



Jay Schwartz. (Photo by Silvia Hortelano-Pelaez, courtesy Jay Schwartz)

“Shown in 16mm on a Giant Screen”: Adventures in Alternative Exhibition with The Secret Cinema—An Interview with Jay Schwartz

Elena Gorfinkel

Jay Schwartz’s Philadelphia-based micro-cinema, *The Secret Cinema*, named after the 1968 Paul Bartel short film of the same name, has for sixteen years been devoted to the screening of a wide spectrum of 16mm films. Culling from his vast collection of educational, industrial, amateur, and no-budget films, cartoons, lost classics, and cult oddities, Schwartz’s programming exemplifies the historical labor of cinephilia in an era of digital reproduction. In a cultural moment in which DVDs and online “clip culture” rule, and small gauge film formats have become historical curiosities, Schwartz tracks and lovingly re-circulates the traces of the popular—and unpopular—film culture of previous eras. *The Secret Cinema* gained its underground reputation as a floating repertory space, setting up shop in unexpected, nontraditional spaces, such as nightclubs and coffee shops, transformed into film venues for an evening by Schwartz’s creative programming. His early efforts were part of a larger trend of emerging alternative exhibition spaces in the United States in the 1990s, as art houses and repertory theaters began to suffer—the flourishing of indie film notwithstanding—with the advent of home video and the hegemony of the multi-and megaplex. What distinguishes *The Secret Cinema* from other ongoing series such as *Other Cinema* in San Francisco, which focuses on experimental film, or micro-cinemas that feature work by contemporary filmmakers, is Schwartz’s attentiveness to the ephemera of film history—from Scopitones¹ to home movies to travel shorts to “exotica” music films and vintage staggs. In bridging his film collecting and public exhibition, Schwartz’s long-running project sustains an atmosphere of perennial

discovery and cultural archeology, in which the traces of the past are unearthed afresh, for both the devoted cineaste and the curious viewer. As a mobile space of film exhibition that champions the collective pleasures of filmgoing, The Secret Cinema continues to thrive in Philadelphia despite the economic and cultural challenges of running an ongoing film series. I met with Jay Schwartz in March 2008 to learn about the genesis and meandering itinerary of the Secret Cinema from its beginnings to its current location at the Moore College of Art & Design.

Elena Gorfinkel: When did you start collecting, and what kinds of films did you collect?

Jay Schwartz: I started collecting films very randomly. My parents had an 8mm Kodak Brownie projector that I liked to watch get used, and later use myself. I began reading about silent movies and watching them on TV, and I would get these tremendous catalogs of 8mm and 16mm films from Blackhawk Films. At that time I would use my mother's home movie projector and watch them on regular 8mm. I bought up this little library and would watch them over and over again. I was interested in all kinds of old movies at the time. I didn't have a sound projector, so though I knew about the Castle catalog, which sold cut down versions of features, and subtitled editions of sound films for people that only had silent projectors, I wanted complete films. That was chapter one of my film collection, which took me from tenth grade till the time I went to Temple University, majoring in Radio, TV, Film.

I saw a classified ad in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for a used 16mm sound projector for \$100. I called the guy—he told me he would throw in some movies with it. I thought it would be a neat toy to play with, and since I was starting film school it would be a good investment for watching my own films. So I bought this early 1950s DeVry projector. The seller threw in five or six reels of films he thought were junk films, which were educational: an Encyclopedia Britannica film about pilgrims, and a sponsored film that I still use called *Figure Forum*—it starts off and says Warner Brothers Presents, but it was a different Warner Brothers, a company that made bras and girdles. It had an interesting pastel fading that has not turned red, and it was about how to pick the right bra and girdle. It was pretty campy. So that was the start of my 16mm film collection. At the time 16mm seemed too expensive; film collecting definitely seemed like a rich man's hobby, based on the prices for new 16mm prints that were advertised in *Classic Film Collector*, a magazine I subscribed to in high school (it later became *Classic Images*). I only bought things that were really cheap, and bought some used silent cartoons from Blackhawk. In addition to their own manufacture of prints from negatives and things that they found and restored from the silent era, Blackhawk would also occasionally acquire used prints from television distributors. They also had the rights to some copyrighted films. I never bought their new sound prints

because they were pretty expensive. At the time there were many companies that sold public domain films. My first feature film was from a company called Niles Film Products. I found a film that was marked down from \$175 to \$125, the classic screwball comedy *My Man Godfrey* [Gregory La Cava, US, 1936], a very poor quality print in retrospect. But I was excited that I had a real feature film to show on my projector, even though it cost more than the projector. It was the only feature film print I owned for a long time. I got some good use out of it, though—in addition to showing it to my family, I later watched it get projected at an after-hours employee screening at TLA Cinema. Later I had a class in underground films at Temple, and when the professor had to be out sick once, he called me and asked me to bring in my print and project it for the class. I last used *My Man Godfrey* just a couple of years ago, when I was asked to show a film for a benefit at a homeless shelter—I chose it since the film has a whole theme about “forgotten men” who squat on the riverfront.

At the time that I bought this, you could borrow 16mm films from the Philadelphia library, and I would do that now and then and watch them with my family and my friends. No one had home video yet.

EG: What year was this?

JS: I started collecting 8mm in 1973 and got the 16mm sound projector in fall 1975, so from then on. My collection grew pretty slowly from 1975 to 1992, when I started The Secret Cinema. At the time I started the Secret Cinema, there were seven feature films in my collection, and a bunch of assorted short films. It all fit into a small coat closet in my one-bedroom apartment. I forgot about it for a while, as I got interested in other things. I was managing a rock band in the early 1980s and was working at a live music nightclub. I had earlier bought several reels of Soundies, with music from the 1940s. I thought they were the most amazing thing I had seen at that point. Sometime in 1982 or 1983, this was just around the time MTV had started, I had this idea—let’s show these films before the band I was managing played. They were called The Impossible Years; I borrowed their name from a 1960s teen movie. So I said that we would advertise that we would have “pre-rock videos from the Impossible Archives” just to make people come to the show and get some extra publicity attached to the band. Another occasional band gimmick I thought of was to hang up all of these one-sheet posters for drive-in movies as a stage backdrop. I remember people shouting loudly during the Soundies screening, “This sucks, let’s rock ’n roll!” But it was the first time I had brought a projector into a public setting, and had to plan what extension cords to bring and how to patch the audio into the house P.A. system. I brought this white sheet and hung it from the top of the lighting pole using Bulldog clips, so I could yank it off quickly before the band would start. I imagined this very fast and dramatic transition from film to live band, with

them hitting the first note as soon as the screen was pulled down, but they were still tuning up, and the moment was lost.

Some years later, after that band had broken up, and I was no longer in the band-managing business or the nightclub business, I knew some Penn students that had a frat house that had a bar open to all Penn students on certain nights. It was known that I had some films, and they asked me to show films during their monthly “happy hour.” I said ok, so I got the white sheet and the projector and put some tables on top of each other for a projector stand. I showed a movie called *Smashing Time* [Desmond Davis, UK, 1967] which was a film about swinging London, a satire, along with some assorted shorts—some cartoons from Blackhawk, some Soundies, and some old cereal commercials I had bought. For the first time I had made program notes.

EG: When was this? Had some time passed between the first public screening and this one?

JS: This must have been 1987 or so. My projector was still mainly being used to entertain friends at home. So I didn’t acquire all that many films. There would be local film collector shows at a Holiday Inn in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and they would sell posters, videos, and films. I would go there and pick up little odds and ends but it all still fit in the coat closet. So I had that show (in the Pi Lam frat house), and there were maybe fifteen to twenty people watching the movie. There was an upstairs where I showed the movie and downstairs where the bar was—this was when drinking was un-policed on college campuses. Most of the people coming that night saw a small group of people sitting watching movies, said “What the hell?!” and immediately went downstairs to drink. A few times I got asked to do house parties, and the same thing would happen. I realized that the only way to show films at a party was that it had to be film party, otherwise if you showed films people didn’t really care. This time there were at least fifteen people there, mostly my friends. So that was kind of fun; I was proud of myself that I had made and photocopied program notes, like a real movie series, the first time I did something more organized. I don’t remember what year that was, but in late 1991 I went to this party with another guy who was in this band called The Wishniaks. I went to see them play in a Jersey beach town and wound up catching a ride home with the drummer. He had just been appointed the booking agent for the premiere indie rock nightclub, then called the Khyber Pass, now called the Khyber. They had this upstairs and at the time they weren’t using it for anything; they used it for a poetry reading maybe once a month. There was another guy at the time in Philadelphia named Todd Kimmell who ran a film series called Todd’s Found Films, and he screened industrial and educational films at different places around town. Anyway Dave who worked at the Khyber said, “Why don’t you have a series?” I said, “Well Todd Kimmell is doing Todd’s Found Films. I don’t want to just copy him.” He said, “Well you could call them Jay’s Lost Films.”

There were a lot of things that weren't being shown in traditional repertory theaters at the time. The major theater that had recently closed was the TLA cinema. So I began to show feature films, films that weren't regularly showing in repertory theaters. I was interested in cult type movies, trashy rock n' roll movies, sixties movies, drive-in movies, fifties B movies, bad seventies movies. *Don't Knock the Rock* [Fred F. Sears, US, 1956], with Bill Haley and Alan Freed, became the very first Secret Cinema program. One of the first film prints I showed was called *Record City* [Dennis Steinmetz, US, 1977], about hi-jinks in a record store. *Riot on Sunset Strip* [Arthur Dreifuss, US, 1967] was another film I screened early on. I also showed the brilliant and totally unsung absurdist mod satire *The Touchables* [UK, 1968], directed by British fashion photographer Robert Freeman, who shot the *Rubber Soul* album cover. I'd discovered that one years before on late-night TV. Films like that never got shown at TLA, which had possibly already closed by then to concentrate on their video business. Temple also had a Cinematheque; Penn and International House had series.

EG: Those were more "art cinema" and foreign film venues?

JS: They showed more prestigious, classic, famous films. Marx Brothers, art cinema. So I was interested in showing things that fell through the cracks. I would always put in some short subjects in between, educational films, musical shorts, cartoons. I did it upstairs at the Khyber every two weeks on a Monday night. A couple of times I could hear the band playing through the floor, but usually the concerts started later so that there wasn't a conflict.

EG: And how long did you show at the Khyber?

JS: Through 1992. I was working a full-time job. I would leave work a little early, come down with my projector—first I had one, then I got a second one for reel changes. I then had to make an A/B switch so that I could switch the sound from one to the other through the same extension speaker, which was an old army-navy projector speaker I had bought for \$5.00 at a film collector show. Gradually I learned how to make a good show using 16mm projectors designed for the classroom. As time went on I would get better equipment, better projectors and sound system and eventually got the right lenses so that each projector could show a large picture in a small space. I remember being really happy once I found a small amplifier that let me play cassettes of walk-in music through my extension speaker with a Walkman. I always take great care in selecting complementary walk-in music. It was a lot of work overall. To set up the screen, I used a nine-foot wide roll of photography backdrop paper—I would hang that from these hooks that I screwed into the rafters with a ladder. I had to move all these chairs from downstairs to upstairs. They also had these old beat-up sofas, so I had to also line them up to face the screen. I

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Flyer for "The Sugar-Charged Saturday Morning Supershow" (October 18, 2002), a reprise screening of an original program Schwartz had first premiered in March 1993. (Courtesy Jay Schwartz)

did a lot of furniture moving in those days in addition to programming, projecting, publicizing, designing flyers, posting them, buying prints, repairing projectors, all these things.

EG: How much labor and time would it take to plan and set up the screenings every other week?

JS: Every show took probably dozens of hours for every program. That would include watching films on video for research (if they were available on video, though often they were not), watching the film print when I got it, easily dozens of hours per week for a two-hour program. And I had a full-time job, which was doing graphic layout in the catalog department of Movies Unlimited, then the largest mail order retailer of videotapes. This was handy as I had access to watching everything possible on video as well as their in-house film reference library and large collection of film advertising art. Between that and the graphic equipment (light tables, stat camera, and early desktop publishing computer setup) I was able to make pretty impressive flyers and schedules. Anyway, it amazes me now that I did that with a full-time job. I haven't worked full-time since 1994 or so.

EG: So how many people would come to your shows?

JS: Most typically, it could be from twenty-five to forty people in attendance. Sometimes fewer—the first show had only seven.

EG: Did you have a sense of who came to your screenings then?

JS: Yeah, a lot of them were people who came to the Khyber anyway. That's one place where I posted flyers, as well as along South Street. Generally, people came who were in their mid-twenties or thirties, a little over college age. You had to be twenty-one to get into the Khyber then, and you could bring drinks upstairs, and you could smoke until I decided to post "No Smoking in Screening Room" signs. I figured that at least half of the audience would prefer no smoking, including me. In my press release for the first screening, I wrote that it was supposed to be a somewhat informal atmosphere—referring to the beat-up sofas and mismatched chairs and occasionally imperfect projection. I wrote that I hoped that the series would have an atmosphere somewhere between the Museum of Modern Art screening room and a dormitory TV lounge.

However, that was the year of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* [Comedy Channel/Comedy Central, US, 1989–96], which I always detested. At one point people started acting like real jerks during screenings, doing bad imitations of the robot heads on *MST*, so I also put up "No Loud Talking" signs. Most of the audience was nice, though.

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Secret Cinema screening flyer, "Other People's Movies" (December 13, 1997), a reprise of an earlier home movie program. (Courtesy Jay Schwartz)

EG: Were you aware of, influenced, or inspired by other cine-clubs or film societies of the past when you began the Secret Cinema, such as Amos Vogel's Cinema 16 or other comparable, locally based film societies?

JS: In my formative years, up through college, there were many opportunities to see old films, but film societies were something I'd only read about in

books, and seemed to belong to an earlier, more romantic time. I think I read about Cinema 16 in the book *Midnight Movies*; otherwise I knew Vogel's name because of the already-legendary book *Film as a Subversive Art*, and because while I was in college he was in Philadelphia, programming a film series at the University of Pennsylvania.² The first time I attended I saw *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* [Walter Ruttmann, DE, 1927], which was part of a free series of documentaries, in a basement 16mm screening room at Penn's Zellerbach Theater. That was my first visit ever to the Penn campus, during my first semester at Temple University. I didn't know the city very well then and had to find my way from North Philadelphia to West Philadelphia, and home again to Northeast Philadelphia, which were three very different worlds. It was a very heady experience all around, and I think I got my first parking ticket that day at Penn.

I went back at night to see Godard and Buster Keaton movies that Vogel had programmed. I remember that I went with two interesting people I had just met: Ray Murray, who was a classmate in my very first class at college, and his friend Danny Miller. Danny is now coexecutive producer (along with Terry Gross) for the NPR show "Fresh Air," and Ray is now the President of the TLA Entertainment Group and runs a couple of Philadelphia film festivals as well—so they both found real jobs, and I'm still struggling, but that's OK.

Amos Vogel also hosted a short-lived public TV show about film while in Philly, but we never crossed paths. I did read Scott MacDonald's book about Cinema 16; what a magical time that seems to have been for cineastes.³

There was a campus film series at Temple that showed various odd programming, using 16mm projectors in lecture halls. I would go after classes and see anything from *Birth of a Nation* [D. W. Griffith, US, 1915] to *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad* [Richard Quine, US, 1967]—which I don't remember liking, but was perhaps an influence on me showing forgotten cult features from the 1960s. The series was not very popular, probably because Temple was very much a commuter campus, and most students were afraid to be in that neighborhood after dark or even after 3:00 PM.

Later, the guy who sold me my first 16mm projector took over the series and showed films in the lobby of the student union building in the middle of the day, which was much more successful. He began by showing odd things from his own collection, anything from his IB Tech print of *The Wizard of Oz* [Victor Fleming, US, 1939] to old cartoons to a kinescope of the Nixon "Checkers" speech. But later they had their biggest audiences with third-run showings of films like *Superman* [Richard Donner, US, 1978]. That's pretty much what Temple's student film series remains as to this day, which is kind of disgraceful for the local college with the biggest film department.

Temple had a separate campus in Center City Philadelphia, and that was where the Temple Cinematheque was based. This was the closest thing to a

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Secret Cinema flyer for Scopitone show (January 23, 1998). (Courtesy Jay Schwartz)

film society experience in my adult lifetime, but like Secret Cinema it was the vision of one person. David Grossman had a large collection of 16mm prints, and had operated an art house in New Jersey in the early 1960s. He showed films several nights each week in a little auditorium that used to be the studio for the *Mike Douglas Show* back when the building belonged to its original

owner, KYW-TV. There was an optional membership that provided a discount on tickets and mailings of programs, which reflected Grossman's very personal taste in classic Hollywood and British films. His mimeographed program notes and hand-painted posters certainly evoked the film society atmosphere (or so I assume). Grossman had a somewhat cantankerous personality and eventually had a falling out with Temple. He moved his operation to a rented auditorium in a senior center and called it "Film Forum," which lasted until his death in 2001. Not long before he died he gave me some old movie theater seats that he'd rescued years earlier from an office in Philadelphia's old Vine Street film exchange district, and which now reside in my film workshop.

Like film societies, another exhibition concept I knew of more from legend was the widespread showing of 16mm films at coffeehouses in the 1960s. I never witnessed anything like that, but I suppose reading about it was part of the inspiration for Secret Cinema's beginnings.

At least I did grow up with the tradition of seeing 16mm projectors and films, not only at these film series, but throughout my school years in classrooms, and also at neighborhood library branches, which could program their own series using the city library system's sizable 16mm film library. That's been completely lost now, and generations are growing up without having any concept of how film works as an invention. Before, everyone had a certain grasp of the mechanics of film just by watching a teacher struggle with jammed film, adjusting focus and framing, and even just rewinding the reels.

EG: After the Khyber, what made you move on to other venues?

JS: The Khyber went on for about a year. I had a couple of sold-out shows. Those were the weeks when I got a write-up in the weekly paper. Other weeks I would get twenty to twenty-five people coming. I think we both got weary of each other, though I'm still friends with the guy that ran the place then. It seemed like things had run their course, and since I couldn't get a big pick of the week in the paper every week, it made sense to stop. But my film collection was growing, and I had other ideas of theme shows that I thought could be more popular. At the time there was this seventies revival starting up, and it wasn't all on cable TV yet—there was a Brady Bunch stage show that got a lot of attention and a fanzine about vintage kid/trash pop culture called *Teenage Gang Debs*. I had this idea that I could have a night of Saturday morning kids shows from the late 1960s and '70s. In the tradition of Sam Arkoff, I came up with the name for it first—the "Saturday Morning Sugar-Charged Super Show," sort of in tribute to Sid & Marty Krofft. Some of them were really rare, even though now they're on TV or DVD. At the time it wasn't so easy to see *The Banana Splits* [Hannah-Barbera, US, 1968–70], or *H. R. Pufnstuf* [Sid & Marty Krofft Productions, US, 1969], let alone *The Hardy*

Boys [Filmation Associates, US, 1969–71], *Mission Magic* [Filmation Associates, US, 1973–74], or *Here Come the Double-Deckers* [20th Century Fox, UK/US, 1970]. So I started finding prints of these shows, and it actually took me a whole year to collect a good program. Often I would base a program on a concept first and then find the prints, thinking of what I could do to get an audience's and the press's attention. One of the press/publicity gimmicks I thought of was to have a Pop Tarts bar and to have bowls of "free sugary snacks" (pre-sweetened cereal) around the club. I made a tape of old cartoon themes to play in between the films. We did this in the main room at the Khyber, not the little upstairs space. The first "Sugar-Charged" show was completely sold out by 9:00 PM, which was unheard of at the usually late-starting rock club—probably 150 people. It was the most successful thing I did at that time. This was in 1993.

I also had this other idea called "Sitcom Rock"—TV sitcoms of the sixties with rock band guest stars or rock 'n' roll storylines, which was another pet interest of mine. I had been collecting sixties rock bands on video just for myself, and it was exciting to learn that some garage band appeared on *I Dream of Jeannie* [Columbia/Sunset Gower Studios, US, 1965–70] one time. So I started collecting those episodes on film, which was pretty difficult; there would be ads in the *Big Reel* advertising the TV show, but you didn't always see the episode title, which you had to know, and it wasn't always broadcast in the original airing, let alone on the eighth generation VHS which just might have the clip of the band. So I had to learn the episode names and titles of the ones I was looking for. There was no Internet then.

EG: How did you find this stuff out?

JS: There was this book I bought, a guide to TV sitcoms, and I went through every page. I would take notes while talking about it with anyone that knew anything. So now that I knew the episode title, I then had to be lucky enough to find one of the remaining twelve or fifteen syndication film prints. TV shows were no longer being distributed on film. Eventually I got enough to make more than one program. That concept still wasn't nearly as successful as the kids' shows were. All those ideas were things that I was interested in that I hoped others would be; sometimes they were and sometimes they weren't.

EG: So that was one of the later shows at the Khyber?

JS: Yes, so that was 1993, a one-off show at the Khyber. That time the next year—the owner of the Khyber also leased the Trocadero, which was a beautiful 1870 vaudeville theater, which had later become a burlesque strip club for most of the twentieth century, then briefly a Chinese-language movie theater, and then finally became a giant rock club. At the time it was operated by the

same guy who owned the Khyber. After he said let's stop the Khyber series, but after he saw the kids' show programs—he offered the Trocadero space. Well I said, "That holds 1,200 people. Why do you want to do it there when we both agreed to stop trying it in the sixty-five-capacity room?" He said let's just try it, since he had some unused nights. I told him he would have to pay me a guarantee to do that. That was a dismal failure. In addition to the usual Secret Cinema selection of obscure cult features, the owner suggested we try something better known, such as Russ Meyer films. We rented two: *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* [US, 1970], a beautiful Scope print, and *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* [US, 1965], and they both did pretty good, at least compared to the others. At first I resisted showing something that other repertory theaters had actually shown before; I wanted to always be original, but I loved Russ Meyer films so I agreed.

EG: So after your regular biweekly screenings at the Khyber ended, you would have one-off shows occasionally there and at the Trocadero?

JS: Yes. Then I began scrambling to find other places to show films. I actually never had a regular schedule again until I moved to Moore College of Art & Design in September 1997. Between 1993 and 1997 I did all freelance shows. So I began to find other places to screen. One of the next places I found was this little coffeehouse called Lionfish. This was even smaller than the space at the Khyber. I figured out it held exactly thirty-nine people, with people standing and sitting on the floor. I had to spend time blocking the windows from the streetlights, which would make the room too bright, so I bought black plastic at Home Depot. That was a lot of work. I also showed films at the Print Center, a nonprofit art gallery. And they usually did pretty well. Although what I did was very different from what they normally exhibited. They contacted me asking if I had films to do with artists, and though I didn't, they wanted me to do my screenings anyway as a way of publicizing their space. I also showed at Silk City Lounge, which has since become a semi-posh restaurant. At the time it was a rock venue and diner, and that's where I first had a show of home movies. When I was collecting I always saw people selling strangers' home movies, and I found it fascinating. One time I found a great film at a flea market, at first I thought it was a funeral, but it was a disinterment of a grave in a cemetery in Philadelphia. Others showed trips to Europe and vacations. They were really great to look at, especially in 16mm, so I did a night of found home movies at Silk City in 1994. I called it "Other People's Movies," and as a publicity gimmick, I invited people to bring their own home movies—so I had to prepare regular 8mm, super 8, and 16mm projectors. People did bring them all, but theirs usually weren't as interesting as the strangers' films that I had weeded out from the boring ones. But that made it more interactive, and I played records on top of them. I did this a few times, and it culminated several years later in the idea of having a band play an original score to found home

movies. So we put together a show with local indie rock musicians at the Print Center and later at Moore. I'm pretty proud of that show; a lot of credit goes to the band though, who composed and put together the original instrumental music. I'm confident that I was the first (in 1999) to present a screening of home movies with an original score, and I stand by that claim. My previous showings of home movies were probably among the earlier public screenings of found home movies, as far as I can tell.

EG: What facilitated your moving to the Moore College of Art & Design?

JS: There used to be a lot of repertory film programming in Philadelphia, as there was everywhere. When I started The Secret Cinema, as I said, I was trying to show films that fell between the cracks of repertory programming and more traditional outlets. And as I went along a lot of these spaces disappeared, and as they disappeared I decided to broaden my programs. I could show more kinds of films, not just campy and kitschy, and I began to show more classic-type films, from earlier decades. One of the first things in that vein were some shows in Borders bookstore on Rittenhouse Square, built before Borders went really corporate. They had a nice-sized dedicated event space in the store. They sponsored it, so they were free screenings advertised to a general demographic, and those two factors guaranteed an audience for things that might not have worked with an all Gen X-indie crowd. The first film I showed was *Congorilla* [US, 1932], a notoriously politically incorrect exploration film, by Martin and Osa Johnson. I thought the Johnsons got a rough deal in film textbooks. They made very famous films, successfully shown in the 1930s in big movie theaters. Osa later wrote an autobiography called *I Married Adventure* that was made into a Hollywood film.⁴ That was the first screening at Borders, and it was really crowded. They lost the lease on that store and bought the one on Broad Street, but the new store didn't have a good event space, so my Borders series ended.

EG: So how did you start at Moore?

EG: Through David Grossman, who at one point ran the Temple Cinemathèque. He had a meeting with Moore College of Art about screenings there, and it apparently didn't work out. But a guy from there called me and asked me if I wanted to run a screening series there instead. So I did, and that's how it started.

At first, I was having trouble getting people to go to the Moore screenings. It seems nobody knew where it was or something, even though it is in Center City near some famous museums. I was having more people come to the coffeehouse shows for a while! Finally I did a program that got a lot of press: "Scopitone Party," featuring several reels of the music clips that were produced for the French-made film jukebox of the sixties, which was pro-

ceeded by me giving a slide talk on the history of the film jukebox. It was the first time I broke 100 at Moore, and things went well there ever since.

My next big show there was when I first showed the Andy Warhol film *The Velvet Underground and Nico* [US, 1966]. This was a seemingly mythical film I had read about for twenty years and was sure I would never get to see in my lifetime, since for a while all Warhol films were out of circulation. I learned that it was available again and foolishly booked a single well-promoted screening at Moore, where it sold out, and I had to turn away at least 100 people. Later I brought it back with what was nearly all extant footage of the band (with shorts by Jonas Mekas and Ron Nemeth), calling the program “The Velvet Underground Film Festival,” with similarly great attendance.

EG: So Moore has become your regular venue?

JS: Moore has become kind of my home base. I like it a lot because it’s my most professional presentation. It has a really large screen, bigger than some actual movie theaters. I bring Marc-300 lamp projectors, projectors designed for a bigger screen. Later I updated my sound system as well. It’s got real theater seating. Even though it’s a much bigger presentation, it’s much less work than showing films at a coffeehouse where I have to climb on a ladder to set the screen up, hang black plastic on the windows, wind power cables through the building, get speakers set up, and move all the furniture!

EG: Was there a period when your shows were most frequent?

JS: Probably in the middle period—then they were usually every two weeks. There were some times when I showed three or four programs a month. I tried to have them be complementary, meaning one might be at a coffeehouse, one in an art gallery. I also still once a year show at Eastern State Penitentiary, a historic former prison that is now a museum; they approached me about showing prison-themed movies. I try to have each event be different from the others in a given month, and also complimentary to the venue and their usual clientele, so that audiences would theoretically like to go to all of them. But in practice I learned that if I do too many close together, no one is going to go all of them, because there are always other things in the world than Secret Cinema. At my peak, I went from a full-time job to a part-time job for many years, then I went to no job, only doing the Secret Cinema. That’s probably when I did my best work, but also it was something that couldn’t last financially for very long.

At the time I had a pretty big collection; my collection had grown so that it didn’t fit in the closet anymore. I had to start keeping it in a friend’s basement that lived nearby. I had some stuff in my parents’ basement, mostly stuff that I didn’t use. But then both those places weren’t enough, so I found a fourth place with a friend who had warehouse space available—it was in a building that had

band rehearsals. There was one room there that wasn't walled off or sound-proofed, but could be perfect for storing and working on films if we put up some drywall. It cost \$150 a month. After two years, he wanted to use the space again to build his own recording studio and made me leave.

This turned my world upside down. I scrambled to find another place. Finally I found one that cost the same per square foot, but it was twice as big. So that's where I moved the collection to, from a 500-square-foot space to a 1,000-square-foot space. But it costs me twice as much. And I have to pay utilities and had to have AC installed. Now my overhead is much more. I had to go back and find another job and found my current job as a paralegal. That takes up a lot of my time, and I don't always have time to go to the space and do what I need to do.

EG: Like cataloging, going through the prints?

JS: Yes, and even just looking at prints I bought years ago, in addition to stuff I do better from home, which is thinking of programs, writing press releases, designing flyers.

EG: Has this slowed down your collecting of prints?

JS: Yes it has. Some time ago someone gave me a sizable film collection from her brother who had died years before, and I haven't yet watched most of that, for example.

I sometimes wish I didn't have to create so much programming from my archive. About ten years ago I was doing some successful shows by renting new films from distributors. In fact, I had already realized that I was much more interested in the past than in new films, but I also realized that I was not reaching a lot of people by doing that only. That hit me hard when I worked for a couple of years as a screening manager at the Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema. I managed an all-volunteer staff, and a lot of the volunteers were film students or other young people whose lives were completely involved with film. They lived and breathed film, had seen every new indie film, every new documentary that played at the Ritz theaters . . . and I was shocked to discover that these young people were for the most part completely ignorant about Secret Cinema, and this at a time when I was getting a lot of local press.

So in a move calculated to reach these people, I decided I had to "premiere" some new release and get on the review page, not just the repertory cinema listings ghetto that, to my great surprise, this generation did not pay attention to as I had as a young film student. I called the features editor at the *Inquirer* and asked what I would have to do to get a new film reviewed in their paper. After discussing it with other editors, she called me back and said I would need to have a seating capacity of more than 150 people and show the

film at least four times. This coincided with my stumbling upon the contact info for Jeff Feuerzeig, the director of a documentary about the legendary indie rock band Half Japanese. I realized that he was the same guy who had advertised a CD in a music fanzine and e-mailed him about his film. It turned out the film was nearly two years old when I showed it, but I still billed it as the Philadelphia premiere, rented the Painted Bride Art Center for the screening (this was just before I started using Moore), got my review, and even had Jeff come down from New York for the opening night for Q&A.

Half-Japanese: The Band That Would Be King [US, 1993] did reasonably well, so I kept looking for more such potential premieres of films that fit into the Secret Cinema aesthetic, yet had been overlooked by other local film presenters, and were available for rental in 16mm. Pop culture documentaries lent themselves to this criteria, and my follow-up was the eight-track-tape-collecting epic *So Wrong They're Right* [Russ Forster, US, 1995], followed by *Screwed* [Alexander Crawford, US, 1996], *Fetishes* [Nick Broomfield, UK, 1996], and local filmmaker Andrew Repaskey McElhinney's first feature *Magdalen* [US, 1998]. But eventually I gave up the quest for new films because nobody is making 16mm release prints anymore.

EG: Have you shown in places other than Philly over the course of Secret Cinema's fifteen years?

JS: I've had shows in New York City at Fez several times, another nightclub called Acme Underground, and later at Columbia University. Fez was suggested to me by music historian Irwin Chusid, whom I'd asked for advice because I wanted to bring to New York a show I had just done here at Silk City called "Exotica Music Films." In the mid-nineties there was a wave of hipster interest in exotic and lounge records from the 1950s and early '60s, which inspired me to compile a program of films of related music genres. I found some prints of early TV shows of now-celebrated exotica keyboardist Korla Pandit, Soundies of The Three Suns, Hawaiian and Latin music, and Scopitones of French pop music. Fez was featuring new exotica acts like Combustible Edison, so the booker was happy to hear about my film program. I eventually brought three separate, longish programs of "Exotica Music Films" there (later incorporating nonmusical films about Tikis and jet travel, and Maria Montez trailers), plus "Other People's Movies" and "Stag Movie Night: Vintage Porno from the '20s, '30s & '40s," which was quite crowded.

Someone had seen what I had done at Fez and wanted me to bring my Scopitone show to Columbia in the Roone Arledge media center. I also showed in Baltimore, at some kind of arts nonprofit multipurpose center in the basement, where I did two or three shows. Martha Colburn contacted me about that. I brought stag films and exotica films there. And in San Francisco I had a nice trip to the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, where I did three nights of The Secret Cinema.

I also did a couple of things in Spain, in Gijón—I met a guy from Philadelphia who was from that town. He had seen what I was doing and told me a friend of his was the head of the Gijón Film Festival. I wrote him a letter and got a free trip to Spain. I visited there and screened for over ten years. I would bring Secret Cinema cycles—four feature films—other times I would get to do something more unique like a shorts program. Through that I met this programmer who worked for a giant outdoor rock music festival in Benicàssim, Spain, which had this film and theater component. I also taught a class at this same music festival on jukebox films and other MTV precursors, as part of a symposium they sponsored about rock videos.

EG: How has the altering climate of film exhibition changed the conditions of running The Secret Cinema?

JS: Everything is becoming a micro-cinema, at least everyone showing repertory programming. I go to International House and see 35mm screenings of fantastic films projected in a 400-seat theater, and sometimes there are only fifteen people there.

One of the reasons why I got out of showing at coffeehouses was that it was a lot of strenuous work to set up the space, even though I could do that once in a while—having an audience of thirty-five to fifty people and looking successful. At Moore I need around 100 people for a successful screening. But the problem is that I wouldn't be able to pay my costs at the smaller venues.

That's conflicting with the current trend with people going out less to see films. I was talking with some people involved with repertory film exhibition, and the numbers are going down all over. It's not just me. I'm actually doing pretty well, all things considered. But you now have to put on some spectacular public event with rare films, special guests and live fire-eaters or something, for people to come away from the living room.

EG: The Pop Tarts probably wouldn't work?

JS: Well, maybe. But that was at the start of the seventies revival; now there's an eighties revival, and we're probably into the nineties revival by now. The eighties revival I mostly didn't touch, probably due to a combination of less interest based on my age and that 16mm film prints stopped being used for television distribution around 1983. By the time low-fade color prints were perfected, TV stopped using film prints. Nor were they striking feature prints for TV use. They were still being used but only for nontheatrical exhibition. That drastically reduced the flow of films into collectors' hands.

EG: It's ironic that your first public exhibition was around 1983–84, the same time that you are tracking the erosion of the use of 16mm for feature film transfers.

JS: It is ironic. I actually didn't think of that. But back to special events, sometimes I can pull it off, and that usually does well. Some years ago I made a program of nearly all of the sixties rock-related short films I managed to find, and named it "Nuggets: Celluloid Artyfacts of Sixties Rock," in tribute to the famous compilation of garage rock. I got my neighbor Stewkey, who was the singer for legendary Philadelphia mod band The Nazz to appear and bring his personal print of the "Open My Eyes" promo film. I wanted to do the show again last year, so to top the first screening, I also got Lenny Kaye, who compiled the original Nuggets album, to come and give commentary on the film shown. That was one of the biggest houses.

Another night I was proud of was reintroducing Philadelphia to the obscure film noir *The Burglar* [Paul Wendkos, US, 1957], starring Dan Duryea and Jayne Mansfield. It was produced by Louis Kellman Productions, which was Philadelphia's largest industrial film studio, and shot entirely on location in Philly and Atlantic City. That alone would have been enough, but I had the film's original art director come and talk, as well as the producer's son, who came down from New York, and also showed some other Kellman-produced films, including an episode of the bizarre syndicated kids TV show *Diver Dan* [Brian Cartoons, US, 1961].

EG: Do you think your audiences have changed over the years?

JS: Yeah I do. I don't want to be too pessimistic but . . . there was an article in the *San Francisco Weekly* or something, that repertory cinema is dying. The programmer at the Yerba Buena Center for the arts told me that he read the same article twenty-five years ago when VHS came out, and I'm thinking, "Gee, twenty-five years ago was a golden age for repertory cinema." He's probably thinking of the time a bit later when TLA Cinema closed to concentrate on their video stores, and I started shortly after that. It's true that there was more then. Places like Film Forum (in New York) thrived for a while after that—I don't know how they're doing now, but I hope it's still good. But they had to figure out a new way to market films. Things are changing so much, now with Turner Classic Movies, really good DVD reissues, and other ways to see old film.


And there's something that I didn't discuss yet: film versus video in public events. I was always a fan of home video and its usefulness for home screening. But I always frowned upon its uses in public exhibition. Some restaurant would say that they had movie night on their four-foot TV screen or worse. And they would send their listings that would be printed there next to mine, and that drove me crazy. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* used to have a featured repertory film pick chosen by their film critic Carrie Rickey, and every week it was some classic Katharine Hepburn or similar famous film. One reason was probably that she had written the capsule summary a long time ago and could call up the file from her computer, and two, because she felt

the Secret Cinema at Moore College of Art & Design presents

Nuggets

CELLULOID ARTYFACTS OF SIXTIES ROCK

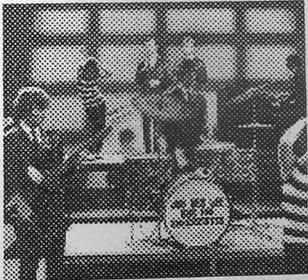

in person
Lenny Kaye!
Musician, critic, historian, and original compiler of *Nuggets*, Lenny will discuss sixties rock and add commentary between films.



in 16mm FILM on a GIANT SCREEN!

ON SCREEN
Rare rock films!
Short films, TV shows and clips starring The Standells, The Seeds, The Birds (UK), The Marmalade, The Zombies and more! ● *Girls In Short Short Dresses*, 1966 newsreel with UK mod band The Thoughts and Mary Quant! ● Super-rare 1966 documentary on Canadian garage band Jon and Lee and the Checkmates!

in person
Stewkey!
Original lead singer of The Nazz, Philly's greatest mod band, introducing a rare showing of his personal 16mm print of 1968 "Open My Eyes" promo film.



Friday, Feb. 16
8:00 pm www.theseccinema.com

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Flyer for "Nuggets" show (February 16, 2007), a repeat screening of a program originally curated in 2001, sans Kaye appearance. (Courtesy Jay Schwartz)

dishonest "reviewing" something she hadn't seen before because probably everything I showed was unseen by her—certainly she had not seen my programs of strangers' home movies or industrial shorts shot in Philadelphia or the unknown solo comedy shorts of Shemp Howard or "Early Educational: Classroom Films of the Silent Era," shown with live keyboard accompani-

ment. But meanwhile, there would be a film screening at the gay community center or at the Italian American society—which literally used a twenty-inch TV set and called it a movie screening, and that would be a featured thing in the *Inquirer*. It would be something like *Bringing Up Baby* [Howard Hawks, US, 1938], and by making that the lead every week the paper was in effect endorsing that TV set screening as the most important film event in the region that week. Meanwhile I'm carrying hundreds of pounds of heavy equipment and setting up film projectors for every screening—not to mention having much more creative programming. In ten years Carrie Rickey chose to feature my screening exactly *zero* times!

I think this is part of what's destroying the repertory audience, because they're probably saying, well I can do this at home, and some places even charge money to see a DVD. I've had debates about this. I once thought that we should get this letter signed by all the repertory outlet programmers saying the newspapers should have this policy of making clear what format films are being shown in. But I never followed up on that, and now I couldn't, because nearly every rep outlet besides me has at some point done DVD or video screenings of films that should be shown using film.

EG: Do you feel like you're constantly fighting an uphill battle for small-gauge film? Do you feel that there's more pressure for you as a programmer to explain the history of 16mm as part of your program?

JS: Yes. Early on I started putting "Shown in 16mm on a Giant Screen" on every press release and every flyer I made because even then people were doing video projection and getting in the listings, and it would drive me crazy. So I decided to say that as a way to make people understand why my screenings were special. Now we're so far past people minding this practice that it seems maybe the only way that I can exist is if I do it as a roving museum exhibit. Other people have said that film projection is going to become, even in theaters, more of a special event—for museums, demonstrations, or something like that.

EG: Like magic lantern slides for us?

JS: Yes, perhaps showing off the technology part more than the films themselves. At some point digital projection is going to get, if not the same look as film, then pretty damn close. The home experience has gotten really good. So there's more reason not to see it in public. But at some point, I feel like my days will be numbered. What more will I have to contribute? There's so much available on DVD, I don't think people really need someone to pick something for them to watch. That leaves maybe just the demonstration of the equipment and the things that haven't been transferred to DVD, but a lot has. You can get Scopitones, you can get Soundies, old movies, stag films, everything.

Silvia [Jay's wife]: But there's the social thing at a film screening—you are such a pessimist!

JS: I don't want to pay for just the social thing if I can duplicate it at home for less money. You can buy a DVD for \$5.00. If people aren't coming then the social experience is not the same. If there are only fifteen people there then it's not the same as the magic feeling of the midnight screenings of the 1970s, people laughing at a sold-out showing of *Pink Flamingos* [John Waters, US, 1972] or something.

EG: What would be your ideal Secret Cinema screening?

JS: That's a good question. Do you mean in terms of favorite program or? . . .

EG: Either favorite program or in terms of ideal space or audience. . . .

JS: I kind of like the variety of experiences that I've had. I've liked the experience at Moore, though in many ways it's not that different from a traditional theater. More unique have been the screenings for various nonprofit institutions, the prison, or a benefit party for the Preservation Alliance at the historical Morris House, now a bed and breakfast. I like the challenge of figuring out the production stuff needed to show films in different atmospheres. Showing films outdoors is probably my biggest set-up job, but people like it a lot. I've shown films on the roof of the Whole Foods parking garage.

Eastern State Penitentiary is probably the most atmospheric thing I've done, where the audience can see actual prison cells in their peripheral vision as they watch a prison film—it's almost like 3-D. One time there was rain at the prison screening, because their roof leaked badly. I stopped briefly, but the rain kept coming. Everyone stayed—that was a real testament to the devotion of the audience, who sat under umbrellas! The projectors were in a dry part so I didn't get electrocuted. That was an unforgettable night.

More recently I got to fulfill my dream of showing 1920s educational films in the Wagner Free Institute of Science, in a beautiful wooden auditorium where all of the great minds of science had once lectured.

I don't have an ideal screening. I worry about the future. I worry about my film prints turning to vinegar. I keep them in somewhat controlled conditions, but far from ideal archival storage. Much of what I have is not so unique or necessary to save, but some is. I would like to properly preserve things, but I rarely have the time these days. I'm wondering which will fail first, the films or the equipment, at the point when there are no longer parts being made, lamps being made, or no longer any rubber belts. It's something I have to come to terms with. But it's rapidly disappearing. I guess there will always be a way to transfer it to another medium, but I'd like to not have to transfer it. I want to enable people to experience the real thing for as long as I can.

Visit www.thesecretcinema.com for current screenings and further information.

Elena Gorfinkel is a lecturer in the program in film studies at Bryn Mawr College. She received her PhD in cinema studies from New York University. Her writing on erotic film festivals, sexploitation cinema, and cinephilia has appeared in the journal Framework and in the anthologies Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory, and Underground USA: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon. She is currently coediting (with John David Rhodes) a forthcoming book collection titled The Place of the Moving Image, as well as working on a book manuscript on the history of 1960s sexploitation films.

Notes

1. Scopitones refers to the short 16mm song films (proto-music videos) made to be shown in the Scopitone machine, a coin-operated device that resembled a hybrid of a television set and a jukebox. Scopitones were invented in the early 1960s in France, though their popularity did not last far beyond the 1960s.
2. J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983); Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (New York: Random House, 1974).
3. Scott MacDonald, ed., *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).
4. Osa Johnson, *I Married Adventure: The Lives and Adventures of Martin and Osa Johnson* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1940).