



Film / **The Horrors of Our Mass Culture**

With Movie-Going on the Decline, Can Small Bay Area Theaters Survive?

Posted By **Neha Talreja** on Tue, Jan 29, 2013 at 11:15 AM



Last month, San Francisco's historic Bridge Theatre closed after lending its single screen to art house, independent, and foreign cinema for more than 50 years.

We're all witness to the obvious replacement of the video store with online streaming options, but what about the movie-going experience, and the availability of important films that probably won't make it on the Netflix bill anytime soon without Cannes lion heads attached to them?

The Bridge, known for its 14 years of *Midnight Mass* -- a midnight movie series hosted by local legend Peaches Christ -- closed only three months after the Lumiere on California Street shut down. The other three Landmark theaters in the city -- Clay, Opera Plaza, and Embarcadero Center Cinema -- still stand, but employees have noted a decline in attendance.

A few Landmark employees have had their shifts cut down to one day a week as orphaned employees from the closed theaters come in. "The Embarcadero has five screens, and is sort of the jewel in the crown: We're newer, we tend to get more customers, and we also get the preview screenings, so movie-goers (mainly elderly people) are very familiar with us," one employee reports. "Lately, it's been painfully slow, and not a shift passes when I get asked if we'll be closing too."

The threat to independent cinema isn't limited to the availability of more easily accessible media at home. Many independent theaters are incurring overwhelming new costs as they upgrade to the digital projection systems pushed by studios, many of which push gimmicks like 3D, IMAX, and 48 fps (frames per second) features as a way to charge more, further pushing customers away.

As for the films themselves that still draw crowds, another theater employee sees a disconnect between those looking for pure art house and theaters (like the Landmark collective) and audiences leaning toward "the disturbing trend of indie-mainstream."

"On Thursday after work, I went to see Michael Haneke's new movie, *Amour*. I had brought a Cheerwine soda and sat by myself and cried. It was very good-uncomfortable, starkly shot, and quiet. When the lights came up, everyone else in the audience seemed really angry. Like, fucking pissed. Old ladies from Pacific Heights, mainly. They had sat through two hours of a beautiful, and what I saw as, a one-sided love story, and they wanted their \$8.25 back. Everyone would rather see Dame Maggie Smith widen her eyes or Bill Murray be an insensitive bastard getting jacked off by a placid and racist Laura Linney, and to me, that's what's disturbing about the current trend in American tastes."

So the masses aren't looking for *Amour*, but Landmark's "indie-mainstream" seats still aren't getting filled. Who and what is surviving?

Sarah Flores works at both Embarcadero Center and the Roxie in the Mission. While there has certainly been a slow down at the box office, she still sees good crowds at some of the smaller theaters in the city, mostly at cinemas that offer special events and programming. "The Roxie offers a wide array of off-beat, special programming that transforms a trip to the movies into a special event that the audience will remember." Alternative cinema still thrives at Canyon Cinema, Black Hole, and Artist's Television Access, where they host a monthly open submissions screening.

San Francisco's cinephiles are still alive and kicking. It's the mommas and poppas that used to take their kids out to the movies that are opting to stay home in the face of higher prices and megaplexes. Independent theaters are caught between competing with big studios' gimmicks, declining attendance, and paying the bills to keep their own niche-driven consumers coming back. No particular business models or trending film selections draw crowds to independent cinemas during this sort of transition period, but theaters that take risks seem to be keeping afloat as traditional movie-going sees a decline.

So go see *Amour*, go see films in 35mm at the Balboa and the Vogue Theater where you still can, and remember it's the wealth of alternative resources that makes a rich urban culture -- supporting their availability is important to maintaining a city's livelihood. "Going to the movies" is an experience in itself that deserves to be preserved the right way, for the sake of future first dates and properly dark and seedy escapism. Movie-going itself, and the odd film that feels discovered by the viewer, are still cultural experiences worth talking about. As Flores notes, "Word-of-mouth is really the small movie theaters' best friend."