Chen Zeng

The Culture of Archives, Libraries and Museums

Final Paper

May. 9, 2017

A Case Study: Repertory Film Programming at Metrograph

Introduction

New York City's moviegoers are living in a utopia. Besides its commercial theatres, the year-round film festivals and various repertory cinemas offer so many alternatives in film. While many revival houses have shut down, others, such as MoMA Theatre, Film Society of Lincoln Center, Film Forum and BAMCinématek, are thriving. But they are also facing tough challenges – an aging cinephile audience, as well as the impact of online video streaming – and those with a passion for classic cinema experience are worried.

However, it's not all doom and gloom and there have been some exciting changes recently. Several new or reopened indie cinemas in New York are enticing the city's youth with their repertory film programming: it somewhat shifts the stereotype of the repertory cinema as a preserve of only cinephilia and the older generation. One particular theatre I am interested in is the Metrograph, a for-profit revival house that reaches out to young audiences and more general moviegoers – its location on the Lower East Side is not where you might expect to find such a place. This essay will focus on the Metrograph, and examine three aspects of its operations: its strategies in repertory film programming, the relationship between film programming strategies and the audience, and its relevant publicity issues. Along with some pertinent information about other theatres, I hope the study can provide some references for better understanding today's

revial houses, as well as the potential challenges they face. Furthermore, although the Metrograph is a for-profit, this case may offer some alternative strategies for the better development of non-profit cinemas and a more dynamic film culture there.

An Overview of Metrograph

Without a doubt, the most essential thing for any repertory cinema is its film programming. This section, however, will provide a brief history of the Metrograph, its distinctive features, and its place in the neighborhood, with the aim of giving a basic understanding of this particular cinema.

Co-founded by Alexander Olch, a fashion designer and filmmaker, and Jake Perlin, a veteran repertory film programmer, Metrograph opened its doors on a quiet street in March of 2016. It is a true "revival house" with many of its facilities, and even the building itself, being repurposed. Two theatres have been established inside a former food storage warehouse, one has a seating capacity of 175, with a balcony for 23, while the smaller one seats 50. The red velvet chairs are made from wood found in the old Domino sugar factory in Brooklyn, and the Dolby audio system in the larger theatre was taken from the closed Ziegfeld Theater[1], with one reviewer saying that Metrograph has "a great respect for the analogue past."[2]

Based on these local historic heritages, the Metrograph, however, has a series of bold and creative designs that have arguably become its main "selling point" in attracting people to the cinematic wonderland. By designing a vintage-style bar, a cinema-themed bookstore and a restaurant, *the Commissary*, that serves food inspired by commissaries in old Hollywood film

---

[1] See http://metrograph.com/about/theaters.
[2] See https://howtospendit.ft.com/art/122843-an-ultra-stylish-arthouse-cinema-in-new-york.

studios,[3] the Metrograph recreates the magic and immersive experience of going to the movies in the 1920s' New York. Even if the visitor has no interest in drinking or eating, the fancy sense is still rendered and spread throughout the building with scented candles and ushers who wear trendy ties. The name of its opening film series explain its purpose and goal: "Surrender to the Screen". No wonder the first movie it screened was Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), a story that characters ramble between reality and illusion.

The Metrograph also cares to immerse itself in the culture of its home community. This may be a reason why another opening movies was Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), since both the director's personal life and story have strong connections with the Lower East Side. The candy shop in the lobby which offers Asian snacks may also because of its close proximity to Chinatown. A much stronger example, however, is how the theater's construction and business plan have been supported unanimously by the community board, and the theatre is also committed to serving the community through educational programming and film mentoring.[4]

Strategies in Film Programming

A few thing should be introduced before getting into the discussion of film programming strategies at the Metrograph. First, programmers at Metrograph is a duo: Jake Perlin who previously worked at Film Forum, BAMCinématek and Film Society of Lincoln Center; and Aliza Ma, a former film programmer at the Museum of Moving Images and the Toronto Film Festival, who is now head of programming. Both have an abundance of experience in film programming at non-profit institutions. Second, the discussion below is based around an

---

[3] See https://www.inc.com/graham-winfrey/metrograph-theater-betting-against-netflix.html.
[4] See http://gothamist.com/2015/10/20/metrograph_cinema_les.php.

interview with Jake Perlin, and my own personal observations and research of past screenings at the Metrograph. Third, first-run films are shown in theatres at the Metrograph, but they are little mentioned in this essay as I am focusing on repertory film programming. In fact, no matter if its first-run or reps, they all follow the same rule: the programmer's loves!

1. First and Foremost: Speak to Programmer

Film programming at the Metrograph centers on the programmer. The programmer personal taste is the core criteria and direction for film programming. Instead of choosing the "best films" in a general sense, the programmer selects ones that truly connect with him/her. "There is no best film, only films I have personal connections." Perlin believes this is particularly important to the year-round series "Welcome to Metrograph: A to Z", an alphabetically-ordered "Metrograph canon" with one film per director. Some are well-known masterpieces, like Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* and Fellini's *Rome*, but you also see some less-known ones from famous directors, or classics from other countries. The only thing for certain is that they are all favored by the programmer.

It should be noted that "taste" is not from intuitions but is developed on the foundation of the programmer's knowledge of film, as well as his/her sophistication in programming. It is essential that they can consistently find new values from old films, and interpret them for today under certain themes. One of many examples is its film series "This is PG?!" that gathers 10 PG-rated films with, ironically, violent or sexual content. It is an exception in the history of America film ratings that only existed in 1970s and 80s until the creation of the 1984 PG-13 rating. Today, violent imagery is much more prevalent but it hardly stirs parents' rage like

resisting PG-rated *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, directed by Steven Spielberg,[5] Such a series reflects how Perlin transforms his historical research into the curating practice. And by selecting and showing these special films, Perlin awakens the audience's memory of the past, and gets us rethinking about this transition.

2. An Open Mind

Metrograph wants inclusiveness in its film programming. It mainly screens American and French films, yet selects many others from all around the world. While it favors prints, the theatre will not refuse any digital forms. The audience can find blockbuster films like Wachowskis' *the Matrix* (1999), as well as experimental films like Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975).

This inclusiveness is also reflected in how the two programmers complement each other. Perlin directly points out that one important reason why he hires Aliza Ma is her very different backgrounds from his, who was born in Beijing and 10-year younger than Perlin. They have different approaches in perceiving cinema, and different scopes of film/film history knowledge, which is very helpful to enrich the diversity and inclusiveness in repertory programming at Metrograph. Moreover, this cross-culture influence could be more and subtle than the general imagination. Perlin emphasizes it is not true that all Asian films at Metrograph are programmed by Ma as many people imagined. What Ma has brought to Metrograph is perhaps a more comparative and comprehensive understanding to cinema and culture. In her latest curating series, "the Singularity," 18 films from America, Japan and Hong Kong presented the same

---

[5] See http://www.businessinsider.com/indiana-jones-and-the-temple-of-doom-created-pg-13-rating-2014-4.

theme "artificial intelligences" but represented quite different attitudes from different perspectives and in different ages. It exhibited films from different countries under the same topic, mixed entertainment (like James Cameron's *The Terminator*) with philosophy (Chris Marker's *Level Five*), and formed a transnational and cross-cultural communication, which is fully embodied "an open mind."

3. Resonance with Communities

Just like its design in construction, the Metrograph also reflects the local culture in its programming. In its opening two months, it screened 20 Chinese films, as well as a Kung Fu film festival in collaboration with a distribution company which focuses on Asian film. In December of 2016, the theatre curated a 20-film retrospective of Maggie Cheung, an iconic Hong Kong actress who won Best Actress in both Berlin and Cannes, a first for New York. It satisfied certain expectations from the local community as well as the actress' many fans, while it also connected with those who have a keen interest in Asian film.

However, it is far more than just this. As a theatre located on the Lower East Side, New York's most classic immigrant area, the Metrograph's film programming looks to reach out to a more inclusive population from diverse communities. For example, the documentary *Los Sures* (1984) focuses on a community of Puerto Rican and Dominican immigrants in the 1980s; *The Lost Arcade* (2015) shows the history and influence of the Chinatown Fair arcade; its latest film series "Making Rent in Bed-Stuy" features six films in relation to the black community in Brooklyn and its local cultural/political legacy. Similar examples go on and on.

4. Echoes with Trending Events

Repertory film programming is always about the contrasts between the old and the new, or the past and the present. The Metrograph is very explicit by programming old films in relation to first-run ones. When the French actress Isabelle Huppert's *Elle* (2016) was running at other first-run theatres, Metrograph conducted a retrospective series of her previous films. It did the same when the director Olivier Assayas latest work *Personal Shopper* was released in New York. Both Huppert and Assayas were paraded at the theatre. Another example is the 1995 Japanese animation *Ghost in the Shell* which started its screenings at Metrograph just one week before the Hollywood live-action version was released earlier this year. The effect of this strategy is quite stunning – it not only attracts a group of cinephiles, but it also arises the curiosity of general movie-goers, drawing them to theatres, and raising the profile of the Metrograph.

5. Showing Streaming Films in Theatre

Though it is more about first-run films, these special choices deserve to be mentioned on its own because it may provide a possibility for movie houses especially art houses in future developments.

Metrograph is now exploring the feasibility of showing cinemas initially released by television or streaming servers in theatre. For example, the 450-min documentary *O.J.: Made in America* was exhibited at Metrograph in November 2016 with additional food service, which achieved a considerable success. *Casting JonBenet*, released by Netflix, was not doing very well that only the director-in-person show was a full-house. Such experiments, though may not be

successful every time, is necessary to understand what the audience truly seeks from movie theatres at present and possibly in future. Metrograph is still continuing its experiment like showing the film *Burden* that is already available in iTunes, and may make further attempts in future, on the premise that the programmer love the film!

Film Programming Strategies as Attempts to Approach and Cultivate the Audience

As an indie cinema, Metrograph is very concerned whether films they programmed can attract a considerable number of audiences. In the interview, Perlin often brought up certain films' attendance as examples to illustrate the theatres' operation, which from a side confirms that Metrograph takes the attendance very seriously. Thus, this section tries to interpret the film programming's strategies at Metrograph from angles of approaching and cultivating a large and even loyal audience.

1. Approach a Broad Audience

Many strategies above as well as diverse film series reflect that the willingness of Metrograph in seeking to reach a broad audience. The balance of Hollywood blockbuster and art films shows that the theatre would like to approach both general filmgoers and cinephiles. Programming film series like Huppert's retrospective, are intended to attract the group of cinephiles as well as arise the curiosity of general moviegoers and bring them into Metrograph. The "family matinees" series on weekend mornings is apparently designed for children audiences and their parents. Metrograph also likes programming animation films, like *Belladonna of Sadness* (1973) and *My Entire Highschool Sinking Into the Sea* (2016), those

completely not for kids but for appealing to more young adult audiences. Moreover, the "resonance with communities" strategy helps Metrograph connect with the local residents and more people with different backgrounds, some of whom may become the loyal audience in response to the theatre's continuingly attention to their communities and culture. For example, Asian viewers or Asian film lovers may feel more intimate then become loyal to Metrograph than other theatres due to its plentiful Asian film series. By absorbing films of many different genres and adopting them to specific curating themes or backgrounds, film programming at Metrograph covers populations from different ages, cultures and races, then improves the theatre's chance of having more loyal audiences.

2. Cultivating the Loyal Audience

Metrograph hopes to cultivate its audiences and audiences' interests in repertory films through film programming. In the interview, Perlin said it is important to him that his audience would like to trust his taste and make some adventures in cinematic world. It can be reflected by frequently introducing less-known films from famous directors or actors/actresses to its audiences, like John Ford's *Steamboat Round the Bend* (1935), Yasujirô Ozu's *Equinox Flower* (1958), Hsiao-Hsien Hou's *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998) etc. These films, also the representation of the programmer's tastes, can appeal to audiences who know these artist very well but have no chance see these rare films on big screen, or who are interested in these artists yet only have little understandings. And through the programming, the Metrograph can locate the audience who have similar tastes with the programmer, as well as develop new audiences whose tastes are cultivated by Metrograph's film programming. Either way, it can establish and enhance an

intimate relationship between the audience and the programmer as well as the theatre, which is the foundation of having a loyal audience.

3. Film Programming as an Experiment to Know the theatre's Audience

Since these strategies are "attempts", which means they are unavoidably accompanied with both success and failure in practice, the relationship between film programming and audience cultivation is a dynamic relationship with mutual adaptation and adjustment. Films in selection show the taste of the programmer and influences the audience, while the attendance of certain films is the response to answer if the programmer's choice is in tune with the audience's taste.

Consequently, understanding the audience's preferences and changing interests is important to film programmer as the basis to adjust the programming strategies. In the case of Metrograph, the inclusive yet carefully selective series "A to Z" can be considered as such a long-term experiment. Such a broad yet personalized series can reach out audiences who have different backgrounds but similar interests in art films, which creates a diverse yet specific audience base that could be the main target or loyal audience of Metrograph. And through statistics of attendance, this series, along with other ones, may help the theatre better understand different needs of audiences, better scheduling strategies, target audiences for certain films, target audiences for the theatre, and the gap between the programmer's taste and the audience's. Even though it is not the original intention that causes the programmer curates the series, it practically functions to do these tests in understanding the reactions of the audience, and helping to find the most appropriate programming methods to certain film and the whole theatre.

Nevertheless, film programming is not the only way to establish the loyal audience, but should work together with the relevant and appropriate strategies of marketing and publicity, in order to relate to the existing and potential audience, and intensify their attention.

Publicity and Film Programmer

"The cinema venue and the programme, and even the name of the film curator, can thus be made into a 'brand.'"[6] Though publicity seems irrelevant to film programmer's job, Jake Perlin is actually heavily involved with the publicity at Metrograph, making great contribution in branding and attracting traffic. The branding of Metrograph then is closely tied up with Perlin's personal taste, preference, social network even reputation.

1. The Calendar as a Branding Method

Metrograph has a very well-designed calendar of film programmes with exquisite printing. It is very much like a small magazine that is printed on the beige papers, same as the background color of its website. All pages are printed in color like Polaroid film. The first page is the contents and contact information like its address, phone number and website. The second page is the advertisement of its restaurant and bar. These details in calendar are coherent with the overall vintage-style design for Metrograph, and highlights its special and stylistic features again - a repertory cinema with a fine restaurant and a romantic bar. In other word, the calendar is not only for promoting films programmed by Metrograph, but also a visual merchandising for the cinema as a whole.

---

[6] See Peter Bosma's *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives,* pp. 53.

The calendar is also an example that film programmers at Metrograph actually participate in the activities of publicity through an indirect yet influential way. After the first two pages, the reader will see a series of film programmes and single films with beautiful pictures and personalized notes, as well as essays to introduce or discuss selected films, which is all written, edited, and selected by two film programmers at Metrograph. For Perlin, this calendar is an essential channel to share cinemas he loves and communicate with his audiences, and the place that subtly discloses his private little world. If the calendar is a magazine, then Perlin is the editor-in-chief. He writes and edits notes of films, some of them are very personalized. One example is the note of Godard's *Every Man for Himself* (1980) that he choose a passage from Charles Bukowski's poetry "The Most Beautiful Woman In Town" to instead of the regular summary, which is also the lines of leading lady in this film. He carefully selects the illustrations from cover to cover, which most of them are film scenes that are already in his mind. He even put a cat on the each back cover of first six volumes, because he is a cat person. (In fact, Perlin's profile picture on the Metrograph website is a poster of the 1978 film *the Cat from Outer Space*.) The calendar is Perlin's passion, taste, and knowledge to cinema. Through the calendar, film programmes, the characteristics of the programmer as well as the theatre' style are closely combined together, which form certain uniqueness of metrograph. Along with its portability, the calendar then becomes an important method for branding all elements of the theatre including the programmer himself.

Perhaps not every film programmer is so devoted to design the calendar like Perlin, but it is prevalent for repertory cinemas that carefully design their film program calendars to impress their audience, promote films they programmed, and branding the theatre. Repertory cinema

considers the calendar as the face of the theatre that conveys the theatre's characteristic style and attitude to their audiences. For example, pink is the main color of BAM's film calendar and it may correspond with its theatre's name "Rose Cinema", and the same-color membership card. Film Forum's calendar is designed to look good on a refrigerator to represent its attitude that moviegoing should be a very customary activity in our daily lives. The recently reopened Quad Cinema explicitly designs its calendar as a square brochure, and one of its opening series is called "Four Play" that includes eight films which have the word "four" in their title. Such calendar designs show how focused repertory cinemas are in creating their own identity, and this will help them appeal to specific moviegoers and sharpen their competitive edge.

2. Celebrity-in-person Meetings

The Celebrity meeting at theatre is probably the fastest path to support the theatre improve its popularity and raise its profile. All repertory cinema would like to hold such meetings regularly, and Metrograph is no exception. Accompanied with special arrangement of film programming, these celebrities meetings are expected to not only raise attendance for the celebrities-in-person screening(s), but also for other films in the same series.

As an indie theatre, Metrograph do not have the fame like iconic institutions nor abundant capital supports. It may be one reason why many publicity about celebrities are directly or indirectly relied on the programmer's network that has been developed through his/her work experiences, personally and professionally. The respective meetings of Huppert and Assayas are both appeared at theatre through Perlin's relationships with them. Meanwhile, film programmers

host the Q&A session with celebrities is another example to reflect programmers' involvement in publicity.

Metrograph also draws many attentions from media by many celebrities appeared on the theatre's opening ceremony as well as the anniversary party, which at least part of celebrities are invited by film programmers as well as the founder Alexander Olch. These examples all reflect that programmers' network can help the theatre improve its exposure and popularity.

3. Interview with Programmer

It is easy to find many interviews with the two programmer, as well as Alexander Olch on the internet that usually aim at advertising the theatre as well as film programmes, but simultaneously they are also branding for film programmers. In these interview, the two film programmers were often asked questions like "what inspires you to open a theatre like this" or "How do you make the decision of movies you're going to include," which directly presents their professional also personal opinions towards certain films or other things. Since these person are represented Metrograph, the emotional or humorous expression with certain personality will makes the theatre be human then become more relatable to its existing and potential audiences. If the reader likes their viewpoints, they will consider to check the theatre out.

In turn, the recognition of Metrograph also contributes the recognition of programmers. The more people get to know the theatre, the more chance there is that they become the audience of the programmer. The popularity of the theatre and the reputation of excellent programmer are again closely bound up with each other. As a "toddler" theatre that recently celebrated its

one-year anniversary, Metrograph needs this connection between the programmer and the theatre on the aspect of publicity to increase the number of the audience especially the loyal one.

A Comprehensive Understanding and Potential Challenges

The previous discussions reveal that the operation of Metrograph is quite programmer-centric. The programmer's personal inclination is the first and foremost principle in programming films at Metrograph, and the programmer's personal connections in the film industry are one of the most important sources for the publicity of the theatre. More importantly, the audience's trust to the theatre is based on the trust to the programmer's taste and choice.

Such a "programmer-centric" model has some explicit advantages. Compare with programmers at institutions, programmers like Perlin have more control to curate films they like, and can establish intimate relationship with their audience from diverse communities. Their personal reputations are not hidden by the fames of large institutions, but inextricably linked with theatres they work for.

Perlin & Ma is not the only example The similar successful example are Karen Cooper and Bruce Goldstein of Film Forum, Dan Talbot of Lincoln Plaza, and Jonas Mekas of Anthology Film Archive etc[7]. One particular example is Bruce Goldstein, the director of repertory programming at Film Forum and, so the TIMES says, has made it "the town's invaluable rep house". He has also earned the reputation of "the Michael Jordan of NYC programming". Many audiences are loyal to Film Forum because they can simply trust the choices of Bruce Goldstein. Meanwhile, Goldstein values publicity a lot, and actively

---

[7] Although they may not be titled as a "film programmer," these persons have their own loyal audience base, and have impacted on the direction of repertory film programming at the theatre they work(ed) in.

participates in the theatre's events. Film Forum organizes regular meetings with Goldstein and other two famed programmers present, and this intimate connection goes a long way to the success of the theatre.

However, indie theatres like the Metrograph may have more difficulties in get quality prints than large institutions, especially those from overseas. Sometimes it is because of certain policies of the origin country, or special agreements between institutions or between institutions and distributors. Perlin said it is much harder to achieve film prints from China and Taiwan than from Europe, which impedes their programming plan for more Asian films. The cost of the prints is another problem. For Metrograph, the revenue from the bar and the restaurant may improve its financial situations. But in general, compared with institution that have many financial and legal assistances, programmers at indie theatre need to pay more efforts to locating and achieving film prints they want.

Another potential challenge for theatres of "programmer-centric" model is, since the programmer decides the film programming and everything based on his/her own "taste," as time passed, the taste will unpredictably shift, and the problem of the aging audience is almost unavoidable. One example is that the average age of Film Forum's audiences is fifty-three. The result comes from its 2016 survey with a poll of 4000 audiences.[8] Although it is certainly not the only cause of the aging audience problem, theatre may need to concern this possibility and make some research and adjustment.

---

[8] The information comes from Karen Cooper when she answered a question in the programmer meetings with members in April 2017.

Conclusion

The film programming at the Metrograph represents the programmer's taste, as well as the will of approaching a broad audience with different backgrounds. The repertory programming at Metrograph attracts young audiences and general moviegoers by extending the scope of film selection and echoing trending events. The programmer conducts communication with films programming as well as the calendar, and hope to establish the intimate relationship with the audience. The film programmer is highly involved with the publicity activities to help film series and the theatre draw more attentions and connect with more audiences. All these aspects reflect some features of the Metrograph are very contrast to cinemas at institutions, while others share some similarities like connecting and building communities. The problems of getting prints and the aging audience are also challenges that both indie cinemas like the Metrograph and institutions have to face, which deserves a further discussion. Despite competitions among theatres, a network of arthouse that can mutually support each other may help us to have a healthier and more diverse development of theatres in future

Work Cited

Pallotta, Frank. "How 'Indiana Jones' Finally Forced Hollywood To Create The PG-13
Rating." *Business Insider*. Business Insider, 24 Apr. 2014. Web. 09 May 2017.

O'Flaherty, Mark C. "An ultra-stylish arthouse cinema in New York." *How To Spend It*. N.p.,
12 Feb. 2017. Web. 09 May 2017.

Roxie Pell in Arts & Entertainment on Oct 20, 2015 11:37 am. "Metrograph, A New LES
Cinema-Restaurant, Gathers Community Support." *Gothamist*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 May
2017.

Winfrey, Graham. "How This Arthouse Theater Is Giving the Movie Experience a Redesign."
Inc.com. Inc., 04 Mar. 2016. Web. 09 May 2017.

Bosma, Peter. *Film programming: curating for cinemas, festivals, archives*. New York:
Wallflower, an imprint of Columbia U Press, 2015. Print.

Metrograph website: http://metrograph.com/.