

Hollywood, nostalgia, and outdoor movies

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Abstract:

As the self-proclaimed 'movie capital of the world,' Hollywood was a forerunner in developing outdoor movies as public events. The number and variety of outdoor screenings in the Los Angeles area has proliferated over the years. Each series offers a unique, styled event to accompany the movie, yet the playlist of films each season is remarkably similar from one series to another. Offering familiar favorites at outdoor film screenings is intended to recapture the pleasures of moviegoing as a communal activity. Along with a brief consideration of the history of moviegoing and nostalgia, this essay looks at the films screened at outdoor movie series as 'cult contemporary' offerings and considers how audiences respond to their favorite films in posts on social media sites.

Keywords: Cinespia, Street Food Cinema, Electric Dusk Drive-in, outdoor movies, cult contemporary

Long perceived as the center of the film industry, Los Angeles naturally asserted its position as a site for event-led cinema early on: shortly after the Santa Cruz Guerilla Drive-In began its walk-up, flashmob style screenings in discrete urban locations, Hollywood Forever Cemetery in Los Angeles added a new feature to the 1999 Rudolph Valentino memorial service by projecting the silent screen star's final film on the wall of the mausoleum in which he is interred. More than a decade later, as many as 4,000 Angelenos still pack picnic baskets and gather at the cemetery on Saturday nights to watch films projected on the exterior wall of the Cathedral Mausoleum. The Cinespia film series at the cemetery has transformed over time. Founder John Wyatt originally sought a venue for screening art films for his film club, yet the past several seasons at Cinespia featured what will be termed 'cult contemporary' films. With burgeoning interest in creating event-led cinema offerings, the number and variety of outdoor screenings in the Los Angeles area has proliferated. Each

series offers a unique, styled event to accompany the movie, yet the playlist of films each season is remarkably similar from one series to another.

As shifts in cinematic culture are brought about by the prevalence of high quality home theatre technology and the availability of vast film libraries on demand, the experience of cinemagoing is deeply affected. This essay argues that the recent proliferation of outdoor film screenings is intended to recapture the pleasures of moviegoing as a communal activity. Watching a film with others in a public space creates a shared experience of communal public life that is increasingly important, yet also largely unrecognized as critical and cultural attention shifts to social media as a site of community building and connection. This study aims to explore the popularity of outdoor movies in Los Angeles through the lens of audience engagement. Taking the perspective that moviegoing is a social practice, what draws audiences to spend their leisure time and resources to re-experience familiar movies in a public venue?

Alternative, outdoor cinema experiences like Cinespia, Street Food Cinema, and Electric Dusk Drive-In create shared cultural space and shared experiences of nostalgia for moviegoing experiences that recall the drive-ins, movie palaces, and even the gritty suburban cineplexes of the past. The facile assumption might be that in light of focusing affect on everything but the film, the film itself must not matter much. In fact the film matters significantly, as the growing popularity of cult contemporary films for outdoor screenings indicates that the films screened are already marked as personally meaningful, closely-held, shared cultural content.

Outdoor film screenings became increasingly popular and widely attended in Los Angeles after Cinespia began its weekly summer film series in 2002. The Fairbanks Lawn, stretching behind the sarcophagus of Douglas Fairbanks Sr. and Jr., is a broad grassy expanse on which moviegoers can spread their blankets and picnic dinners. Where Cinespia projects movies on the mausoleum wall, Street Food Cinema employs portable screens at a variety of city parks and other public venues throughout the greater Los Angeles area. As the name implies, Street Food Cinema also enhances its offerings with a variety of food trucks, drawing a so-called “foodie” audience to its screenings as well. Electric Dusk Drive-In, which operated in a parking lot atop a downtown Los Angeles building until construction shut down the series in October 2015, drew on nostalgic drive-in food fare. Outdoor films are screened on weekends at each of these sites during the summer months.

Outdoor film series in Los Angeles typically screen an array of contemporary films popular for Millennial and Generation X audiences. These are films that audiences grew up watching, often repeatedly, on cable, broadcast, VHS, DVD, and Blu-ray, from *Purple Rain* to *Sixteen Candles* and *Princess Bride*. Audience members demonstrate their familiarity with these films not only by calling out lines of dialogue during screenings but also quoting those inimitable movie lines in Tweets, Facebook messages, and on Instagram and other social media sites. Social media posts mark significance for users: beyond a declaration of location and activity, a post publicly ties people to events, objects, and others who are valued. As such, social media, especially Twitter, was a primary source for audience perspectives for

this study. The screening series with the most substantial social media presence were included, and thousands of Tweets with the hashtags #ElectricDusk, #StreetFoodCinema, and #Cinespia, posted between May 2012 and August 2015, were reviewed for content. All posts with mention of film titles were selected, and due to the frequency of simple hashtag-plus-film-title mentions, only those posts with more detailed discussion were analyzed. In addition, Yelp.com includes 490 reviews for Cinespia Cemetery Screenings, 175 reviews for Street Food Cinema, and 91 reviews for Eat|See|Hear that were analyzed to determine what audience members found noteworthy and chose to report about the screenings. The earliest review for Cinespia, the longest running of the three series, was posted in September 2005. Themes including shared experience of a film with others, citing movie dialogue, and qualities of cult or classic films emerged through analysis.

The ritual nature of moviegoing

Before analyzing the views of outdoor movie audiences, a historical glance at moviegoing practices in the US can offer clarity for how the desires and engagement of audiences have changed due to transformation of cinemas, screening spaces, and technologies.

For many moviegoers, particularly prior to access to digital films at home, going to the cinema was a routine practice. In these habitual behaviors, the meaning of experience is not given and preformed but rises out of the experience itself, as participants interact with and respond to the film, the space in which the film is screened, and other members of the audience. In the era of majestic movie palaces like the Egyptian Theatres and the Warner Hollywood Theater, an evening out at the movies was an event. Early movie theaters were designed with spectacular exteriors and equally magnificent interiors, intended to transform the moviegoers' experience even before the film began. The Warner Hollywood, located at Hollywood Boulevard and Wilcox Avenue, was replete with 'lounges with rich, walnut paneling, authentic antiques, a smoking room, a nursery with toys, and a music room' (Williams 159). The opulence of these theaters was not, however, class-bound: rather than excluding working class audiences unaccustomed to such lavishness, the picture palaces invited them to transcend their everyday experiences not only through engagement with the film but also with their surroundings. In her study of Southern movie palaces, cultural critic Janna Jones contends that 'picture palace developers created a public space that for the first time dramatically mixed various classes of picture show fans. This was no doubt motivated by the desire for high profits; however, many of them claimed that they had created a democratic space of leisure' (19-20). Jones notes that these assurances of democratization were largely self-proclaimed and still highly exclusionary. She adds that running alongside these claims were 'design elements and structures built into the palaces [that] were intended to enforce acceptable public behavior' (20). From well-dressed and formally behaved ushers to high-end décor, movie palaces established a refined environment in which one could easily be embarrassed for not following social expectations.

Historic picture palaces were renovated as part of the recent revitalization of Hollywood, but their contemporary audiences tend to include tourists in t-shirts rather than

the evening attire appropriate to these theaters in their heyday. Writing about movie audiences in the late 1980s, Bruce A. Austin notes that

moviegoing was once a communal ritual, often set in an opulent ambience. [...] Going to the movies meant being in the company of friends and strangers who would sing songs together by following a white ball that bounced across lyrics projected on the screen.

Austin adds that 'today, moviegoing retains comparatively little of the social and experiential specialness it once had' (44). The cineplex or the second-run 'dollar theater' of the 1980s tended toward plain, unappealing architecture, often sitting squat in a strip mall or a shopping mall parking lot, attracting none of the glamorous appeal of the picture place.

Because of the unique aspects of public spaces used as sites for screenings, outdoor movie audiences participate in moviegoing in some of the ways Austin describes. Being outdoors in open space eases some of the constraints of social decorum that traditionally dictated behavior in an indoor theater. This openness is enhanced by socializing and entertainment before the screening, which evoke a more party-like atmosphere and recall the customs of drive-ins with their accompanying playgrounds, entertainment areas, and extensive snack offerings.

Media scholar John Ellis draws a distinction between the filmic experience and the cinematic experience that plays out in the ways visitors engage with outdoor screenings. Ellis posits that what the moviegoer purchases with a theater ticket 'is the possibility of a pleasurable performance: the performance of a particular film and the performance of cinema itself, both together' (26). The appreciation of the cinema stands apart from an appreciation of the film, and, Ellis contends,

often people 'go to the cinema' regardless of what film is showing, and sometimes even with little intention of watching the film at all. Cinema, in this sense, is the relative privacy and anonymity of a darkened public space in which various kinds of activity can take place (26).

While Ellis, writing in the 1990s, may be hinting at elicited behaviors, the habits of moviegoing have been transformed by the distracting behaviors of those who privilege social space over the sanctity of the film. Yet the social pleasure of a shared experience with others can also draw moviegoers to the cinema. Outdoor screenings draw on similar social motivations: to spend time with others, to have an experience with friends, and an interesting setting for a date night or family activity are all factors that might lead to moviegoing away from the theater.

Many sites that host seasonal outdoor screenings are rich with cultural history. At these locations, history intertwines with memory, as cultural memory influences personal memory. Screening movies at historic sites is common not only in Los Angeles but in sites

around the US, as moviegoing becomes linked to placemaking. Cultural heritage tourism works with moviegoing to bring visitors to a historical site for an experience: not merely a tour or an educational visit, but a leisure activity that can create a meaningful and memorable experience. In this regard, outdoor movie screenings can function as part of placemaking, turning space into place and tying people meaningfully to their communities.

Place, Nostalgia, and the Drive-in

Recent research (Jones 2013, Kuhn 2011, Maltby 2011, Staiger 2005, Stubbings 2003) into moviegoing histories shows that the experience is often remembered more than the film itself: moviegoers remember their companions, their snacks, and the cinema, far more regularly than they recall the plots and details of the films they watched. Moviegoers establish personal meanings associated with particular places, and even though those meanings are individual, the extent of those varied connections creates an important space in a community. This is true even when shared meanings are somewhat limited. Whether a movie theater carries significance because it was the destination for a first date, or because it was the means of escaping the heat in a particularly long summer, social meanings are connected to places, and those meanings change over time.

Early outdoor movies like Santa Cruz Guerilla Drive-In created sense of place by hijacking spaces. Parking lots, abandoned factories, and other unused spaces became screening locations for this film series in Santa Cruz, California. Keeping the location secret until announcing it privately via electronic messages added a degree of enchantment to the space, enhanced by the experience of watching a movie there. In a 2004 interview with *The New York Times*, Guerilla Drive-In founder Wes Modes explained,

Part of why we're doing this is to reclaim public space and give people a way to use the nighttime that's not mediated by commerce. In our town, the parks close at sundown, you have to buy something at coffee shops. We wanted to give people a way to interact with each other outdoors without having to spend any money.

Modes and his compatriots sought to establish a sense of shared space where there was none, building a sense of community through a shared experience.

The origins of Cinespia are similarly related to repurposing space for communal use. The cemetery at which Rudolph Valentino is interred – originally called Hollywood Memorial Park – has hosted a memorial in the silent film icon's memory since the first anniversary of his death, in August 1927. After the cemetery was purchased and renamed Hollywood Forever, the 1999 Valentino memorial hosted by the new owners included an outdoor screening of the Valentino classic silent film, *Son of the Sheik*. John Wyatt, who ran a film club, approached the cemetery owners and asked about the possibility of establishing a screening series there. Cinespia has screened films to sell-out crowds at the cemetery since 2002.

Santa Monica Pier was an early adopter of the now-common screening of feature films in familiar outdoor venues. The original series, Santa Monica Drive-In at the Pier, played on the Cinespia slogan of screenings ‘below (and above) the stars’ to claim ‘movies over the water and under the stars.’ Now called Front Porch Cinema, movies at the Pier were since included under the Eat|See|Hear flag, which produces summer screening events at a variety of public parks in greater Los Angeles. Griffith Park, La Cienega Park in Beverly Hills, and Will Rogers State Historic Park are among the venues that transform existing public spaces into moviegoing sites.

Nostalgia is frequently employed in placemaking and is fundamental to the ways audiences make meaning at outdoor movie screenings. This nostalgia is often rooted both in the experience and in the film, as many outdoor screenings feature what will be termed ‘cult contemporary’ – films that have achieved a cult following primarily through their accessibility, repeat viewings, and their role as a background for audiences watching at the cinema, on home televisions, and on mobile devices.

Scholars and critics writing from different perspectives – from Susan Stewart on materiality to Svetlana Boym on the end of the Soviet Union to Chuck Klosterman and Simon Reynolds on music – agree that nostalgia is a longing for something inaccessible. This longing may be related to a particular place or time in an individual’s lived experience, or it may be nostalgia brought about through cultural memory and the desire for an emotional state perceived as preferable to the present. A familiar film can evoke a unique nostalgia as the audience enters into the world of the film, whether the time and space of the narrative, the time and space of a prior screening, or a combination of both. For the brief time of being immersed in that world, one can revisit one’s past self and experiences, although the respite from the present is bittersweet with the realization that it is merely a way of revisiting a time that is no longer accessible.

Outdoor movies create a panoply of nostalgia: for the experience of a kind of moviegoing that is no longer possible, for the place and time of the drive-in or the movie palace and the cultural accoutrement that it calls to mind, for friendships from the past in which watching movies together was a common shared experience, and for films themselves that can create nostalgia for their place and time or for the familiar comfort of an oft-watched film. In her discussion of the nostalgic aesthetic of American Movie Classics, Barbara Klinger points out that the primary audience for AMC, ‘baby boomers and their parents [who] grew up watching many of these films in theaters or on network television’ are therefore ‘primed for reminiscence’ (102), recalling not just the time of the film but also the idealized time of watching it. The pleasure of viewing again, especially as home access to classic and contemporary films becomes immediate and expected, shifts the experience of moviegoing. As audiences are familiar with the films they watch – or the films that become comfortable background noise to other everyday activities – characters and dialogue easily invoke nostalgia for seemingly simpler times of previous screenings.

Running alongside the novelty of outdoor movies is the resurrection of traditions, particularly those associated with the drive-in. Like the drive-in, the pleasures of an outdoor

screening far exceed merely watching a movie. In a 1982 survey of drive-in audiences, Bruce Austin found that 'to see the movie' accounted for only 7.5 percent of the reasons for attending the drive-in. Affordability and comfort versus the walk-in theater, privacy, having fun, and being outdoors were all considered more significant factors than the film itself (91). At the time of Austin's survey, the drive-in was already in significant decline on the US landscape: from a peak of 4,063 drive-in theaters in 1958 (Fass, par. 5), the number of drive-ins fell from 2,507 in 1987 to only 910 nationwide by 1990 ('A Brief Overview').

Yet the drive-in remains a part of the cultural imaginary, and has been re-presented to a younger audience through mediated experiences such as *Grease*, *The Outsiders*, and several video games including *SimCity 2000* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* that feature drive-in scenarios. Nostalgia for the drive-in is rooted in a yearning for an idyllic communal filmgoing experience, in which each individual or group occupies their own private space within the context of a larger public setting.

There are no longer any drive-in theaters in Los Angeles proper. Built in 1955, the Vineland Drive-In in City of Industry is the last vintage drive-in theater in the county, accommodating as many as 1,700 cars for first-run features year round. In a 2004 feature story about the Vineland in the *Los Angeles Times*, Duane Noriyuki reports that the drive-in experience has seen some changes.

Those rattly metal speakers that hung on poles are a thing of the past, replaced by Dolby surround sound through the radio. Another change is that the playgrounds at the base of the screens are gone. [...] Other than that, it's much the same experience, not unlike tailgate parties outside a football stadium as people set up lawn chairs and blankets or convert the back seats of their vans to outdoor seating. (par. 14)

Noriyuki notes that 'the lure of the colossal screen and the tang of popcorn give drive-ins their appeal. And it's still a good place for making out' (par. 16). Whether the appeal is for the larger-than-life screen, retro-style concession stands, or a romantic dalliance, a drive-in revival is underway. Enthusiasts-turned-operators are using innovative means to recreate the bygone experience.

In the summer of 2007, Angel City Drive-In began screening films in the parking lot of Hotel Alexandria in downtown Los Angeles, while the hotel was under renovation. Built in 1906, it provided residences for many film stars in the early years of the industry and was the site chosen by Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, D.W. Griffith, and Charlie Chaplin to announce the formation of United Artists in 1919 ('Hotel Alexandria Rehab'). The Alexandria was part of the rise of downtown gentrification, transforming a classic yet rundown landmark hotel into studio lofts for upscale Angelenos. Angel City Drive-In complemented its screenings with car hop service by members of the roller derby team Angel City Derby Girls as well as Hot Dog on a Stick, the popular snack first sold on Venice Beach in 1946. As a moviegoing event, Angel City drew heavily on Los Angeles history to evoke nostalgia related

to various touchstones in the city's cultural memory. As construction continued at Hotel Alexandria, the film series was forced to move and evolved into Electric Dusk Drive-In. Films were still screened on the rooftop of a parking garage, with a view of downtown skyscrapers for a backdrop. As an event, Electric Dusk played upon the ways it reflected the experience of a traditional drive-in: many moviegoers posted photos on Instagram showing the portable screen and other vehicles shot from their car interiors; others show their moviegoing companions seated in the vehicle enjoying food they have brought with them or purchased from Electric Dusk's 'Snack Shack.'

With the growing popularity of Netflix, cable and satellite television, and the burgeoning market for home theater technology, watching movies at home can be a convenient and high-quality alternative to moviegoing. What is missing, of course, is the company of others and the pleasure of cinema as a shared experience. Surely a comedy seems funnier when others laugh along with us, and home viewing denies the pleasure of enjoying a film with a large group of people in a communal setting. The social experience of outdoor movies, constituted in part by chance encounters with strangers, is one you cannot get in your living room, regardless of how many friends you have over to watch.

What we watch

When Cinespia began at Hollywood Forever, John Wyatt intended to provide an opportunity for film buffs to view more obscure, seldom screened Hollywood classics. Cinespia's mission statement, posted on its website shortly after it went live in 2003, states that the film society was 'created to bring together the community of film enthusiasts in Los Angeles. We are convinced that Angelenos are still enthusiastic about cinema's great films, including those outside the normal repertory. We are dedicated to showing unusual films in unusual places' ('Mission'). The cemetery is an unusual place for screening a film, yet over the years Cinespia's fare has become increasingly mainstream. These changes are reflected in the text now posted on the website:

Since 2002, Cinespia's Hollywood Forever Cemetery outdoor movies have offered audiences one of the most magical nightlife entertainment experiences in greater Los Angeles. In addition to showcasing the best of cinema, Cinespia cemetery screenings feature pre-show DJs, themed photo booths, a picnic at a gorgeous Hollywood landmark, and even occasional visits by stars, directors and filmmakers (Cinespia.org).

Cinespia has repackaged itself as an event rather than a film screening. Despite this shift in focus, a few unconventional movies still appear on the schedule each season, yet few equal those screened in the earlier years. Among the films shown during Cinespia's 2002 season were *Purple Noon* (*Plein Soleil*) and *Eyes Without A Face* (*Les Yeux Sans Visage*), both French thrillers originally released in 1960. Depending on the visitor's perspective, one could say that in its initial offerings, Cinespia used the cemetery as a sinister backdrop for frightening

films, or conversely, that the beauty and serenity of the cemetery makes a horror film less frightening, particularly as the city lights keep- the cemetery from becoming as dark as a theater would be. As Wyatt said in a 2004 interview with Pepperdine University's *Graphic* newspaper, 'I love that there's a lot of Hollywood history and beautiful architecture at the cemetery. The surroundings are quiet, serene and natural. It's the perfect atmosphere to watch classic films' (Barge, par. 8).

That Cinespia itself can educate audiences about film history is one of its benefits for Wyatt. He says that many younger moviegoers 'don't know these classic films. I've had people [at Cinespia screenings] tell me they've never watched a black-and-white film before' (Epstein, par. 3). Cinespia screens classics from Hollywood's Golden Age, including the screwball comedies *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), starring Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant, and Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934) with Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. These films portray a worldview and have an aesthetic that offers insight into both cinema history and cultural history. Jan, who moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career in acting, was interviewed at a screening of *The Searchers*, a John Wayne film from 1956. Jan said Hollywood Forever 'is perfect to watch old classics.' He finds those films appealing because 'it seems like they don't script it so much. It's that old fashioned beauty that I like. The new stuff today, there's too much special effects that kind of destroy movies in some ways.' This classic film fan implies that there is a feeling of authenticity associated with the straightforward narrative and production of old black-and-white films, in contrast with the high production value of many contemporary films.

In addition to the dearth of older films, much has changed since Cinespia took up residence at Hollywood Forever. In a 2007 survey that I conducted on SurveyMonkey related to this research, a respondent named Lisa wrote that 'the crowds used to be made up of people who had an interest in old films and/or a love of that cemetery; now it seems that it's just the "in" thing to do and a bunch of disrespectful drunkards show up. And it's way oversold. Way too crowded.' When she went to see *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* at the beginning of the 2005 season, Lisa found it disappointing that 'the organizers and most of the crowd had no idea that director John Huston was buried a few feet away from the screening.' Cinespia now appeals to a younger audience as intent on re-experiencing the films they love as on being exposed to the history of Hollywood cinema.

In a lengthy review posted on Yelp.com in 2009, Aaron L. critiques the changes to Cinespia while still celebrating its novelty and the pleasures of watching movies at the cemetery. He describes 'picnicing with friends and loved ones, drinking good wine, eating good food... Walking out onto that field with music blaring, people congregating in the grass, it feels more like a music festival than a movie screening...' Yet Aaron L. also notes a change to a younger audience that can be attributed to screening cult contemporary films:

This past summer I noticed an alarming change in the demographic that attends these events. Now it could be because Cinespia chose to show a more "obvious" selection of well-known "mainstream" or "easily-

accessible” films, that drew not only a larger audience, but a different type... In the past Cinespia tended to screen more obscure titles, lesser-known classics, which would attract a more “bohemian” crowd, with a genuine love and appreciation for film as well as a respect and admiration for the environment in which they were gathered... That crowd has been replaced as of late, by, well, other people... Perhaps less interested in cinema, and more interested in drinking and socializing, which means more people talking obnoxiously, standing in front of you, walking around, waving their arms, and generally disrupting your viewing experience... This also means that there isn’t the same degree or type of audience participation anymore, people don’t seem to know when to laugh or cheer with the movie anymore... Again, maybe its the selection of films being shown, or maybe the secret is just out...

Audience members posting reviews on Yelp have a different motivation from those posting on social media sites. Yelp reviewers will give significant space to environmental concerns: encouraging others to bring blankets and food, as well as critiquing the food trucks, parking, and atmosphere of the screening. Selection of movies for screening are also addressed, often with enthusiastic comments about what films they saw. On Twitter, audience members are marking their presence at an outdoor movie screening, often tagging the friends who are with them, the films being screened, and the food. Little critical thought is likely brought to a quick social media post, where reviews of Yelp require more time and contemplation to compose.

Food plays a significant role in how these moviegoing events take shape. Cinespia has always welcomed audiences to bring picnic baskets; that alcoholic beverages are allowed impacts decisions about what people pack in their baskets. Cinespia has featured photographs of picnic spreads, encouraging a focus on the pleasures of eating and drinking as part of their experience. For example, as a follow up to the screening of *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure*, Cinespia posted a photo on August 26, 2015 with the message: ‘Bow tie, bike wheel cookie & beer. Regram @borgieandpest Pee-wee themed #cinespiapicnic What are you packing? Beer and wine permitted at #Cinespia.’

Classic, cult, and cult contemporary

While there are various, often overlapping, definitions of cult movies, film scholar Bruce Kawin focuses on two: “any picture that is seen repeatedly by a devoted audience, and as a deviant or radically different picture embraced by a deviant audience” (19). Some films acquire cult status because they are difficult to locate and rarely publicly screened. Because of changes in technology that enable instant access to thousands of films, including obscure, independent, and international titles, audience relationships to movies have been transformed. For many movie fans, the cultural circumstances that created the condition for the third definition of cult films have all but disappeared. As movies are viewed at home and

on portable devices including laptops, tablets, and smartphones, box office earning and critical reception do not have the same bearing they once did on how audiences come to understand the cultural value of a particular film. The idea of a hard-to-find or rare films is also less common than it once was. A new set of circumstances is needed to define both 'cult' and 'classic' films.

Film critic Jim Emerson raises the question of how classic film might be defined, asking in a blog post on rogerebert.com, 'What's your definition of "classic"? Record-breaking? Precedent-setting? Influential? Enduring?' (Emerson) He notes that 25 years must pass from release date before a film can be eligible for the National Film Registry. Of a dozen films tagged as 'classic' by outdoor moviegoers on social media, only *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *American Psycho* (2000) were less than 25 years old at the time of being consider classic films. The remaining films ranged from the 1950s (*Roman Holiday* and *Sunset Boulevard*) to the 1990s (*Pulp Fiction*). Because movies are repeatable and accessible, 'enduring' is perhaps more difficult to define if it constitutes a qualification for classic film. Precedent-setting fits Ellen H.'s review of *The Exorcist* (1973) on a Yelp review of Cinespia:

Along with a fellow Yelper [self-reference for someone who frequently writes reviews on Yelp.com], I went to the final summer 07 screening at Hollywood Forever Cemetery – and it was THE EXORCIST. For those who are younger than me, The Exorcist is a classic, and still one of the most shocking films around (in some ways trumping Peter Jackson and Sam Raimi gore-fest.) Hey, I skipped high-school prom when my date and I opted instead to watch this on video (video what's that?)

As is often the case, what is deemed classic earns that status as much from personal affect and meaning-making as it does from cultural significance.

Like 'classic,' the term 'cult film' is also being reconsidered in a post-cinema era of moviegoing. Film critic Danny Peary is widely credited with popularizing the term 'cult classic' in his 1981 book *Cult Movies: The Classics, the Sleepers, the Weird, and the Wonderful*. For this first book – a second and third followed – Peary chose one hundred films that garner, for various reasons, a group of passionate fans who have seen these films enough times to be familiar with every bit of dialogue and will happily engage in lengthy discussions of their merits. By Peary's initial definition, cult classics are typically rejected by critics and earn little at the box office on initial release, yet are cherished by those who believe they are among a privileged few who find something extraordinary in them. Especially appealing for fans is the community that forms around cult classics. 'There is nothing more exciting than discovering you are not the only person obsessed with a picture critics hate, the public stays away from en masse, and film texts ignore,' Peary says (xiii).

Outdoor moviegoers seldom refer to films as 'cult' or 'cult classic' in their online posts. One rare exception is Anthony H., who wrote about Street Food Cinema on Yelp in

July 2013. Of particular significance is not that he refers to *Mean Girls* as a cult classic, but that he details many of the qualities of cult contemporary film as it is being defined here, especially in the context of an outdoor movie:

My boyfriend took me here the other night to watch *Mean Girls*. I have seen this movie so many times, but it's so much better watching it under the stars with hundreds of other people who have memorized every single line. (Seriously who knew that *Mean Girls* would become such a Cult Classic Film!) The best of the event is not even the movie, it's the food trucks! I tried Fry Girl for the very first time and was satisfied with the food, but not amazed. However there is something about eating street food, drinking pink champagne with your partner, and watching a hilarious movie with hundreds of other foodies.

'Cult contemporary films' are those that have been watched so frequently that the dialogue is not only familiar but instantly quotable. For the outdoor screening, the shared pleasure of being among other devoted fans far exceeds the discomforts of cold, hard ground, or noisy neighbors that may detract from the experience.

The quotability of movie lines as a marker of cultural capital is evident from hundreds of Tweets that use film dialogue to show their familiarity with a film and to mark their presence at a screening as a familiar fan of cult contemporary. Simon Kassianides (@simonkass) posted the following Tweet on August 16, 2015:

"Are there rocks ahead?" "If there are we'll soon be dead!"
[#theprincessbride #electricduskdrivein...](#)
<https://instagram.com/p/6dAresnuMy/>

Many Tweets include hyperlinks to Instagram, where moviegoers post a variety of photos. Common themes include images of themselves, their companions, the screening space, food that was packed as a picnic or purchased from food trucks, and in the case of screenings that are pet-friendly, there are many photos of dogs at outdoor movies.

Jennifer Stone (@comeagainjen), who attended a Street Food Cinema screening of *The Wedding Singer* in June 2015, tweeted:

"I'll even let you hold the remote control." #streetfoodcinema
#weddingsinger https://instagram.com/p/3nc_rnmK0n/

A friend or follower scrolling through Stone's Twitter timeline would need to be familiar with the film to understand her intent for singling out this particular line of dialogue. Some cult contemporary films and their elements are familiar enough for the moviegoer to not

even need to mention the title of the film. On July 26, 2015, Kevin (@KingCappy) tweeted from Cinespia:

I've got a golden ticket! #cinespia #nofilter @ Hollywood Forever
<https://instagram.com/p/5l0iRRzP2r/>

Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory has become frequent fare for each of the outdoor screening series in Los Angeles. The film is a bright and colorful sing-along that recalls childhood memories, whether the movie was seen at home or at a theater.

Pee-wee's Big Adventure (1985) offers an example of a cult contemporary film screened at Cinespia that has developed cultural cachet associated with cemetery screenings. Paul Reubens developed the character Pee-wee Herman – a quirky, childlike man who always wears the same suit and bowtie – while he was a member of the improvisational comedy troupe The Groundlings. Following the success of the film, Reubens developed the Saturday morning children's program *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. The series aired on CBS from 1986 to 1991 and attracted a large college-age audience in addition to children. The annual screening of *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* at Cinespia is a highlight of the season. At the 2005 Cinespia screening of the film, Reubens phoned in an introduction, which John Wyatt broadcast over the public address system. In 2006, *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* sold out, and many disappointed fans were turned away at the cemetery gates. Those who arrived in time to be admitted were treated to a cast reunion, as Paul Reubens, E.G. Daily, and other members of the cast were in attendance. A blogger who calls herself Cat wrote enthusiastically about the screening:

Now the gates opened up at 7:30 and there was already a huge crowd, and I mean huge! It was going to be a sell out night. [...] So when we were all together we enjoyed our picnic and right at 9pm they started the show...with some introductions at first...Paul Reubens, Pee-wee himself was there! Everyone stood up and cheered. He was so cool, was pretty excited to be there. [...] Seeing the movie was so much fun. This was one of the best crowds to watch with too. When Pee-wee was in Texas and sings everyone watching clapped along and sang "Deep in the Heart of Texas." We had our own fun reciting lines amongst ourselves. ('Pee Wee')

The familiarity with the script and scenes, and the shared experience of clapping along with 'Deep in the Heart of Texas' reinforce and reflect the feelings of being part of an exceptional minority that is typical of cult fans. It is a performative celebration of cult fandom. *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* celebrated its thirtieth anniversary with a celebratory screening at Cinespia in 2015. Along with Reubens' guest appearance, the event also featured a photo booth for visitors to have a keepsake image to remember the occasion and to post on social media.

Reception and revelry

As outdoor movies become fixed events in Los Angeles, those who have attended will return to see a favorite film, to bring others to enjoy the experience for the first time, and often to celebrate a birthday or other event. These repeat screenings are often mentioned in social media, as moviegoers declare an affinity for a certain film or location. For example, Meredith Grau (@blahlaland) tweeted her enthusiasm for an upcoming film in July 2014: 'Nay, the Drive-in is not dead! This weekend #ElectricDusk is screening my all time fave, SUNSET BOULEVARD.' Moviegoer enthusiasm for a classic film from Hollywood's Golden Era is uncommon on social media, making this Tweet significant. More recent films are more likely to be the subject of comments on social media, such as Nicole Pacent's (@NicolePacent) Tweet about some of her favorite films screened at Cinespia: 'Real talk: #Goonies is the best adventure ever. Only to be rivaled by #Hook. The End. PS #GooniesNeverSayDie #cinespia.' Alberto Sorto (@alberto_sorto) was able to declare his Street Food Cinema screening a classic: 'It was my first time seeing *Weird Science* and it didn't disappoint. Great film...Classic! @stfoodcinema #WeirdScience #StreetFoodCinema.' Inclusion of the handle @stfoodcinema and the hashtag #StreetFoodCinema indicate a desire to be included in the conversation generated by the film series as well as the conversation about the film series.

Nostalgia comes full circle at Electric Dusk Drive-in for Whitney P., who posted on Yelp in February 2015: 'I hadn't been to a drive in movie since probably *Jaws* in the 80s, and I certainly wasn't driving, and the only other experience I have with drive in movies is seeing them in old movies, like *Grease*.' Although her husband prefers horror movies to *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, which was screened that evening, Whitney P. noted that 'he still enjoyed it because who can resist the nostalgia of a drive in movie? Unless you were born in the 90's or 2000's then I guess this is retro or normal even?' These questions return to fundamental questions about personal memory and cultural memory, noting that because of cultural memory it is possible to feel nostalgic for something you have not personally experienced.

Finally, Jean W. warns in her Yelp review from June 2011 that while Cinespia is a:

really wonderful LA experience [...] don't go see a movie you LOVE or that you wouldn't be ok with an audience laughing inappropriately at. You might think that the idea of seeing your favorite horror or classic film at the cemetery might be awesome, but when hordes of people start laughing at less than stellar effects or acting, etc.... it may mar your experience of the film. (I've gone to see a few movies with some cinephile friends who were very, VERY grumpy by the end of the night.)

Outdoor movies are, as Jean W. notes, not the cinephile's fare. Many posts on social media and Yelp express annoyance with poor audio quality, difficulty in seeing the screen, and the behavior of inattentive moviegoers. The event-driven qualities of outdoor screenings take

precedence over the film itself, although the film is always fundamentally the reason for coming together.

Conclusion

Outdoor movie series are popular in many locations around the US as well as elsewhere in the world. Los Angeles, which prides itself on being the ‘movie capital of the world,’ was early in establishing outdoor movies as a social event. Over time, the film series moved from a focus on film to adding an array of entertainment to enhance the experience. Cinespia has a long tradition of having DJs play music before and after screenings, but more recent additions include a photo booth that encourages audience members to dress in costume and to take on the aura of a cast member by entering into a mockup of the film’s space and sensibility. The move to a more party-like atmosphere at Cinespia was accompanied by a change from films that could be classified as classic, obscure, or film noir to a slate stressing cult contemporary films instead.

Established after Cinespia, outdoor movie series like Street Food Cinema, Eat|See|Hear, and Electric Dusk Drive-in have primarily focused on cult contemporary films. They have also focused attention on food trucks, live music, and other forms of entertainment that may or may not be relevant to the film being screened on any given evening. The popularity of cult contemporary films at outdoor screenings offers a view of the changing nature of moviegoing. Where cinema audience members have been irate over the behavior of other moviegoers, especially those who do not hesitate to use smartphones while the movie is playing, outdoor movie audiences talk, sing along, and shout out lines of dialogue during the film. These behaviors are not only acceptable, they are desirable.

Biographical note:

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