

Cinemas of the Future

A Look at the Little Known Micro-Cinema Movement

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There was a certain charm in attending the independent art-house theaters of the past. Each had its own style and programming quirks. Although usually noted for their squeaky, stained chairs, day-old popcorn, and watery coffee (in the pre-Starbucks era), rather than today's stadium seating, cup holders, and surround sound, there was a sense of adventure in seeking out the obscure films shown there—a spirit that rewarded us with the knowledge that what we were watching was, if nothing else, unique.

By the mid-1990's, many repertory houses closed their doors as people embraced videotape as the medium of choice for viewing older films. But foreign films, along with a burgeoning American independent film scene, remained vital to the art houses that stayed open. In fact, by the twenty-first century, many of these “small” films were grossing major profits and competing for space at the big multiplexes as well as finding their audiences at the small cinemas devoted to specialty fare. In addition, the growth and success of Landmark Cinemas, the national art-house chain in the U.S., marked a new era for specialized films.

This crossover trend has been both good and bad, exposing bigger audiences to smaller films on the one hand, but creating a competitive economic climate in which risky work is crowded out of even the art-house cinemas in favor of more palatable foreign and independent fare. In his *Film Encyclopedia*, Ephraim Katz defines an art house as “a theater specializing in the exhibition of quality films, either classic revivals or new films of limited box-office appeal.” In this new context of art-house appeal to the mainstream, “of limited box-office appeal” is striking, if not, perhaps, inaccurate. On the other hand, general conceptions of “art house” have come to describe films simply on the basis of their production outside the Hollywood system, regardless of their status as conventional dramas or slightly offbeat comedies. A case in point: the highest grossing foreign language film in the United States is Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), also labeled an “independent film.” Surely a film with a \$30-million dollar budget, Hollywood stars, and wide release does not fit the standard “art-house” profile. And yet a documentary about global warming with “art house” written all over it—complete with its charisma-challenged star, Al Gore—enjoyed sold-out screenings at huge multiplex theaters across the country. It seems that the terms we use have become somewhat slippery.

In the triumph of little films gaining wider acceptance, however, something has been lost from the art-house experience. 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. And so, while the “art house” may thrive under its current de facto definition, this part of the exhibition industry struggles with three key dilemmas. First, there are the financial circumstances which make programming risks increasingly difficult for exhibitors across the board. Second, with the continuing growth of home-entertainment systems, the living room threatens to rival smaller theatrical experiences, with the added attraction of the private, customized experience that has become increasingly desirable. But it is the third factor—the intertwining of mainstream and art-house audiences—that is most troubling in hastening the disintegration of the art-house subculture.

I saw Werner Herzog's documentary *Grizzly Man* (2005) at a traditional theater that was toying with the "art-house thing" at the time. As the lights came up, I ached to discuss this brilliant film, but having come to the film alone, could only turn to the people behind me, one of whom shrugged her shoulders and said, "It was okay, but I wanted to see more bears." So much for the passion of the "art house" audience!

While the spirit of the art house can still be found in the theaters of New York's Film Forum, for example, in suburban and rural areas, we see nothing but multiplexes crowding out the single-screen art houses that previously graced those communities. As a result, the truly small films have almost no chance of a theatrical run in these communities.

But there remains a glimmer of hope for those who wish to rekindle the magic of discovering small films on big screens amid likeminded cinephiles. Makeshift theaters have spread across a wide range of communities and are taking up residence not only in actual movie theaters, but also in alternative spaces like tractor trailers, cafes and bars, church basements, and even health clubs. They call themselves microcinemas, and they bring with them the promise of a communal cinema experience, showing films with virtually no marketing campaigns, no stars, and no budgets.

The emergence of these screening programs in all types of communities has taken the place of the traditional art-house cinema in three ways. Due to extraordinarily low overhead and a markedly different business model, microcinemas are able to bring truly underground, risk-taking works to the screen, regardless of commercial viability. The sense of community that is essential to the theatergoing experience, distinguishing it from home entertainment, has been wonderfully rearticulated. And finally, the glory of cinephilia is extended to smaller suburban and rural communities, in defiance of the overall perception that art films are appreciated only in big cities. From 2002 to 2005, I ran a screening series on Cape Cod in the sleepy town of Chatham, Mass. (population 6,625). With each program, I worked hard to introduce films Cape Codders would never see elsewhere—not even if they made the ninety-mile trek to Boston or Providence. I tested their patience with Michelle Handelman's video installations, made them uncomfortable with Joey Huertas's brilliant fiction/documentary hybrid *I Really Think It's a Black White Incident*, and disturbed them with surrealistic underground sci-fi by film students and local artists. Week after week, they came back, paid their five dollars, and watched things beyond the scope of their cinematic imaginations.

These were mature, educated art-house types. Many regularly attended screenings of art-house films, whether at the single-screen Cape Cinema or at the local multiplex. But still, they returned to the microcinema, seeking out work that they knew nothing about, that received almost no local press and certainly no national attention. And they lingered on after the screenings—even for the films they hated—to talk about what it all meant. In fact, after a screening of Michael Galinsky and Suki Hawley's *Horns and Halos*, one irate viewer stood up and demanded that a discussion take place even though the filmmakers were unable to attend.

They came because they craved a new cinematic experience, even if we were usually screening on an old television set. There was an air of unpredictability to it all, a sense that anything could happen. What other theater would close down at the last minute because the pregnant programmer/ticket taker/projectionist went into labor early? Where else could they see a filmmaker give a speech advocating the release of former Manson Family member Susan Atkins from prison, while receiving a Clam d'Or award? When was the last time you

paid for your movie ticket with a basket of day-old bread and muffins, as one financially-strapped patron did?

This phenomenon has its roots in two distinct facets of exhibition history. On the one hand, microcinemas are very much tied to the film society or ciné-club, a phenomenon that began in Paris in the 1920's with café screenings. In the United States, Amos Vogel's Cinema 16 is often cited as one of the earliest and certainly the first really important film society here. Scott Macdonald, who has authored two histories of film societies (Cinema 16 and Art in Cinema) sees microcinemas as extensions of what Cinema 16 was trying to do. In an interview he explains that, while the art-house cinema has taken on the job of showing foreign films and documentaries as well as narrative independent fare, the experimental films that Vogel is credited with bringing to the masses have since been hidden away, with few possibilities for public screenings outside of academia. Macdonald sees the microcinema as the sole torchbearer of this form.

As important as film societies were in the development of microcinemas, however, there is another equally significant precedent. Even before Vogel's revolutionary screening program hit the streets of New York, another exhibition thread had taken root outside urban centers. In his 1990 essay, "From Exhibition to Reception: Reflections on the Audience in Film History," Robert C. Allen describes the developing small-town and rural movie audiences who did not rush off to movie palaces on Saturday nights, even in Hollywood's heyday. Instead, these folks attended screenings set up by traveling showmen at amusement parks, in public libraries, and at the local YMCA. What these screenings lacked in glamor, they made up for in community building, with movies serving as a casual social event that set the stage for today's microcinema phenomenon.

According to Joel Bachar of Microcinema International, a microcinema network/distributor (<http://www.microcinema.com>), many of these programs come and go quickly. They often are run by one or two committed individuals, and more often than not, rise up in non-urban areas. This is not a new trend. Macdonald says that in his research he also found many examples of film societies outside large urban areas, including societies in the Connecticut suburbs, in Delaware, and in Charleston, West Virginia. While there is still no comprehensive collection of microcinema programs in the United States, Microcinema International maintains a database of such programs, and several other Internet lists are circulating these days. It's clear that people are hungry for alternatives to the alternative cinema.

One of the older microcinemas still operating in the United States is San Francisco's Other Cinema, run since its inception in the early Eighties by experimental filmmaker/programmer Craig Baldwin. The cinema currently resides in a Mission district storefront, formerly a bakery, where Baldwin says it fulfills a community need quite different from the work of San Francisco's many art-house cinemas. "It's really more a platform to represent the huge explosion in personal cinema, do-it-yourself cinema, low-budget cinema, low-tech cinema. I don't want to call it a revolution, but a renaissance, certainly," he explains enthusiastically.

Generally, the films shown at microcinemas are not made with any sense of commercial viability in mind, and the microcinemas themselves often operate with almost no budget. Baldwin recalls an earlier microcinema, Total Mobile Home, which really exemplified this philosophy. In fact, the founders Rebecca Barten and David Sherman are widely credited with having invented the term "microcinema."

“Their whole deal was so quintessential microcinema, because it was a tiny little, sort of easement below their house,” Baldwin says laughing. “It was only about ten feet wide, and people sat on benches that held only two to a bench. So you could have ten benches on one side and ten benches on the other side.”

Each microcinema has its own particular vibe, largely dependent upon the particular audience in the area and the individual or organization programming the films. Other Cinema, for instance, is just one of many microcinemas serving the San Francisco Bay area, but each with its own niche. Baldwin distinguishes Other Cinema from San Francisco Cinematheque, for example, explaining that “what has happened increasingly to underground cinema is that it’s become sort of academicized. I don’t condemn that; it kind of moved into another sector and that created a space for the microcinema movement, which is more electronic folk culture, as I call it, more neighborhood, more street, more underground, more contemporary, more a community kind of thing and not so much just the avant-garde sort of thing—you know, with international stars and funding from above, and writing grants in order to survive.

“It’s not entirely clear how microcinemas do survive, although certainly the typically low overhead helps make their continuation possible. Many of the films shown do not have distributors, so the income generated by ticket sales is often shared between the filmmaker and the exhibitor. While some art-house theaters struggle to remain profitable under a system that often gives distributors ninety percent of the box office in the first (and possibly only) week of a run, the microcinema model is more negotiable. While Bachar says his programs, which mainly consist of short films, offer the filmmakers a flat fee, it is more common for screening programs to split the box office evenly.

Although it may not be a defining factor, many exhibitors delight in offering their audiences the experience of seeing movies in nontraditional spaces. Baldwin recalls a microcinema that showed films on a bocce ball court in San Francisco’s North Beach. Denver Revolution shows films inside a school bus. And the Aurora Picture Show is just one of numerous microcinemas located in a church. Mobmov (<http://mobmov.org>) is actually a network of microcinemas all over the world that show films projected on warehouse walls in their communities. Cinephiles in the know drive to the established location and watch films from the privacy of their own vehicles—merging the microcinema ethic with drive-in nostalgia. These screenings happen in big cities, as well as small U.S. towns and rural areas like Huntsville, Alabama and Enumclaw, Washington, not to mention international sites like Singapore, Costa Rica, South Africa, and eighteen other countries. According to Mobmov founder Bryan Kennedy, most of the films are licensed through Film Movement, an independent distributor/DVD-of-the-month club that actively encourages microcinema screenings of its programs through inexpensive licenses. In the spirit of microcinema, many of these screenings are either free or extremely cheap, some simply operating on donations from their audiences.

I would be remiss if I left you with the impression that traditional art houses are not doing anything to ensure their own survival as both financially viable and culturally significant businesses. The Coolidge Corner Theatre, an art house in Brookline, Massachusetts, which borders Boston, for instance, has gone through significant changes in the last few years, reinventing itself as not just a movie theater that shows ‘art films,’ but as a non-profit community center of sorts.

The theater is currently run by executive director Joe Zina, who says it took some internal reorganization to get the theater on this new track after years of financial instability. The

Coolidge now operates a main screen—an original 600-seat auditorium retained from its seventy-three years as a movie house—as well as three smaller rooms, including a tiny screening room called “the minimax,” which seats only twenty people and screens in VHS and DVD formats, similar to a microcinema setup. This versatility allows the theater to accommodate independent films of all budgets, placing them in whichever screening facility best suits the film. In addition to showing films (which Zina says still accounts for seventy-two percent of their income), the facility also hosts book readings, film club screenings, a film series featuring expert panel discussions, and special screenings for new mothers who can bring their infants.

A relatively new art-house cinema that has taken a different approach to revitalizing the art-house scene is New York’s ImaginAsian Theater on East 59th Street. This single-screen theater shows only Asian and Asian-American films, addressing a key problem for art houses—the generation gap. Asian cinema represents a beacon of hope for foreign cinema in this regard. For one thing, Asian product is readily available with its several very active national cinemas. But more importantly, the audience demographic for Asian and East Asian films, in particular, is younger than it is for European film imports.

Dylan Marchetti, Chief of Operations for the theater, says that approximately seventy-five percent of their audience is under the age of thirty-five, something he attributes to the diversity of Asian films. “Ask most people what they think an art house movie is, and they’ll often describe a low-budget drama,” Marchetti says. “But ‘Asian films’ encompass every genre—including those that tend to be popular with younger audiences such as horror, action, and cult/comedy.” Asian films account for five of the ten top-grossing foreign films released in the last decade, with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) the highest grossing foreign-language film of all time in the U. S. (Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* notwithstanding).

ImaginAsian does more than just show films that fit a cultural niche; they have also adapted their concession stand to the films they show, selling wasabi peas and guava drink in addition to the traditional popcorn and soda. The refreshments are tailored to the specific film being shown and its country of origin. “For example, when we show a Japanese film, Pocky and Mushroom Cookies are the top sellers,” Marchetti explains, “but with Indian films we often sell out of Samosas.”

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. In some cases, an audience of fifteen is actually preferable to an audience of 100.

Perhaps in this age of faltering box-office receipts, an opportunity lurks for the little guys. Such opportunities are not unique in cinema history. After television became a fixture in post-World War II American homes, international cinema boomed in the United States with films like Vittorio De Sica’s *The Bicycle Thief* (1949) and Roberto Rossellini’s *Open City* (1945). Later, as the star system self-destructed, independent filmmakers like Mike Nichols and Francis Ford Coppola emerged to mirror the social upheaval of changing times in successful films like *The Graduate* (1967) and the *Godfather* films of the early Seventies.

Ironically, it is the anti-commercialism inherent to the microcinema movement that may just keep it alive in the hearts and minds of audiences, even if those audiences are necessarily small. This aspect of the microcinema is the very thing that allows us to see something truly

different from what we can access at theaters or in our own well-equipped homes. Risks can be taken because overhead is low. Risks will be taken because microcinema operators are beholden to no one, sometimes not even their own audiences. Filmmakers and exhibitors share box-office receipts, revising the standard lopsided deals, and the distributor often is cut out of the arrangement completely.

But beyond the benefit to filmmakers, exhibitors, or even audiences, there is a cultural value to the microcinema. In every field there is a mainstream and a fringe, each feeding off the other. As the mainstream grows complacent, the fringe steps up its provocations. As the fringe becomes more acceptable, it merges into the mainstream. But still, there is a fringe to the fringe, an outer edge where new elements rise to the surface—some good, some bad. Discovering the current edge of filmmaking can be a magical, even a religious experience. That edge is out there on a microcinema screen, whether you live in Brooklyn, New York or in Paducah, Kentucky.

Microcinema Contacts:

- Microcinema International <http://www.microcinema.com/>
- Other Cinema - San Francisco, CA <http://www.othercinema.com/>
- San Francisco Cinematheque - San Francisco, CA <http://www.sfcinematheque.org/>
- Denver Revolution - Denver, CO <http://www.denverrevolution.org/>
- Aurora Picture Show - Houston, TX <http://www.aurorapictureshow.org/>
- Mobmov - multiple locations <http://mobmov.org/>

Arthouse Contacts:

- Cape Cinema Dennis, MA <http://www.capecinema.com/>
- Coolidge Corner Brookline, MA <http://www.coolidge.org/>
- The ImaginAsian New York, NY <http://www.theimaginasian.com/>
- Film Forum New York, NY <http://www.filmforum.org/>

“From Exhibition to Reception. Reflections on the Audience in Film History” was originally published in *Screen* 31:4 (1990) , S.347-356. I actually encountered the article in a book of collected essays:

Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition by Gregory Waller (Editor); Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2002, pp. 300-307.

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~ by Stefan on June 12, 2007.

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