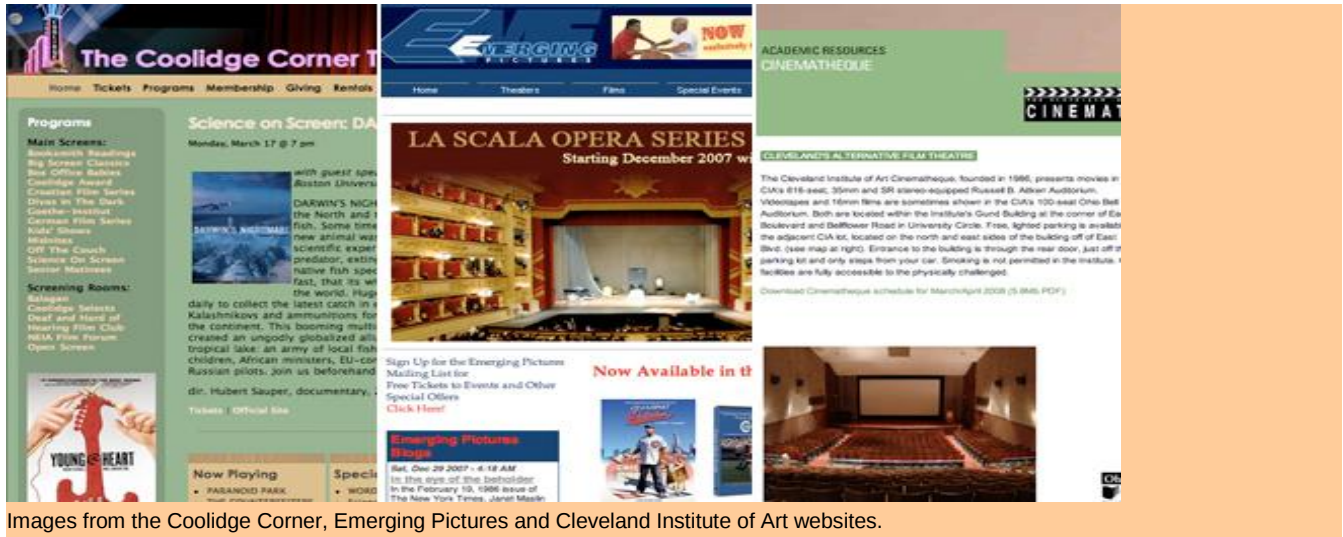


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Images from the Coolidge Corner, Emerging Pictures and Cleveland Institute of Art websites.

Beyond The Art House: True Indies Find Real Theatrical Alternatives Outside Commercial Venues

by Steven Rosen (March 17, 2008)

Commercial urban art houses are often so filled up with studio specialty division releases that truly independent films have a tough time getting in. But a vibrant and varied alternative scene is growing to get these endangered small movies seen - and maybe even to make a little money. It involves cinematheques, non-profit film centers with niche-oriented programming, film clubs, museums, microcinemas and cafes, universities, and more. Despite the growth of online platforms and on-demand sources for home viewing, these outlets are committed to providing communal moviegoing experiences, often with an educational component. And traditional distributors are working with them, even while continuing to try for extended engagements in the commercial theaters.

"As these new venues become part of the established opportunity for local audiences, people develop the habit to seek out truly independent movies," explained **Jason E. Squire**, instructor in cinema practice at **University of Southern California's** School of Cinematic Arts and editor of **The Movie Business Book**. "And once that habit is established and grows, there's a greater range of potential revenue." After all, he says, this is how traditional art houses got established in the first place.

New technology is playing a role - the affordability of HD video projectors that can play films on tape or DVD with improving quality is opening up new theatrical spaces to indies. That, plus the fact that some indie films are shot on video, means many "prints" can move around much faster and cheaper than if they were in 35mm or 16mm canisters. Filmmakers can also travel with their work and do personal appearances, like rockers on a concert tour.

"I think the band model is the way to go," noted **Chris Metzler**, co-director with Jeff Springer of the self-distributed quirky documentary "**Plagues and Pleasures on the Salton Sea**." "These people become your fans. And you have a base when your next film comes out." Their 2007 film, which so far has been on **Sundance Channel** and is now on a **Docurama** DVD, continues to get bookings at places like the **MASS MoCa** art museum in North Adams, Mass., and the **Robinson Film Center** in Shreveport, LA. They plan to appear there with the film in April, as they have done for many of their other 60+ engagements to date.

Some of the more committed urban art houses, such as the **Coolidge Corner Theatre** in Brookline, MA, are experimenting with booking policies and interior renovations to get more indies shown. It can be in their interest: "It gives our most dedicated patrons more reason to visit us frequently," said Joseph Zina, executive director of the Coolidge Corner. "When you're holding '**Juno**' for 12 weeks, you need to do that."

In 2000, Coolidge Corner -- a non-profit corporation -- converted office space into two video rooms, one 45 seats and the other just 17. The theaters now use HD video projectors that can play films on tape or DVD with increased quality. Zina says one-eighth of the theater's revenue comes from those venues. There are also two larger auditoriums. Successful bookings have included **Craig Zobel's** deadpan "**Great World of Sound**" (**Magnolia Pictures**) and documentaries "**Dr. Bronner's Magic Soapbox**" by **Sara Lamm** and "**King Corn**" by **Aaron Wolf**.

The video rooms have also provided a safe haven for Iraq war documentaries that have had otherwise a tough time in the marketplace. "We're choosy. We don't book anything we don't believe in," Zina added. "There's a lot of quality content out there that the major studios don't want to market because their expenses are in the millions."

Ira Deutchman's Emerging Pictures, meanwhile, is emerging as a notable player in the new alternative scene by equipping 30 theaters nationwide -- many run by non-profit institutions -- with three-chip digital light projectors and then programming mostly indie films.

And he's trying to provide his network with smaller titles, like **ThinkFilm's "Nanking"** by **Bill Guttentag**, IFC's "**4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days**" by **Christian Mungiu**, and **Linda Hattendorf's "Cats of Mirikitani"**, the Tribeca festival audience award-winning doc about a homeless artist's mysterious past that has slowly been gaining interest since shown on PBS.

Deutchman believes the commercial art house chains aren't that interested in showing such films. "They have huge real-estate costs and their imperative is that every film gross well," he said. "But when the institution also has a cultural commitment, all of a sudden other things can happen." Sometimes, the old technology can help, too. The **Cleveland Cinematheque**, which screens at the **Cleveland Institute of Art** and is in the hometown of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, earned \$1,878 from two first-run screenings of "**Pete Seeger: The Power of Song**." While a **Weinstein Company** release, it was having trouble getting a theatrical booking. (It was recently on **PBS**.) But it did so well the commercial art house subsequently picked it up.

Instead of newspaper advertising and other marketing, the Cinematheque primarily relied on the \$400 per week it spends printing its repertory calendar. (It also has an e-mail newsletter.) Weinstein was okay with that. "For the older component of our audience, I think putting a calendar up on the refrigerator still works," said the Cinematheque's **John Ewing**. That especially helps, he says, since the local newspaper -- which that audience still reads -- no longer reviews every new film.

In Ohio's southwest corner, the **Cincinnati World Cinema** organization has had success with carefully promoted first-run bookings of films not booked by the two local art houses that are run by the same operator. World Cinema's **Tim Swallow** said his 18 separate events at the **Cincinnati Art Museum's** 300-seat auditorium in 2007 drew 6,200 patrons.

In addition to screening "**The Cats of Mirikitani**," he did very well in December with three screenings of **First Run Icarus Films' "Forever**," the subtitled, essayist documentary by **Heddy Honigmann** about Paris' Pere-Lachaise Cemetery. At the first night, which this writer attended, group discussion lasted almost an hour as the audience expressed feelings about mortality that the film elicited -- a quite serious response to film as art.

That is exactly what First Run Icarus wants from "Forever," in addition to making some money. "We want it to be part of the conversation," said president **Jonathan Miller** via e-mail. It has quietly grossed \$100,000 while not yet playing Chicago or Los Angeles - a true alternative to the commercial art house circuit.

Richard Lorber, president of **Koch Lorber Films**, uses the term "semi-theatrical" for such venues, and is increasingly finding them a great way to get worthy new movies out beyond New York and into the heartland. They even help reach audiences in the Big Apple. His new "**Chop Shop**," **Ramin Bahrani's** much-praised film about a boy living in an industrial New York neighborhood, has moved from Manhattan's **Film Forum** to the small, 120-seat theatrical space, **The Pioneer**, an extension of the adjacent Two Boots pizza restaurant in the East Village.

And "Chop Shop" has future bookings at Columbus, Ohio's, **Wexner Arts Center**, Cleveland's Cinematheque, Rochester's **George Eastman House**, and Seattle's **Northwest Film Forum**. (Koch Lorber is only releasing "Chop Shop" on 35-millimeter film, which all the venues can project.)

"They are committed to supporting emerging artists and that creates an awareness and a support base for the filmmakers, which is important for their future," Lorber explained. "These places have growing significance - they have the budgets and the desire to engage their communities in dialogue about film."

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