

# LA CLEF

## *Revival*



international  
press review

A selection of English articles recounting the grassroots effort to save La Clef cinema, spanning five years – starting with an illegal occupation that mobilized hundreds of volunteers and film professionals, and continuing with a fundraising campaign aimed at buying and reopening La Clef collectively, which eventually succeeded in June 2024 !

We are now looking for patrons to help us fund the renovation work – thanks to fiscal sponsorship through Film Independent, donations are 100% tax-deductible in the United States !



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# FILM COMMENT

## A Key for Every Lock

By [Devika Girish](#) on September 9, 2024

*This article appeared in the September 6, 2024 edition of The Film Comment Letter, our free weekly newsletter featuring original film criticism and writing. Sign up for the Letter [here](#).*

*This piece is the first in a new Film Comment series called Light Work, which features articles and interviews about the intersections of labor and film culture and the stories of cinema workers around the world.*



Patrons lining up for a screening at La Clef. Photo courtesy of the La Clef Revival collective.

Last June, a victory message appeared on the @laclefrevival account on Instagram: under an image of raised fists holding keys, red and black lettering announced, “*On a réussi. La Clef est sauvée*” (“We succeeded. La Clef is saved”). For those of us following the La Clef Revival collective’s five-year campaign to prevent the closure of the La Clef cinema in Paris, it seemed a miraculous denouement to a long, arduous, and ultimately thrilling journey.

La Clef is a community cinema in the Latin Quarter of Paris, an area dotted with universities. The cinema’s four-and-a-half decade history as a beloved neighborhood institution seemed to face an unceremonious end in 2018, when its owners put the building up for sale—until a collective of the cinema’s workers and local activists occupied the theater, refusing to let it close down. Their occupation lasted for nearly two-and-a-half years, during which time their initial act of refusal grew into something bigger and richer. While they waged a legal and media battle to save the cinema, La Clef became the site of a “permanent festival,” with free, daily screenings that drew filmmakers like Céline Sciamma and Leos Carax. The occupiers were evicted in 2022, but the collective’s campaign to save La Clef was far from over: they decided to try and buy the cinema, launching an ambitious fundraising campaign that Martin Scorsese supported with a video message and Quentin Tarantino with a handsome contribution. On June 19 of this year, they succeeded, and La Clef is now a collectively owned, community-run cinema in the heart of Paris, slated to reopen next year after renovations.

It's a beautiful new chapter in a story that began in 1973, when Claude Frank-Forter opened the theater as a space to share the work of underrepresented filmmakers from across the world with the public. Frank-Forter found the location on Rue de La Clef to be apt—La Clef means “the key” in French. “For me, a key represents a mythical, almost magical object, because its etymology in various languages describes either a thing that allows you to limit access, or the opposite ... to open it widely,” he said in a 2019 interview. “This corresponded perfectly to my conception of art-house cinema, which obviously does not interest everyone but which can provide great satisfaction to those who appreciate its characteristics!” In the 1980s, amid a crisis for independent cinemas in France—Frank-Forter attributed it in part to the rise of color television—La Clef was bought by the Works Council of the Caisse d'Épargne d'Île de France, who turned the building into a cultural center. Under the Council's aegis, two of La Clef's three screening rooms were made available for films, and from 1990 to 2017, the cinema developed a strong identity as a bastion for cinema from Africa and Latin America, particularly under the curatorial auspices of the Beninese filmmaker Sanvi Panou, who founded the “Images of Elsewhere” program at La Clef.

For the La Clef Revival collective, the goal was not just to save the building, but also to honor this legacy of independent, internationalist, and noncommercial moviegoing. If their story struck a chord in Paris and around the globe, it's because it is familiar to many of us: in most major cities of the world today, ever-soaring real-estate prices have whittled away space for any cultural activities divorced from a profit motive.

Earlier this summer, I spoke with collective members Kira Simon-Kennedy and Chloé Folens about the lessons they've learned from the success of the La Clef Revival campaign. Here are their key (pun intended!) insights, as told to me, with some editing and condensation for length and clarity.

Key 1: Fight for cinema as a cultural good

Those who stayed in the cinema during those two-and-a-half-years emphasized that it was not a squat, but an *occupation*, with the aim of reopening the cinema to the public. It was a means of drawing attention to the fact that cultural institutions were being asphyxiated in Paris because of the rising price of real estate. During the takeover, the space became its own thriving hub. On the first night, September 21, 2019, the collective screened Cinda Firestone's 1974 documentary *Attica*, which offers an account of the Attica Prison Uprising of 1971. The police came by that evening, but they thought the cinema had reopened—they didn't realize that what was happening was actually against the law!

When the pandemic began and the city went under lockdown, we began to use the space for other projects. We started a residency, Studio 34, to train new young filmmakers: someone brought a camera; someone brought on a friend who was a sound engineer, and it just came together. A pirate radio station was launched; film workshops were organized for children. Gradually, we realized that the issue was not only to save the cinema itself, but to try and save all that had been invented within it during the takeover—the experimentation that flourished. There are programmers, scholars, and film professionals within the collective, but we also have a psychiatrist, a baker, a physician. It's a communal space for organizing, and some have found that to be their main drive to join the collective.

So at a certain point, things shifted from, “we would take any buyer, as long as they guarantee that La Clef remains a cinema,” to “why not buy the cinema ourselves and have it be a self-organized, independent, autonomous, and community-run space?”

Key 2: It helps if you live in a country with a social safety net

There was a major economic crisis during the pandemic in France, but it wasn't the same as in the U.S., with people immediately losing their jobs and health insurance, and possibly getting evicted. That already gave us a base of stability. Then, the *Intermittents du Spectacle* system for cultural workers in France [a tax and unemployment assistance program for freelance artists] basically guaranteed a baseline of sustenance during the pandemic. Also, many of us are middle and upper class. And finally, though all the screenings had pay-what-you-wish ticketing, the average ticket revenue was about 4.5 euros throughout the occupation. So there was always a revenue stream coming in, quite a significant amount, to cover the basic expenses.

All of this played a role in helping us carry out such a time-consuming struggle, but the current, repressive political environment in France makes it nearly impossible for people in greater danger of encounters with the police—due to class, race, ethnicity, or immigration status—to take part in an occupation. Turning the space into one that can operate legally is part of our effort to welcome everyone into La Clef safely.

Key 3: Use movies to bring together people (and hoodwink the police!)

It's quite unusual for a squat of this size to last two and a half years, especially in this area of Paris. It's because it was a beloved space to begin with. It's also an interesting and historic neighborhood that's gentrifying, but which still has a strong middle-class identity. People are attached to established institutions and care about the neighborhood staying affordable.

The threat of eviction became imminent in 2022—we had exhausted all possible legal resources, and the police could have come at any point to throw us out. But, you cannot legally be evicted at night in France. So we organized a festival that lasted all day, every day, with screenings starting at 6 a.m. and ending at night. The bet we made was that if there were spectators in the building starting at 6 a.m., that would deter the police. And that worked for five weeks. We had full houses all day. Filmmakers also came to show their films at dawn. Students and cinephiles came from far away, taking night buses from distant neighborhoods to be there on time. Then one night, we found out that we were going to be evicted the next morning. There was no delaying it anymore. We had planned to show [Agnès Varda's] *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962) that morning, but we decided not to open the theater to avoid putting spectators in danger. But when we briefly reopened for four days in June 2024, to celebrate our purchase of the cinema, our first screening was *Cléo from 5 to 7* at 6 a.m.

#### Key 4: Court small and big donors

After a two-and-a-half year legal battle, it was public and press support that bought us time to negotiate with the owners and raise funds to purchase the building. The initial sales price for the building was 4.2 million, not including the notary fees, architects' fees, and lawyers fees. Thanks to the negotiation team, the cost came down to 2.7 million euros. The crowdfunding was the biggest source of funds for the purchase of the building. Kira helped set up a fiscal sponsor in the U.S., so we could take donations through Film Independent in Los Angeles. We raised \$400,000 from 5000 small donors through this campaign. We also had a beautiful art exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo in October 2022, where a lot of creatives donated works—both big names and emerging artists, keeping with the spirit of La Clef. It was called “[Everything Must Go](#),” a big group show that we treated like a fire sale. The next biggest chunk, \$800,000, was from two separate bank loans from cooperative unions. The other slices came from major donors, some who are anonymous, and some who are famous and [wanted to be named](#). The donations were all no-strings-attached—no special treatment for anyone, no matter how much they gave.

#### Key 5: Build independence and democracy into your organizational structure

We wanted to find a legal way to sustain this self-organized model and the independence of the cinema for years to come. We took inspiration from the ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes, a Zone to Defend campaign in the west of France, where a huge occupation effort resulted in the government abandoning plans to build an airport on agricultural land. They thought through how to make sure that everything that was invented in the context of that struggle could be maintained, and especially how the land could be owned collectively. For that, they've made sure that specific uses of the property were required to use the endowment funds—it has to be a collective farm; it has to be organic.

We did the same thing. We created a fund called Cinema Revival. It not only allowed us to collect tax-deductible donations, but also to write a certain number of principles into the use of the building. It has to remain a cinema, and if, for instance, there's a catastrophe and we can't repay the loans, the building has to be sold to someone who uses it as a cinema, and it cannot be sold for a profit. It's a way of despeculating the value of real estate. Also, there are two separate bodies involved in the cinema: the fund [which is managed by professionals including Sciamma; Laurent Tenzer, a representative of the collectively-run Nova Cinema in Belgium; commons expert Eric Arrivé; and Jean-Marc Zekri, head of the Paris arthouse cinema Le Reflet Médicis] and the collective. The resale of the building would require the agreement of a majority of both parties—a way to foolproof the longevity of the space by not concentrating power in any one group. [[Learn more about this structure here.](#)]

La Clef also has to remain community-run and independent. It has to have solidarity pricing. It has to be collectively programmed, which is very important because we want it to remain a place that's open to different sensibilities. And it has to be *mostly* volunteer run—we will have only two salaried positions, for admin and finance, when we reopen. That's a way to keep the power dynamics equitable, and to make sure that there's an opportunity for anyone to come in and learn. There should be an open loop between the people who program and the people who are watching the films.

#### Key 6: Separate programming from profit

We have two screening rooms and a multipurpose hall we use for conferences, readings, etcetera, but there are also several narrow, poorly lit spaces that no one knew how to use what to make of. Then we realized that they're perfect for film and sound editing! When we reopen, those will be available to rent, particularly for shorts films and self-produced films—projects with more fragile economies. That will hopefully be a secure source of income, so that the pressure of having to bring in money does not fall on the volunteers who program the films. We want people to choose films based on their love for them, not on the prospect of drawing crowds or making profits.

#### Key 7: Remember—it's possible!

If anyone says that something like this can't be done, you can just say, this place in Paris did it. We of course had our own circumstances, but it's possible. We got that “it can be done” energy from other such initiatives, too—we are part of a network, called Kino Climates, of alternative cinemas in Europe.

And finally, trust the audience and the collective experience of moviegoing. It's not just about the consumption of cultural content. That's what's been so inspiring about this experience: you allow the audience members to imagine that they could find themselves on the other side at one point, and they could be the ones sharing a film.

# DEADLINE

## La Clef Cinema: Historic Paris Venue Saved From Closure After “Major” Cash Donation From Quentin Tarantino

By Zac Ntim

June 19, 2024 3:53am



La Clef Cinema and Quentin Tarantino.

Andreas Rentz/Getty Images/Stephane Cardinale - Corbis/Corbis via Getty Images.

Nestled on a quiet street a stone’s throw away from the bustle of Paris’ fifth arrondissement, La Clef cinema, one of the city’s most enduring rep houses, has been saved from closure following a five-year battle involving lawyers, developers, and government officials.

Cinéma Revival, the activist group behind the campaign to save the venue, has purchased the cinema building, which had been put on the market by its previous owner, Caisse d’Epargne banking group. The group bought the building with €2 million raised through an online fundraising campaign. €400,000 was raised from 5000 individual donations with contributors including filmmakers and actors such as David Lynch, Wang Bing, Leos Carax, Céline Sciamma, Sophie Fillières, Agnès Jaoui, and Irène Jacob.

The remaining cash was raised through a series of what the group described to us as “major” cash donations from *Pulp Fiction* filmmaker Quentin Tarantino and two other anonymous patrons who have asked to remain anonymous. The group plans to reopen the cinema for four days from June 27 to 30 before closing for one year to renovate the decades-old building. A bar will be installed onsite alongside three film post-production rooms, which will be run for profit to support the cinema operations. The Cinéma Revival fund will employ two full-time staffers to run the public-facing for-hire business while all cinema programming will continue to be conducted by volunteers.

“The cinema remains community-run, relying on volunteers with complete political, cultural, and economic autonomy, the group told us this week during a video interview conducted onsite at the cinema, which is currently undergoing minor renovations.

“The fund owns the building but it has no say in how the cinema is run. We have created a structure that has no shareholders, so the people who gave us money have no say in how the cinema is run. That’s how we preserve the independence of the cinema.”

Tarantino’s donation was the result of an impromptu meeting with two members of the La Clef collective at the Cannes Film Festival in 2023. The *Jackie Brown* filmmaker had been in town to promote his book *Cinema Speculation* and host a screening of John Flynn’s *Rolling Thunder* at Directors’ Fortnight.

“He was really interested in the project and then sent us a mysterious email saying ‘How much do you need to get the cinema?’,” the group told us.

“The subject of the email was: ‘This is Quentin Tarantino.’ And then at the end, it said, ‘sent from my iPad.’ He asked how much we needed and then covered it all. That allowed us to complete the financing.”

Tarantino has been a long-standing public supporter of physical cinema spaces. The filmmaker owns two cinemas in Los Angeles. He bought the embattled New Beverly Cinema in 2014 and the Vista Theatre on Sunset Boulevard in 2021.

# DEADLINE

The first screening back at La Clef on June 27 will be Agnes Varda's *Cleo from 5 to 7*. The seminal New Wave classic had been the film scheduled to screen in 2018 when bailiffs first entered the cinema to shut down operations. The screening will be presented by Agnes' daughter, Rosalie Varda. The group told us future programming will prioritize progressive and militant world cinemas.

Billed as one of the French capital's sole surviving community cinemas, La Clef is at the heart of Paris's Left Bank fifth arrondissement, once associated with student activism and intellectual and political ferment. When the La Clef building was officially closed in 2019, a collective of moviegoers, film professionals, academics, artists, and local residents began an occupation of the building, hosting continuous daily screenings and talks in the cinema with guests including Leos Carax, Frederick Wiseman, Céline Sciamma, and Adèle Haenel. The building's owner sued and the activists were hit with a 350 euros daily fine, which was later repealed by a local court. Legendary *Killers Of The Flower Moon* filmmaker Martin Scorsese even penned an open letter in support of the movement.

The La Clef collective has launched a separate fundraising round to aid with the building renovations. They need €300,000 to complete the work. But with the cinema's immediate future somewhat cemented, the group is looking to spread their momentum across the city.

"Many cinemas in Paris are closing or are at risk of closing, so it's still an ongoing fight. But I hope other collectives will use that example and use our example of a victorious struggle to find their own way to defend places that are under threat," they told us.

"Given that we've made it I'm quite confident that this will be a space to invent new ways of programming, making, and discussing films."

## Martin Scorsese Gets Behind Rescue Plan For La Clef Cinema In Paris As Activists Announce Breakthrough

By **Melanie Goodfellow**

April 26, 2023 11:03am



La Clef, Martin Scorsese

Melanie Goodfellow, Vera Anderson/WireImage

Martin Scorsese has re-voiced his support for Paris's La Clef community cinema, following news that activists fighting to save the venue have secured the right to buy the site.

The battle to keep the 50-year-old cinema up and running has been supported by a raft of local cineastes, such as Céline Sciamma, Mathieu Amalric, Léos Carax and Agnès Jaoui, and also captured the attention of filmmakers and cinephiles worldwide.

“La Clef must remain a cinema,” wrote Scorsese in an open letter posted on the site of France’s Libération newspaper.

“So, why should care in one more movie theatre disappears? Because it matters,” he continued.

“Every theatre matters; Every theatre bears the traces of all the people that have come together to watch a Lubitsch silent, Souleymane Cissé classic, or the latest film from Paul Thomas Anderson or Alice Rohrwacher, among countless other films and programs of titles.

“Just think of all those convocations of film lovers, sitting under the light of the projector beam. And the history of La Clef must be guarded all the more precious because it was actually brought back to life by people who came together for the love of cinema and the freedom that comes with that love. “

Scorsese’s open letter comes on the eve of his upcoming trip to France for the world premiere of *Killers Of The Flower Moon* at the Cannes Film Festival in May.

The future of La Clef has been in doubt since 2015 due to plans to sell off the building in which it is housed by the Caisse d’Epargne banking group.

Billed as the French capital’s sole surviving community cinema, the theatre is situated in Paris’s Left Bank fifth arrondissement, once associated with student activism and intellectual and political ferment.

The Caisse d’Epargne banking group shut down the cinema in 2018 but activists, operating under the banner of La Clef Revival Collective, reoccupied the building in September 2019.

A small band of die-hard cinephile supporters lived in the theatre round the clock, to prevent it from being repossessed.

They kept its activities going on a voluntary basis while lobbying the Caisse d’Epargne to allow them to acquire the building at a favorable price.

Their efforts – which carried on throughout the Covid-19 pandemic – came to symbolize the fight to keep cinema-going alive as well as preserve public and cultural spaces in the face of developers on the hunt for prime city sites.

Following a prolonged legal procedure by the Caisse d’Epargne, the group were expelled from the building on March 1, 2022.

La Clef Revival Collective did not give up and continued to raise funds and lobby the Caisse d’Epargne to sell them the site.

These efforts paid off and the group announced at a press conference in Paris on Wednesday that a deal had finally been done and it had signed the first documents setting the acquisition in motion.

The collective needs to gather the asking price of \$3.2 million by October 2023. It said it had already raised 80% of the total sum and plans to collect the outstanding \$662,000 via a crowdfunding campaign.

I strongly and fully support the efforts of the collective to purchase the building, thus keeping the theatre in operation,” said Scorsese in his letter.

## S.O.S. Cinéma La Clef Revival

All right, boys. This is it. Over the hill.



NICK PINKERTON

FEB 28, 2022



Share



About a month ago I was riding the 7 line on the Paris Metro, jotting furiously in a pocket notebook, as is my wont, and a stranger, a guy with Shannon Hoon-ish locks who I’d have guessed to be somewhere in his twenties, noticed a name and address that I’d written down in its pages. I should explain that I divested myself of my smartphone some time ago, consequently losing on-the-go access to the convenience of Google Maps

and the like, and this requires me to prepare for any outing into unaccustomed territory by scrupulously writing out directions in advance. This is of course a massive annoyance, not least to the friends and loved ones who are forced to shoulder the burden of my technophobia, and very likely comes off as an infuriating affectation, but one of the comforts of aging—perhaps the only one—is that, if you’re doing it right, you give ever less fucks about looking like a ridiculous prat. The address in question was 34 rue Daubenton, in the 5th arrondissement near the University of Paris III, and what the stranger asked me was “Allez-vous à la Clef?”

In my life as a repertory rat, this is the first and only time that a stranger has ever seen fit to strike up a conversation with me on the basis of any of the telltale signs of morbid cinephilia that are habitually dangling from my bedraggled person—contrary to popular belief, toting Tag Gallagher’s *John Ford* on one’s morning commute does not function as a piece of PUA flare. It’s illustrative of the degree to which the Cinéma la Clef Revival, a communally programmed and operated squatter’s cinema in the Quartier Latin who’ve spent the entire month of February under threat of eviction, captured the Parisian imagination this winter.

The La Clef Revival phenomenon can’t be explained by clichés about ardent French cinephilia; in Paris, as everywhere around the world, hardcore moviegoers are graying, aging, and shuffling off this mortal coil. A friend coming from a late January Cinémathèque Française repertory screening of *Histoire de Marie et Julien* (2003), part of the Cinémathèque’s Jacques Rivette retrospective, reported an audience of about a half-dozen, with an average age of approximately 88. This makes perfect sense, because what young person in their right mind would want to find themselves stuck in Bercy for an evening? In 2005 the Cinémathèque left behind its space in the bowels of the Palais de Chaillot, its residence since 1963, for a new home in that deathly dull 12th arrondissement neighborhood, settling into the former American Center building by starchitect Frank Gehry, which looks like a rejected design for a correctional facility in Fort Wayne, Indiana that one of Gehry’s assistants happened to find lying around when the commission came in.

La Clef Revival enjoys a considerably more propitious location for drawing the youth crowd than the Cinémathèque. The stretch of the Left Bank in the vicinity of the

Sorbonne is home to more cinemas per square kilometer than perhaps anywhere else in Europe, if not the world—though this bastion of movie mania has suffered under the besiegement of urban redevelopment. A map of Saint-Germain-des-Prés featured in Axel Huyghe and Arnaud Chapuy’s [recent volume on the storied Le Saint-André-des-Arts cinema](#) allows one to see just how many movie theaters have turned off their lights since the heyday of the 1950s, back when Rivette was the holy terror of the trivia nights at the Studio Parnasse in Notre-Dames-des-Champs. Further cinema casualties have been inflicted by Covid closures, like the charming Accatone on rue Cujas <sup>1</sup>, snapped up after its shuttering by the neighboring Hôtel Excelsior. I’m not sure if they plan to keep it as a cinema space, but at any rate it won’t be named after a Pier Paolo Pasolini movie, and this seems to me an obvious loss for world culture.



That Paris isn’t quite itself anymore is a common complaint among Parisians, who’ve seen rents spike as absentee Airbnb renters infest the center city, inspiring many to light



out for cheaper, grungier destinations like Marseilles and Brussels, which promise a temporary reprieve from the onslaught of corporate bulldozers—temporary, of course, because it seems they’ll arrive everywhere eventually, and flatten everything in their path <sup>2</sup>. This goes some ways towards explaining why La Clef Revival, a bulwark against the marching profit motive in the heart of Paris, has become a cause to rally to. As various well-known well-wishers put in appearances in the leadup (and aftermath) of a threatened Feb. 1st eviction by force, still looming at the time of this writing, it felt like the hottest ticket in town.

Having heard about La Clef Revival for some time from friends both at home and abroad, I set out to attend the cinema’s 8:30 screening of *Une chambre en ville*, being presented by Leos Carax on the evening of January 31st—potentially La Clef’s final screening. The line of disconcertingly good-looking, stylish kids that wrapped around the block 45 minutes before showtime said in no uncertain terms: “Better luck next time, Gramps.” Granted that the prospect of seeing police truncheons and tear gas lent the evening a certain grim allure of possible “value-added” entertainment, but the sight of a large number of hip Parisians who could just as easily have been having sex or swirling around in K-holes or whatever it is that young people do these days instead clamoring to watch a 1982 Jacques Demy movie together was intriguing and more than a little heartwarming. What exactly was going on here?

An abridged history: La Clef was opened as a three-screener, *de cinéma d’Art & Essai* La Clef, on October 10, 1973, with *salles* of 226, 97, and 86 seats, as well as an attached restaurant, *Auberge de La Clef*. This was under the management of one Claude Franck-Forter, the son of children’s clothing manufacturers from Troyes who had a small family fortune to play with and a yen to try his hand in film exhibition. I would’ve bet good money that La Clef had been built as a porno palace, given the fact that its façade is graced by a rather phallically suggestive key, but Monsieur Franck-Forter puts this theory to rest in [a history of the La Clef hosted on their website](#), explaining: “For me, a key represents a mythical, almost magical object, because its etymology in several languages describes either something that allows access to be limited, or the opposite, that is, to open it widely.” The only poster legible in the rare vintage image of La Clef online is for Francesco Rosi’s *Lucky Luciano* (1973), and the programmer through the Franck-Forter era was the perfectly respectable Bernard Martinand, a co-founder with

the late Bertrand Tavernier of the ciné-club Nickel Odéon and a longtime associate of Henri Langlois at the Cinémathèque, where he would serve in various capacities after his time at La Clef. Guess I’ve just got a dirty mind.



After seven-plus years doing a brisk business with students, playing revival titles in mornings and late nights and new releases in-between, La Clef hit the skids at the beginning of the ‘80s. This situation Franck-Forter attributes to the new availability of inexpensive color televisions and a new hesitancy among distributors to give big-budget movies to small houses: the small fry gets screwed over, *plus ça change*. After closing the cinema in 1981, Franck-Forter sold La Clef to Comité d’Entreprise de la Caisse d’Épargne d’Île de France (CECEIDF), the works council of a regional branch of the Caisse d’Épargne cooperative banking group, since 2008 merged with the Groupe

Banque Populaire, and still the building's present—or, more accurately, absent—owners.

Following the purchase, Caisse d'Épargne kept two of the La Clef screens functioning as cinemas—now down to 120 and 65 seats—while using the rest of the premises as a cultural center for their employees. By 1990, the screens were being made available for outside organizations to program, most notable of these Images d'Ailleurs, who focused on screening works by African diaspora filmmakers and films from the Arab world; this was the brainchild of Togo-born Sanvi Panou, a “slameur” poet who'd appeared briefly as an actor in Jean-Luc Godard's *Week-End* (1967) and recorded, as Alfred Panou, with the Art Ensemble of Chicago in 1969. (You can listen to his “Je suis un sauvage” [here](#); it's a hot track.) Around 2009-10, a new programming team moved in, consisting of Dounia Baba-Aissa, Raphaël Vion, and Nicolas Tarchiani, who continued to work along the lines established by Panou, until, in 2015, Caisse d'Épargne announced their decision to sell the cinema, closing its doors in April of 2018. This is where the Association Home Cinema comes in.

In September, 2019, the Association Home Cinema (hereafter AHC) illegally occupied La Clef, and began a program of free daily screenings that has continued to the present day. A court order was issued demanding the group leave the space by December 19th of that year; an appeal of the decision was duly filed, and during the wait for a court date, the world stopped functioning. This effectively operated as a stay of execution for AHC, and while most of Paris—indeed, the world—went into work-from-home hibernation, the AHC was in a frenzy of beaverish activity, including the publication of a house fanzine, workshops, and regular broadcasts from a [webradio station](#). And, vitally, as screens across Paris went dark, La Clef Revival soldiered on with public outdoor screenings projected on the cinema's outer wall. I'm not going to speculate as to if the screens inside were being made use of during the same period—that can be the AHC's little secret—but I emphatically hope that they were.



I finally wedged my way into the doors of La Clef Revival on the evening of Wednesday, February 2nd, to see Claire Denis present a 35mm print of her 1990 *S'en fout la mort* (*No Fear, No Die*). In point of fact, I didn't see either Denis in the flesh or the print, but rather a simulcast of her introduction and a low-resolution digital projection in the smaller downstairs “overflow” theater. This seemed to me entirely reasonable, as I'm a late-to-the-party outside interloper, and anyways I can enjoy some heavily artifacted deep blacks when I'm in the right mood.

Denis, who since my visit has returned to La Clef to present her 1994 *U.S. Go Home*, is a particularly ardent supporter of this cinema which hasn't lacked for support from both famous names and rank-and-file moviegoers. In response to an offer to buy La Clef made in early 2021 by the entrepreneurial firm Groupe SOS—an offer rebuffed by the AHC—a letter of support was issued by la Société des Réalisateur des films, a filmmakers' association, with signees including Denis, Alain Cavalier, Bertrand Bonello, Vincent Macaigne, and Nicole Brenez. (The last-named was instrumental in one of La Clef Revival's great programming coups, coaxing a seven-film *carte blanche* program out of Jean-Luc Godard, a figure not known for keeping a particularly high public profile, in October of 2020.) With each new hurdle faced by La Clef Revival, statements of support have continued to spill in: from filmmakers, like that old anarchist Luc Moullet, from festivals (Cinéma du Réel), and from other cinemas (Brussels' Cinéma Nova and

Marseilles' Videodrome 2, among the finest in the Francophone world.)

Since receiving its eviction notice, La Clef Revival has ramped up their screening activity, routinely opening shop at 6 AM. (I genuinely believed that I would make it out to a before-sunrise screening of Gregg Araki's 1997 *Nowhere* on the 9th, but where the mind is willing, the flesh is sometimes weak...) During this all-hands-on-deck period, a cavalcade of filmmakers have stopped by to present their work and show solidarity, among them Alejandro Jodorowsky, Marie Losier, Serge Bozon, Sébastien Lifshitz, and Wang Bing, who introduced his *Man with No Name* (2010) earlier on the day of Carax's *Une chambre en ville* screening. The significance of Carax's choosing to screen a musical drama, made by Demy at the outset of the rapacious '80s, that unfolds against the backdrop of a skull-cracking labor dispute in c. 1955 Nantes was, I trust, lost on no-one.



Prior to the theaters filling up on my Wednesday night visit to La Clef Revival, a quartet of AHC members passed the mic to deliver addresses to the crowd milling in the lobby, a cozily junky space where beer and box wine was on sale for two Euro a cup, its walls plastered with flyers and posters, most prominently one for Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968) overlooking a badly out-of-tune looking upright piano.

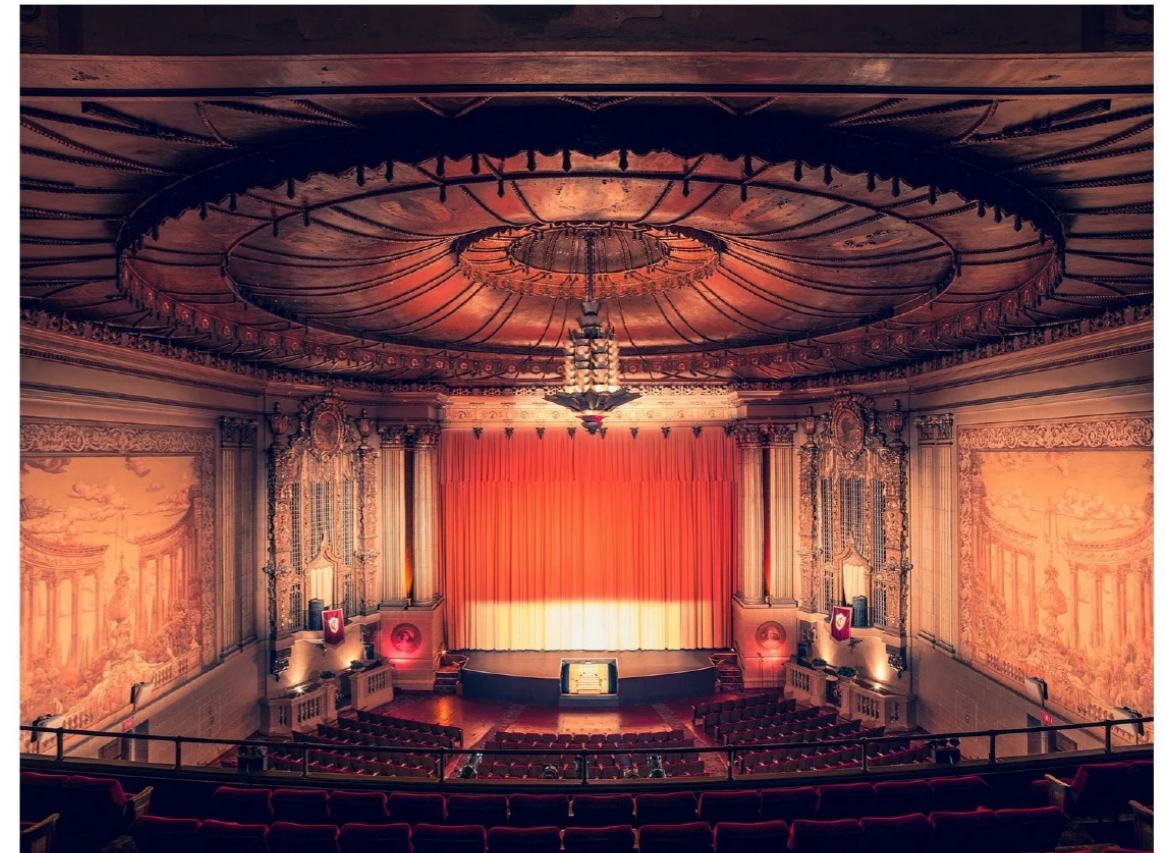
The general content of the oratory—at least as I could discern with a toddler's ability to comprehend spoken French of the rat-a-tat-tat Parisian variety—can be gleaned from a recent post at [Andy Rector's Kino Slang blog](#), which offers the AHC platform statement, read aloud that evening, in a translation courtesy of filmmaker Valérie Massadian, who presented her 2011 *Nana* at La Clef Revival on the 1st of February. (Rector's also links [an admirable English-language primer on La Clef Revival](#) from the Romanian film magazine *Films in Frame*, authored by Flavia Dima, which is further recommended

reading.)

If I don't feel compelled to dwell on the politics of the AHC or the nature of the programming at La Clef Revival, it's because my position towards the entire endeavor—which is one of unequivocal support—is based on general principles rather than any ideological sympathy or enmity.

The first of these principles is that a cinema being programmed with passions and prejudices, whatever they may be, is in almost every case, superior to the absence of that cinema. If La Clef Revival, per their platform, are inclined “project and produce queer, anti-racist, radical films,” well, hell, that's a-okay by me, I can get down with plenty of that stuff... but any question of aesthetic or ideological alignment is strictly an afterthought. If the only occupant of the La Clef was a filthy, scabby crank with a 16mm projector playing a monthlong program of Sam Wood at his most lugubrious, I'd still be all for it.

Over the last couple years, I've had the second track from John Cale's 1975 album *Slow Dazzle* stuck in my craw—[the one that features Cale bellowing “They're taking it all away” on the hook](#). It's a catchy little ditty, sure, but it also seems an appropriately despairing anthem for times in which the earth is being steadily and purposefully denuded of every routine pleasure that makes life worth living. This certainly isn't limited to cinemas—*real* cinemas, not those suburban outlet store equivalents that exist as a dumping ground for sixteen screens of Disney dross—but the aggression on that front has been particularly virulent, which is why I've had to dutifully write about six hundred versions of this piece through the years, addressing matters from Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop's attempt to oust the Friends of the Loew's from their rightful home in Journal Square to [the Bolsonaro government's callous, unforgivable treatment of the Cinemateca Brasileira](#).



The act gets a little tiresome, admittedly, but then this death-by-a-thousand-cuts attack on the greatest popular artform is pretty tiresome, too, so here we go again. I write this in the aftermath of news that San Francisco's Castro Theatre, a cinema since 1922, will [become a venue for coders to guffaw at the comedy stylings of Jim Gaffigan](#), and [of a cry for help from an association of exhibitors in Italy, a country where 500 of a total 3,600 screens have stayed dark post-Covid](#). Times change, yes, but there are people high up who have their thumb on the scale when it comes to determining *how* they'll change, and I'm very far from being convinced that business closures commanded with insufficient promise of compensatory remuneration and loss-leading Silicon Valley juggernauts running on endless influxes of venture capital flattening competition and dismantling anything that keeps people away offline for even a solitary second could be called “the invisible hand of the market.”

Our decisions have been made for us and we've been done dirty, from dead-tech DCP to

archives jealously guarding their holdings under lock-and-key to non-profit arts organizations in the death grip of numbskull board members insensate to tradition and invariably enthralled by the siren song of techie novelty, their rheumy eyes briefly lighting up at the words “podcast” or “VR.” The case of La Clef Revival is rather cut-and-dry, but I wouldn’t be averse to every CVS and supermarket that used to be a movie theater being reconverted to its original function at gunpoint. I’m on the side of cinema, and at this juncture, that doesn’t leave space for quibbling over property law.

The second reason for my support of La Clef Revival is a conviction that culture that comes from the ground up—that is, people united by common cause just getting together and doing a thing—is almost invariably superior to that which comes from the top down.



Before heading to La Clef, I met up with a friend—the Canadian filmmaker Sofia Bohdanowicz, now based in Paris, responsible for some of the images accompanying this piece—at Ciné-Images, a consummately excellent movie poster shop in the 7th arrondissement. Ciné-Images is located across the street from the presently-under-renovation Cinema La Pagode, an ersatz Japanese-style “temple” built in 1896 by architect Alexandre Marcel which, save for a brief closure during the Occupation, operated continually as a cinema from 1931 to 2015.

The renovation of La Pagode, by all accounts badly needed, is occurring at the behest of—and with the funds of—Charles S. Cohen, the real-estate mogul-turned-arthouse impresario who is owner of the Landmark Theaters and Curzon Cinemas chains, and the rightsholding custodian of the collection of classic film titles amassed under dubious pretexts by collector/slimeball Raymond Rohauer, a rather infamous character in silent film circles.

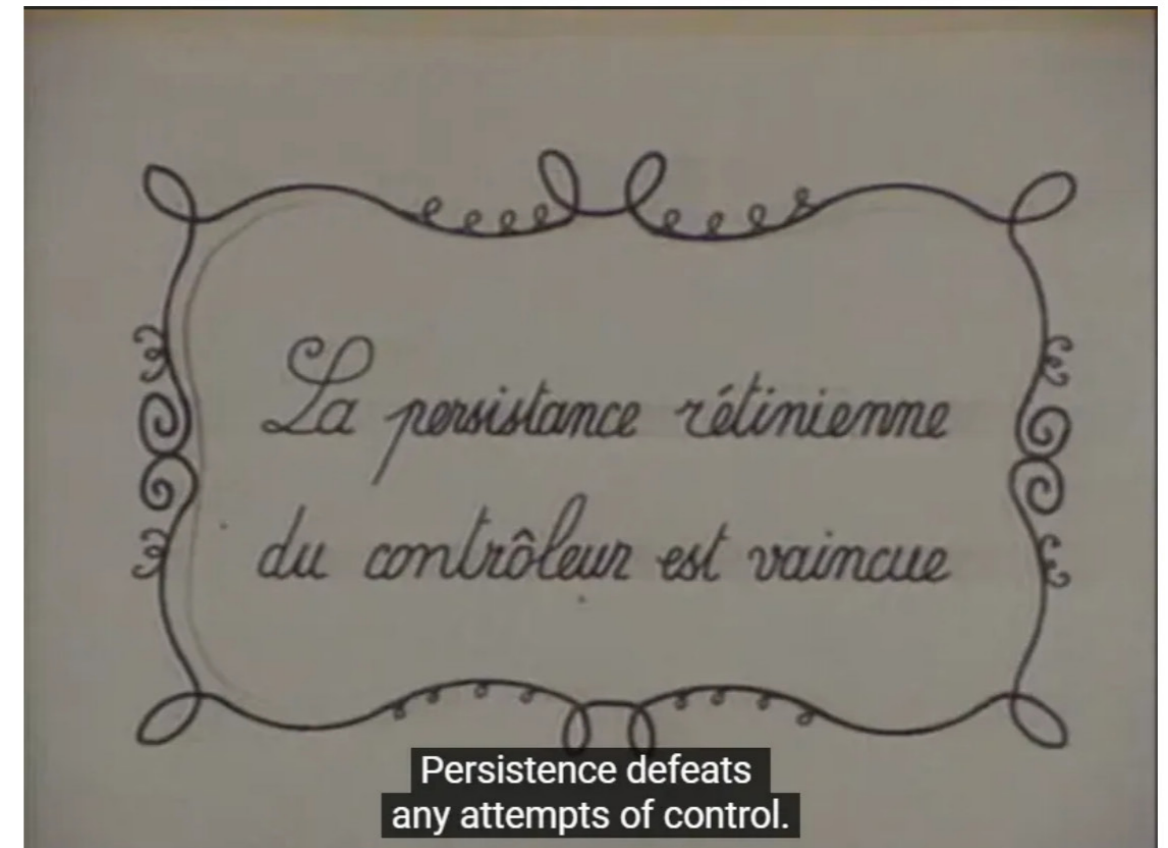
It is, of course, better that La Pagode should get a fresh coat of paint and be reopened to showing movies than that it be turned into a Carrefour, but let’s be realistic: it probably won’t be distinguished by anything other than architecture, because it’s a Cohen cinema, and before he’s anything else, Cohen is a money guy, long on cash and short on taste. Some may recall an earlier high-profile venture into exhibition by Cohen, his purchase and rehab of New York’s Quad Cinema, reopened in 2017. The official story was that Cohen, inheritor of a small empire, was a thwarted cinephile who’d joined the family business out of duty; now, having done his diligence in increasing the net worth of Cohen Brothers Realty by however many billions, he was free to play patron, a modern-day Medici of the Seventh Art, bringing on honest-to-God programmers at his theater and spending his amassed lucre on shipping 35mm prints of Just Jaeckin movies to New York with no thought for the bottom line, because a big pile of money to burn can go a very long way, as Charles Foster Kane observed when describing his losses in the newspaper business defiantly to befuddled bank bean-counter Mr. Thatcher.



But then, almost nobody really operates that way, at least not for long. Inherited wealth may in some cases be squandered splendidly—I'm thinking of Andrew Getty, who before his death in 2015 poured his inheritance into making a genuinely vile horror movie, *The Evil Within* (2017), and some would say that Annapurna had a pretty good run before the plug was pulled. But if you have enough money to afford to lose a little on a passion project, you probably got that pile by thinking about balance sheets above all, and that habit dies awfully hard, and so the Quad today has settled into being a perfectly unexceptional “arthouse” cinema that presumably pays for itself, just as, in all likelihood, La Pagode will.

The circumstances that allow La Clef Revival to operate are particular to France, which has a proud tradition of amateur operated cine-clubs—like the Nickel Odéon—and a system of legal concessions in place to ensure the continued existence of such groups, as well as “associative” cinemas like La Clef Revival, the last such institution in Paris. The *Films in Frame* piece, cited earlier, quotes from a 2012 report from the Opale cultural resource and social/solidarity economy center, which describes the associative cinemas as “answer[ing] to a social demand rather than the laws of the market.”

Dima writes from a Romanian perspective, addressing an audience of cinephile countrymen and -women who've faced unique adversity. Aside from the paucity of serviceable materials available to screen—addressed in [this interview](#) that I conducted last year with director Radu Jude—there's the small matter of a catastrophic 2015 fire at the Colectiv nightclub, with subsequent scrutiny of the structural integrity of entertainment venues of all kinds leading to the closure of most of central Bucharest's cinemas. While knowing full well that French cinephiles face different challenges—and enjoy different resources—than those in Romania, Dima asks: What can we in Romania take away from the example of La Clef Revival? And what, for that matter, can cinephiles around the world learn from it?



This brings me to the final reason for my support of Cinéma La Clef Revival: excepting cases in which one is subjecting others to harm without their consent to do so, I am almost without exception in favor of people being bad and doing things that they're not

supposed to—i.e. continuing to operate a cinema during a proclaimed public health crisis.

I first heard of La Clef in mid-2020 from an American friend who was waiting out the first wave of Covid on the Continent, and who had been to the theater several times. (“They fed me pasta for free the first time I went,” he enthused to me via WhatsApp.) His experience left me deeply jealous, and deeply embarrassed that nothing equivalently insubordinate was happening on the home front.

As someone who managed to criss-cross the Atlantic a few times during the plague years, I had some opportunity to observe a contrast in attitudes between friends in New York City and Europe, and the comparison did not—a handful of reckless, beloved degenerates aside—tend to favor the North Americans. The reasons for this contrast aren’t hard to explain, at least as regards the United States: the bare minimum of provision was made for out-of-work citizens, our health care system is comically atrocious, and, in the face of laggardly, disorganized, altogether fuddled government response, the burden of responsibility for “stopping the spread” was thrust onto the individual, resulting in the creation of a generation of presumably well-meaning neurotics who will never again leave the house without N95 masks covering every square inch of their bodies. The campaign to make people believe that compliance was synonymous to conscientiousness was ruthlessly effective, and as it was being pushed ahead, common sense went out the window. The divisiveness of the Trump presidency engendered a politicization of the pandemic that has continued to this day: good lefties had to treat a disease with very specific demographic targets as the bubonic plague, good righties had to laugh it off all the way to the ventilator. (Don’t take my word for it, you can [read about it in the Grey Lady!](#))

I have not observed quite the same Manichean divide in Europe, or at least in France. In Marseilles last summer I stumbled across a rally protesting the then-recent implementation of *Passe Sanitaire* laws, rendering the right to free movement in the social sphere contingent on providing proof of vaccination, and a local friend confirmed my impression of the unusual makeup of the gathering, composed of groups representing the far-right, the far-left, and just about everything in-between. This is an anecdotal observation, only worth about as much as such things usually are, but it may

help to explain how a leftist collective operation like La Clef Revival could be celebrated for continuing to operate during the pandemic in Paris, while anyone in New York would’ve been pilloried for doing the same thing.

Some might say that inviting people to congregate and watch movies during a pandemic, running the risk as such a thing might of spreading further contagion, falls under my abovementioned “harm without consent” category. I would respond that there was more harm in abandoning the public sphere en masse to be razed and reshaped by human-hating tech billionaire shysters who determine our fates whilst sitting cross-legged in a tent at Burning Man, and that if you were a relatively healthy young person who wasn’t passing the pandemic living in close quarters with an octogenarian, there was no compelling reason that you shouldn’t have been able to, if so inclined, treat yourself to a nice little movieshow in the company of a few friends and strangers. Anyhow, we all know that Covid germs just float up to the ceiling in movie theaters.<sup>3</sup>

It’s almost certainly unproductive to spend the rest of our natural days relitigating who was laudably responsible and who was and derelict of duty to their friends and neighbors through the Covid years, but that’s never stopped a good, old-fashioned clamor for moral high ground. At least the tut-tutting has died down a bit these days, in the streets and online, particularly since the New War dropped—an event which may make rallying behind a squatter’s cinema in Paris seem less crucial than it did, say, a month ago. Here I feel compelled to cite a quotation from an undated letter by Godard, addressed to the Cinémathèque’s Henri Langlois, which graces the side of La Clef Revival:

“What consoles me, anyway, is knowing that there is always somewhere in the world, at any time—when it stops in Tokyo it starts again in New York, in Moscow, in Paris, in Caracas—there is always, I say, a little monotonous noise, but intransigent in its monotony, and this noise is that of a projector projecting a film. Our duty is that this noise never stops.”



When I was about seventeen, I played Henry Antrobus in an amateur theatrical of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*. This wasn't a high school production—I would never sully myself with an official extracurricular!—but rather the work of an organization called the Renegade Garage Players, who staged classics with casts made up of teenagers and mentally and physically disabled adults with, as you might imagine, rather avant-garde results.

Wilder's play was first presented in 1942, not long after the United States' entry into World War II; my memory is a little hazy on most of what happens in it, but I can tell you

the play is an extended allegory for the life of man- and womankind, and the various tribulations we as a species have faced through the millennia, written in a moment fraught with fear for the future. What I can recall of it most vividly is the absolutely piercing line-reading that the young woman playing my wife gave when upbraiding the family maid for neglecting the hearth: "Sabina!" she would say, with a shrewish shriek that rattles me to this day, "You let the FIRE go out!"

The fire, if I remember rightly, serves as a heavy-handed metaphor for civilization, and as such must be stoked at all costs; at any rate, the line has been bouncing around my head for twenty-some years, and will probably keep rattling around in there until closing time. I bring it up only by way of saying that I've always liked janky spit-and-tape operations like Renegade Garage Players, and I like people who keep the projector going, and I like people who tend to the fire, and I like what they've done at La Clef Revival, very much.

You can donate to La Clef Revival [here](#).

You can slap your John Hancock on a Change.org Petition [here](#).





## Cinéma La Clef. A pocket guide to cinematic insubordination | The State of Cinema

16 September, 2021



“*Ce qui me console, de toutes façons, c’est de savoir qu’il y a toujours quelque part dans le monde, à n’importe quelle heure, quand ça s’arrête à Tokio ça recommence à New-York, à Moscou, à Paris, à Caracas; il y a toujours, dis-je, un petit bruit monotone mais intransigeant dans sa monotonie, et ce bruit, c’est celui d’un projecteur en train de projeter un film. Notre devoir est que ce bruit ne s’arrête jamais.*” – **Jean-Luc Godard, in a letter to Henri Langlois, a text reproduced on the walls of cinema La Clef**

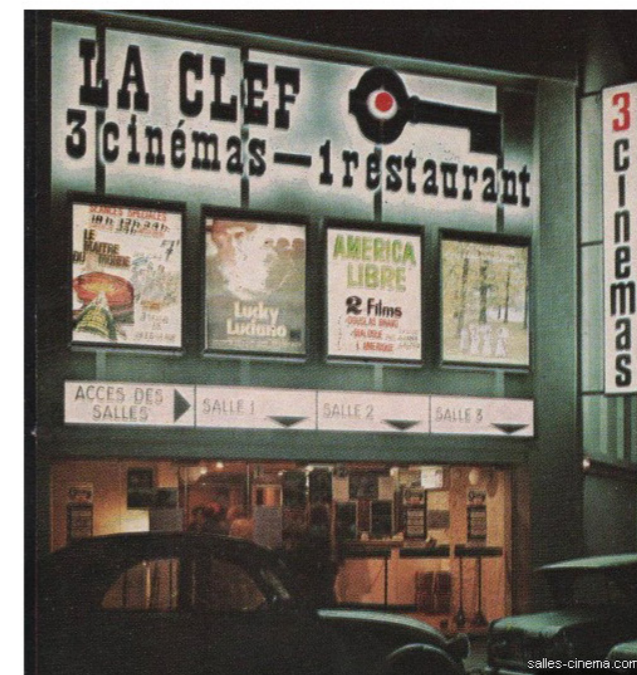
A few months ago, I wrote about “[La Loupe](#)”, the *passer* cinephile group (which has been meanwhile closed down by Facebook and has reopened, albeit under a tamer version), and ever since, my interest towards cinephile communities of resistance has been gaining constant momentum. At the same time, given the reopening of cinemas and the revival of the local festival circuit, I have kept on wondering about the issue of Romanian independent cinemas: we still have a very small number of such cinemas across the country while multiplexes have become the norm, initiatives such as “[Save The Big Screen!](#)” seem to have died off, and the situation is not at all pretty when it comes to the few screens that we still have – see the case of [the Romanian Cinematheque](#), as documented by my colleague, or that of the [Alhambra Garden](#). (And the few texts regarding local cinemas are, for the most part, still written in a romantic key – [and they’re not even published by the local press, either.](#))

In this context, I discovered the spectacular story of how cinema La Clef (in translation, The Key) was saved – by a lively and ardent group of cinephiles who have taken upon themselves the task of saving the hall from closure by occupying it. Whether or not you agree with guerilla/political tactics, the case of La Clef is a truly fascinating one, as it reveals more than the particularities of the French legal system when it comes to cinemas, but also a situation in which the cinema community can involve itself in the salvation of a precious space that doesn’t work in the for-profit logic of the big multiplex chains, but is truly dedicated to arthouse cinema (be it recent or classical). As such, I constructed this article as a small explanatory guide, which expounds on a couple of key notions surrounding the case and its chronology – it may serve as a pocket guide to future cinematic dissidents, or as a story to rattle cinephiles out of their generalized apathy towards the fate of local cinemas.

### What is an associative cinema?

By design, the associative cinemas in France exist in opposition to the private cinematic sector, which is based on competition – and belong to the same category as cine-clubs, film caravans or independent film education programs. As their name indicates, they are managed by associations which can also recruit volunteers, in various forms: direct management, endowment (public-private partnership), and renting. Their existence is indirectly owed to the legal framework of the French state’s intervention in cinematography, through the CNC (which offers funding both for production, as well as for distribution and exploitation, thus implying its financing of certain cinema halls), as well as the Regional Development Agency of Cinematography (ADRC).

A 2012 report of the “Opale” cultural resource and social/solidary economy center explains the history of associative cinemas, whose functioning is provisioned by the “Sueur” law of June 1992, which allows communities to involve themselves in the functioning of local cinemas (which also includes the act of investing). This report also estimates that around 20% of the cinemas in France at the time (!)<sup>[1]</sup> were functioning in this system and that this model was a direct contributor to the conservation of the cinema halls that were situated in the historical centers of French cities. They “answer to a social demand rather than to the laws of the market”, according to the authors, in a country that has special provisions for the so-called “art et essai” cinemas.



Cinema La Clef, in the seventies.

### What was the initial history of the La Clef cinema?

La Clef was originally inaugurated in 1973, in the chic and central Latin neighborhood of Paris’ 5<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, where the Sorbonne, the Pantheon, and the Jardin des Plantes are also situated. It functioned as an arthouse cinema from the very beginning, screening films directed by the auteurs behind the French New Wave. Initially led by a cinephile entrepreneur, the cinema entered bankruptcy at the beginning of the eighties, when a decision that would affect the space to this very day was to be taken: its building was put up for sale by its founder and was bought by a local chapter of the French cooperative bank Groupe Caisse d’Epargne.

Initially, the banking group didn't operate any major modifications onto the building: they repurposed one of its three original screening rooms in order to set up a cultural center for its workers. The other two halls went to the Images d'ailleurs (Images from elsewhere) association, led by Tongoleze filmmaker Sanvi Panou, who took it over during (another) period of inactivity – and thus transforming La Clef into the most important Parisian movie theater dedicated to African and Arabic cinema throughout the nineties. Panou was motivated by the lackadaisical distribution of films directed by directors of color, which he kept in his cinema long after their normal distribution cycle had ended, and in the twenty years in which he led the cinema, he also organized a yearly festival.

The problems at La Clef began during his tenure: from one point onwards, the owners began to be bothered by the large crowds of people of color assembling there, says Panou, and so they started to neglect the cinema's maintenance. The filmmaker led the cinema until 2009 and starting with 2010, a new team, led by Raphaël Vion, Dounia Baba-Aïssa, and Nicolas Tarchiani took over the hall, maintaining a similar curatorial line while shifting a stronger focus onto documentary cinema.

In 2015, the final blow arrives: Groupe Caisse d'Épargne announces its decision to sell the building hosting the cinema – and despite the protests of the association that was managing it and of attempted crowdfunding, in April 2018, La Clef closed its doors, and the talks between the two parties failed. But only for a short period of time.

#### How was La Clef Revival born?

After closing down in 2018, the cinema lay closed for little over a year, until September 2019 – when a group of filmmakers and cinephiles going by the name of the Home Cinema Association (without implication on the part of the previous association) decided to illegally occupy the cinema and reopen it, with one clear goal in mind: to save Paris' last associative cinema. Alongside organizing daily screenings in the evening, which could be attended free of charge, the collective also launched a multi-disciplinary cultural platform, which included a weekly fanzine, a podcast, creative workshops, and roundtables. [Their terms to end the occupation?](#) Getting a written declaration from the owners, in the presence of the press and of legal witnesses, that the hall on Rue Daubenton will never change its designation as an independent and associative cinema

Home Cinema's strategy of obtaining films in the context of an occupation that was initially unfinanced was as simple as it was efficient: they obtained films managed by independent filmmakers and distributors, who offered them their titles free of charge. And the selection of the titles themselves was composed of rare, experimental, or political films – a context that, at the same time, was prime for an eclectic artistic direction, unlike that of any other Parisian cinema. The names that rallied to the support of the cinema, in various capacities, are absolutely stunning: amongst them Jean-Luc Godard, Claire Denis, Catherine Breillat, Olivier Assayas, Claire Simon, Mati Diop, Luc Moullet, Michel Hazanavicius, Laurent Cantet, Nicole Brenez, and Yann Gonzalez, along with entities such as the Paris Town Hall (which, at one point, offered to buy the building that housed the cinema), the French Society of Filmmakers, the French associations of directors of photography and editors, the Cinéma du Réel festival, and Nova (Bruxelles) and Videodrome 2 (Marsilia) cinemas. ([An attempt to buy the space by SOS Groupe, a social entrepreneurship NGO](#) led by Jean-Marc Bonello, a close ally of President Emmanuel Macron, was however contested by Home Cinema, and the battle wages on in the Parisian courts.)

Despite a legal decision that obligated the association to evacuate the space until the 19th of December 2019, the collective appealed the decision – and during the wait for their court date, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, a fact that, in context, proved to be a blessing in disguise, since it allowed for the continued occupation of the cinema.



Cinema La Clef, during lockdown.

#### How did La Clef Revival function during the pandemic?

It might be that no other space than La Clef – doubly-shut down, by the pandemic and its owners, or, as [Jean-Michel Frodon noted in a piece for Slate FR](#), "a situation borne out of several stories, enclosed into each other like matryoshkas" – was more suited to continue functioning during the lockdown, in an unconventional fashion: by screening films on the cinema's outer wall. Its formal reopening, after the first lockdown, took place on the 19th of March 2020, with a screening of George A. Romero's *Zombie* ([according to TimeOut Paris](#)) – and the tally of its first year of functioning is highly impressive: over 300 screenings (considering the pandemic!), with over 100 guests in attendance and over 20,000 entrances (!), according to [a statistic published by the collective](#).

The most important (and visible) event of La Clef Revival took place in October 2020 when, with the help of cinema theoretician Nicole Brenez, the cinema hosted a *carte blanche* programmed by none other than the legendary Jean-Luc Godard over the course of a week, featuring films directed by Orson Welles, Kenji Mizoguchi, Norman McLaren, and Chris Marker. Godard also dedicated the following words to the members of the Home Cinema collective:

„nouns avons perdus les  
clés, mais, hell as, avons  
gardé les serrures, alors  
voilà sept maffiozos sous  
le garrot: au bord mer bleue,  
lune vague après pluie,  
splendeur ambersons, blin-  
kity blank, paquebot tenaci-  
ty, hitler connais pas, fond de  
l'air rouge.

(un déserteur de l'alphabet)<sup>[2]</sup>

#### What's next for La Clef? And what are the lessons that we can learn from its case?

La Clef Revival is still operating and is just about to celebrate the occupation's 2nd anniversary, and a cursory look over its current programming reveals titles directed by filmmakers such as Chris Marker or Alan Clarke, although the legal term for the building's vacation has been surpassed. Meanwhile, [a graphic novel documenting the history of the cinema and of its occupation](#) has recently been published.

For the moment, the members of the Home Cinema association are in the process of collecting the over 4 million Euros needed to buy the building, and [a first crowdfunding attempt](#), which is simultaneously dedicated to the elaborations of support programs for independent (or politically engaged) distribution and creation, has overpassed its initial goal of 100,000 Euros. Through the same call, the association also took the oath of never implementing a system of stocks to manage the cinema financially and to assure that it will always be led by non-profit organizations with a horizontal organizational structure – a fact that, the organizers claim, would save the space from being targeted by housing market speculations and would assure that it will always operate at low costs for the spectators (especially for those with a precarious social background) and artists in search of a space for creation.



Graphic from the La Clef Revival website.

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[1] Of course, the number of these halls seems to have dwindled over the past few years – [the Salles-Cinema website](#) records only a few such cinemas across France, most of them situated in provincial towns, but it's highly likely that this list is not an exhaustive one.

[2] Translation: "We [n: orig. nouns, wordplay; the word simultaneously means "nannies"] have lost the / keys, but, unfortunately [n: *helas* written as "hell as", wordplay with the word's meaning in English] we / have kept the locks, so / here are seven *maffiozos* lying under / the tourniquet: by the bluest of seas / tales of the wave after the rain moon / magnificent ambersons, blin- / kity blank, s.s. tenaci- / ty, hitler never heard of him, the base / of the air is red. / (a defector from the alphabet)"

# Medium

## The Cinema That Refused to Close



Slamdance · Follow

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By Noel Lawrence



Last month, I flew to Rotterdam to premiere my new film *Sammy-Gate* at their storied and sprawling film festival. Much as I enjoyed my stay in the glorious lair of the IFFR Tiger, a filmmaker should never forget where he or she came from. And for the better part of 20 years, that place has been in the bowels of the underground: screening in squats, sleeping on couches, and struggling to achieve one's cinematic visions in an economy of scarcity.

As a filmworker in Hollywood, I forget my roots at times. I make no pretense of bohemian sainthood. But I am nonetheless delighted to see young people taking up the arms that I have laid down.

And that brings me to the story of *La Clef*, a small cinema in the Latin Quarter of Paris.

During the festival, a small delegation of theatre volunteers blanketed Rotterdam with pamphlets about their cause. Without going into detail, the owners of the building that housed the cinema planned to sell it. And, more likely than not, the theatre would be replaced by a supermarket or a bank. If this happened somewhere in America, the closure probably would provoke a brief flurry of angry and sad emoji on Facebook. And, after that flurry, the cinema would inevitably shut down because such is the way of capitalism.



But my French comrades took a somewhat different tack... After the theatre officially closed two years ago, a group of activists and professional squatters broke into the cinema and reopened it to the public. With a staff of 40 volunteers, the theatre now stages free (i.e. “pay whatever you want”) screenings every night at 8pm. The shows are well-attended and patrons crowd the lobby even on weeknights.

After an introduction by a mutual friend at Rotterdam, the programmers promptly invited me to screen at the cinema. They (astonishingly) knew about my early short films and I also offered to show the “Department of Anarchy” program that I co-curate at Slamdance. Besides the pleasure of showing my work to enthusiastic cinephiles, I also had a chance to experience the sights and sounds of an “occupied” cinema. And smells... The first thing that struck me when I entered La Clef was the odor of stale beer in the lobby. In fact, the theatre sells it out of the keg for one Euro, definitely the cheapest booze in Paris!



On any given night, La Clef is a hive of activity. In the big theatre, video art by Rafael Cherkaski plays on the screen. Downstairs, patrons marvel to the rare films of J.X. Williams. In the kitchen, I partake of red wine and Corsican liver sausage with curators Theo DeLyanis (Collectif Jeune Cinéma) as well as Bulle Meignan and Camille Zehenne (Les Froufrous De Lilith). They may be anarchists but not without epicurean sensibilities.

Next door in the lobby, a group of volunteers paint a giant banner that will hang outside the theatre. It quotes part of a letter that Jean-Luc Godard wrote to Henri Langlois:

There is always somewhere in the world, at any time, the noise of a projector projecting a film. When it stops in Tokyo, it starts again in New York, Moscow, Paris, Caracas. Its noise can be a little monotonous but also uncompromising. Our duty is to ensure this noise never stops.

While this quote evokes fairly conventional notions of French cinema, the cultural influences that swirl inside La Clef are a bit more eclectic, and, dare I say, postmodernist? For instance, the first time I met Derek Woolfenden, the quasi-ringleader of the collective, he compared the cinema's plight to the fraternity in John Landis' *Animal House*. If you recall, the evil dean of Faber College invokes "double-secret probation" to expel the motley band of students from their frat house.

To illustrate his point, Derek then played me famous the scene from the film in which John Belushi rallies the fraternity to fight the college administration by sabotaging their annual homecoming parade: "Over? Did you say over? Nothing is over until we say it is. Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor? Hell no!" While this speech hardly invokes images of the Communards or the Paris barricades of '68, it does seem to fit the ironic yet earnest vibe of the cinema.



Les Froufrous De Lilith: Bulle Meignan and Camille Zehenne

Namely, this place is revolutionary but also carnivalesque in the good sense. There is an energy and sense of possibility in the air. Many of the volunteers are under 30 and embody the famous graffiti that defined a previous generation of the French counterculture: "All Power To The Imagination." For me, La Clef is a special place because it is not just a political protest but an aesthetic one, a belief that art trumps commerce.

In the U.S., the term “culture warrior” has a negative connotation. It brings to mind a figure like Dennis Prager or Bill O’Reilly. But I’d like to see this phrase re-appropriated by the Left. When Pat Buchanan once declared in his historic speech at the 1992 RNC, “We are engaged in a cultural war for the soul of America,” I don’t think the correct response was to plug one’s ears in disgust. No! The right answer would be to say, “Bring it on, motherfuckers!” La Clef is engaged in a cultural war right now and I hope they win it.

Having bloviated longer than anticipated, the rest of this post will let the volunteers of the theatre speak for themselves. Here are a few questions and answers we exchanged via e-mail this week.

**1. What do you hope to gain through occupying a cinema that could not be obtained through more conventional means?**

We occupy the cinema in order to protest against its sale by the owner — the works council of La Caisse d’Epargne (a french bank). The cinema has remained closed since April 2018 while the works council tried to sell it for a profit, ignoring the audience and previous employee expectations and disputes. We have opposed these neoliberal strategies by occupying the cinema for the last five months. It had the effect of freezing the sale.

Demonstrations or petitions certainly would not have blocked the sale nor would it have forced public power (city government and district government) to take part in the debate over its sale. What is the future of cultural goods if they can be sold to the highest bidder in order to make money?

**2. Could you describe your specific demands?**

We want the building to remain a cinema managed by a non-profit organization, mostly volunteer-run, with total freedom of programming, and financially accessible to everyone.

We have a “pay what you want” policy for every screening.

**3. How do you keep the owners of the building from locking you out?**

The owner took us to court. So as long as the trial was going on, we couldn’t be expelled. Then after four months, we learned that the verdict granted all rights to the owner. Since February 8th, we have faced the risk of being expelled.

We have tried to convince the city government to prevent our expulsion by contacting the prefect and preventing him from sending policemen to our doors.



#### **4. How has the Parisian public responded to your occupation?**

They were in favour of our occupation to save the cinema.

To be precise, before it closed (in April 2018), the neighbours created a collective to help the previous employees that wanted to buy it. But the sale to the previous employees failed and it was to be sold to someone with no guarantee that it would remain a cinema. So since September 21st, we have occupied it.

Everyone was in favour of this. We have support from the neighbours who helped us with logistical support and distribution of leaflets to alert people about the situation of our cinema. Cinema lovers have come en masse to the screenings. Each screening gets an average of 60 spectators.

We have the support of most media (press and tv), the neighbourhood, french cinema institutions, the mayor of Paris and the many directors that came to present their movies.

There has been a great show of commitment from everyone around this cinema because Paris lacks a place where we can show alternative movies, organize free screenings and program as a collective (We have 50 people working on programmation/thought meetings once a month.)

#### **5. What can people in America do to help?**

We want to put maximum pressure on the works council of la caisse d'Epargne and the city government of Paris. Demonstrating that foreign citizens and media are interested in our case will help sway public opinion toward saving La Clef.

Finally, be sure to sign the petition to keep the cinema open. Click [here!](#)

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