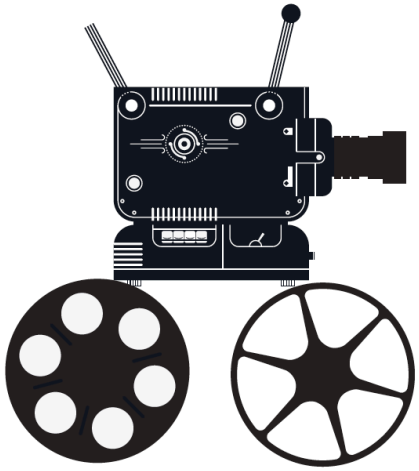
Final Report

SPF Project 0119: Cinema Out of the Box!



CINEMA

OUT OF THE BOX

Nov. 2013-Mar. 2015

Submitted by professor Alanna Thain, Project Manager (Department of English)

Our bike: portable, eco-friendly and generating no waste

1. What we set out to accomplish

Cinema Out of the Box was a project to develop practical tools for a mobile cinema. Today, our media is defined by mobility, and for some, this means that a "cinematic specificity" has been lost. On the contrary, the new mobility of cinema (portable devices, such as our laptop screens) means that we can have "cinematic experiences" in new and unexpected ways. Our project proposed to do three things:

1) design portable infrastructure for a mobile cinema that can take the capacity to project audiovisual materials anywhere: on campus in unexpected locations, up the mountain, in the pool, and beyond

2) develop a year long screening series experimenting with the potential of this new mobility and

3) find the most ecological and sustainable ways to equip our cinema, focusing in this first year on the potential for bicycle powered generators, low energy projectors, and passive sound amplification.

Project RA Tyler Lawson transporting the equipment

A key component of sustainability that we focused on was the creative ability to work with what is at hand. One of the biggest challenges of the downtown location of the McGill campus is a lack of space for expansion. In particular, we lack dedicated space for media arts, with no art gallery or on campus cinema theatre. I direct the Moving image Research Lab, but it is a small space dedicated to research; while we frequently collaborate with on campus and Montreal based arts organizations, there are strict limitations on how many people we can accomodate. Our mobile cinemas project made creative use of on and off campus space without requiring elaborate construction or infrastructural support. Our "pop-up" projection mobile cinema will allow for creative and experimental collaborations, bringing media arts to the campus community. Likewise, our engagement with bicycle generators, passive amplification, and human powered performance will model the potential for energy-efficient mobile media.

Screening of The Five Obstructions at Outremont Parc

The Sustainability Project Fund:

Our most important sponsor was the Sustainability Project Fund; with a contribution of $19,087.27,three quarters of our budget. Our other sponsors included the SSHRC Partnership Grant "Immediations", Professor Thain's SSHRC funded project "Anarchival Cinemas", a Digital Arts Engine Grant and in-kind funding and support from the Moving Image Research Lab. As the project developed, we also received in-kind support from Visual Voice Gallery, Space X, the Amer-Asian Film Festival and the Miskatonic Institute. A proposed Dean of Arts development fund proposal was not pursued, due to scheduling conflicts with Andy Costello and k.g. Guttmann for a planned collaboration (which can hopefully be rescheduled). The funding from the Sustainability Projects Fund allowed us to accomplish all of our goals and more. In what follows, I will describe how we used the funds and to what ends. A detailed budget and impact metrics have also been submitted.

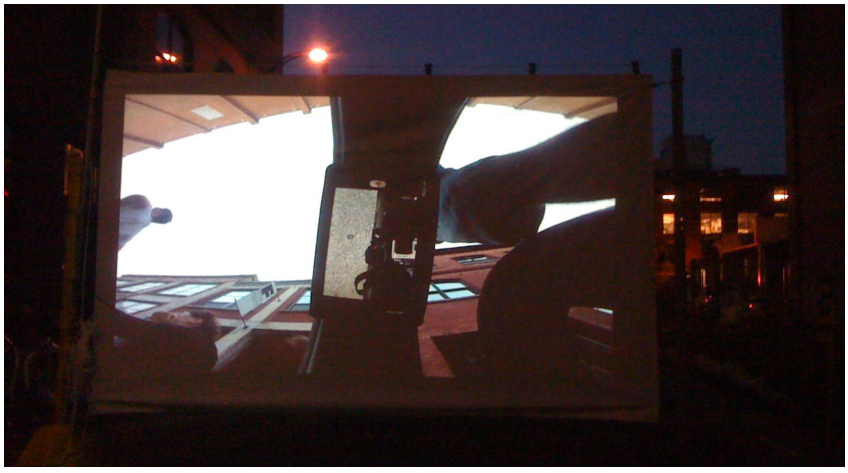
Screening of A Taste of Tea with East Asian Studies Student Association at Parc Mont-Royal: what counts as part of the movie?

2. What we accomplished

We had three initial goals:
1) design portable infrastructure for a mobile cinema that can take the capacity to project audiovisual materials anywhere: on campus in unexpected locations, up the mountain, in the pool, and beyond 2)) find the most ecological and sustainable ways to equip our cinema, focusing in this first year on the potential for bicycle powered generators, low energy projectors, and passive sound amplification and 3) 2) develop a year long screening series experimenting with the potential of this new mobility

I have combined 1 and 2 here as these practical questions overlapped in practice.

What we accomplished: This project was dreamt up in the aftermath of another event, a series of "public kitchens" in collaboration with Boston's Design School for Social Intervention, for which I purchased a bicycle powered generator system to help enable street cooking. When we were planning a mobile infrastructure, we knew we wanted a bicycle to both power and move the project, and we looked at numerous examples of mobile and outdoor cinema projects worldwide for inspiration and ideas. Graduate student Thomas Pringle was largely responsible for sourcing project materials. He and Tyler Lawson consulted with McGill's bike co-op and local bicycle stores to finally decide on the purchase of a large and sturdy cargo bike, capable of transporting all the project equipment in a box to whatever site necessary. This was the single biggest expense for the project. The bike's quality guarantees its longevity and availability to future iterations of the project. The mobile cinema was assembled to be able to project on film and on digital video. For film projection, we had a used 16mm projector custom retro-fitted to be more energy efficient (a necessity given the constraints of the energy set-up) and also purchased a used Super-8 projector. We sourced the most energy efficient highpowered digital projector we could find, and used the constraint of energy efficiency in selecting all the other materials. We also purchased an inflatable screen. In practice, only the screen has proven to be a less than perfect choice, as the need to keep a generator running to keep it inflated is less practical, not to mention it adds bulk to the project. In the end we have generally used only the screen itself and not the support, however, the quality of the screen is such that it made no financial sense to exchange it for a non-inflatable version. As it stands, we are able to run screenings of up to 3 hours on a single battery, with continuous participation from the crowd on the bicycle. We have taken this infrastructure all over the city, including areas not accessible by road. We have completely succeeded with this goal and have not faced any constraints in our ability to take cinema on the move, although we did have to learn to become very adept at suspending the screen from all kinds of supports!



Screening and Go-Pro research creation workshop at the Darling Foundry in collaboration with Immediations (SSHRC Partnership Grant), Heimispheric Institute and the Moving Image Research laboratory

2) develop a year long screening series experimenting with the potential of this new mobility

In the end, we held more screenings than originally planned and slightly exceeded one year. The key for us was "experimenting with the potential of mobility". This meant that we were not simply interested in replicating the "cinema under the stars" found in public parks or the Quartier du Spectacle. Our non-reliance on electrical sources meant we could go anywhere, and a major consideration was experimenting with how the sites for screenings could interact with both the content screened and the ecologies we set up in. An obvious example might be the collaboration with the Volatile Den, a local organization which is a kind of alternative educational space around horror and cult cinema. We collaborated on a screening of the French 1970's horror classic *La Rose du Fer* in the cemetery on Mont Royal. On the one hand, it was an obvious choice—the film is set in a graveyard, we set our screening in a graveyard—very straightforward. But in practice, the experience was much richer. This was the only time we requested permission to use a space for screening, out of respect for the nature of the site. The cemetery admin was extremely enthusiastic; not only did they waive the $200 fee normally charged for such events, but they have already invited us back for another screening in summer 2015 (scheduled for August 7). What we learned from this event was that a cemetery, as one of the largest green spaces in the city, is already an extremely multi-use site. We shared our space that evening with picknickers, who ended up as spectators, joggers, dog walkers, lovers, skateboarders. We had a great conversation around the way that both the cemetery and horror films are places for experimenting with bodies, in ways that are both profane and banal. The connections between film, setting and participants was emergent, rather than simply mimetic—it came from staging the film there and not simply from the idea. This has generally been the experience of the project as a whole, and makes it an excellent example of practice-based research (or research-creation), a field of growing importance in the university today.

We often left campus to hold our screenings, frequently taking McGill community members (often students) into parts of the city that they didn't know. We solicited participation through our facebook page and publicity, and also through collaborations with numerous campus organizations. In the end, we held of a total of 29 screenings over 14 months in collaboration with 30 different organizations and individuals. There is a complete schedule as an appendix to this report. Our first screenings attracted around 30-40 people; by the end of our regular summer screening series, we had closer to 200-300 people at our events.

Experimenting with mobility in phase one of this project meant designing portable equipment and finding sites that lent themselves to the project. In the next phase, we would like to experiment with screenings that are more like events or performances, building on what we have learned to far, to complement an ongoing project of regular screenings.

A big turnout on a summer night

The project budget was spent on equipment and student salaries. Three McGill students collaborated on this project. Tyler Lawson, a McGill undergraduate, and Thomas Pringle, an MA student, were the original students on the project. When Thomas graduated, I hired Steph Berrington, another MA student, to take his place. We learned that we needed at least 2 students at every screening to set-up and take down (and we also grew a team of "regulars" who would show up early and stay late to help). We also learned more about what kind of time was needed for the project, around 10 hours per screening for each student. This meant around 5 hours for the actual screening, between getting and transporting the equipment, setting up, holding the screening (generally 2-2.5 hours) and returning and storing the equipment. Another 5 hours was spent organizing the events (publicity, outreach, meeting with collaborators, maintenance of equipment) and handling the archiving of materials related to the project. In phase 2, I strongly recommend adding a third student focused on researching similar projects to enhance to knowledge production of COTB. The project was so successful, with so many demands for screenings, that we ended up going slightly over budget with student salaries; the excess was paid out of Professor Thain's personal research funds.

16mm screening with curator Josh Guildford of the Filmmaker Co-op, NY as part of the workshop Media Crossings (MIRL)

3. What we learnt and what challenges/ failures we encountered:

I have combined these two questions as I think they are inseperable; failure is mode of learning, which is actually a key aspect of both experimental research-creation work and the emphasis on improvisation that was a big part of the event.

Overall, we had very few set-backs with COTB. It required substantial experimentation to figure out the logistics of powering the set-up, determining how long a battery could last, for example, how much power we could draw on, as well as the best practices for placing screens, speakers, etc. Most times, we had a line-up of people waiting to jump on the bike and take a turn. The bike-power was a huge attractor for participants. We usually set-up on site at least an hour before starting the screening, so that people walking by could ask questions about the project and hopefully get lured into the fun. On a few occasions we (the project team) did A LOT of biking, but at least the project helps keep people in shape! We also learned that the cargo bike is less effective for powering the generator. Since we always had at least two team members at each screening, team members brought their own bikes, but I would suggest buying a project bike (not a cargo bike) to have for COTB, as well as a trailer attachment for transporting extra equipment, as the cargo bike box is completely full each time. We also need to equip a small kit of practical tools, such as better flashlights, to help with set-up and take down, as we were using our own equipment in an ad-hoc manner. I would also considering buying a second sound amp. As the crowds grew in size, placing the amp became a challenge so that everyone could hear. If we had a second amp and a splitter, we could distribute the amps at the front and back of the crowd for better sound. Lastly, many of our screenings were done using a laptop borrowed from the MIRL, or my personal laptop. I would suggest buying a dedicated project laptop for more consistency and to serve as a research resource for the project RA.

I wouldn't say that we had any failures. Astonishingly, we were never once rained out! We did have several challenges that became important ways to reconceive what we were doing.

The first challenge was identifying and working with our public. None of the students on the project were bilingual, and we initially faced some criticism from the public when our first publicities were in English only. I did translation for all future events and introduced the screenings in French and English. However, I would definitely like to have at least one project RA be bilingual for future iterations. A second challenge was working with the McGill community. While we have continued to hold events in winter, the best promise of the project happens during spring and summer when weather makes it possible to take the entire city as our lab. This also means, though, that due to the rhythms of academia, we have more of a challenge working with the McGill community, a key aim of SPF projects, and for us as well. The key way that we tackled this was by getting campus groups to co-sponsor our events. The MIRL was a major partner, but we also worked with numerous campus organizations. This type of collaboration can only get better and better, especially with more opportunity to plan in advance and as our project gets better known.

The project also raised the question of who counts as the McGill community. A significant part of our audience was not from McGill at all. The opportunity to create a site for mixing of McGill and non-McGill publics, in the context of a McGill based research project that wasn't necessarily seen as taking place "on campus" or in the ivory tower was incredible. As a downtown university, the McGill campus is a well used public space, particularly for its green spaces. I feel like COTB was a participant in a tradition of the public university that doesn't simply serve students, faculty or employees, but helps brings the resources and excitement of research to the wider community as well. Another large part of our audience was McGill alumni still living in Montreal and happy to have a way to reconnect with the university. As a project, COTB is wholly grounded in the McGill community, but by necessity is part of the wider ecology of the city as well.

Cemetary screening with the Miskatonic Institute and the Cimetiere Mont Royal.

Lastly, one of the most interesting effects of this project, directly relevant to concerns about the increasing privatization and neo-liberalization of the university, was the unexpected nature of the encounters we had. I will share just one example, because I think it encapsulates the potential of a project like this and a challenge that we could better address in future versions. At a screening of 5 Broken Cameras at Parc Lafontaine, a documentary about violence and political repression of Palestinians along the border with Israel, a man showed up about halfway through the screening and started acting in a disruptive fashion, yelling and swearing at the screen from the edge of the crowd. This went on for quite a while until he got tired and left. It was neither violent nor threatening, just unusual and disturbing, and I wondered what would have happened if he had become violent. I also wondered what is was like for him, as we could easily have been on territory that he considered a home. How can this project be made relevant for people who may not have shown up on our initial radar as a target audience? How far can our media ecology stretch in an urban ecology of unequal participants? What are the resources in the McGill community for making our project more relevant, inclusive and responsive? In this way, phase 2 of COTB seeks to engage explicitly with what David Harvey calls the "social practice of communing": "At the heart of the practice of commoning lies the principle that the relation between the social group and that aspect of the environment being treated as a common shall be both collective and non-commodified-off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations"

4. Future recommendations if we were replicating the project:

1. For equipment: the biggest expense of Phase 1 was the equipment. With this in place, our expenses are much reduced. However, I would include in the budget funds for maintenance and upkeep. I would also suggest purchasing an extra sound amp, putting together a kit for on-site set-up, a project bike for use with the generator, and a dedicated project laptop.

2. Our current student structure works quite well. However, I would like to bring a third student onto the project for 2 reasons. First, to ensure that the project can run even if one student is out of town. Second, to expand the research potential of this project. I have given a few talks on this work and there is a great deal of interest in it. I am exploring options for bringing it into collaboration with other McGill based research projects such as "Arts and Ideas in Motion". A student whose participation was able to develop research into similar projects and their social effects would be a real boon. For this reason, I will be proposing an Arts Internship position paid jointly from my research funds and the Dean of Arts Internship program to join the project.

3. This third student would also free up time for the other students to more aggressively pursue collaborations with existing McGill organizations, to expand our audience and our impact.

4. Further develop our publicity. We relied a lot on Facebook and our website hosted by the MIRL, but we need to expand into other means, possibly using other

forms of social media, for greater outreach and also improved feedback from our participants.

5. I would like to develop the event-based nature of COTB, to build on our existing work with the urban environment. For example, the Immediations project is planning a collaborative "disco-soup" public kitchen event, to be held at one of the public markets, in collaboration with COTB. I would like to develop these options.

It has been a pleasure to work with the SPF on this project, and the logistics of this collaboration were smooth and productive. I appreciate the ways that this funding allowed us to bring students into the mix as fellow participants and not just as workers. I look forward to future projects and for continuing to explore the many different ways we can live the concept of sustainability in our work and research at McGill.

The most sustaining part of the project has been the way in which the environmental concerns of COTB have opened directly only experiences of joy, community, communication and collaboration. People have proven to be really excited by the project, attending regularly, staying after for long conversations, sending suggestions about what and where to screen next. The open format and the movement around and off campus has been central to this. I hope this project continues for many years to come.

We are applying for funding for a second round of COTB, and also preparing for 2016 a major SSHRC partnership grant application that would guarantee funding for the next 7 years. In the short term, Professor Thain's research funding and a Dean of Arts Internship award are keeping the project up and running over the first part of the summer, along with in kind and materials support from the Moving Image Research Lab. SPF funding for COTB 2 would allow us to keep up our programming through the fall and academic year.

Budget

There were only minor changes to the initial proposed budget.

Type of Expense	Initial Budget	Final Budget	Explanation
Total budget	19.087.27	18,989.51	
Equipment	9215.27	8662.14	Change in prices allowed us to save money. The extra funds were spent on student salaries.
Student Salaries	9872.00	10327.37	Money saved allowed us to do 3 extra screenings.

Link to project video:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bwi1NWiRiKS4T0traWw1YVg5ZjQ/view

Complete List of COTB Events October 2013-February 2015

(date, screening, collaboration and location)

2013:

October 13, 2013: Man with a Movie Camera, Book Launch Professor Furuhata, East Asian Studies, St Viateur Lofts Studio

November 14: Selection of 16mm short films, SPF Vision 2020 event, McGill Bookstore

2014:

January 18: At Land, The Festival of Temporary Experiences and the Open Academy: a Free Forum for the Exchange of Ideas and Knowledge

February 10: Bells of Atlantis (1952) by Ian Hugo Life of an American Fireman (1902) by Thomas Edison

CoLAB, (The Plant)

April 10: "The Life of an American Fireman" with CKUT's Under the Weather segment; Joanna Petrasek MacDonald of McGill Geography's Climate Change Adaptation Research Group (McGill Campus)

June 4: Birth, Moving Image Research Lab, Parc Mont Royal

June 7: Transanimations' Screening of experimental short 16mm films, curated by Josh Guilford of the Filmmakers' Co-op in collaboration with the "Media Crossings" conference at the Moving Image Research Lab, Parc Laurier

June 8: La Haine, La Cave volunteer led bicycle cooperative in the Solin Hall Residence basement.

June 18: Tropical Malady, Parc Beaubien

June 26: Leaky Cauldron research-creation event, with Immediations, Sonic Electric, Topological Media Lab, School of Making Thinking and Art dans le Jardin at Darling Foundry

July 2: The Five Obstructions, Immediations, Parc Jarry

July 10: The Taste of Tea, The Monthly Asian Movie Night at Ciné-Asie and the East Asian Students Association (Parc Mont Royal)

July 17: The Swimmer, Parc Lafontaine

July 23: The Night of the Hunter, Les Amis du Champs des Possibles http://amisduchamp.com/ and Cinema 17, Le Champs des Possibles

July 29: Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me, Parc Mont Royal

August 1: "La Rose de Fer"The Volatile Den/L'Antre Volatil (Mont Royal Cemetary)

August 6: "Neighbours" and "5 Broken Cameras" Parc Lafontaine

August 13: "Beyond the Black Rainbow" with James Oscar, filmmaker and writer (Rosemont Underpass)

August 20: "Sans Soleil" Parc Mont Royal

August 27: Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance Solidarity Across Borders/Solidarité Sans Frontiere (SAB) (Parc Jarry)

August 30: Hedwig and the Angry Inch, QPIRG-McGill and Rad Frosh (Parc Raymond-Blain)

September 10: Diversidad: A Roadtrip to Deconstruct Dinner, Cinéma Nomade à Parc Extension and Transport Actif Parc-Extension, Parc Saint-Roche

October 2: Persepolis, The International Studies Department at Marianapolis College, grounds of Marianolpolis

October 22: Wapikoni Mobile Short Films, Wapikoni Mobile+McGill Rad Law+Space X, at Space X

November 4: Short films from Montreal-based activist filmmakers Moïse Marcoux-Chabot and Franklin López, Divest McGill, Space X at Space X in Mile X.

2015:

January 8+9 2015: Footage of the Tar Sands Healing Walk, extraction resistance at Unist'ot'en and in the Gaspésie, and other environmental justice short films, GRIP-UQÀM, Pavillon Judith-Jasmin at UQÀM

January 14-31: Art+Science in Motion Festival de courts-métrages, Gallerie Visual Voice and IPLAI, Galerie Visual Voice

February 3, 2015: Public Lecture on Cinema Out of the Box at Vanier Cegep, part of their interdisciplinary Humanities Seminar Series, with Prof. Thain and Steph Berrington

February 2015: Just Eat It: A Food Waste Story, ECOLE Project and the AUS Environment Committee (ECOLE House)