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Abstract

This paper explores the vital role art house movie theaters play in their communities, particularly in bringing film culture to small towns. I argue that art house theaters have a symbiotic relationship with their communities (particularly small towns) in which the art houses play a vital role in bringing culture to their downtown communities, and these communities are ardent supporters of art house theaters, helping them convert from 35mm to digital and continue to thrive. I explore two art house movie theaters in great detail as case studies, the County theater in Doylestown, PA and Gettysburg's Majestic theater, to prove that art houses are staples of small towns and play a cultural role so vital that they have overcome major changes in technology and appear to have a bright future.

Keywords

art house, film, digital, future, film studies, cinema

Disciplines

Cultural History | Film and Media Studies | Other Film and Media Studies

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Cinema & Media Studies Senior Thesis

They Survived the Conversion from 35mm to Digital, so Now What? The Future of
America's Small-Town Art House Theaters

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The first movie I saw at the County Theater in my hometown of Doylestown, Pennsylvania was *Nowhere Boy* (2009), directed by Sam Taylor-Wood. A quick perusal of the Internet Movie Database will show that Ms. Wood, who now goes by Sam Taylor-Johnson, is also the director of the notorious 2015 blockbuster, *Fifty Shades of Grey*. However, prior to that hit film, Wood had only a few titles to her name (IMDb). I wasn't drawn to the film for the acclaim of the director, because it featured Hollywood stars, or because I had seen ads for it plastered on billboards or flashing across my television screen. I was simply drawn to the film when I discovered that it told the story of John Lennon's formative years, and the conception of The Beatles. A huge Beatles fan, I knew I had to see this movie. However, to my dismay, I could not find it listed when I looked up movie times at my local multiplex, The Regal Barn Plaza 14. Then it occurred to me: this must be one of those indie films my parents like to see at The County.

Because my little sister, Megan, was also a big fan of The Beatles, I proposed a family movie night at The County. My mom had something going on that night, so I remember it was just the three of us: my Dad (the one who first got us hooked on classic rock and The Beatles), my sister, and me. I was sixteen at the time, but I felt mature going to see an R-rated movie at The County, like I had been granted exclusive access into the world of adults. Going to The County was something my parents did on their date nights, in between candlelit dinners at Andre's Wine and Cheese Bar around the corner, or sipping on lattes while browsing books at The Doylestown Bookshop.

While the memory of my first film experience at The County has grown dim over the years, there is one thing about that night that stands out in my mind: it was just that, an experience. I was not simply in a large, dark auditorium of a multiplex with a bunch of

strangers, trying in vain to shut out the white glow of cell phones in the hands of the teenagers who ignored all the warnings to put them away, the person who keeps kicking the back of my chair, and the obnoxious comments and giggles of middle school girls oblivious to the fact that some people are actually trying to enjoy the movie. At this theater, after purchasing our tickets at the old-fashioned ticket window and pushing through the double art deco doors, I handed my ticket to an usher stationed on a stool in a vestibule before the main lobby, and I felt like I was handing my golden ticket to Mr. Wonka to enter his wondrous chocolate factory. At the snack bar, my dad bought us soda that came in the vintage glass bottles and there was an ancient looking “butter machine” (as I like to call it) where I could drizzle as much melted goodness onto my popcorn as I desired.

Besides the superficial aesthetic differences, though, there was something deeper, something about the atmosphere that set this movie theater apart from any other I had ever been to. Sure, there were only two screens instead of fourteen, and this audience consisted almost entirely of adults- I think I spotted one other teenager with his parents. But more than what I could initially pick out with my eyes, it seemed that for the duration of the movie, the entire auditorium full of people was wholly focused on absorbing the images on the screen before them, not fidgeting with their phones or whispering to the person seated next to them. As Jim Sanders, Director of Development for The County, stated in a 2009 issue of *Bucks & Montgomery Living*, “There is power in being in a room full of people enjoying a movie on a big screen, and we’re happy to give them that experience” (Lange 38). I felt, as the credits rolled and I stood up to leave, that I had been a part of a community *event*.

I would later find out that The County Theater is not just a movie theater that shows primarily independent and foreign films, but is classified as one of America's more than 300 art-house movie theaters (Berg 55). I had always just considered theaters like The County to be independently owned movie theaters showing independent films, without really stopping to consider what that meant. Ephraim Katz, a film scholar and author of *The Film Encyclopedia*, defines the art house as "a theater specializing in the exhibition of quality films, either classic revivals or new films of limited box office appeal" (Alvin 4). However, Rebecca Alvin, the author of a 2007 *Cineaste* article quotes Ephraim in order to contest the accepted definition of art houses (ibid). In truth, art houses are difficult to define in a single, tidy sentence because they all have their own personalities and business styles based on where they are located, the audiences they cater to, and who runs them. Alvin contests Ephraim's definition of art houses as showing "films of limited box office appeal." Perhaps art houses are better defined by journalist Jeff Berg as hosting "a somewhat more specialized audience, one that's more mature and discerning, open to appreciating a blend of foreign pictures, small American films, documentaries of all sorts, and the occasional breakout hit that relies more on storytelling than pyrotechnics" (Berg 55). Berg also emphasizes how it is offering audiences something different that can't be experienced at a multiplex that keeps them in business: "Every art house is different, but we all show the movies that [the mass audience doesn't] want to see. If everyone wanted to see them, they'd be selling out at the multiplexes and there would be no art house theaters" (Berg 60).

What Ephraim fails to point out is the more marginal but passionate movie-loving audiences that frequent these theaters, and how these theaters make an effort to offer a

wide variety of specialty programming to appeal to a diverse audience, from foreign films to independent films to documentary films to repertory films to educational programs. In this study speculating on the future of art-house theaters in America, I argue that art-house theaters play a vital role in their communities, bringing film culture to small towns that wouldn't otherwise have a film culture, and it is precisely for that reason that they will continue to thrive. Art-house theaters have a symbiotic relationship with their communities, particularly in small towns, in which art houses play a vital role in bringing culture and business to their downtown communities. There is no better proof of how these communities are ardent supporters of art-house theaters than how they helped their respective theaters make the conversion from 35mm to digital film stock, and provide them continuous support. I will explore the universal conversion to digital film exhibition in the film industry and how that has affected art-house theaters through the case studies of the County Theater in Doylestown, PA and The Majestic in Gettysburg, PA. Finally, I will discuss the future of art houses based on the important roles they play in their communities relying on the most recent conversations surrounding them at the 2015 Art House Convergence.

Although many have sprung up in small towns across America in the last ten or twenty years, art houses are by no means a novel institution. According to Jeff Berg in his 2015 report on the state of art house exhibition in America, "Art-house cinemas have been around in one form or another since the Twenties, with substantial growth taking place after World War II" (Berg 55). Their numbers peaked in the late seventies until many could no longer stay in business with competition from cable television and multiplexes. Overall, however, as David Bordwell states in his e-book *Pandora's Digital Box* analyzing the implications of the digital changeover in the film industry, art houses have enjoyed a

“stable tradition” of being an American institution (Bordwell 135). While movie houses occasionally played European imports as early as the start of the 1920s, it wasn’t until 1927 that several theaters dedicated explicitly to arts programming arose in the major cities of New York, Washington, Baltimore, and Los Angeles. The “Little Cinema” movement, was inspired by the Little Theatre movement, where small local drama ensembles spread across the country. Before long, art houses proliferated, popping up in smaller cities as well. The invention of sound wiped out many of these theaters until after World War II, in which an influx of foreign films into the country spurred a renewed interest in art houses (Ibid). When art- house theaters resurfaced in the 40s, they began as city institutions, growing to become a staple of every large city in America. As a *Variety* article from 1949 noted, “With the exception of Newark...every city of 200,000 or over now sports at least one art theater” (Bordwell 137). The popularity of art houses in the post-war era was fueled by a hunger for foreign directors and films, especially British films such as *Henry V* (1944), which was released in America in 1946, playing for four year and grossing two million dollars (Bordwell 137). The rise of international film festivals also fed the fire that led to a growing market for art houses in the 1950s and early 1960s (Bordwell 138).

The golden era of art houses ended in the late 1960s, (Bordwell 140) with their numbers dropping off sharply in the early Eighties (Berg 55). There has been a “slight revival” in more recent years, however, as can be demonstrated in a trend of historic downtown theaters being converted into art-house cinemas over the last few decades. But these are different in one key respect: aside from large art house chains like Landmark, which originated in 1974 and now has locations all over the country, many art-house theaters have shifted from private ownership to being run as “not-for-profit entities,

funded by foundations, private donations, and government agencies, such as arts councils” (Bordwell 141). This is largely because many small-town, independent theaters, including the County and the Majestic, had previously seen sharp declines in business as commercial, for-profit theaters. Thus, changing their purpose and mission as venues offering community members specialized, art house fare saved them. Russ Collins, the Conference Director for the Art House Convergence, explained this trend as follows: “Most ‘new model’ Art House cinemas are nonprofit organizations managed by professionals who are expert in community-based cinema programming, volunteer management and the solicitation of philanthropic support from local cinephiles and community mavens” (Bordwell 141). In general, even though the model of the art house sector of cinema has changed over the years, as Bordwell states, “the market has refused to die” (Bordwell 140).

Art houses today have grown to encompass many forms. While sharing the general characterization of what Barbara Twist, the Conference Manager of the Art House Convergence, describes as “community-based and mission-driven,” each has its own style and history (Twist). Bordwell describes several potential scenarios in *Pandora’s Digital Box*, all ending in the general categorization of an art house, but demonstrating how “art and rep houses have personality, even flair” (Bordwell 132). For instance:

One venue might be a 1930s picture palace saved from the wrecking ball and renovated as a site of local history and a center for the performing arts. Another might be a sagging two-screener from the 1970s spiffed up and offering buns and designer coffees. Another might look like a decaying porn venue or a Cape Cod amateur playhouse (even though it’s in Seattle). The screen might be in a museum auditorium or a campus lecture hall. When an art house is built from scratch, it’s likely to have a gallery atmosphere. (Ibid)

Additionally, they can be located anywhere. It is perhaps no surprise that the largest concentration of art houses are still in cities because they are meccas of culture, but as

Bordwell states, “Most of these theaters are in urban centers, some are in the suburbs, and a surprising number are rural” (Ibid).

Despite having individual styles, one thing all art houses have in common is the fact that the state of art-house exhibition has always been precarious due to art house’s marginal position in the film industry (Berg 56). As such, “Not having the financial backing of theater chains and often having less cooperation from the major studios and certain specialized distributors when it comes to booking titles, these venues face a number of unique problems, the most recent being the switch to showing films in a digital format during the last five years” (Berg 55). Art houses have become an institution of many small towns across America; however, it is the small-town art houses, usually run as non-profits and relying on community support, that were most affected by the change in technology to digital film exhibition.

Just as art house theaters are not a new development, the basic technology of digital projection has been in existence for a number of years, making its debut in the summer of 1999 with Fox’s *Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace* and Miramax’s *An Ideal Husband* being presented in a rudimentary digital format (Berg 55). David Bordwell gives a timeline with key dates signaling the end of 35mm film projection a blog post from May 2013 entitled “End Times.” Beginning in July 2011, Technicolor closed its Los Angeles film laboratory; in October 2011, Panavision, Aaton, and Arri report that they would no longer be making film cameras; in November 2011, Twentieth Century Fox announced that it would stop supplying movie theaters with 35mm prints and only distribute films in DCP (Digital Cinema Package) format “within the next year or two”; in January 2012, Eastman Kodak filed for bankruptcy protection; and in March 2013, Fuji discontinued its sales of

negative and positive film stock for 35mm photography (Bordwell, "The Blog Series"). Ty Burr, a staff writer for the *Boston Globe*, cites James Cameron's *Avatar* as a "watershed moment" for movie theaters' conversion to digital technology (Burr). Jeffrey Gabel echoed this theory in an article for *The Evening Sun* newspaper, stating, "Perhaps the tipping point came when the film *Avatar* was released in 3-D. Such effects must be produced digitally and the success of *Avatar*, which was the first film to gross more than \$2 billion, further pushed the conversion to digital cinema" (Prudente). As Bordwell admits, however, after breaking down the end of film into a timeline, "Each of these events looked like turning points, but now they seem merely phases within a gradual shift. After all, the digital conversion of cinema has been in the works for about fifteen years" (Bordwell, "The Blog Series").

Even if digital projection technology was in development for many years, the sudden and rapid conversion nevertheless came as a shock to theater owners accustomed for decades to projecting films in 35mm. As Jesse Crooks, the Head Manager of the County Theater, said in our interview, "The motion picture technology was there earlier. People were shooting digitally and distributing them as film prints. The main barrier was controlling the intellectual property. So when it came, it was all of the sudden" (Crooks). The County Theater was not the only art-house theater to be caught off guard by the conversion from 35mm to digital projection in the film industry. Art houses all over the world were faced with the dire prospect of quickly coming up with the funds to covert their screens to digital or going dark, and the outlook was initially very grim. As John Fithian, the president of NATO (the National Association of Theater Owners) bluntly stated, it was as simple as, "Convert or die" (Hurley, "1,000 Small Theaters). Jeffrey Gabel, the Founding Executive Director of the Gettysburg Majestic Theater, was confident that the Majestic was

in a stable position to make the change by the end of 2013, but stated in a 2012 progress report, “We have no choice but to convert or close” (Gabel, “Downtown Movies May go Dark”).

The conversion to digital was not primarily an aesthetic choice, but rather was almost entirely financially motivated. Distribution companies can ship Digital Cinema Packages (DCP) to exhibitors for 90 percent less than the cost of shipping 35mm prints (Alexander, Blakely 50). According to an *Evening Sun* article on the Majestic’s conversion to digital, “Digital films can be shipped for a couple of dollars. More than a DVD, these devices are equipped with sophisticated security systems to prevent piracy” (Prudente). Additionally, digital distribution makes it possible for films to launch simultaneously on screens all around the world, serving as a way to boost global box-office receipts. Digital films can be played over and over again without diminishing the quality, as opposed to film stock, which is fragile and perishable (Alexander, Blakely 50). Other advantages of digital exhibition, for art houses in particular, are that it can increase programming flexibility, the lower cost may encourage distributors to release prints to exhibitors more quickly rather than slowly cycling 35mm prints through the market, and it becomes easier to schedule specialty programming events with filmmakers and speakers (Dombrowski 238). On the other hand, “The shift to digital distribution promises to save the industry billions of dollars, but it comes at a price” (Alexander, Blakely 48). With digital cinema projectors costing anywhere from \$60,000 to \$150,000 each, that “price” falls on the art house theaters that bring in a marginal income, relying on donations and community support to stay in business. The article surmises that many art houses will not be able to make the conversion because they cannot afford the expensive digital projection equipment (Ibid).

Reports on the state of art house theaters, especially with the digital changeover underway, written within the last few years, generally convey a pessimistic outlook on the future of art house theaters. Bordwell predicted in 2012 that, as art houses have always had a precarious existence, “The conversion to digital cinema projection could wipe out many of them” (Bordwell 132). Michael Hurley, the owner of two small theaters in Maine, speculated that up to 20 percent of art house theaters, totaling about 1,000 in number, could be lost because they cannot afford digital projection. He lamented that small towns all across America would be severely impacted by the loss: “For the same reason that every successful city center, mall and downtown works to attract and keep a movie theatre, small towns all over the world stand to lose a foundation that has kept them connected to the world” (Hurley, “1,000 Small Theaters”). Additionally, the major studios originally established VPFs, or virtual print fees, in order to encourage exhibitors to invest in DCI-compliant digital projection (d-cinema). This system of financing is a loan of sorts, in which exhibitors contract with a third-party digital integrator that sets up a bank loan in order to buy, install, and maintain d-cinema equipment. Essentially, as Lisa Dombrowski, associate film professor at Wesleyan University, explains, “the distributor passes along its savings (a digital print costs between \$100 and \$300, while a 35mm print averages between \$1,200 and \$2,000 or more) to the exhibitor to offset the investment in DCI-compliant projection” (Dombrowski 236). However, while benefitting the large multiplex theaters, VPF agreements are far more complicated for the art house sector, with Dombrowski explaining, “Even if an art house is able to secure a VPF agreement, distributor-subsidized financing does not come without strings attached” (Dombrowski 239). One of the reasons it is more difficult for art houses to accept VPF deals are that most of the deals require the

exhibitor to convert all of its screens within a limited amount of time which is not feasible for many small art house theaters trying to raise funds locally within their communities. Additionally, smaller distributors often are not willing to book with a theater that has a VPF deal because they have to pay the exhibitor to play their films, and the return from the ticket sales usually is not enough to cover the cost of the VPF (Ibid). John Toner, the Executive Director of Renew Theaters, stated, "My prediction is that the VPF deals will not work for small independent art houses. We value our freedom and independence too much. So it will come down to 'do it yourself' which is pretty much how all art houses started to begin with" (Dombrowski 239).

It is precisely that independent, do-it yourself spirit that has allowed art houses to play such vital roles within their communities. Contrary to the initial predictions of a few years ago, most have raised the funds to convert to digital projection and are still here, and are in it for the long haul. This is because in operating outside of the mainstream, art houses are free to offer a plethora of unique programming to their loyal audiences. Although many were met with challenges in raising the funds to convert to digital projection, they were able to benefit from community support. This shows how they remain viable downtown institutions due to the roles they play as linchpins in their communities, particularly small towns, all across America.

Such is the case with The County Theater in my hometown of Doylestown, Pennsylvania, a town of approximately 8,300 people in the borough and 17,565 representing the entire township (American FactFinder). Doylestown is located in bucolic Bucks County, an affluent suburb of Philadelphia. In a town where the median household income is \$97,507, one can expect that the downtown businesses would profit from so

much disposable income (Ibid). As I found out from Jesse Crooks, the General Manger of the theater, and from further research, that is exactly the case of The County Theater, which a 2003 newspaper article from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* entitled “Cinema as Revival: Theater enriches Doylestown” describes as “a cinema that is thought responsible for the flowering of a nightlife that was far from a full bouquet in the early ‘90s” (Naedele).

According to an informational video on the County Theater’s website, its own description as being “membership supported, community based, and nonprofit” (County Theater) closely reflects the more general definition of art houses as described by Russ Collins and Barbara Twist of The Art House Convergence who also describe these as being “community-based, mission-driven” (Twist). Even before my official interview with Jesse Crooks began, I could see how the theater was on a different caliber than a multiplex like a Regal or AMC. When I arrived for my interview on a blustery January afternoon, I was told to take a seat in the lobby and wait for Jesse, who was busy chasing down a customer to apologize for asking him to turn off his cellphone. When a tall young man with a full head of facial hair and flushed cheeks pushed through the silvery double doors into the main lobby area, I knew that must be Jesse. Jesse shook my hand and breathlessly explained that he was apologizing to someone he had to tell to put their cell phone away during a screening, which “doesn’t usually happen here.” Usually audiences take this requirement very seriously in order to allow every audience member to be fully absorbed in what’s playing on the screen (Crooks).

One of the first questions I asked Jesse when we sat down in the small office space off the projection room was about the history of the theater. As a history buff as well as a film enthusiast, his passion for the County bubbled over. While it is not necessary to know

the full history of Doylestown's County Theater in order to understand its current mission and role in its community, it is important to understand that the building the theater is currently housed in on East State Street has been operating as a movie theater since 1925. Before that, "the first dedicated presentation space [in town] was called The Princess Theater, established in 1913," proof that movie have been a downtown tradition in Doylestown for over a century (Crooks). Predating its being converted into a non-profit business offering art-house programming, the County has served as a movie house and central downtown destination since 1925 when it opened as the Strand Theater, a silent-era theater with an organ for musical accompaniment (Crooks). It has operated under its current name since 1938 when it opened with the film *Little Miss Broadway*, starring Shirley Temple (Cinema Treasures). According to Jesse, in the golden days of the theater, it "had over 700 people. Think about how many more people used to come on a sold-out night at the County Theater when there were so many other people, before television, before other movie theaters were around. It was a BIG deal in this town. Then came the rise of the multiplex" (Crooks). The theater used to be owned by a company called Budco that also owned the multiplex a few miles outside of town on Route 611 (Ibid). When the owners of the theater realized it was no longer profitable for them to operate both the multiplex and the County, they sold the theater to a local businessman named Jonathan Rudolph in 1980, but the theater was leased several more times over the next decade, and despite efforts to bring in more business and cut costs, such as splitting the main auditorium into two screening rooms with 155 and 130 seats each, attendance continued to decline (Wartenberg). The theater closed temporarily in 1990, and again in 1992, before being taken over by the local film society, Closely Watched Films. As Jesse said, "The theater

had declined, it was competing with the Barn, the downtown Doylestown in general had declined a little bit, and that's when we stepped in" (Crooks). When it became evident that the County was failing as a for-profit business, Closely Watched Films realized they could show films there as a non-profit, and after a series of renovations funded by magnanimous community donations, the theater started to take shape in its current form as a nonprofit art house theater playing an essential role in the community (Ibid). The County's parent nonprofit company, Renew Theaters, evolved from Closely Watched Films and, according to Jesse: "The term 'renew' in Renew Theaters has to do with the idea of downtown revitalization: taking theaters that were just going to be gutted, turned into retail space, torn down, whatever, and keeping them alive, revitalizing the theaters as well as playing a role in downtown revitalization" (Crooks). John Toner, the Executive Director of Renew Theaters, which now operates three other theaters in addition to the County (the Ambler in Ambler, Pa, the Hiway in Jenkintown, PA and the Princeton Garden Theater in Princeton, New Jersey) stresses that even though the same management team runs the theaters, each theater operates separately (Renew Theaters). "Each theater is a separate local nonprofit with its own board, finances and memberships," he said. "Renew was created so that the multiple theaters could remain separate and maintain their own local character and control, while still being run by one shared management team" (Toner). It was important that each theater be given the freedom to operate independently within their communities because art houses "need special care and treatment. They are local in character. Each runs a little differently" (Ibid).

In talking to Jesse, it became apparent that the County continues to apply that same love and care to this day, offering community members an experience they cannot get

anywhere else, and in return thriving as a downtown business and center of culture from the community support it receives. “From the beginning it’s been an art house and the mission had been arts programming,” said Jesse. However, Jesse has observed that even in the several years that he has worked at the theater, “what an art house movie is has kind of shifted, so that now you have subsidiaries of the big production companies that put out these smaller films that are supposed to be artsier, independently made, and it’s more tied into mainstream film” (Crooks). Some of these subsidiary companies producing the bulk of independent films screened at art houses include Fox Searchlight, Focus, and Sony Classics. These, according to Bordwell, “maintain the tradition of studio subsidiaries devoted to foreign and indie product” (Bordwell 139). The County no longer shows completely independently made works like they used to, “but that’s just kind of how the film industry changes, nothing to do with our admission changing,” said Jesse (Crooks). In fact, just in making a simple comparison of the films shown at the County and at the Majestic, both of which use a film booker to bring in quality films, in the 2013-2014 season, 19 titles overlapped, (Gabel, County Theater) and of those 19, ten were ranked among the highest-grossing independent films of those years, as tracked by *Indiewire* (Knegt).

It is not so much the regularly scheduled independent, foreign, and arts films these art house venues show that set them apart from multiplexes and from each other. “The programming that really makes us unique and differentiates us from the for-profit chains is our special event series,” said Jesse. “As a non-profit, we certainly have an educational mission.” As he went on to say, “We’re all about arts programming and providing film culture to the general public” (Crooks). The County, like all non-profit art houses, seeks to provide a service to its community in the form of cultural content, such as classic

(repertory) films, live performances, Saturday children's matinees, film lectures and discussions, Q&A sessions, and presentations from film reviewers from various publications such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Ibid).

The County's non-profit business model is really what allows them to put on specialty programming and play such a vital cultural role in the community, which it would not be able to do as a for-profit theater. "We bring in ticket revenue, but we couldn't afford to show art house movies like the special event series without public support for it," Jesse informed me (Ibid). The County also strives to support local filmmakers by screening their films several times a year as part of their regular programming and making it free to members, as a public service (Ibid). These specialty programs catering to niche audiences within the wider community demonstrate what Bordwell explains in *Pandora's Digital Box*, that, "Everything is about localism. These people know their customers, often by name. They sense the currents of taste crisscrossing their town...Art house operators and programmers aren't only about making money but about weaving unusual cinema into the fabric of their town's culture and subculture" (Bordwell 135). The diverse cultural options the County offers are what build a local film community within Doylestown. The County has a solid membership base, with over 4,000 official members lending annual support, and as a result, said Jesse:

We have people who are friends with each other because they always see each other in the theater. I can't tell you the number of days I have off and I'm at the Carversville General Store getting a sandwich and someone comes up to me about what we're playing in the theater or telling me how much they liked the movie we had or asking if we're going to get such and such movie. (Crooks)

Examples of some of the specialty programming and events the County has put on in the past that have attracted large crowds and fostered an appreciation for film culture include

their “lively arts program,” which is live theatrical performances broadcast via satellite on the County’s screen, primarily from the National Theater in London, and a special event series where there are two shows a week that “the film enthusiast community comes out for” and are only two dollars for anyone under 18, “to expose younger people to the older films and films they might not otherwise see and get them into the film culture” (Ibid). The special event films consist primarily of repertory films, ranging from the 30s through the 70s. “We do everything from classic Hollywood *Casablanca*, *Gone With the Wind*, that kind of stuff, to old archival B-movies like Ed Wood films,” said Jesse (Ibid). The popularity of these films demonstrates the unique experience of watching a film in an enlightened, cinephilic environment and the intense film culture the County has ingrained in the Doylestown community. For example, as Jesse pointed out, “Our classic movies, anybody could watch at home. You don’t have to come here to see *Casablanca*, but it sells out every year” (Ibid).

Jesse considers the cultural role of the County to be a “great benefit,” in generating membership and support for the theater. The other equally important benefit, he says, is in bringing business to the downtown and contributing to a vibrant nightlife:

The other benefit is the economics where we play a key role in nightlife in Doylestown. So people come in on a Friday night. They don’t just come in to see a movie. They come in and they see a movie, and they go out for dinner or they go out for a drink afterwards. We have a lot of business sponsors as well- people that run businesses in town. Doylestown is almost entirely small privately owned business where they own that store and that’s the only one kind of deal. We have very few chains here. I mean we have Starbucks in the center of town but we also have two other independent coffee shops. The Subway came in and went out of business. Now it’s a privately owned pizza place in that retail space. Almost everything’s privately owned and we certainly play a role in getting people to come into town for a full night out. (Crooks)

My parents are prime examples of people who often go the County just for the experience of it and to enjoy a night out on the town. Just the other day, they informed me that they were going to a screening of *While We're Young* (2015), starring Ben Stiller, Naomi Watts, and Amanda Seyfried, and produced by the independent production company, Scott Rudin Productions (IMDB). However, while the film seemed appealing enough for them to go pay ten dollars each and watch it, they often care less about what is playing than the fact that it's playing at the County. As my mom told me, "We love going into town. It's our town and we're proud of it and want to support it." While my parents enjoy an outing to the County every few weeks, they are by no means film mavens. Rather, they represent the primary demographic of "married couples over 40" who come to the theater and reflect Jesse's observation that, "We have a lot of people that come to see everything we show, and they really rely on our programming to get access to that realm of the art world. For the local community in a small town, that's how a lot of people get access to stuff and even find out about what's out there" (Crooks).

The revitalization of the County Theater in the 90s when Closely Watched Films took it over also played a key role in the revitalization of downtown Doylestown as a whole. As Jesse said, "Movie theaters can be a central part of downtown revitalization schemes and in Doylestown in certainly was" (Ibid). Although Jesse was not at the County in the 90s to personally witness the changes in the town as a result of the theater becoming an art house, he heard from members that Doylestown was in an economic slump at the time, where there wasn't much to do, recreationally, and "other people in the community have certainly credited the County Theater coming back as one of the influential factors of the whole revitalization of the downtown in Doylestown" (Ibid). Founding Executive Director

John Toner, who witnessed the transition in the theater when his nonprofit management company Renew Theaters took it over in 1992, agrees that, “Regarding small towns, movie theaters play a huge role in revitalizing downtown areas. When we bring 100,000 people through each theater’s doors on a yearly basis, it has a big ripple effect on local businesses, especially restaurants, which thrive and increase in our towns” (Toner).

Because of its strong membership base and as a result of being situated in a relatively affluent town, the County was well equipped to make the conversion to digital for their two screens. The change in technology to digital projection nevertheless came as a surprise, because the issue of rights management was resolved so suddenly as a result of DCP being so heavily encrypted (Crooks). Therefore, art houses all across the country had to rely on community support and spearheaded digital cinema campaigns in order to raise the conversion funds. Luckily, because the County as well as other art houses play such vital roles in bringing culture and business to their communities, the changeover was not as tumultuous as many figures in the film community initially predicted. For the County in particular, their journey to digital began in 2011 when the theater realized that Digital Cinema was “an existential challenge” and that unless they made the conversion soon, they would no longer be able to show most films, especially what are considered “upper tier” or crossover films produced by subsidiaries of the major production companies- films such as *The King’s Speech*, *The Artist*, and *Moonrise Kingdom* (Toner, “Journey to Digital Cinema”). Quite simply, as Toner explains, “We need to convert or die” (Ibid). The County, obviously, did not die, so it garnered all the support it needed to convert. The theater officially switched from 35mm film to Digital Cinema on June 28, 2012, after a 14-month campaign process. As Toner explains, the conversion would not have been possible without

community support. The County's "rallying cry," as Toner puts it, was "don't let our screens go dark!" (Ibid). They advertised their campaign to the public via website, handouts, slides, posters, press releases, and videos shown before movies and on their website (Ibid). As a nonprofit theater, the County raised the money for the conversion themselves through their "Digital Cinema Campaign," in which they raised \$310,000 from over 1,100 community donations, which exceeded their campaign goal of \$200,000, the minimum amount needed to install the digital cinema equipment. The additional money raised went towards other improvements, including the ability to upgrade resolution from 2K to 4K, new screens, 3D capability in one of the auditoriums, and other digital equipment (County Theater). While a few loyal patrons of the theater bestowed large grants, most of the donations were for \$100 or less, so, "It was very much a grassroots campaign" (Ibid). Toner states that members and regular patrons of the theater understood how dire their situation was, so they offered their support in order to save the theater they loved to frequent. As Jesse said, "Luckily we have a lot of community support and they came through and we got a ton of money. Now we have top-of-the-line digital technology and it's great" (Crooks). Additionally, the County never signed a VPF deal for two primary reasons: they did not need to, and they also worried that small distributors might not want to play their theater if they had to pay a Virtual Print Fee. "We have a general anxiety that VPF deals tie you too close to the distributor," said Toner. "As a small independent, we value our freedom. We want to make all of our own programming decisions" (Toner, "Journey to Digital Cinema").

Even though the industry speculates that digital projectors have a lifespan of only about ten years before they need to be replaced, both Jesse Crooks and John Toner, despite being film purists who appreciate original film, are confident in the future of DCP (Digital

Cinema Package). As John Toner shamelessly declares on his blog, “My name is John Toner and I’m a DCP believer” (Ibid). Toner, at the time his blog post was published in 2012, was also confident that other theaters would be able to make the conversion, as the County did with community support, optimistically announcing, “The good news is that Digital Cinema conversion is not as daunting as it initially seems” (Ibid). The reason the County and other art houses are able to make the expensive conversion on a limited budget is because, as Jesse reminds us, “The small towns, we have a bigger footprint as a theater than a theater like the IFC Center or the Ritzes have in major cities, so I mean we always need community support but I think the community might benefit more as a whole by having a business like us” (Crooks). The Doylestown community was willing to step up and offer their support because they did not want to lose the County for the valuable cultural and economic role it plays.

When I came to Gettysburg College as a freshman in 2011, I was delighted that the small, historic town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania had an art house theater that reminded me of the County. While I have not had the opportunity to visit the Majestic Theater as often as I would have liked in my four years as a student, I can see the role it plays as a linchpin in the Gettysburg community, and I am proud that my college decided to attach itself to such a critical cultural institution for the town of Gettysburg. With a population of only 7,620 people and a median household income of \$35,028, Gettysburg certainly qualifies as a small town, and being a rural, working-class community in addition to a college town, it is also not a particularly wealthy one, with much less disposable income to spend on a luxury like a night at the movies than the average citizen of a town like Doylestown (American FactFinder). Despite that fact, the Majestic still has a loyal base of

attendees to its nightly film series, and many of its patrons, being long-time Gettysburg residents, remember the theater's earlier days of being the only movie house in town, and remain regular movie-goers and supporters of the theater.

The Majestic Theater has been a performing arts center as well as an art house since 2005. Jeffrey Gabel, the Founding Executive Director of the Majestic, beamed with pride for his thriving theater as he gave my hand a firm shake and beckoned me into his spacious second-story office with wide, welcoming arms when I visited in February 2015. In addition to being the director of the theater, Mr. Gabel is also a charismatic man with a long career in the entertainment industry, beginning when he acted as a clown on public television.

As evidenced by the fact that Gabel spent almost half our time together answering my first question about the history of the Majestic Theater in Gettysburg, it is obvious that the Majestic has also played an important historical role in its community, and Jeffrey Gabel, like Jesse Crooks, is also a history nut and unashamed cinephile. Mr. Gabel provided me with a folder bursting with materials on the Majestic when I arrived; one of the documents was a printout entitled, "A Brief History of the Gettysburg Majestic Theater," with key dates in the theater's history, such as its grand opening in 1925, when Gettysburg College bought the Gettysburg hotel and the theater in 1988, and the theater's grand-reopening as part of the Le Van Performing Arts Center in November 2005 after a 16.5 million dollar renovation (Gabel, "Brief History). However, just in talking to Gabel for the first 40 minutes of our meeting, I got an informed and comprehensive history of the theater that was anything but brief.

Again, it is not necessary to elaborate upon the full history of the theater to understand the vital cultural and economic role it plays in the Gettysburg community, but one should know that, like the County, the Majestic has been functioning as a movie house in its current location since 1925. Therefore, the theater has a long and storied history of providing film to the town. It would not be possible, said Gabel, for the theater to function as it does today as a cultural center offering both live and film arts without its history of serving as Gettysburg's only film center:

We're unusual in that not many performing arts centers, particularly in a small community such as ours, have both a very active professional presenting series of international and national touring artists doing live shows as well as a nightly cinema series. We're pretty unusual in that sense and that evolved because the Majestic was built as a silent film theater and opened in 1925, and until 2004 when we closed it for the sixteen month renovation and expansion, it was the only movie theater in Adams County for nearly 80 years. (Gabel)

The Majestic has the distinction of being the longest-running movie theater in town. It was the center of downtown entertainment and commerce throughout the 30s, 40s, and 50s, which Gabel described as "the halcyon years for small town movie theaters before television came in" (Ibid). Small town theaters used to be the center of community life during the glory years of the Hollywood studio system, and throughout those years, the Majestic was owned by Warner Brothers and prospered as a commercial movie theater. "Movies were the thing," said Gabel. "That's what you did for entertainment. You can imagine in a rural county like this...People came dressed in coats and ties and women in their finest hats and white gloves. Going to a movie was a very common, popular thing for dating couples to do" (Ibid). After the theater went into a steady decline in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, it is now once again a downtown hub of culture and entertainment due to its

reinvention as an art house theater. The planning for this began in 1999, and was only made possible through community fundraising (Ibid).

The Majestic, like the County, played an enormous role in the downtown revitalization of Gettysburg, and to this day, remains a valuable business institution, in addition to a center for culture and art. According to Gabel, the town of Gettysburg was a “sorry sight” in the 1980s when Gettysburg College bought the hotel on the square, as well as the theater. The Gettysburg Hotel, connected to the Majestic building on the third floor, was destroyed by fire in 1983, and while the volunteer firemen attending to the fire managed to put it out before it spread to the theater, the hotel remained a burned-out shell until Gettysburg College purchased it in 1988 (Gabel, “Brief History”). When the college took over, they launched a campaign to completely renovate the theater, beginning in 1999 with the planning and fundraising phase, and ending on November 14, 2005 with the grand re-opening of the theater as an art house at the newly established LeVan Performing Arts Center. David LeVan, a Gettysburg native who graduated from Gettysburg College in the 60s and became president of the board from 1995-2005, remembered coming to movies at the Majestic as a kid where, as Gabel put it, he “spent more time sneaking into the balcony to kiss girls than doing his homework” (Gabel). It was Le Van’s close, personal relationship with the theater that prompted him to make his vision of partnering with the community and converting the college-owned theater into a performing arts center a reality. The renovation was a massive undertaking, totaling a whopping 16.5 million dollars, which would not have been possible without state grants totaling 8.5 million dollars and, most importantly, 4 million dollars raised solely within the community in about a three-year

time period (Ibid). According to Gabel, “How these theaters evolve, how they change, and how they’re saved is because of individuals who have a real relationship” (Ibid).

In the ten years that it has been in business as an arts house and performing arts center, the Majestic has had an enormous economic impact on downtown Gettysburg. As Gabel explained in an interview for *The Evening Sun* on the Majestic’s conversion to digital, the Majestic’s movie programming allows it to stay open 360 days a year and it is “one of the few downtown businesses to remain open after 6 p.m.”(Prudente). Therefore, it benefits other downtown businesses, such as the restaurants and borough parking garage (Ibid). Because the Majestic is a small town theater, as Gabel explained to the *Gettysburg Times*, “We work hard to know our patrons and call them by name. It’s our return customers who are the heart of our business” (Fletcher). Although the theater is owned by Gettysburg College, which underwrites a portion of its annual operating costs, it “relies upon its patrons and community to fund the programming services” (Ibid). It is these return customers that come regularly to the theater for a night on the town that serve a core economic purpose, supporting not only the theater, but also offering “economic synergy” to the Gettysburg community with their patronage of other downtown businesses (Ibid).

When I asked him why it was important for the town of Gettysburg to have a cultural center like the Majestic, Mr. Gabel leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head, and with a smile that said, “That’s an easy one,” he told me, “because culture builds community” (Gabel). Friends of Jeffrey Gabel who own theaters from all around the country that are part of the League of Historic American Theaters, in which the Majestic as well as the County both belong, remark how wonderful it is to have live theater

and cinema together, under one roof, because they feed off one another (Ibid). The League of Historic American Theaters is a nonprofit that promotes the preservation, restoration and operation of historic theaters, movie houses, and opera houses across the county; it does not distinguish between live performance theaters and cinemas, indicating the thin line between the performing and cinematic arts (League of Historic American Theaters). For instance, the Majestic will often promote the theater's theatrical performances in their movie previews, because the audiences for the live performances and their nightly film series overlap; according to Gabel, there is a "really nice synergy between the audiences"(Gabel). Surprisingly, however, the original plan that came out of the feasibility study for the Majestic before its grand reopening in 2005 which determined that the primary program the community was interested in was keeping movies downtown was to continue to show commercial films. It was only because of the two commercial cineplexes (The Gateway and Frank Theaters chain) that opened during the Majestic's renovation that the theater decided they needed to offer the community something different. "As it turns out," Gabel said, "programmatically the independent films, the documentaries, and everything are much more aligned programmatically and audience-wise with a performing arts center, so it all worked out nicely" (Ibid).

In fact, as evidence of the Majestic's success in offering art house fare, up to 15,000 people patronize the theater's film screenings annually, and when the theater showed the British independent film, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* in 2012, they brought in twice the amount of customers to the film than Frank Theaters, which also showed the film, did (Fletcher). Gabel attributes the Majestic's success as an art house to being attuned to the content the community desires, and offering them an ambiance and cultural experience

they can't get anywhere else. "You really have to get the community involved," he told me, because as he has observed as a theater owner, "the content really drives the audience" (Gabel). While Gabel relies on his film booker to bring in top-notch independent and foreign films, he features a variety of specialty cinema programming in order to target and reach out to specific groups in the community. For instance, the Majestic often partners with the community by allowing organizations to rent out the space for fundraising and their own programming, which the Majestic assists them with. One such example is a documentary series the Gettysburg Hospital puts on a few times a year on the current state of health care, followed by a panel of local doctors. The Majestic also hosts films and discussions about organic farming and farmland preservation to appeal to Gettysburg's rich farming community, and reaches out to Gettysburg's prominent Hispanic community by screening Spanish-language films several times a year (Ibid). The Majestic, in being owned by Gettysburg College and granting them the use of the space for the Sunderman Conservatory and performing arts, also plays an important role for the college community. So Gabel tries to tap into the college audience whenever he can by offering them relevant programming, such as working with the college to bring in something that has inter-generational appeal to bring in college student and their families over family weekend. The Majestic's core audience (about 60 percent) is college-educated, double-income homes, ranging in age from 50 to 80, which is the case for most art houses across the country because they have the most dispensable income (Ibid). Despite that fact, "the content really drives the audience," said Gabel (Ibid). When Gabel brings in a Spanish-language film, there will be a greater proportion of Hispanic people in the audience, and when he puts on family-oriented shows on Saturday mornings or afternoons at a reduced ticket price, the

audience will consist almost entirely of parents with their young children (Ibid). All of these special programs pick up on the local flavors of the area in order to bring culture to the community. As Gabel said, “The buildings are here to be filled with relevant activities, events, and programming, and that’s what we try to do. It’s great to have this beautiful facility, but you have to fill it on a nightly basis with programming that people are interested in. That’s how you use art culture to animate community” (Ibid).

When the Majestic was faced with the prospect of converting to digital, their campaign was all about keeping “the tradition of downtown movies” alive (Fletcher). Because of the 85-year history of downtown movies, it was a “no brainer,” for Gabel that that’s what their campaign would be about: saving downtown movies. As Gabel wrote in a press release on the progress of the Majestic Theater in 2012 as it faced the digital conversion, “Art film lovers from Camp Hill to Frederick have enjoyed our nightly line-up of high quality, intelligent, American independent films, foreign language films, documentaries, short subjects, and film festival prize winners” (Gabel “Progress 2012”). He wasn’t about to give that up, accepting the fate of 35mm as “Gone with the Wind” and realizing that the Majestic had “no choice but to convert or close” (Ibid). Gabel ended this report on an optimistic note, stating that the Majestic “must rely upon its patrons and community to fund the programming services it values most” but that the theater was in a stable position to make the conversion because of its “generous and loyal patrons,” that Gabel was confident would ensure that “the tradition of downtown movies will survive and thrive for years to come” (Ibid). As Gabel explained and pointed out to me on a brochure he provided me, the Majestic went with a classic silent film image from the film, *Safety Last!* (1923) for their digital campaign (Gabel, “Save our Downtown Movies”). This image, of the

actor Harold Lloyd precariously dangling from a clock tower, was chosen “to convey a desperate situation that was time sensitive” (Gabel). The campaign was executed as a classic fundraising campaign, in which the theater needed to raise at least \$125,000 to buy the state of the art digital projectors needed for the two nightly theaters, so they called on the community for support. As Gabel explained to me, a boyish grin splitting his face from ear to ear, the community was more than willing to step up and lend their financial support, exceeding the Majestic’s campaign goal with their generous donations. The twelve people on the Majestic’s advisory committee pledged \$2,500 each which amounted to \$35,000 total, and from there, it was up to the community to come through. The greatest benefactors were the Majestic’s core audience: the older, educated crowds that tend to be members and attend the theater on a regular basis. In general, it was the people and organizations that had the closest relationships with the theater that cared about it enough to save it with their support. “The money just rolled in! Hundreds and hundreds of hundred dollar gifts,” said Gabel, so that the theater was well over halfway to its campaign goal before even launching the public phrase. The Majestic met its goal of raising \$125,000 just four months into the campaign when donations were still pouring in, so Gabel upped to goal to \$150,000, and eight months into the campaign, \$165,000 had already been raised, so he ended the campaign and “called it a success” (Gabel). While Gabel was surprised that the Majestic was able to exceed its goal in such a short amount of time when he had anticipated it would take a year to raise the necessary funds, the campaign affirmed for him the vital role the theater plays in the community: “That was ten years of investment of showing great films with really good customer service and all of that built up a well of gratitude that once we tapped it and had a clear message and the time ticking,” they were

able to secure overwhelming support to make the conversion to digital and remain a viable downtown cultural institution (Ibid).

The County and the Majestic represent two case studies of art houses that successfully made the transition from 35mm to digital, suggesting that art houses have both a vital role and a vital future. Thanks to financial support from audience members who value the cultural and economic role the theaters play in their communities, art houses all across the country have converted to digital projection and remain valuable centers of film culture in their downtowns, suggesting that perhaps the outlook on the impact of the digital conversion on small-town, art house theaters is not as dire as it once seemed. According to a recent report on art houses and their roles in being “part of the American fabric, making communities where they have survived more livable,” the prognosis of art house theaters, in the wake of the conversion to digital and competition in viewership from Video on Demand (VOD), is optimistic. According to Julia Jacobs, the author of the report, the way in which art houses fit into the film industry appears to be simple in that they “lend exposure to films deemed not commercial enough (whether stylistically or in subject matter) to otherwise make it to a screen.” However, “from an audience’s standpoint, the role they play is arguably more valuable-promoting culture and community by bringing people together for a singular collective experience, edifying a public that craves a broader, more rounded cinematic education than the commercial stuff can teach” (Jacobs 66).

Art houses play a valuable cultural and educational role in their communities, one that is so vital that most have managed to escape the ominous fate that many in the film community, even scholars such as David Bordwell, predicted. In fact, Bordwell, who was so certain in his e-book *Pandora’s Digital Box* that the conversion to digital would wipe out

many art houses, felt the need to post updated information on the state of the digital conversion at the end of 2013 in a blog series called “End Times.” Though Bordwell remained pessimistic about the fates of the roughly 3,200 analog venues that had yet to convert, he conceded that of about 40,000 movie theater screens in America, nearly 93 percent had made the conversion at that time (Bordwell, “Blog Series”). Small-town theater owner, Michael Hurley, of the Colonial and Temple theaters in Main, wrote in February 2012 about the imminent threat small-town theaters around the country faced because they couldn’t afford to convert to digital. However, two years later, in January 2014, Hurley submitted a more optimistic outlook to *Indiewire*, with the introduction to the article reporting, “While some small, independently owned theaters continue to struggle to make the industry-imposed transition from 35-millimeter film to digital, it hasn’t been the disaster Hurley had predicted. The transition to digital hasn’t been easy, but it won’t be the death of small theaters” (Hurley, “Happy Ending”). Hurley himself explains that it is difficult to know exactly how many small, independent theaters were lost in the digital changeover, and while many had to close, many have reopened under new management, and many theaters, as the County and the Majestic demonstrate, “have found patrons and communities ready to help them pay for the conversion and stories abound of successful fundraising conversion drives...People do love their small-town movie theaters” (Ibid). Hurley optimistically declares that, even though the conversion is still underway, “the light at the end of the tunnel is in sight” (Ibid).

A group that exudes this positive attitude regarding the future of America’s small-town art house theaters on a large scale is the Art House Convergence, a group of over 50 affiliated art house theaters from across the country that holds an annual conference in

Midway, Utah at the site of the Sundance Film Festival (Art House Convergence). The first gathering of the Art House Convergence was in 2005 when the Sundance Institute brought together 14 art houses from around the United States (Loria). This year, over 500 attendees representing America's small, independent theaters came together to share ideas and engage in discussion (Art House Convergence). The latest conference, which was held from January 19-22, 2015, focused on the future of America's art house theaters and featured sessions on issues that pertain to all art houses as small business, such as attracting younger and more diverse audiences, film education, and eventising, which is, as Barbara Twist, Conference Manager, explains, "making your cinema experience way better than the home cinema experience" (Ibid). Some of the sessions included, "Community as Brand," "Audience Members as Makers," "Crowd-building your Audience," "The Nonprofit Art House: Mission, Message, and the Bottom Line," and "Art House Communities and the Future of Independent Film" (Ibid). What these titles convey is an emphasis on community and audience. Interestingly, not a single one of the more-than-forty sessions held over the conference's four days was devoted to the issue of converting to digital cinema. "It's a reality now, and that's just kind of where we are," Twist said in a podcast on the event. "Most theaters have converted, and if they haven't, they're in the process of converting" (Ibid).

If art houses are to continue to survive, which art house exhibitors across America are confident they will, they will need to "continually figure out how to remain relevant as culture and people's use of pastime evolves," according to Jeffrey Gabel (Gabel). That means appealing to the community and providing them a cultural education, and working to attract a diverse audience, which as Gabel says, "all comes down to great content" (Ibid).

The issue in which the owners of all art house theaters must continually focus their attention “is about much more than movies. It’s about keeping struggling downtowns alive and bringing people together in an age when it’s easier to stay at home and fire up the 48-inch screen” (Burr). As Julia Jacobs reminds us in her study of art houses, art houses build community, “But just as discerning art house fare fosters community, so too does community determine what that fare should be” (Jacobs 68). Barbara Twist says that art house theaters, in contrast to the multiplexes that “continue to play large-scale, blockbuster titles that either do incredibly well or bomb completely” reflect the communities they are in, even while sharing a similar audience across the nation (Twist). Russ Collins, the Conference Director for the Art House Convergence, believes that art house cinemas “need to think of themselves not just as business, but as a cultural dynamic that can operate effectively within a community” (Jacobs 69). Therefore, art house exhibitors have a responsibility to promote film culture in their towns and foster a “deeper connection to film screenings” through community engagement, education, and passion- as Twists says, “art house owners are often film nuts themselves” (Twist). Being aware of what the local film-viewing community is passionate about and delivering them that content is key.

The digital conversion, for most art houses, has become a thing of the past; however, art houses continue to face other, more long-term challenges. One of these challenges, as Bordwell explores in *Pandora’s Digital Box*, is that the baby boomer generation that makes up the core audience of most art houses, including the County and the Majestic, will eventually die out, which raises the alarming question of, “Where will new patrons come from?” (Bordwell 151). Younger generations have become accustomed to time-shifting and immediate access, says Bordwell (Ibid). Additionally, as studies show, “even when art

houses are near college campuses, students make up a small fraction of the audience.”

(Ibid). The Majestic Theater is owned by Gettysburg College and rents out its space to the Sunderman Music Conservatory and various college functions, yet their core audience tends to be middle-class couples in their fifties or older, who are also the ones that came through the most in funding their digital conversion (Gabel). The Bryn Mawr Film Institute (BMFI) is another example of an art house theater situated in an affluent, bustling college town in which many people in the area, particularly college students, are not even aware that the theater exists. Despite affordable ticket prices, a diverse array of films, and all of the special screenings and events intended to appeal to them, BMFI fails to attract a significant portion of the nearly 6,000 college students that attend the four colleges within a 1.25 mile radius (Berg 58).

Video-on-demand (VOD) poses a potential threat to the art house as well by making it more convenient and less expensive for people to watch films in their own homes, as opposed to the communal experience of watching them in a theater. These threats to the already-marginalized business of art houses may appear daunting and condemning, but the art house community is confident that art houses will endure. Barbara Twist says that in order to attract a broader, more diverse audience, it is vital for art houses to reach out with their content to children between the ages of five and 12, “as they are our future audience,” and, “If we don’t get kids to go to the movie theaters as they are growing up, they won’t remember to choose us as an activity when they are older” (Twist). Jeffrey Gabel does not feel threatened by the fact that “we all have our fine art houses on our iPads, our iPhones, or our computers,” but rather sees the advancements in technology as an asset in that “it opens access to more people that can find their genre, their family, gay/lesbian, any

particular culture, language, etc.” (Gabel). The Majestic will simply have to be prepared to respond to changes in the industry, as they were for the digital conversion, by finding “ways that make the communal viewing experience something that people really appreciate and still value” (Gabel). Jesse Crooks of the County Theater is optimistic about the future of art house theaters as well, telling me, “There are people that are very scared about iPads, but if you look at the people who are coming here, they’re coming here to get out of the house, to have a night on the town, to enjoy the weekend” (Crooks). Julia Jacobs of the article “Art House Nation,” poses the question of where the “humble art house stands” in relation to the “VOD meteor hurtling straight towards the multiplex,” but then gives her answer that, “The prognosis, it seems, is optimistic- as long as we the people care enough to act in the footsteps of a number of pioneering art house champions” (Jacobs 66). Many of these pioneering art house champions were in attendance at the 2015 conference of the Art House Convergence, where they shared in their successes and looked optimistically towards the future. One theater director, Carol Johnson from the Amherst Cinema in Amherst, Massachusetts, discussed in a panel of nine art house theaters the “tremendous series of successes” that the theater has come through, and how they are “thriving despite all the challenges many of us have suffered or faced: video on demand, the recession, conversion to DCP, and films by Seth Rogen” (9 Art House Tales). Russ Collins, the Conference Director of the Art House Convergence, announced his high hopes for art houses at the latest conference as well:

The art house sector, I believe, as demonstrated by The Art House Convergence, is actually a growing sector of the cinema market in North America. Now, that being said, it’s still a smallish part of the market, but it represents the diversity and richness of cinema culture, and that’s the most important thing that I think the art houses provide. Not only a local place that’s devoted to cinema culture, but a place that’s devoted to exploring the richness and diversity of cinema culture because

cinema, in my mind, is a lot like music in that it's a very intuitive art form to experience and it's also very rich, and we don't think of music as having one single market. We think of it having lots of little markets and some big markets, so there are some music acts that play arena markets and some acts that play clubs. There are folk artists. There are jazz artists. There are hip-hop artists. There are pop artists. There are gospel artists. There are blues artists. There are all kinds of musical forms, and we seem to understand each of those in the pockets they exist. Cinema, I believe, is very similar. It's got all kinds of different forms. You've got independent films. You've got documentary films. You've got classic films. You've got films that are designed for worldwide consumption. You've got films that are designed for local consumption, and there is just this richness and diversity that can be celebrated. That's what the art house is dedicated to. (Art House Convergence)

Collin's statement reflects the optimistic attitude of the Art House Convergence as a whole, and the enthusiasm of art house owners from around the world. Collins is not concerned by changes in technology and the film industry, "Because the well-operated art house theater is close to its community and passionate about the art form that it celebrates, [so] it can survive changes that might be less accepted in the commercial dynamic" (Jacobs 69). If the majority of America's art houses can come through the digital conversion with flying colors, thanks to the vital roles they play within their communities, what's stopping them from sticking around another ten, 20, 100 years?

Russ Collins is 100 percent sure that, even 100 years from now, art houses will still be around in some form or another, that "there will be passionate and struggling independent theatrical exhibitors out there in cities large and small, showing movies by classic, great, and up-and-coming filmmakers to cinephiles in their community in uncountable places throughout the world" (Art House Convergence). Thinking back to all of the times I have sat down in one of the darkened auditoriums of The County to catch the latest indie, like *The Way, Way Back* or *The Theory of Everything*, my glass bottle of Cherry Cola in the cup holder, and a pinstriped bag of butter-drenched popcorn on my lap, I

cherish those memories for the *events* that they were, and cannot imagine a world without independent movie theaters. I relate with what Jeffrey Gabel told me in our interview: “Film audiences, particularly for independent films, tend to be very passionate and very loyal, and still appreciate attending movies in community because they value the collective experience of how your emotions are magnified when you’re in a theater and it’s dark and you’re totally focused on the story” (Gabel). I suppose I am one of those passionate cinemagoers. I could not get the same experience lying in bed with my laptop. Obviously, not every town in America has an art house theater. According to Barbara Twist, it is not necessary that every town have a space devoted exclusively to film, but, “It is vital that every town of any size has a film exhibitor,” whether it be integrated into a performing arts space (as the Majestic’s films are), a university, or a museum. I am grateful that my home and college towns recognize and celebrate the vital role film culture plays in its communities. Barbara Twist concluded our interview on a positive note regarding the future of America’s art house theaters: it is always discussed, she said, but the discussion is focused on “‘Where will we be?’ and not ‘Will we be here?’” (Twist). For now, anyway, I think it is safe to say that the future of America’s art house theaters is safe: they are determined to stick around to continue serving an economic role in their communities and bring them a cultural experience only art houses can provide.

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