

Journal Title: *Wide Screen*
Vol. 9, No.1, July 2022
ISSN: 1757-3920
URL: <http://widescreenjournal.org>

L.A.'s PANDEMIC-ERA UNDERGROUND DIGITAL CINEMATHEQUES

NATHAN SCOLL

Abstract: This article has two facets, a to-date survey and implications for past and future screening venues and communities. The bulk of the article chronicles the creation, formatting, distinctions, and aims of three primary online digital cinematheques, The Midnight Now, The Museum of Home Video, and Valley Vox Theatre. I detail the development and interrelationship of the overlapping and occasionally shared personnel and audiences of these platforms, then go on to then encapsulate their evolution and attempts to sustain longer-range plans amidst increasing vaccination rates and the re-openings of conventional theaters.

The article otherwise positions the three digital cinematheques as communal correctives to the proto-#MeToo leadership scandals that plagued analogue, forerunner cinematheques such as Austin's Alamo Drafthouse and Los Angeles's CineFamily. The creators and runners of these COVID-prompted online, Los Angeles based digital cinematheques were abused staff and programmers of CineFamily, and they have made a conscious and deliberative effort to shape their forums as a de facto rejection of the toxicity of disgraced venues. The channels thereby serve as something of a reclamation-cum-redemption of elements worth salvaging from earlier cinephile communities and spaces, while pointing to the progressive potential these alternative online spaces hold for post-COVID exhibition and media consumption.

“Movies and Theaters Are Coming Back, But What About L.A.'s Treasured Art Houses?” ask Ryan Faughnder and Mark Olsen in the Calendar section of the July 13, 2021 *Los Angeles Times*. An even broader query occurs in the penultimate paragraph of the article: “What makes a movie theater? Is it the movies themselves, the specific titles that are playing, or is it something about the physical space, the people inside or the overall vibe of the place?” The question looms for both mainstream theatrical behemoths and niche, independent theaters alike as COVID

restrictions ease, vaccinations increase in key urban markets, and as streaming options continue to grow.

Seemingly unbeknownst to Faughnder and Olsen, some LA-based cinematheques have been furtively—and digitally— providing some answers to those questions over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantines. Streaming cinematheques such as The Midnight Now, The Museum of Home Video, and the Valley Vox Theatre have provided a bridge between the pre-pandemic “treasured art house” culture of Los Angeles and posited alternative definitions to “what makes a movie theater a movie theater?” Whether considered iVenues, micro cinemas, digital cinematheques, niche streamers, considered more broadly as New Media or the latest incarnation of pirate broadcasting, these programmers and forums have provided new templates, peoples, spaces, and an “overall vibe” of moviegoing.¹ The digital cinematheques have fused the pandemic phenomenon of virtual screening parties via internet platforms like Zoom, MS Teams, Kast, and TwitchTV with the curated and communally oriented programming of post- “Gen X” arthouse venues like Austin-based Alamo Drafthouse and Los Angeles’ now-defunct Cinefamily. As they evolve their specific brands and expand their audiences each week throughout the pandemic, the digital cinematheques have served to offset the art-and-revival-house void of art and independent moviegoing not only in Los Angeles, but globally. Rather than arbitrary ad hoc screenings, participants log-in for specific and scheduled broadcasts from all over Southern California and beyond to miscellaneous EU and antipodean territories.

USC cinema professor David E. James chronicled the former spate of Los Angeles’ key alternative cinematheques and screening spaces in a 2009 *Film Quarterly* piece entitled “L.A.’s Hipster Cinema.” His abstract summarizes these offline and material sites as “ubiquitous, although in intertwined utopian and dystopian forms” (James, 67). In the article, James uses utopian and dystopian schematics somewhat implicitly to connote the fluctuating and dislocated spatial and architectural components of the various cinematheques and a related assessment of the anomie of their nexus of politics, culture, and spectatorial consumption and commodification. Phenomena of televisual billboards, increasingly arbitrary and elusive audience demographics, and slippery specifics of both format and audience called into question the established interplay and community

¹ I refer to them as digital cinematheques given their cumulative and dominant emphasis on feature-length cinema and that their repertory tendencies and presentational approaches align with traditional and more recent arthouses and independent theaters.

of spectators, venues, and programmers. Amidst the reality of a global pandemic, the digital cinematheques have since taken on different and more explicit combinations of utopian and dystopian elements of cinema culture and exhibition. The dystopian components of cinema culture amidst quarantine-mediated screenings are no longer abstract, while their utopianism is embodied in the more egalitarian approach to form and forum than previous brick-and-mortar spaces enabled. Over a year and a half into the COVID-19 era, the digital cinematheque participants are more acutely united in a sensibility and format in these current digital spaces than the more disparate physical spaces often allowed.

The more finite and accessible nature of the new digital cinematheques has fostered substantial overlap in their protocols, interfaces, and audiences, largely avoiding the paradox of choice in which an abundance of options can diffuse or diminish the user's satisfaction in their decisions. In establishing an overlapping and moderate community of programmers and audiences and offering them non-competing time slots for programming, the digital cinematheques have potentially facilitated a more cohesive community than the cohort of physical theaters profiled by James in 2009. The frequent and myriad participants in these digital cinematheques have found the weekly, bi-weekly, and monthly programming a fun and a therapeutic engine for alleviating social isolation and sequestered spectatorship. The pandemic era livestreams have become appointment viewing for scores of persons—even hundreds.²

Note: I consciously use the term “participants” rather than “audiences” since the interactivity of these forums is facilitated by a live, “real-time” joint commentary within a chat window running in simulcast with the broadcast media. The discussion and comment thread give the digital cinematheques a unique advantage over their offline counterparts, at least as concerns the potential for a vibrant community of enthusiasts beyond the classical form of theatrical spectatorship. In an often more acute manner of mainstream moviegoing, one of the frequent disadvantages of theatrical viewing with cinema aficionados can be the tensions fostered by overly chatty patrons who talk among themselves and/or at the screen opposite those who prefer a somewhat sacrosanct and mute spectatorship. The voluntary and silent nature of the chat window

² For some, the screenings have gone beyond appointment viewing; Jordan Dobbs Rosa of The Midnight Now admits “there have been people that came to me and like [said] ‘I want to be clear... not just “hey thanks for putting on a show” but...this kinda saved my life... I had this to look forward to.’” This sentiment applies to the programmers as well in some cases, Kathleen Ashe of Valley Vox Theatre saying that in putting on a cinematheque with her collaborators, “we’ve saved each other through this whole process.”

avoids these tensions, while still allowing the interactive elements for those who might otherwise confuse a movie theater for their living room to the frustration of their fellow patrons. The discussion thread has the advantage of avoiding tensions within the chat as well. Moderators can warn and, if needed, remove unruly patrons without risk of further escalation or physical altercation. Jenny Nixon of The Museum of Home Video has done this on the few occasions that have mandated deleting offending patrons' access to the stream and thread, e.g., when after two of her warnings as co-showrunner and moderator, a patron kept making transphobic and lewd remarks. Others can avoid confrontation entirely; In his purview as moderator and host of The Midnight Now, Jordan Dobbs Rosa has utilized a chat filter which flags certain words and terms, thereby requiring his approval before potentially offensive remarks can even be posted. In a departure from the frequency and enablement (tacit or otherwise) of problematic patrons of certain arthouse and independent venues, these are conscious and deliberate measures advanced by the programmers to ensure a safe and respectful environment for participants in a manner not as feasible in conventional theatrical settings.

The chat thread also actively facilitates and encourages more social interaction than past physical settings. While former Los Angeles art/indie/repertory cinematheque Cinefamily had a back patio in which patrons could mingle and drink in conjunction with screenings and events, most physical theaters are limited to lobbies and whatever space may be afforded beneath a marquee façade. However, the digital cinematheques' chat feature allows a commons area in which all may mingle as much or as little as they like. These chats are often quite funny and educational by virtue of the myriad references, suggestions, and facts participants offer each other. In addition, since almost all participants apply usernames, the chats afford a semi-anonymity that eases the potential anxiety of approaching strangers in real life settings. For many participants, the chat has become as much of a draw as the streamed curated content and delivers on the communal and democratizing promise of both online communities and community-minded arthouse culture.

The digital cinematheques are otherwise capable of responding in relative concurrence to audience feedback and current events in ways traditional venues would find logistically impossible. The new cinematheques can respond to real-world contexts and real-time chat considerations untethered from booking and scheduling physical media (namely, locating and procuring prints), as well as calendaring and promoting them in sufficient advance to ensure an

audience. This flexibility and ease of exhibition also allows the digital cinemas to be more political and activist in ways mostly foreign to and prohibited by their antecedent cinematheques.

Beyond the diversion, spectatorship, engagement, and socializing the digital cinematheques have offered amidst a global crisis, it has been especially impressive that the burgeoning community, diversity, and inclusiveness of these platforms serve as a corrective for much of the toxicity that had been plaguing miscellaneous art and independent film cultures prior to the pandemic. With respect to Faughnder and Olsen's article, Los Angeles' independent theaters have faced specific existential and operational challenges far in advance of any COVID concerns and pandemic closures. In late August of 2017 an anonymous email was sent to hundreds of addressees within with the Los Angeles independent film community and its affiliated screening venues. The email outlined multiple accusations of sexual harassment and employee abuse at Cinefamily, up to then a beloved hub of the city's alternative cinema culture. These accusations largely surrounded lawsuits and various abuse allegations against co-founder Hadrian Belove and Shadi Elnashai, vice president of the board of directors. Other select board members and management were also implicated for allegedly allowing the abuse to fester and for obstructing recourse to employee complaints.³ The short list of alleged culprits and enablers among the upper echelons of the Cinefamily hierarchy made for a toxic work environment for a majority percentage of the workers. "Regardless of whether people had a good time at Cinefamily, no one who worked there at any time, at any era, for however long, no one has a good exit story. If you could find someone who has a good exit story from Cinefamily, they weren't there for more than a week" says Bret Berg, a former co-programmer at Cinefamily and current co-runner of Museum of Home Video.

These problems of sexism and harassment were not limited to the Los Angeles area and theaters. Shortly after the Cinefamily email, similar allegations were made public surrounding Harry Knowles and management at the landmark Austin, TX cinematheque Alamo Drafthouse. Mere weeks later, the *New York Times*' expose on Harvey Weinstein's myriad sexual assault allegations was published, effectively subsuming the Cinefamily and Alamo Drafthouse stories and expanding the scope of investigation and reckoning beyond indie cinematheques into

³ According to several former workers and myriad articles documenting the downfall of Cinefamily, most of the toxicity was localized to the two accused and a few key members of the board of directors, rather than spread amidst most staff and programmers. The site www.cinefamilyaccountability.org provides an exhaustive archive of resource and testimonials.

independent cinema and cinema industries at large. An *LA Weekly* postmortem article on Cinefamily includes a summation that might well be applied to much of both independent and mainstream cinema culture pre-#MeToo: “Cinefamily was a place with a lot of magic accompanied by no shortage of toxicity and sexism.” Between the dissolution of Cinefamily, multiple delays and rocky start of Alamo Drafthouse’s Los Angeles theater launch, and lack of acceptable venues to reboot a more salubrious form of the positive contributions of Cinefamily, Los Angeles independent and art house enthusiasts were left with a comparable void of communal alternative film culture. Pandemic shutdowns and theater closures only exacerbated the absence further.

However, as of Spring and Summer 2020, several former Cinefamily and Drafthouse staff and programmers have informally regrouped as the primary creators and producers of weekly digital cinematheques The Midnight Now and The Museum of Home Video. The latter has expanded into a channel with repertory programming and an accompanying Patreon account, wherein subscribers can access the archive of all broadcasts.⁴ Many former habitues of Cinefamily and Drafthouse have followed these programmers to their new platforms and comprise a substantial portion of frequent participants and Patreon subscribers. The adjacent Valley Vox Theatre is primarily the purview of Kathleen Ashe, who worked for decades in independent film production and with AKBAR, a landmark LGBTQIA-leaning bar and cabaret in Los Angeles’ Silverlake neighborhood. These digital cinematheques have not only comprised a tenable and vital substitute for pandemic-era arthouse and independent film exhibition and culture. In addition, they have done so by consciously rejecting the toxicity surrounding the previous iterations of the same film and filmgoing worlds. They resume the promise David E James saw in the initial boom of Los Angeles’ alternative cinematheques in 2008, one which expands “the possibilities of contemporary non-industrial film culture in general” (James, 57) into a more equitable and politically progressive community.

This article focuses on the three primary LA-based cinematheques, to chronicle their motivations, development, specificities, and cultivation of audiences, in addition to their plans as conventional theatrical venues re-open. Beyond these taxonomic aims, I demonstrate the effect each has had of effective rehabilitation and detoxification of earlier forums and templates of art and indie exhibition. Serving as a potential answer to questions raised by James, Faughnder and

⁴ The creators of Deathblade, one of the repertory shows on the Museum of Home Video that focuses on *outré* and extreme direct-to-video action movies, are two veterans of Alamo Drafthouse.

Olsen, and whomever else, digital cinematheques not only point towards evolving operational and logistical definitions of indie and arthouse exhibition and curation, they offer a progressive moral template for the same metrics. The following analysis and commentary are based on observations and analysis drawn from my own participation⁵ in the digital cinematheques throughout the pandemic, and on interviews with the primary creators of each venue, which have been lightly edited for clarity and economy.

The Midnight Now

After an accomplished career as a child actor and, later, as a produced screenwriter and director, Mya Stark was the first director of development at Cinefamily. Of her departure, she says in a manner both suggestive and elliptic, “I left in 2013 when I couldn’t succeed in making changes to how it was managed.” Her conception of *The Midnight Now* was initially conceived in an only semi-related context, rather than as a direct counter to shortcomings at Cinefamily.

The *Midnight Now*’ is something I thought of quite a few years ago right after I saw my first 360 film. I instantly wanted to create a VR movie theater environment in which to display a film, but with a sense of physical presence and live programmers introducing the films and doing events. A “midnight movies” theater that was available anytime. Basically, to digitally recreate Cinefamily.

She is quick to add, “I should clarify: when I say ‘recreate Cinefamily’ I mean the aforementioned weird aesthetic and the community only. What was happening upstairs [at the Cinefamily offices] was not in any way necessary to create those, despite how the powers that were would have it.”

Of starting a new forum with better protocols, she says, “It was the only motivation for it. The impetus was nothing to do with wanting to see any particular movies, it was to curate an audience of people—primarily from the LA film community I already knew—to experience closeness over cinema with.” To this end, she drew upon Jordan Dobbs Rosa, former general theater manager of Cinefamily. While he has gone on into a career in TV animation since leaving Cinefamily in 2012, Rosa’s background is that of a typical stage “techie” in both analog and digital terms, meaning he is both adept with the logistics of physical and structural aspects of

⁵ Note: my participation therein is pseudonymous, as are most participants’ identities. While assorted participants know each other personally, almost everyone employs a username rather than real world identification in the chats.

theatrical venues, and of managing and enabling their software/ IT needs and digital media promotion. The analog skill set made him an ideal hire for Cinefamily and its ageing, maintenance-intensive Silent Movie Theater headquarters, while his digital skills made him an obvious choice for Stark to approach for launching a streaming cinematheque. It was Rosa who explored streaming format options and suggested Kast for their initial launch (though they have since switched to Twitch).

As with Stark's somewhat organic approach to a curated community of Los Angeles cinephiles and a complementary ethos among them, much of their rollout was likewise an almost automatic and mellifluous process. After a focused streaming session to beta test their technology and approach in the opening weeks of the pandemic lockdowns, the duo properly launched on March 28, 2020, making them the first of the LA-based digital cinematheques to debut. As their first feature, they showed *Mr. Go* (Kim, 2013), a South Korean baseball comedy described on Wikipedia as being "about a gorilla who becomes a baseball superstar and his 15-year-old female manager." This selection inaugurated the "house style" of Midnight Now screenings; per the namesake, the cinematheque is guided by a classical Midnight Movie ethos of cult, fringe, and otherwise mutated genre fare. Subsequent programming slates have included surf and skateboarding movies, Cryptids month, post-apocalyptic month, and a beach party movie retrospective and tribute.

Moreover, the inaugural selection inadvertently demonstrated what would become a hallmark of the digital cinematheques in an arguable advantage they possess over their physically located counterparts: the ability to respond to current events in approximate real time. In this case, the baseball film was selected as a substitute for the COVID-mandated cancellation of Major League Baseball. In a conventional arthouse theater where logistics of scheduling, licenses, and physical media elements are necessarily planned months in advance, a digital cinematheque has far fewer hurdles to clear in presenting and exhibiting content. The Midnight Now has consistently been able to exploit this temporal and logistical advantage. For instance, after the passing of actor Charles Grodin, they were able to immediately change course on that weekend's stream to compile a tribute to the actor via a highlight reel pre-show and a feature screening of one of his landmark

performances in *The Heartbreak Kid* (May, 1972). It is also significant that the film is itself rather difficult to access on analog consumer media⁶ and only (quasi-legally) available to stream on YouTube.

A standard cinematheque would face significant obstacles in being able to respond as quickly or at all. To screen a film would require legally obtaining a print or physical DCP, then creating a slot to screen it amidst somewhat intractable predetermined scheduling and logistics of their existing calendar. Advertising such a last-minute screening would in turn prove risky to alerting and attracting sufficient patrons to justify the cost of licensing the print and legal clearances to screen it. Meanwhile, even if a digital copy of the film could be suddenly and easily obtained for an informal watch party of select friends and/or family, it would limit the scope of communal spectatorship to a small number of participants. Beyond a relative ease with acquiring and screening content on short notice, through a combination of technological savvy and curated, mediated participants, the digital cinematheques are proving able to split the difference between the binary and established formats of the communal theatrical and the more isolated domestic screening options, all by enabling a broadly communal temporal spectatorship despite physical home isolation.

A more significant facet of digital cinematheques *kairos* and temporal flexibility is their ability to respond to real-world and real-time considerations comes via their approach to the other societal tumults of the pandemic era, namely BLM protests and a hyper-partisan presidential election year. Rosa recalls: “The BLM riots were super-happening end of May, I spent the last week of May, that was *bad*... that was like the first week of pandemic. Everything felt heavy. I remember going to check with my more politically minded, politically hip folk of ‘do we just go dark this weekend?’” His consultation took place in part on The Midnight Now’s social media, allowing Rosa to get swift and direct feedback from his patrons in a manner unfeasible throughout much of the history of theatrical exhibition. After a resulting consensus to proceed, he showed a politically charged hip-hop preshow, followed by a feature presentation of *Fear of Black Hat* (Cundieff, 1993). The following week was an Ernest Dickerson tribute. In these instances, and terms of general sensitivity to audience attitudes and values, the digital cinematheques have not

⁶ The film was barely issued on DVD in 1998 and in 2002 with no special features. As of this writing, an Amazon search shows the 1998 edition is completely unavailable, and the 2002 version selling for almost \$400.00 US new, 90.00 US used. Even the VHS copies are approximately \$60.00.

shied away from politics. The Museum of Home Video has been even more explicitly political in their programming than *The Midnight Now* (about which more shortly), but both agree that political matters were rather anathema to Cinefamily's programming imperatives, and, again, impractical for any real time responsiveness to events based on scheduling, promotion, and print acquisition.

The populist interface and online dynamics of digital cinematheques potentially expand the concept of theatergoing into terms of New Media. The digital cinematheques uniquely combine the individual or small group intimate interface of home viewing with the communal viewing of the public theatrical cinematic experience, merging facets of hybridized and fractured cable/television channel surfing with the specificity of attending curated screenings. In the case of *The Midnight Now*, this hybridization was accomplished in a similar fashion to the other protocols of its inception: organic and almost accidental. Stark and Rosa decided to have a preshow leading up to their feature as a weekly part of the broadcast. As Rosa recounts, the preshow was initially about twenty minutes of footage germane to the night's selected feature. The hodgepodge of content was initially a conscious throwback to the Cinefamily's tendency to broadcast "odds and sods" found footage while the houselights were up, patrons taking their seats in leisurely advance of the official start of the feature programming. However, the decision was also pragmatic as Rosa and Stark were able to use the pre-feature time to finesse any technical issues with and for their participants. A preshow combined with the comment thread allowed a feedback mechanism to ensure audio and video were operational and broadcast correctly for the participants to access in advance of the feature itself. The preshow portion also allowed participants to login casually and still avoid missing the start of the feature. As an immediately popular element of the digital cinematheque, the preshow quickly expanded in scope to one hour, and was then rebroadcast as a post-show after the feature to accommodate latecomers and those who wanted to continue the chat.

If this seems like channel-surfing before and after (even during) a cable, streaming, or home video feature film, there are numerous parallels. The digital cinematheques actively cultivate the liminal space between home viewing and theatrical attendance by incorporating both the toggling of clips in preshow montage with a style of host personality one finds on such televisual staples as talk shows, anchored news, infomercials, and pre-or post- event broadcasts. Cinefamily had cultivated an atmosphere evocative of those interfaces by the presence of a host or master of ceremonies figure at most screenings. Most often, it was Hadrian Belove who (prior to the

allegations against himself and the board of directors) provided a consistent focal point and persona representative of the theater itself. Rosa would occasionally fill the role at certain screenings and Q and A moderations while an employee. His background in improv performance and TV horror host fandom (in particular, Bay Area personality Mr. Lobo, whom Rosa had brought to Cinefamily as an occasional guest presenter of events and screenings) made him a natural fit for anchoring *The Midnight Now*, while his technical skills and expansive knowledge of amassing relevant content assured a harmonious symbiosis between preshow content and pace relative to the night's feature.

The concept of anchoring persona/s plays out differently on *The Midnight Now* and *The Museum of Home Video* and its affiliate channels, as well as on the *Valley Vox Theatre*. *The Museum of Home Video* incorporates elements of variety show, while *The Valley Vox Theatre* drafts in tenets of radio drama and performance art. In all three digital cinematheques however, the concept and implementation of hosting personae both rarefies and expands the Cinefamily model in several ways. Cinefamily was presented as something of a one-man show and Belove rather self-consciously modeled his persona on Henri Langlois and 1960s French "cine clubs,"⁷ positioning himself and the venue as erudite pinnacles of cinema culture. Such a move is certainly pragmatic; it is obvious why this setup is the standard strategy of most audience-directed curated exhibition. However, the strategy has the inherent risk of incubating elitism, patriarchy, and power imbalances. Making himself the primary public face of Cinefamily served functional branding objectives, yet in retrospect provided fertile soil in which the eventual accusations and ignominy surrounding Belove and other Cinefamily leadership could grow. Moreover, while Belove was the dominant and most public persona of Cinefamily, he was surrounded at the upper echelons of decision making, programing, and policy by an all-male brain trust. As elitist and patriarchal structures will almost inevitably lead to potential abuses, this "boys' club" modus operandi effectively guaranteed the typical problematic outcomes of boys' clubs: chauvinism, toxic masculinity, and sexual harassment in terms of both direct action and hostile environment.

The familial impetus of Cinefamily was always embedded in the name and general design of the cinematheque programming and the utilization of its back patio for after-screening socializing, grilling, drinking, and entertainments where patrons and staff could comingle. The family vibe was intentional and often successful, especially for the members and regulars who

⁷ Foundas, Scott. www.laweekly.com/come-back-into-the-dark/

attended several times a month or even several times a week. The same held true for much of the staff and volunteers among themselves and in their associations with those same serial attendees. First name basis was not uncommon between staff and regulars. At its best, Cinefamily felt like a fusion of social club, cinematheque, and surrogate family. However, in harboring so much reported and alleged legally actionable behavior from atop its pyramidal and patriarchal structures ensured an increasingly dysfunctional “family.”

In what once seemed arch and ironic, other elements of the Cinefamily ethos seem indicative of its eventual downfall as well. Many of the pre-show ads soliciting patrons to pay for monthly memberships recontextualized cult initiation footage from the little-seen 1982 film *Split Image* (Kotcheff, 1982) to frame Cinefamily membership as a zealous rite. Patrons were invited to “Join Us” as footage showed white-clad revelers chanted as actor Michael O’Keefe’s character was initiated into the film’s sect by an ultimately malevolent charismatic cult leader played by Peter Fonda, who preyed on his followers’ needs for a strong father figure. A perusal of the articles chronicling the accusations against Belove and others shows a similar pattern of select older men preying upon the enthusiasms of young innocents and thereby wielding increasing power and influence over them. While this article is not intended to (re)litigate any legal actions or accusations against accused Cinefamily leadership and enablers, it is imperative to establish the former venue’s standard operating procedures and how the subsequent digital cinematheques have served as more progressive and ecumenical templates for curated cinematic spectatorship. Whatever the innocence or guilt of the accused at Cinefamily, their approach to their cinematheque was that of a party of a few to which many were invited, whereas the dominant approach of the digital cinematheques is of a party for all who participate.

The party sensibility is as intentional as the theaters’ politics and operational protocols. Freed of the financial and material logistics of a standard cinematheque and physical theater, The Midnight Now has been able to prioritize fun and plasticity in their programming and audience interface. While Belove sought to be a nouveau Henri Langlois, Rosa’s persona is “your old drinkin’ buddy J-Dobbs,” who he has consciously modeled on his own personality and a mix of syndicated TV horror host and Joe Bob Briggs. While Rosa is the primary persona, the curation is by no means exclusively Rosa and Stark’s purview. In a significant departure from standard art-and-independent cinematheque protocol, The Midnight Now features a more egalitarian approach to programming and interface. Rosa has not only been mindful of his own screening selections, he

has brought in guest hosting and programming from equal numbers of men and women, including Paula Haifley, Katie Rife, and Jenny Nixon. Rosa has otherwise approached programming as a more plastic and interactive fashion, soliciting certain regular participants for ideas on forthcoming themed programming slates in addition to the aforementioned process of response to BLM protests. This is quite the departure from Cinefamily, where upon hire it was made very clear to employees that programming was limited to Belove and a few others at the top of the hierarchy; employees were effectively told not speak unless spoken to on matters of curation.

While more egalitarian and diverse in hosting and audience/programmer symbiosis than traditional arthouses, *The Midnight Now* superficially seems the most of a one man show of the digital cinematheques. Rosa is the most visible consistent persona week-to-week, and Mya Stark has—by her choice and preference—shifted to an increasingly hands-off presence. She granted Rosa *carte blanche* after the initial broadcasts and has not been involved in most logistical or content matters since May 2020. Rather than relishing the autonomy however, Rosa says:

I think it made me more conscious even when she stepped aside like “hey! more women filmmakers is good!” You know there’s also been a thing of like... I have very much consciously tried to only show, and uplifting isn’t the right word but, I don’t want anything heavy. It’s staying on vibe and not wanting to bum out the party. This is a party. [re: the Neo-Noir miniseries] I mean like, *The Long Goodbye* (Altman, 1973) is like as heavy as its gonna get, or *Red Rock West* (Dahl, 1993) and that’s why I went with *Red Rock West*; I honestly think *The Last Seduction* (Dahl, 1994) is the better film, but it’s like “yeah except the final twist rape.” I don’t wanna do that, the point is, as much as I do like movies as an escape, I’m also very much a “screw you if you say that’s all movies are” but *The Midnight Now* is an escape. It’s a party ‘cuz we can’t go to parties.

Stark adds, “Given that it’s obviously impossible to experience ‘closeness’ during a lockdown as that’s the whole point, watching something together, and joking in the chat, is at least a shared experience of some kind. Pretty watered down, but better than nothin’.”

While they have both been very conscious in avoiding pitfalls of their former shared venue, one frequent feature of *The Midnight Now* is an explicit carry-over from Cinefamily and one its few collaborative programming features: “The 5 Minutes Game.” The game was started as an informal afterparty among employees of the CineFile video store, which itself formed many of the initial staff and brain trust of Cinefamily. Employees would select a handful of random VHS titles

and watch the first five minutes of each before deciding on which to continue as a feature. Cinefamily adapted this template to showing the first five minutes of approximately ten entries, voting on the results, then having hot dogs and beers on the back patio while results were tabulated. The audience would then reconvene to screen the entirety of the selected feature.⁸

We did a “5 Minutes Game,” and that was at Mya’s request. Mya was very clear that had to be called “The Return of the 5 Minutes Game”; we were gonna rescue “The 5 Minutes Game.” The original ballot was some stuff I got from Bret [Berg, of Museum of Home Video] and some stuff I had... that was I think *Violent New Breed* (Sheets, 1987), *Ra: Path of the Sun God* (Keen, 1990), *Time Runner* (Mazo, 1993), *Stone Pillow* (Schaefer, 1985), *Fight Ring* (Gallimore, 2009), and *The Plug Lady* (Saladino, 2004), and *Fight Ring* won... People had a blast with “The 5 Minutes Game” thing (yes, everybody does) and it works great for the format.

A few things stand out in this assessment beyond the mere particulars of the game itself. First are the spread of titles, indicative of the cinematic fringes to which the digital cinematheque curators are willing to travel and the tours thereof that they subsequently afford their viewers and participants. Second is the aside that Bret Berg had furnished some of the title suggestions several months in advance of launching Museum of Home Video with erstwhile Midnight Now guest host Jenny Nixon. Bret and Jenny’s involvement portends a symbiosis between the two digital cinematheques that goes beyond shared prior employment (and effective PTSD) from Cinefamily and once again demonstrates an organic and shared affinity between the very distinct streamers and audiences. Third, it hardly seems coincidental that one of the most readymade and optimal programs to carry over from Cinefamily was one of its only communal ones. The audience engagement in selection, curation, and feedback is an imperative of the digital streamers and a primary draw for their participants. Last is the telling semantic when Rosa casually uses the verb “rescue” in recounting the initial foray into an all-digital “5 Minutes Game.” This crowd-pleasing template was not merely continued on from earlier incarnations, it was rescued, and thereby one of the somewhat short list of things worth saving from Cinefamily.

⁸ David James’ description of “The 5 Mins Game” distills the channel surfing effect of the compilation programming characteristic of The Midnight Now and The Museum of Home Video. James summarizes Cinefamily’s inaugural “5 Minutes Game” as “An irreverent escapade, it nevertheless possessed a flawless avant-garde lineage: the first part was a filmic ‘exquisite corpse,’ recalling the Surrealists *dérive* from theater to theater in order to create a discontinuous dream narrative; the second part interrupted the autonomy of the filmic with a celebratory communal ritual; and the final screening... reflected the spectators immediate communal desires” (James, 63).

The Museum of Home Video

Echoing Stark, Berg assesses the relationship between Museum of Home and his former employer:

At the moment I left Cinefamily, I was saying to people that I wanted to extract the things from the Cinefamily experience from both the audience and behind the scenes sides I wanted to – with like, an eyedropper, because there’s not that much I wanted to extract from Cinefamily, or let’s say a straw in a milkshake: I wanted to suck one straw’s worth of milkshake out and then just like put it in a tiny glass somewhere else... the things I wanted to keep were the intersection between archiving, performance, and comedy.

While Berg enjoyed programming privileges at Cinefamily, he was primarily involved in their performance and event components. After leaving Cinefamily in 2015 well before any scandals, Berg became part of Alamo Drafthouse’s team for establishing their presence in Los Angeles, which included staging live events with screenings, the most successful of which were a 16mm print retrospective of *Pippi Longstocking* films and a screening of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (Lynch, 1992).⁹ As Alamo Drafthouse delayed their opening and ceased their affiliated live events, Berg created the Voyager Institute for approximately twelve mediated lectures with guest speakers, which gradually became “just screenings and random events.” In late 2019, Berg recounts that

Jenny [Nixon] came along and said, “oh are you still doing Voyager, I would love to help you with social.” I said “well, I think I’ve concluded Voyager Institute, but I’ve got this new thing...” and the new thing was the Museum. I had gotten a commitment from Zebulon [Café] to start weekly on Saturday afternoons in June of 2020... and then covid happened, and then Twitch happened. So, there you go.

Jenny is the aforementioned Jenny Nixon, his former colleague at Cinefamily and sometime guest host of *The Midnight Now*. Nixon’s background is likewise in exhibition and live events. As Stark and Rosa rather automatically partnered in commencing *The Midnight Now*, so, too, did Nixon and Berg. While Rosa alluded to Berg’s influence and involvement in *The Midnight Now*, they, in turn, influenced the evolution of *The Museum of Home Video*, providing a touchstone for the chat feature. “I started participating in watch parties through some friends and

⁹ Prior to the film’s Criterion Collection DVD/Blu Ray release when it was out of print and semi-unavailable for home viewing.

I immediately got a feel for why the chat's important and the importance of just gathering, in the sense of that's the only gathering we could do, how important it was" says Berg, paraphrasing Rosa's "it's a party 'cuz we can't go to parties." However, *The Midnight Now* was but one reference point as Berg and Nixon shaped the ethos and brand of their digital cinematheque. They cast a much wider net both within and outside of Los Angeles and their locus of former arthouse and indie peers. Berg says,

I was totally in the dark until a few different people including Dimitri of EIT [Everything is Terrible],¹⁰ Caroline of Spectacle Theater, and John of Screenslate (those two are up in New York) ... those two are both starting stuff on Twitch for their own organizations. So, I conferred with them a lot like "how are you doing this, what are you doing, what is your approach?" So me paying attention to all three of these people kind of figuring out Twitch, and then also having friends that did watch parties, kind of kickstarted in me "ok we're gonna do this, we're gonna do it online for as long as we can until real life comes back" and then the Twitch version exploded and the audience, and then we thought even if IRL comes back ("even if," like we didn't know) we're gonna still keep doing Twitch because there's all sorts of people outside of LA that would just be totally fucked over if we did this great show and then stopped doing the show for them.

Regarding audience metrics, there are two figures Berg and Nixon track: max viewers and meek viewers. "Max" tallies the cumulative total of those watching for any portion of an episode, while meek viewers are the totals at specific instances. On average throughout late 2020 to-date of 2021, there are approximately 250 meek viewers and participants at any given point of a broadcast and 550-700 max viewers, although they have had over a thousand such viewers on occasion. Their Los Angeles Punk retrospective drew a max of 1200 viewers at its highest point, which Berg attributes to spillover from a separate Twitch broadcast, Twitch having a function that enables showrunners to direct their viewers elsewhere at the conclusion of a streaming broadcast. The Museum of Home Video thus not only hosts the most participants of the three digital

¹⁰ Berg had originally envisioned the then-gestating and -unnamed Museum of Home Video as a subset of Everything is Terrible, recounting: "I was really pushing EIT also to do it and, I was not the only voice telling Dimitri [Simakis] 'you should do this.' but was definitely telling him a lot. And I originally didn't have an idea to do a channel, I was just doing my show and I was pushing Dimitri, I was like 'you gotta bring on a bunch of people and have a schedule because you have the audience' and ultimately they didn't do that much, I mean they did some great shows but... they were devoting energy into this Meowolf exhibit that was just opening in Vegas. So they didn't go full throttle on Twitch and also I think Nick from EIT was unsure of what it was and Dimitri was the only one interested, so they didn't jump in."

cinematheques, each Tuesday night broadcast exceeds the 175 person capacity of Cinefamily screenings.

The Museum has sustained and increased their participants beyond the live chat threads and initial Tuesday night broadcast by expanding to a slate of repertory programming. Two programs are devoted to feature-length films, *Deathblade* and *Friday Night Frights*.¹¹ *Deathblade* shows direct-to-video action films of the 1980s and 1990s, *Friday Night Frights* screens horror obscurities from approximately the same era. The channel is rounded out by *Music Videodrome* (devoted to music videos and live musical performances), and *LA Daze*, a monthly anthology of mediated Los Angeles somewhat akin to Thom Anderson's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (Anderson, 2003). Berg and Nixon are planning a sixth repertory program to the channel to center on feature films.

Museum of Home Video programming often has a basis in cinema, but hybridizes elements of film, television, found-footage, music videos, live performance, news clips, and whatever else may be found on YouTube, TikTok, and other internet platforms, but predominantly operates as a cinematheque. Even if the eponymous Tuesday night program is comprised predominately of themed blocks of assorted of audio-visual content, cinema accounts for at least segments of almost every broadcast. For example, there is a semi-frequent section of the Tuesday night show called "Fasterpiece Theater," an abridged version of a feature or sometimes an entire single act of one.¹²

The Museum of Home Video's sensibility and guiding principles for feature film content are practically identical to the more flamboyant feature selections of *The Midnight Now*. This affinity enhances the odd symbiosis between the two entities that extends beyond the history and friendships of the creators; the two digital cinematheques are comprised of hosting, guests, miscellanea, and feature film screenings in evolving combinations. While *The Midnight Now* is a preshow of material germane to the feature film followed by Rosa's hosting introduction and screening of said feature, *The Museum of Home Video* alternates blocks of guided programming germane to whatever Berg and Nixon select, interspersed with their hosting and guest presenters. Their guests are drawn from kindred spirits and associates across the country to highlight current

¹¹ *Friday Night Frights* is a carry-over from Cinefamily programming run by *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Fowler, 2020) screenwriter Josh Miller.

¹² In an early broadcast, Berg screened the first thirty minutes of Nicolas Roeg's underseen and rather gonzo *Eureka* (Roeg, 1983), but has not shown full acts often since.

projects and obsessions, and have included Mya Stark from *The Midnight Now*, who gave a highlight reel of her child acting work and related anecdotes.

Berg shares an aside that distills the ethos of *The Museum of Home Video* and is likewise applicable to *The Midnight Now*:

The movie *UHF* (Levey, 1989) turned out to be the most influential movie to me of all time, not *2001* (Kubrick, 1968) or *Eraserhead* (Lynch, 1977) or something, even though *Weird Al's UHF* in hindsight is only like 50/50 good... the idea of hijacking the airwaves and having your own schedule and nobody tells you no, that came directly from watching *UHF* over and over again as a kid so... it's the most influential movie to me in my life (in a weird way). It dawned on me more recently because specifically the idea of broadcasting and startling people with original ideas on TV... I wasn't thinking about TV at Cinefamily because my life was live events. And I didn't think about doing Twitch until May or June of last year because I was so focused on "when is live going to come back?" and then live was staring me in the face just in a different way. So no, *UHF* is not conscious until around this time. And then I rewatched it and it's really about only three mins of the movie that's really influential and I stole a catchphrase from it... So there's this one two minute sequence where it's like "Channel 62: the reason television was invented," and I was like "oh fuck, I'm stealing that" and I say it on the air now... I say the museum is the reason television was invented.

Valley Vox Theatre

While *The Midnight Now* and *The Museum of Home Video* are a Frankenstein's monster of cinematic, televisual, and online content, Kathleen Ashe is as influenced by radio as she is by the more recent media. Growing up in the rural Australian bush before moving to Los Angeles by way of Melbourne, she was a devoted viewer of syndicated television matinee *Ivan Hutchinson's Midday Movie* and listened extensively to a transistor radio, developing a love of hosted exhibition and radio dramas. She arrived in Los Angeles around the time of "earthquakes and OJ" as she describes it, thus early 1994. After co-founding the LGBTQ-friendly bar and cabaret Akbar in Silverlake, she began working in independent film production with myriad companies and productions. Ashe began to volunteer at KPFK and produced news radio, then facilitated and oversaw a program for film crews to shoot at the station and use their equipment.

All of the digital cinematheques have elements of performativity and play in their hosting. On *The Midnight Now*, Rosa is “your old drinkin’ buddy J-Dobbs” and presenting in themed attire in front of a greenscreen with similarly thematic footage projected. On *The Museum of Home Video*, Berg minimizes his props to a THC cigarette and a few choice catchphrases, while Nixon occasionally joins in from behind a fake beard. But Valley Vox Theatre seeks to differently evoke moviegoing and shared spectatorship by incorporating scripted content and dramatis personae amidst scenarios of a fictitious haunted theater. As primary host, Ashe is the ostensible usher, and is abetted by a Pittsburgh-based manager going by “Mr. Jeffries,” while Austin-based “Frankie” is the projectionist dealing with all technical matters and preshow elements. Of the trio, Ashe says “we’re taking these characters that are extensions of ourselves and then expanding them” but is clear she is the only one identified by her actual name and comfortable enough with being accessible in real life by patrons. The three principles met online and have developed their cinematheque remotely, beginning in winter of 2020 and launching their first broadcast in January 2021. While they have yet to all meet in real life, the three appear on their zoom screens with allusive asides to the fictitious owner of the fictitious theater, former starlet Gloria Davenport, who was willed the theater by her husband, Monte. Monte may or may not be the mischievous ghost who benignly haunts the theater.

Like the other digital cinematheques Valley Vox presents a combination of themed programming, preshow montage, and invited guests, who have included veteran stunt performer Sandy Gimpel, writer-director Anna Biller, and director Sarah Kelly. The predominance of features and affiliated guests surround women in film and female topics, such as Biller’s *The Love Witch* (Biller, 2016) and *Dance, Girl, Dance* (Arzner, 1940), the latter including a tribute to pioneering director Dorothy Arzner. The female focus is by design, Ashe stating

I used to work in the film industry and that’s how I primarily met all these people, but I’ve primarily helped produce other people’s movies. And I’ve found that there were barely any women on set and that shocked me. And there were barely any people of color... To think that there’s a young woman out there who hasn’t heard of Ida Lupino... that kinda breaks my heart a little bit.

She adds, “Valley Vox Theatre is a safe place for everybody. We celebrated gay pride month and made a point of bringing that attention to our listeners. We have a progressive crowd.” In that, she feels comfortable including live Q & A sessions (via Zoom) with guests, because “we have the control to unmute somebody... the chat also moderates itself. We have loyal listeners

who have listened to us for some time who are kind of protective, so we haven't had any problems yet." She reports that there have been no incidents yet with needing to censure or ban participants in either the comment thread or during Q&A sessions.

Just as *The Midnight Now* and *The Museum of Home Video* influenced and continue to promote each other amidst an overlapping group of participants, they each played a formative role in the Valley Vox Theatre. Ashe recounts "Frankie started researching Twitch and said, 'oh there's *The Museum of Home Video*, and I think you'll really like it' and I said, 'oh hang on these are the Cinefamily people' that, their names rang a bell, and that's how I found out about *The Midnight Now*." The mutual appreciation and promotion of the digital cinematheques is, indeed, how I found Valley Vox Theatre, since Berg and Rosa both suggested I contact Ashe.

Once physical gatherings can be accomplished safely, Ashe hopes all three entities will be able to meet in a live and broadcast setting to discuss their overlapping experiences in COVID-era digital cinematheques. Since she and her team are considering taking Valley Vox to Twitch, such a meeting might portend a collective broadcast for their audiences. Ashe has otherwise "thought about going live again, but we want to all be together when we do it, and that might take some time. But for now, this is a great way to share with everybody because, you know a lot of our people attending overseas can't attend, so we might set up some screen or still have them involved." As is, Valley Vox Theatre broadcasts on alternating Saturday afternoons, in part because so many of their viewers are in the American Midwest and overseas. As the most recent of the three digital cinematheques to launch, Ashe was also conscious to schedule broadcasts in a time slot that would neither conflict with *The Midnight Now* or *The Museum of Home Video*.

Whether a summit of Valley Vox Theatre, *The Museum of Home Video*, and *The Midnight Now* occurs in whatever combination of digital or physical interface, most of the entities plan to continue and expand to live event-based simulcasts after travel becomes less of a risk. As of this writing, *The Museum of Home Video* has staged one live broadcast for technical specs, limiting attendance to Berg, Nixon, and two others. While that was in Los Angeles, it was a smooth operation, and they hope to travel to key cities for future live broadcasts. Valley Vox Theatre plans to expand to live events and audiences, but, for the moment, are less inclined to travel for them. *The Midnight Now* had considered concluding weekly broadcasts by September, in what would have been their eighteen-month mark. However, this consideration was predicated on a hoped-for return to normalcy and mass theatergoing. While there was no plan to become defunct so much as

only broadcast on a more informal basis, as the Delta variant of COVID-19 continues to spread and vaccines plateau, they may continue a weekly show accordingly.

Ashe summarizes part of the excitement and relevance of the digital cinematheques: “all these pivotal moments in our lives, there’s always a film or an album that goes along with it so COVID [digital cinematheques] is like that too.” As she recounts first seeing *The Museum of Home Video* she says, “I realized ‘oh that’s right this is what happened to these people after Cinefamily imploded’ so it’s good to see. I’m very excited to see Bret back in a live situation again and if that manufactures that interest in the art house theater again, now we have another element we can work with.” These digital cinematheques are indeed “what happened to these people after Cinefamily imploded,” they made something better for its participants and, by extension art and independent film culture. Beyond exemplifying an alternative to theatergoing and forum for film culture amidst a pandemic, the digital cinematheque approach is a new and valid arena in which art and independent cinema media culture can flourish, while portending an innovative and hybridized collective spectatorship.

Faughnder and Olsen’s “What makes a movie theater? Is it the movies themselves, the specific titles that are playing, or is it something about the physical space, the people inside or the overall vibe of the place?” For the digital cinematheque programmers and participants, the answer seems to emphasize the people inside and overall vibe. Berg says:

I believe that the museum is the whole channel is community first, not content first. We paid lip service to that at Cinefamily, but community was not first. Not at all. Because we were openly disparaging of the community either to their face or behind their back, or the community was at arms-length because the community couldn’t participate in the actual creation of any of the stuff that was happening, and at the top of the pyramid was this negative force that gave PTSD to every—regardless of whether ppl had a good time at Cinefamily, no one who worked there at any time, at any era, for however long, no one has a good exit story. If you could find someone who has a good exit story from Cinefamily, they weren’t there for more than a week.”

Meanwhile, the digital cinematheques are reaching their eighteen-month mark. As collective participants in myriad elements of evolving exhibition and consumption, *The Midnight Now*, *The Museum of Home Video*, and *Valley Vox Theatre* continue to

expand and overlap with an increasing momentum into an uncertain and innovative future of art and independent cinema culture.

About the author: Nathan Scoll holds a PhD in American Studies from the University of Utah, as well as an MFA in Film from the same institution and a MA in Cinema Studies from San Francisco State University. He has taught film at a variety of colleges and universities in California and Utah, and will be commencing a Visiting Assistant Professor position at St. Lawrence University in Fall 2022.

Contact: nathan_scoll@yahoo.com

Works Cited

- Cills, Hazel. "Former Cinefile Employees Allege Mishandling of Sexual Harassment Claims." *Jezebel*. 8/31/17. jezebel.com/former-cinefamily-employees-allege-mishandling-of-sexua-1798440765.
- Faunhnder, Ryan and Olsen, Mark. "Movies and Theaters Are Coming Back, But What About L.A.'s Treasured Art Houses?" *Los Angeles Times*. July 13, 2021. www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2021-07-13/movies-and-theaters-are-coming-back-what-about-l-a-s-cinema-treasures
- Foundas, Scott. "Come Back Into the Dark." *LA Weekly*. October 24, 2007. www.laweekly.com/come-back-into-the-dark/.
- James, David E. "LA's Hipster Cinema." *Film Quarterly* Vol. 63, No. 1 (Fall 2009), pp. 56-67.