

## EMERGENT RELATIONSHIPS: COLLECTIVE INITIATIVES IN CINEMA EXHIBITION THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

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SCRIPT:

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I've decided to take the opportunity to use this space given to me for the symposium to discuss and share some very current thoughts I've been having in relation to my thesis. It is, by nature, a discussion of thoughts in-formulation.

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I'll start with an anecdote. Last year, when I was back in New York, I was invited to an opening reception to a new film festival that celebrates female filmmakers. And so I headed to the address and ended up at some upscale membership clubhouse. My heart sank. I walked inside and it looked like a swanky boat club that I've seen in commercials in the back of a cab promoting a Tribeca lifestyle. I found myself doing the familiar thing of scanning the room full of white people to see if there might be any other people who were feeling as uncomfortable in this room as I was. There were some familiar faces, mainly other film programmers I know from the city and I chit-chatted with them.

I was already feeling quite bristly by the party in this exclusive, upper class setting. I was introduced to a woman who runs a highly curated cinema website that shows quality short films for free. I admired the films that they showed. She spoke about growing their staff and wanting to chat with me in the future because the website was getting funding from Prada or was it Chanel? I don't remember but it was one of those brands and it was at that point that the hosts of the festival came on the microphone and they were two young white women. I had seen these women in the bathroom a few minutes ago talking about their lifestyle brands and it turned out that one of the co-founders and curators of the series works on "influencer strategies." It was at this point that I walked out.

On my way home, I looked at the film festival program. It included films and artists that I truly admired. They were groundbreaking films and artists that brought personal and radical politics onto the screen. There was a racially diverse panel of women talking about film programming. A stark difference from the party I had just left.

Having worked at museums and other cultural institutions in New York as a film programmer, this experience probably should not have felt as singular as it did to me at the time. Large institutions are always showing films or presenting meaningful artwork and the rich funders and funding organizations celebrate afterwards in their private, upscale settings. What felt crushing to me about this particular film festival was that it was new and it was small in terms of the number of films and it fell squarely into the scope of independent film exhibition. It made me wonder if this was indeed where independent screenings were going to continue to head in. The separation between ideas exhibited in the films and those behind the screen (those who are bringing the films to the screen) felt like a vast and dirty gulf. I thought as I often do that

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*it can't be enough to be showing films that have anti-colonial or anti-capitalist politics without internally reflecting on the structure of the system and the bodies that inhabit these systems of exhibition.*

My work and thesis at VCS has been primarily around notions of film curation as an artistic practice and a research method but also investigating and re-articulating film exhibition, specifically in the context of independent movie theaters; the act of viewing together with an audience, as a complex phenomenon. I am interested in what sitting together in a theater to watch a film can do with an emphasis on the affects of multiple voices and bodies and how the body of the film programmer is part of this complex system of relations.

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I first came across the concept of complex phenomenon from French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin's works around complex thought, who by the way, also co-directed the seminal cinema verité film, *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). Morin first began theorizing complex thinking through the cinema but moved on to the field of education, science and philosophy, and has throughout his output, been calling for a paradigm shift to consider complexity as a way of thinking.

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He is interested in dialogical thought, which he explains as "the union of two antagonistic terms in order to understand a complex problem."<sup>1</sup>

As an example of dialogical thought, he explains that, "living systems are both the product and the producer of the product. Society is also like this. A society is the product of interactions between individuals, but the society has emergent properties that are retroactive on the individuals, and hence shape what we become as human beings, so we are both the product and the producer of the society."<sup>2</sup> A different way of explaining this per Morin, is that while there is the common notion that a system is more than the sum of its parts meaning that a system cannot be known just by observation of their parts, the system is also *less* than a sum of its parts. The latter he says is "especially evident in social systems: as individuals we have many qualities and potentials that present us with many possibilities for behavior which we cannot exhibit because of constraints, due to socially determined laws or inhibitions due to group norms."<sup>3</sup> In other words, that because the system affects the individual, observing the system does not tell you the full potential of the individual, hence it is less than a sum of its parts.

[Highlight "emergent properties" on screen]

One key phrase here is "emergent properties" which leads me to first acknowledge and thank writer, researcher and film programmer Jemma Desai who has recently been offering group teach-ins via zoom about her research on being a POC cultural worker in the field of film exhibition in the U.K. The weekly engagement with her work has been a source of inspiration and solace for me to know that across the ocean, there are people grappling with similar ideas but articulated in different ways and in Desai's case, on a really important

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<sup>1</sup> Morin, Edgar. "Complex Thinking for a Complex World—About Reductionism, Disjunction and Systemism," *Systema: connecting matter, life, culture and technology* 2, no. 1 (2014): 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 15.

policy and institutional level, drawing on her personal experience and of others in her field, speaking often from an embodied place. Or perhaps, in Morin's words, from a place away from the "form of understanding which cannot conceive of system or organization except by eliminating the idea of being or existence."<sup>4</sup>

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Desai's writing has also inspired me to read *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by social justice facilitator, healer and doula, adrienne maree brown based in Detroit. It is from reading this book that I was sparked to realize that so much of the things I have been grappling with and trying to articulate about the complexities of film exhibition, distribution and circulation can also be talked about through the lens of *relationships*.

In *Emergent Strategy*, brown uses relationships as key to movement and social justice work. She proposes to "focus on critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships"<sup>5</sup> and often drawing from examples from nature, she says that "an ecosystem isn't just a list of living things (squirrel, tree, bee, flower); it's the set of relationships \*between\* those living things (the squirrel lives \*in\* the tree, the bee \*pollinates\* the flower)...In terms of organizing, this means that a given social movement isn't a list of organizations, or campaigns, or even individuals; it's the set of relationships \*between\* organizations, campaigns, individuals, etc."<sup>6</sup> To brown, a resilient social movement is not about the parts but the relationships between the parts. What seems very useful about the term "relationship" is that it is qualitative. It compels the question: What kind of relationship is it?

It is striking to notice that though brown draws primarily from black thinkers like writer Octavia Butler and Chinese-American activist Grace Lee Boggs there are many similarities in the way that brown and Morin approach their work and worldviews. brown says, "emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions."<sup>7</sup> Both writers pull examples from the natural sciences and the study of complex systems (a trans-disciplinary approach to understanding non-linear systems) as a way to enact new paradigms. It is also noteworthy that both Morin and brown, in true trans-disciplinary fashion, find iterations of their ideas in a myriad of sources including and emphatically, the arts.

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Borrowing from their ideas, I propose that by viewing cinema exhibition culture as a complex system, the relationships and the interdependence of the many parts can be better articulated. And as a result, we could look forward to the emergence of a more equitable landscape in moving-image making and collective watching. This lens that takes cues from a social justice approach can be used to look at various aspects of film exhibition such as the organization of funding bodies, racial inequity in film and festival curation (even

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<sup>4</sup> Morin, Edgar. "Concept of System to the Paradigm of Complexity" in *Science avec Conscience* translated by Sean Kelly. (Paris: France, 1982) 172-189.

<sup>5</sup> brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Changing, Changing Worlds*. 2017

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

when cosmetic changes are being made like having a panel of POC women) and the way the presences of our bodies existing in these spaces affect the film-viewing experience.

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However, as we all know, in this current state, we are unable to congregate in a cinema space. Taking to heart what Morin says: if the system is both more and less than a sum of its parts and if a system can obscure or even circumvent the emergent possibilities of its parts, I am interested in what is revealed when a significant part of this system of movie-going—the physical movie theater—is taken out of the equation albeit temporarily.

For the rest of this presentation, I want to attempt to look at some initiatives that have taken shape recently under the covid-19 crisis and what we can glean and articulate about the relationships that are revealed. The initiatives I bring up are in no way exhaustive and highly selective. The selections are also reflective of my own embodied being as a bilingual Japanese person living in the U.S. whose recent film programming work has involved screening films from Japan in the U.S. (primarily in New York). Thus, the selections draw from these contexts I am most familiar with. I focus here on collective initiatives because of my interest in relationships between entities.

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What is emerging from the landscapes of independent cinemas when collective viewing in a theater is not possible? What kinds of relationship are at work?

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Example 1: The *Cinema Worker Solidarity Fund* is a mutual aid resource organized by the founders of Light Industry (a venue for film and electronic arts in Brooklyn); and members of Screen Slate (an online listing and website that connects audiences with cinematic experiences in and around New York). It was conceived as a stop-gap measure to support hourly workers who have lost income due to movie theater closures. In ten days, the crowdfunding campaign raised over 80,000 USD, an amount beyond their initial goal. By the end of the campaign, they were able to send 225 USD to 347 cinema workers who applied. In the updates on the campaign page, one of the organizers, Nellie Killian noted that, “For perspective on the scale of need before us: if we were to pay a week’s missed wages to everyone who applied, we would need approximately \$185,000. It’s a daunting amount, and one that will likely only be raised if major donors decide to step up.”<sup>8</sup>

Among many things, this fund reveals some key relationships in the ecosystem that center on the hourly wage workers and the precarity that they face (as is true beyond the independent cinema industry). More pessimistic outcomes in a similar light are the furloughing of lower paid workers primarily in large institutions such as museums (many that also house cinema spaces) before pay cuts were considered at the high-paid executive level or pulling from massive endowment funds that the institutions sit on. What does this say about the relationship that the institution has towards its lower paid workers? Theaters such as Seattle’s Northwest Film Forum that engage in social justice narratives at their programmatic level has kept every staff on paycheck by cutting the salaries of their higher paid workers. The presence of Screen Slate whose mission has been to promote cinematic experiences around New York with a conscious effort to not place hierarchical order between venues is also significant when thinking about the kind of relationships that are being activated.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gofundme.com/f/cinema-worker-solidarity-fund> accessed April 1, 2020.

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Since this campaign, similar funds have been established in other cities including the *Chicago Cinema Workers Fund*, which is still accepting funds and applications by workers and organized by a group of cinema workers including my fellow cohort member Emily Eddy who will likely have her own thoughts on this process.

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Similarly on a local level, one of the first initiatives to spring up in Japan right before a state of emergency was declared on April 7 was the Save Our Local Cinemas campaign in the Kansai region. Kansai is located in the west of Japan and includes large metropolitan cities like Osaka and Kyoto. Thirteen cinemas in the region banded to fundraise for the theaters by designing t-shirts to sell. The profit will be split equally between the theaters. In an interview I had coincidentally conducted days before this initiative was launched, for an upcoming issue of *Another Gaze* (a feminist film journal). I had spoken to the three women who had kickstarted the initiative. The interview was around the collective efforts between theaters in the Kansai region where women manage the majority of them. An interesting point that arose when asking them about what had initially led to collaborating was that it all really began about a decade ago when all of the theaters were faced with the daunting task of updating their projection booths to incorporate the increasing pressure of projecting digitally. It was around that time when the theater operators in the region started hosting workshops for each other to knowledge-share. This decade-long network and collaborative relationships started from a very different kind of crisis but they were key to an incredibly fast response to the Covid-19 crisis.

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On a national scale, two of Japan's leading arthouse directors, Koji Fukada and Ryusuke Hamaguchi launched a crowd-funding campaign called the *Mini-Theater AID Fund*. "Mini-theater" refers to independent small-scale theaters in Japan and the campaign is to raise funds for these theaters across the nation. This impressively coordinated effort led to the most successful crowdfunding campaign in Japan to date, where in 54 hours, it had raised the initial goal of 100 million Japanese yen (approximately 1 million USD) promising at the very least approximately 15,000 USD equally to 110 movie theaters as of mid-April. They have since raised the goal to 300 million Japanese yen. The concerted efforts began with the directors and their collaborators to reach out to individual theaters to listen to their needs and what kind of financial losses they were facing. What is significant here is that they did not wait for applications from the theaters but rather, reached out to the theaters themselves and invited them to participate. Using their relationships as established directors, they also brought in other film directors and actors to help promote the campaign. In addition to the daily posts that they have been doing of directors and actors sending in messages of their favorite memories of mini-theaters, they hosted an inspired press conference

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where they had people from the mini-theaters come on alongside the actors and directors to discuss the crises they are facing.

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It is interesting to compare this to the Art-House America Campaign kickstarted by the Criterion Collection, the powerhouse in arthouse cinema distribution and administered

by the Art House Convergence. Unlike the other aforementioned initiatives, this fundraising campaign does not split the fundraised money evenly but instead administers funds based on need as decided by a review committee. This campaign also employs well-known figures in the arthouse community including directors such as Greta Gerwig, Wes Anderson and Barry Jenkins listed as “Team Members” on the gofundme page. Curiously, the campaign has raised \$562,000 as of April 11, almost two weeks into the campaign. This is in no way a small amount of money raised but given the number of high-rolling, high-profile celebrities in the U.S. movie business, it’s interesting to see that the campaign has raised half of the amount raised in Japan at more than twice the amount of time.

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The last two initiatives I will end this survey with are those initiated by independent film distributors. One of the early initiatives to come from the film distribution side was Kino Marquee (by distributor Kino Lorber) putting forward a virtual cinema structure through their online platform where audiences can pay to watch a movie from the comfort of their home. The price of streaming is \$12 (comparable to the price of seeing a film in the theater) and the income generated is split in the same way as in a theatrical release between the theater and the distributor. In this virtual setting, the distributor is keeping the relationships it has with the theaters alive by replicating it. What flips here is that usually, it is the theater that reports attendance and revenue to the distributor but in this case, the direction of the report is flipped.

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In an interview on boxofficepro.com, Kino Lorber’s Chief Executive Director, Richard Lorber said that, “Indie art-houses are really in touch and of the cloth of their communities. That’s really the key to making this work.”

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A similar initiative just started in Japan called the “Temporary Cinema” ideated by filmmaker Kazuhiro Soda (who splits his time between New York and Japan) in cooperation with documentary film distributor Toofoo who also set up a virtual cinema to run their new titles in the same way. The revenue split is the same as Kino Marquee but what is notably different is that from the beginning, Toofoo and Soda publicly invited other distributors to join them on the endeavor. Richard Lorber has mentioned that they are very selectively opening Kino Marquee to films that are not handled by them, citing that the quality of films is also the key to their success. It is unclear from public messaging just how selective the Temporary Cinema is in their film selection but it would be a point of interest to see how the Japanese version fares in comparison to Kino Lorber’s.

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In this very brief survey and introduction to some of the initiatives that have come out of the U.S. and Japan, I have not been able to get into the many complexities of the context of independent cinema culture in Japan and the U.S. that certainly affect the outcome of these initiatives. In this brief attempt, I have tried to place similar initiatives to tease out some common threads and relationships between the two contexts:

- The first to respond in both contexts were by organizations and groups that have established their work on collaborative and non-hierarchical networking (e.g. Screen Slate and theaters in Kansai)

- The hierarchical structure within theaters and institutions in their approach to furloughing or cutting paychecks. Does the institution see its survival dependent on the survival of its workers? If so, which workers?
- What is the relationship that high-visibility filmmakers and actors have with the independent cinemas? In the case of Japan, the relationship has emerged to be very strong.
- Independent distributors and theaters are in an interdependent relationship at a financial level
- State and government-level aid have not been early responders

I don't claim that any of the points I have made are radical conclusions. Rather, to harken back to brown's quote that "emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions." By starting to parse out the simple interactions at play in this current state of cinema exhibition where we cannot physically congregate, we can perhaps better see the complex systems and patterns that the ecosystem is made of. By moving between the level of the parts and the level of systems, we can acknowledge emergent properties at both levels that are affecting each other. In other words, films exhibited in a system that better reflects its radical politics, will in turn affect the films that are made and the emergent properties at both ends of this recursive loop are exponential.

As a final note, I want to add that both brown and Morin are proponents of passion and emotion as an inseparable part of social systems and accounts for emergent properties. I'd like to play this promotional video for the Temporary Cinema that mimics the pre-screening notices at a cinema in Japan that exudes a sense of passion from the creative minds behind it.

Unfortunately, I am unable to find the means to subtitle the video so I will read the translation of the narration along with the video.

[Click Play]

Narration: Thank you for coming. While the film is playing, please try to turn off electronics that make sounds such as cell phones. We also strongly condemn the recording of the film you are about to see.

On screen text and narration: One more thing that we'd like to ask our visitors today...

Narration: When the situation clears, please do visit a real movie theater. This is a temporary cinema. Now, please enjoy the film until the end. (Beeping sound indicating the start of a film showing)

END