), in addition to an expanded slate of workshops, panels, keynote events, plenary sessions, and break-off groups.

These concerns can largely be grouped under best practices in art house management—the internal workings of maintaining, growing, and serving community consumers in a mission-driven business model. The group’s mission statement adopts a wide-reaching commitment to film culture yet stresses the civic-centric role of art houses:

Art House Convergence (AHC) is an association dedicated to advancing excellence and sustainability in community-based, mission-driven media exhibition. Each year our annual conference, regional seminars, and programs provide networking opportunities, educational resources, and define best practices for hundreds of theaters and festivals located throughout North America. Collectively, our constituents host over 20 million audience members annually. We exhibit film for the cultural enrichment of our communities and expand the audiences for specialty cinema in North America. We count art house cinemas, independent theaters, museums, educational institutions, film societies, microcinemas, and film festivals as our key constituents.³⁴⁸

What stands out here is the lack of vocabulary associated with “industry,” “trade,” “resistance,” or “lobbying,” keywords that would suggest a stake in industrial practices. When asked by a *Boxoffice* interviewer in January 2020 about the state of art houses “after an eventful 2019 with several industry-changing headlines,” Kozberg reinforced the group’s mission-statement by describing AHC in terms removed from the commercially tinged concerns of theatres:

Today “the industry” usually describes media conglomerates, and while the impact of these actors is undeniable, art house cinemas do more than react to streaming, mergers, and franchises—we build relationships that center cinematic art and audience experience. On the precipice of 2020, we have to think about these relationships with filmgoers, distributors, funders, and each other, and how we can collectively nurture a love for cinema. Art houses are spaces to gather, share, teach, and learn and not just receptacles for industry-wide decisions.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ 2016 Art House Convergence Annual Conference booklet.

³⁴⁸ “About Art House Convergence,” Art House Convergence.

³⁴⁹ Alison Kozberg, “Mission Driven,” *Boxoffice*, January 16, 2020.

Kozberg's phrasing here again makes clear that AHC sees itself differently than the trade groups that came before it. Rather than protesting anticompetitive behavior, AHC adopts an internal orientation focused on best practice nonprofit management. Former trade groups tried to carve out space for independent cinemas within larger commercial exhibition culture (NITE viewed itself as a necessary companion to NATO, for example). AHC positions itself apart from hegemonic industrial practices. As a result the group has a reduced ability to formalize campaigns against rental contract disputes or other policies as a unified exhibitor sector. It also lacks the industrial clout of larger established associations for theatrical exhibitors, notably NATO, which today represents around 65,000 screens across the world. This self-positioning sharpens the AHC case for differentiation of art houses from the mainstream.

I do not mean to suggest that AHC is aloof from industrial matters or considers art houses as immune from larger exhibitor issues. Clearly this isn't the case. In 2014 AHC joined NATO representatives in testifying before the Small Business Administration and the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., about hearing and visually impaired accessibility issues. That same year AHC released an open letter to Sony in support of releasing the controversial film *The Interview* (dirs. Seth Rogan and Evan Goldberg, 2014), which was mired in a hacking scandal involving North Korea. Even though the raunchy James Franco/Seth Rogan satire of dictator Kim Jong Un wasn't an obvious hill for art houses to defend, many theatres supported the film on free speech grounds and made links to the art house tradition of screening films deemed politically controversial. AHC is also keenly aware of the challenges facing exhibitors in the digital century. In its earliest years the group held conversations that grappled with the financial precarity and technological hurdles presented by the 1-2 punch combination of digital projection and the Great Recession of 2008. One 2009 conference session was titled "How to Survive an

Economic Downtown” and another focused on “the growing anxiety and confusion about how art houses should respond to the impending conversion from 35 millimeter to DCI digital cinema.”³⁵⁰ Exhibitors everywhere were expected to transition to digital technologies by the end of 2012, and this stress produced a swath of conference activity to help members navigate the operational nuances of the move. *Boxoffice* editor Phil Contrino, who attended the January conference that year, wrote that it “will surely be looked upon as a key event in the history of the art house” for the many worried discussions on how small exhibitors could manage the upcoming switch by the end of the year.³⁵¹ With the rise of cable television, DVDs, and streaming, this organization confronts a starkly different terrain for movie theatres than met the organizers of last century’s trade associations, and it has responded in kind.

The rest of this chapter reveals the kinds of conversations AHC holds through its annual conferences to promote a rebranded art house geared around the professionalization of nonprofit administration and the galvanization of grassroots energy necessary to maintain their venues. A quick note: AHC did not maintain pre-2016 conference schedules. There has also been dramatic turnover in the leadership levels of AHC in recent years, as we will see later in this chapter, which impeded my access to information. Where possible I pieced together conference activity before 2016 via secondary sources, trade journal conference reports, and other materials. The full descriptions of all conference sessions mentioned below are gathered in Appendix One.

4.3 Getting to Work: Professionalization, Data Analytics, and Art House Tales

A glance at some of the sessions from the 2020 AHC conference reveals titles such as “(Almost) Everything You Wanted to Know About Writing an NEA Grant,”; “Building Positive

³⁵⁰ Twist, “The First Ten Years.”

³⁵¹ Phil Contrino, “The Utah Summit,” *Boxoffice*, March 2012: 10.

Relationships with Press and Media,”; and “The Joyful Aftermath: Thriving After A Capital Campaign.” Highly representative from its conferences since 2016, these titles suggest the added work going on at art houses beyond selling tickets and popcorn. Today’s art house boss or manager is increasingly likely to be a number-cruncher with a degree in arts management or business administration, a background suited to running an enterprise dependent on grant-writing, community outreach, event management, membership drives, and philanthropic solicitations. This aligns with the shift to nonprofitization and the need for robust development, marketing, and other administrative departments among arts institutions over the course of the twentieth century. Until roughly the 1960s, arts managers largely adhered to an impresarial form of management, “a style that combined traditionalistic authority, charisma, and entrepreneurialship” in the shape of a person (almost always male) who “conducted himself in a commanding and flamboyant style that was tooled to flatter the wealthy and tyrannize subordinates, but [who] related to people on a personal, individualistic basis.”³⁵² This traditional “showman” role gradually fell out of dominance after the 1960s in lieu of the arts administrator, who relied on different skill sets. As part of their tax-exempt standing, nonprofits operate under the watch of agencies and interest groups keeping tabs on their financial health, sources of income, and social contributions to target demographics. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), founded in 1965, and other federal agencies in the US introduced structured systems of grants and support for the arts that added to the need for formal accountability. Institutions and artists needed the know-how to navigate the sea of tax structure bureaucratization, grant applications, and legal or regulatory codes. With the rise of the administrative style of arts

³⁵² Richard A. Peterson, “From Impresario to Arts Administrator: Formal Accountability in Nonprofit Cultural Organizations,” in *Nonprofit Enterprise in the Arts*, ed. Paul J. DiMaggio (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986): 162.

management came the need for strategies for how to thrive as nonprofits with educated experts and expanded professional staff,³⁵³ which led to a number of now-standard practices and programs like the “loaning” of expert management personnel from for-profit corporations to nonprofits; the rise of “service associations” to support administrative techniques; the proliferation of arts administration graduate programs in business schools; and the emergence of scholarly publications devoted to professionalizing arts management.³⁵⁴ These developments contributed to an evolution of the arts manager figure: “Unlike his impresarial counterpart, whose style was based on flattering and cajoling the affluent elite while dominating performers and employees by an autocratic imposition of his will, the successful arts administrator relies on the ability to apply even-handedly technical knowledge to obtain the best possible results for the arts organization and all interested parties.”³⁵⁵

The expanded nature of art houses from mere exhibitor to community resource and media arts hub necessitates newer job roles that oversee a variety of practices. Many art houses today staff administrative positions unlikely to have existed twenty years ago. These roles demand a range of bureaucratic, managerial, organizational, and artistic skills to aid in the smooth functioning of businesses with multiple possible income streams and community obligations. Take the Film Streams theatre in Omaha, Nebraska, which at time of writing staffs the following positions: Executive Director, Community Engagement Manager, Membership Coordinator, Office Manager, Finance Manager, Marketing Assistant, Communications Manager, Event Manager, Artistic Director, Development Manager, and an Education Coordinator, not to

³⁵³ Michael Haber, “The New Activist Non-Profits: Four Models Breaking from the Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” *University of Miami Law Review* 73, no. 3 (2019): 870.

³⁵⁴ Peterson, “From Impresario,” 176-177.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

mention the projection, general managers, and theatre house staff. While this is a loaded example, it is not uncharacteristic; the websites of other art houses reveal the same thing.

Responding to this new administrative reality, AHC sets out to educate its delegates on contemporary art house duties and to professionalize their practices. Let's take the 2017 and 2018 conferences as examples.³⁵⁶ In the first year a session led by nonprofit and philanthropic experts titled “How to Get the Money: Fundraising for Art House Theatres” provided “a crash course in how to raise money successfully from foundations, corporations, and individuals [by reviewing] fundraising trends and strategies [... and] ways to frame your theater's story and discuss different community outreach approaches you can use to attract financial support.” That same year also featured the “Are You Covered?: Risk Management” session in which presenters led theater operators on a “comprehensive dive into what risks you may be exposed to and how you can prepare for them, whether it's material, personnel or data-driven ... [specifically focusing] on situations when you need insurance and which policies will cover which risks.” Another session from the 2017 conference, “Maximize Impact with Paid Placement in Social Media,” addressed how to “attract new audience members to specific events” via social media buzzwords, Google AdWords, and sponsored posts on Twitter. “What is Your Brand Strategy?: Maintaining a Cohesive Brand” delved into one of the more prominent (and thorny) elements of running art houses—the importance of “creating a platinum brand on a peanuts & popcorn budget.” The 2018 conference echoed this concern with administrative management. “Demystifying Memberships: How to Build Strong Patron Relationships” related ways art houses can “capitalize on the relationship assets of your organization” to maximize membership numbers and benefits, while “Theatre Rentals: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” offered advice

³⁵⁶ The following panel titles and descriptions were supplied via database by AHC Events and Operations Manager Mackenzie Peacock in September 2020. These are included in Appendix One.

for theatres wanting to rent their venues out to community members and the contractual or practical issues around that. AHC panels encompass everything from technical expertise of digital projection systems to the nuances of credit card processing to the pains—but ultimate benefits—of securing a liquor license for one’s theatre.

In step with its broad efforts to professionalize nonprofit art house management, a core part of AHC labor involves collecting and distributing data about theatre operations and audiences. Unlike its forebearers, AHC operates at a time when improvements in computer software and more theoretical and industrial interest in consumer or philanthropic habits have made possible—even necessary—the use of quantitative data to aid nonprofit arts management.³⁵⁷ As defined by the Arts Management and Technology Laboratory, “data analytics refers to the collection of internal and external information about quantifiable metrics that relate to an organization’s performance strategies and tactics for future success.”³⁵⁸ There are many different possible metrics within nonprofit data analytics: donor habits, customer preferences, audience compositions and geography, efficiency of communication, institutional finances, monthly cash flow trends, and other information. In the United States this data is often required by federal or state funding bodies to demonstrate a nonprofit’s economic or social impacts on one’s community. Administrators also value quantitative data for its help in framing the relative successes of an organization to accomplish its goals in a mission-driven sector, or to communicate the work that is still to be done. “While data analysis can effectively aid in the acquisition of donors and retention of key audience segments, nonprofits can use these tools to decide which programming elements are bringing about the community benefits they are seeking

³⁵⁷ “The Definitive Guide to Nonprofit Analytics,” Blackbaud, Inc. January 2014: 3.

³⁵⁸ Bria Blackshear, “A Simple Guide to Data Analytics for Nonprofits,” Arts Management and Technology Laboratory, April. 26, 2019.

(and which are not).”³⁵⁹ Many nonprofits, lacking the technological infrastructure, research expertise, or deep pockets to compile such information, outsource this work to designated data analytic firms, which have risen in number as technology improves to allow for larger and better-organized data-sets managed by increasingly well-trained data scientists. In a 2018 survey of over 460 nonprofit organizations in the United States, 90% indicated they collected or solicited the collection of data,³⁶⁰ suggesting that data-gathering has wide buy-in among the sector in step with the digital transformation of information storage.

Economic insecurity has likely played a part in the rise of nonprofit data-gathering. The Great Recession of 2008 spurred many nonprofits to pursue more consistent data analytics as a means of shoring up quantifiable metrics of success and learning more about patron behavior or values. A related, creeping sense that nonprofits must act like for-profit businesses is also behind the proliferation of data analytics. Pundits have noted how, to survive in modern economies sped up and connected by the convenience of smartphones, for example, nonprofits must jettison their most romantic ideals of non-commercialism and conduct themselves as businesses like any other. Nonprofits have often lagged behind their for-profit colleagues in areas like mobile optimization, which would allow for greater ease in recruiting and receiving donations. Data analytics (often in the form of behavioral information about a customer base) contributes to an institutional ethos that nonprofits should approach donors as modern consumers whose preferences and behaviors can be tracked, predicted, and targeted.³⁶¹

As the first trade group for small or independent exhibitors able to benefit from data analytics, AHC has prioritized this information-gathering in ways that warrant comment. Since

³⁵⁹ Bria Blackshear, “A Simple Guide to Data Analytics for Nonprofits, Part II,” Arts Management and Technology Laboratory, May 21, 2019.

³⁶⁰ Dominick Duda, “Why Data Analytics Matter for Nonprofits,” Research Hub, October 17, 2019.

³⁶¹ Dominick Duda “The G2 on Nonprofit Tech: Mobile Optimization,” Research Hub, September 20, 2019.

2011 AHC has presented the results of two major data-centric surveys that the organization solicits: The Theatre Operations Survey and the National Audience Survey. Delivered to conference attendees and posted on the AHC website, these reports offer extensive operational breakdowns of hundreds of North American art houses, film festivals, and other venues specializing in art films, as well as the compositions and consumer behavior of their audiences. Between 2011 and 2015 AHC partnered with the Bryn Mawr Film Institute, an art house and education center in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, to compile the Theatre Operations Survey. Offering an analytic snapshot of art house cinema finances, attendance, workforce composition, salary data, and other metrics, these surveys were initially conducted via email solicitation and predominantly included cinemas in the AHC communication pipeline. As AHC continued to grow and art houses saw their operations entwined with those of other film culture organizations, there was need for a larger, full-service data firm to take over the survey. Starting in 2016 AHC shifted their data-collection partnership to SMU DataArts, a research and analytics firm for cultural organizations. Given DataArts's partnerships with major arts groups, including Americans for the Arts and the National Guild for Community Arts Education, AHC's hiring of this firm allowed for a broadened scope in the survey that "includes film societies, film festivals, and other arts institutions that show movies," in addition to art house theatres.³⁶² Its first survey for AHC, released in 2016, compiled data from 70 AHC-associated theatres, 58 film festivals, and 258 "comparison organizations," defined as live action theatres and performing arts venues. In 2018-2019 AHC and SMU together received a multi-year grant from the National Endowment for the Arts that allowed them to expand the survey into more detailed reports.

³⁶² "Data and Reports," Art House Convergence.

The other major AHC data drive is its National Audience Survey, touted as the largest survey of art house audiences in the world. For this project AHC partners with market research firm Avenue ISR to discover “how patrons learn about Art House programs, when and why they attend, and what they want to see from their local theater.”³⁶³ In the survey conducted in 2013, more than 18,000 art house attendees from 29 participating theatres answered questions about their movie-going habits, preferred genres or events, their demographic and income information, and other quantifiable attitudes toward their neighborhood art house. This survey has evolved with the times and added questions about audiences’ streaming habits, preferred programming, and beliefs about the community impact(s) of art houses. To linger for a moment on an example of the data contained in these reports, the National Audience Survey presented by DataArts at the 2020 AHC conference unveiled its new “Patron Conversion Funnel,” a framework that points out the various levels of patronage at theatres, ranging from “awareness” to “donor,” and where art houses can improve their audience development and retention along this chain. Prior surveys have shown that approximately 80% of adults in a given market area are “aware” of their community art house, but that only 20% of that number purchased at least one ticket over the course of a year. Of those who began attending their local art house, 22% claimed it was because of a special event or program that the theatre hosted, and not a particular film, reinforcing the surveyors’ hypothesis that one of the keys to building audiences for the future relies on offering “unique” or “enhanced experiences” that “bundle film, refreshments, and socializing.”³⁶⁴

The consistency of this data collection (started in 2011 and then expanded in later years by professional data firms) as well as its prominence within AHC (data is presented at a plenary

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ “2020 National Audience Survey,” DataArts, slide 40. Presented at 2020 Art House Convergence Annual Conference.

session at each conference and posted to the organization's website) shows the group's broad commitment to data-gathering. But to what end? It's difficult to say with precision how theatres use the data reports solicited by AHC. Bryn Mawr spearheaded the reports out of a vague sense that they would benefit art house proprietors seeking quantifiable information about their business. But it is one thing to gather information and another to implement changes based on it. Studies suggest that while data-gathering is widely prevalent among nonprofit organizations, only 50% of organizations report that they make operational decisions based on data.³⁶⁵ Clearly, within the nonprofit sector, there is a gap between the scale of data gathering and its part in implementing policy. The data reports solicited by AHC also only offer a composite of information of limited use to individual art houses whose audiences and donor bases reflect the specificities of their location. Theatres are, however, able to compare how their own organizations relate to national averages. Still, the truism holds that data is more useful the more targeted to one's operation it is. Perhaps catching onto this, AHC has started to offer conference sessions encouraging theatres to hire their own data analytic firms. Two 2020 sessions, "Smart Data, Smart People" and "Raising Dollars with Data," underscored the uses of data specific to individual theatres for improving their grant applications and philanthropic solicitations. These sessions suggest that data will play a role as theatres continue to professionalize their operations and strive to learn more about their customer base.

This sustained buy-in with data suggests a few things about AHC and the art house sector. First, data solicitation is symptomatic of what consumer culture demands of nonprofit art organizations, even modest art houses operating at the fringes of the exhibition network. The motivations to know more about one's audiences and to engineer one's products or services

³⁶⁵ Doug Bonderud, "The Beginner's Guide to Business Analytics for Nonprofits," *Biz Tech*, June 30, 2020.

accordingly is the conventional behavior of commercial enterprises. This isn't to say that nonprofit art houses are turning their backs on their social services by conducting audience or theatre surveys. But it suggests a precarity to the sector in that more analyses are perceived as necessary to maximize financial efficiency. Second, the data solicited by AHC makes graspable a common economic and social understanding of a decentralized band of independently managed theatres. It creates a frame for understanding "an art house sector" that otherwise would appear even more nebulous than it already does. Administrators and journalists frequently refer to stats or summative findings mined from these reports when describing the art house sector, as it's often the best portrait one can access. Scholars of exhibition also seek out the data gathered by AHC for their research (myself included). This gives AHC and the art house sector greater presence as a coordinated entity. Finally, data like that described above helps art house administrators mobilize certain political or cultural projects that opens up flows for economic but also social capital. Data analytics make possible the privileging of certain activities over others and the adjustments of organizational goals or practices. One recurring finding of the National Audience Survey is that art house audiences stubbornly skew highly toward older, white, affluent members of one's community. This kind of measured data is often used by programmers and development teams to justify targeting younger, non-white, and economically marginalized populations. One can question whether or to what degree theatres act on this data, especially given that much of it gets echoed at each year's conference. The true utilization or impact of this kind of data is hard to nail down without further targeted research.

Aside from its formal pedagogic and data-driven efforts, AHC connects art houses in solidarity with one another as independent enterprises by emphasizing their shared idiosyncratic charm and grassroots labor. This is most reflected in *Art House Tales*, a popular fixture of the

annual conference. Effectively a “home movies” account of art house cinemas, this special two-part plenary session is held in the hotel’s main ballroom and features theatre or festival operators who present 7-minute slideshows detailing their organizations’ histories, evolutions, renovations, community work, marketing tactics, fundraising, capital campaigns, special programming, concessions or food offerings, successes, failures—anything going on at one’s theatre. At the time of writing, 72 different institutions had presented at Art House Tales since 2015, comprising a health cross-section of first-run cinemas, for- and nonprofit, individual theatres, small chains, and the occasional festival. The presentations, recorded for posterity and posted to the AHC website, are designed as casual and fun “show-and-tell” sessions spotlighting the personal touches of independent theatres in contrast to multiplex homogenization. As such they are noteworthy for their articulations of art house labor, grit, and charm.

In *Production Culture* John Caldwell breaks down the formal characteristics of conversations circulating among above- and below-the-line trade groups in the entertainment industries. Delineating different “genres” of trade discourse within production culture in Los Angeles, Caldwell sees these exchanges not just “as a source of knowledge and a form of pedagogy intended to help assistants and trainees master their specialized crafts...[but also as a means to] help practitioner communities weather change in the face of technological flux and economic instability,”³⁶⁶ a description that maps easily onto AHC as an exhibitor group navigating its own well-documented changes. The genres that Caldwell names include “war stories” and “against-all-odds allegories,” two closely related tropes in which practitioners relate physically or mentally taxing ordeals that “establish a set of ideal characteristic traits: lowly

³⁶⁶ John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008): 37.

origins, physical perseverance, and tenacity.”³⁶⁷ While in Caldwell’s study these tropes refer to stories of how cinematographers overcame tough odds to find success in the industry or achieve an impossible shot, for example, in the AHC context, “against-all-odds allegories” detail how plucky movie theatres survived periods of precarity to emerge as invigorated organizations.

More than a few Art House Tales presentations tell variations of this narrative genre. After falling on hard times during the art house decline of the 1990s, the aftermath of the digital transition, or the harsh effects of the 2008 Global Recession, small cinemas on the verge of shutting down found last-second reprieve after robust community organization or a “guardian angel”—a wealthy donor who swooped in at the last minute to save their theatre. One presenter from 2015 shared the story of receiving a check in the mail for \$50,000 from an anonymous schoolteacher who hoped to see a theatre established, saying “When I opened that check, I knew we were going to be able to do it.”³⁶⁸ Another theatre tells the story of a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds for digital conversion wherein a city commissioner donated his entire annual salary to the cause.³⁶⁹ A corollary scenario includes once-vibrant cinemas that sat dormant until headstrong entrepreneurs or community organizers rolled up their sleeves to relaunch them. An Art House Tale from 2020 featured a couple in Bethel, Maine, who took over a vacant movie theatre building, *The Casablanca*, that had sat idle since 2015 when the owners couldn’t afford digital projectors and shut down. After extensive community support and entrepreneurial grit, the couple reopened a new theatre, *The Gem*, in 2020. Part of their presentation is worth repeating:

Bethel is a tiny town of 2500, but we’re next to a ski resort. The Casablanca was built in 1994 as part of a large development plan to cater to skiers, however the theatre was all that got built. So this 14,000 square-foot cultural hub sits next to a lumber yard and 15 acres of vacant land. ... We purchased the building and had to find a way to purchase the digital projectors. We had a goal of raising \$40,000 in pre-sold tickets through a Kickstarter campaign—enough for one projector—

³⁶⁷ Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 40.

³⁶⁸ Amherst Theatre Art House Tales Presentation, 2015.

³⁶⁹ Maiden Alley Cinema Art House Tales Presentation, 2015.

but the community support was enthusiastic and we raised over \$80,000 and started with two screens. But two projectors a theater does not make. [Referencing picture of a run-down theatre lobby] I mean seriously, look at that piece of shit. In the three years [the theatre] was vacant, pipes had frozen, tiles floors had been flooded and ruined, the seats were moldy, the concession stand was laden with grease, all of the pay-by-the-pound candy on the wall had liquified in the humidity and re-congealed on the floor. Luckily we were able to finance an extra \$17,000 with our building loan, which was enough to clean mold from the seats, polish the concrete floor, and build a scaled-down concessions area so we have more room for events in the lobby.³⁷⁰

As comes across in this and others accounts of restoration and renovation, Art House Tales celebrate the modest charms of small, grassroots exhibitors in the face of dominant megaplex culture. Threaded throughout Art House Tales and “against-all-odds allegories” is the use of humor, inside jokes, or shared references about small-scale exhibition that unite art houses under a banner of hardship, casting such cinemas as little-engine-that-could ventures whose second-hand roots endear them to loyal audiences. This is both stark reality and discursive strategy. Knowing that they cannot (and largely don’t want to) compete with the facilities or entertainment options of large theatre chains, art houses double down on their homespun, patchwork qualities to appeal to those who prefer the idiosyncratically local over the cookie-cutter mainstream. The logics of contemporary megaplex exhibition, which boomed in the 1990s as art houses suffered and has since established itself as the dominant form of movie-going, integrates amenities like “cup-holders, state-of-the-art sound systems, and large lobby space where one might find restaurants, bars, party rooms, and video arcades.”³⁷¹ In addition, megaplexes concentrate a larger number of screens into the same venue, and offer several start-times for the same film across multiple theatres to maximize viewing options for the biggest hits. Acland writes that “these modifications sought to bring exhibition into line with an expanding range of audiovisual entertainment, doing so by marking the irreproducible qualities of megaplex

³⁷⁰ Gem Theater Art House Tales Presentation, 2020.

³⁷¹ Charles Acland, “Theatrical Exhibition: Accelerated Cinema,” in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, eds. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008): 85.

spectatorship and by making moviegoing consistent with the streams of individualistic, convenience-driven models of cultural consumption.”³⁷²

In contrast to these mainstream articulations, the cinemas featured in *Art House Tales* have to move mountains to open a second or third screen, and the theatres themselves are often highlighted as patchwork containers built out of community love. *Tales* often feature chuckle-inducing anecdotes about the cozy size of theatres (“Our incredibly spacious lobby can sometimes accommodate 5 or 6 people,”)³⁷³; questionable theatre safety measures (“The local town government...said [our theatre] was a fire hazard, which it was: you could basically jump down two floors to some concrete”)³⁷⁴; and personalized or inspiring operational touches (“Pictured here is Joel Hamberg who painted the entire interior and exterior of the building pro-bono—about \$50,000 worth of work”).³⁷⁵ Many presenters single out their theatre staff for praise, exhibiting photos of smiling employees posing for the camera or candidly dressed for special events. Other presentations add further personal touches, such as memorable familial histories or important community events, like elaborate on-site wedding proposals. Anecdotes such as these humanize art house operations and the communities they serve, adding heartbeats to the mound of data and best practice strategies that otherwise define the conference.

Of course not all *Art House Tales* focus on economic precarity or the homespun essence of small exhibitors. Many of the more established institutions, like the Northwest Film Forum in Seattle, and the Gateway Film Center in Columbus, Ohio, use their presentation time to detail extensive special events, community initiatives, or their role in larger neighborhood restoration efforts—themselves all examples of particular art house labor. In this view, *Art House Tales*

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁷³ Gold Town Theatre *Art House Tales* Presentation, 2016.

³⁷⁴ Cinema Arts Center *Art House Tales* Presentation, 2015.

³⁷⁵ Hollywood Theatre *Art House Tales* Presentation, 2015.

spotlights the operational ephemera that fall through the cracks of more formal accounts of exhibitor work concerned with “big picture” industrial conditions or managerial strategies. Undergirding many of these descriptions of art house work (whether professionalization efforts, data gathering, or nitty-gritty restoration labour) is the mantra among AHC theatres that successful art houses must go beyond the standard blueprint for film exhibitors, a philosophy neatly contained in three discursive AHC conference threads to which I now turn: community, diversification, and activism.

4.4 Nonprofit Rebranding: Community, Diversification, Activism

AHC was overtly founded to encourage art houses to stake out terrain in the exhibition market as community-centered, nonprofit cultural centers. While the Convergence welcomes for-profit theatres with a commitment to local communities, 80% of its attendees are nonprofit, and Collins, who came from a performing arts management background before founding AHC, has continually stressed that “a lot of similarities between arthouse theaters and not-for-profit performing arts organizations. ... [It’s] kind of silly that the primary model for an arthouse cinema is a commercial model. There’s a model for a community arts organization that is already quite successful.”³⁷⁶ A clear through-line at AHC conferences encourages nonprofit values and management practices, namely the importance of developing strong community relationships or sources of support; diversifying programming models and sources of income; and staking out positions as activist hubs with investments in civic or political causes. This section aims to give shape to these major nonprofitization discourses promoted at AHC through a select sample of

³⁷⁶ Tatiana Siegel, “Niches go nonprofit,” *Variety* January 17, 2011.

conference titles and their descriptions between 2016 and 2020. (See Appendix One for the full text descriptions of each session mentioned here.)

A chief topic of AHC conferences relates to serving one's community as part of a nonprofit mandate. Community involvement takes many forms: collaborations with outside groups on film screenings; regular partnerships with local arts organizations; education programs to serve area schools; and so on. At a broad level, "Collaboration and the Salt Lake Film Society" offered a case study on the benefits of maintaining strong ties with a variety of community partners, "from local arts organizations to non-profits focused on social causes." In "Building Relationships: Developing Sponsors & Community Engagement," panelists likewise discussed "strategies for identifying, cultivating, and activating valuable opportunities [among] corporate and community partners to increase development revenue, ticket sales, and engagement." It is worth remembering that the impulse toward strengthening community relations is an economic imperative for small theatres that also fits with the mission-driven goals of nonprofit organizations hoping to affect positive change. Investing in communities thus yields financial benefits and shores up cultural capital rewards. "Harnessing Philanthropy to Drive Community Impact" touched on this dynamic: "Arthouse theaters across the nation are tapping foundation grants and major donor support for capital campaigns to expand capacity and to create special programs. This session will explore the dimensions of foundation-giving to arthouse theaters and will help you make the case for philanthropic support." In "Getting Personal with your Patrons," speakers went a step further by stressing "how much it matters to make your audience feel like you know them personally," and that sustained loyalty to small businesses so often depends on cultivating a sense of community care. In that vein, some theatres engage with community by helping local media-makers. Arguing that "being highly adaptable is

a key tenet of today's art house," the Austin Film Society and Coral Gables Art Cinema teamed up for a session titled "Filmmaker Central: Your Cinema as a Supportive Hub," promulgating that "supporting local filmmakers as part of your mission can be a unique and sustainable way to keep your organization community-based and provide bottom-line dollars for your organization."

As evidenced at several AHC conferences, education or media literacy programs have become a popular way for art houses to serve their communities while spreading film appreciation. One session, "From Concept to Execution: Fundraising and Partnership Development for Media Literacy Programs," spotlighted the Jacob Burns Film Center's vaunted media literacy programs for PK-12 grade learners, suggesting that "art house theaters have unique opportunities for partnership and fundraising in unforeseen places, both in their own communities and nationally" as education hubs. "First Steps: Starting an Education Program" reiterated that "more and more art houses are considering expanding their work to include education" and offered concrete steps for how to initiate such programs. Similar insights were shared in other panels titled "Screening Room as Classroom," which walked listeners through the practical questions involved in hosting middle and high school groups in one's theatre, and "Art House to School House," an interactive session of case studies of art house education programs that shared "best practices on curriculum development, standards alignment, partnership models, and funding support." The pedagogical possibilities of art houses are thus reasoned out beyond the cinephilic discovery of world cinema; theatres themselves, collaborating with local teachers or experts, can easily become classrooms for media literacy.

One question that other AHC panels addresses concerns which communities are ultimately targeted or served by art house outreach. As the data reports commissioned by AHC suggest, art house ticket-buyers remain predominantly white, older, highly educated, and

affluent.³⁷⁷ This disproportionate presence puts added importance on community outreach initiatives or programming norms that aim to develop audiences reflective of one's community. A number of AHC panels have asked the question: "How can the programming at art house theatres and film festivals better reflect the diverse audiences, makers, and stories in our communities?" For example, "Engaging Latino Audiences at Art House Cinemas" noted the lingering difficulty of indie theatres to attract those identifying as Hispanic or Latino/a. Admitting that "it can even be difficult to engage our existing members who are fans of foreign cinema with films from Latin America and Spain, on this panel we will look at successful strategies, and obstacles, for expanding audiences, programming and events to better reflect our multicultural and multilingual society." A stronger impetus was behind the panel "Movies So White: Decolonizing Programming," which used case studies "to examine the relationship between race, ethnicity, and the many factors that impact workplace culture" and how to responsibly and collaboratively curate programs by and for people of colour. "Asian Pacific Films in US Art Houses" similarly nudged attendees to diversify their programming and gave specific tips on "how to access, curate, and market Asian-Pacific films," while "Confidently Curate and Create Community around Queer Cinema" featured speakers on "how to identify affirming queer cinema, engage community partners with an eye toward intersectionality, and build an audience of both queer-identified folx and allies." Again, these are simply a representative sample of AHC conference sessions pertaining to programming with one's community and questions of diversity and difference at the fore.

Another AHC refrain in recent years is that art houses must think outside the confines of first-run feature exhibition if they hope to engage new audiences outside of older, white, affluent

³⁷⁷ "2020 National Data Surveys," DataArts, Art House Convergence Annual Conference, Midway, Utah, January 20, 2020.

patrons. AHC challenges members to function as multi-purpose cultural institutions whose dynamic programming, aided by flexible digital formats and convertible theater space, makes it easier to screen more content faster, or to adapt theatre space for live events like musical concerts, dance shows, or other entertainment. Many of the Art House Tales presentations detail such special events, which I will unpack more in later chapters. For now, suffice it to say that AHC advocates for localized, creative curation and event planning, encouraging theatres to abandon one-size-fits-all programming models. As AHC Founder Collins puts it:

We need to think about movie exhibition in the same way we think about concert promotion: there are some concerts that need to be presented by commercial promoters that do them in arenas and big theaters and they're doing them singularly for the profit motive. Then there are the folks who are dedicated to the artform, to a particular type of music that can only exist in a subsidized format, and there are dedicated people who present that type of concert. What's going to help the arthouse cinema in the future is the understanding that their job is to marry their local audience to the type of film the local audience is interested in. That's going to vary from town to town.³⁷⁸

The drive toward diverse kinds of programming is a truism among arts nonprofits everywhere to generate multiple income streams from different audiences. Of particular import has been the need to attract millennial viewers to replace art house stalwarts from the 60s. "Cultivating a Younger Audience" addressed the contemporary difficulty of attracting attendees under 30 and turning them into "long-term patrons and donors" at a time of decreased interest in going to theatres. One strategy for courting millennials, the midnight cult movie, was explored in "Keeping It Weird: Midnight Movies at the Coolidge," a case study of Brooklyn's Coolidge Theatre's special series "Coolidge After Midnight," described as a series to lure younger audiences through "late-night programming for cinephile insomniacs with screenings of horrifying, weird, camp, avant-garde, tripped-out, and cult films, often from 35mm prints." Midnight screenings, it must be remarked, are a highly conventional, old-fashioned way of

³⁷⁸ Collins in Contrino, "The Future of the Arthouse Cinema."

appealing to youth culture, a strategy employed by mainstream cinemas for decades. Going directly to the source, the session “The Kids Are Alright: The Cinematic Landscape of the Future” featured a wholly under-30 panel to discuss “effective strategies for developing loyalty amongst their peers” with the goal of nurturing long-term engagement [...] via programming, marketing, audience outreach, and education,” a sentiment echoed in an earlier session, “Art Houses V. Millennials.” Targeting an even younger age, “Starting Young: Hooking Youth on Cinema” offered plans for how to entice under-18s through the door via everything “from Parent & Baby Screenings to High School programs.”

As these latter conference sessions suggest, art houses today adopt a different stance toward entire families as audience members than they used to. Little cinemas of the 1920s often shunned children entirely in order to preserve a serious, adult ambiance for movie-watching. This attitude more or less carried over into the postwar art house and definitely so once art houses switched to nudie or grindhouse programming. But since the nonprofit turn, children and families are not just welcomed by art houses but actively courted. In a 2018 session called “Building a Future: Developing a Love of Cinema among Children,” panelists pointed out how few films children see in theatres per year versus on screens at home, asking how art houses can foster a kid-friendly climate that encourages long-term affiliations. As my case studies chapter will discuss, it’s common practice for art houses now to dedicate screen time to family fare once or even twice a week, usually on the weekends during mornings or afternoons. Education programs with local school groups further entwine art houses with children, signaling that kids are another audience segment that art houses since the digital transition are eager to attract, especially as part of nonprofit mandate to serve the totality of one’s community.

Focusing more on retaining an older crowd of movie buffs, the session “Repertory Programming Case Studies” offered insight “into [how art house operators] can balance repertory programming within the missions and values of their organizations,” while “A Deep Dive to Find Cinematic Treasures and How You Can Show Them” shared “ideas about how to find prints and licensing from archives, studios & private collectors.” Later follow-ups to this theme included “Repertory Case Studies: Beyond the Canon,” which accounted for the rise of streaming services and the need for art houses to “go beyond annual screenings of *Ghostbusters* and *It’s a Wonderful Life*” to satisfy audiences for repertory events. Perhaps a surprising panel given the historic nature of art houses (yet a sign that indie theatres today can’t take anything for granted), “It’s a Small World: Finding the Audience for International Cinema” warned attendees that “there is a perception that there is more resistance than ever in getting US audiences to subtitled films,” so strategic local marketing of international cinema is more in order than ever.

Just as important as diversifying one’s regular screen content is the need to flexibly manage screen time and special events. While digital technology was once seen as a hazard to small theatres, the range and ease of digital formats has expanded the ability of independent theatres to deftly choreograph more content at a faster rate. Once upon a time neighborhood art houses were dubbed “clean screens”—the industry term for theatres showing just one movie, uninterrupted, all week. Those days are long gone: art house screens are dirtier than ever. For example, “Four Times a Day?!?: Collaborative Approaches to New Programming Paradigms” questioned the traditional model of showing a film four times per day for multiple weeks, and “explored how creative approaches to scheduling can diversify your line-up and boost attendance for true art house fare.” The benefits of “eventizing” at theatres was unpacked in the session “Making the Case for Event Cinema in Your Theatre,” which broke down marketing and

programming strategies for cinema events, while “Eventizing for Wider Audiences” touted the ability of “one-off, ‘eventized’ screenings that can pack the house and bring new faces and voices into the art house,...making room for traditionally overlooked audiences and community-members to participate in dynamic speciality programs.” “Art House-Organized National One-Day Events” went further in this vein:

National screening events can only be produced by large companies or distributors, right? Wrong! Whether you’re in a big city, or a tiny town, you can use the power of the art house community (with a little help from the internet) to create a national, or even international, screening event. Join the individuals behind Art House Theater Day, the Jonathan Demme “Stop Making Sense” Tribute, and the 1984 National Screening Day, as they reveal how they produced events that stretched across state lines, and national borders, to take place simultaneously at hundreds of cinemas. Learn from their successes and mistakes, as they candidly share their experiences creating national one day screening events.

The brand of dynamic curation peddled by AHC extends far beyond screen content, however. To paraphrase a theme often invoked at their conferences: selling tickets alone won’t cut it. Theatres today employ a variety of avenues to generate income, including sales from alcohol,³⁷⁹ food, gifts, and paraphernalia, as well as transforming theatre space for live performances. In “Producing Live Shows in Your Venues,” speakers covered the nuances of “booking acts and navigating contracts” when deciding to produce “comedy, music, and other live performance shows in your theatres.” Creative marketing too has never been more important, said the AHC session “The Grind of Creating Meaningful Content: Tools and Tips for Feeding the Content Beast,” which looked at “how printed pieces, blogging, podcasting, infographics, and social media are used to tell your story and engage audiences.” One underrated avenue for connecting with audiences is GIFs, according to the AHC tutorial “How to Make Your Own GIFs (and Why You Should),” which lent best practices for how movie theatres can conceive, make, and implement GIFs to further their brand. Other (self-explanatory) sessions

³⁷⁹ At least one AHC conference addressed this in 2018: “Changing Liquor Laws to Help Save Indie Theatres.”

suggestive of the creative best practices AHC encourages include “A Different Audience: Managing Your Board”; “Mastering the Rush Line and Managing Audience Expectations”; and “Re-Imagining Concessions 101.” Undoubtedly it is easier for multiscreen art houses in locations with large or dynamic audience bases to harness creative and flexible programming than one- or twin-screen rural theatres, a reality that was addressed in “Small Town Development Practices,” which “explored the unique fundraising challenges and opportunities facing theaters in smaller markets [and brainstormed] creative ideas for building audience development and sponsorship” in towns with fewer than 150,000 people.

It’s clear within AHC activity that the group envisions art houses as activist hubs with a responsibility as cultural institutions to advocate for social change. This is hardly surprising given that nonprofits often mandate some investment in socio-political issues important to one’s community while resisting outright political campaigning. Though AHC made sporadic gestures to social causes for most of its tenure, usually at the level of programming, its efforts mostly crystalized since 2017 when an internal working group called Alliance for Action formed in response to issues in US society with crossover in the art house sector. Hollywood and other media industries were rocked in 2016-2017 by a series of sexual assault and harassment allegations against male executives of major companies, most notably Harvey Weinstein, the former founder and CEO of Miramax and The Weinstein Company. At the height of what became known as the #MeToo movement, reports surfaced detailing widespread sexual harassment complaints at Cinefamily, a well-known indie theatre in West Hollywood.³⁸⁰ Around the same time, Tim League, CEO and Founder of the Alamo Drafthouse theatre chain, came under fire for quietly rehiring the former editor-in-chief of Alamo’s film website, Devin Faraci,

³⁸⁰ Alicia Kozma, “2018 AHC Conference Report: Art House Convergence,” *Film Criticism* 42, no. 3 (2018).

after accusations of sexual assault against him.³⁸¹ Spring-boarding off of these highly publicized controversies, Alliance for Action used the 2017 AHC conference as a pivot point for the organization to begin substantial reflective work about the art house as a vehicle for combating structural inequality while shoring up equity and inclusion among theatres and AHC itself.

Alliance for Action's inaugural session, "How to Be an Ally," invited attendees to "participate in addressing the power structures inherent to traditional film exhibition and distribution that inhibit social equity [via] an open source, peer-to-peer exchange of experiences, hard questions, and case studies around inclusive film programming." Since this open-ended session in 2017, AHC conferences have foregrounded more sharpened issues of equity, inclusion, and safe-space work environments. The 2018 assembly announced that year's conference as guided by four questions: "1) How can the Art House Convergence be more diverse and inclusive? 2) How can we include voices from outside the art house community? How can we elevate the conversation? How will panels translate into action beyond the conference?" Reflecting these new self-reflexive concerns, 2018's lineup of conference sessions and workshops was noteworthy for its "regular integration of conversations around multiple points of diversity, allyship, and identity, ... signaling a departure from AHC's typical conference structure."³⁸² A plenary session that year, "Harassment and Intimidation Have No Place in the Art House," addressed how to create harassment- and intimidation-free working environments by "developing a credible program to address toxic behaviors." The session featured experts in the legal and communication fields to lay out the legal contours of workplace harassment, and it also invited League, a former AHC keynote speaker, to explain the initiatives

³⁸¹ Dana Harris-Bridson, "Devin Faraci Was Rehired After Sexual Assault Allegations: What Was Tim League Thinking?," *IndieWire*, September 13, 2017.

³⁸² Kozma, "Conference Report."

that Alamo Drafthouse had put into place in response to the sexual harassment complaints leveled against him and his company. While the event started productive conversations around sensitive topics, it was not without controversy. At least one observer criticized the session's emphasis on branding in the wake of harassment accusations as a sign of the "problematic politics around change, equality, art, and business." Complaints also arose that AHC was too reactive in its address of sexual harassment and equity issues rather than leading the way among exhibitors. Attempts to bring the art house into national conversations on sexual harassment were met with scrutiny. A PSA debuted by a panel member (a communications specialist) against workplace harassment meant to be distributed to theatres was roundly criticized by Alliance for Action and pulled until amendments were made.³⁸³

Despite these tensions, AHC conferences continued to stage sessions with activist intentions for equity, access, and fairness. Activism can of course take many forms; some of AHC's activist promotions center internally on how art house proprietors carry out hiring processes, interpersonal communication, the language of formal policies, codes of conduct, and other workplace topics. One of the recent centerpiece panels, "Allies for Action: Make Change, Take Action: Equity in the Art House," took stock of the prior year's inaugural conference and reflected on future conversations to have around issues of art house equity, which, since 2018, have manifested in the following representative sessions: "Top 10 Ways to Prevent Sexual Harassment in Movie Theatres"; "Equity Workshop: Shifting the Culture in Your Art House"; "Is It Safe in Here? A Conversation on Trigger Warnings, Content Consideration, and Audience Consent"; "Changing Workplace Culture and Preventing Harm"; "Inclusive Structures, Signage, and Policies: Improving Accessibility at Your Theater"; "Pro Tips for Parity: Lessons from the

³⁸³ Ibid.

Front Line”; “A Conversation About Race in Your Institutions”; “Land Acknowledgement: Activating the Sacredness of Indigenous Storytelling”; “ADA: Accessibility Beyond Compliance”; and “Is It Safer Here? Practical Tips for Communicating about Content.”

Other permutations for art house activism at AHC include initiatives for how art houses should program diverse content at the level of subject matter and creative talent. Many examples of identity-specific programming sessions, including the 2018 entry “Programming for Gender Equality,” were touched on earlier in this section. At a broad level, AHC dialogues about how—if at all—art houses should engage with overtly political matters in their programming. The 2019 session “Politics and the Art House,” responding to the ongoing culture wars forming the backdrop of Donald Trump’s presidency, came with the following description:

At a moment when everything is refracted through a political lens, and battle lines over social issues have become sharply drawn, community-based art house cinemas can often find themselves enmeshed in political controversy. Once-simple choices about what films to show, or not to show, can quickly enrage one side or another on the political spectrum. Should we be politically engaged, impartial, or consciously avoid politics? Is it right for staff to allow their personal political views to shape the theater's programming? What are the effects of political advocacy on fundraising? How should we handle controversy, and complaints from offended customers? What political advocacy is permitted for non-profit cinemas, and what would potentially endanger their tax-exempt status? Is it still okay to show *Gone with The Wind*? How about *Birth of a Nation*? Join staff members from three cinemas as they share their different approaches to running an art house cinema in a time of extreme political polarization.

While this description suggests that art houses may choose to avoid political positioning entirely, the wider spectrum of sessions at AHC conferences makes apparent that this is not likely to be the case for community-based art cinemas, a sentiment reinforced by a panel in 2018 titled “Educate to Engage: Teaching Through Film to Tackle Social Issues.” To be clear, art houses are as diverse as individuals—some are more political than others, and still others not at all. Many art houses do not consider themselves political vessels or “progressive” institutions according to certain AHC chatter. A 2017 Google Group thread titled “Is Your Theater Progressive?” solicited remarks about operators’ perceptions of their theatres’ political leanings. While some

respondents clearly wear the “progressive” badge with honor, citing their overt commitment to programming films deemed leftist, others view their function as “storytellers” first and foremost with little consideration for politics. Others underlined that, as nonprofits, their theatres were forbidden from formally endorsing political figures even as they support local causes of their particular political stripe. The work of art house operators today increasingly means juggling the political ramifications of deciding which films to screen, how to frame those screenings, how to behave as an organization, who and how to hire, and conversing with transparency.

4.5 Alternatives and Crises

This chapter has shown how AHC broke the mold of associations for independent exhibitors by focusing not on improved trade conditions for independent theatres at large but rather on professionalizing the art house network and encouraging nonprofit management. These efforts, as evidenced by its increasing growth and influence over many small exhibitors, have expanded contemporary understandings of the cultural roles of art houses beyond enclaves for cinephilia or distinction. But given the disparate needs facing art houses or independent exhibitors in a fast-changing market, it’s no surprise that alternatives to AHC have emerged to galvanize theatres in ways reminiscent of earlier trade groups. Two examples worth mentioning are the Independent Cinema Alliance (ICA), founded in April 2018, and the Network for Independent Canadian Exhibitors (NICE), launched in early 2020. ICA is the more established of the two, describing itself as a “cinema advocacy group” that broke apart from NATO “to give independent [exhibitors] a voice they otherwise lack on industry issues.”³⁸⁴ The alliance welcomes for- or nonprofit theatres or chains (many of them in rural areas) whose consolidated

³⁸⁴ Randy Hester in Andreas Fuchs, “Declaration of Independent: Exhibitor Alliance Aims to Preserve the Cinema Experience,” *Film Journal International*, April 16, 2018.

screen count does not exceed 500, and acts as a collective to deal with studios and distributors on issues including on-the-break releasing (a term to describe a film’s initial release in a given market), premium video-on-demand (PVOD), and subscription-based movie ticketing services based on the troubled run of MoviePass, which folded in 2019 after running up huge deficits. “It’s a lot more efficient for studios to speak with the ICA rather than fielding 400 phone calls from different cinemas,”³⁸⁵ said founding member Randy Hester of the efficacy in communication ICA hopes to achieve within the industry.³⁸⁶ ICA is more concerned with industry-level policies than AHC. It submitted a 25-page public comment to the Antitrust Division of the Department of Justice in fall 2018 in response to their proposed revaluation of the *Paramount* decrees that year. The gulf between the ICA and AHC is apparent: When members of the latter learned of the former and considered reaching out to consider areas of overlap and common cause, one AHC member pointed out that “the ICA has nothing to do with the AHC. ... [It] hopes to gain relief from high film rentals and the limited number of runs in small markets.”³⁸⁷ Another top AHC figure claimed that ICA viewed them as “too ‘artsy,’ too urban, and too ‘mission-driven’ as opposed to exclusively commercially driven.”³⁸⁸ Comments like these reinforce AHC’s discursive position of disinterest in trade policies in contrast to the advocacy directives of groups like ICA.

The other recent addition to independent exhibitor trade groups in North America is NICE, “an industry body on behalf of and in the interest of Canadian independent film exhibitors

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Comprised largely of one-time NATO members, the alliance split from that group in order to maintain the Cinema Buying Group (CBG), a NATO-affiliated buying organization comprised of 400 independent cinemas that negotiated with merchandizers, manufacturers, and vendors for better business deals. Renamed the Cinema Buying Alliance (CBA) and now wholly owned by ICA, CBA “aims to use the collective buying power represented by ICA’s 4,000 screens to yield a better buying structure for its members.” See Rebecca Pahle, “ICA Enters Year Two with Four New Board Members,” *Boxoffice* 155, no. 4, April 2019, 118.

³⁸⁷ “Independent Cinema Alliance,” AHC Google Group thread, April 12, 2018.

³⁸⁸ “Re: Paramount Consent Decree - the latest,” AHC Google Group thread, January 1, 2020.

[that] facilitates a network for information and resource sharing.”³⁸⁹ NICE emerged in early 2020 to lobby against the impact of Cineplex, Canada’s largest theatre chain, on the Canadian film exhibition and production sectors. On December 15, 2019, the UK-based entertainment company Cineworld announced its proposed acquisition of Cineplex, Canada’s largest theatre chain with 75% of the national market share. The planned buy sent shockwaves around exhibition circles and was met with consternation by independent exhibitors who feared the merger further consolidated power in the hands of a few companies. A petition started on March 4, 2020, on change.org detailed NICE’s planned efforts to complain to the Competition Bureau of Canada and the Ministry of Heritage, arguing that Cineworld’s proposed acquisition represented an existential threat to small cinemas in Canada. In the end NICE was relieved to see that Cineworld backed out of the deal in June 2020, citing “certain breaches of the contract” signed with Cineplex.³⁹⁰ The disruption of Cineplex’s plan was a welcome surprise to independent Canadian exhibitors, though it remains unclear how much of a mandate NICE will have to continue advocating for smaller theatres in Canada considering the combined efforts of NATO and ICA to do the same. In sum, the ongoing examples of ICA and NICE represent attempts among independent exhibitors to strengthen their power in the industry through collective action and advocacy—something that AHC has deprioritized to focus on best practice management.

Despite its undeniable impact, AHC has suffered from its share of external and internal conflicts revealing cracks in its foundation and concerns for its longevity. The oldest of these fractures concerned the group’s official status under the Michigan Theatre Foundation, which,

³⁸⁹ “About,” Network of Independent Canadian Exhibitors (NICE), February 28, 2020.

³⁹⁰ This jettisoning from the merger was widely seen as Cineworld’s escape from an expensive acquisition in the midst of the devastating financial effects of COVID-19 on movie theatres. Cineplex, for its part, filed a lawsuit against Cineworld in July 2020 seeking \$2.1 billion for the reneged deal. See “Cineplex Sues Former Merger Partner Cineworld for \$2.1B,” *CBC News*, July 6, 2020.

until recently, made all budgetary and personnel decisions. While this was arguably necessary to get the association off the ground, AHC now serves a much wider network of stakeholders, and such centralized control has led to charges of lack of transparency. Also, since AHC began a pronounced emphasis on diversity and equity in the art house (namely through the work of Alliance for Action), it has come under scrutiny by its members as regards its own practices in these areas. In a 2018 conference report Alicia Kozma praised the assembly’s new-found commitment to addressing topics around allyship and diversity but also noted a clear “tension between those striving for change and the broader art house community ... bifurcated among age and gender” lines,³⁹¹ highlighting perceived resistance because “Alliance group members—a mix of young women, some of color, and male allies—are demanding change from an older white male art house leadership.”³⁹² Intergenerational and interracial disagreements like these are certainly not unique to AHC; many cultural institutions have collectively reckoned with accusations of systemic racism, sexism, or inequity since the MeToo and BlackLivesMatter movements gained mainstream attention starting in 2017.

These points came to a dramatic head in early 2020. Miriam Bale, Artistic Director of Indie Memphis Film Festival, was slated to co-chair the fifteenth AHC annual conference, but she did not show up. As detailed by a report written by Abby Sun titled “Art House Convergence 2020: Transparency and Crisis,” as well as Bale’s own Twitter posts, Bale was removed from all event advertisements and schedules after vowing to “raise differences she has over the conference’s philosophy on inclusion,” at which point she was told not to attend.³⁹³ According to Bale’s account of events, AHC “lacks the proper organizational training and community

³⁹¹ Kozma, “Conference Report.”

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Abby Sun, “2020 AHC Art House Convergence 2020: Transparency and Crisis,” *Filmmaker Magazine* (blog), January 24, 2020.

structure needed to properly support its BIPOC team members,” creating a “tokenized” atmosphere in which she felt she and others were invited simply to diversity the conference. Some fellow attendees spoke against the exclusion of Bale in their own panel presentations. Midway through the conference, sensing the backlash haunting the proceedings, Collins read what Sun described as a “convoluted” statement that obfuscated the reasons for Bale’s disinvitation and simply sowed further distrust among members. In a further effort to apply a salve, Alison Kozberg delivered a closing night statement committing to “a strategic plan to address structural problems in AHC in the next 14 days,” though it is unclear if AHC released any such statement or if further action was taken. In the best light, the Bale incident was a disagreement among conference organizers over content and representation; at worst it points out certain irreconcilable differences between the old and new guards of art house administrators who have differing approaches to the work AHC performs in the name of equity and inclusion.

As tense as these situations were, AHC was hit with two far more calamitous events later in 2020. First, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in the spring, bringing an abrupt stop to all indoor theatrical activity across much of the world. As cinemas began to shut down, members of the Google Group exchanged resources and worried anecdotes about closures, layoffs, strategies for staying connected to communities, and how to launch experiments with “virtual cinema”—the strategic term that indie exhibitors and distributors settled on for art house-arranged streaming of content.³⁹⁴ (These events will be detailed more in my conclusion.) Then on May 22, a bombshell announcement from founding director Collins rocked AHC at its most vulnerable moment. In what was widely regarded as a bizarre posting to the group’s Google Group, Collins announced the cancellation of the in-person January 2021 AHC conference and the abrupt firing

³⁹⁴ “VOD, Streaming or Virtual Cinema? Your Guide to Digital Movie Options,” *The New York Times* April 24, 2020.

of Managing Director Kozberg. All conferences in the foreseeable future were to be replaced by virtual gatherings, and the Michigan State Theatre Foundation, the AHC's host since 2008, would begin negotiations to "spin off" the AHC "as an independent organization or to a similar and simpatico professional service organization." Citing discussions since 2015, Collins's statement, which read more like a press release pasted in from another source, hoped for new stewardship of the AHC to concretize by the end of the year via a transitional board of volunteers. While the decision to cancel the in-person conference was understandable given the unfolding COVID crisis, the firing of Kozberg came as a shock to everyone, including the AHC Provisional Board who were reportedly left out of the decision-making. The announcement set off a firestorm of confusion. Comments from the group expressed sympathy for Kozberg but quickly shifted to anger at Collins and other AHC brass for the callousness of the message, lack of transparency, and lingering charges of bureaucratic inefficiencies or inequities. Calls piled up for AHC to follow the invitation set out by Collins and form its own independent nonprofit. Since then AHC members have attempted to do just that, albeit with clear mandates to change its administrative representation and procedures. A community town hall Zoom meeting was held a week after the announcement to address the crisis and invite questions. (Though I viewed the meeting in its entirety after it was posted to the AHC Google Group, its content was embargoed from any journalistic reporting.) At time of writing, AHC is in the process of electing a transitional board to see the group through to reorganization as its own 501c3 non-profit. It remains to be seen whether the new board will satisfy demands among some members to deliver greater transparency and equity that formed the basis of internal fractures. It also remains to be seen if or how the association will resume its normal functions—including its annual conference—once the COVID pandemic subsides.

The fate of AHC is not a moot point for the art house sector. As one Google Group user and former member of the AHC provisional board expressed after its splintering in May 2020: “The last six months have been bumpy, but the last 10 years have been glorious. Those of us who predate the AHC know how lonely it was out here before there was an AHC. Getting together and meeting each other has been transformative. I can’t imagine going back.”³⁹⁵ Kozberg’s letter suggested that the writers at *Variety* were unaware of or unable to recognize the evolution of small exhibitors in recent years. AHC signifies that film culture can remain stubbornly local in an age of multi-media conglomeration and on-demand viewing habits. From helping theatre owners professionalize their nonprofit management to sharing crucial data surveys to positioning independent theatres as community-centric, civic-minded cultural venues, AHC has proven a crucial influencer in contemporary art house cinemas. My next chapter leaves the conference room behind and heads for theatres themselves to discuss how the values and practices promoted by AHC have been realized in two North American art houses.

³⁹⁵ “Dear Art House Community,” AHC Google Group thread, May 25, 2020.

Chapter 5 | Screen to Screen: Two Case Studies

“It’s long been known that the art house scene in Los Angeles lags behind that of New York, but must we be outdone by Iowa City?”³⁹⁶

Subscribers to the Criterion Channel, the Criterion Collection’s on-demand streaming service, would have noticed in early 2017 a new original series devoted not to art films (their specialty) but to the theatres that exhibit them. Art House America offers intimate looks at the histories, operations, and cultural value-making of individual art house theatres across the United States. Only a handful of episodes aired before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down production in 2020. Among the theatres spotlighted include the Walter Reade Theatre, the cinema housed within New York’s renowned Lincoln Center arts complex; Gold Town Nickelodeon, a cozy venue in Juneau, Alaska, which splits its building lease with a yoga studio; and the Roxy Theatre in Missoula, Montana, which burned to the ground in 1994 but relaunched in 2001 as the hub of the International Wildlife Film Festival. That the preeminent at-home distributor of specialty art cinema devoted a series on its streaming platform to art house theatres suggests where these cinemas have migrated in the film-cultural imagination as objects of interest in their own right. The homespun sentiment behind the Art House America series signals the geographic extension of such cinemas away from elite coastal urban venues into neighborhoods, mainstays as familiar as barbershops or bowling alleys. In the highly reflexive posture that today’s art house networks adopt, these cinemas don’t just exhibit stories—they are stories themselves, full of dramatic highs and lows to match the best movie script, and worthy of documentation and reflection as a distinct cultural form.

³⁹⁶ Michael Nordine, “Why is L.A. an Art House Film Desert?” *Los Angeles Times*, July 17, 2015.

My previous chapter established the ways that Art House Convergence as an industry trade group has, over the last 15 years, promoted a reorganizing of art houses into nonprofit, multi-purpose resource hubs. I parsed out three elements—content diversification, community-building, and civic service—that characterize this new direction at a time of precarity in the theatrical exhibition market. With this framing in hand, I want to now look at how the practices and strategies promoted by AHC manifest in actual theatres. Mapping out specific theatre operations helps to clarify large-scale shifts in the exhibition business, even one as fragmented as the independent art house sector. It does so by concretizing the abstract discourses promulgated by tastemakers when theorizing how one’s industry should organize itself and what goals it should aspire to.

To return to my historical survey chapter, there have been three rough periods of evolution in art house history. First came the postwar settling of small, independent exhibitors into art film enclaves. Many small theatres in need of screen content refashioned into speciality theatres to capture a market distinct from mainstream cinema culture. This is the change documented by Barbara Wilinsky’s book wherein she shows how “switching to an ‘arty’ theatre involved a range of changes that went beyond simply screening art films, such as alterations in theatre décor and the manager’s wardrobe. [...] The high culture image of art films ... did not emerge solely from any inherent artistic quality of [art] films, but was also a construction of art house operators attempting to find a niche within the film exhibition market.”³⁹⁷ Funneling this narrative onto one particular venue, Jim Lane examined the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and its discursive construction as an alternative film culture venue in the 1950s.³⁹⁸ The second major batch of art house case studies documents the partial or wholesale

³⁹⁷ Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters*, 104-105.

³⁹⁸ Lane, “Brattle Theatre.”

integration of provocative sexual content into art houses of the 1960s and 70s in the wake of relaxed censorship norms. Dennis Nyback tells some lurid tales of Seattle’s speciality cinemas teetering between highbrow and sewer-brow sensibilities following the mid-century art film craze.³⁹⁹ Other case studies detail how esteemed cinemas such as The Adonis in New York bought into the grindhouse ethos by redesigning theatre space to encourage anonymous sex and other clandestine activity decidedly at odds with the prestige reputation of art houses.⁴⁰⁰

The third shift in art house history comprises the focus of this thesis—the rethinking of art houses into community-minded nonprofits deploying a range of practices to remain financially and culturally solvent. This shift is no less worthy of critical attention yet case studies on contemporary art houses are rare. One such study positioned between a Bourdieuan lens of cultural distinction and my own concern with community-centric practices is Janna Jones’s 2001 article on the Tampa Theatre, in Tampa, Florida, a vaudeville-era movie palace that restructured into an art house in the 1950s. The Tampa continues to specialize in foreign, independent, and documentary films today. Jones highlights the theatre’s patron group, the Tampa Theatre Film Society, and its members’ impressions of the Tampa as an urban oasis for high-class film culture. Her analysis largely echoes the Bourdieuan method of mapping cultural taste-making, similar to the approach that Wilinsky and Lane apply to art house programming, theatre décor, and promotional materials. Interviews with Film Society members reveal how patrons value the Tampa because it represents what Hollywood and the city’s suburban megaplexes are *not*; the Tampa’s differentiation defines its appeal. Its downtown location, whose business core empties

³⁹⁹ Dennis Nyback, “Art and Grind in Seattle,” in *From the Art House to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transgressions in Cinema’s First Century*, eds. John Cline and Robert Weiner (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 153-169.

⁴⁰⁰ Jack Stevenson, “Grindhouse and Beyond,” in *From the Art House to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transgressions in Cinema’s First Century*, eds. John Cline and Robert Weiner (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 129-152.

out once the workday ends, provides Tampa movie-goers with a sense of “destination” and “occasion” that suburban or mall-based theatre chains lack. The inconvenience of traveling, steep price of parking, and threatening prospects of nighttime crime only augment its aura of distinction; the Tampa’s “relative inaccessibility has helped to reconstruct its cultural position.”⁴⁰¹ Her article also hints at where art houses might migrate as film-cultural community centers. Many Film Society members, remarking on the intellectual complexity of the theatre’s programming, express a desire to have organized discussions or adult education classes in film appreciation to better take part in the communal experience of art film exhibition.

Remaining case studies of digital-age art houses have picked up where Jones left off. In my thesis introduction I mentioned a 2018-2019 double-issue of the academic journal *The Projector* that reinvestigated contemporary art house exhibition beyond the frames of postwar distinction and foreign-language cinephilia. Two noteworthy case studies came out of these issues. First is Joan McGettigan’s profile on the Hiway Theatre in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, one of four art houses gathered under the nonprofit Renew Theatres company that operates across Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Akin to my project, McGettigan mapped out differences between the Hiway and mid-century art film exhibitors by pointing out the recent turn toward nonprofit business structures and a concerted effort to foster community interactions among patrons. Theatres like the Hiway have become associated with neighborhood or downtown revitalization efforts and depend on philanthropic contributions or patron-driven membership programs,

⁴⁰¹ Janna Jones, “Finding a Place at the Downtown Picture Palace: The Tampa Theatre, Florida,” in *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, eds. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 132.

suggesting that “the desire to be part of a community, not necessarily an interest in a particular film,” drives the success of the theatre and its differentiation from mainstream culture.⁴⁰²

The second recent applicable case study is my own survey of the Mary Riepma Ross Media Arts Center in Lincoln, Nebraska. My article examined the Ross’s curatorial identity as an art house affiliated with a major institution, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, through discourse analysis and an interview with the theatre’s long-time “star curator,” Director Dan Ladely. I sought to determine how the Ross (housed within the university’s Hixon-Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts) reconciles the tensions between “community and capital programming.” The former represents “exhibitions collaboratively executed with local stakeholders and intended to intervene in social or cultural debates,” and the latter signifies “standard commercial business practice to maximize profits,”⁴⁰³ a duality that scholar Peter Bosma labels “a cinema of disturbance” vs. “a cinema of reassurance.”⁴⁰⁴ My findings suggested that the Ross’s curatorial brand is highly linked to Ladely’s individual vision for the theatre (insofar as distributor deals allow) and to the university’s academic network. As a speciality exhibitor balancing institutional obligations and a highly idiosyncratic curation scheme tied largely to one person, the Ross combines varying iterations of art house exhibition today. This and McGettigan’s case study mark an initial foray into a longer rumination of current art house cinemas that this thesis carries forward.

I turn now to two additional case studies that give concrete form to a range of practices emblematic of art houses since the transition to digital projection. Specifically I will look at the

⁴⁰² Joan McGettigan, “From Auditorium to Art House: The Many Lives of the Hiway Theatre,” *The Projector: A Journal on Film, Media, and Culture* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 32.

⁴⁰³ Will Fech, “Ticket Stubs, Social Hub: Capital and Community Programming at the Mary Riepma Ross Media Arts Center,” *The Projector: A Journal on Film, Media, and Culture* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2018): n.p.

⁴⁰⁴ Peter Bosma, *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2015), 63.

origins, strategic evolutions, and contemporary operations of The Hollywood Theatre in Portland, Oregon, and FilmScene in Iowa City, Iowa. In selecting these sites, I considered a number of factors. First, both cinemas are nonprofits. This was important in order to understand how this particular business model informs art house operations and discourse-making. Second, given the travel restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have chosen theatres with robust online presences in the form of official websites, YouTube channels, press interviews, Kickstarter videos, etc., as well as active participation in AHC conferences, so that I had access to ample primary sources suitable for discourse analysis. Finally, I strove for more geographic variety than has typically been featured in art house scholarship, which tends toward theatres in the largest markets like New York City and Chicago. By focusing on a cinema in a west coast city like Portland, Oregon (which has a distinct national reputation as a liberal, counter-culture enclave) and a small college town in an otherwise conservative-leaning US state, I hope to bring more layers of geographic and cultural coverage to the scholarship. I should clarify that these case studies largely detail activities before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020. My concluding chapter offers a parting look at how art houses responded to this crisis and how the redrawn contours of the art house market have adapted to the pandemic environment. That said, it was a reality of my research process that art house administrators were less available for personal interviews than they might have been in a year without the disruptions of the pandemic. More than half of my email and telephone requests for interviews went unanswered or were otherwise politely declined. While FilmScene administrators were graciously able to sit down with me, I've had to mine secondary sources (local journalism, AHC reports, websites) for targeted information about the Hollywood Theatre.

With that caveat, a series of research questions and tensions shape this chapter. In researching these cinemas, I wanted to get a sense of the internal understanding among administrators of theaters as nonprofit businesses and cultural resources. If the postwar era created the emergence of art houses, thanks to particular industrial conditions that favored European art film and refined taste culture, and if “going grind” became a way for the same cinemas to stay afloat in later decades, the shift into nonprofit cultural centers signals something else entirely for the sector: a financial imperative, yes. But it is also a rearticulation of theatrical exhibitors less as arbiters of taste and much more within the spectrum of commerce and community. Nonprofitization has produced a prominent new tension into the art house space between capital-minded practices and community-minded practices, often activated through a theatre’s programming, its ancillary services as a resource center, and its efforts to integrate outside stakeholders. I thus pay special attention in this chapter to how nonprofit art houses serve their communities while remaining financially solvent. The issue of community service also compels one to wonder exactly which communities are most or best served by these cinemas so newly devoted to social causes. How do art houses reach out to the economically disenfranchised? How and to what extent do art houses court children and families as part of their core audiences? To what extent do these cinemas define themselves *for* something rather than *against* a megaplex model of exhibition or Hollywood culture broadly? What are the complicated taste formations circulating around the through these cinemas? The case studies are not uniform; questions and tension points rise to the surface organically to different degrees and in different ways. In each case, though, I recap the origins and evolutions of these cinemas into their current forms to trace an arc of practices that formalize our understanding of where art houses have gone as institutions in recent decades.



Figure 1: Exterior of the Hollywood Theatre, Portland, Oregon, in 2018. Photo credit: Leah Nash and Christopher Onstott. https://hollywoodtheatre.org/about/press_page/.

5.1 *The Hollywood Theatre, Portland, Oregon*

5.1.1 *Origins and Nonprofit Turn*

The Hollywood Theatre is an established landmark in Portland's eclectic cultural scene that dates back to the days of silent cinema. It opened on July 17, 1926, as a single-screen, 1,500-seat movie and vaudeville palace on Sandy Boulevard, a main thoroughfare east of the

Willamette River, which cleaves the city in two. The cinema's lavish furnishings wowed local crowds who enjoyed the Hollywood's eight-piece orchestra and \$40,000 Wurlitzer pipe organ that accompanied both stage and screen fare. The theatre, then and now, catches the eye: its prominent Spanish Colonial revival architecture, complete with a 55-foot multi-coloured terra cotta tower, highly ornate columns, and a façade dotted with mermaids, cherubs, and angelic figures, was designed by the renowned architectural firm of Bennes and Herzog. This duo was responsible for many esteemed theatres and other buildings still standing throughout Oregon today. Largely thanks to its architectural prestige, the theatre was and remains deeply woven into the fabric of its neighborhood. In fact its "prominence and grandeur" inspired its commercial district's name, Hollywood.⁴⁰⁵ For a city that even by West Coast standards prides itself on being modernly hip and progressive, the Hollywood's historic building has been a life preserver in rescue efforts to keep the cinema afloat over the decades.

The Hollywood went through many incarnations in the twentieth century—as local media put it, “from glorious movie palace to second-run shithole to under-attended arthouse over the course of nine decades.”⁴⁰⁶ Two years after it was founded by Claude C. Jensen and John G. von Herberg, the Hollywood was sold to West Coast Theatres, a chain owned by major studio heads such as Marcus Lowe, Louis Mayer, and William Fox. Records of the theatre during this period are scarce, but the 1930s through the 1950s saw the theatre operate as a standard first-run studio-affiliated exhibitor that also occasionally hosted live variety acts, war bond drives, civic events, fashion shows, and even a popular children's radio program. Despite being one of the first cinemas in the country to adopt Cinerama in the 1950s, an ultra-widescreen format that required

⁴⁰⁵ National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, Hollywood Theatre, United States Department of the Interior, August 1, 1983, 7.

⁴⁰⁶ AP Kryza, “After 90 Years, the Hollywood Deserves Its Name,” *Willamette Week*, June 28, 2016.

two additional projection booths and a large wrap-around screen, the Hollywood never reclaimed the lustre of its vaudeville roots.

As with most theatres, attendance at the cinema started to decline as television use ascended and leisure habits changed. At some point in the early 1970s the Hollywood was bought by local theatre mogul Tom Moyer, an early innovator of multiplexes in the Portland area. In 1966 he had successfully introduced the region's first multiplex cinema, the Eastgate Theatre, and from there expanded in the Pacific Northwest under the name Luxury Theatres, a large circuit that would eventually merge with Regal Cinemas, today one of the largest chains in the United States. Moyer sought to modernize the Hollywood to replicate the success of the Eastgate. In 1975 the Hollywood divided its balcony space to create two smaller auditoriums, robbing the main auditorium of one of its best features. Moyer also had the original 1926 marquee replaced. Many of the building's decorative flourishes were similarly painted over or ripped out in the name of adapting to the trends of multiplex exhibition. These changes didn't generate long-term profits though, and the cinema drifted into second-run territory with dwindling attendance. By the 1980s, even with the addition of more screens and Moyer's many modernization attempts, the discount exhibitor with costly building upkeep was on the brink of collapse. The rise of VHS, cable television, and new multiplexes had siphoned customers away. According to local film writer and director David Walker, the state of the Hollywood in the 1980s was appalling: "There were roaches. People smoked in the theater. And the upstairs theater smelled like a urinal."⁴⁰⁷

The theatre received a lifeline when passionate local organizers got the building placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983, qualifying it for helpful tax incentives and

⁴⁰⁷ John Chandler, "The New Hollywood Theatre," *Portland Monthly*, July 1, 2013.

other protections. This staved off demolition but didn't guarantee longevity. In 1997 the Hollywood narrowly avoided disaster again when a fire burned down two adjacent buildings (the cinema is attached to a long row of smaller businesses). The residual fire and smoke damage to its main auditorium was so extensive that Luxury Cinemas, which didn't see the Hollywood as a profit-maker, was content to write the cinema off as a loss.⁴⁰⁸ By then, even with its National Register designation, the theatre was a shell of its former self: "The roof leaked, transients camped out on the fire escape, and rodents outnumbered paying customers."⁴⁰⁹

That same year, however, in 1997, the architectural legacy of the Hollywood saved the day once more when the nonprofit Film Action Oregon Association, a state government initiative dedicated to fostering understanding and appreciation for the state's film heritage, purchased the building to preserve it and restore its potential as a first-run exhibitor. Over the next ten years Film Action Oregon procured a number of grants from historical preservation organizations for seismic assessments and architectural studies of the building.⁴¹⁰ Other financial support in the amount of \$175,000 simply went toward keeping the theatre open, including "interior and exterior painting, removal of the old, unsanitary concession stand, the installation of a new security system, and carpet and seat cleaning, [all in the name of changing] the negative image that had surrounded the building for the past decade."⁴¹¹ But as a nonprofit finding its feet at a time when specialty and repertory houses were going bust around the country, and long before AHC emerged for nonprofit restructuring, the Hollywood struggled to establish an institutional persona. Records of its operation are few but one local publication recalls that the Hollywood of

⁴⁰⁸ "Art Santana and Connor Kirkwood of the Hollywood Theatre," Karl Show! podcast, 2013.

⁴⁰⁹ Joe Fitzgibbon, "Hollywood Theatre," Oregon Encyclopedia, last updated February 28, 2020.

⁴¹⁰ These included \$36,000 from the Kinsman Foundation; \$10,000 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation; and \$3,500 from Architecture Foundation of Oregon. See Alison Ryan, "Back to Grand Beginnings for Hollywood Landmark," *DJC Oregon*, July 9, 2007.

⁴¹¹ "Oregon Film and Video Project/Hollywood Theatre," Volunteer Match, n.d.

the early 2000s, in contrast to how it exists now, “survived as a poorly attended art house specializing in more Merchant Ivory than cult classics and audience participation.”⁴¹² The deleterious effects of the Great Recession in 2007-2008 and looming conversion to digital further worked against efforts to get established. Volunteers were necessary for basic theatre functions like concessions and ticket sales. As recent as 2010 the Hollywood was \$73,000 in debt.⁴¹³

But since then the Hollywood has made a dramatic recovery that echoes the upward trajectories of several art houses over the last 20 years. The theatre’s evolution into its present form coincided with the hiring of Executive Director Doug Whyte in 2010. Whyte, a finance graduate from Wisconsin who had 15 years of experience with film, nonprofits, and fundraising, was tasked by the Film Action Oregon board (since renamed the Hollywood Theatre 501c3) with revamping the theatre for the unfolding era of digital film exhibition. First, though, the Hollywood had to undertake more costly repairs and upgrades to a building that had largely been neglected as a privately owned cinema. Whyte wasted little time in launching new crowdfunding and grant campaigns that saw the cinema transform from a rundown relic into a multifaceted community venue for film culture and an architectural treasure worthy of continued preservation. Among the most visible of these capital campaigns was a 2013 Kickstarter drive to the tune of \$130,000 directed at replacing the theatre’s 1970s-era marquee with a new one based on its 1926 original.⁴¹⁴ Whyte also patched up the Hollywood with new seats, fresh coats of paint, and roof repairs to make it bearable as a place to watch movies. Beer and pizza were added as concessions items, a move that by itself helped bring the cinema back into the black. A subsequent capital campaign in 2016 saw the Hollywood add a 70mm projector. Combined with its Digital Content

⁴¹² Kryza, “After 90 Years.”

⁴¹³ Chandler, “The New Hollywood Theatre.”

⁴¹⁴ Carol Keljo, “Security Signs Revives Historic Theater with New Marquee,” *Signs of the Times*, September 25, 2015.

Projection (DCP), 16mm, and 35mm capabilities, the Hollywood was at this point one of the few theatres in the city capable of handling all of these formats. In early 2020 the Hollywood announced yet another fundraising drive in the amount of \$280,000 to make repairs to the building's lower façade due to masonry failure and water damage, as well as a redesign of the theatre's entryway to "bring back some of the original historical elements" from its 1926 design,⁴¹⁵ but these efforts were abandoned in 2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, the improvements and investments over the last decade has brought the theatre into the twenty-first century while preserving its aura as a vaudeville-era movie house. These preservation efforts often get spotlighted in Hollywood marketing discourse as a reason to support the cinema through patronage or tax-deductible annual giving. The theatre's architecture has thus always been a large part of its success as a nonprofit but also a huge financial liability. Whyte doubted that private ownership would be able to foot the "\$2.2 million annual fiscal burden of operating such a theatre" in the present day,⁴¹⁶ signalling the impetus behind the crowdfunded form for art houses, especially those in operation since the early twentieth century with the added obligation for historic preservation efforts.

Since Whyte took over the Hollywood in 2010, the cinema has actively reworked its identity away from "just a movie theatre" into a multidimensional resource center invested in building a community of like-minded cinemagoers. Its nonprofit business structure makes this possible. So does the cultural milieu of Portland, whose young, liberal, counterculture demographic has proven eager to get behind a movie theatre offering something different from the standard megaplex experience. On the Hollywood's website, its "Mission" page defines the

⁴¹⁵ Danny Peterson, "Hollywood Theatre Fundraising for Building Upgrades," *KOIN.Com*, January 10, 2020.

⁴¹⁶ Phill Colombo, "Hollywood Theatre's \$265,000 façade and roof restoration gets underway," *The Hollywood Star News*, July 30, 2015.

cinema through a wide lens as “an artist-driven, community-centered movie theatre, a non-profit whose mission is to entertain, inspire, educate, and connect the community through the art of film, while preserving a historic Portland landmark.”⁴¹⁷ In a 2015 presentation at the Art House Convergence conference, Whyte declared the theatre’s conscious expansion of the word “mission” into “manifesto” based around 5 points: “Push forward. Promote local. Invite everyone. Respect heritage. Give back.” (See Appendix Two for the full description.) The switch from “mission” to “manifesto,” insofar as this shift has taken hold, is neither moot nor necessarily profound. Both terms denote public declarations of an organization’s values or intentions, but the word “manifesto” conjures sentiments of political activism (think Marx and Engel’s *The Communist Manifesto*) or authorial statements to break away from established artistic forms (think avant-garde manifestos of the early twentieth century). The word is charged as provocative, bold, and action-oriented. It literally signals a raised fist. These qualities have brought the word into greater use among corporate managers and marketers in recent years. Business culture websites are peppered with articles and listicles arguing that mission statements are antiquated and ineffective. Manifestos, meanwhile, have become the parlance of consumer-culture branding.⁴¹⁸ Lululemon has a manifesto. This is not to disparage the visionary intent of the Hollywood at all but merely to point out that the associations tethered to the word “manifesto” are not as revolutionary as they once were. Regardless, Whyte’s tweaking of the theatre’s official language marks the self-reflexivity of the cinema around a particular institutional mandate. The Hollywood carries out its nonprofit manifesto through a range of practices that provoke a reimagining of art houses. In the following, I focus on the theatre’s

⁴¹⁷ “Mission and History,” Hollywood Theatre.

⁴¹⁸ John Brandon, “Forget Mission Statements. You Need a Manifesto Instead,” *Inc.*, June 4, 2015.

diverse and dynamic curation of film and special events, as well as its investment in ancillary activities outside of theatrical projection that have extended the Hollywood's reach well outside the scope of traditional exhibition venues.

5.1.2 Keep Programming Weird

First-run exhibitors are naturally associated with first-run releases—the new films put out each year by distributors and yoked to marketing and awards campaign promotions. But these screenings comprise only a portion of an art house's composite program, and an increasingly smaller one as theatres look to diversify their screen content (and off-screen events) to tempt audiences out of their homes. Highly curated regular or special series have become crucial to an art house's institutional identity and differentiation from mainstream theatres. Such series may be organized according to any number of taxonomies that address particular audience demographics or appeal to specific film cultural tastes. These can include thematic content (horror), identity group (LGBT+), time period (1980s), exhibition format (70mm), or overlapping matrices (1980s horror films with LGBT+ subtexts shot on 70mm). Curated in-house or by outside organizations, these screenings might occur once a week or no more than once a year. Many series are comprised of repertory films. Occasionally they are made up of more contemporary films that endorse a specific worldview or promote a political point. Either way, series programming satisfies audience interests that would otherwise go unmet by one-off, regular first-run releases. For this reason series programming allows for a higher degree of curation and value-formation than first-run programming. Programmers are also able to make more calculated decisions about which films to present and in what framing, rather than depend on the market-driven confines of first-run distribution. Programmers have more licence to curate, in other words, and can more freely recruit community stakeholders to collaborate with.

The Hollywood's programming is renowned among art house administrators for its eclectic variety. Its novel offerings have been featured on national news outlets such as *National Public Radio*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*—rare public victories for an exhibition sector that has recently struggled to find positive headlines in the ongoing battle with home entertainment formats. For Whyte, taking the reins of the nonprofit in 2010 entailed a targeted programming commitment to local audiences while also differentiating the theatre within Portland's famously liberal setting. Portland is widely perceived in the United States as a harbour for counterculture or subculture populations: hipsters, hippies, punks, poor starving artists, goths, anarchists, political radicals, and others defined against mainstream values or structures of authority tend to gather there. At times this reputation produces light-hearted riffs, as was the case with *Portlandia* (2011-2018), an American sketch comedy television series that spoofed the city through skits set in spaces like radical feminist bookstores and vegan restaurants. At other times Portland grabs headlines in more somber ways. In response to the 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, for example, the city witnessed prolonged anti-police violence protests and offshoot riots that summer long after they had died out elsewhere around the country. Within the realms of media consumption and taste culture, Portland's audiences are largely receptive to ironic, campy treatment of sacred subjects. The adopted motto of the Rose City, after all, is "Keep Portland Weird."

This sentiment could just as easily apply to the Hollywood's programming. Said Whyte at AHC in 2015: "[When I came aboard], we had to start thinking hard about our programming, and that meant thinking hard about our community. In such a progressive city with many great independent theatres, how do we stand out without becoming a *Portlandia* joke? With such a young, creative population, we wanted to figure out how to get them in the door and enjoying the

theatrical experience again.”⁴¹⁹ Whyte’s strategy for bringing people back to the Hollywood includes a rotating pool of film series that cover a range of tastes or content areas, curated by staff, community programmers, and other partner organizations.⁴²⁰ On the Hollywood’s website, “First Run” is simply listed as one of the 37 total Signature Film Series spread across its calendar year, including “Samurai Sunday” and “Family Pictures.” For most cinemas, first-run features are not tagged as a separate category of programming. It usually *is* the default programming. But at the Hollywood, first-run features are one modest part of a large whole.

The theatre’s motivation to offer highly curated series and eventized cinema outside of first-run titles has to do with luring its Portland clientele desirous of alternative experiences. But it also has to do with simple distribution economics. Whyte explained that larger chain cinemas in Portland often get the lucrative crossover titles that might otherwise travel between specialty and commercial theatres. For art houses with one or two screens, landing big-name films in consideration for mainstream plaudits like the Academy Awards can have an enormous impact on a theatre’s yearly intake. Films like *Black Swan* (dir. Darren Aronovsky) or *The King’s Speech* (dir. Tom Hooper), two such examples from 2010 that played in both art houses and chain theatres, tend to go to Portland’s Regal Fox Tower megaplex. The geography of Portland, which is split in two by the Willamette River, comes into play here. The Regal Fox Tower sits downtown, on the other side of the river. According to Whyte the Hollywood struggles to convince distributors that booking a film east of the river, where the Hollywood rests in a mixed business-residential area, won’t siphon off the same audiences from theatres in the west:

One of the biggest challenges remains getting the films we want. Many studios don’t realize the east-west divide in Portland. While we may only be three miles from a Regal [cinema] showing art house fare, they’re downtown on the other side of the river, and we are on the east side, and

⁴¹⁹ Doug Whyte, Hollywood Theatre, Art House Tales Presentation, 2015 Art House Convergence Annual Conference.

⁴²⁰ “Signature Film Series,” Hollywood Theatre.

we might as well be in another state. Portlanders do not cross the river. We have so many people using public transportation and bikes, and people tend to stay in their own neighborhoods.⁴²¹

As such the Hollywood “really has to get creative” with its programming, which means giving large leeway to its Head Programmer, Dan Halsted, and its curator community to draw moviegoers in with the promise of alternative or interactive cinema events.⁴²²

A few elements are worth highlighting. First, the Hollywood’s series programming joyfully dismantles the popular if incomplete legacy of art houses as purveyors of chic cultural refinement. Much of its program can be best described as a mishmash of high and low taste formations in a city known to court cult nostalgia, gory sleaze, or subcultural irony. As a magazine profile of the revamped theatre put it in 2013, “Old is new and bad is good” at the Hollywood.⁴²³ This sentiment is suggestive of scholar Jeffrey Sconce’s articulation of paracinema, “an elastic textual category [that] would include entries from such disparate subgenres as ‘badfilm,’ splatterpunk, ‘mondo’ films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography.”⁴²⁴ No fewer than four Hollywood series cross over into paracinema territory. This is partly due to the aforementioned programmer Halsted whose personal archives of fringe Kung Fu and trash cinema titles comprise a large part of the Hollywood’s series. For example, the series “Kung Fu Theatre” presents rare 35mm prints from Halsted’s collection of Hong Kong action films, pitching the movies’ “old school sound effects [and] white-haired villains with maniacal laughter” with glee. Titles from recent years include a 2013 screening of

⁴²¹ Whyte, *Art House Tales*.

⁴²² Chandler, “The New Hollywood Theatre.”

⁴²³ Chandler, “The New Hollywood Theatre.”

⁴²⁴ Jeffrey Sconce, “Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” *Screen* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 372.

Seven Brothers Meet Dracula (dir. Roy Ward Baker, 1974) and a 2017 presentation of the only known print of *Invincible Kung Fu Legs* (dir. Tso Nam Lee, 1980). In a similar vein, “Grindhouse Film Festival,” a showcase of 35mm exploitation entries from the 70s and 80s, platforms 35mm prints of “horror, crime, blaxploitation, sexploitation, hicksploitation, revenge films, biker films and more,” presented with vintage 35mm trailers. X-rated sexploitation classic *Emmanuelle Around the World* (dir. Joe D’Amato, 1977) and monster movie *Q, The Winged Serpent* (dir. Larry Cohen, 1982) both featured in this series in 2019. The “Mondo Trasho” series, meanwhile, promoted as “a dumpster dive into the gems of trash cinema,” proudly proclaims that “One person’s trash is another person’s treasure” at the Hollywood. Trash-treasures like *Scream Blacula Scream* (dir. Bob Kelljan, 1973) and *Tammy and the T Rex* (dir. Stewart Raffill, 1994), about a high school student whose dead boyfriend’s brain is implanted into an animatronic tyrannosaurus rex, featured in 2019. The “Repressed Cinema” series is less defined than some of the other Hollywood series, described simply as a “monthly exhibition series ... showing vintage and contemporary films that are obscure, neglected, and from the fringe,” including *Ed Wood Appreciation Night* and something called *Psychotronic After School Christmas Special*, a collection of bizarre 16mm Christmas films “with plenty of unintentionally funny moments and strangeness.” One final Hollywood series worth noting, “Re-Run Theatre,” projects vintage or quirky television content on its big screen, including *1983: The Year in Videos*, an ode to the year that MTV found wide success across American television screens, and *Black Adder Fest*, a collection of episodes from the BBC series *Black Adder* complete with British commercials banned in the United States at the time of broadcast in the 1980s and 1990s. Even more than the other series, “Re-Run Theatre” basks in the nostalgia value of the series—

nostalgia not just for the content but for the medium of television itself, the long-time supposed enemy of movie theatres. Its website description bears this out:

Re-Run Theater: The TV Party as Cinema. Movie theaters generally have the noble task of presenting feature length motion pictures, current and repertoire, as they are meant to be seen: on the big screen. We take shows originally intended for the small screen and make them bigger and louder than they've ever been shown before. Our primary goal is to exhibit classic, rare, oddball television, complete with commercial interruptions. You are actually transported back in time to an era and a mindset. Some of it is quite bizarre, particularly when remembering that this was all designed and approved to be on network television, broadcast to American homes.⁴²⁵

The paracinema and nostalgia fare at the Hollywood intersect with another strand of its series programming—participatory screenings. Like many art houses today, the Hollywood has devised special events that get the audience involved as more than mere passive viewers, a point at odds with the behavioral conditioning of sophisticated little cinemas of the 1920s, for example, which demanded uninterrupted, solemn attention to films as artistic object. At the Hollywood, some paracinema series hinge on a high degree of audience interaction in the name of affectionately disparaging films as a group. In 2006 a Portland-based art collective named Wolf Choir devised B-Movie Bingo as a way to liven up the many bad Chuck Norris action movies the trio of friends watched together. They later approached the Hollywood with the prospect of hosting their one-time living room rituals once a month in the theatre for paying guests. The premise is as one might expect. Audience members are handed Bingo cards gridded with staples of B-movie or action movie cliches such as “Falling Down a Flight of Stairs,” “A Bar Fight,” “A Weapon that Needs to Be Assembled,” and so on. The hosts, sitting in the front row with an RCA hookup to the theatre’s \$200,000 digital projector, call out some of the harder cliches to help audience members along, such as “A Briefcase Full of Money.” Those who mark

⁴²⁵ “Re-Run Theatre,” Hollywood Theatre.

off five cliches in a row or column receive a bag of candy and a chance to win the grand prize: an autographed headshot of B-level actor Gary Busey—signed not by Busey but by the hosts. Another now-defunct Hollywood series went even further in the name of communal disparagement of films. Hecklevision is part of the live commenting genre of exhibition that has seen mixed fortunes in recent years. In this format audience members are encouraged to text reactions (often disparaging in tone, hence the heckle) to a film that, via a technological add-on called MuVChat, get projected under the projected image for all to see. Hecklevision was initiated by the Alamo Drafthouse chain in 2011—a surprising move given the company’s well-documented hardline stance against texting and talking in its theatres. The program only lasted a

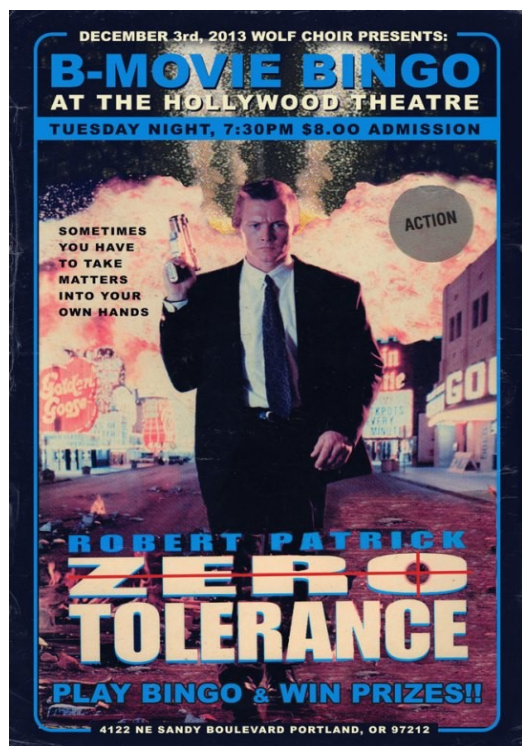


Figure 2: Poster of one of the Hollywood’s B-Movie Bingo screenings presented by Wolf Choir.

<https://prod3.agileticketing.net/websales/pages/info.aspx?evtinfo=69620~5f969332-ec94-41af-822d-5c7ec8f2ca2b&>

few years at the Drafthouse, but since then, according to scholar Tess Dwyer, it “has been carefully managed in the US alternative cinema circuit, positioning it within existing traditions of “bad film” appreciation and Midnight Movie screenings ... imbued with a sense of transgression and rebelliousness.”⁴²⁶ Before the digital age, such screenings may have taken subcultural engagement forms like screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in which audiences are prompted to interact with the movie and other audience members. Because it encourages overt interruptions to the textual pureness of the presentation, Hecklevision is virtually exclusive to

⁴²⁶ Tessa Dwyer, “Hecklevision, Barrage Cinema and Bullet Screens: An Intercultural Analysis,” *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 14, no. 2 (2017): 574.

paracinema or “bad film” screenings where one’s viewing experience isn’t obviously ruined by audience commentary but ostensibly upgraded into a subcultural bonding event.

The Hollywood sensed that the Hecklevision concept would play well with Portland’s young, digitally savvy crowds. In January 2012 it began offering such screenings with, as Whyte said, “films that we love to hate and hate to love.”⁴²⁷ Programmer Art Santana took over the Hecklevision series, booking such heckle-worthy titles as *Bio-Dome* (dir. Jason Bloom, 1996), *Con Air* (dir. Simon West, 1997), and *The Garbage Pail Kids Movie* (dir. Rod Amateau, 1987) once a month. Santana parlayed his connections to the city’s comedy scene and hired professional comedians to attend screenings and text alongside the audience. Sometimes these hired comedians would arrive “with pre-loaded and well-timed jokes” to add to the atmosphere of affectionate disparagement.⁴²⁸ Santana said in a 2017 interview that Hecklevision screenings typically attracted around 100 people, but some events, such as the free live-to-air broadcast of the 2012 Presidential Debates between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, were in much higher demand. Hecklevision doesn’t persist to this day at the Hollywood; it’s unclear exactly when it ended. In an informal conversation in 2019 with Whyte, he mentioned to me that audiences eventually tired of the concept whose success depends on the wit of those texting. Also, the delay between a text-worthy moment in a film and the arrival of a corresponding text message on screen also proved a problem. Snarky comments or zingers meant for one scene often appeared in another, late and out of context. Moviegoers ultimately could indulge in paracinematic interests via several other Hollywood film series. Hecklevision as an exhibition concept appears to have been a fad rather than new frontier. If it can’t work at Portland’s premier alternative

⁴²⁷ Doug Whyte, Executive Director of the Hollywood Theatre, interview on Comcast Newsmakers of Oregon and Southwest Washington program, January 30, 2014.

⁴²⁸ Art Santana quoted in Dwyer, 575.

cinema, one questions its staying power elsewhere, underlining that not every experimentation with content diversification in art houses will be or has been a success.

The frequency of the aforementioned series and the creative fervor with which they are presented suggest that the Hollywood is a place where schlock and irony get center stage much of the time. One imagines this is sharp distinction to the “refined” art house theatre screening contemporary foreign-language award-winners. But there’s still appeals to cultural exclusivity going on here. By marking such film presentations with phrases like “extremely rare prints” or “the only known 35mm print,” for example, the Hollywood actively promotes an aura of exclusivity (albeit for “bad” cinema). The very “badness” of much of its program and its frequent irreverence for the so-called purity of theatrical spectatorship has become a distinct advantage to its brand. Few theatres outside of the Hollywood would bother so extensively with the detritus of film culture these screenings represent. It's not that art houses have never hosted low-brow paracinema forms before. My historical review pointed out how art houses have always been hybrid sites, not pure ones, as regards high-low taste expressions. But it’s noteworthy how celebrations of paracinema have become formalized and foregrounded to such a high degree at theatres where high-art sensibilities also circulate. It would seem that the Hollywood and other art houses echoing their practices have tapped into a contemporary strand of youth culture that modern art houses have often struggled to capture. This is different from the viewing sensibilities that attracted urban counterculture youths of the 1950s and 60s to art houses. In the latter case the modern formalism and intellectual sophistication of certain European titles and directors comprised for young audiences a welcome schism from conventional Hollywood practices. In the case of art house programming like that of the Hollywood, twenty- and thirty-something moviegoers appear less intrigued by aesthetic or thematic provocations in the name of artistic

exploration so much as ritualized transgressions against conventional exhibition experiences and the “sincerity” of particular “bad films.” If the beatniks lent momentum to mid-century art houses, perhaps hipsters are doing the same today, albeit with different cultural sensibilities in mind and an impulse toward affectionate ridicule rather than artistic elevation.

Yet the Hollywood presents these paracinema series not merely as a-historical cult relics good for a cheap laugh. Sconce’s articulation of paracinema points out that “paracinematic audiences and the elite cineastes they commonly attack would appear to share what Bourdieu terms a ‘cultural pedigree,’ both embracing supposedly “low” cultural viewing formations.⁴²⁹ Hollywood promotional material presents its Grindhouse series in particular as “a sociological study of the time period” that the sometimes “offensive, sexist, and excessively violent” films came out of. A local journalist at a 2013 Kung Fu Theatre screening observed that “in an introduction, the evening’s host [Halsted], drew the audience into the 1973 relic with the panache of a sommelier proffering a distinctive Shiraz.”⁴³⁰ In other words, while some of its series may run against what has classically been understood as “refined” art house content, the Hollywood still frames many of these exhibition experiences in intellectual or film-cultural contexts. “Para-art cinema” thus may be a more precise descriptor of the formation the theatre expresses in the name of content diversification. Of course, the Hollywood, located in Portland’s cultural milieu and staffed with a head programmer who collects Kung-Fu and trash cinema, is ideally suited to stake out this particular exhibition terrain as a quirky exhibitor of cult classics or unconventional screenings. It is an extreme case of content diversification but not a misrepresentation of wider trends within the art house sector, as my later case study of FilmScene hints at.

⁴²⁹ Sconce, “Trashing the Academy,” 375.

⁴³⁰ Chandler, “The New Hollywood Theatre.”

5.1.3 *Diverse Faces, Community Spaces*

Based on my breakdown so far, one might imagine the Hollywood as a shrine to irreverence and camp. But the cinema's affinity for nostalgic or cult series like Re-Run Theatre and B-Movie Bingo is counterbalanced by more straight-faced programming committed to addressing social justice issues of the moment. These efforts include overt devotion to representations of marginalized communities via several regular series curated by local in-culture stakeholders in the name of a non-profit mandate—what we might call “screen service.” Without going into each example in detail, the Hollywood maintains a number of series highlighting the lived experiences of identity groups unrepresented in mainstream media. For instance, the Ollin: Social Justice Series is loosely organized around films that explore social justice issues, curated by a different local advocacy group each year. Proceeds from the Ollin screenings, which come with panel discussions with advocates and elected officials, go back to help fund these advocacy organizations. The 2018 edition, for example, was hosted and curated by the Latino Network, a resource and advocacy group for the city's Latino population, and included screenings of films like *El Norte* (dir. Gregory Nava, 1983) and *Salt of the Earth* (dir. Herbert Biberman, 1954). Another Hollywood series in the spirit of correcting for a dearth of commercial screen representation took shape in 2016 when a theatre staffer had the idea of reserving most of the cinema's March programming for films about and/or directed by women, the majority of which were chosen in partnership with local women's organizations. The series became known as Feminist March and acts as a “month-long celebration of the women who have shaped the film industry.” Some of the titles are more classic or conventional, like *All About Eve* (dir. Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950) and *A League of Their Own* (dir. Penny Marshall, 1992). Others, like *Narcissister Organ Player* (dir. Narcissister, 2018), present more obscure or avant-garde voices. At some point in the last few years the Hollywood changed the language promoting the Feminist

March series to “[acknowledge] the ongoing need for intersectional advocacy on behalf of marginalized voices, specifically trans and nonbinary filmmakers and filmmakers of color” within the broader feminist movement.⁴³¹ Such changes to marketing language suggest the cultural projects that art houses like the Hollywood are attuned to. In this case, intersectional advocacy in the spirit of left progressivism has become a common North Star for nonprofit cinemas to orient themselves around programmatically.

The Hollywood’s foray into screen service also includes hosting or founding film festivals. As I suggested earlier in this thesis, art houses these days are increasingly likely to make themselves available as sites for festival exhibition, not just first-run, special series, or event cinema. With the explosion in the number of film festivals in the last quarter century and the gradual contracting of available theatre screens around fewer megaplex sites, art houses with strong ties to local stakeholder groups have stepped into the role of co-festival organizers or viewing sites to make these cine-cultural events possible. The Hollywood has been at the forefront of many identity- or social issue-themed film festivals since 2010, including the Portland Black Film Festival, launched in 2013 in collaboration with local writer-filmmaker David Walker, who brings eclectic, hard-to-find films from black directors to festival screens “all too often dominated by white filmmakers.”⁴³² Titles such as the blaxploitation film *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (dir. Ivan Dixon, 1972) and the Oscar Michaux silent-era picture *Within Our Gates* (1920) typify the festival’s lineup. Another long-time Hollywood festival attuned to Portland’s particular advocacy community is the Portland EcoFilm Festival, launched in 2013 when Whyte says the theatre “noticed that what’s been touted as one of the greenest

⁴³¹ “Feminist March,” The Hollywood Theatre.

⁴³² “Portland Black Film Festival,” The Hollywood Theatre.

cities in America didn't have an environmental film festival."⁴³³ The cinema's guiding principle in launching the festival with local documentary filmmakers was to connect audiences directly to environmental advocacy groups through filmmaker talks, panel discussions, and other interactions "with partner organizations that offer opportunities for continued engagement after [people] leave the theater."⁴³⁴ Much of the festival programming encourages targeted policy or political actions. For example, the festival has screened films in support of ballot measures that outlaw wildlife trafficking of endangered species in Oregon, and also gathered signatures for a campaign that the film *DamNation* (dirs. Travis Rummel and Ben Knight, 2014) created to breach nearby river dams to restore salmon runs. Other festivals that the Hollywood collaborates on include the POW Film Festival, showcasing films directed by women, and QDoc, the only festival in the US devoted exclusively to Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) documentaries. Again, these programming highlights are not novelties at the Hollywood but constitutive elements of its identity. By diversifying its screen content and alternative events, the Hollywood situates itself not as an art film bastion for the refined cine palate but as a movie theatre with something for everyone. As Whyte said, "We host all of these [series and festivals] with the idea of serving a very wide swath of the community, and our hope is that they will come back for our regular run films as well."⁴³⁵

Clearly the Hollywood's nonprofit model allows it to foreground creative and representationally diverse media to attract audiences. But the cinema also goes beyond the confines of theatrical exhibition by providing a variety of resources for its community. As I mentioned in chapter 3, some standard ways for nonprofit art houses to engage with community

⁴³³ Whyte, *Art House Tales*.

⁴³⁴ David Smallman, "Starting a Conversation in a Movie Theatre," *The Intertwine*, April 18, 2018.

⁴³⁵ Whyte, *Art House Tales*.

service is to offer education classes, filmmaking resources, and fiscal support to local filmmakers. To focus on education for the moment, the Hollywood's pedagogical component has been a part of the theatre's mandate since 2004. When Whyte took over in 2011 and began applying for more operational grants, the Hollywood's educational services became more prominent. That year saw the start of the Hollywood Theatre Education Program in which staff and contracted filmmakers partner with area schools to provide media arts training and film screenings to over 2,000 students each year. In some cases the Hollywood helps install permanent media labs in these schools where students learn the basics of filmmaking and animation. Portland's Open Meadow Middle School, an alternative school for those struggling socially or academically, was one such recipient of a state-of-the-art lab in 2014. Its permanent lab came complete with production stations, editing suites, high-quality digital cameras, lights, and other equipment for students to use under the guidance of a full-time instructor. Promotional videos for the program reveal students aged 7-18 learning how to use digital cameras or creating their own short animation films. The studio also was intended to give visiting teachers more experience in incorporating media arts into their curriculum. Another group of filmmaker-students at Grant High School used their Hollywood-sponsored media lab to produce a short documentary about earthquake safety precautions among Portland schools in 2013. Educational opportunities and resources like these have become a common way for art houses with the means and organizational know-how to invest in community learning, particularly among young people.

The Hollywood also steps in as a service provider by fiscally sponsoring local independent filmmakers. Fiscal sponsorship is a specific formal and legal arrangement in which a designated 501(c)(3) public charity essentially acts as the administrative home of another non-tax-exempt group or individual. Under this arrangement, "the legal and tax-exempt status of the

nonprofit is made available to [an] approved project for fundraising purposes, allowing the producers of the approved project to widen potential funding sources to include grants and donations available to nonprofit entities without starting their own nonprofit.” This is important because most private foundations have specific requirements that grantees for funds be recognized as tax-exempt by the Internal Revenue Service.⁴³⁶ Moreover, according to Candid Learning, a global resource organization for nonprofits and fundraising, “fewer than one out of ten foundations and very few government agencies are willing to consider proposals from individuals without institutional affiliation.”⁴³⁷ A Hollywood-sponsored project may apply for grants available to nonprofit entities and solicit tax-deductible donations under the umbrella of the theatre, for instance, making the exhibitor a resource for independent projects that otherwise would not get off the ground. The Hollywood’s website explains that it has served as a fiscal sponsor to a variety of film projects, film festivals, and educational programs with sympathetic progressive missions since 2003. The Hollywood also offers consultation to partner-filmmakers about marketing and distribution strategies, and all fiscally sponsored films also receive free access to the theatre for one screening event (a fundraiser, premiere, etc.). Most of the sponsored films have been Oregon-based initiatives helmed by “seasoned filmmakers/film professionals with a proven track record creating a film (or film festival, education program) from its inception, through successful distribution and engagement with the public.”⁴³⁸ Recent sponsored films include *Samurai in the Oregon Sky* (dir. Ilana Sol, 2019), the story of the only Japanese pilot to bomb mainland US soil in World War II and his subsequent relationship with the Oregon

⁴³⁶ “Fiscal Sponsorship for Nonprofits,” National Council of Nonprofits, n.d.

⁴³⁷ “Introduction to Individual Giving,” *Candid*, n.d.

⁴³⁸ “Local Filmmaker Support,” The Hollywood Theatre.

town he attacked, and *The Reluctant Radical* (dir. Lindsey Grayzel, 2018), a profile of environmental activist Ken Ward's ongoing battle with the fossil fuel industries.

The Hollywood's efforts to engage in advocacy and offer educational or fiscal services to its community are indicative of what many art houses do today as part of a nonprofit mandate.

Other community-minded projects spearheaded by the Hollywood are more particular, however.

The introduction to this thesis began with reference to one of the organization's more unusual endeavours, the Hollywood Theatre microcinema at Portland International Airport, one of the



Figure 3: The PDX Hollywood Microcinema. Photo credit: Bill Purcell. https://hollywoodtheatre.org/about/press_page/.

first of its kind in the United States.⁴³⁹

Featured in major media outlets like *USA Today*, this free-of-charge, 17-seat cinema opened in 2017 after

Whyte became inspired by airport

cinemas operating in east Asia.⁴⁴⁰ Like

other of the theatre's initiatives, the

airport microcinema was the result of

extensive grant-writing and

fundraising in the name of a nonprofit venture that would serve the Portland community. After

receiving sizable grants from local arts or travel organizations, the Hollywood procured a

\$80,000 sound system from a Portland-based company, as well as a high-tech projection system

⁴³⁹ The Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport opened an open-space lounge design microcinema in 2013, though it falls short of the enclosed theatrical auditorium experience of the Hollywood PDX.

⁴⁴⁰ Movie theatres in airports, though a relatively new concept in the US, have taken flight in Asia for many years. Singapore's Changi Airport has two large movie theatres that shows feature-length films for free. Hong Kong has an IMAX at its international airport. Because the biggest challenges to most airport movies theatres is the allocation of space and money, pioneer airports in the States thus far have opted for small theatres playing art, documentary, or animation fare that general audiences can digest in short amounts of time.

donated by industry giant Barco. The Port of Portland also agreed to donate a space along the C Concourse that formerly housed a business center.⁴⁴¹

From the Hollywood's perspective, the PDX microcinema marked an exhibition outlet for Oregon filmmakers and the Hollywood's youth education program students. The microcinema's program consists entirely of short films commissioned from Oregon-based creatives or others whose work depicts Oregon or the Pacific Northwest. The 2020 program of films included a stop-motion animation made by a local 5-year-old education program student, for example, as well as the short documentary *Kenton Women's Village: Village Building* (dir. Zach Putnam, 2018), about an experimental community project to help address Portland's worsening housing crisis. At the same time, the microcinema also clearly occupies a highly visible space in an international transit hub that wants to promote Portland as a destination for travel. All films shown at the microcinema must be G-rated, since the cinema is open to walk-in traffic from the concourse. The theatre thus lacks the counterculture edge of its cult-heavy origin site and instead has to strike an amenable tone that showcases Portland's local culture and history within a consumer-friendly context. In an airport already known for its particular Portland flavor, the Hollywood microcinema ostensibly helps advertise the city and larger Oregon region (though explicit advertisements in any of the films are strictly forbidden by the Hollywood).⁴⁴² Some of its 2020 program films function as travelogues about local sights, such as *Bridgetown* (dir. Derek Weber, 2019), a visual history of the city's many bridges shot entirely by a drone, or *Rocky Intertidal Zones* (dir. Irene Tejaratchi Hess, 2019), in which a young boy explores the ecosystems along Oregon's coastlines. "Our goal is to introduce visitors to the diverse array of experiences Oregon has to offer," said Whyte in a 2016 *MovieMaker* article

⁴⁴¹ "The Hollywood Theatre @ PDX," Film Freeway, n.d.

⁴⁴² "The Hollywood Theatre @ PDX."

about the opening of the microcinema. “It’s an exciting opportunity to create a memorable experiential space for thousands of the airport’s daily visitors, while promoting Oregon artists, organizations and attractions. Public programs are a big part of what the Hollywood Theatre does. We prefer to spend our resources on community projects rather than traditional marketing methods.”⁴⁴³ As Whyte’s language suggests, the PDX microcinema constitutes another way for the Hollywood to give back to its community, even in a highly international setting ribbed with consumer culture amenities. Does the Hollywood’s example signal that more satellite art house cinemas will open up in North American airports? Time will tell, but Whyte suggested early on that he had been approached by similar theatres in other cities wanting to do just that.⁴⁴⁴

One final dimension of the Hollywood’s integration into local culture, its Movie Madness video collection, deserves a few words. In 2017 the long-time owner of a beloved movie rental store in Portland named Movie Madness decided to retire. Since its opening at the height of VHS rentals in 1991, the store had been a mecca for movie lovers who enjoyed its immense collection of 84,000 titles (most of them unavailable via online streamers) and a sizeable museum of movie memorabilia (like the knife featured in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 *Psycho*). Wanting to preserve his store’s contents with a worthy caretaker, the owner approached the Hollywood with the idea of selling the store and its video titles to the theatre for \$250,000—less than half of the appraised value. To complete the purchase the Hollywood again turned to Kickstarter and passed its fundraising goal in a mere nine days, officially adding the Movie Madness rental operations to its nonprofit form in January 2018. (The former owner retains ownership of the store’s memorabilia collection and has loaned it indefinitely to the Hollywood for display in the store’s museum.)

⁴⁴³ Maddy Kadish, “Duty-Free Cinema: Art-House Hollywood Theatre Comes to the Portland International Airport,” *MovieMaker*, April 12, 2016.

⁴⁴⁴ Kadish, “Duty-Free Cinema.”

It's clear that the Hollywood's goal was not to stave off the demise of a dying video rental business model but rather to "help it evolve by rethinking the role it plays in the community."⁴⁴⁵ Whyte and others envisioned the store as a film library community center where film history buffs and local groups could access hard-to-find titles, gather for research, or simply socialize around shared interests in cinema. To that end, in addition to maintaining the video rental service, and having raised more than its initial fundraising goal, the Hollywood added a microcinema to the store in fall 2019 called the Movie Madness Miniplex. This 18-seat screening room, constructed largely from donated equipment and materials supplied by local companies,



Figure 4: Entrance to the Movie Madness Miniplex within the Hollywood Theatre's newly acquired Movie Madness video rental store, 2019. The text on the door explains the extent of community fundraising necessary to save the Portland landmark. Photo credit: Christopher Onstott. https://hollywoodtheatre.org/about/press_page/.

can project the thousands of VHS titles in the collection, as well as the usual DVD/Blu-Ray formats, in high-resolution, high-quality surround sound. The Miniplex also provides much-needed space for the Hollywood's education classes on film history, bookings for private rentals (\$300 for a three-hour period), and free programming series on a weekly or monthly basis with the expected

Hollywood Theatre twist. The Reel of Fortune series, for instance, offers a monthly film and tarot card readings by the Hollywood's Development Director, who doubles as a professional

⁴⁴⁵ "Save Movie Madness," Kickstarter page, Hollywood Theatre.

tarot reader, while *Don't Stop Filming* showcases the best horror-themed found-footage films for audiences with tough stomachs.

The Hollywood's purchase of the Movie Madness store signals a brick-and-mortar pushback against the notion that all films are available online. It's been widely reported that the most popular streaming sites like Netflix have paltry collections of films made in the twentieth century, particularly before 1950.⁴⁴⁶ Silent-era or early sound titles are virtually impossible to find through major streaming sites. Said Hollywood Head Programmer Halsted on the Movie Madness purchase: "It's more than just a video store; it's a film archive—it's the history of cinema in there. I think there's a misconception right now that movies are all available online, and that isn't the truth at all. There's actually a very small number of movies that are available."⁴⁴⁷ In 2016 *Variety* reported that Netflix contained 4,563 movie titles—a tiny percentage of the 84,000 titles housed within Movie Madness—while *NPR* echoed a finding by tracking site All Flicks that Netflix held fewer than 250 titles from all of the twentieth century, and that its collection continues to shrink.⁴⁴⁸ This is coupled with Netflix's and Amazon's strategic decisions over the last several years to pivot toward new original series and movies instead of licensing non-exclusive content such as classic films. Even well-known classic titles from the mid- to early twentieth century could slip further into obscurity among the general population.⁴⁴⁹ Considering all of this, the Hollywood's efforts to keep Movie Madness accessible to the Portland public constitutes more than a simple extension of the theatre's brand into a local

⁴⁴⁶ Zach Schonfeld, "Netflix and the Slow Death of the Classic Film," *Newsweek*, September 15, 2017.

⁴⁴⁷ "Movie Madness to Close? Not If the Hollywood Theatre Can Save It," *OPB*, October 11, 2017.

⁴⁴⁸ "A Portland Video Store Goes Nonprofit To Save Itself," *NPR*, October 21, 2017.

⁴⁴⁹ Todd Spangler, "Amazon Prime Video Has 4 Times Netflix's Movie Lineup, But Size Isn't Everything," *Variety*, April 22, 2015.

zone of commerce—it takes on the function of a cultural archive of wide swaths of media that are not as accessible in online formats as people suppose.

Examples of Hollywood operations such as this make evident key takeaways about the rethinking of the art house since the digital transition. In its diverse and dynamic slate of offerings, as well as its ancillary projects outside of its main theatre space, the theatre demonstrates a multi-format commitment to film culture in the shape of home video entertainment, television, classic iterations of cinema, disruptive audience participation, so-called “low,” forgotten, or antiquated media, and more. Its openness and non-pure approach to taste formations and technological format indicates a philosophy of creative accommodation regarding what can be a part of an art house program.



Figure 5: Exterior shot of FilmScene's new Chauncey Building site, Iowa City, Iowa. 2019. <https://www.asisignagelatimergroup.com/case-studies/new-high-rise-mixed-use-development-in-downtown-iowa-city-creating-signage-for-the-chauncey>.

5.2 FilmScene, Iowa City, Iowa

5.2.1 Building a Scene

FilmScene represents a different iteration of art house than the Hollywood Theatre in that it was conceived as a nonprofit from the start. It emerged during the anxious push among

exhibitors toward digital projection in the 2010s. Unlike the legacy history of the Portland cinema, FilmScene also had no architectural panache to lean on nor any long-time devotees to see it through tough times. In fact it started in response to a loss of theatre screens in downtown Iowa City. As recent as the 1990s four cinemas had operated in the center of this college town of 80,000. But a combination of suburban multiplex openings,⁴⁵⁰ competition from at-home entertainment, and expensive renovations gradually picked off the city's centrally located cinemas. The final holdout was bought by the University of Iowa in 2007 and converted into offices, marking the first time in 100 years that no cinemas operated in the city's downtown. Says FilmScene co-founder Andrew Sherburne of the time: "We were an art house wasteland, a multiplex hell."⁴⁵¹ Out of this context emerged the entrepreneurial efforts of Sherburne and co-founder Andie Brodie, a former programmer at the university's Bijou Film Board, the student-run film society of the University of Iowa. The two cineastes set out to rally community support for a new art house exhibitor under the banner "Let's bring cinema back to Iowa City!" The subtext of this slogan (since the city actually had an abundance of screens outside of the downtown core) conferred on FilmScene from early on an intended differentiation from megaplex culture. "Cinema," within this promotional framing, means a particular kind of theatre experience geared around dynamic curation and a set of specialized exhibition practices that sets it apart from "multiplex hell."

FilmScene helps clarify the grassroots precarity that defines many new nonprofit efforts to start an art house in the digital era. Without an established network of supporters or real estate holdings, Sherburne and Brodie had to take incremental steps in the form of repeated capital

⁴⁵⁰ Marcus Theatres, a regional chain with hundreds of cinemas throughout the Midwest, expanded into the Iowa City area to the detriment of independent downtown theatres, according to Sherburne.

⁴⁵¹ Andrew Sherburne, AHC Art House Tales presentation, 2018 Art House Convergence Annual Conference.

campaigns to build FilmScene into what it is today. One of their earliest and easiest decisions was to structure the cinema as a nonprofit (Iowa's first) in order to access grants and contributed revenue from memberships and donations. The desire to launch a highly curated cinema that would not replicate the area's multiplex programming made the nonprofit form necessary: "The clear thing from the beginning is that we wanted this to be an art house cinema, a community cinema. [...] There are some for-profits that fall into the art house realm, like Alamo Drafthouse, but a lot of them are in bigger cities where there is more demand. What we found is that when you have a cinema where curation comes first, that demands a nonprofit model."⁴⁵² Sherburne and Brodie took notes and inspiration from the Art House Convergence conferences, whose information-sharing I surveyed in my last chapter, for how to start a nonprofit art house. They absorbed tips on how to launch membership programs, frame their mission as a service provider, and communicate this vision to patrons.⁴⁵³ This path entailed a commitment from the start to cultivating partnerships with community organizations, most importantly the Bijou Film Board, the University of Iowa's student-run film group, which the cinema collaborates with frequently. Upon receiving nonprofit status for their organization in 2011, Sherburne and Brodie set about trying to generate community interest in their theatre by starting an open-air pop-up cinema series called Starlite Cinema, which provided semi-regular screenings of Hollywood and cult classics in vacant public spaces. These were conceived as ways to gather together kindred spirits, raise donations, and foster enthusiasm for a permanent theatre.

Like other art houses pursuing a nonprofit business model, FilmScene organizers depended highly on crowdfunding to fund its establishment. Community buy-in was crucial. The theatre's earliest promotional efforts were intimately linked to its Iowa City setting and the

⁴⁵² Personal interview with Andrew Sherburne, co-founder of FilmScene, April 2, 2021.

⁴⁵³ Sherburne, personal interview.

communal value the theatre would bring to a small midwestern city trying to distinguish itself as regional center for the arts. A video on FilmScene’s IndieGoGo website home page launched in 2011 bears this out.⁴⁵⁴ It opens with a comedic reference to the most famous depiction of Iowa in film, the Hollywood classic *Field of Dreams* (dir. Phil Alden Robinson, 1989), a fantastical drama set around a farmer (Kevin Costner) whose corn crops magically conjure the spirits of early twentieth-century baseball players. In the ad, a version of “Shoeless” Joe Jackson (a 1910s-era Chicago White Sox baseball player and one of the film’s central figures) emerges from one of Iowa’s ubiquitous corn fields to speak with a lost wanderer (played by Sherburne), who asks where he can find a movie theatre in the area. Invoking the immortal line from the film, Shoeless Joe replies, “If you build it...”,⁴⁵⁵ which sets Sherburne thinking. A montage then kicks in of

organizers handing out pamphlets about a new theatre to people in different Iowa City settings: the university football stadium, the steps of City Hall, a women’s roller derby competition, etc. This montage is paired with a guitar musical track supplied



Figure 5: Iowa iconography at work. Sherburne (left) asking “Shoeless” Joe Jackson where he can find a movie theatre in Iowa City. Still image from FilmScene’s IndieGoGo promotional video, 2013. [https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/filmscene-make-a-scene-build-a-downtown-iowa-city-cinema#/.](https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/filmscene-make-a-scene-build-a-downtown-iowa-city-cinema#/)

⁴⁵⁴ “Film Scene Makes a Scene – Build a Downtown Iowa City Cinema,” IndieGoGo crowdfunding promotional video, n.d.

⁴⁵⁵ In popular memory the line delivered by a disembodied corn field voice was “If you build it, *they* will come,” suggesting that if Kevin Costner’s character, Ray, builds a baseball field in his corn patch, the ghosts of the 1919 Chicago White Sox baseball team will appear, and people will subsequently line up to pay to see them. But this was misheard. The line actually reads “If you build it, *he* will come,” referring (spoiler alert) to the ghost of Ray’s father, himself a baseball player from the era, who appears at the end of the film. FilmScene’s use of the line suggests that if Sherburne and others build the new movie theatre, audiences will show up in droves.

by Kevin Burt, a local blues musician, whom we see sitting on a neighborhood bench as he riffs and plucks in an original song about the city's need for a new movie theatre. The promotional video is thus highly anchored to its local setting and emphasizes the community benefits of a "new moving-going experience" in Iowa City. Indeed the words "art house" are never mentioned, though a speaker does clarify that the cinema will focus on "independent and world cinema." This clarification, however, is sandwiched between descriptions of the theatre's "cold beer, pizza, wine, tasty desserts, soda, and Iowa popcorn" offered through its planned café and rooftop terrace. The promotional video makes little direct appeal to art film as a cultural category (*Field of Dreams*, moreover, is the epitome of Hollywood), possibly to avoid elitist connotations of the phrase "art house" among the general population. Its discursive construction is that of community vibrancy and consumer amenities for a town lacking in screens.

Pounding the pavement to drum up support proved fruitful. But the fate of the venture depended on the whims and generosity of particular individuals in position to aid a start-up business. Some donors to the project, designated the "Founders' Circle," pledged \$1,000 or more to the cause sight unseen.⁴⁵⁶ Moreover, in 2013, Sherburne and Brodie were only able to open their single-screen, 65-seat cinema in a vacant downtown retail space thanks to an altruistic developer's offer. The Ped Theatre, so named because it rests deep within a pedestrian-only mall complex hidden from street traffic, was intended as a temporary home until the organization could accrue the capital to construct its own new building. The space previously had been used as an attorney's office, a packing and provisions store, and even a casket factory and showroom. FilmScene Head Projectionist and Facilities Manager Ross Meyer pointed out that the space housing the Ped is far from ideal for showing movies and comes with many structural and

⁴⁵⁶ Colleen Kennedy, "FilmScene at Five: Celebrating a Milestone with Iowa City's Iconic Art House Theater," *Little Village* (blog), November 18, 2018.

logistical challenges. For one, “only certain movie projectors may be operated due to the beamed ceiling, which is in conflict with optimal projection angles.”⁴⁵⁷ There is another problem with the space. Given an ordinance that limits the amount of locales in the downtown area that can serve alcohol, the Ped had to appeal to the city for an exemption to serve food and drinks, which have become crucial sources of revenues for independent cinemas. Despite these operational hurdles, community support fomented behind the Ped. After its first year, it welcomed 30,000 people, accrued 500 members, and cycled 175 films through its one screen, about double the founders’ expectations. Sherburne and Brodie managed to add a second screen in 2015 after another \$30,000 crowdfunding campaign (a 4-seat multipurpose screening room), which made it feasible to build more of a programming identity around first-run releases and special events. A rooftop terrace cinema in 2017 added a third screen for Hollywood and cult classics May through October, though this came with a hiccup: films could not screen on top of and inside the theatre at the same time because of noise bleeding through the roof. The Ped thus gave the organization foundational roots but also expressed “the tenuousness and rough edges that independent exhibitors deal with” today when finding their footing as start-up nonprofits.⁴⁵⁸

Even with its early successes, the Ped was not capable of accommodating the crowds or fulfilling the curatorial ideals that FilmScene administrators held. Starting in 2017 the organization undertook a third capital campaign to open a new cinema in a larger designated space without the logistical barriers of their first venue. To do so FilmScene partnered with the Englert Theatre, a downtown performing arts space that itself was seeking capital for major renovations of its historic stage and building. That campaign, titled “Strengthen, Grow, Evolve,” sought community investment to the tune of \$6 million for the purpose of building “the greatest

⁴⁵⁷ Meyer quoted in Kennedy, “FilmScene at Five.”

⁴⁵⁸ Sherburne, Art House Tales.

small city for the arts” that would see the Englert restored and FilmScene settled in a proper site. The cinema’s destination was the lower levels of the 15-story Chauncey Tower, a new high-rise development only a few blocks away from the Ped that also contains residential units, a cafe, bowling alley/arcade, restaurant, hotel, and office space. Construction of the Chauncey was plagued by legal delays, including court injunctions filed by a nearby church and a citizen’s group that protested the height of the building in what is a relatively flat Iowa City downtown with strict zoning bylaws. But eventually it was completed and FilmScene opened its Chauncey Theatre on September 20, 2019, welcoming guests to three new auditoriums (seating 30, 65, and 117 people each) plus an exterior screening space for summertime movies-on-the-lawn.

The Chauncey extension presents a compelling mix of megaplex and specialty exhibitor logics. The theatre shares building space with consumer amenities one might find in megaplexes, like a bowling alley, arcade, and restaurant (which FilmScene had no direct control over as one of many building tenants). Visitors arriving at the cinema first see a wooden alcove of “circular architecture adorned with hundreds of small, bare bulbs [glowing] above the sharp-angled ticket and concessions counter, giving the modern space a soft, vintage feel,”⁴⁵⁹ not unlike the chic lobbies of New York’s little cinema scene in the 1920s. In a “Sneak Peek” video posted to the cinema’s Facebook page,⁴⁶⁰ Sherburne and other administrators lead a tour through the site, emphasizing that conscious effort was made in the building design to construct “lots of public spaces for the community to come and talk about the films they just saw or are about to see” in the large, airy lobby. The box office, meanwhile, includes a 24-hour kiosk where one can purchase tickets without interacting with employees—perhaps a slight contradiction to the

⁴⁵⁹ Brooklyn Draisey, FilmScene Chauncey Raises the Curtain: A Look into the New Building,” September 19, 2016.

⁴⁶⁰ “Sneak Peek of FilmScene at The Chauncey,” FilmScene Facebook page, September 16, 2016.

interactive, communal ethos of the theatre espoused earlier in favor of convenience and speed. The interior of theatres marks a distinct upgrade from the exposed brick and random pillars and that characterize the Ped. The video even cracks a joke about the Ped’s “chairs” in comparison to the Chauncey’s plush new recliner-style seats with large cupholders and ample leg room. The largest of the three Chauncey theatres also contains a row at the back for VIPs decked out in higher-quality seating, an echo of megaplex comforts and a (small) partitioning of FilmScene’s community crowds according to price differentiation.

5.2.2 *Programming Iowa*

In anticipation of the Chauncey opening, FilmScene Programming Director Rebecca Fons sought to expand the organization’s programming outside of first-run specialty distributor releases. In a personal interview, she recalled,

I knew we would have this big expansion in 2019, so I [wanted to] outgrow our current space so that when we have two locations and five screens, we are bursting at the seams and can very easily transition to more screens. Because if I under-programmed, then we would be hustling and scrambling to find content. So I aggressively programmed; I went from not only booking first releases but also creating programming committees, taking on big initiatives, creating specialty or repertory series—really cramming it all in.⁴⁶¹

Reflecting on this programming crunch in a 2018 interview, Head Projectionist Ross Meyer remarked that the ambitious curation across a limited number of screens was an exhausting challenge for the nascent nonprofit: “‘We may have up to seven films running on the two screens in a regular shift,’ but during [special October Halloween events] and other programming, FilmScene was continuously running films, workshops and lectures for over 40 hours straight. ‘We all work 40+ hours a week, but we all come in here during our time off’.”⁴⁶² Both Fons’ and

⁴⁶¹ Personal interview with Rebecca Fons, FilmScene Programming Director, March 19, 2021.

⁴⁶² Kennedy, “FilmScene at Five.”

Meyer's accounts here recall a central conclusion from my analysis of AHC's Art House Tales presentations—that reimagined nonprofit art houses, in order to survive, depend to a large extent on the flexibility of screen programming and the passionate, around-the-clock labor of administrators above and beyond the traditional purview of such jobs.

When the Chauncey opened in 2019, adding three interior screens and one exterior screen to the Ped's screen count, FilmScene was able to double-down on becoming a multipurpose cultural center. Education programs, filmmaking workshops, and a diversified slate of regular and special series (not to mention the ability to show 35mm and 16mm films, which the Ped can't accommodate) are now firmly in place. Like other art houses, FilmScene's programming suggests a general strategy of differentiation from megaplex culture with targeted forays into "low-brow" or overtly popular media. As Fons put it, "We love the high-falutin' films but also schlock."⁴⁶³ The Chauncey's celebratory opening weekend set this tone. Hollywood, prestige, cheap horror, and adult sex movies all made appearances. *Field of Dreams* (the consummate Iowa-Hollywood film) was featured, as was *Cinema Paradiso* (dir. Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988), an Italian film centered on a young man's devotion to a popular movie theatre and its aging projectionist, and *The Blob* (dir. Irvin Yeaworth, 1958), a classic 50s-era monster movie remembered for a sequence in which the eponymous coagulant fiend wreaks havoc on a movie theatre. Also screened in the opening weekend was the 2019 slasher film *Haunt* from directors Scott Beck and Bryan Wood, two University of Iowa filmmaker alums who visited the Chauncey for its Iowa premiere. The Bijou Film Board also arranged a screening of the Taiwanese adult film *The Wayward Cloud* (dir. Tsai Ming-liang, 2005), a provocative film starring porn stars and a rather seedy scene involving a watermelon. A sharp contrast to this was then offered with a

⁴⁶³ Fons, personal interview.

screening of the new *Downton Abbey* movie (dir. Michael Engler, 2019), a film version of the highly successful historical drama about upper-crust British aristocrats and their working-class subordinates. Guests were encouraged to dress up to the nines for an elegant evening out.

The Chauncey's opening weekend was a harbinger of the complex programming trends and taste formations that circulate through FilmScene. Beyond the hodgepodge opening weekend, FilmScene's programming includes regular series or special seasonal events that go beyond foreign-language films and target niche interests or diverse audiences. The organization is devoted to eclectic, curated programming that includes first-run exhibition of international films, independent films, and locally made films from the Iowa City or Midwest areas, often with a community-minded twist or thematic tie-in. Some programming appeals to feelings of mid-century art house refinement and upscale prestige. *National Theatre Live* broadcasts (at \$18 a ticket, \$9 for members) prove popular with older crowds as they do in art houses across the country. FilmScene's *Vino Vérité* series comes with the tagline "Film. Wine. Truth." For \$25 (\$20 for members), guests enjoy wines chosen by local sommeliers paired with global films in the tradition of *vérité* filmmaking. Audiences can then mingle with filmmakers in post-screening receptions complete with hors d'oeuvres and desserts catered by a local market. Some of these programming choices contain strategic tie-ins to the cinema's cultural milieu. One *Vino Vérité* selection from 2020, the Dutch film *Ceres* (dir. Janet Van Den Brand, 2018), an "ode to an agrarian lifestyle" in Belgium, was promoted "as a beautiful reminder of our own local heritage" in corn-fielded Iowa. The drive to connect a film thematically to an exhibitor's milieu is a conventional programming technique. FilmScene follows this tradition but also looks for chances to eventize screenings or otherwise differentiate itself from the notion of movie theatres as neutral viewing boxes. For instance, Fons booked the US abortion drama *Never, Rarely,*

Sometimes, Always (dir. Eliza Hittman, 2020), a film that had gained national attention due to its controversial subject matter. To go a step beyond the usual programming, FilmScene partnered with a local Planned Parenthood clinic for a post-show discussion of the film's treatment of abortion—something a large chain cinema would surely flinch at. “We just try to do those little things that set us apart,” she underlined.⁴⁶⁴

Like most art houses, FilmScene struggles to expand its core audience away from older, white, affluent visitors with the capital and leisure time to enjoy regular cultural outings. This results in varied efforts to diversify its programming, which in turn underscores the hybridity of the art house form today. Building new audiences through what Fons calls “hip” programming and a wider array of screen representations with community partners has become a priority. As she said, the difficulty for art houses today rests in breaking “the historical conception that these are elite spaces for the old grey crowd coming to see foreign films, that it's not a place for entertainment, it's a place for education and stodgy films that are 4 hours long, and with subtitles, and in black and white. We have to fight against that misconception by making our space more welcoming to younger people, to people of color. It's an ‘us’ problem, not a ‘them’ problem.”⁴⁶⁵ To overcome or lessen the barriers Fons sees between art houses and younger, non-white audiences, FilmScene makes concerted efforts to diversify its screen representations according to identity groups and also to collaborate with local groups or audiences to cede agency for programming to the community. For example, each quarter, FilmScene reviews suggestions from individuals or organizations that would like to partner with the cinema “for a screening or cinematic event” with the goal of selecting “12 partnership screenings per year, based on proposal merit, scheduling availability and curatorial diversity.” On the same webpage,

⁴⁶⁴ Fons, personal interview.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

Fons invites emails from people wanting to suggest first-run bookings, too, or requests from local groups to rent out theatre space for special events.⁴⁶⁶

To hover over the question of students for a moment, even though the University of Iowa sits in FilmScene's backyard, the college population remains stubbornly elusive as customers. Unlike the young crowds that helped drive the art house movement in places like New York in the 1950s, "students and young people are the white whale of the art house" today, according to Fons. She explained that FilmScene is better situated than many small exhibitors because of its ties to the university's Bijou Film Board. This group of student filmmakers and cineastes curates two programs twice a week during the school year: Bijou Film Forum on Tuesday nights offers an international film usually followed by a discussion and Q&A, and Bijou After Hours on Saturday programs late-evening cult classics, fan releases, and modern genre films.⁴⁶⁷ Both of these programs are funded by the university's anti-drinking campaign to provide students with alternative options to partying in this raucous university atmosphere. Another regular series, Bijou Horizons, billed as a "world cinema showcase ... of diverse cultures through film," is noteworthy for its facilitation of cultural exchange through a "passport" program. Students stamp a passport with each free-of-charge series film they attend. Those whose passports are full by the end of the series get entered into a drawing for a study abroad scholarship sponsored by the University of Iowa's International Programs office.⁴⁶⁸ Another FilmScene series unassociated with the university, "Late Shift at the Grindhouse," held every Wednesday night, also caters to the younger crowds by featuring "low-budget b movies, horror and gore fests, and camp classics," complete with custom-made trashy trailers and prize giveaways.⁴⁶⁹ Echoing other art

⁴⁶⁶ "Suggest a Film," FilmScene.

⁴⁶⁷ "Bijou Film Forum," FilmScene.

⁴⁶⁸ "Bijou Horizons," FilmScene.

⁴⁶⁹ "Late Shift at the Grindhouse," FilmScene.

house practices in university towns, FilmScene courts the nearby college population because they have the screen flexibility to do so and the financial incentive to build long-term patrons by capturing this younger crowd.

In other words the theatre does not hold itself up as the purest iteration of an art house program catering to values of “high-brow” intellectual distinction. FilmScene is clearly willing to roll with particular first-run Hollywood blockbuster titles for the sake of business, though not without gestures to eventizing or differentiation. For example, to help build more awareness around the new Chauncey expansion in 2019, the theatre booked *Joker* (dir. Todd Phillips, 2019), a decidedly commercial hit starring Joaquin Phoenix as the eponymous *Batman* universe villain. To add an interactive, communal touch, FilmScene hosted a Joker-themed costume contest with prizes. In other instances a particular title can serve multiple roles within taste culture differentiation. Fons decided to program *Cats* (dir. Tom Hooper, 2019), the ill-received film version of the successful 1981 Broadway musical, fully aware of the film’s awful reviews yet sensing a chance to frame it effectively for different audiences. FilmScene programmed the film for one week as a special run around the holidays. Fons slotted the title in the afternoons as part of its family-friendly series, The Picture Show, where it did great business, and then also as a great “bad movie” on Friday and Saturday late nights to draw out the grindhouse regulars and the ironic, fun-seeking college crowds. Fons recalled the Universal distributor cocking a brow at this latter prospect and asking, “You’re not going to make fun of the movie, are you?” A similar booking at a mainstream chain would never garner such a concern; the distributor’s comment reveals the complicated deployments of taste and irony that habitually emerge at art houses now.

The late-night showings did even better than the family screenings; Fons recalled “the strong smell of pot in our lobby” and plenty of students astounded that FilmScene even existed.⁴⁷⁰

5.2.3 *A Pedagogical and Political Space*

The mantra among many art house proprietors, especially nonprofits, is to not rest on their laurels as mere viewing boxes for art film. Both Sherburne and Fons insisted to me that they believe art houses today play a distinct role in providing educational services and helping to drive social change. An exhibitor’s curated program presents a default way to provide a nebulous kind of social service, what I called “screen service” earlier. Screening films from around the world, particularly those from marginalized countries or film cultures, or framing topics with a pedagogical bent, represents a conventional art house strategy to expose local audiences to a global range of perspectives in the spirit of cosmopolitanism. This impulse has progressed a great deal from the days of urban nickelodeon or little cinemas where the pull of exotic voyeurism into foreign lands constituted for many patrons an attractive novelty. Today’s art house audiences, as national surveys tell us, value their art houses for platforming films that showcase foreign cultures, marginalized voices, or social topics not covered enough by mainstream media. But more art house administrators are pushing back against the notion that programming by itself is enough to fulfill a nonprofit mandate for pedagogical or social impact, particularly as major theatre chains venture more into screening crossover art house hits or “smarthouse” specialty distributor fare.

Providing concrete, formalized educational services has become a common way for art houses to serve their communities while also generating long-term interest among young people for film culture. FilmScene is no different. Fons, who worked as the Education Director of the

⁴⁷⁰ Fons, personal interview.

Chicago Intentional Film Festival for many years prior to joining the Iowa City venue in 2013, came aboard with the understanding that she would shape the cinema's educational efforts along with its programming from an early stage. "Not all programmers also oversee the education departments [of a cinema]. ... But I was brought in with my background in arts education, and I'm always thinking about dialogues and opportunities to talk about important issues."⁴⁷¹ To pair film exhibition with education, FilmScene offers a slate of courses and programs for different age groups. For children, the theatre administers Animation, Miniature Construction, and Advanced Animation summer camps comprised of one-week courses in which students learn the principles and techniques behind different animation styles, including GIFs, claymation, hand puppets, hand-drawn cartoons, and more. They also learn set design and modeling principles such as one might ordinarily learn in film production classes. Veteran animators and designers lead the classes, which are priced in the hundreds of dollars (with scholarships available to those in need).⁴⁷² Area high schoolers can also get involved in FilmScene through a program called Scenesters Selects. After applying to the program, which requires a letter of recommendation from a teacher, Scenesters attend a set amount of FilmScene screenings throughout the year and then cap off the season by curating, as a group, their own short program of films for public audiences. They also are charged with introducing films and leading post-show discussions to grant them experience in analyzing film as an intellectual object.⁴⁷³ For adults, FilmScene offers FilmScene 101, a year-around series of one-night seminars "taught by some of the best and brightest film-focused minds in our community" that focuses on genres, filmmakers, or movements within film history. A March 2020 FilmScene 101 series titled "The Future is

⁴⁷¹ Fons, personal interview.

⁴⁷² "Special Events," FilmScene.

⁴⁷³ "Scenesters," FilmScene.

Female,” taught by a local writer and film MA graduate, explored “four science-fiction films directed by women and their impact on the industry and audiences.”⁴⁷⁴ Other FilmScene 101 series have included “The Black Image in Comics” and “New Hollywood,” hinting at the range of topics the series covers.

Another educational service offered by FilmScene that demands a digression is a series called Science on Screen (SoS), a project aimed to increase film and scientific literacy. In 2005 the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Brookline, Massachusetts, began SoS with the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to present a seven-film program that

pairs screenings of classic, cult, science fiction, and documentary films with lively presentations by notable experts from the world of science and technology. Each film is used as a jumping-off point for a speaker to introduce current research or technological advances in a manner that engages popular culture audiences—from the function of the amygdala in the zombie brains of *Night of the Living Dead* to how far epidemiology has come since *The Andromeda Strain*.⁴⁷⁵

The program found great enough success at the Coolidge that the theatre and the Sloan Foundation formalized and expanded the initiative into a nation-wide grant program in 2011, using the newly established Art House Convergence conferences as a platform. Eligible venues (US-based nonprofit theatres and museums) receive up to \$8,500 to program their own SoS series and invite local experts to unpack scientific or environmental topics as depicted in the series films. The 2019-2020 grant season, for example, awarded funds to 32 participating art houses and museums across the country to aid in the marketing, screening, and speaker logistics of the series. The programming is not standardized; each theatre proposes a different program of titles and speakers in their grant application. The level of audience interaction and the nature of the pedagogical experience thus differs between cinemas, as many theatres propose titles with connections to their local settings. Most programs include a mix of Hollywood, global,

⁴⁷⁴ “FilmScene 101: The Future is Female,” FilmScene.

⁴⁷⁵ “About,” Science on Screen.

independent, contemporary, classic, cult, and popular films that grant recipient theatres can creatively hitch to conversations about science, technology, or the environment. Sometimes this shows the complicated flows of taste formations that art houses stage. Films that one wouldn't ordinarily associate with the prestige branding are popular choices. The 2008 stoner comedy *Pineapple Express* (dir. David Gordon Green) starring Seth Rogan and James Franco was programmed as part of the SoS series by the Enzian Theatre in Maitland, Florida, in 2020. By inviting a doctor from the local marijuana care clinic to speak about the science and uses behind medical marijuana, the SoS framing reformed the film's reputation as a low-brow comedy into an educational opportunity befitting a community art house.

For its part, FilmScene was awarded an SoS grant for the 2019-2020 season and presented titles with direct or tangential connections to science or the environment, such as *Stuffed* (dir. Erin Derham, 2019), a documentary about taxidermy paired with a discussion with directors from the University of Iowa Museum of Natural History, and *Making Waves: The Art of Cinematic Sound* (dir. Midge Costin, 2019), featuring industry sound designers and university scholars of music conversing about the science behind audio. As these examples suggest, the pedagogical potentials of a theatre like FilmScene depends to a large degree on its close proximity to a university. All arts organizations, not just art houses, draw from university communities to shore up their own educational service. Guest lecturers, partnerships with university associations, and the sheer audience demographics of intellectuals interested in world cinema or outside of mainstream Hollywood benefits art houses enormously. Exhibitors in towns without universities are at a marked disadvantage in this regard.

Aside from its dimensions as an educational resource for the community, FilmScene also marks an example of how art houses have become self-reflectively active as overtly political

spaces. The nonprofit turn among such cinemas, not to mention the ongoing cultural debates in the West over questions of racism, sexism, and inequality, has fed into the ethos that such cinemas and all cultural institutions have the responsibility to promote sentiments of equity, inclusion, and diversity within their field. FilmScene, conceived as a nonprofit in a liberal college town in an otherwise politically conservative state, sees itself as a purveyor of social-cultural progressivism that extends this cultural project. For Fons, art houses are clearly political spaces that have an important role in supporting social justice movements in ways that other performing arts venues can't always match: "All arts and culture centers and community leaders have a responsibility to respond to injustice. To not respond is a failing of an organization. Film is such a catalyst for conversation, and I think film is an access point that most have. If you're a ballet company, it's hard to figure out how to do that, but there are so many films that can spark conversations and be influential."⁴⁷⁶ The response Fons has in mind includes both creative curation (programming, community collaborations) and administrative practices (hiring norms, executive board compositions) that have been teased out by the Alliance for Action subgroup that arose at Art House Convergence conferences starting in 2017, discussed in my last chapter. Fons, a prominent member of the group, said she brought a lot of ideas back to FilmScene based on Alliance for Action's dialogues about what art houses should do in the name of social justice.

The main thrust behind art house activism as promoted by Alliance for Action is the drive to diversify audiences, screen creatives, and staff/board members to include more racial minorities, women, sexual minorities, and disenfranchised people. Fons reiterated that "there's been a great reckoning in the last year [regarding social justice issues] because we've been thinking not only of our internal machinations, but also the films we show or do not show, and

⁴⁷⁶ Fons, personal interview.

how those are reflective of systemic racism. I think we're all just considering it, for lack of a better word, in a new way." To act on this awareness, FilmScene has adopted a proactive stance toward diversifying its programming away from white, straight, male filmmakers that form the historical canon and current majority of film content. Fons clarified that one of her fixations as a programmer is that "no matter when one looks at programming at FilmScene, there [should be] representation on display—women filmmakers, queer filmmakers, filmmakers of color. It doesn't have to be Women's History Month or Black History Month—we should always have a balanced and representative slate of films."⁴⁷⁷ While it's hard to make precise claims about how or if FilmScene's regular first-run program carries out this ambition, the cinema's regular series suggests dedicated attempts to diversify its screen content. Its African Diaspora series highlights "the work of African-American filmmakers and films and artists of the African diaspora through year-round screenings and events curated in collaboration with Black members of the Iowa City community."⁴⁷⁸ Pride at FilmScene, meanwhile, "partners with Iowa City Pride to present one film a month showcasing new and classic LGBTQIA+ from around the world."⁴⁷⁹ FilmScene's Reel Representations series perhaps best encapsulates the organization's mandate toward representational diversity and inclusion. The series began under the name Women's March in 2017 amidst the burgeoning MeToo movement, broadly, and the Women's March of January 21, 2017, in particular. That protest was held in Washington, D.C., and other global cities the day after the inauguration of US President Donald Trump, whose election campaign was marked by misogynistic comments and accusations of sexual harassment and assault. For art houses, MeToo signalled a specific reckoning within the film industry—exhibitors included—over programming

⁴⁷⁷ Fons, personal interview.

⁴⁷⁸ "African Diaspora," FilmScene.

⁴⁷⁹ "Pride at FilmScene," FilmScene.

norms, gender inclusion, and workplace harassment. FilmScene answered this call by forming an intersectional advisory board in late 2017 for a new series dedicated exclusively to women storytellers and subject-characters. For the whole of the month of March 2018, FilmScene solely programmed contemporary and classic films directed by women and depicting women perspectives. This included all first-run features, Bijou Forum films, its Grindhouse series—each and every screening spread out among FilmScene’s two locations. In 2020 Fons and others rethought and renamed Women’s March into a regular series called Reel Representation, “a year-round program that celebrates local, national and international female and gender-non binary artists, [showcasing] new releases and film series from, special events with, and dialogues about this underrepresented perspective in the industry.”⁴⁸⁰

It’s clear that FilmScene has taken a cue from the cultural zeitgeist to make concerted efforts to diversify its screen representations. But it’s also apparent that the ability of a nonprofit like FilmScene to enact some of its most ambitious practices in this vein, like staffing community engagement officers or to paying for outside consultation services, hinges on finances. The “Strengthen, Grow, Evolve” capital campaign to the tune of \$6 million largely went toward building renovations and improved customer experiences at both FilmScene and the Englert Theatre, with some monies set aside for community engagement. The loftiest political actions in the name of social justice at art houses don’t simply activate because art house administrators wish it at conference panels. Resources have to be generated and allocated, which is likely only possible among nonprofits with large community support, or the largest chain cinemas, which do not appear as invested in left cultural progressivism to the same degree.

⁴⁸⁰ “Reel Representations,” FilmScene.

FilmScene and the Hollywood Theatre are only two examples of a much larger accounting of concrete art house practices that would benefit from future research. While some of the details I recounted here are specific to a theatre's setting (like the Hollywood's PDX microcinema), the wide swath of practices I have described are widely indicative of the industrial norms that AHC has encouraged for years at its conferences. Above all else, art houses increasingly assert an identifiable brand rather than defining themselves solely in opposition to Hollywood commercial culture. The need to creatively curate a variety of content for increasingly fragmented and niche audiences is a truism that touches many specialty theatres today. The more ambitious or capable of these nonprofits go beyond mere programming mandates, though, and understand themselves as important providers of social service for their communities, whether through education programs, filmmaking ventures, or financial support mechanisms. And it's clear given their administrative discourse and programming norms that many theatres no longer see themselves as neutral viewing boxes whose most prominent contributions to left-progressive politics is to screen foreign-language or obscure independent films. With highly trained fundraisers and administrators now among their ranks to procure membership and philanthropic donations, the art houses that have thrived since the transition to digital projection have largely done so by embracing new missions as cultural institutions. Some of these maneuvers, like the Hollywood's commitment to paracinema sleaze and audience participation, signal the dynamic eventizing that art houses call upon to get people into the theatres. The example of FilmScene, meanwhile, paints a picture of the grassroots challenges baked into the recipe for new nonprofit art houses. It also points to the successes many have enjoyed at the same time.

Just when it seemed that the art house model built on a highly curated and community-centric nonprofit ethos was settling in as the sector's answer to the challenges of recent decades, the COVID-19 pandemic erupted around the world in 2020. My next and final chapter offers a parting look at the art house sector in the wake of this and other calamities.

Conclusion: A COVID Coda

If the years since 2005 saw a settling of art house logics into a community-minded, nonprofit form, the year 2020 must be considered its first major stress test. That winter, while I was drafting this thesis, the COVID-19 virus began its slow, steady spread around the world to calamitous effect. Within a matter of days that March, entire global industries ground to a halt as part of safety measures prescribed by local or national health officials. In incremental fashion, all but non-essential businesses across North America, including bars, restaurants, gyms, and theatres, were first requested to limit capacity and eventually to shutter completely. Millions of people were out of work and millions more tumbled into greater financial precarity. Leisure and entertainment venues where people gather together in interior spaces were most affected. More somberly, millions have died from COVID-related health complications and tens of millions of hospitalizations have overwhelmed health care systems around the world, a situation that has only recently been partially curtailed at time of writing in summer 2021 by the gradual rollout of vaccination campaigns among the world's wealthiest nations.

The pandemic represents a seismic event in the arc of theatrical exhibition—an unprecedented industry-wide crisis that calls into question the future of fixed-site moviegoing. 2020's domestic box office in the United States was down 80% from the previous year,⁴⁸¹ and AMC, the largest domestic theatre chain, only staved off bankruptcy in early 2021 after scrambling to assemble nearly \$1 billion in equity.⁴⁸² Similar to the narrative in the 2000s when pundits fretted about the impact of digital projection on independent theatres, trade and media publications have openly wondered about the long-term damage to the entire theatrical model

⁴⁸¹ Sarah Shevenock, "Movie Theatres Are Reopening Again: Is the Public Ready?" *Morning Consult*, March 10, 2021.

⁴⁸² Katherine Doherty and Antonio Vanuzzo, "AMC Says Bankruptcy 'Off the Table' for Now With Fresh Funds," *Bloomberg.Com*, January 25, 2021.

wrought by COVID-19.⁴⁸³ Will throngs of people feel comfortable returning to crowded theatres? Will the dramatic uptick in streaming service subscriptions brought on by stay-at-home orders sway moviegoers away from theatres once and for all? Will studio-distributors see pandemic conditions as further evidence of the need to retire conventional release windows and relegate theatres to the back burner of the exhibition chain?

Early reports showed cause for concern on several fronts. Studies conducted by research firms in March and April 2020 suggested that US audiences wouldn't be in a rush to return to movie theatres after the pandemic subsides. 49% of 1,000 respondents indicated that it would take them "a few months" to "possibly never" to return to movie theatres after receiving the all-clear. Though the majority of respondents claimed that their regular attendance to theatres wouldn't change, "the net effect suggests an alarming erosion of theatrical returns that exhibitors and studios alike can ill afford."⁴⁸⁴ Other research revealed similar findings. IMPACTS, a data and predictive company that tracks trends across government and entertainment organizations, released an "intent to visit" metric for cultural organizations that suggests when people predict returning to their usual leisure destinations. While finding that the majority of people planned to resume their normal attendance habits within six months after the pandemic, the research also concluded that people will not return to all cultural habits equally. Organization types that allow visitors more physical freedom in less constricted environments are predictably projected to fare better post-COVID, while those organizations predicated on crowded indoor settings will suffer more. Of the eleven cultural organizations that respondents were asked about, movie theatres

⁴⁸³ Jason Bailey, "Independent Movie Theaters Across the Country Brace for the Worst," *Vulture*, March 18, 2020.

⁴⁸⁴ Adam B. Vary, "Movie Theatres and Concerts Could See Major Attendance Drop Post-Pandemic (Study)," *Variety*, March 31, 2020.

were the least likely venue for people to return to in pre-COVID numbers.⁴⁸⁵ One year after the pandemic began, with vaccination campaigns under way, new data began to track the level of customer comfort to return to movie theatres. According to Morning Consult, a data analysis and consultation firm for the entertainment sector, the percentage of all adults who said they would be comfortable returning to a movie theatre as of March 2021 has hovered between 25-33% since the beginning of the year, with the youngest populations (Gen Zers and Millennials) the most likely to be willing. Findings such as these will inevitably shift as COVID cases continue to rise or fall in different geographic areas. But it appears clear that theatrical movie-going will not return to its normal robustness for the immediate future if ever. For art houses whose audiences skew older than those at large chain exhibitors and therefore are more at risk to the COVID virus, the prospect of a long-term downturn in attendance is of particular worry.

Mandated theatre closures have also spotlighted the continued thorniness of theatrical release windows and lent more momentum to the prospect of studio-distributors scrapping theatrical window exclusivity altogether. Before it was shelved due to the pandemic, the 2020 CinemaCon, the exhibition industry's major annual conference-gathering, was previewed by *Variety* as a clash "heavy on drama" between Netflix and movie theatres about the fairness of its release window demands.⁴⁸⁶ Later that year, however, as most movie theatres were forced to close or restrict their seating capacity, it became clear that studios outside of Netflix were willing to break release window solidarity. Headlines about begrudging agreements between theatre chains and studios regarding release windows came fast and furious over 2020. Universal Studios announced that March that it would make select films available day-and-date. The AMC

⁴⁸⁵ Colleen Dilenschneider, "Data Update: Which Cultural Entities Will People Return to After Reopening?" *Know Your Own Bone*, April 6, 2020.

⁴⁸⁶ Rebecca Rubin, "CinemaCon 2019's Hottest Debate? Exhibitors vs. Streaming," *Variety*, March 27, 2019.

theatre chain responded with a boycott of all Universal films. This distributor-exhibitor game of chicken didn't last long, though. In July AMC reversed its stance and agreed to a deal with Universal to an unprecedented 17-day window for that studio's movies for three years in exchange for a cut of the films' premium video-on-demand (PVOD) profits. Pundits claimed that the deal had "potentially profound ramifications for [the] industry...[and] is all but certain to lead other studios to press for similar terms from AMC and other exhibitors."⁴⁸⁷ But the most seismic COVID-era release window deal was surely Warner Bros.' announcement in December that it would release its entire 2021 slate—17 total titles including big-budget attractions like *The Matrix 4* (dir. Lana Wachowski) and *Dune* (dir. Denis Villeneuve)—simultaneously in theatres and on its affiliated streaming service, HBO Max, as PVOD for about \$30 per film to subscribers. After one month, titles would then move back to theatres exclusively for otherwise normal runs before migrating again to at-home platforms. This model was touted by Warner Bros. as "hybrid distribution" and was cited as a necessary "creative solution" to the "unprecedented times" presented by COVID.⁴⁸⁸ Though the studio played down the prospects of doing away with release windows entirely once the pandemic subsides, Wall Street shares of the biggest North American exhibitors fell sharply after the film studio's announcement.⁴⁸⁹ Many exhibition insiders and groups worried that once studios start investing more in streaming services and insisting on hybrid distribution deals like those of Warner Bros., it will be hard to stop that particular rolling ball from flattening movie theatres.

⁴⁸⁷ Tom Brueggemann, "A 17-Day Window: The Biggest Change in Film Distribution History Since the Release of 'Jaws'," *IndieWire*, July 29, 2020; Jake Coyle, "Deal between AMC and Universal Will Shrink Movie Theatrical Release Window to under 3 Weeks," *CBC News*, July 29, 2020.

⁴⁸⁸ "Warner Bros. Pictures Group Announces Innovative, Hybrid Distribution Model for Its 2021 Theatrical Slate," *WarnerMedia*, December 3, 2020.

⁴⁸⁹ "Shares of AMC Entertainment, the world's largest theater chain, fell 16 percent on Thursday, while Cinemark dropped 22 percent. Imax and the Marcus Corporation also lost significant value." See "HBO Max Will Stream All 2021 Warner Bros. Movies," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2020.

While major studio distributors and large theatrical chains butted heads over balancing theatrical exclusivity with VOD access, the art house sector had to turn to emergency fundraising and grant programs for the second time in 20 years to stay afloat. This time, however, theatres were better organized. The turn toward nonprofitization and its emphasis on solicited income, institutional branding, and professionalized administration positioned art houses well for the philanthropic campaigns and grant applications that unfurled during COVID. Fifteen years of social capital built up among independent exhibitors and their allies in distribution proved useful to responding to the shared crisis. For example, the Criterion Collection and Janus Films, two of the top distributors for art films in the country, teamed up with AHC to launch the Art House America Campaign in April 2020, a relief fund for independent art house cinemas forced to close due to the pandemic. By the time the campaign wrapped up in the summer of 2020, over 5,000 donors, ranging from everyday people to top Hollywood directors, had donated over \$800,000 to more than 150 eligible nonprofit art houses across the country.⁴⁹⁰ The all-hands-on-deck ethos that Art House America embodied gained steam because of the alliances established between distributors and exhibitors since the digital transition. Yet these funds were only a stopgap; it would take more intervention at the federal level for art houses to find a long-term safety net.

On cue the United States government issued a series of emergency funds and loan programs to beleaguered individuals, families, or entire economic sectors throughout 2020 and 2021. One of the loans most pertinent to art houses was the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), a mechanism created in April 2020 to incentivize small businesses and nonprofits to keep staff on payroll with short-term loans. Many art houses applied for and received these loans in the spring that year. However, terms of the loan were not practical for all. PPP loans were only

⁴⁹⁰ “Art-House America Campaign Launches to Help Independent Cinemas Nationwide,” *Boxoffice*, March 30, 2020.

forgivable for expenses incurred by June 30 of that year, for example, and the program stipulated that 80% of the loan go to payroll costs. But most movies theatres were closed throughout March-June of 2020 due to mandated health measures, meaning that many theatres would have no way of spending the forgivable amount of the loan in time. Also, many art houses had to lay off their hourly employees and reasoned that said employees would make more money by staying home and receiving the \$600 per week unemployment program in place at the time. Theatres *wanted* the PPP loan, but only after they could actually open their doors for business and spend the funds meaningfully. Because of these conditions, some art house administrators opted to apply for the Employee Retention Credit (ERC), a refundable tax credit good for up to \$5,000 per employee through the end of 2020 that, according to the administrators who applied for it, awarded businesses the balance of the unused credit. For theatres with a majority of employees working by the hour, the ERC seemed for many the better long-term strategy for coping with the closures.⁴⁹¹ The dilemma between PPP and ERC became moot in April 2020 when the Small Business Administration (SBA), the arm of the government responsible for issuing the PPP loans, announced that it had run out of money, leaving those art houses who had not already been approved for the PPP out of luck.⁴⁹² After the passing of legislation to fund the government with emergency funds that year, though, the terms of the PPP were amended in early 2021 to extend loan forgiveness time and loosen regulations on how the loans could be spent.

As this recap so far suggests, independent exhibitors formed ranks of support during COVID closures, but they lacked the clout for advocating for substantive federal intervention. Suddenly the resources of a larger, more established trade group like NATO began to look more

⁴⁹¹ “PPP - Read this before finalizing your PPP Loan,” AHC Google Group thread, April 16, 2020.

⁴⁹² Lauren Fox and Phil Mattingly, “The Government’s Small Business Loan Money Is Gone. Now What?,” *CNN*, April 16, 2020.

appealing to the independent-minded band of scrappy art houses. NATO had been busy with its own initiatives to save movie theatres. In July 2020 it launched the “Save Your Cinema” campaign encouraging movie-goers to pressure politicians to help see “a cornerstone of the American experience” through the closures by passing the RESTART ACT (a bill to extend loan programs for businesses hit hard by COVID). This act argued that the PPP, the government’s first round of support for businesses, was not adequate for movie theatres given the mandated closures and heavy restrictions on how funds could be spent. NATO President & CEO John Fithian went on the offensive, calling on Congress and the Trump Administration to provide \$15 billion in grants for Broadway theatres, live music halls, and mid-sized or small movie theatre companies—a collective effort among arts venues called Save Our Stages.⁴⁹³ NATO got its wish in December 2020 when Congress passed the act, securing the \$15 billion NATO hoped would find its way to the nation’s cultural institutions.

Efforts like this made it clear to many art house exhibitors during 2020 that their sector would only benefit from closer associations with NATO. Tori Baker, President and CEO of AHC-member Salt Lake Film Society and a NATO membership committee member, penned an email to AHC in July encouraging art houses to join NATO. Noting that membership fees for nonprofits to NATO were waived until July 2021, she wrote that “arthouses do exist in sort-of a bubble, but are not unaffected by the larger [\$12 billion] industry that feeds the cultural perceptions and core business models of our theaters.”⁴⁹⁴ Scores of AHC art houses signed up in this period to make use of the larger group’s organizational resources. NATO was particularly helpful to art houses applying for the Shuttered Venue Operators Grant (SVOG), a massive

⁴⁹³ Beatrice Verhoeven, “Theater Owners Urge Congress to Pass Immediate Relief Legislation,” *The Wrap*, November 9, 2020.

⁴⁹⁴ “Fwd: Save Your Cinema!,” AHC Google Group thread, July 23, 2020.

funding program within the broader Save Our Stages Act. During the spring and summer of 2021, NATO officials fielded questions, shared documents, and organized informational webinars to help theatre owners (including hundreds of art houses) apply for these grants. As of May 3, 2021, approximately 1,300 motion picture theatre operators across the US had submitted SVOG applications, though it is unclear how many of these were art houses.⁴⁹⁵ In scanning the AHC Google Group forum, where art house administrators often announced loan awards, dozens of art houses received these crucial funds over June and July 2021. Whatever the exact level of awarded monies, art house administrators were effusive in their praise for how NATO executed the Save Our Stages campaign and aided exhibitors of all sizes. One art house executive went so far as to say that “[NATO’s] work on getting this legislation passed and technical assistance will going forward be one of the major factors that has helped save independent exhibition.”⁴⁹⁶

Art houses have clearly seen the benefit in the short-term of joining NATO during the pandemic. In the long-term, some art house administrators also expressed interest in leveraging their growing NATO membership to change the mainstream exhibition industry from within by advancing off-screen cultural projects, such as achieving greater gender and racial equity on executive boards.⁴⁹⁷ Both subsectors of the exhibition market potentially stand to gain something from the greater inclusion of the other. This nascent relationship suggests a possible new porousness between mainstream and independent exhibitors reminiscent of the 1970s when many independent theatres held memberships in both NATO and the National Independent Theatre Exhibitors Association. Indeed the pandemic has suggested that exhibitors of all kinds may need to band together out of mutual interest in the redrawn environment of a video-on-

⁴⁹⁵ “U.S. Small Business Administration Shuttered Venues Daily Report,” United States Small Business Administration, May 3, 2021.

⁴⁹⁶ “Updated SVOG User Guide,” AHC Google Group thread user comment, April 9, 2021.

⁴⁹⁷ “Representation in NATO – the board meetings this week,” AHC Google Group thread, October 6, 2020.

demand, pandemic-conscious world. Just as the rise of Indiewood as a studio filmmaking strategy in the 1990s has contributed to the blurring of commercial and arty-indie media within the cultural market, it will be interesting to gauge just how far this threading of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors goes as the exhibition industry regains its footing post-COVID.

The pandemic was not the only crisis of 2020 with deep resonance for art houses. The killing of black Minneapolis citizen George Floyd by a white police officer in June of that year sparked nationwide and then global protests against excessive police force specifically and systemic racism and inequality broadly. At first a trickle of demonstrations and offshoot riots in major cities, the protests cascaded into ongoing reckonings across arts and culture organizations, many of which professed solidarity with the protests and the wider left-progressive cultural project joined to them. The killing of Floyd and the rhetorical themes that gained ground in the mainstream media thereafter, including the BlackLivesMatter movement and calls to Defund the Police, became highly politicized talking points and further alienated the left and right ends of the American political spectrums from one another. These events collided that year with the highly contentious US presidential election between Democrat Joe Biden and Republican incumbent Donald Trump, an election replete with impassioned rhetoric, calculated disinformation campaigns, and staunch political tribalism. This culminated in a dramatic win for Biden in the face of baseless accusations from the incumbent, as well as several Republican members of Congress, of widescale voter fraud. After protracted legal scuffles to challenge the verified election results, a band of Trump supporters, coaxed by the president himself, stormed the US Capitol Building in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021, as the official electoral vote was being counted. The ensuing violence resulted in a handful of protestor and police deaths and a prominent black eye on the face of American democracy in the twenty-first century.

From the standpoint of this thesis, the global pandemic amid a fractured socio-political climate has afforded the chance to evaluate, to some degree, the response of art house theatres to the fraught cultural and industrial moment. While handwringing about release windows and government rescue funds played out across 2020, theatre operators and distributors organized survival tactics to supply customers with movies. Chain circuits and independent art houses scrambled to launch TVOD (transactional video on demand) options for at-home viewing, a move that ordinarily would seem outlandish for theatres. As soon as the end of March 2020, exhibitors were encouraging one another to settle on a specific term for this new frontier—virtual cinema—to distinguish what is otherwise technically understood in the marketplace as streaming. Specialty distributors were the first to toe these waters. In March 2020 Kino Lorber launched its virtual theatrical exhibition initiative, Kino Marquee, a partnership with around 150 small or independent venues across the United States. In this arrangement exhibitors book films through Kino Lorber, which provides links to customers to access titles for one week at a time. Profits are then split between distributor and exhibitor 50/50—a much more favorable share than what theatres usually receive. With no geo-blocking restrictions, users are allowed to view titles through any participating art house but are encouraged to wait until titles migrate to their local art house before purchasing a ticket in order to benefit their neighborhood theatre (it’s unclear to what extent people actually do this). Citing solidarity with their shuttered exhibitor brethren, Kino Lorber claimed that “everything about Kino Marquee was consciously designed to emulate the theatrical experience, from the theater marquee graphics on every portal, to the opportunity to buy a “ticket” to “screen” a film. We never use the word ‘stream’.”⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁸ Kino Lorber was more fortunate than other virtual cinema players in that it had just launched a proprietary TVOD site, Kino Now, in late 2019, which formed the essential technological mechanism of their Kino Marquee platform. See Wendy Lidell, “How Virtual Cinema Will Help Arthouse Theaters Reopen Nationwide,” *IndieWire*, July 7, 2020.

Marquee graphics and theatre-friendly nomenclature notwithstanding, there were bugs to be ironed out of virtual cinema model, according to veteran distributor Ira Deutchman. In most cases patrons who want to watch a virtual cinema title movie booked through an exhibitor are sent a link to a distributor's website, from where customers often have to migrate to a third-party platform, create an account, and view a film from an impersonal site not visibly connected to their local theatre. This "confusing hodgepodge of platforms and instructions for each film" inevitably led to technical problems. Art house exhibitors quickly found out that they had to offer tech support solutions on the fly. Many theatre proprietors reported exasperated clientele—most of them older and not tech-savvy—confused about accessing titles online, only to be shunted off onto distributors or third-party customer service lines. Also, the rush among distributors to launch virtual cinema meant that no one platform offered a centralized service adaptable to individual exhibitors; in other words virtual cinema systems "require building specialized links for each theatre. In some cases distributors must upload the films multiple times," making for a cumbersome process with no clear coordination.⁴⁹⁹ Finally, virtual cinema upended some of the foundations of exhibitor/distributor relations—and not to the benefit of theatres. Because users are sent to a distributor's or third party's site to view films, theatres lose out on gathering customer data or interfacing with clients directly. Distributors asked theatres to enact a "share the link" approach to marketing their virtual cinema titles, essentially using theatres as a passive funnel of customer data.⁵⁰⁰ This rubbed many exhibitors the wrong way who had spent years building trusted relationships with their patrons only to see them shuffled along a conveyer belt of URLs with little to show for it. What's more, distributors, not theatres, are in charge of virtual

⁴⁹⁹ Ira Deutchman, "How Virtual Cinema Could Help Arthouses Secure Their Future in 7 Easy Steps," *IndieWire*, July 1, 2020.

⁵⁰⁰ Brian Welk, "Have Virtual Cinemas Fallen Short of Saving Art Houses During the Pandemic?," *TheWrap*, March 8, 2021.

cinema grosses, and have no coordinated way to track and pay theatres. This results in exhibitors receiving a delayed share of profits.⁵⁰¹

While acknowledging the good-faith effort and benefits of platforms like Kino Marquee, some art houses attempted to form alternatives to specialty distributors' virtual cinema platforms. Armed with new entrepreneurial zeal formed over the last several years, they did so with the idea to insist on the particularities of art houses in contrast to generic streaming experiences. In August 2020 *Boxoffice* reported on the formation of @homeArts, a project founded by The Salt Lake Film Society. Described as a technology offering “a clear and defined distinction between VOD and Theatrical VOD releases,” @home Arts was designed to improve the cash flow problem plaguing exhibitors under most virtual cinema arrangements and the issue of virtual community connection. The platform, which released with eleven US art house partners, allows a higher degree of web page customization for each theatre and does away with pesky third-party site navigation. The Salt Lake Film Society also wanted an exhibitor-centric platform that would retain the structure and language of the theatrical experience as much as possible in a necessarily online format. This involved reinforcing things like temporal exclusivity for titles (as opposed to the watch-whenever-you-want ethos of Netflix and other streamers), the excitement of a Friday night premiere, live-streamed filmmaker Q&As, locally targeted curation, and direct ways for patrons to donate to their local art house. The foundational appeal of @homeArts to art houses was that customers would sense the familiar personal touch of the exhibitor. Said Tori Baker of the @homeArts vision, “We are trying to replicate the same experience with the exception of an online screen. [Users] should feel like they are still my patron, they are walking up to my box office, they are participating in our curation and our program, and they are not being sent

⁵⁰¹ Deutchman, “Virtual Cinema.”

elsewhere.” The appeals to branding and community seems to have worked. Baker estimated that as of September 2020 the Salt Lake City Film Society saw a 40 percent supplement to online ticket sales in the form of donations.⁵⁰² Other art houses reported similar surges in online donations through their virtual cinema platforms, suggesting that close-knit community support remains strong as people rally around the institutions that the pandemic has imperiled. As of December 2020 27 different art houses had joined the @homeArts network.

Models like @homeArts suggest the benefits of the grassroots ethos that art houses have discursively invested in since the digital transition. Yet despite the clear need for virtual cinema in this moment, the common impression among both distributors and exhibitors is that it has been a mixed bag for theatres. Over 80% of 150 art house respondents said in a March 2021 poll conducted by AHC that virtual cinema revenue doesn’t come close to replacing theatrical revenue levels. San Francisco’s Roxie Theatre reported that even with generous revenue splits with distributors like Kino Lorber, its year of virtual box office revenue was around 5% of its usual intake. Wesley Emblidge, the marketing and education manager at the Coolidge Corner Theater in Boston, said of his theatre’s intake that “it’s not even a fraction of the revenue that we’d be making if the theater was open. It really doesn’t compare. ... There are individual films that have played at the theater that in their total run have made more than all of the virtual films have made combined so far.”⁵⁰³ Interestingly, people seem happy to donate money directly to their art houses out of a sense of wanting to help sustain the business, but they seem far less willing to actually pay to watch new releases at home. This suggests that among art house crowds, interest in video-on-demand formats is perhaps lower than expected while loyalty to

⁵⁰² Tori Baker, “Art Houses Fight On: Salt Lake Film Society Launches @homeArts,” *Boxoffice* Podcast, episode 29, September 24, 2020, 25:15.

⁵⁰³ Welk, “Fallen Short.”

one's local art house is perhaps higher. More to this point, though Baker insists that virtual cinema platforms like @homeArts are not streaming services, it is questionable if the cosmetic discursive tweaks theatres make (using "tickets" instead of "streams," marquee graphic design, donation portals) significantly confer on customers a meaningful sense that they are not just streaming a movie. Exhibitors obviously have a vested interest in maintaining the sentiment of theatrical however they can in order to persuade patrons not to give up on the fundamental practice of visiting movie theatres in person, but the rhetorical tap-dancing that some enact in this spirit may fall on deaf ears.

In a more positive spin, one legacy of the pandemic closures may very well be that brick-and-mortar cinemas lean into virtual cinema in ways that work for their particular business model—just as they did with digital projection. It seems unlikely that theatres will entirely scrap virtual cinema once large crowds feel comfortable returning to theatres. A more likely scenario is that art houses add a virtual cinema option to their regular in-theatre programming. This would be of particular use to art houses operating with only one or two auditoria given the "screen crunch" many small exhibitors grapple with. This could also serve a sector that balances a diverse slate of films and formats; many low-budget or independent filmmakers have found virtual cinema a cheaper, easier way to get their films seen in limited markets than conventional release strategies. Long-term virtual cinema options would also align with art house cultural projects to increase inclusion and access. A virtual screen could be of service to community members who, whether because of social anxiety, limited mobility, or prolonged health concerns, would not otherwise be able to attend a theatre in person. All exhibitors seem to admit that hybrid distribution models in which big titles are released simultaneously in theatres and on a studio's streaming service for a premium price are here to stay in some form. Those art houses

that can afford the technical architecture of virtual cinema and see enough revenue from it will likely innovate programming practices to maximize its potential.

It remains an open question how art houses will fare in the theatrical marketplace relative to large chain cinemas once the effects of COVID abate. Pundits have argued that the delays and pushbacks of major studio tentpole films means these movies will need more calendar space once audiences return in full to offset months of disruption, which will muscle out indie fare from the largest theatres. This represents a sum positive for small, independent exhibitors who will in all likelihood have less competition for small- to mid-size specialty films from the likes of A24 and Neon. Indie distributors in need of screens for their under-the-radar releases competing for eyeballs may find in future years that art houses more than ever are the de facto place for their films. Before her firing, Alison Kozberg claimed in a panel discussion on moviegoing in the age of COVID that the temporary engagement model represented by virtual cinema has underscored how much collegiality exists between art houses and indie distributors. The “robust local marketing awareness” that art houses possess means that “they can generate support among community audiences easier than chains,” which attracts small distributors whose titles depend more on word of mouth.⁵⁰⁴ Perhaps the blurring of art house titles into the bloodstream of major studio releases since the 1990s will revert back to a slightly more siloed model in which specialized cinemas handle the awards darlings and world cinema titles, while the largest chains grip harder to the blockbusters and franchises. There’s also the lingering issue of what effect, if any, the recently scrapped *Paramount* decree will have on art houses or other small exhibitors. The two-year sunset clause banning block-booking and circuit-dealing that was built into the

⁵⁰⁴ Alison Kozberg, “Moviegoing in the Age of COVID-19,” Carsey-Wolf Center Virtual panel discussion, University of California Television, April 30, 2020.

circuit court's decision is set to expire in 2022. Smaller exhibitors with less bargaining clout with major distributors will be keenly aware of how this shifting terrain eventually settles—if it does.

Outside of industrial matters, many art houses appear likely to continue with left-progressive projects as gatekeepers of film culture. In the wake of the Floyd killing, blunt conversations broke out on the AHC Google Group forum about how art houses, as community resources, should improve their commitments to principles of equity, access, and inclusion, both on screen and in the workplace. Conventional statements of support for black Americans and denouncements of police violence were quickly critiqued as ineffective, patronizing, or hollow. Some made demands for more direct action or institutional changes within the exhibition sector. The more vocal AHC members encouraged administrators to interrogate the racial and gender compositions of their executive boards and staff, and to put in place practices, not just official language, to address tenets of structural racism, inequality, and white supremacy. By way of example, the Northwest Film Forum in Seattle announced it was donating all June 2020 theatre proceeds to “causes or organizations that the Black Lives Matter or empower Black people.”⁵⁰⁵ Cinemapolis, an art house in Ithaca, New York, began instituting ways to “develop a culture of anti-racism at the board level” of its non-profit organization by starting a 4-session read of the book *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo. This was supplemented by bi-weekly meetings outside of regular board meeting time for facilitated discussions and exercises about how to achieve institutional anti-racism.⁵⁰⁶ Outside of anecdotal proclamations made on the AHC Google Group forum, though, it is difficult to say how widespread actions like these described above were across art houses in the wake of calls to interrogate internal policies as anti-racist organizations.

⁵⁰⁵ “Fwd: A Call to Action for each of us,” AHC Google Group thread, June 4, 2020.

⁵⁰⁶ “Anti-Racism Resources and Readings for White People,” AHC Google Group thread, June 4, 2020.

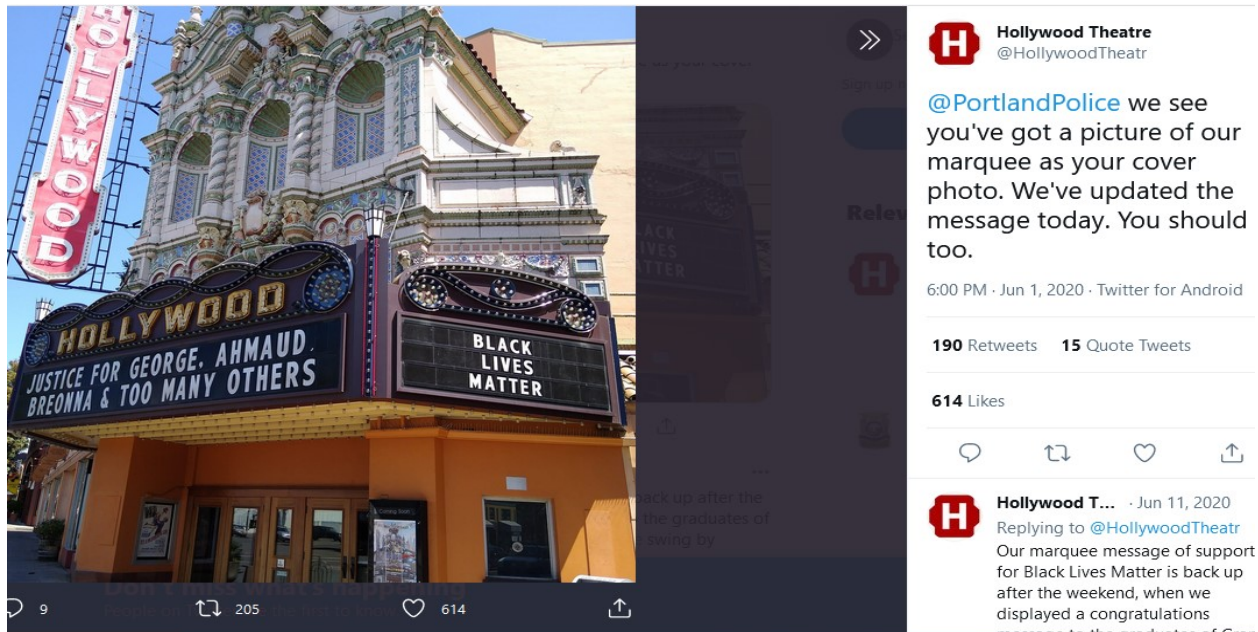


Figure 7: Screenshot of The Hollywood Theatre's Facebook page showing their building marquee message in the wake of the George Floyd shooting in Minneapolis late May 2020. The call-out message to the right directed at the Portland Police Department points to the political stances art houses increasingly take.

Calls to devote more art house programming to people of color or sexual/gender minorities have become a standard reaction in this context. But it also appears that many art houses no longer see themselves as “just” exhibitors that can make additional bookings in the name of diversity and call it a day. Rebecca Fons of FilmScene stressed to me that programming represents “the easiest part of what a place like FilmScene can do” in the name of equity, diversity, and inclusion. “It really shouldn’t be the thing that art houses rely on. I see a lot of people say, “Hey, we’re not a racist organization because we have black people on our screens,’ and that’s a really easy, performative thing to say. We have to do more than that.” Working from the premise that art house executives and audiences are been dominated by white, affluent patrons, FilmScene in the last few years is “considering equity in our spaces by working with facilitators to think about hiring practices, audience engagement, and board recruitment. [Our guiding question has become] ‘How are we operating or not operating in a way that is welcoming or not welcoming?’” In Summer 2020 the theatre announced that it planned to hire a

Community Engagement Employee (shared with the nearby Englert Theatre) who would “foster deeper artistic connections with our local K-12 schools, universities and colleges, neighborhoods, and the diverse cultures of our community.” The theatre also received state grants to research and improve arts access and engagement throughout its county. On the programming front, some FilmScene efforts toward inclusion have included forming cultural in-group committees to curate its programming, such as its African Diaspora series. But even collaboration in the name of inclusion needs tweaking in this cultural moment. Ten years ago, AHC was spotlighting the value of consulting with outside cultural groups or inviting cultural insiders to interact with audiences. Now these practices are critiqued as exploitative of people of colour and marginalized minorities unless said groups are compensated for their time, input, and emotional labour. Several recent Alliance for Action sessions at AHC conferences, as well as handfuls of AHC forum posts, have admonished art house administrators to stop drawing from the lived experiences of non-white populations for no remuneration. So, according to Fons, FilmScene is now “stepping back from using the free, volunteer labor of communities of colour and thinking more about what we can do to support a community like that.”⁵⁰⁷

The resignation of AHC Director Russ Collins and the firing of Managing Director Alison Kozberg in May 2020, detailed in chapter 4, added to the chaos of the moment. Just as COVID closures were entering their second month, and only weeks before the murder of George Floyd, the art house industry’s major resource organization was effectively leaderless. Calls for an official response from AHC on the Floyd killing and what art houses intended to do were met with clarifications that nobody was minding the store. Since then the tumult has made room for new leadership mandates that appear likely to shake up the organization. As of April 2021 there

⁵⁰⁷ Fons, personal interview.

was active planning within AHC about restructuring the group as its own 501c3 within a sponsor organization by 2022. The transitional board in charge of setting up the new AHC (if that is to remain its name) has vowed to create a more transparently governed and inclusive group that will center the cultural projects that AHC began in the last few years. Said Fons, “AHC is also going through a huge reckoning right now. Huge inequities came to light about the planning [of the group], grievances that hadn’t been dealt with. Other art house programmers/leaders came forward, and decided they needed to not rebuild but build.”⁵⁰⁸ Whether or to what degree the nation’s art houses continue to have a resource group as transformative as AHC has been for the sector remains a question. It seems apparent, though, given the socio-political climate of the United States and the stated intentions of the transitional board of AHC, that many art houses will further the cultural projects that have risen up the list of priorities of the organization, and many cultural institutions, in the last few years.

This thesis has mapped out new cultural configurations of art house cinemas—a persistently hard-to-define form yet one with undeniable currency in today’s film market. The transition to digital projection among theatres was far from a simple technological upgrade. For art houses it marked an existential danger that demanded flexibility and innovation. It upended the business model of specialty cinema exhibition in the direction of nonprofitization, bringing about a series of organizational, financial, and philosophical redesigns. I have argued that the cultural distinction promoted by mid-twentieth-century art houses has been significantly displaced as a driving force behind these exhibitors. Clearly many art houses still lean on their differentiation from commercial cinemas as part of their appeal—but the basis of this differentiation has morphed from the Euro-centric intellectualism of programming and the

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

upscale elegance of its space to sentiments of community vitality, content diversification, and left-liberal progressivism. The niche that art houses have carved out as nonprofit, locally minded venues with particular cultural projects in mind marks the end of a specific theatrical model that dates back to the 1940s and heralds in another permutation, far removed from the ephemeral grindhouse trend, whose success has taken root but whose longevity in an ever-shifting exhibition environment remains to be determined.

The years following the resumption of normal economic life after the pandemic subsides will provide fertile research on the redrawn art house exhibition landscape. This thesis has cracked open some of these questions. How will nonprofit art houses continue to negotiate their position relative to commercial exhibition markets? Increased membership of art houses into NATO suggests a need to band together to ensure the long-term survival of the theatrical space. This might signal a new symbiosis between independent cinemas and chain exhibitors that sets aside decades-long feuds over distribution inequalities. On the other hand, staunchly independent art houses may want to avoid long-term affiliation with a corporate entity like NATO. Some art houses might turn to other trade organizations that split this difference, such as the Independent Cinema Alliance, which lobbies for industrial-economic matters more than left-progressive cultural causes.

Meanwhile, after decades of watching with consternation the rise of megaplex moviegoing as the dominant exhibition form, will art houses have the upper hand in a post-COVID world as sleeker, more flexible venues for specialized media? If shrinking release windows and hybrid distribution deals wind up contracting the size and spread of chain exhibitors, these largest theatres may resign themselves to focusing even more on high-concept, bid-budget Hollywood studio blockbusters—the kind of spectacle-driven cinema that lures

casual moviegoers to theatres. Art houses would then have easier access to the specialty fare that drives much of its business already. There is also the question of rapport: the personal connections forged between independent exhibitors and specialty distributors have been a large part of the former's survival because small distributors are more likely to recognize that "[independent theatres] are places with particular personalities ... with programmers working very hard to tailor their programs to their communities."⁵⁰⁹ We should likewise not assume that the megaplex model will remain the default form of exhibition outside of homes. Drive-ins, rooftop cinemas, pop-up cinemas, and DIY movie theatres could resurge in the context of lingering pandemic concerns, offering moviegoers a composite alternative to the megaplex. Small nonprofit art houses with loyal followers, as opposed to behemoth for-profit chains, may find post-COVID recovery much easier because the community-centric business model "allows for a nimbleness in how [art houses] react to industry pressures, notably disruption."⁵¹⁰

Finally, even as this thesis has stressed that film-viewing is but one option among many services that art houses now supply, the fate of these cinemas is still squarely tied to that of moviegoing itself. Are the end credits about to roll on the theatrical presentation of moving images? This question has been and will continue to be tossed around for years. Exhibitors and cinephiles love to wax nostalgic about the inherent magic of the theatrical viewing experience; there is no getting around the "fundamental human desire to share public spaces and experiences,"⁵¹¹ this reasoning goes. The problem with this argument is that it stems from the perspective of people who grew up basking in the glow of theatre screens, not younger generations born with smartphones in their hands. Some art house insiders are catching onto this.

⁵⁰⁹ Kozberg, "Moviegoing in the Age of COVID-19."

⁵¹⁰ Baker, "Art Houses Fight On."

⁵¹¹ Kozberg, "Moviegoing in the Age of COVID-19."

Cinema Lab, a co-operative of independent exhibition consultants, launched in 2021 in direct response to the problem of adapting theatre-going to the “needs and wants of millennials and Gen Zers.” Viewing Hollywood and the large theatre chains as aging relics of entertainment, Cinema Lab takes aim at “theatre deserts” around the country and helps organizers launch community art houses in the vein of those discussed in this thesis. The organization then offers “customized deployment plans [and] oversees [theatres’] content changes to ensure they meet the needs of the millennial generation ... [in order to] enjoy a more competitive and profitable market presence.”⁵¹² Many of these changes center on technology: enhanced social media marketing, expanded app services like pre-show ticketing and concessions, and even the possibility to “shopify” one’s theatrical experience by linking moviegoers to, for example, the suit Daniel Craig wears in a James Bond film, offering film-goers new consumer connections.⁵¹³ Proposals like this prompt necessary questions about the commercialization of nonprofit cinemas, even as discourses that center “local culture” continue to define much of their self-understanding. Cinema Lab’s first theatre, the five-screen Village Cinemas at South Orange Performing Arts Center in South Point, New Jersey, opened in July 2021, with two others in the works in nearby towns in 2022. This all-encompassing film network to help small exhibitors adapt to younger, tech-savvy consumers could signal a compelling, if complicated and contentious, next chapter of art house cinema operations.

This research ultimately has sought to extend the history and critical conversations about the art house sector into contemporary terrain. Art house operators in the 1940s and 1950s carved out a niche within the film market after disruptive changes to the business of film presentation. Administrators working in art house cinemas since 2005 have done very different work in pursuit

⁵¹² “About Us,” Cinema Lab.

⁵¹³ Brandon Jones, “70: Indie Focus with Cinema Lab’s Brandon Jones,” *Boxoffice* podcast, July 22, 2021.

of a similar goal: to establish sustainability in the cultural market for film. Further research must continue to attend to the backroom practices and conversations, not just headline-grabbing industry announcements, that convey how art house operators view their work as cultural tastemakers. Never before has there been so much self-reflection among small exhibitors about what it means to run these cinemas, and scholars must be ready to chronicle these histories. Art houses of course remain vital to the circulation of alternative film and media, but they can no longer be encapsulated as movie theatres and nothing else.

Appendix One

The following conference sessions and plenary discussions, organized by year, took place at Art House Convergence Annual Conferences since 2015. This is not a comprehensive list—only those conferences mentioned in my chapters appear.

2020

ADA: Accessibility Beyond Compliance

This panel will discuss the efforts of individuals, exhibitors and organizations in moving beyond the baseline ADA requirements and providing a more fully accessible theater-going experience. In addition to providing basic resources for ADA compliance, this panel will share strategies and best practices for accommodations, marketing and communications, programming, online presence, and customer service that truly welcome diverse audiences to our organizations.

(Almost) Everything You Wanted to Know About Writing an NEA Grant

Join NEA's Director of Media Arts Jax Deluca for an overview of how to submit a grant for funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). We'll cover the basics from registering your request to writing a compelling narrative about how your organization or project aligns with NEA funding guidelines and priorities. Participants will also break up into small groups for a hands-on activity.

Building Positive Relationships with Press and Media

The media can be your best connection to your community, but how many of your press releases are picked up and distributed? How do you build a stronger partnership with your local press outlets so they become advocates for your arts and culture programming? Hear from publicists and journalists about how to tell your organization's story and build relationships that last.

Confidently Curate and Create Community around Queer Cinema

Hear from a distributor, outreach professional, exhibitor and an impact producer on how to identify affirming queer cinema, engage community partners with an eye toward intersectionality, and build an audience of both queer-identified folx and allies.

A Conversation About Race in Your Institutions

Do you ever think about the language people use when talking about programming for 'minority' communities? Can we talk about the language you use when writing grants for black communities? Can we talk about the issues black arts administrators work through regularly at your PWI (primarily white institution)? Can we talk about intention vs. impact? This listening session will dive into the realities of common language used and other ways racism creeps into your PWI. We'll talk. You'll listen.

Is It Safer Here? Practical Tips for Communicating about Content

Featuring data and findings gathered by the Content Considerations Committee (CCC), this panel offers case studies and audience feedback about how exhibitors can effectively communicate about challenging content. Ample time will be given for questions, ideas and

feedback from participants. Come prepared to share your own thoughts and experiences. This panel builds upon the 2019 session “Is It Safe Here?”.

The Joyful Aftermath: Thriving after a Capital Campaign

Capital campaigns are brilliantly transformational! Big dollars, bigger egos, and complicated construction projects are stressful, however, the ultimate outcome is sublime — frequently in surprising ways. Besides improving facilities, capital campaigns expand organizational capabilities, community connections, and fundraising opportunities. Three executive directors will share the agony and ecstasy of capital campaigns and methods of sustaining and growing operational fundraising in the aftermath.

Four Times A Day?!?: Collaborative Approaches to New Programming Paradigms

Traditionally a theatrical run dictates four shows per day for multiple weeks. But is this model obsolete? Bringing together distributors, exhibitors, and buyers, this panel explores how creative approaches to scheduling can diversify your line-up and boost attendance for true art house fare.

Land Acknowledgement: Activating the Sacredness of Indigenous Storytelling

This workshop serves an effort to restore and respect indigenous autonomies in light of our intersecting diaspora. The workshop will include an overview of the decolonial role, purpose, and responsibilities of land acknowledgement; discuss the challenges and possibilities for collaborating with not only films, but also with land, memories, subjugated histories, and knowledge holders; and activate a contemplative sacred container to hold intentions and to honor indigenous peoples and traditions.

Raising Dollars with Data

Fundraisers depend on data at every stage, from identifying first-time donors to stewarding them for board involvement. Thanks to the new information economy, research can be gathered with relative ease, but how can we use and visualize data? How can organizations ethically store and share data, and what policies need to be communicated? Learn from panelists about leveraging data efficiently and ethically, and get ideas for how you can do the same. A portion of the presentations will be dedicated to interactive conversations with the audience, who will be invited to share their own case stories around data.

Repertory Case Studies: Beyond the Canon

*Repertory staples are increasingly available everywhere, from streaming services to screenings at your local corporate multiplex. What’s the path for an art house that wants to go beyond annual screenings of *Ghostbusters* and *It’s a Wonderful Life*? In this special edition of our annual Repertory Case Studies panel, we’ll hear from programmers on the cutting edge of curation who are working to expand the canon while balancing institutional mission, promotional needs, and archival protocol.*

Small Town Development Practices

Small towns across North America are revitalizing the independent theater model, bringing diverse programming and community-based cinema to their local audiences. This session explores the unique fundraising challenges and opportunities facing independent theaters in

smaller towns (fewer than 150,000 residents). Panelists will explore creative ideas for building audience development and sponsorship, and share how their venue honors its regional flair.

Smart Data — Smart People

Join three representatives from Europa Cinemas for the presentation and analysis of their 2019 data survey of European art house cinemas. Presenters will share key takeaways about converting social media followers into cinema goers, dynamic membership programs, and how to effectively integrate data into marketing and operations for cinemas of all sizes.

Tutorial: How to Make Your Own Gifs (and Why You Should!)

GIFs have been around as an image format for decades, but only in the past 5–10 years have they become a massive part of the way people communicate online. Many companies have struggled to figure out how best to use GIFs to further their brand, but lucky for us, we're selling motion pictures already. In this tutorial, learn some best practices for conceiving, making, and implementing GIFs on your theater or film festival's social media platforms, using the Coolidge Corner Theatre as a case study.

2019

Art House to School House

This interactive session provides case studies of art houses that have effectively and strategically developed media arts education programs for schools. They will share best practices on curriculum development, standards alignment, partnership models, and funding support. Organizations thinking about working with teachers and students — and those that already do — will leave with new tools and ideas.

Changing Workplace Culture and Preventing Harm

Join us for a conversation about how we can make art houses and film festivals more supportive, inclusive, and safe. Hear from specialists committed to equity, healing, and preventing harassment about long-term strategies for developing a healthy organizational culture and share ideas about how art houses and festivals can collectively contribute to parity and transparency in the film industry.

Equity Workshop: Shifting the Culture in Your Art House

Alliance for Action has developed a tool for art houses to use for self-reflection and assessment. In this workshop we will use an in-depth discussion guide that helps art houses identify next steps towards becoming more equitable by asking questions like, "Where are we today?" "Whose space is this?" "What are our equity goals?" "What are the next steps we can take toward working on these goals?" This workshop will also build understanding of words like racial equity, racial justice, institutional racism, and intersectionality.

Eventizing for Wider Audiences

In recent years exhibitors have begun to see the financial merits of one-off, "eventized" screenings that can pack the house and bring new faces and voices into art houses. This panel explores how one-night events can boost box office and contribute to greater inclusivity and

community engagement in the art house, making room for traditionally overlooked audiences and community members to participate in dynamic speciality programs

Inclusive Structures, Signage, and Policies: Improving Accessibility at Your Theater

Gain a deeper understanding of how to make your theater more ADA accessible. Presenters will address legal accessibility requirements for cinema exhibitors and effective strategies for adapting your space, using new equipment, communicating with your staff, and providing a more accessible and welcoming experience to your community.

Is It Safe in Here? A Conversation on Trigger Warnings, Content Consideration, and Audience Consent

How do we make our audience feel safe without resorting to self-censoring? As programmers, we wield the power and responsibility of choosing what we screen. We want each patron who enters our spaces, regardless of identity, to feel welcomed, included, and safe. During this session a team of programmers and scholars will consider how challenging material impacts our audiences, and what we can, or should, do about it.

It's a Small World: Finding the Audience for International Cinema

Getting U.S. audiences to subtitled films has always been a challenge, but in recent years there has been a perception that there is more resistance than ever. This session will challenge that assumption by highlighting case studies of successful initiatives in the local marketing of international cinema as well as recent trends that may indicate a larger appetite than is realized. Panelists will include both exhibitors and distributors who are committed to finding solutions.

The Kids Are Alright: The Cinematic Landscape of the Future

It's time to hear from young people about how and why they consume media. Experts under 30 will discuss effective strategies for developing loyalty amongst their peers and will share their ideas about the future of our industry. With a focus on nurturing long-term engagement, this interdisciplinary panel will address programming, marketing, audience outreach, and education.

Movies So White: Decolonizing Programming

How can the programming at art house theaters and film festivals better reflect the diverse audiences, makers, and stories in our communities? This discussion will use case studies to examine the relationship between race, ethnicity, and the many factors that impact workplace culture; it will consider filmmaker identities, representation, audience (existing or desired), and staffing (who curates and for whom?). After the panel, continue the conversation in a workshop hosted by Alliance for Action on Wednesday morning.

Politics and the Art House

At a moment when everything is refracted through a political lens, and battle lines over social issues have become sharply drawn, community-based art house cinemas can often find themselves enmeshed in political controversy. Once-simple choices about what films to show, or not to show, can quickly enrage one side or another on the political spectrum. Should we be politically engaged, impartial, or consciously avoid politics? Is it right for staff to allow their personal political views to shape the theater's programming? What are the effects of political advocacy on fundraising? How should we handle controversy, and complaints from offended

*customers? What political advocacy is permitted for non-profit cinemas, and what would potentially endanger their tax-exempt status? Is it still okay to show *Gone with The Wind*? How about *Birth of a Nation*? Join staff members from three cinemas as they share their different approaches to running an art house cinema in a time of extreme political polarization.*

Pro Tips for Parity: Lessons from the Front Line

How do you create intersectional programming? In this session we will learn from festivals whose missions are dedicated to programming by and for communities often underrepresented in art houses and film festivals. These experts will share how their mandates have touched every moving part of their organizations — from programming to operations, to marketing, to developing an audience. How has history informed their past and current practices? What impact does today's larger parity conversation have on their work and what can festivals who are working to be more equitable and diverse learn from their challenges and triumphs?

Re-Imagining Concessions 101

Ready to jazz up your snack bar? Hear from experts serving everything from buttery popcorn to dinner service about their best practices for staying organized, streamlining operations, earning revenue, connecting with local vendors, and providing tasty treats.

2018

Allies for Action: Make Change, Take Action: Equity in the Art House

Art House Convergence centers urgent equity needs in our field. At last year's conference, a working group for equity issues in art house film exhibition and distribution called Allies for Action was formed. The group consists of art house professionals who are committed to making film exhibition more equitable by taking action to dismantle systems of oppression and inequity in our communities and our industry. This session introduces the working group's mission and goals with speakers who will address equity from each track in the conference: Programming, Marketing, Operations, Development, and Education. A jumping off point for ongoing conversations throughout the conference, the session will also start conversation that will in continue in breakout sessions focused on each conference topic.

Art House-Organized National One-Day Events

National screening events can only be produced by large companies or distributors, right? Wrong! Whether you're in a big city, or a tiny town, you can use the power of the art house community (with a little help from the internet) to create a national, or even international, screening event. Join the individuals behind Art House Theater Day, the Jonathan Demme "Stop Making Sense" Tribute, and the 1984 National Screening Day, as they reveal how they produced events that stretched across state lines, and national borders, to take place simultaneously at hundreds of cinemas. Learn from their successes and mistakes, as they candidly share their experiences creating national one day screening events.

Building a Future: Developing a Love of Cinema among Children

The future lies with out children — but most kids only see three films a year in a theater, vs 20 on tablets and TV. How do we create culture of cinema to ensure future audiences for theaters and

festivals alike? How can we work together to develop new programs and activities that encourage long-term affiliation?

Building Relationships: Developing Sponsors and Community Engagement

This discussion is geared toward relationship building with corporate and community partners to increase development revenue, ticket sales and engagement. Panelists will discuss strategies for identifying, cultivating and activating valuable opportunities that increase cash flow and butts in seats. Learn the ins and outs of creatively banking on your organization's brandable assets to achieve growth.

Changing Liquor Laws to Help Save Indie Theatres

Who doesn't enjoy a glass of wine or a cocktail while watching a great film? In this panel, we'll be discussing the do's and don'ts, the trials and tribulations, and the hoops you might have to jump through to have alcohol in your cinema. Is it worth the hassle or the risk of alcohol related incidents? We'll look at the bottom line (and the top shelf) to see what has worked in each of our panelists' theatres.

A Deep Dive to Find Cinematic Treasures and How You Can Show Them

Archivists and experienced programmers share ideas about how to find prints and licensing from archives, studios & private collectors plus a discussion of theaters working together to circuit imported film prints and DCP drives.

Demystifying Memberships: How to Build Strong Patron Relationships/Intermediate

This class will help you capitalize on the relationship assets of your organization by creating, maintaining or enhancing your membership program. This is rich, interactive seminar that's filled with insights that every art house membership manager and executive director should know.

Educate to Engage: Teaching through Film to Tackle Social Issues

Gender. Race. Environment. Immigration. These are just a few of the complex and pressing social issues that confront our communities, concern our patrons, and motivate filmmakers the world over. By using film as an educational tool, we can provide a valuable forum for addressing such topics. Panelists will offer case studies of initiatives they've developed to provide meaningful and interactive opportunities for students of all ages, inspiring them to see movies—and engage with the world—on a whole new level.

First Steps: Starting an Education Program

Articulate and address the opportunities and challenges of starting an education program, and to provide some concrete first steps, as well as solutions to common (or rare) obstacles.

From Concept to Execution: Fundraising and Partnership Development for Media Literacy Programs

This timely and engaging session will highlight how the Jacob Burns Film Center is revitalizing traditional notions of partnerships and fundraising with its PK-12 media literacy programs. This session explores how art house theaters have unique opportunities for partnership and fundraising in unforeseen places, both in their own communities and nationally. Participants will

explore how JBFC is implementing these programs, and enjoy a space to brainstorm new ways to execute their own educational programs. Participants are encouraged to bring ideas about current or new initiatives they are pursuing or would like to pursue.

Getting Personal with Your Patrons: The Secret Weapon for Increasing Your ROI

Everyone knows that keeping patrons coming back to your art house cinema is about a lot more than what's on the screen. Patrons value a personal relationship with the organization, and they want to feel like they belong. This session will prove — with real numbers and case studies — just how much it matters to make your audience feel like you know them personally! We'll present our decade-long research study on quantifying the value of connecting with your ticket-buyers and how you can increase membership sales & donations, foster greater loyalty, and improve your bottom line.

The Grind of Creating Meaningful Content: Tools and Tips for Feeding the Content Beast

With so much content vying for attention, how can theaters connect with audiences in meaningful ways? This session will look at how printed pieces, blogging, podcasting, infographics, and social media are used to tell your story and engage audiences. Explore strategy, workflow, and the tools used to support the constant creation of quality content. Hear specific examples of our successes (and our mistakes) that will help you produce results.

Harassment and Intimidation Have No Place in the Art House

There is no room in the Art House community for harassment of any kind. The Art House Convergence is an organization that believes in creating a community committed to preserving independent film exhibition as a place where everyone feels safe and welcome to participate in a shared experience. It is the responsibility of each of us to engender a harassment-free environment that supports the behaviors and culture that are central to our mission. Harassment and intimidation are pervasive issues. In order to combat it in our community, we must address these behaviors in a direct way. We will discuss 1) the legal framework for harassment and intimidation, 2) how to develop a credible program to address toxic behaviors, and 3) how to establish and implement organizational values to ensure a safe and healthy working environment. The conversation will be moderated by Seed&Spark's Emily Best and spearheaded by experts in the legal and communication fields. Janet Grumer, Partner in the Employment Law Department at Davis Wright Tremaine LLP, has represented employers in a wide range of disputes before state and federal courts, including wage and hour, misclassification, harassment, discrimination, and retaliation claims. Jacqueline Strayer, a leading communications consultant and graduate school faculty member, has spent over twenty-five years working in all aspects of communications and marketing with deep experience in mergers and acquisitions, strategic philanthropy, reputational crisis, brand and advertising, cause marketing, and creating results-driven communication and marketing strategies. The plenary will feature a key case study with Alamo Drafthouse Cinema. Alamo Drafthouse Cinema's Founder and CEO Tim League and Director of Family and Community Engagement Amy Averett will join us in candid conversation to share their experience as they grappled with harassment within their organization. Together we will address hard questions we all must face: What is happening culturally and systemically that prevents us from creating safe environments? How do we implement cultural and systemic change? How do we move forward as a community?

Harnessing Philanthropy to Drive Community Impact

Art house theaters across the nation are tapping foundation grants and major donor support for capital campaigns to expand capacity and to create special programs. This session will explore the dimensions of foundation giving to art house theaters, and will help you make the case for philanthropic support. Obtaining foundation grants is highly competitive and it is important to understand their specific interests and strategies. We will provide you with research on which foundations are supporting art house theaters, why they are giving, what kinds of projects they are supporting, and tips on how you can secure funding for your organization.

Programming for Gender Equality

How do we address gender inequality in our programming? How can we build upon the work that has been done and continue to re-imagine our programming for gender equality? Join us for a conversational brainstorm session to conceptualize what gender equality in cinema will look like going forward.

Repertory Programming Case Studies

During this session several experienced members from the Repertory Programming community will speak from their own experience, successes and learning experiences within Repertory Film Programming, Promotion and Marketing. Presenters will offer specifics in the forms of metrics, techniques, profit and loss statements, pro forma planning, financial reporting, and programming examples from their own experience. Each presenter will delve deep into what they believe are the most important ways to balance repertory programming within the missions and values of their organizations and experiences.

Screening Room as Classroom

First-run films, curated series, and festival highlights offer tremendous potential to leverage great programming for middle and high school groups, build community, and develop new audiences. Presenters will share successful strategies for outreach and program development and address practical questions such as bus transportation, film rights, and ticketing.

Theatre Rentals: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

We want to be part of our communities, and that includes renting our venues for events, but issues can crop up, and we need to take care of ourselves as well. This session involves seeking solutions as people from art houses get together to vent a little, compare notes, and maybe discuss and brainstorm strategies to prepare for the situations that arise, i.e., how to word contracts/ agreements, estimating/setting prices, load-in/setup time going over, excessive cleanup, damage to venue, politely kicking people out who won't leave, etc.

Top 10 Ways to Prevent Sexual Harassment in Movie Theatres

Grab a coffee during the break and come join this breakout presentation, which will provide a list of practical actions that theatre owners can take today to minimize the likelihood of sexual harassment and the claims that come with it. We will pay special attention to movie theatre issues, including managing young employees, alcohol service, and other topics directly applicable to theatres. The session will also allow time to answer questions in this area.

2017

Are You Covered?: Risk Management

Operating an art house cinema or a film festival requires taking risks: producing creative events, programming challenging cinema, managing a diversely able staff, and welcoming thousands of audience members each year. How do you protect your theater and organization so you can make bold choices? This session will take a comprehensive dive into what risks you may be exposed to and how you can prepare for them, whether it's material, personnel, or data-driven. We will focus specifically on situations when you need insurance and which policies will cover which risks.

Cultivating a Younger Audience

We all have a core audience (thank goodness). But how do you develop new attendees—especially the under 30s? Learn 1) successful strategies to reach younger, affluent audiences and potential new supporters; 2) how to target Generation X and Millennials to become long-term patrons and donors; and 3) methods for reaching these groups to become advocates of the cinematic experience.

Engaging Latino Audiences at Art House Cinemas

The percentage of the U.S population who define themselves as Hispanic or Latino continues to increase, and Spanish-speakers make up a significant number of potential audience members. However, finding this audience is still a challenge for many art cinemas. It can even be difficult to engage our existing members who are fans of foreign cinema with films from Latin America and Spain. On this panel we will look at successful strategies and obstacles for expanding audiences, programming, and events to better reflect our multicultural and multilingual society

How to Be an Ally

How do film organizations create the most inclusive approach to building audiences? In this session, representatives of theaters, festivals, and distributors lead an open source, peer-to-peer exchange of experiences, hard questions, and case studies around inclusive film programming. All session attendees are invited to participate in addressing the power structures inherent to traditional film exhibition and distribution that inhibit social equity. We will share the questions we're wrestling with, successes, setbacks, and ideas for collective action. We will challenge ourselves to create more accessible and equitable programming, to reach wider audiences, and explore how adopting a racial equity lens in programming can contribute to undoing racism in the film industry.

How to Get the Money: Fundraising for Art House Theaters

Join non-profit and philanthropic experts for a crash course in how to raise money successfully from foundations, corporations, and individuals. Bob Ottenhoff, president of the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, and Vince Stehle, executive director of Media Impact Funders, will review fundraising trends and strategies, share ways to frame your theater's story, and discuss different community outreach approaches you can use to attract financial support. Whether your theater is new to the non-profit world, or on its third capital campaign, everyone can build their skills at this session.

Keeping It Weird: Midnite Movies at the Coolidge

A midnite movie program at your theatre is a great way to develop and diversify your audience, attracting younger attendees as well as cinephiles, and a fantastic way to keep film rolling in your booths. This session will share programming ideas, tips for growing your midnite audience, and evidence of midnite movie success.

Maximize Impact with Paid Placement in Social Media

Everybody knows about using social media to reach your core audience— but how do you attract new audience members to specific events that appeal to them? Inexpensive, highly-targeted paid placements can greatly increase your audience potential. This session will discuss the following approaches: • The new world of inexpensive narrowcasting • How to determine the right audience to advertise to • Boosting effectively on Facebook • Google AdWords—how to buy (or get a grant) • Sponsored posts on Twitter • How to determine the impact of your advertising buys.

What Is Your Brand Strategy? Maintaining a Cohesive Brand

Branding. . .it's not just for cattle. Companies like Apple and Nike spend billions creating iconic brands to build customer loyalty and boost profits. Art houses can benefit from investing in branding too—but how do you create a platinum brand on a peanuts and popcorn budget? This panel will show you how, using real-life theater case studies.

2016

Art Houses V. Millennials

This session will tackle the most discussed audience: Millennials. Hear from several programmers (and representatives of the demographic themselves) how they have approached and engaged this audience.

Asian Pacific Films in U.S. Art Houses

How can you craft a more diverse program and engage a more diverse audience? One way is look towards Asia and the Pacific. With a panel made up of professionals regularly working with Asian-Pacific filmmakers and distributors, this session will cover how to access, curate, and market Asian-Pacific films.

Filmmaker Central: Your Cinema as a Supportive Hub

Being highly adaptable is a key tenet of today's Art House. Supporting local filmmakers as part of your mission can be a unique and sustainable way to keep your organization community-based and provide bottom-line dollars for your organization. The Austin Film Society and the Coral Gables Art Cinema explore the realities and considerable benefits of turning your cinema into a community hub for filmmakers and media artists.

Making the Case for Event Cinema in Your Theater

Event Cinema requires more attention than a typical screening. Eventizing is crucial part of marketing and programming these screenings. This panel will discuss promotion, pricing, delivery, exclusivity/clearances, and non-traditional marketing. The panel will also share market

statistics for the UK vs. US event cinema box office and offer suggestions for increasing US box office for theaters.

Producing Live Shows in Your Venues

From booking acts to navigating contracts, this session will discuss how to produce comedy, music, and other live performances in your theaters.

Starting Young: Hooking Youth on Cinema

This session will discuss cultivating the next generation of filmgoers and film lovers. Hear from exhibitors who are actively engaging and growing audiences under 18, from Parent & Baby screenings to High School programs.

2015

Collaboration and the Salt Lake Film Society: Why and How to Collaborate Successfully

Collaboration can be tough. This case study of Salt Lake Film Society and its collaborations is aimed at sharing lessons, successes and failures in collaboration. Film can be about anything, so naturally the Art House can be a town-hall environment to collaborate with diverse non-profits. This panel will encourage audience participation and storytelling, in hopes to gain lessons from around the country about what to beware of and excited about when choosing to collaborate.

A Different Audience: Managing Your Board

As a non-profit, your interactions with your board are much different than your interactions with your daily audience and yearly donors. How do you manage these board relationships effectively to yield the board involvement you would like? With both festival and Art House representation, hear from four panelists on how they manage expectations, encourage involvement, and build trust with their boards.

Mastering the Rush Line and Managing Audience Expectations

You programmed so many fabulous films, that there are no seats remaining! The challenge of managing audiences goes far beyond queuing them in line. And for those who can't get in, or did but were disappointed, your ability to accommodate might be the key to future successes.

Source: Art House Convergence Managing Editor Mackenzie Peacock.

Appendix Two

The Hollywood Theatre Manifesto

Push Forward

We strive to explore new ideas in theatre programming to propel this art form forward.

Promote Local

We support local artists and vendors and offer products from many of Portland's finest purveyors.

Invite Everyone

We are diverse, inclusive, and welcoming to all. We are a refuge for film lovers of all kinds.

Respect Heritage

We honor our history and continue to restore the theatre as we carry forward its legacy.

Give Back

We help inspire filmmakers of the future through educational programs and support.

Source: Doug Whyte, Executive Director of the Hollywood Theatre, speaking at the 2015 Art House Tales presentation session, Art House Convergence Annual Conference, Midway, Utah, January 2015.

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