

INTRODUCTION

Film for the Future

Michelle Baroody and Maggie Hennefeld

Lovers of film all know it as “an invention without a future,” to quote the notorious, alleged proclamation by Louis Lumière in 1895.¹ The medium has since survived its initial obsolescence, the insistent rise of a slew of rival technologies (television, video, internet streaming, etc.), multiple global pandemics, and the ongoing destruction of its volatile archives, among other existential catastrophes. Yet, despite film’s resilient object lessons for futurity, the Covid-19 pandemic has somehow felt different: a final nail in the coffin? With the indefinite closure of movie theaters, cancelation of international festivals, and hemorrhaging revenue losses across the global industry, film’s elasticity has at last reached its breaking point. Or has it? Despite the recession of collective viewing experiences, innovative new experiments proliferate in the pandemic’s wake, emphasizing the virtues of virtual curation, the digitization of obscure and overlooked archives, and increasing accessibility of on-site events (such as special screenings, festivals, and panels) for spectators worldwide.

These hopeful turns are exemplified by *Another Screen*: the “free streaming project by *Another Gaze* journal, created to foreground rare film work we deem worthy of feminist interrogation, across geographies and modes of production.”² *Another Screen*’s collaborative programs spotlight the politics of feminist film collectivity, such as: “For a Free Palestine: Films by Palestinian Women,” “Hands Tied / Eating the Other,” and “[Silence] [. . .] [Laughter],” all curated with historical context, multilingual translations, and critical feminist essays.³ *Shasha Movies* launched globally in 2021; it is the first virtual platform dedicated to streaming films by and for Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA)

makers and audiences, conjuring the power and reach of virtual programming toward transformative feminist ends.⁴ This unprecedented service realizes the open-access objectives of Habibi Collective, *Shasha's* organizers, an online archive founded in 2018 that is committed to elevating the voices of women and nonbinary SWANA artists and making film accessible to those who might not see these works otherwise. If the canon has too long been dominated by white, male, cishet auteurs and their on-again/off-again relationship with big Hollywood industry, the death of film has created space for collective voices, different perspectives, wayward formats, greater accessibility, and activist mobilizations. This is the story of the future of film, which is mischievously unfolding before our very eyes.

Ends of Film?

Film has spectacularly outlasted its own death more times than Wyle E. Coyote fatally nosedived off a cliff or survived his accidental self-immolation—which is not bad for a medium that cut its teeth on the morbid reanimation of irretrievable pastness and loss. “By the time you read this, cinema will have died,” remarks Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece in her evocative introduction to the timely (too timely) 2020 edited volume, *Ends of Cinema*, “because cinema has ended many, many times and will surely end again in the near future.”⁵ We opt for the term “film” over “cinema,” not to split hairs about signifiers but to stir trouble through recourse to the medium’s material base, which has been all but eclipsed by digital streaming during the pandemic. Though the ends of film (much like the pandemic) may feel endless, if nothing else, its prolonged finality has been deeply generative for film and media scholars, who have ragpicked at the ruins of the medium and its unruly social potentials across a vast range of locations, histories, practices, and contexts.

What qualities are inflexibly essential to film? Its impression of reality, the collective projection of still-moving images onto a blank screen, and its celluloid base number among the many conventions threatened by our current conjuncture of home viewing and multimedia convergence. Recent film books theorize toward the friction between what cinema is/has been and what it irreversibly will have become. Shane Denson’s *Discorrelated Images* (2020), James Leo Cahill and Luca Caminati’s *Cinema of Exploration: Essays on an Adventurous Film Practice* (2020), and Caetlin Benson-Allott’s *The Stuff of Spectatorship: Material Cultures of Film and Television* (2021) all pose versions of this chameleonic ontological question: not *what is film* (to invoke André Bazin’s famous polemic), but *what will it have been?* Given film’s radical dispersal, wholesale digitization, and disavowed colonialist roots, defamiliarization offers one such

tactic for contesting the medium's ruptures and continuities with its deeply troubling pasts.

This dual gesture to disrupt and to inherit takes on multifarious historiographic dimensions in Priya Jaikumar's *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space* (2019) and Debashree Mukherjee's *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* (2020), both of which envision new ideas of the medium in the regional geopolitics of Indian archives, where disparate historical forces converged on alternative timelines of filmic practice. Michael Gillespie and Racquel Gates speculate on the tonal resonances of Blackness in relation to the discursivity of race—from film strip to negative signifier—in *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (2016) and *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (2018), respectively. Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt's *Queer Cinema in the World* (2016) and Eliza Steinbock's *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (2019) similarly reinvent film's form through its mediation of social movement, with particular ramifications for queer belonging and gender transition. In contrast to these optimistic openings toward film's heterogeneous futures, Hunter Vaughan exposes *Hollywood's Dirtiest Secret: The Hidden Environmental Costs of the Movies* (2019), unearthing its catastrophic tolls levied by its most lavish box office spectacles from *Gone with the Wind* (1939) to *Avatar* (2009). That escalating antagonism between imaginative worldmaking and carbon-spewing apocalypse is captured evocatively by Jennifer Fay's *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of Anthropocene* (2018), which puts a very different kind of ontological spin on the future sustainability of filmmaking and film culture. The key point is that these works all take as their premise—across disparate themes and intellectual commitments—the promise and pitfalls of destabilizing film as an object of unwavering collective investment.

No Time for the Present

This journal issue is divided into three parts. First, we revisit the histories and archives of film for the future, from the undead myths of classical film theory to communal efforts in the present to decolonize the legacies of ethnographic documentary. To begin, we invited Sarah Keller to write an addendum to her outstanding monograph, *Anxious Cinephilia: Pleasure and Perils at the Movies* (2020), which in many ways anticipated the affective crises of cinemagoing during Covid-19. "It's not that I'm a psychic," Keller reassures us. "Change was on the horizon even before the pandemic." She reviews the technological and industry shifts accelerated by quarantine and lockdown, outlining a nuanced timeline of panics, theater closures, and hysterical media speculation that kept

the torch of cinephilic anxiety alive during the recent conflagration. While Keller closes on a warm note with memories of shared moviegoing, Genevieve Yue locates such collectivity not in the viewing experience itself but in the decolonization of filmic archives. In “*Nanook of the North’s* Pasts and Futures,” Yue discusses her work as chair of the Nanook Centennial Advisory Committee, which will digitally repatriate sixty-four boxes of archival materials on Robert Flaherty’s work (including photographs, papers, books, and ephemera), donated by Claremont College. Yue emphasizes the ethics of archival “collection,” with its logics of settler colonialism and capitalist ownership, pursuing instead a practice of “survivance” (over survival) as a key decolonial principle.

Archives are impermanent and unstable, which Yue views as an opening for uncovering film’s histories of exploitation and exclusion. So too are the spaces of moviegoing exhibition. In “Bombed Past, Burning Futures: Notes on Demolition and Exhibition,” Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece details the epidemic of movie theater bomb explosions in the 1930s, perpetrated by the mob, which infiltrated the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) to recoup some of its liquor bootlegging losses in the waning years of American prohibition. She compares this forgotten campaign of terror to the Covid pandemic’s politicization of public space, with contested mask mandates and social distancing regulations that sow discord “in the seats as much as in the streets.” The conflict over film will always implicate movie theaters as dual sites of joyful community and lethal contingency. To repeat an all too familiar Covid-era mantra, there is nothing “normal” about ordinary life, least of all its temporality. Mary Ann Doane and Doron Galili tease out the “unreality” of Covid time, in a conversation that spans theories of cinematic scale, speculative historiographies of media convergence, and the unending sprawl of dystopian Zoom meetings. Doane and Galili compare notes about their essential new books—*Bigger Than Life: The Close-Up and Scale in the Cinema* (2021) and *Seeing By Electricity: The Emergence of Television 1878–1939* (2020)—both of which were completed shortly before the pandemic and explore the trajectories of shape-shifting screen interfaces. Their exchange poses pandemic time as a question for the canon, reframing tensions that have long held the line between media disciplines: recording vs. liveness, spatial abstraction vs. corporeal immediacy, capitalist conglomeration vs. revolutionary contingency. To paraphrase, the future of film is no less open for the fact that it’s also old history.

The Future of Film Will Be Televised

“We have become a nation of subscribers during the Covid-19 pandemic,” declared Mike Snider in February 2021.⁶ Worldwide streaming increased 44

percent in the last quarter of 2020, surpassing a billion subscriptions by the end of the year. Netflix alone now has over two hundred million customers.⁷ With the unbridled growth of hegemonic viewing platforms such as Amazon, Netflix, Hulu, HBO Max, Disney+, and Peacock—and hardscrabble struggle for brick-and-mortar theaters to survive months of closure and revenue loss—the future of film may well be in the cloud. Meanwhile, streaming platforms continue to project astronomical growth, leveraging same-day-releases such as Warner Bros.'s “shocking” announcement that they would “all but abandon in-person movie-going” and offer their 2021 lineup directly through HBO Max.⁸ Yet, even with corporatized domination comes unruly opportunity.

The essays in part two inhabit the uncanny valley between pervasive streaming and collective experience. In “The Nomadic Cinephilia of Ruun Nuur,” Girish Shambu extends his concept of *The New Cinephilia* (2014) to rural microcinemas, which help democratize film and dethrone its Eurocentric patriarchal canon, making way for heterogenous feminist collectives. Shambu focuses on the work of Ruun Nuur (formerly Rooney Elmi), a Black Somali woman and writer/programmer/activist who co-created (with Ingrid Raphael) the microcinema NO EVIL EYE (NEE) and zine *SVLLY(wood)*, both of which “cultivate and make visible regional cinephilia and film culture.” In contrast to the “old cinephilia” rooted in elite urban arthouse theaters, nomadic cinephilia wanders across disparate locations, oppositional gazes, and multimedia formats. While Shambu suggests that nomadic cinema will not only survive but will actively transform the post-pandemic future, K. J. Relth-Miller documents “a moment in history that runs the risk of disappearing” altogether. Her essay, “How Not to Disappear Completely,” reveals the “unlikely emergence” of underground film curation via Twitch.tv, a platform primarily used by video gamers that’s since become a haven for die-hard cinephiles. “Operated collectively and occasionally unpermitted, these artist-run spaces offer an accessible, welcoming community where makers of any ilk can practice unbridled self-expression.” Relth-Miller conducted interviews with four curatorial teams: *Teen Dream Stream*, *Racer Trash*, *Museum of Home Video*, and *Spectacle Theater*, whose mashups she spotlights with eye-popping embedded clips. Whether they epitomize high art experimentation or pulp pirate television, you should watch them immediately! As Relth-Miller warns, these fragments might not outlast their temporary Covid-era expediency.

Alanna Thain and Dayna McLeod unearth “Cinema’s Missing Bodies” in their expansive, poetic, multimedia installment, which features audio interviews with four queer experimental curators: Laurent Lafontant (Massimadi Afro LGBTQ+ Film and Arts Festival), Bradford Nordeen (Dirty Looks), So Mayer (Club des Femmes), and Gary Varro (Queer City Cinema). In

their accompanying essay, Thain and McLeod reflect on their participation in *2gather-a-part*, a 19-episode exquisite corpse video series that unfolded from March to December of 2020, arising from “a queer burst of friendship” and further serving to fundraise for artists impacted by Covid. Traversing questions of queer temporality, reproductive care, and public community, their essay “attempts both to document a certain moment of action and uncertainty, and to understand better” how a “less nostalgic cinephilia intersects with what is so often glossed as a labour of love.” They each express hope for a future of film that cultivates radical ways of seeing through queer tactics of failure and refusal.

Out with the old, in with the new! Peter Labuza brings this section full circle with the death of a dinosaur in “Under the Electric Cloud: Cinema at Paramount’s Twilight.” The 1948 Paramount Decision, a landmark decree in antitrust law that broke up the classic Hollywood studio system, was finally put out of its misery in June 2020. Labuza examines the disastrous implications of media deregulation and weakened antitrust law in the age of behemoth streaming platforms, whose dominance has been further inflated by the viral pandemic. “This article traces why antitrust will—and should—play a role in the future of cinema,” promises Labuza, who follows the twilight of Paramount across interlocking discourses of technology studies, copyright law, antitrust activism, and neoliberal economy. The new Majors’ avarice “sows seeds for an anticompetitive marketplace,” but Labuza gives tentative hope via the activist futures of antitrust law. (Thankfully, Netflix and Amazon have not yet seized hold of queer exquisite corpse or nomadic microcinemas!)

Online Film Festivals, Cinematic Activism, and Community Survival

If nothing else, the pandemic has spawned a wave of provocative challenges for film programmers. Throughout 2020, international film festivals were cancelled (Cannes, CinemaCon, Telluride, Tribeca) or held physically in limited capacity (Brussels, Cairo, Ghent, Moscow, Tokyo, Venice). But many others took place partially or entirely online: from AFI Fest, Jerusalem International, and Locarno to Hot Docs, NewFest LGBTQ, and Inside Out. The essays in section three all emphasize the activist imperatives of online film programming and assess the prospects for collaborative projects between pre-pandemic competitors. “We are born out of crisis,” declare the organizers of FIC Silente: Mexico’s first annual silent film festival. Co-written by all ten members of the collective, their essay traces a “Path of Community Survival,” detailing the emergence of silent film culture in Puebla, the politics of archival film heritage in Latin America, and the activist spirit of collectivity that they source in the feminist ghosts of early cinema. “Silent film screenings, public-academic dialogues, and

relief aid for earthquake victims are all baked into the DNA of our festival,” they muse, “which has become a larger expression of our community’s hopes and fears for the future.” The FIC Collective celebrates the importance of collaboration and community, whereas Michelle Baroody and Alison Kozberg question “the term community, and its deployment in nonprofit work.” In “The Politics of Collective Programming and the Virtual Arab Film Festival,” they consider the potentials of collaborative curating unleashed by the pandemic, while also delineating the challenges such projects face within existing nonprofit funding structures. Baroody and Kozberg both helped organize The Arab Film Fest Collab, and in their essay, they reflect on their Covid-born virtual event, which was presented by four Arab/Arab American arts organizations in December 2020. Rather than “announce the final, final death blow to cinema,” they argue, “the pandemic has exposed the shallow depth of our insistence on ‘community building’ and ‘shared space.’” When public-health protocols unmask normative values of community good, the crises of Covid charge all empty signifiers with irrefutable material and social urgency.

While Baroody and Kozberg put pressure on the collective possibilities of film festival futures, Umayyah Cable sources a theory of festival practice in the work of community organizing. In “Cinematic Activism: Grassroots Film Festivals and Social Movements in Pandemic Times,” Cable tracks emergent forms of “philanthro-spectatorship” and “cinematic activism” through analyses of the London Palestine Film Festival and the Palestine Writes Literature Festival. These virtual spaces seek to “disseminate vital information about social movements,” sustain activist energy, raise awareness of community needs, and keep people safe through tremendous upheaval. Rather than compete with elite, big-budget events, grassroots festivals produce an almost Brechtian call-to-action in the communities they engender by mobilizing “popular films to spark urgent political dialogue.” Vivian Hua (華婷婷) directly implements what Cable calls “cinematic activism” in her work as Executive Director of Northwest Film Forum (NWFF). In “Art-house Cinemas as Sites of Resistance,” Hua presents an interview between Tracy Rector and Chai Adera—“mixed race Indigenous, Black, and white artist-activists from the Seattle area.” NWFF transformed from a “Safe Space” to a “Safe House” amid the Black Lives Matter uprisings in the summer of 2020, providing refuge for protestors and opening their theater for activists to rest and store supplies. It also became a post-production site for filmmakers to charge their cameras, edit their work, and post videos of the protests online. In times of acute global crisis, movie theaters may best serve their communities by pushing aside expectations of film programming to meet the material needs of their actual constituents. Covid has upended the way we all live. Essays in this section envision an emergent world of film exhibition

that prioritizes practices of political collectivity that have flourished during this morbid interregnum. We hope they too will survive to the other side of the pandemic.

Toward a Film for the Future

In the spirit of resilience and community that our contributors have generously modeled, we would like to express our immense gratitude for their thought and commitment during these difficult times that have unevenly affected us all. We also want to extend tremendous thanks to Alexis Zanghi for her invaluable work formatting and collating the manuscript in its final stages. Financial precarity, loneliness, anxiety, unmanageable reproductive labor, illness, mourning, loss, and (at best) human “Zoombification” are just the tips of the iceberg, which, as we know, is rapidly melting. If film culture, independent programming, and academic scholarship are to have any futures at all, it will be because of the political solidarity and critical imagination that empower our many, passionate fellow travelers.

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Notes

1. James Naremore, *An Invention Without a Future: Essays on Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014).
2. *Another Screen*, <https://www.another-screen.com/>.
3. Daniella Shreir and Sam Dolbear (programmers), “Hands Tied / Eating the Other,” April 2021, <https://www.another-screen.com/hands-tied-eating-the-other>; Daniella Shreir (programmer), “[Silence] [...] [Laughter],” <https://www.another-screen.com/silence-laughter>;

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- Daniella Shreir (programmer), "For a Free Palestine: Films by Palestinian Women," *Another Screen*, May 2021, <https://www.another-screen.com/films-free-palestine-women>.
4. *Shasha Movies*, <https://shashamovies.com/>.
 5. Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece, "Introduction," *Ends of Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), vii.
 6. Mike Snider, "Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+, and Hulu are streaming favorites as Americans subscribe to more services amid COVID-19," February 16, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2021/02/16/netflix-amazon-streaming-video-disney-hulu-hbo-max-peacock/6759020002/>.
 7. Ryan Faughnder, "Streaming milestone: Global subscriptions passed 1 billion last year," March 18, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2021-03-18/streaming-milestone-global-subscriptions-passed-1-billion-last-year-mpa-theme-report>.
 8. Esther Zuckerman, "Warner Bros. Is Releasing Its Entire 2021 Slate of Movies on HBO Max," December 7, 2020, <https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/warner-bros-2021-movies-hbo-max>.