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Film Museums and the Plight of Art-House Film Theatres in London, Ontario

by Matt Rossoni

Cinema has always had a precarious relationship with/as art. It has long been acknowledged as the Seventh Art, but its imbrication in the realm of popular culture and as a commercial enterprise opens it to a never-ending debate about what exactly 'film as art' constitutes and, what it can or should be. Michael O'Pray captures the difficulty in drawing finite conclusions when he states: "It is an awkward fact that all of these types of cinema – mainstream, art cinema and the avant-garde – lay claim to art. But these types of cinema are primarily categories of practice and not necessarily divided by different categories of what accounts for art" (3). Increasingly, similar questions and concerns are also being directed at museums. What is the role of a museum towards the public? What function does it serve? Is its responsibility to be readily accessible to the general public? Is it primarily to educate, to entertain? These are just a few of the tensions that affect museums and museum curatorship. This essay will explore these questions at large and investigate how they relate to the curious film practice at Museum London, located in London, Ontario. The history of theatres in London will also be discussed, since what the London film community had and was is saddeningly quite different from what it is today. I will also briefly discuss the formation of film museums and the hesitancy of declaring film as "museum worthy."

In 1935, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, announced it would form a division dedicated solely to the collection, preservation, and exhibition of all things related to the field of cinema. This new section was to be called the Film Library (now the Department of Film and Media), and was the first of its kind. Up to this point, very little had been done to preserve film prints or their related memorabilia. Films were considered by most to simply be a form of popular entertainment. The question was not so much "are films worthy of preservation?" as it was "why would anyone want to preserve a film?" Films were usually seen once by an audience, who would then go on to watch the newest release, and so on. To view a film more than once was unusual and almost impossible to do. Theatres would screen a film and the print would soon be shipped to second and third-run theatres. After the demand for a print ceased, it would haphazardly be stored. Sometimes in a studio, oftentimes not: long-term preservation was not considered. Some films were even recycled for their silver content, more valuable for making new films than for conservation. As Haidee Wasson notes in her book *Museum Movies*, "[d]espite the profound influence cinema exercised on conceptions of time, space, knowledge, industry, nation, and leisure, only a year after their initial release most films could not be seen" (3). The idea that film could be an art had not yet taken hold in the minds of the average movie-goer, though one could argue it still hasn't in the mindset of popular audiences.

Regardless, the viewing experience was quite different than it is today. A patron could walk in and out of the theatre at any point, and catching the film from the beginning was not necessarily all that important. Wasson begins her book with an interesting anecdote about Iris Barry, the Film Library's first curator. She notes that initially, audiences were unsure of how to behave while watching a movie in a museum. Aside from the usual late attendees, viewers would talk, shout, laugh at inappropriate times, and exhibit a host of other poor behaviour that would disrupt the attention of other patrons. To combat this, Barry began projecting a slide before each film started that read "If the disturbance in the auditorium does not cease, the showing of this film will be discontinued" (2). Indeed, she would call the projectionist from a telephone in the auditorium and the film would stop playing until the audience quieted down. Few had considered film an art worth paying close attention to, and had to be integrated into correct, responsible viewing patterns by Barry et. al.

What Barry, John E. Abbott, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Thomas D. Mabry, Jr., and others at MoMA realized is that film is an art embedded with history and cultural milieu worth reviewing and sharing with future audiences. As stated by Barry et. al., "the bulk of all films, whether foreign or domestic, new or old, which are of importance historically or aesthetically, are not merely invisible under existing circumstances but are in serious danger of being permanently lost or destroyed" (326). Much indeed had already been lost by 1935. In a 2009 video tour of the Celeste Bartos Film Preservation Center, Arthur Wehrhahn, the Center's manager, states: "[o]ut of all the films made in America... the silent films, only 15% of them exist. All the rest are gone, lost forever. Out of all films made from the turn of the century right up until today, only 50% exist" (Facts About Film). Much of that existing "percent" is deeply indebted to the continued work of MoMA.

The mission statement of Barry et. al., released in a document entitled "An Outline of a Project for Funding the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art", states:

The purpose of the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art is therefore to trace, catalogue, assemble, preserve, exhibit and circulate to museums and colleges single films or programmes of all types of film in exactly the same manner in which the museum traces, catalogues, exhibits and circulates paintings, sculpture, models and photographs of architectural buildings, or reproductions of works of art, so that the film may be studied and enjoyed as any other one of the arts is studied and enjoyed. (326)

To that end, the Film library would gather prints, photographic stills, screenplays, notes and other materials used in the production of film. By collecting a vast number of films and non-film materials, not only could MoMA ensure they would be preserved in a professional environment, they could also readily access the films from their archives and publicly screen them, as well as make them available for private viewings and study.

Screenings at MoMA consisted of domestic and foreign, commercial and avant-garde, shorts or features, etc., exposing audiences to various practices, methods, and conceptions of cinema with the intention of broadening, encouraging and supporting the study of film and the appreciation of film as an art. They also worked to meet the increasing demand for repeated viewings and specialized films outside the mainstream commercial circuit. As Wasson explains:

When the Film Library was established, there was neither such a fixed circuit of theatres or special venues nor publicly funded agencies that otherwise might have provided readily identifiable cultural or financial corroboration for its project. Institutions that exhibited films, in particular, struggled to support the most basic access to popular or noteworthy films of the past, or to feature films made outside dominant American commercial systems, those made by American independent filmmakers, or so-called foreign films. (6)

To better facilitate education about film history, individual films were arranged into programs, and viewers were given program notes, production information, as well as presented with lectures (Wasson 4). Interest in film grew rapidly around this time, as the emergence of numerous publications devoted to film indicates: *Close Up* (1927-33); *Film Art* (U.K., 1933-37); *Cinema Quarterly* (U.K., 1932-36 becoming *World Film News and Television Progress*); *International Review of Educational Cinematography* (Italy, 1929-34); *Sight and Sound* (U.K., 1932-present); *Film Spectator* (U.S., 1926-31); *Experimental Cinema* (1930-34); as well as a host of others (Wasson 14). Wasson explains that:

With a public platform and critical mass, writers in magazines and newspapers became more coordinated in their attacks on the state of current cinema. They bemoaned the absence of old movies and the difficulty in seeing the precious few non-American films that appeared on commercial screens. Old films and foreign films were seen as appealing alternatives to unsatisfying, undistinguished, banal, or objectionable film programming. (15)

Despite the millions of viewers who attended cinemas each week, many of those raised with traditional art forms like literature, painting, etc., and those schooled in the social sciences remained doubtful of film as an art, as entertainment, and as a tool for mass communication. As Jim Leach explains, during the first half of the century “commentators condemned commercial movies as products of a new ‘mass culture’ that undermined traditional cultural standards as well as distinctive national treasures, and there was widespread concern that popular movies virtually hypnotized their audiences, causing them to lose contact with reality” (5). While this is often still a critique and concern with popular mainstream cinema, especially in regards to violent films desensitizing young viewers, to essentialize in this regard is not only uninformed, but also dangerous. Film can and does take many forms, and the loose categories of “commercial,” “art-house,” and “avant-garde” degrade the scope of individual vision

and socio-cultural impact imbued in each text. With these considerations in mind, it is important that governmental assistance enter the arena of film preservation.

While governmental dedication to film production and education in Canada had taken a major step forward in 1939 with the formation of the National Film Board of Canada, preservation in Canada was not begun until 1964 when the Canadian Film Institute in Ottawa established the Canadian Film Archives. In that same year, the *Connaissance du Cinema* in Montreal became *la Cinémathèque Canadienne* (now *la Cinémathèque Québécoise*) and was given the task of conserving and documenting French language film (Kula 56). To date, Library and Archives Canada (the present housing for such materials) houses over 71,000 hours of short and full-length films, documentaries, silent films and "talkies," in black and white and in colour, dating back as far as 1897; over 21.3 million photographic images, captured since the 1850s; and over 270,000 hours of video and sound recordings (About the Collection). Twenty sources in this archive are from London, Ontario. While that number is mainly composed of various news footage and interviews (between CBC and Walter Redinger, and Tony Urquhart, for example) there is no doubt that London has an interesting film history in that it is somewhat of an allegory for the broader dissipation of art cinemas throughout North America. This also contributes to the on-going debate on the role and quality of popular mainstream cinema. Furthermore, the historical difficulties faced by theatres in London are re-emerging in various ways at Museum London, as we shall see.

Throughout its history and at various stages, London, Ontario has been the locale of numerous theatres. This includes: Loews (later Century and in 1965, after converting to a twin cinema, Century and Little Century, 1919-1989); Park Theatre (formerly Palace, 1927-89) (Collins; Gallagher "Signs"); The Victoria Theatre (formerly the Patricia Theatre, 1910-64) ("Once" 7); the Princess Theatre (1911-1919) ("Razing" 8); the New Yorker Cinema (1974-79, later reopened and closed again on several occasions, finally closing in the 1990s) (Gallagher "Troubled"; "Undaunted"; "New Yorker") as well as the Mall Theatre (closed in 1987 for expansion of London Mews Cinemas) ("Mall"), Elmwood, Capital, Fine Arts Movie House, Fox (Glencoe), Gallery Theatre, Hyland, London Centre Arcade (later London Mews Cinema), Cinecity, Odeon, International Cinema, New International Pictures, Regent; and Savoy. The demand for movies in London was large well up until the 1980s.

W.M. Spence, who was prominently connected to early film exhibition in London, told the London Historical Society in 1934 that the first moving image to be seen in the city was a "multigraph", shown at an old opera house in 1898 ("Great" 25). He described the painstaking efforts that those working for the theatre had to go through to show the first films: "[the multigraph] consisted of a big machine, six by eight feet, which was hauled by ropes and tackle up the stairs of the opera house" ("Great" 25). The demand to see moving images was strong. Spence recalls that a nickelodeon was opened in 1903, and that the first two-reel feature to be exhibited in

London was Edwin S. Porter's infamous *The Great Train Robbery* (1905), "which was very popular for some time" ("Great" 25). Of the many theatres that would arise over the following years, many were art-house type theatres. A common fate of these theatres, but also shared by second and third-run houses, was that they could no longer afford to stay operational amidst the rise of large chains like 20th Century Fox and Cineplex, as well as a general decline in attendance of art films. Yet for many years the film-going habits were strong enough in the city that numerous theatres could not only survive, but could do so while showing alternatives to mainstream cinema.

A 1976 article in the *London Free Press* states: "repeatedly long line ups keeps London on the heels of Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal in the minds and hearts of major theatre chains" ("London", L). Former Cineplex Odeon Corp. chairman Garth Drabinsky (a native Londoner) stated in 1989 that he considered London "as worthy a market as Manhattan or Los Angeles" (Miller, Entertainment). While it seems as though Drabinsky is exaggerating because he was looking to buy out Cineplex and, by not embellishing the public would only hurt his private interests, his comment also suggests that he was either neglectful of the recent theatre closings or insensitive to the plight of smaller, independent theatres.

The recent years before Drabinsky made that comment in 1989 had seen the closure of the Hyland, the Park, and the fate of Century and Little Century had already been decided. A major factor in these theatres and other theatres like them all over North America was the formation of the Cineplex (short for "cinema complex"). Nat Taylor, chairman of the board for Cineplex Corporation, first came up with the idea in 1979 of dividing large auditoriums into smaller theatres, thereby reducing the number of empty seats while offering more than one film to choose from. The original Loews in London, for example, seated 1400 before eventually being divided into Century (900 seats) and Little Century (500 seats). Taylor was interviewed in an article in the *London Free Press* in 1980, stating "Cineplex keeps films alive" (Gallagher "Cineplex"). Also, Taylor suggests:

Cineplex... caters to three types of film. There's the "specialty" pictures, meaning off-beat documentaries or foreign films not likely to be screened in the first-run movie houses. Then there's [the] "came and went" features, good movies that many film buffs missed first time around. Finally there's the "revivals," movie classics like *Casablanca* or Hitchcock thrillers, which audiences never tire of. (Gallagher "Cineplex")

Nowadays it is hard to imagine a Cineplex screening a "specialty" or "revival" film, with the enormous budgets of most mainstream films requiring all the attention/revenue they can get. Regardless of how faithful Cineplex initially was to its varied exhibition pledge, the fact is that most independent theatres could not compete with the multiplexes' improved facilities, multitude of options, nor could they secure first-run prints. Consequently, their attendance numbers dropped significantly.

Multi-screen cinema complexes are also more economically viable. Large exhibition corporations like Famous Players and Cineplex have stronger ties to distributors and are privileged with new releases, often at a cheaper rate. Another important factor was the introduction of television. Whereas in the 1940s the seven major studios were producing an average of 38 films per year (sometimes up to 46), production in the '50s and '60s dropped to an average of 12 per year. This left exhibitors with, on average, 84 films to choose from, whereas previously it had been closer to 266 ("Famous"). As George P. Destounis, former president of Famous Players explains: "[t]he reason for shrinking the old palaces to multiplexes is that the economic feasibility just isn't there. Even though the studios are producing more now, they're still not churning them out at the rate they once did. And the films can only run longer in smaller cinemas" ("Famous"). This also meant that larger exhibition corporations could hold on to the prints longer, thus largely eliminating the need for second and third-run theatres.

A Famous Players representative, parent company of the Park Theatre, attributed the Park's decreasing business and closure in 1989 to the London Mews (which it also owned) doubling its number of screens to six. Mews also increased its seating capacity to 2,017, compared to the small, single screen of the Park, which could only seat 529 in its single auditorium (Gallagher, "Sign"). Even the Century and Little Century, which mainly showed new releases, could not compete with multi-screen theatres after dividing into two separate houses. Empty seats were common in both the 900 and 500 seat auditoriums. Petitions to declare and preserve the Century as a heritage site failed, even with its former role as a popular vaudeville house taken into consideration (Gillepsie, "Time"; Gallagher, "Usher"). It was soon demolished and replaced by an office complex in 1989 (Gallagher, "Lights"). There was also a cultural shift that saw less and less demand for alternate forms of film, namely foreign or "art-house" films.

Abe Bonder ran Cinecity from 1974-76 and attempted to establish it as a repertory theatre. His "greatest disappointment" occurred after he booked the Columbia Pictures' Golden Anniversary Celebration series. The series was to run for ten days, with each day featuring one of ten of the most acclaimed films produced between 1934-66, including *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939). Bonder came up with the idea after hearing numerous complaints from viewers to the tune of "why don't they make films like they used to?... Why don't they bring back those good old films?" (Webster 28). Bonder recognized the value in watching old films not just for profit or as a niche marketing strategy, but for their rather timeless quality and appeal. However, he was forced to discontinue the series after four days due to lack of attendance. New International and International Cinema were also heavily dependent on interest in independent, foreign and art films, and have closed since their establishment in the '70s.

More than any other theatre in London, the New Yorker has had an unstable history pattern. It was first operational from 1974-6 before being sold by its owner, Peter Rosgovas, due to lack of attendance. It reopened in 1977 and continued to face financial difficulties. With major exhibition venues depending on longer runs of each print and access to blockbusters and other potentially high-grossing films, control of the market kept the New Yorker from establishing itself long-term. Ron Dalziel, the owner from 1977-79, claimed that the major exhibition chains in London undercut him by demanding assurances from distributors that he would not gain access to popular first-run films: “[t]hey were burying me”, he said (“Undaunted”). Instead, Dalziel began to show second-rate, art, cult, and foreign films, which ultimately proved to be a failure due to lack of attendance.

The New Yorker was purchased and reopened again by Murray Dean, who sought to turn the theatre exclusively into a repertory theatre. Dean captures the mentality for support of repertory theatres, like MoMA’s Film Library, when he explains “I just had faith in the repertory concept... It has variety, a rapid turnover and gives people the chance to see movies they’ve missed, classics and, occasionally, the kind of films other commercial movie-houses in this town aren’t going to show” (Gallagher, “Repertory”). Dean was diagnosed with a terminal illness, and in 1983 signed off the New Yorker to his friend and business partner Brian Hill. One of the major challenges Hill describes in operating the theatre, and a sentiment shared by many in the 1980s and ‘90s, was that the home video had a substantial impact on movie-going habits. Viewers could now rent relatively recent films as well as have a greater variety of and access to foreign films. Also significant is that, with the rise of video, distributors were making fewer release prints and were increasingly wary of shipping what they did have; this also made print trafficking much more expensive. Repertory theatres also usually change programs each day or in very short periods, enticing as many potential spectators as possible and creating the “rapid turnover” that Hill mentions.

With the increasing price of print trafficking and a decreasing market potential, “rapid turnover” became outrageously expensive if not impossible for independent theatres like the New Yorker, and hence the double features often advertised by repertory cinemas became impractical. Also, as Gary Meyer, co-founder of Landmark Theaters and co-director of the Telluride Film Festival explains: “[t]he audiences that supported repertory programs in the Seventies and Eighties have continued to attend art and repertory films but with a reduced number of regular visits as their careers and families take precedence.” The New Yorker closed in the late 1990s, but was always teetering on the brink of financial collapse. Hill alludes to the theatre’s foreclosure in 1993: “... London is a great film town, but they (local movie-goers) lean more to mainstream commercial films. The population here simply isn’t large enough to support particular-special interest films... there just isn’t a market for them” (Gallagher, “New Yorker”). These tensions between mainstream and art, popular and high culture, financial viability and best intentions, and state-of-the-art and classical

venues and viewing practices, convolute the film exhibition practice at Museum London, which faces many of the same problems and questions as smaller/independent theatres have historically faced in London.

Museum London is not: a film preservation facility; a museum dedicated to housing film and non-film materials; a repertory cinema; an institute offering production classes; a theatre with frequent regular screenings (they are only held once a month); nor do their screenings have a popular following. But, as a publicly funded museum, all exhibitions, film related included, are expected to follow the rubric issued by the Canadian Museum Association (CMA). In 2004, the CMA updated its definition of what constitutes a museum to better reflect the needs between community and communication. It reads as follows:

Museums are institutions created in the public interest. They engage their visitors, foster deeper understanding, and promote the enjoyment and sharing of authentic cultural heritage. Museums acquire, preserve, research, interpret, and exhibit the tangible and intangible evidence of society and nature. As educational institutions, museums provide a physical forum for critical inquiry and investigation. (Gendreau 42)

Museums are thus responsible with providing educational programming that supports local heritage. This creates an especially difficult situation for film exhibition at Museum London. It is required to screen films in the mode of cultural education while maintaining a certain level of access to the public at large. Films are popular entertainment as well however, and the idea of a museum showing films is already somewhat alienating to the average movie-goer. As Lindsay Anderson explains, “words like “instruction”, “culture”, even “art” acquire connotations of pretentiousness and gloomy didacticism, so the idea of pleasure dwindles into that of “fun”” (qtd. in Robinson 257-8). The sense of “fun,” however, has its own connotations: superficial, infantile, and escapist. Applied to film, this translates to the “popular” vs. “high culture” debate, and raises issues on who the target audience of a museum film screening should be (the “average” movie-goer?) and what it should be providing to that audience.

As mentioned above, there is a growing concern amidst museum curatorship about the direction museum practices and exhibitions have taken in recent years. Increasingly, temporary exhibitions are being presented in ways that prioritize entertainment and greater attendance over historical contextualization. For example, in their essay “Museum Programs: Public Escapism or Education for Public Responsibility?”, Madhu Suri Prakash and Sanford Sivitz Shaman recall a popular 1981 university art exhibit called *Swords of the Samurai*. The exhibit presented samurai swords as pieces of art and also included an extensive lecture series, Japanese martial arts demonstrations, Samurai films, and demonstrations of the rare art of sword polishing. Each component of the exhibit was presented to a full and attentive audience, and consequently museum attendance skyrocketed. But, as

Prakash and Sivitz note, “[n]o attempt was made to stimulate thinking regarding ethical issues attached to the violent use of the sword and the historic evolution of that violence. If anything, the program glorified and romanticized a rather violent aspect of Japanese culture and history” (21). In film, this would be like programming a series on American screwball comedies of the 1930s without any mention of the Hay’s Code. Interestingly, these kinds of “popular” exhibitions are referred to as “blockbusters,” a term which has obvious ties to Hollywood and that creates similar concerns within academic film discourse.

Given the incredibly short time Museum London has to engage with its film audience each month (about ninety to one-hundred and twenty minutes) it would seem that film screenings must be carefully selected and programmed. As Prakash and Sivitz note, “[t]he exhibition is such a powerful medium because its message is sponsored by an institution of perceived authority. Just as learning is an essential element in the museum experience, so the communication of a point of view is an inevitable component in an exhibition” (22). They ultimately conclude that museums should *not* cater their programs to elevate entertainment as the primary goal. Similarly, Sabine Lenk, specifically addressing the place of film in a museum states:

When shown in a movie theatre, they mostly mean entertainment for the viewer. In a museum those very same images become educational; they may document (film) history, or they can be presented as works of art. Films thus receive a cultural recognition similar to all the other objects that end up in museums before them; through the authority of the institution, the visitor is inclined to consider them more valuable than other moving images s/he has seen. (320)

The danger is thus programming a film that does *not* have considerable cultural or artistic merit. A new Hollywood film, for example, will likely not contain the traits desired by a museum, and for audiences who come to the museum expecting to learn something they could very well develop a false sense of what constitutes a “good” film.

As the historical fate of London film theatres indicates, the average movie-goer prefers mainstream commercial releases to independent, artistic, and foreign films. As Daryl Chin and Larry Qualls state in their discussion of quality film festivals, “[q]uality is no longer a criterion for critical judgment; rather, box office potential is a paramount consideration” (38). Thus it would seem that contemporary popular films are further ill-suited for museum exhibition because they, unlike the museum and its ideological imperative, are not necessarily meant to be “quality” films.

But “quality” in a museum has always connoted elitism and, as Albert Elsen argues, “[i]s it not the goal of the big exhibition to make important, if esoteric, knowledge intelligible, and to make beautiful and significant art accessible in a meaningful context?” He also proposes that the blockbuster “is our most dramatic gesture of thanks to the same public that pays for our enterprise” (qtd. in Prakash 22). To answer Elsen’s assertion, which does seem to be a reasonable and democratic

justification, Betty Smith's essay "Art Education and the Museum" proves useful. In it she states "[t]he problem is to find some common denominator which will satisfy the needs of a popular culture, representing a "thriving amateurism", and which will also satisfy the needs for a national culture strengthened and developed by professionals in the fields of art and humanities" (13). Museum London seems to have inadvertently answered many of these questions by joining a partnership with the Toronto International Film Festival "Film Circuit" program three years ago.

Film Circuit was launched in 1995. According to the Circuit's 2011 Resource Manual:

Film Circuit is a year-round, outreach division of the Toronto International Film Festival Group. Its primary goal is to stimulate consumer interest in Canadian films. It establishes links with community partners and facilitates screenings of Canadian, foreign, and independent films. Participating communities tend to other wise have limited access to this product. Through this network of community partners, Film Circuit favourably positions the screenings of acclaimed Canadian products alongside their International film counterparts in niche markets. (1)

The Film Circuit works with distributors on behalf of interested parties. Unlike Museum London, however, most parties belonging to the Circuit are volunteer-run. Their screening venues are typically rented from a local chain like Cineplex, whereas Museum London has its 150-seat theatre in-house. Also, since the Museum is obligated to incorporate works related to cultural heritage, it screens exclusively domestic feature films. The list of potential films to exhibit at the Museum is rather short, however, since the films *must have* been accepted to the latest TIFF. Ostensibly, this practice meets the requirement for a popular art form that is also culturally and artistically valid. It also brings about many questions in regards to Canadian cinema culture.

Museums have always been delegated somewhat of an educational responsibility. Is there something naturally educational about Canadian film? And what about the encouragement of museums to incorporate more popular, familiar media? According to the Circuit manual, Canadian films generate, on average, only 2% of all film attendance in Canada per year (2). On the one hand, educating the public may be as simple as exposing them to alternate forms of cinema, i.e. Canadian content. On the other, there is the risk in alienating potential viewers simply due to showing Canadian films.

This has long been a well-known reality. A 1977 *London Free Press* article on film programming notes "... one theatre manager noted that many film-goers have a built in aversion to Canadian films. "One man called our cashier and asked what the film (*Outrageous*) [Richard Benner, 1977] was about. When he heard it was Canadian he just said "forget it" and hung up"" (Gallagher "How Does"). Unlike past independent

repertory theatres in London, however, Museum London receives government funding and, with few screenings, there are little repercussions if the film is not well attended (which it rarely is) and loses money. The Museum is not going to close, unlike the New Yorker et al. As Scott Mackenzie states, “To talk of Canadian cinema... seems oxymoronic. After all, with the majority of Canadian screens showing nothing but American films, and the majority of our audiences seeing and enjoying these same films, where can one begin to conceptualize a properly “Canadian cinema?” Perhaps this makes the Museum’s partnership with Film Circuit all the more responsible, giving back to Canadian filmmakers who, like many artists, are continually marginalized. Of course, what makes it more difficult for the Canadian film industry is seeing, or rather not seeing, their product sold alongside American films at the local theatre.

Film Circuit has its flaws as well. By only distributing films that have been previously accepted to TIFF, which is extremely competitive and very difficult to accomplish, and is also based on individual programmers’ personal opinions, a large number of quality domestic and international titles are excluded from the catalogue. Films that have been produced locally or close by but that were not accepted to TIFF cannot be exhibited at Museum London because of their obligation to support Film Circuit. This weakens the Museum’s position as a promulgator of local art development and local heritage because many of the best films in Canada, and those that have been accepted to TIFF, are made out west in Vancouver and further east in Quebec, as well as Toronto of course.

Furthermore, with the limited catalogue of films available for Museum London to choose from, those that are domestic, feature length, less than a year old, and lucky enough to have screened at TIFF, there is no guarantee that the film will necessarily reflect the Museum’s obligation to educational and/or artistic work. To consider Canadian films as inherently more artistic than their American counterparts would be to essentialize a medium that is in no way static. But as Mackenzie states, “if Canada does have a popular cinema, this is the cinema we have: one that has meshed within its narrative structures avant-garde and experimental elements, derived both from Canadian experimental film and video and from European art cinema.” This can be seen in the work of many of Canada’s most well recognized contemporary directors, like Atom Egoyan, John Greyson, Jean-Marc Vallée, Patricia Rozema, Guy Maddin, François Girard, Robert Lepage, David Cronenberg, Denys Arcand, and Bruce McDonald. Artistic/experimental influence on Canadian narrative film, and indeed the lasting reception of Canadian films, can be traced back to the establishment in 1939 of the National Film Board of Canada.

John Grierson founded the NFB after being invited by the Canadian government to make a report of the state of domestic film production in 1938. His report called for a new government-coordinated film production agency that would oversee production as well as international distribution. Under Grierson, the NFB would mainly produce

documentaries and documentary shorts. During WWII, no other country produced more propaganda films than Canada. By 1945 the NFB had made over 500 short films, becoming “one of the world’s largest film studios” (Melynk 62). The NFB’s other direction at the time was in the field of animation, which Grierson put in the control of Norman McLaren.

McLaren was a hugely successful artist, winning an Academy Award in 1952 for his stop-motion film *Neighbours*, and would also be nominated for *Pas de Deux* (1968) and *Ballet Adagio* (1971). McLaren’s body of work is decidedly experimental. Even his first four NFB films, *V for Victory* (1941), *Five for Four* (1942), *Hen Hop* (1942), and *Dollar Dance* (1943) combine hand-drawn vivid colours, rhythmic jazz-style movements and sound, and dreamlike visuals, while serving the commissioned purpose as advertisements for the War Savings Campaign. Since the war’s end, the NFB has gradually faded from cultural significance and production output and now mainly releases its documentaries and animations (mostly directed towards children) through school systems and online.

However, lingering effects of the NFB’s early production history have, to a degree, negatively affected current Canadian film production. A national cinema is generally thought to be one that encapsulates the cultural ethos of a particular nation. As Jim Leach notes, however, the problem with Canada’s albeit rich history in documentary, animation, and avant-garde film, is that “national cinemas are usually defined by the kinds of stories they tell” (5). He also asks “[h]ow can films be said to reflect the psychology of the nation if most of the nation’s citizens never see the films and reject them when they do?” (8). As the history of independent London theatres suggests, alternatives to Hollywood have not proven to be economically viable in London. Today there is only one theatre, Hyland Cinema (which through the resurrection process has managed to keep its large auditorium), that offers any alternatives, though the titles it offers are rarely international headliners.

Museum London, however, cannot incorporate avant-garde film into its programming. This is despite the fact that this field is arguably the most “artistic” form of cinema due to its intensely personal mode of production, reliance on private or government art grants for funding, and as Murray Smith notes, exhibition primarily by “film societies, museums, and universities” (qtd. in O’Pray 2). Many museums and repertory theatres, like MoMA, the Dryden Theatre at the George Eastman House, the San Francisco Cinematheque, the Pacific Cinémathèque in Vancouver, all exhibit experimental films as well as “classic” narrative films. Also, “Early Monthly Segments” is a monthly experimental film program exhibited in Toronto, in conjunction with the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC).

While these kinds of theatres have always been and are increasingly marginalized and are under the thumb of financial viability, there is a demand for them and a continued interest in avant-garde film. Willie Varela gives the example of

Criterion's 2003 release *By Brakhage: An Anthology*, which sold 13,000 copies by 2005, and was popular enough to warrant a second Brakhage anthology. Cinematheques, film museums, and other such venues have, however, much stronger ties and access to appropriate distributors than small and meager exhibitors like Museum London. They can rent the prints at a cheaper rate or even just take them from their archives at no cost. Furthermore, and as mentioned earlier, Film Circuit largely controls what the Museum can show. With the low attendance rate of Canadian feature films at its monthly screenings, it is hard to imagine Museum London willingly paying more (for shipping, projectionist, etc.) for a mode of cinema that is historically the most marginalized and would likely get few attendees.

A few years ago Museum London exhibited a film retrospective of London-native and avant-garde luminary Jack Chambers, in conjunction with an exhibit on his paintings. Both portions of the exhibit were well received by local visitors. It may be through incorporating films with larger thematic exhibitions that Museum London fulfills its role as an educator, as a public service, and as an institute with its own somewhat egocentric aspirations of what exactly accounts for "good art." For now, film screenings at Museum London will continue to meet ideological and government mandates without fear of closing like past local theatres. Attendance will likely be low, and unless more funding is given to the Museum to expand its film programming venture, it will continue to rely on Film Circuit and its limited catalogue. Art cinema in London has not proven to be popular, but if Museum London were to have screenings more regularly, and offer a wider variety, or at least offer a strong alternative for cineastes who have had little to celebrate since the closure of the New Yorker, then it may be able to change film culture in the city for the better – and that's the larger imperative of museums.

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