Of Bicycles and Films: The Case of *CineCycle*

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What role do permanent spaces (i.e., movie houses) play in the creation of dynamic film and media cultures? The city of Toronto can boast one of the most dynamic alternative film scenes in North America, with fringe film and media festivals taking place alongside two, very large annual film festivals: the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) and Hot Docs. My last count was just over sixty-eight annual events and hundreds of one-time events. Despite this flurry of activity, there are at present only two repertory cinemas left in the city; and there are a handful of theatres that serve the South Asian and Chinese communities. It would appear that the alternative film cultures that are thriving in Toronto and in many other cities interconnected through these festival circuits, do so despite the destruction of permanent architectures for seeing films. This is presumably because these film-going activities are generated through cultural scenes and networks rather than specific spaces.

Nevertheless, in this essay I wish to foreground the important role played by material places in the continued sustenance of dynamic film cultures. I shall argue that scenes need concrete spaces and settings where the past accumulates to create a shared project and common grammar, the elements of which animate the relation between aesthetics and politics in meaningful ways. I would like to situate this idea by looking at the alternative film theatre and bicycle repair shop CineCycle, a vital Toronto venue for experimental film and media since 1991. CineCycle has helped to create a form of what I would call resistant obsolescence in the context of perpetual technological change. Its commitment to low-end technologies, do-it-yourself culture, and all variety of film and video formats has encouraged an alternative cultural economy, which we can trace through a variety of cultural networks across North America and in parts of Europe.

This research belongs to a larger undertaking to understand the relation between art scenes, cultural spaces, and the specific articulation of film as a situated practice that builds common purpose and a public sphere. Film is not simply a discrete object or text enabled through technology. Rather, film is embedded in the complex spatio-temporal fabric of cultural spaces that are local and particular, just as they are inflected by and reflected in larger global structures. This is especially true with experimental and avant-garde films, which are distributed through specialized circuits.

In narrating the story of CineCycle, one inevitably encounters characters: cinephiles who helped to create events, screenings, personal film collections and archives outside of public institutions. These are often characters who were part of and who created scenes in the enclaves and interstices of dead spaces in the city. It is my hope to complicate the clichéd narrative of gentrification, which gives little purchase to the bohemian cultures that revitalized abandoned urban sites, because, in the end, these prepared the way for condominium developers. While there is some truth to this cliché, it obscures the rich and varied cultural history of these cultures and the individual and collective efforts to imagine and rebuild urban spaces.

CineCycle will never simply be incorporated into a dominant commercial culture via the processes of gentrification. This is no doubt because its central character is Martin Heath: avid cyclist, itinerant projectionist, serious film collector, and builder of several alternative film-going spaces. This essay is dedicated to excavating Heath’s longtime efforts to create film scenes.

Radical Distribution

Heath’s interest in cinema began with his involvement in the film societies in England in the 1950s. His first exposure to the architectonics of its circuits was in his job at Contemporary Films in London, England. Contemporary Films had been established in New York by the radical film distributor Charles Cooper to
become one of the foremost non-theatrical distributors of the postwar 16mm market, expanding it to school
libraries, film societies, churches, and community groups. When Cooper was blacklisted during the McCarthy
era, Contemporary Films was taken over by Leo Dratfield who continued to build on Cooper’s political mandate.

Cooper created another branch of the company in London, England. During the early 1950s, the
Communist Party of Great Britain experienced a mini-Renaissance. The New Era Film Club was founded to
act as a film society, a 16mm projection service for clubs and trade union branches, and a production group.
Branches of the club were established in different cities. Through his ties to numerous Soviet film directors,
Charles Cooper’s Contemporary Films Ltd., along with Ivor Montagu’s Plato Films Ltd. (which replaced the
defunct Progressive Film Institute), was funded in part by the British-Soviet Friendship Society. Cooper had
the license to show the re-released prints of many of Eisenstein’s films and was committed to distributing the
work of socialist directors from the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China. Both Plato and Contemporary
Films had as their motto, “See the Other Half of the World.” Cooper had an extensive 16mm film library of
international art and avant-garde films, and he built an international distribution circuit in England much as
he had done in the United States—by the late sixties he had purchased two cinemas in London. This is where
Heath began his film career in the late fifties and early sixties.

As a young man, Heath was hired to run the film library at Contemporary Films. He also began to build
his own film collection. Although he was required to destroy extant film prints when they were damaged, all
that was needed was a photograph of someone destroying the print can with an axe. Heath became adept at
faking these axe deaths and rescued many films. Thus began his love affair with film repair and projection. It
also introduced him to Cooper’s committed and highly politicized vision of film distribution. In Cooper’s
vision, creating circuits for the distribution of films was an implicit, but all too often neglected, component of
politically committed filmmaking. The refinement of 16mm projection technologies enabled the development
of film screenings outside the realm of professional cinemas. Although Cooper opened several cinemas in the
late sixties, early strategies focused on distributing films and projectionists to alternative screening spaces.

Radical Exhibition

Another influence on Heath’s conception of film distribution and exhibition was Montreal’s Expo 67. I want
to turn briefly to the film experiments at Expo because these highlight the liberal humanist values behind the
avant-garde scenes and cinemas that Heath would help to create in Toronto.

Through his employment at Contemporary Films, Heath was hired to help build a cinema for the Russian
Pavilion at Expo 67. Although this was a traditional screening situation, he came into contact with the numerous
multi-screen projects that were housed in over half of the Pavilions at Expo. One of the most impressive
multi-screen installations was \textit{Labyrinthe} produced by the Canadian filmmakers Roman Kroiter and Colin Low
at the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). Before this, Heath had been impressed by the NFB’s mobile
cinema experiments, taking film out into more remote parts of the world. Such experiments were themselves
inspired by the Soviet mobile cinema (using trains and automobiles) projects of the 1920s.

Expo 67 stands above other Expositions in terms of its stellar displays of audio-visual technologies. Over
three thousand films were produced for the event, and numerous film festivals and televsional events were connected
to it. Approximately sixty-five per cent of all Pavilions and complexes presented moving pictures, many of which
were fantastical displays of the new flexibility of the screen and the new synaesthesia of the visual cultures of
the world mediated through technology. As Judith Shatnoff’s review in \textit{Film Quarterly} described: “Film came
on two screens, on three, five, six, nine in a circle, 112 moving screen cubes, a 70mm frame broken into innumerable screen shapes, screens mirrored to infinity, a water screen, a dome screen...". New names were invented to describe these screens: Circle Vision, Polyscreen, Kinoautomat, Diapolyecran, and Kaleidoscope. While the Moscow World's fair featured Glimpses of the USA, a projection on seven screens by Charles and Ray Eames in 1959 and while the New York World's Fair in 1964 had dozens of multi-screen projections, including Glimpses of the USA on fourteen screens at the IBM pavilion, there was nothing that matched Expo in terms of sheer quantity and experimental quality of films.

The relation between screen and architecture, the screen as architecture, was central to the humanism that was at the heart of the design aesthetic of Expo. Whereas classical depictions of dehumanization staged the cinema screen as precisely that, which alienates humans from social structures, Expo’s image of the screen, was just the opposite. R. Buckminster Fuller wrote the wonderful introduction to Gene Youngblood’s book Expanded Cinema (1970), a book deeply inspired by the visual experiments of Expo 67. Fuller’s planetary vision of an “earth space” challenged the view of the planet as a flat piece of property. Drawing on Einstein’s theory of a non-linear universe, a complex of frequencies, broadcasts, and instantaneous communication within the context of the universe, Fuller offers a vision of decentralized settlement expressed in mass produced and mobile 4D architectures. For Fuller, Youngblood’s book is important because it uses the “Scenario-Universe principle.” His conceptualization of synaesthetic art as inherently pedagogical is of the utmost importance for the future, as it will synchronize the senses and humankind’s knowledge in time to ensure “the continuance of the...Space Vehicle Earth.” The new forms of art are ecological and will provide the foundation for the “Expanded Cinema University.”
Just as Fuller's geodesic homes were designed for mobility, so, too, were new forms of cinema designed for mobile and aleatory experiences. Temporality was introduced into the frame by means of an expanded screen. No longer was cinema something that was merely static, but both the screen and its spectators were set in motion in a new dynamic encounter between images and bodies.

When Heath moved to Toronto in the early 1970s, he moved into Rochdale at the University of Toronto. Rochdale, some would argue, was the quintessential utopian expression of the “Expanded Cinema University.” Not unlike the vision of co-operative community living featured at Expo 67 (especially Moshe Safdie’s Habitat), Rochdale College was the University of Toronto’s first co-op residence, Canada’s first Free University. It opened in the spring of 1968 as a pedagogical experiment inspired by McLuhan, who was teaching media studies only few blocks away. Film and Theatre were the principle experimental media for creating new kinds of awareness.

While at Rochdale, Heath worked with Deane Taylor, and, together, they made the rock documentary *Son of Tutti Frutti* (1972), which screened weekly at the Roxy Cinema throughout the year. The film was an anthology of clips from the important history of rock n’ roll music between 1955 and 1965. The film had been an eight-hour, two-screen happening that Taylor and Heath had designed for various music events in England in the late 1960s, including a very successful Grateful Dead concert. In Toronto, Taylor co-founded the infamous *Video Cabaret* with Michael Hollingsworth. Heath worked with them on many of their early presentations, which incorporated multiple video broadcasts of live screen performances—benchmarks in the early history of video and performance art.

However, Heath was not so much interested in production as he was in the performative aspects of distribution, as he had understood it through Charles Cooper. When he decided to stay in Toronto, he worked for a distribution company with Linda Beath who, along with Deane Taylor and others, organized the first women’s film festival, Women and Film International Festival (WFIF) in 1973. Heath invented his own position at the festival as a “film revisionist” and projectionist, looking after two screens at the St. Lawrence Centre. He argued, correctly, that Union projectionists would not be able to handle the special needs of the diverse film materials that were coming in from around the world. The Women and Film International Festival was the precursor to the Toronto International Festival (TIFF, formerly the Festival of Festivals), which was established a year later. Heath continued in his position as film revisionist for the festival, a position he holds to this day and one that is unique to the Toronto Festival.

From the mid-seventies onward, Heath became involved in most of the major film events in the city, either as a technology consultant, a revisionist, a projectionist, or a cinema builder. As evidence of this, the first photograph in *Brave Films, Wild Nights* (2000), a history of TIFF, is a full-page photo of Heath at the helm of the festival—spooling films onto 35mm reels.

All of these jobs served to support Heath’s one true love: inflatables.

**Inflatable Mobile Cinema (or CineCycle)**

In 1975, Heath received a Canada Council grant, and, with Chris Clifford, produced a series of inflatable Mobile Cinemas, which toured Ontario and other parts of Canada over three summers (1976–1978). The inflatable cinema was expanded out of a van. It was originally a sculpture of a large inflatable penis by the French artist Daniel Lanois. Heath decided to invert its meaning and to transform it into a feminine like vessel that would contain people and film projections. The inflatable cinema could house about thirty people at a
time and was set up at campsites, in parks, on beaches, in cities, and in small towns across Canada. He also produced floating screens that could be viewed through walking inflatables. These were transparent cubes that allowed spectators to walk or roll on water as they viewed a film.

Heath’s mobile structures grew out of a utopian spirit. His desire for a shared space and collective cinematic experience that was adaptable and mobile, was influenced by, among other things, Charles Cooper’s Contemporary Films, Expo 67, and Rochdale’s radical affective pedagogy. In his inflatables, Heath screened works from his growing collection of art and avant-garde films (now numbered at two thousand) using a multiplicity of different projectors selected from his collection of historical and state-of-the-art film projectors covering all formats (now numbered at over fifty). He produced a semi-permanent inflatable cinema that was located in the East end of Toronto for almost a year before he closed it down and sought a more secure architecture.

In the late seventies, Heath worked with artists on Bathurst Street in Toronto to create a live-in art space, which included the three key components that would come to define his permanent film spaces: a bicycle repair shop, a small cinema, and an espresso machine. A year later, Heath established another live in art studio with artist Chrysanthe Stathacos, a space in an abandoned factory on Grange Avenue and formed the Grange Arts and Performance Space (G.A.P.), which worked in conjunction with A-Space Gallery. Based on the same combination of bicycle repair shop and cinema, the space lasted seven months as an open theatre. It was shut down to the public after a rowdy New Year’s Eve party encouraged the city to apply its residential zoning regulations. The bicycle repair shop is what was unique in Heath’s first two permanent cinema designs, Bathurst Street and G.A.P. As an avid cyclist since childhood, to him, the synergy between bikes and films seemed natural. It is also another version of the inflatable mobile cinema. Bicycles grew up with the cinema, and Heath has in his collection some of the silent films documenting the bicycle craze of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Antagonism between bicycles and cars is present in most Western cities, and that antagonism no doubt is what Heath had in mind when he came up with the name CineCycle. Both the experimental alternative cinema and the bicycle occupy urban spaces in ways that are marginal and, yet, able because of their flexible forms to transgress the physical infrastructure of media and cityscapes. Indeed, there is a survivalist (makeshift) aesthetic in all of Heath’s designs.
In 1989, Heath formed Access Bicycle Works, and, in 1991, he opened CineCycle at 317 Spadina Avenue in the back lane behind an abandoned factory. As was the case with his previous spaces, it was launched with a series of parties. The front half of the Spadina Avenue space was a bicycle repair shop and an espresso bar. Patrons had to walk through the repair shop, which was littered with old bike parts and the smell of cats, before getting to the eighty-seat theatre in the back. Importantly, it was a space that was not dependent on government funding for its subsistence. Heath had seen or been involved in numerous failed cinemas that collapsed because of a dependence on government subsidies: Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (1974-1978), the Funnel Experimental Film Theatre (1977-1988), and the Euclid Theatre for Independent Film and Video (1989-93). In trying to create a self-sustainable theatre, Heath recognized the importance of making available multiple formats. CineCycle was a unique space that offered 35mm, 16mm, regular and super 8 film projection, as well as VHS/3/4" video. This commitment to a variety of formats was quickly recognized by the local film and video community, as well as the press. The space was very busy with regular screenings programmed by Pleasure Dome Artist Film Exhibition Group (established in 1989), which used CineCycle for most of its on-going, bi-monthly screenings, and, at present, makes up about 75% of CineCycle's regular programming. Pleasure Dome is organized along the principles of the artist-run centre, through a rotating collective of artists and critics committed to experimental film and media. Other groups that continue to use the cinema are the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers (LIFT) and Innis Film Society, which book it for special events and special guest appearances by avant-garde filmmakers. Heath also screens films from his own collection on a monthly basis.

Despite Heath's on-going efforts to keep CineCycle going, the rent for the Spadina Avenue space became very difficult to maintain. Heath needed to find a new location, and the owners of 401 Richmond Street were very sympathetic to CineCycle's needs. The present location is very appropriately in the Coach House behind 401 Richmond Street, a historical warehouse in the heart of the city that was purchased in 1994 by Toronto's Zeidler family, Christina and Margaret Zeidler, manage the building. 401 Richmond St. is of interest to urban researchers because, unlike many so-called creative spaces that use artists to bring "color" to the marketplace, it is a building that has an organic existence within the city. It houses many of Toronto's artist-run galleries, alternative presses, festival offices, and independent designers and other small creative industries, through an unofficial policy, which offers tenants a sliding scale for rent with the proviso that they contribute to the cultural life of the building and the city.

Despite its location at 401 Richmond, CineCycle, like all of Heath's previous spaces, can only be accessed through the back alley. While it is not difficult to find, patrons need to be "in the know." It is proudly marginal in the back lane behind 129 Spadina Avenue. This secret address is part of its appeal as an underground space, a marginality, which creates and calls upon the aura of the historical avant-garde that never was in Toronto. Still, CineCycle is not simply an imaginary incarnation. Rather, it belongs to a dynamic experimental film scene, a network of histories, places, events, artworks, and characters in the city and beyond.

**Situated Scenes**

I would like to return to the question with which I began this essay, namely, what do cultural places contribute to a cultural scene? But we should first consider the very meaning of the concept of a "scene." Both Erving Goffman and Henri Lefebvre give us theatrical interpretations of the term. For Goffman, the scene is organized according to a framework that functions to bracket off the inside from outside world. Rules apply to the inside world of the game, and actors become aware of the brim of the frame, aware of the very boundaries of the
space. Goffman’s insight is not just that everyday life holds a dramaturgy akin to the theatre, but that reality and the structures of drama cannot easily be disentangled. A great deal of time is spent daydreaming, and a great amount of social interaction is precipitated through such dreams and forms of narration—figuring oneself as a character in a film, as one rehearses what one will say, recounting events that cast ourselves as central to the plot, going over what one should have said at a particular moment. It is precisely this theatrical aspect of daydreaming experience that is often ignored.⁹

For our purposes, Goffman’s ideas may give us some insight into the aura of place that is prevalent at CineCycle. As noted above, it is not that the space harkens back to some lost moment in Toronto’s cultural history, but, rather, that it inserts a space of experience, a theatricality, into the life of a young city that has no lengthy history of bohemian culture. There is a collective dream that is activated by the utopian aspirations of Heath’s space, as an alternative space for experimental cinema in a city committed largely to big corporate spectacles.

A scene like that of CineCycle might read as a form of resistance. For Lefebvre, the scene is akin to the fête or festival, a temporality that celebrates use value rather than exchange value, transforming the society of the spectacle through creative appropriation, opening space up to the eros and poetics of unpredictability through forms of sociability, shared grammars and projects.¹⁰ As an analytical concept, the scene is not very precise—its boundaries are indiscrete and fluid as Goffman’s Frame Analysis well argues. In this sense, the places that host scenes tell us something about their productive value. Scenes are both universal elements inside cities, they are what cities may share—the film scenes in San Francisco and Toronto share artists and film projects, but scenes and cinemas like CineCycle are also particular to different cities. By virtue of their structures of publicity, scenes might be read as cultural responses to globalization, because scenes, which are at once social gatherings and the on-going accumulation of impressions, are relational. Scenes make the city visible or invisible in particular kinds of ways. In this respect, scenes make the city a place; they are both universal to the discourse on cities and differentiated experiences inside them. It is the unique local character of a scene in a city that is its appeal, yet it is a uniqueness defined in relation to scenes in other cities. The uniqueness of a scene also depends on its being totally current, which is its affinity to fashion and music.

CineCycle’s urban vernacular, intimate size, and idiosyncratic blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure, bikes and films (which reference a post-fordist economy), and finally, its insistence on the ride rather than the destination are intrinsic aspects of its character. The fact that Heath must clear his bicycle shop out of the way and set up the chairs before every screening, produces a sense of a collapsible, mutable space. While changeable, it has also remained remarkably consistent over a fifteen-year history. Like Heath’s inflatable, mobile cinemas, CineCycle has helped to support a scene that is ephemeral, unfinished, and in a state of constant becoming. Yet there is something else about CineCycle that is rarely talked about, but which is very much part of blurring “the rim of the frame.” That is the fact that CineCycle is also where Martin Heath lives. There is no evidence of this domesticity, and it is something that is just known. But this is perhaps what produces in the experience of walking into his cinema, a feeling of both exclusivity and belonging.

CineCycle was designed and built by a cinephile; it is a space dedicated to film and media history. The old bicycles and film posters mounted on the walls, the different projectors at the back, the old espresso machine. It is very much like the specialized music scenes, which many have argued can be read as spaces “organized against change,” forms through which to resist flow and “regularized obsolescence” to favor minor tastes that are supported by networks of small scale institutions,¹¹ which, in the case of film scenes, can be located through festivals, specialized video outlets, alternative publications, spaces (like CineCycle), individual collections, and universities.¹²
In this sense, the use of recycled footage, historical or found footage, or home movies is something that is common to many alternative and avant-garde film practices, particularly today. These methods of appropriation and collage are perfectly commensurate with CineCycle’s mandate to maintain a screening space for obsolete formats like 8mm, technologies like Fisher Price’s pixel vision, and, famously, Heath built a bicycle-powered Super 8 projector. Yet it is not only DIY technologies that CineCycle supports. Heath’s collection of early 35mm silent films has often been screened on his “Silent Sundays.”

CineCycle, as the locus for a scene, creates a shared project that exceeds the simple avant-garde dictate to create the new. The cinema is more than movies; it is the place, the material culture of film, of projectors, of film stock, and of the time of the screening (including the before and after). Several of its supporters are very committed to archiving film scenes and to writing film history. For example, (Super 8) John Porter, a longtime CineCycle supporter and friend of Martin Heath, has, in his house, an extensive photographic archive of film events that goes back to Maya Deren’s visit to the city in the 1950s. Indeed, many of Porter’s films are time motion studies of social and cultural gatherings (parades, film screenings, winter exams, etc.). I would like to conclude with a John Porter anecdote that, in many ways, demonstrates the importance of place and collecting in the creation of a shared history.

Over the past few years, Pleasure Dome co-founder and CineCycle’s former general manager, Jonathan Pollard, has used CineCycle to create open screen events that invite the public to show their home movies. Pollard has been working with the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) to create a database of home movie collections, which NFB affiliates see as building a collective social history of the 20th century. Pollard began
his home movie project with Heath’s own collection, where he discovered a feature length series of home movies that documented the childhood experiences of a young girl growing up in Forest Hill, a middle-class neighborhood in Toronto. Heath had acquired the films through an acquaintance who had acquired the films at a house contents sale, the location of which he could not remember. The film itself was on beautiful, pristine Kodachrome stock, the material had been lovingly and artfully shot covering the years in a young girl’s life from 1937 to 1952. There was no identification on the film cans except the name presumably of the little girl, “Catherine.” The films were given the title, “The Catherine Films.” Pollard programmed the films as part of Pleasure Dome’s regular monthly screening and asked his collaborator, John Porter, to shoot numerous stills from the films for publicity purposes. As Porter looked at the orphan films, he felt sure that their subject might still be living in Toronto, and soon became obsessed with finding Catherine, with reuniting her with the films. Porter’s final report on this adventure reads like an episode of a forensic thriller:

I have lived in Toronto for fifty years, working as a photographer, filmmaker, letter carrier and bicycle courier and I have made a study of Toronto’s history and streets, so I know the city well. … The Film contained only two shots of Catherine’s house and they were just of the front porch with no house number. As I was carefully inspecting each frame of a scene of Catherine roller-skating, I was thrilled to discover a few frames with a Toronto Transit bus passing at the end of Catherine’s street… From scenes showing the sun’s shadows in different seasons, I determined in which direction the street ran. I also saw that the last block of the street was unusually short. At the Toronto Archives I got a copy of a 1940s bus route which I redrew onto a 1940s city street map from my own collection. By examining my custom city map, I determined that there were only two possible streets in Toronto that matched my clues and both those streets were close to my own childhood neighborhood. As I rode my bicycle uptown, knowing I would be seeing Catherine’s street, I felt a déjà vu. … I was heading toward my childhood neighborhood. I was arriving full circle.14

Porter arrived at the home pictured in the films. He asked the owner if he knew Catherine, the woman who used to live in the house. It just so happened that Catherine had visited her childhood home two years earlier and had sent the owner a thank-you card. It also just so happened that the owner had kept the card, and that the envelope contained a return address. Needless to say, Porter found Catherine, and she was reunited with her films, which were screened publicly in 1999 at CineCycle.

I wanted to conclude with this story because it could not have unfolded without the impetus to collect and preserve films, without associations, attachments, and networks that grow out of the sensibility of the projectionist. It may seem antithetical that Heath’s CineCycle provides the locus for the creation and deep appreciation of film history. Yet, human relations (labour and imagination) are embedded and performed through the material cultures of Heath’s cinema (bikes, wheels, reels, film, cameras, projectors, screens, chairs, coffee, etc.). The place of the cinema fosters a scene, which makes of history an unfinished project—something that is made and shared collectively.
ENDNOTES

2 Ibid., 83.
4 This upstaged The Family of Man photographic exhibition curated by Edward Steichen.
6 Whose father Eberhard Heinrich Zeidler runs one of the most respected architectural firms in the city: Zeidler Roberts Partnership/Architects.
9 Goffman, op. cit., 551.
10 Henri Lefebvre, op. cit., 66.
13 Artist Petra Chevrier custom built Toronto’s only Xenon-lamp, 8mm projector with a 2000-foot reel.