

# Praising Arizona

Tim Concannon

‘Whenever I hear the word cinema, I can’t help thinking hall rather than film.’

Roland Barthes.<sup>1</sup>

*kiva* (kē'və). noun. An underground or partly underground chamber in a Pueblo village, used for ceremonies or councils. Origin: Hopi.

If motion pictures constituted the undeclared religion of the 20th century, an unassuming strip mall in Scottsdale, Arizona would qualify as one its most important shrines.

Ley lines of cinema magic intersect in downtown Scottsdale’s Main Street. They enter the modest wooden structure, past the scarlet-striped box office in the foyer – the only remaining sign that it was ever a movie theatre – from which a woman called Mary Anne now sells candied popcorn in mind-altering colours to shoppers and tourists passing by.

It was from this kiosk in the 1950s that a young Steven Spielberg bought a 50-cent ticket every Saturday morning to see marathon matinees: two features, usually both B-movies – Westerns, science fiction, monster and Tarzan films – 10 cartoons, and occasionally classics like John Ford’s ‘The Searchers’ and Huston’s ‘Moby Dick’. “It was a great Saturday,” he later recalled. “I was in the movies all day long. I saw ‘Tailspin Tommy’ and ‘Masked Marvel’ and ‘Commando Cody’ and ‘Spy Smasher’ – serials like that.”

As an adult, Spielberg has paid affectionate homage to the movies he saw at the Kiva theatre on Main Street, sitting in the darkness with the friends he made monster movies with on Super-8 cameras.<sup>2</sup> “I’ve seen absolute duplicates in Spielberg movies of scenes we used to see back in the 1950s at the Kiva,” remembered his friend and fellow Super-8 movie maker, Barry Sollenberger.

“When Harrison Ford in ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ rides his horse down the hill and jumps onto the truck carrying the ark, Spielberg got it from the 1937 serial ‘Zorro Rides Again’, with John Carroll.”<sup>3</sup>

“There’s something magical,” Spielberg told Mark Kermode in a 2006 interview, “about having something as primitive-sounding today as twenty four pictures a second moving past a shutter gate with a light beam projecting on a big silver or white screen. It’s magic. And it’s our forefathers.”<sup>4</sup>

Lines of telluric energy – lightning, fire, the power of the collective unconscious or something – converge in the Kiva’s auditorium. It’s a lost sanctum now, gutted and containing mostly empty shop units with windows obscured by brown paper. The Ark of the Covenant has departed, or is at least long-forgotten and buried nearby. It’s a placeholder, a cipher waiting to be cracked. As purgatories go, it’s not so much the Black Lodge from ‘Twin Peaks’ back here as a tastefully banal, cream cul de sac; a liminal world between worlds.

If the son of the Emperor – the proxy of the 1%, if you will – walked into the Holy of Holies at the rear of this Temple of extinguished illumination, he’d find an empty space, dormant cubicles, an ‘Exit’ sign with camp, sterile, green neon strip-lighting over it. (In case the non-existent crowds get lost in the smoke and chaos of a fire.) He’d find only inner confusion, a question mark metabolised into intangible reality by forces of economic recession.

“Set fire to the tapestries. Bring in the wrecking ball, scorch the earth so that we may develop this prime retail opportunity for the good of the people,” would be the order to his centurions.

As you can tell, I feel a great attachment to this building in a snobby, sedate part of Arizona. I love Scottsdale’s quaint, Technicolor, mostly empty streets. The locals are relaxed, middle-aged, in v-neck sweaters, well-heeled in cowboy boots. When I visited, I liked the bright and brittle optimism, the incessant low-level chatter and gossip about nothing in particular at the ice cream parlour round the corner from where the Kiva Theatre once did brisk business.

Contrast this indigenous ‘third place’ with the occupiers: the dingy, intense, red-brick Starbucks across the road from the ice cream parlour. Banal nineties ‘Trip Hop’, Sheryl Crow’s warbling clogs the air and your ear-ducts. It’s the aural equivalent of the synthetic smell of freshly-baked bread that corporate-owned

eateries pipe into air conditioning (to get you to buy food with your over-priced beverage).

In his New Statesman essay 'Diss Capital', when Paul Mason asks the resurrected Marx about the parlous state of socialism, the philosopher gestures in a desultory fashion at their surroundings, a Starbucks on the Euston Road:

...the querulous youths, the baristas, the brown walls and the tepid jazz music, the whole unstated atmosphere of preening and sexual attraction, the whole previously impossible combination of leisure, work and courtship:

"What do you think this is? In the middle of the worst crisis ever? *Aufheben*, my friend, *aufheben*!"

I mentally thank God that English has no single word that means simultaneously destroy, preserve and transcend.<sup>5</sup>

Back at the ice cream parlour, the indoor environment doesn't leave your ear drums or nostrils sullied and stinging. Instead, a persistent trickle of families, visitors, shoppers are offered its endless flotilla of sugary, dairy joy: banana sundaes and coke floats, at only mildly extortionate prices.

I adore the all-pervasive Frank Lloyd Wright architecture on the bus route to Downtown. (Wright was another Scottsdale resident. His archive is kept at his former winter residence and studio, in Taliesin West.) Relaxed 50s futurity coexists harmoniously with cruddy 21st century kitsch. I have fun imagining Natalie Wood, Roddy McDowall, Vincent Price, Rock Hudson, Jimmy Dean, Jayne Mansfield mooching around these streets in horn-rimmed sunglasses, looking for espressos and fancy imported linens.

(You're aware of the Arizona climate, like nowhere else in the South West, because you're always moving from one prissy, air-conditioned, artificial environment to another; constantly breaking into a sweat. The Popular Mechanics futurist dream that Lloyd Wright's architecture made reality – open plan, desert ranch-style homes; civic amenities and shopping malls full of labour saving devices; all connected by a grid of asphalt highways – is turning out to be

the opposite of cool. Forty percent of Phoenix is covered in tar macadam, driving local and planetary temperatures ever higher.)<sup>6</sup>

Maybe the 14-year-old Steven would spot film stars passing by in their open-topped Chevrolets, as his mother drove him into town to leave him at the movies on a Saturday morning. “Look, mom! It’s Vincent Price! From ‘The Fly!’”

I have no idea whether or not these stars ever visited the health spas and casinos around the area to the East of Phoenix. They seem like the kinds of West Coast hipsters who would have dug the scene back then. They’re who I’d cast in the movie of Scottsdale’s street life in 1958.

Scottsdale is about 390 miles east of Hollywood. The I-10 route takes you there directly, in effect. The seven hour drive goes through Palm Springs, the desert, past Joshua Tree National Park. It’s a beautiful landscape of wild desert and untamed freeways, even prettier than Fresno and Bakersfield to the other side of Los Angeles, where James Dean died too young. There aren’t as many bends on the road driving to Phoenix. It’s a soothing, arid vista. It implores you to drive a sports car through it at high speed while listening to Dave Brubeck, Miles Davis, Steely Dan, Scritti Politti, Wendy and Lisa, Todd Rundgren, Brian Wilson. You get my drift.

Scottsdale has attracted movie stars and record company executives close to burn-out for many decades. Now it’s starting to feel like an overly manicured retirement home, despite the large number of arts festivals the town runs and the many museums open in Downtown during tourism season. (My recommendation to the civic elders is to regalanise Scottsdale’s once hip yet effete reputation by sponsoring Russell Brand’s mid-career meltdown.)

Buster Crabbe – Flash Gordon *and* Buck Rogers – retired here. I like to imagine Buster walking down Main Street in shades, eating a low-fat ice cream cone (maybe a sorbet; nowadays it would be frozen yogurt and probably vegan). Buster stops by a shop window and ponders the purchase of some wind chimes, idly. Or possibly a ceramic owl. Buster would see his reflection in the glass and think, ‘I look pretty damned good for a guy in his seventies.’ (And so he did).

I've discovered a secret here, a quantum superimposition of cinema histories on Scottsdale's Main Street. (I'm not giving it away this early on, I'm building up to it. Bear with me.) I think I'm the only person who's spotted this coincidence so far, but now - in this essay - I get to share it with you.

I hope my excitement about this discovery is infectious. I want the old Kiva building to be appreciated for its significance as a place, if not for being a particularly amazing piece of architecture. (It isn't. It's nice to look at, I'll grant you, but it isn't going to win a heritage award anytime soon for being an outstanding example of cowboy-themed mini-mall design.)

What's important about the Kiva is the procession of overlapping personal histories, the continuity of life that's occurred inside the building, and to and from it. Steven Spielberg's childhood in Scottsdale has been the basis of movies; his story stands out. The Kiva's story is of all the trips to offload the kids on Saturday mornings; the original thrill of seeing the King of the Rocket Men take flight; the treasure trove of precious, collective memories of seeing rare, old, fragile, foreign, exotic, alien movies for the first time.

The journey from home, work, school to the meditative darkness of a few hours spent in a cinema auditorium traces a thread of meaning as fine as a single strand of spider silk. It's woven through waking reality, binding it seamlessly into the collective Dreamtime. Beams of invisible energy extend out of the Kiva exposing these tracings with ultraviolet rays.

The lines reach out across the United States, encircling the globe. The Ark is on fire with the fury and enthusiasms of the Gods of Celluloid. Since the 50s, these invisible rays have attracted louche urban sophisticates to the Kiva: gadabouts looking for kicks, for an oasis of metropolitan culture in a literal desert. The restless, the curious, thrill seekers, insomniacs, urban guerrillas with a few hours to kill in the downtime between revolutions: all have been beckoned into one great confluence of cinematic imagination; drawn into the cross currents of an underground stream of consciousness.

You see, the Kiva isn't only the place where 'ET', 'Close Encounters', 'Duel', 'Jaws', 'Schindler's List' and Indiana Jones were first kindled from sparks in the young Spielberg's over-active imagination. Without this building, we might not remember the Time Warp, or at least not in the same way. Brigitte Bardot might

not have acted as Roger Vadim's muse in rousing sexual revolt across Conservative America. Kenneth Anger's 'Scorpio' might never have risen without trace. Divine might not have vied to be the filthiest human being alive, and John and Yoko might never have acquired the rights to Alejandro Jodorowsky's gory cult western and Catholic allegory 'El Topo'. Hippies might not have readily embraced Stanley Kubrick's '2001' as a psychedelic trip.

This is the wellspring of our stories about the end of the 20th century, the last known resting place of the Lost Art.

## **To arms, whatever...**

Jonathan loved Indians. They were called Red Men. He had an Indian blanket that was red and a pink piggy bank that looked like Pow Wow the Indian boy. He loved his picture books that were full of pictures of Indians, hunting buffalo in the grass, or dancing. He would coat them with layers of red – lipstick, jam and Crayola crayon...

He was subject to fits of blinding rage.

He broke his Indian bow and arrow quite coldly out of hatred for something he did not understand. It was terrible because he had truly loved his Indian bow and arrow. He was stricken with remorse.

Geoff Ryman, 'Was'.<sup>7</sup>

'This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.'

Maxwell Scott in 'The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance'.<sup>8</sup>

The sign reads 'Old Town Boutique Shops' and has done since 1993, when the Kiva movie theatre finally closed. The wooden building that stands at 7125-7219 E. Main Street, Scottsdale now sells the jewellery and Native American beadwork that are the staples of the tourist trade in this part of the United States. On my 2011 trip through the American Midwest and South researching this essay I also noticed many uses of the sepia image of Geronimo, rifle in hand, with three other Apache braves, photographed before their surrender to General Crook in 1886. The photograph is appended with the strap-line: 'Homeland Security: Fighting Terrorism since 1492'. Google that line and you'll find many different designs based on the same idea.

I've seen this combination of image and slogan on websites, posters, t-shirts, and postcards sold in trinket stores and at county fairs, very often by Native vendors. The idea isn't copyrighted or licensed by anyone as far as I can make out – no doubt explaining its prodigious memetic propagation – making it very much the 'Keep On Truckin' emblem of revisionist Native American history.

The subjugation of one people by another requires that all parties do degrading, demeaning things to one another, and to one another's memory, ad

infinitem. Colonialism isn't over with the initial massacres and land clearances. There are long, lost decades that follow; of Jim Crow minstrel shows, mutterings about white devils, apprentice boy's marches and Paddy jokes. Of squalid, mean-spirited caricatures (North Korean television propaganda, Fox News) or of hollow sloganeering and vainglorious jingoism (again, Fox News).

In the final stage, there is either total amnesia – in Turkey, of the massacre of its Armenian population; in the DRC and pretty much everywhere else, of the genocide of non-Bantu-speaking peoples of the Congo Basin – or there's romanticism.

We're on the winning side by a mistake of history. The vanished people became us, at least in spirit, through recitation of stories about them. It's absolution by empathy, on the victor's terms; but where the underdog is always the hero, and where there's always a happy ending.

Proudly, Parisians sing their rebel anthem, *'La Marseillaise'*, even though today you're more likely to hear Occitan – the language of the Languedoc and the south of France – at a folk festival than you are in a pub or café in Marseilles, where you're just as likely to hear Arabic.

*What does this horde of slaves,  
Of traitors and conspiring kings want?  
For whom are these vile chains,  
These long-prepared irons?*

They're for your neighbours, *mon brave*.

Romanticism at least offers some hope of redemption for the world soul. It incubates within it romance, love, a kind-heartedness bundled up with the coronets.

A therapy for a civilisation's forgetfulness is to go on a lengthy *dérive*, to explore an imaginative path back through the wilderness of our ancestors' nostalgia and selective memory loss. Night in the desert is cloudless, cold and unforgiving. Out here on the margin between humanity and the wild nature of things there are no empirical facts, but there are wind-blasted relics. The desert



is a refugium of lost peoples: we can reach down, anywhere, sift the sands with our finger tips, finding shattered micrographia recording the inchoate, diffuse realities of past lives.

We can re-imagine these weathered reliquaries, reconstruct them in imagination, to find a deeper empathy with the people who went before us; the structures they built, the animals and plants they shared the landscape with.

In this harsh environment, unfriendly to certainty, the only travelling companion that forgetfulness can hope for is laughter.

In 1979, when the wickedly great Serge Gainsbourg became the first white pop singer to record an entire album in Kingston, Jamaica – with Rita Marley, Sly and Robbie – his version of ‘*La Marseillaise*’ truncated the familiar version of the chorus by removing the more militaristic lines.

<i>Aux armes, citoyens,</i>	To arms, citizens,
<i>Formez vos bataillons,</i>	Form your battalions,
<i>Marchons, marchons!</i>	Let's march, let's march!
<i>Qu'un sang impur</i>	Let an impure blood
<i>Abreuve nos sillons!</i>	Water our furrows!

Became:

<i>Aux armes et cætera</i>	To arms, etc
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At this, veterans of France’s involvement as aggressors in the Algerian War of Independence suffered a collective irony-failure. Gainsbourg received anti-Semitic death threats for desecrating the French national anthem. As Asterix the Gaul might well have observed, these Romans are crazy.

Serge, the immigrant Russian Jew in France, had the last laugh, not once but twice.<sup>9</sup> Shortly after the controversy, he purchased the original manuscript of ‘*La Marseillaise*’ at auction. The manuscript clearly shows that the author Rouget de l’Isle did not bother writing the full chorus three times, preferring to shorten it with the word “*etc*” – “*Aux armes et cætera...*”

Meanwhile, the eponymous album on which the track appeared went on to become a million-seller in French-speaking markets; Gainsbourg's first big hit as a recording artist rather than just a songwriter.

Localities construct complex collective myths, as nations do: belligerence directed at the past, yielding to reflection, remorse, good humour; then back to intemperance again.

Cab drivers hang around in front of the Kiva while they wait for fares (there are parking spaces outside in the daytime) and tell apocryphal stories that could be the basis of Scottsdale's fabricated self-mythology. One driver I chatted to pointed across the road to a building with sturdy stone walls, indicating – he said – that it had been the jail. The Sheriff's office was usually built opposite the saloon, right? So the site of the Kiva had always been trouble.

What, I wonder, was there when the first settlers moved in? Had it inspired the name 'Kiva', a memory of what was once an underground chamber for rituals built by the previous inhabitants? Was the act of building a bawdy house on top of it a deliberate act of desecration; a subjugation of the old magic by the new Trinity of Christianity, Commerce and Consumerism?

The theatre Spielberg knew as a child was originally called the Tee Bar Tee, and had been since Scottsdale's first mayor, Malcolm White, built it in the 50s. This all changed in 1962 when the building was acquired by Louis K Sher. A film distributor originally based in Cleveland, Ohio, Sher moved his operations to Arizona when his wife developed diabetes and a doctor recommended the desert climate for her health.<sup>10</sup>

The Kiva became the headquarters of Sher's Art Theatre Guild of America, a chain of cinemas which was a major player in distributing foreign and independent films throughout the 60s; and which carried on as an innovator in 'adult entertainment' till the Kiva's closure in 1993.

Why did Sher call it the 'Kiva', a Pueblo term for round ceremonial halls in the South West? Kiva buildings are associated with the groups such as the Anasazi who live north of Scottsdale, nearer to Flagstaff. You can still see circular structures built by Indian communities next to the railway tracks, often

combining traditional shapes with Buckminster Fuller geodesics, using modern materials like polythene.

The two major peoples who lived in Scottsdale before Europeans were the Hohokam and then their descendents, the Pima. For 1500 years or so, and in a more lush and verdant climate, the Hohokam built a complex grid of irrigation channels and canals for agriculture. Modern Scottsdale's matrix of intersecting roads may be tracings of this earlier grid. At some time between 1350 and 1375, climatic changes deepened the Salt River Bed and flooded the canals. The large Hohokam communities broke up and the culture faded away.

The fragmented communities came to call themselves the "Akimel O'Odham" ("the river people"). "Hohokam" is an O'Odham word meaning "those who have gone before" and "the ancestors". The O'Odham are better known by a short name, "Pima", which came about through a misunderstanding. The phrase *pi 'a'ni mac* or *pi mac*, meaning "I don't know," was used repeatedly in first contact with Europeans.

There was a traditional Pima dwelling in Scottsdale, still lived-in, on the southeast corner of Indian Bend Road and Hayden Road when Sher acquired the lease on the Kiva in 1962. Pima who live within Scottsdale now reside in new buildings rather than traditional ones. Small towns built by the government for Indian communities stand abandoned along the railway line from Flagstaff. Many live in the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, which borders Scottsdale to the east.

Sher's invocation of 'Kiva,' a word from Pueblo culture to denote sacred space, is pure romanticism. He could equally have called his movie theatre the Luxor, or the Orpheum. Sher the showman's instinct for the exotic, the esoteric and attractive would have led him to such a simple and evocative word.

If Sher had wanted to draw on O'Odham culture he could have done better by naming it the "I'toi", but try saying "let's drop the kids off at the I'toi this morning, honey, and go bowling!"

In O'odham mythology, I'toi is the mischievous progenitor god who lives in a cave just below the peak of Baboquivari Mountain, part of the Tohono O'odham Nation. I'toi brought the ancestors, the Hohokam people, to the surface from the underworld. He authored the Hohokam's list of rules for living, the Himdag,

guiding humanity to live in balance with the overworld. Visitors to I'toi's cave must offer a gift to ensure a safe return from the subconscious depths of history.<sup>11</sup>

Often referred to as The Man in the Maze, I'toi dwells at the centre of a labyrinth design used commonly in Pima basketry and silver jewellery. Like Islamic mosaics, Pima baskets contain a "mistake"; rather than humility before the perfection of the Divine, the flaw ensures the spirit in the maze isn't trapped in the object but is free to roam. Deliberate error – forgetfulness of craft – admits the ineluctable, the realm beyond knowledge, in to our world. A happy accident is a doorway between dreaming, speculation and empirical reality.

Nothing that's left of the original building would reveal how important this space has been to half a century of film culture. The Kiva Theatre was the black box for the young Steven Spielberg's imagination to receive transmission of the archaic remnants of cinema's first fifty years, to descend into the maze of signs and symbols and emerge with rules for storytelling; and that wasn't even half of the epic tale.

Nobody I talked to in Scottsdale knew that this building was the same place as the cinema where the young Spielberg went to Saturday morning matinees, though they were generally delighted and surprised to be told this. They knew the story that he went to a movie theatre somewhere in town in the 50s, but not that it was the one on Main Street, and definitely not the one with a reputation for showing racy films into the early 1990s. Not that this information caused anyone to bat an eyelid. This surprised me, in a community known for its self-consciously Christian values and Republican leanings.

"You have to be relaxed in Arizona, it's so hot," one trader opposite the Kiva told me, jokingly. "We're all tourists here. When I came in 1958 it was a town of five thousand people. New people coming in were relaxed about it, but felt an adult theatre wasn't really the done thing."

## Underground Cinema 12

Artists have made profound use of real and imaginary subterranean worlds that promised places of mystery and a search for truth and power. This quest was mirrored in the excavations carried out by geologists, palaeontologists, anthropologists and archaeologists who sought, through their tunnelling, mining and drilling to unravel the 'Mystery of lost time'. The excavations uncovered a truth about the world's development; its strata and fossils exposed to the light a time before man, as archaeological digs exposed a hitherto unknown history of man.

The literal excavation of the underground produced a parallel set of ontological investigations. As Rosalind Williams observes, 'both Marx and Freud depend so much on subterranean imagery that it is now virtually impossible to read a text about the underworld without filtering it through a Marxist or Freudian interpretation – without reading the buried world as the subconscious, or the working class.'

Peter Stanfield, 2011.<sup>12</sup>

'I would never see a good movie for the first time on television.'

Jean-Luc Godard to Gene Youngblood,  
March 15<sup>th</sup> 1968, Los Angeles Free Press.

Over three decades the Art Theatre Guild fostered artistic and technological innovation in American cinema-exhibition, cosmopolitan taste in the midst of cultural scarcity, and smut. Mostly smut, it must be said.

Sher was a distributor, theatre proprietor, film and Broadway producer, tireless opponent of censorship and frequent client of civil-liberties lawyer Alan Dershowitz. Despite exerting an invisible influence over the development of modern cinema, like his Kiva Theatre, Sher's name is barely recalled in Scottsdale. When it is, it's with a wry smile and a certain amount of fondness.

That his contribution to world cinema culture has barely been acknowledged is in large part due to the fact that he spent much of his career showing soft-core

pornographic movies, with unequalled commercial success. As Executive Producer of the 3D skin flick 'The Stewardesses', Sher oversaw the most profitable 3D film of all time. Made on a budget of \$100,000, it eventually grossed over \$27 million in 1970 money. This makes it one of the most profitable films ever, only recently superseded by James Cameron's 'Avatar'.

Sher is overlooked in histories of film not only due to the eventual decline of his business into this lowest common denominator logic, but also because his contribution to cinema was mainly as a businessman – albeit a huckster of genius, as well as taste and refinement – rather than as a director, writer or performer. Nonetheless, his business instincts were pivotal to shaping popular tastes and finding audiences for new film makers and genres.

In the early 60s, Sher brought foreign art films and bizarre fare like 'Mondo Cane' to post-beatnik hipsters in the South and Midwest, during a period of endless cowboy and Jerry Lewis movies. ("If You Never See Another Film, You Must See Mondo Cane!" Sher's newspaper ads at the time declared. Famously, 'Mondo Cane' – which went on to spawn a franchise of exploitation travelogues – featured an old Italian woman breast feeding a baby pig).

Sher's nephew Mike Getz also has an important part to play in this untold story of America's emerging bohemian film-going tastes.<sup>13</sup> Getz ran an eight-week festival of films at midnight – 'Underground Cinema 12' – which toured his uncle's theatres from the late 60s through the early 70s. Getz brought the work of underground film makers such as Jonas Meekas and Andy Warhol to wider audiences, as well as showing porn, rock concert films, Busby Berkeley musicals, W. C. Fields comedies, and oddities from the 30s and 40s like 'Reefer Madness' and Todd Browning's circus horror classic 'Freaks'.

'Underground Cinema 12' shares much of the credit for starting the midnight movie trend of the 70s, and for giving rise to the idea of cult cinema. Through revivals of screenings that Getz originated, such as Steve Wooley's Scala cinema programming in London in the 80s, 'Underground Cinema 12' started a trend that would influence Channel 4's early output of films and the direction of British movie-making for twenty years. A film like 'Trainspotting' that combines techniques from avant-garde film-making, rock music videos (especially for Iggy

Pop), gritty social realism and pure exploitation (of Edinburgh's drugs culture in the 90s) is a logical inheritor of 'Underground Cinema 12's' eclectic approach.

Another spiritual descendent of Getz's touring bill is Spectacle Theatre in New York: a thirty seat "goth bodega" housed in a disused shop on an average, if rapidly gentrifying, Brooklyn street. Spectacle Theatre has been improvised from a digital projector bolted to the ceiling with sheets of fibre board, a broken popcorn machine, faded velvet blackout curtains, and a rolling calendar of "overlooked works, offbeat gems," contemporary art, radical polemics, and live performance. Spectacle is programmed by dedicated volunteers, many of whom met through social media and the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011.

Spectacle Theatre's British cousin is the 'Scala Beyond' season of films in London's endlessly proliferating improvised digital cinema scene, based around projection on the walls of small venues. The most recent Scala festival in September 2012 included a rare showing of Czech animator Karel Zeman's near-perfect 1962 version of Baron Munchausen - not seen in public in Britain since a Channel Four television broadcast to coincide with Terry Gilliam's film released in 1989 - exhibited for an appreciative public in room over a pub round the corner from the British Museum. There was a double bill in the Scala Beyond season of films starring the iconoclastic American actress Parker Posey at the Rio in Dalston. The Roxy near London Bridge screened a night of Giallo-influenced Italian slasher films.

Underground Cinema 12's influence can also be felt in the catholic co-option of influences from grindhouse exploitation to Trauffalt in Tarrantino's oeuvre, and those of his imitators and collaborators. John Waters, director of 'Hairspray' and 'Pink Flamingos', has credited the touring 'Underground Cinema 12' programme as the only way he could find distribution for his early films outside of his native Baltimore and his home-from-home, the gay enclave of Provincetown, MA.

The travelling 'Underground Cinema 12' programme originated from Sher's Los Angeles Cinema Theatre at 1122 North Western Avenue, and became a central feature of the L.A. counterculture. From 1967, for many years the line of freaks attending the midnight shows extended several blocks down adjoining Santa Monica Boulevard.

An unintended consequence of the symbiotic relationship between midnight movies and the underground was to inspire journalists in that culture to create the L.A. Free Press, the formative underground newspaper. On 7th March 1964, the Hollywood Vice Squad had busted Getz in possession of a print of Kenneth Anger's 'Scorpio Rising' and charged him with lewd exhibition. The subsequent trial (Getz's conviction was overturned on appeal) was covered in the first issue of the Free Press, with articles by Seymour Stern and Jonas Meekas relating his own prosecution for showing Jack Smith's 'Flaming Creatures', and asserting the importance of opposing censorship and police oppression.<sup>14</sup> By 1968, the paper carried a film review column that shared a name with 'Underground Cinema 12', written by Gene Youngblood, which did much to shape the counterculture's relationship with cinema. (Among Youngblood's most celebrated columns was one that embraced Kubrick's trippy science fiction opus, a review with the title '2001: A Masterpiece'.)

The 'Scorpio Rising' bust was neither the first nor the only time that Sher's business stood up to the censors. Through his Art Theatre Guild chain of cinemas, Sher had fought and won a landmark legal case in the 50s that went to the Supreme Court and established the limits of obscenity and artistic freedom in the USA, then as now considered by the global industry to be the most important single market for motion pictures.

On 13<sup>th</sup> November 1959, Nico Jacobellis, an Italian immigrant managing Sher's Heights Art Theatre in Cleveland Heights exhibited Louis Malle's 'Les Amants'.<sup>15</sup> Tame by today's standards, it's typical of the kind of titillating imported fare on which Sher established his chain. Brigitte Bardot's table-top tango in Roger Vadim's 'And God Created Woman' was another defining image of this period, when the self-censorship of Hollywood and the Conservative values of middle America dictated what could and couldn't be shown in cinemas.

'Les Amants' contained scenes equally as shocking to moral guardians as Bardot's sultry badinage: Jeanne Moreau has an orgasm on screen, and leaves her husband and child to run off with her lover. Jacobellis knew what he was doing (managing another of Sher's Cleveland theatres, the Continental, he baited censors once again with the 1967 Swedish film 'I Am Curious Yellow'). In 1959, 'Les Amants' was too much for the forces of public decency. Jacobellis was



prosecuted for obscenity, and Sher and his lawyers fought the US Government censor all the way to the Supreme Court. In 1964, the court overturned his conviction with a landmark ruling that obscenity could not be based on a community standard, but required a nationwide standard that could be applied universally. In the course of the case, Justice Potter Stewart made the now-famous remark as he struggled to find a judicial definition of hard-core pornography.

"I know it when I see it," he wrote, "and the motion picture involved in this case is not that."

These boundaries are being tested once again with the distribution, legally and otherwise, of movies on the internet. The BBFC's initial decision to ban 'The Human Centipede' sequel from general release in the UK only added to its notoriety and to people's curiosity to see simulated acts of coprophagia and violent rape, that are only a few mouse clicks away. Meanwhile, the cinematic release of 'Piranha 3DD' in 2012 suggests that contemporary film-makers are no more imaginative than they were in 1970, when 'The Stewardesses' was released, in pushing the possibilities of 3D technology beyond the depiction of stereoscopic hooters.

Sher's story is important because it's about a businessman with relaxed but cultured tastes, relenting to the logic of the market. By all accounts he was always far happier to show the films of Louis Malle, Roger Vadim and Buñuel than of John Holmes. He fought many such cases to establish the principle that self-appointed community leaders couldn't decide the limits of artistic expression, or for that matter the limits of crude lowest common-denominator sleaze.

But, especially with the growing pressure of home video in the eighties, the audience simply wasn't there for classy European films featuring nudity and outré content. This meant that Sher had to show increasingly more hardcore material at his theatres. The line between pushing boundaries and pandering to the masses is always a difficult one to delineate, and even a supremely shrewd entrepreneur found it impossible to remain at the end of the spectrum where Russ Meyer and Bettie Paige would have felt more comfortable.

Even when Spielberg was growing up, the Kiva had a reputation for showing bawdier fare to an adult audience in the evening. In the 50s and 60s, while the theatre showed old kiddie pictures on Saturday mornings, by night sharp-suited hipsters and their girlfriends in elegant imported dresses stood at the ticket window, eager to check out foreign films featuring European starlets in various states of undress.

By the 60s, Scottsdale's cognoscenti attended the Kiva to see the latest underground and hippie films from the East and West coasts. Traders along Main Street recall the Kiva Theatre with a smile. That there was a cinema showing adult films for almost three decades until 1993, on a row of stores selling Native art, cowboy boots and snacks, adds a frisson to an otherwise unprepossessing row of tourist shops.

The legacy of the Kiva and Sher's Art Theatre Guild is as eclectic and far-reaching as the movies that were shown in the tiny auditorium: landmark civil liberties cases; common origins of underground cinema and midnight movies; the free press; as well as novelties which have nonetheless influenced cinema technology, like the staggering commercial success of 'The Stewardesses'.<sup>16</sup>

It's a lesson in the perils of a monoculture: Scottsdale has no shortage of jewellery stores selling turquoise necklaces and dream catchers; as the American South West's economy waxes and wanes through a few more tourism seasons, and online shopping changes consumption habits inexorably, it's unclear that they can all be sustained. Sher's story also offers a lesson in the merits of a pluralist approach to culture. The potential overheads of digital film-making and distribution may be fractional compared with the industry's analogue days, but nearby Hollywood also seems unable to learn the merits of pluralism and perils of monoculture. Like sense-a-rama, or the scratch-and-sniff cards accompanying John Waters' 'Polyester', 3-D films have remained stuck in the mode of novelty. The nemesis of a 'Napster moment' for mainstream movie studios – that 3-D was meant to avoid – looms once again in their future.

At a Fortune magazine seminar in Colorado in July 2011, Dreamworks Animation chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg berated his industry for its short-sightedness and the overall quality of that year's movies:

They suck. It's unbelievable how bad movies have been [...] I think Hollywood has managed to grasp defeat from the jaws of victory here [...] There were, unfortunately, a number of people who thought that they could capitalize on what was a great, genuine excitement by movie goers for a new premium experience, and thought they could just deliver a kind of low-end crappy version of it, and people wouldn't care, or wouldn't know the difference.<sup>17</sup>

There have to be reasons to visit a movie theatre, besides the opportunity to see Thor beating up CGI sentinel robots in 3D; reasons that are as much to do with the experience of being part of an audience as with the spectacle on screen.

Cinema exhibition serves a social and – dare I say it – spiritual function. It gets you out of the house, out of the privacy of your thoughts and cloistered living space. You become part of a drama within a drama: leaving your house or workplace, travelling through the natural and built environment, to a darkened hall to witness a story in the company of others. Cinema is an event. There is no pause button, smart phone or laptop to distract you. You make an appointment with a film projected on to a big screen. The cinema buildings that once bore names like the Orpheum, the Luxor, the Kiva betray the roots of theatre in hollowed out religious rituals.

In an exchange in 2010, David Lynch told the Guardian in response to this question 'would you ever release a film just on your website'?

'That's where everything is heading very soon. It will just be downloads. But it doesn't matter how people get hold of a film; as long as they can see it in the right way it will still be beautiful. If people can see a film on a big screen, with the lights low and good sound, then they still have the chance to enter another world. Some films do better on a small screen than others, but if you saw 2001 on a phone it would be just the most pathetic joke.'<sup>18</sup>

The convention of hushed silence and a darkened hall comes to us by way of Sir Henry Irving's innovations in Victorian London theatre, influenced by his experience of Wagner's opera house in Bayreuth, the hidden orchestra pit and raked seating designed so that his Ring cycle could take over your mind: the secular equivalent of a religious experience.

A renaissance in film exhibition requires a re-consecration of the magic places of the cult of cinema. Few places resonate with movie magic like the former Kiva theatre building in Scottsdale, Arizona. Ideally, I'd hope that alongside once-again thriving shops, the Kiva is restored to its former use as a cinema; if not for the entire time then for some of the time. (You could project films down the aisle in the middle of the mini-mall.) To extend my 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' metaphor, in this situation I identify with Josephus, the Jewish historian of Rome's wars in Palestine. When offered any treasure from the Temple that his friend, the Emperor's son, was about to sack and destroy, Josephus asked for the books. (Another "wtf" moment for the future Emperor Titus Flavius Caesar, to go along with discovering the Holy of Holies *sans* Ark, later that day.)

Stories imbue this apparently mundane wooden structure with its deep meaning. Conversely, without the building still standing and in use, the full importance of the stories is lost forever. Without the sacred space, there is no meditation. Without pure acts of contemplation, the Temple will be lost. As a ritual meeting place for the cross currents of American cinema, anything and everything was admissible within the walls of Sher's Kiva Theatre. Like all folk processes for the transmission of important ideas and stories, the specifics of how that transmission occurred are beginning to pass out of the scope of living memory.

Sher died in 1998 and received a short but complimentary obituary in the 'New York Times'.<sup>19</sup>

He deserves another epitaph: 'Louis K Sher, proprietor, Art Theatre Guild of America. Not gone, but forgotten.'

## **It's astounding, time is fleeting**

I would like, if I may, to take you on a strange journey to the near-future.

It will seem like a fairly ordinary night, seventy years hence.

After oil prices have peaked at \$500 a barrel. After the United States breaks up into warring states, following California's secession from the Union.

One Saturday night, when a group of ordinary kids will drive outside the safety of the walled Citadel of Phoenix into the badlands, in search of the lost town of Scottsdale.

It's true they will drive towards dark storm clouds, heavy, black and pendulous.

Having read about the Kiva Theatre in this very essay, a digital copy dormant for decades on the cloud of archived wisdom surrounding the City: the past hugging the broken future in an apologetic embrace of Wikipedia pages and pictures of cats who haz ur internetz.

At the precise GPS coordinates where the mini-mall once stood, they will find some battered boards, collapsed timbers chewed by termites and weathered by swirling eddies of sand. Brown paper and smashed glass lie all around, a shattered exhibit in a forgotten museum of the 20th century.

Being normal kids and on a night out, well, they are not going to let a desert storm spoil the events of their evening.

On a night out.

It will be a night out they are going to remember for a very long time.

Removing scaffolding and black polythene from their VW Camper van (modified to run on home-brewed ethanol) the hooded youths will fall out of the vehicle and into anarchic battalions. Laughing, surveying the setting sun cautiously, moving by pack instinct in improvised groups, a fluid social dance; constructing their temple with speed not haste.

Within an hour, it's standing, fifty feet tall: a black box, Kubrick's monolith, a Kaaba worthy of the faithful flocking to Mecca. The faces of the cube are whipped by the desert wind, anonymous pirate flags occupying and enclosing a sacred space.

The pilgrims walk inside through a tent flap. The storm batters the walls of the black box, whistles over the open roof. A needle of light cuts through the solemn pitch black interior, revealing sparkling grains of sand hanging in the still air. Against a silver screen, Patricia Quinn's sanguine lips hover into view and part. The show is ready to begin. The acolytes sit and wait.

Michael Rennie was ill the day the earth stood still  
But he told us where we stand  
And Flash Gordon was there in silver underwear  
Claude Raines was the invisible man  
Then something went wrong for Fay Wray and King Kong  
They got caught in a celluloid jam  
Then at a deadly pace it came from outer space  
And this is how the message ran  
Science Fiction - Double Feature  
Dr. X will build a creature  
See androids fighting Brad and Janet  
Anne Francis stars in Forbidden Planet  
Oh-oh at the late night, double feature, picture show.

The film rolls, a hamper comes out. In no time, they're dressing up in feather boas, doing one another's makeup while referring to pictures of Tim Curry, Divine and the Cockettes on their glowing tablet computers and phones.

They gather in front of the screen, mouthing the words with the actors, copying their actions from memory. They form a line and dance:

The Blackness would hit me and the void would be calling.

Let's do the Time Warp again.

One hundred minutes pass. The storm is over. The aliens return to Transylvania and the credits roll on 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show'.

The devotees lie on the sand, listening to the dissipating winds breathing heavily on the black plastic panes of their temporary sanctum.

They look up at the night sky. Shooting stars stream past. There is no global dimming in this future, only the perfect clarity of an overheated atmosphere and the infinite firmament.

We do this, they think, because our forefathers did it.

*Tim Concannon, Lewes, England, March 2013.*

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, 1986 'Leaving the movie theatre' in 'The Rustle of Language' Blackwell, London, p. 345.

<sup>2</sup> Spielberg produced director J J Abrams' 'Super 8' - about kids who encounter a real alien while they're making a monster movie – a plot which in part echoes his childhood in Scottsdale. He was also on the committee that came up with the story.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph McBride, 2011 'Steven Spielberg: A Biography' Univ. Press of Mississippi, Jackson, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Kermode, 2011, 'The Good, The Bad and The Multiplex' Random House, London, p. 312.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Mason, 6<sup>th</sup> January 2011, 'Diss capital', New Statesman.

<sup>6</sup> Phoenix is one of the South West's main "Urban Heat Islands" (UHI) and "black" asphalt is the major underlying cause. Urban heat is a problem now facing every city in the world but it is a special problem for Phoenix due to the legacy of town planning in the post-War period, and reliance on two lane blacktop. The road surfacing absorbs and stores heat: summer temperatures in the Downtown area can reach 115°-118°(F), with asphalt surfaces even higher at 150°-170°(F). The heat is then re-released with nightfall, so the city warms up again. An UHI creates a perfect storm in that it leads to micro-climatic changes, with local wind patterns, cloud formation, fog, humidity, precipitation, and thunderstorm activity all affected. Indoor air-conditioning, and refrigeration to compensate, leads to higher CO2 emissions and more climatic warming. Phoenix is now at the forefront of various business studies advocating "cool pavement" technology intended to ameliorate the UHI effect.

PR Newswire, June 2011 'Asphalt Going Green with "Cool Pavement" in Phoenix' Emerald Cities Ltd, Scottsdale Arizona.

May 2011, 'Phoenix's Urban Heat Island' Phoenix Magazine, Scottsdale Arizona.

<sup>7</sup> Geoff Ryman, 1992, 'Was', Flamingo, London, p. 227.

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<sup>8</sup> James Warner Bellah and Willis Goldbeck, 1962 'The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance' from a story by Dorothy M Johnson, Paramount, Los Angeles.

<sup>9</sup> 'In his 1975 album, 'Rock Around the Bunker,' the song 'Yellow Star' (Gainsbourg was obsessed by Anglophone culture, from Hollywood films to Gershwin tunes) recalls how it felt to be a young Jew wearing the obligatory Yellow Star in the streets of wartime Paris. Alluding ironically to the badge's resonance as a prize ("I've won the yellow star") and a badge as sported in Western movies by a "sheriff or marshal or big chief," this bittersweet recollection concludes that the "law of struggle for life is difficult for a Jew."

Benjamin Ivry, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2008 'The Man With the Yellow Star: The Jewish Life of Serge Gainsbourg' The Jewish Daily Forward, New York, NY.

The biopic 'Gainsbourg: A Heroic Life' depicts part of Serges's self-mythology, that as a child he lined up to be the first Jew in Paris to have the Vichy authorities pin a Yellow Star on him.

<sup>10</sup> Craig Outhier, March 2011, 'Scottsdale's Kiva Theater', Phoenix Magazine, p. 52.

Dewey Webb, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1990, 'Too real for the immature! The raw truth about Scottsdale's frisky Kiva', Phoenix New Times.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. John Myers & Dr Robert Gryder, 1988, 'The Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indians'.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Stanfield, 2011 'Going Underground With Manny Farber and Jonas Mekas: New York's Subterranean Film Culture in the 1950s and 1960s' in Richard Maltby et al, 2011, 'Explorations in New Cinema History', Blackwell, Oxford, p.217. Quoting Rosalind Williams, 1990, 'Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Society, Technology and the Imagination', MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, p 48.

<sup>13</sup> Mike Getz interviewed by Alison Kozberg, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2010, 'Alternative Projections: Experimental Film in Los Angeles 1945-1980', FilmForum, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>14</sup> David E James, 2005, 'The most typical avant-garde: history and geography of minor cinemas in Los Angeles' University of California Press, Berkeley, p.223.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Krouse, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2009, 'Cleveland Heights theatre recalls 1959 Nico Jacobellis controversy over "The Lovers"', Cleveland.com.

<sup>16</sup> Co-Producer and cinematographer Chris Condon continues to be an innovator in the field of 3-D that has recently experienced a resurgence, but which may have (ahem) peaked.



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<sup>17</sup> Fortune Editors, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2011 'Brainstorm Tech video: Katzenberg on the future of movie watching' Colorado.

<sup>18</sup> Gareth Grundy, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2010 'David Lynch: I'm not a musician but I love making music. It's a blast.' Guardian.

<sup>19</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> December 1998 'Louis K Sher, 84; Exhibited Foreign Films' New York Times.