Media Development

Coming To A Screen Near You: The Future of Cinema

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

The 2/2021 issue of *Media Development* will focus on the legacy of the 1980 MacBride Commission for the Study of Communication Problems and what it might have had to say about the digital transformation of society. The issue will include reflections by Juan Somavia, one of the original MacBride Commissioners.

It's a difficult question. Why do people need cinema? Is it merely to take us out of ourselves, to relieve ourselves temporarily of the burdens of life? Is it simply a form of escapism from the day-to-day problems that beset us – personal, familial, financial, moral, spiritual?

In *The Cat's Table* (2011), Michael Ondaatje tells of a 16th century Dutch tapestry hanging in an Italian villa and depicting a garden scene. "These were tapestries that had been woven in cold attics in some northern country – places that may never have seen a wild boar or a dove or the lush greenery that was found in them." A window onto a different world. Is that what cinema offers?

When the Lumière Brothers first screened films in late 19th century Paris, ordinary people saw themselves for the first time. Workers coming out of a factory, the arrival of a train at a station, politicians getting off a boat. Glimpses of the lives of others. Photography and moving images immediately fascinated people who previously only had scant recognition of their existence. In the UK, the earliest known home movies were made by Alfred Passmore in 1902, showing his family at home in south London and on holiday on the south coast.

Following in the steps of the Lumière Brothers, Georges Méliès is credited with creating film narration: documentaries, comedies, historical reconstructions, dramas, magic tricks, and féeries (fairy stories). When films began to tell stories, they identified and expressed the hopes and fears of those watching. They focused on archetypes and stereotypes symbolic of the realities of the human condition: life, death, love, conflict, success, failure, temptation, judgement, and the coexistence of good and evil. People flocked to see them.

What was the appeal? In her book *Raising Kane and Other Essays* (1971), American film critic Pauline Kael wrote, "At the movies we want a different kind of truth, something that surprises us and registers with us as funny or accurate or maybe amazing, maybe even amazingly beautiful… A good movie can take you out of your dull funk and the hopelessness that so often goes with slipping into a theatre; a good movie can make you feel alive again, in contact, not just lost in another city. Good movies make you care, make you believe in possibilities again."

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, which intermittently closed cinemas, the way audiences viewed and perceived films was changing. Film streaming platforms together with technological advances were giving audiences the option of where and when to watch. No longer was sitting in a crowd in relative silence and darkness the accepted way of viewing a film. No longer was it necessary to pay the cost of several tickets: a single low payment could suffice for several people to watch together. And they could choose from a broad menu of old to recent films that algorithms suggested might be to their liking.

The way films are made changed in the same way that they had changed when film moved from the cinema to television. "This film has been modified from the original version. It has been formatted to fit your screen." Film production embraced digital technologies, which added several layers to the creative imagination.

Today, the film industry is becoming more and more IT-intensive and technologically advanced. For example, key aspects of filmmaking – from video editing, to animation, to visual effects (VFX) – are all moving to the cloud. The cloud helps solve data complexities that face film production, including real-time access to data sets from any global location. Major film studios are working with production teams distributed around the world to collaborate on top-secret film projects. With feature film data sets in the cloud, these postproduction editors are able to access data from anywhere and studios can be confident that their next blockbuster is protected.

With the introduction of virtual reality

(VR) and 360º video, major studio players will want to offer moviegoers the ultimate immersive experience. They are expecting widespread consumer adoption of VR to grow, as well as theatre/cinema adaption to accommodate the new medium. And as VR technology advances and becomes more seamless, it opens up more options for filmmakers to tell stories, making both short and long form content viable.

With the rise in quality and affordability of 4K TV, streaming services, and home theatre systems, more people will likely stay in to watch movies. The industry will have to find ways to corner the market with better stories, more attention to quality filmmaking (not simply sticking to a formula), and high production standards. Viewers are no longer ignorant of cinematic techniques and they recognise innovation and imagination.

On the distribution side, the big studios are likely to take over the Netflix model and do it themselves, so customers will subscribe to the Universal or the Paramount channel for exclusive content. This concept has already been tried and tested by major symphony orchestras like the Berlin Philharmonic, which has its own state-of-the-art audio and video recording facilities and its own Digital Concert Hall.

Articles in this issue of *Media Development* explore different aspects of cinema's future, recognising that people need art, drama, literature, music, and film in order to help make

sense of the world and to find meaning. Even so, we should recall the wise words of Alfredo in *Cinema Paradiso*, "Life isn't like in the movies. Life is much harder." ∎

Streaming stress; pandemic panic

Heidi Ippolito

2020 has been a year of apocalyptic revelations in the U.S., uncovering national failings and imaginative alternatives amidst turbulent times. An inadequate national response to a global pandemic, raging environmental disasters, a chaotic presidential election, and an ongoing reckoning for racial inequity and police violence.

Most of these narratives are intertwined, further complicating microcosmic changes to corporate industries, public offices, and individual lives. One major question that has been brewing for the past few years was brought to boiling point with international lockdowns in response to the widespread Covid-19 pandemic: What are we watching? And perhaps more importantly, *how* are we watching?

Even before movie theatres temporarily closed their doors and half the nation began binge-watching everything in their Netflix queues, the entertainment industry contended with growing concerns about the encroaching influence of internet-distributed content, or what media studies scholar Amanda Lotz calls "Portals" (e.g., Netflix, Hulu, HBO, Amazon Prime Video, Disney Plus, etc.).[1] Media scholars and journalists conjecture that we may be moving into a "post-TV" or "post-network" era,[2] but does this also mean the end of cinema as we know it?

Funded primarily by subscribers (rather than the legacy models of TV advertising and movie theatre box office profits), Portals are ushering in a new era of watching that simultaneously promises more viewer control as well as algorithmic suggestions that cater to individual viewer tastes. Far removed from the days of gath-

ering around the "boob tube" or waiting in line for the latest midnight movie premiere, we now have access to a multitude of Portals through a variety of devices, blurring the lines between film, TV show, and online video into a swarm of seemingly endless on-screen storytelling.

I define *on-screen stories* as scripted film and television programming accessed on or created for multiple screens, including movie theatres, TVs, laptops, gaming consoles, and smart phones. For the purposes of this article I will focus on how these shifts have affected our understanding of film and television in particular, and what is at stake for the future of on-screen storytelling.

This major shift has influenced both content and form for on-screen storytelling – the rise of Portals has influenced not only *what* we watch, but also *how* we watch. Thematically, there has been a shift toward niche programming. Rather than attempting to appeal to mass audiences with summer blockbusters and holiday season Oscar bait, Portals are able to offer original films created in-house (e.g., "Netflix originals") as well as acquired films from other media conglomerates. These Portals tend to distribute a wider variety of content compared to their risk-averse counterparts who must meet the finicky demands of box-office success. For example, horror-thriller *Bird Box* (2018), Oscar-nominated crime drama *The Irishman* (2019), and teen romantic comedy *To All the Boys: P.S. I Still Love You* (2020) are all Netflix original films. While *Bird Box* and *The Irishman* opened in theatres as well as online, *To All the Boys* is a streaming exclusive.

Netflix has the ability to finance such an assortment titles because ultimately, they all become part of the Netflix library; no matter how many times each title is viewed (on the couch or in the theatre), the overall profits still rely on monthly subscriptions rather than the success of any particular film. Legacy film and TV companies also produce diverse content, but the shift to internet-distribution allows for success outside of box office numbers, award season fanfare, and real-time viewership tracked by Neilson ratings.

Even as some filmmakers romanticize movie palaces and push back against the popularity (and award eligibility) of digital streaming,[3] audiences seem quite comfortable within the expanding spectrum of on-screen storytelling. With widespread movie theatre shutdowns due to the pandemic,[4] massive restructures of the entertainment industry,[5] and a growing abundance of internet-distributed content, there is a concern that audiences will no longer crave the movie theatre experience.

Movies and TV shows were conceived and developed with different aims, but in recent years, they seem to be coalescing toward a kindred resemblance. Though they have separate origin stories, perhaps we should understand them within the same "universe," much like the Marvel and DC Universes that frequently flash across our screens. Instead of clinging to established definitions, we should begin to understand how our notions of "movies" and "television" are "less defined by how the content gets to us and what we view it on than by the set of experiences and practices we've long associated with the activity of viewing."[6]

In other words, we can practice similar watching rituals ("activity of viewing") across different modes of watching ("what we view it on"). Lotz's words are particularly insightful as we consider the future of on-screen storytelling: we must contend with how our watching rituals have (or have not) shifted, rather than fixate on purist categories of "film" or "television."[7]

Watching rituals that create community

One way to explore this is by examining the relationship between our watching rituals and our ideas of community. The "specialness" of the movie theatre experience is often marked by communal aspects: sharing an evening with friends and strangers in a dark room lit by a larger-than-life screen and peppered with smells of popcorn and whispers of delight. Legacy TV touts similar selling points: audiences across the nation circle around their TVs in a simultaneous viewing experience that is further discussed around water coolers the following day. The internet-distribut-

ed models of Portals, however, seem to cater to a more individualistic approach: watch anything, anywhere, anytime. Even though we watch TV and movies separately (in different spaces as well as different places) through our Portals, we still yearn for community and seek out ways to "gather" in virtual spaces to discuss what (and how) we are watching.

For most of 2020, flocking to movie theatres was no longer an immediate option, but audiences have found other ways to enjoy communal aspects of watching. Several local theatres offered the opportunity to support the theatrical experience from home. In my own city of Denver, CO, the Sie Film Center (home of Denver Film) offered exclusive access to internet-streamed premieres through their "Virtual Cinema" (including snack boxes available for pick-up at the theatre), drive-in movies at the Red Rocks Amphitheater, and hybrid options for the 43rd annual Denver Film Festival.[8] Quarantine-bound friends and families embraced the idea of "virtual watch parties" by taking advantage of platforms like Twitch, Discord, and Zoom. Soon after these do-it-yourself models took off, media companies took notice and created official versions of their own, including Teleparty (formally Netflix Party) and GroupWatch on Disney Plus.

These are co-creative activities: how and what we watch creates community, and the people in our communities influence how and what we watch. Several writers have observed the myriad of ways that watching from home during a viral pandemic has affected our watching rituals. In a poignant piece about social life during isolation, Doreen St. Félix declares that "live streaming [on social media], which once seemed to presage the dissolution of human intimacy, now looks like its preservation."[9] While some viewers experienced an overall discomfort toward people hugging and touching each other on screen (a reflection of how pandemic life instantly made us see the world through a new lens), others masochistically leaned further into content that emphasized feelings of claustrophobia, constraint, and anxiety.[10]

Stuck-at-home screenwriters were called upon to imagine how on-screen characters might handle the pandemic and, even more ominously, how they might write the "ending" of 2020, as if we had all been cast in a film about this roller coaster of a year.[11] With ample time to research and reflect, artists and critics fuelled by decades of exclusion were suddenly sparked by this year's nation-wide Black Lives Matter protests to dig deeper into issues of equity and on-screen representation.[12] The events of 2020 have certainly

highlighted our divisions, but they also reveal our desire to unite, connect, and heal.

The cyclical nostalgia of communal experiences

The ritual of going to the movies will never be fully replaced by the way we watch movies at home, just as watching the latest *Game of Thrones* episode feels different when you watch on Sunday night with all your friends, compared to watching it alone, several days after it airs. Even those who can afford surround sound and giant flat screen TVs, nothing can quite replicate the sensations generated by a room full of eager watchers: the urgency of arriving on time, the smell of someone else's snacks, the anticipation when the trailers or commercials end, and the booming laughter that erupts from everyone in the room simultaneously.

Ultimately, I do not believe films are in any kind of dire state. No matter how many Netflix shows we watch, *people will still want to go to the movies*. We are in an improvisational age of "yes, and…": gleefully accepting new modes and mentalities when it comes to our watching habits. We want to scroll through TikTok videos on our phones *as well as* buy a ticket to see blockbuster films in the theatre; we crave reality TV comfort food *alongside* arthouse dramas and experimental horror series. In a world where we can order dinner, drinks, and a beanbag from the couch, we are no longer concerned about whether Oscar films and Saturday morning cartoons can be enjoyed from the same spot. After all, we may be stuck in these spots for quite some time.

So where do we go from here? Henry Jenkins' reflections on collective imagination provide guiding inspiration for the future: "Imagination is not something we consume or inherit but something we actively produce together, something we do. We can watch imagining happen; we can hear the voices of people engaged in acts of imagining. We are in the room where it happens."[13]

But what kind of room do we currently find ourselves in, amidst a global pandemic, political unrest, and general unease? In this time of institutional suspicion and public distrust, perhaps now, more than ever, we should lean into the communal experiences of on-screen storytelling, where watching goes beyond consumption and into a realm of co-creative reconnection with our beloved communities. ∎

Notes

1. The term "Portals" was coined by Amanda D. Lotz in *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television*, Kindle edition (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, 2017).
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7. Amanda Lotz, "Q12: Is Netflix Television and What Is the Future of Television?," Amanda D. Lotz (blog), July 13, 2020, http://www.amandalotz.com/netflix-30-qa/2020/7/13/q12-is-netflix-television-and-what-is-

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13. Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova, eds., Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination (NYU Press, 2020), quoted in "Returning to the Civic Imagination Project: New Publications," Confessions of an Aca-Fan (blog), March 23, 2020, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2020/3/14/returning-to-the-civic-imagination-project-new-publications.

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What's to come in faith and film

John P. Ferré

The last decade has been a strong one for critically acclaimed movies about faith. With the exception of Spotlight, *the $20 million Universal Studios release about the Boston Globe's investigation of paedophile priests that won Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay, movies about faith have been independent productions made with modest budgets.*

Wadjda, the 2012 Saudi Arabian movie about spunky subversion of rigid religious culture, won three awards at the Venice Film Festival, including the INTERFILM Award for Promoting Interreligious Dialogue. *Ida*, the 2013 Polish movie about family, identity, and commitment, won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. *First Reformed*, Paul Schrader's film about a pastor's spiritual crisis, won a Critics' Choice Movie Award for Best Original Screenplay in 2019. That year also saw the Polish movie about anguish and redemption, *Corpus Christi*, receive the Europa Cinemas Label at Venice given to boost international distribution of important films.

But, like movies of all kinds, movies about faith – even the best ones – face an uncertain future. Already before the 2020 Lenten season, which began with Covid-19 breaking out in Europe and ended with the first million people infected around the world, per capita attendance at movie houses was in decline almost everywhere in the world except for China. Major studios were releasing fewer titles and spending more on blockbuster franchises. With fewer tickets being sold for fewer movies, cinemas were forced to consolidate, reducing the number of venues for

screening movies that cannot promise the revenue return of mega-budget productions.

The pandemic had an immediate impact on the movie industry. Production scaled way down and scheduled releases were postponed. Theatres closed and festivals were cancelled, postponed, or moved online. Funding for new films diminished. Video streaming, by contrast, flourished. Streaming giant Netflix added 26 million subscribers in the first six months of 2020 and by mid-October reported a total of 195 million subscribers worldwide, over half outside the United States.

"It will take a lot of time, some box office gambles and perhaps even a vaccine before enough fans are comfortable sitting in a darkened room alongside hundreds of strangers to laugh and gasp in unison – or even just breathe the same air," says *Time* magazine's Eliana Dockterman.

Compounded by the pandemic, ongoing changes in the movie industry will affect movies about faith for some time to come. These changes include who makes the movies, the genres of the movies they make, and the way the movies are watched.

Women directors

Women have directed films at least since Alice Guy-Blaché directed *The Life of Christ* in 1906, but to this day most films have been directed by men. The so-called "celluloid ceiling" is troublesome, cultural critic Amanda Fortini explained recently in *Playboy*, "because the people who tell our stories, and the actors who embody them, shape our culture, our reality. If all the storytellers are men, society will continue to believe that only men are entitled to speak; we'll continue to live in a world that believes only men's subjectivity matters. The lack of jobs and the collective consciousness are not unconnected."

For Hollywood studio productions, the celluloid ceiling has been unyielding for female directors. According to research by Martha Lauzen, executive director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film at San Diego State University, just 13% of the 250 top grossing films in 2019 were directed by women, a nominal improvement over the 9% figure from 2008. The Academy Awards have been just as unkind to female film directors. Only one woman, Kathryn Bigelow, has won an Oscar for Best Director (for *The Hurt Locker* in 2010).

Lauzen's research also shows that the gender imbalance in film directing is decreasing in the world of independent films. In 2008, women directed 22% of independent films. By 2019, that figure had increased to 38%. Also by 2019, women were directing 42% of independent documentary films and 33% of independent narrative features. To maintain this momentum, the Swedish Film Institute has promoted "50/50 by 2020," a campaign for gender parity in film festivals. Over 100 film festivals – including Cannes, Venice, and Berlin – have signed on. That is good news for today's film school graduates, half of whom are women.

It's also good news for the future of noteworthy movies about faith, many of which are independent films directed by women. One recent example is the 2017 animated feature, *The Breadwinner*, directed by Ireland's Nora Twoney. Appealing to children and adults alike, *The Breadwinner* tells the story of a resourceful 11-year-old Afghan girl named Parvana whose father has been unjustly imprisoned by the Taliban. Supporting her family falls on the shoulders of Parvana, who disguises herself as a boy to evade the Taliban's violent misogyny. *The Breadwinner* was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature.

Following *The Breadwinner* a year later was the American dramatic film, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, directed by Desiree Akhavan. In this film, a teenaged girl is sent to God's Promise, a gay conversion therapy centre, after her evangelical Christian guardian learns about her same-sex relationship. Praying away the gay fails, of course, sometimes tragically, but not everyone understands or cares. *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* won the Grand Jury Prize for U.S. Drama at the Sundance Film Festival.

With the increasing number of women di-

recting independent films, we can expect more films of the quality of *The Breadwinner* (still above) and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, which explore important issues about faith that resonate with diverse audiences.

Documentaries

Accompanying the growing number of notable films directed by women is the popularity of documentaries. Thom Powers, who programs documentaries for the Toronto International Film Festival, says that we are experiencing "an undeniable golden age for documentary filmmaking." Not long ago, documentaries were considered lesser artistic products as a class of films, products that were long on education but short on entertainment. Now they are go-to narratives, available not only on PBS and CNN, but also on Amazon, Hulu, and Netflix.

The rise of documentaries in the last generation has much to do with innovations in production and ease of access converging with a ready audience. Documentaries today more and more

resemble their feature counterparts. They use original music scores, creative camera work and editing, protagonists and antagonists, and dramatic story arcs. They are easily accessible through online streaming services, which use algorithms to point viewers to both feature and documentary films that will likely interest them. And they appeal to millennials and other viewers accustomed to watching informative and entertaining videos on social media. It's not surprising that the number of feature documentaries released theatrically in the UK and the Republic of Ireland rose from 56 in 2009 to 99 in 2019.

Women are finding success as directors of documentaries. Over the last five years, an average of two of the five documentaries that contended for an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature each year were directed by women. Women co-directed the last two winners, *American Factory* in 2020 and *Free Solo* in 2019. Even more encouraging is Lauzen's latest study, which reported that nearly half of the documentaries that U.S. film festivals screened last year were directed by at least one woman.

A number of recent documentaries that garnered critical acclaim have concerned matters of faith. *One of Us* (2017) examined the lives of three Hasidic Jews who broke away from their ultra-orthodox community. The seven-part Netflix series, *The Keepers* (2017), explored the unsolved murder of Sister Catherine Cesnik, a Catholic high school teacher in Baltimore who was murdered in 1969 after she reported the school's chaplain for sexual abuse. And the six-part Netflix series, *Wild Wild Country* (2018) focused on the conflict and violence that followed the building of the utopian City of Rajneeshpuram in north central Oregon in 1981. Last Fall's Chicago International Film Festival featured *'Til Kingdom Come* (2020), which examines the relationship between American evangelicals who pray and pay for the second coming of Jesus Christ and Israelis who build settlements in Occupied Palestinian Territory.

The popularity of documentaries combined with their production quality portends the ongoing production of important nonfiction films that explore issues of spirituality.

Streaming

Whoever the director and whatever the genre, movies today are most often watched through streaming services. Even after viewers return to movie theatres, they will continue to stream movies at home because what subscription video on demand lacks in movie-house screen size and the company of others, it more than makes up for in convenience and value. Netflix subscribers in the United States, for instance, have access to more than 4,000 films that they can watch at any time. For countries such as Albania, Gibraltar, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic the number is closer to 200, but that choice is still much greater than what was available in local theatres before the pandemic. A standard subscription costs as little as $6 in Brazil and as much as $19 in Switzerland, about the price of one ticket to a movie theatre. For the cost of one movie theatre ticket per month, subscribers to Netflix and other streaming services can watch as many movies as they want without leaving home.

Given the size of the Netflix film library in most countries, critically acclaimed films about faith will be among the selections available to subscribers. In some cases, those selections are Netflix productions. One is the 2018 film *Come Sunday*, about the African American megachurch preacher Bishop Carlton Pearson, who was declared a heretic for preaching that there is no Hell. In his review of the movie in *Slate* magazine, critic Lawrence Ware said, "This is an important movie for one simple reason: It shows why pastors who question orthodoxy are often afraid to publicly articulate the theological and political dilemmas with which they wrestle privately."

Netflix also produced *The Two Popes* (2019) about the unlikely friendship between Pope Benedict and the future Pope Francis (still left). An audience member's review of the film and television review ag-

gregator Rotten Tomatoes called *The Two Popes* "one of the best, funniest and most emotionally-moving religious films I've ever seen."

Movie streaming is unlikely to lose the gains that it has made over the past decade. Audiences will return to theatres when they feel that it is safe to do so because watching movies on large screens in the presence of others is a visceral experience unequalled by watching movies on tablets and phones. But the convenience, the choice, and the price of streaming will keep subscribers subscribing, and that's good news for movies about faith, which appear on modest home screens far more often than on the giant screens at the multiplex.

Conclusion

With changes in the world of film come opportunities for making innovative movies about any subject, spirituality and faith included. As they always have, filmmakers who are risk averse will let these opportunities pass and produce sentimental movies that appeal to conventional attitudes and viewpoints. Others, however, will respond creatively to the changes that filmmaking worldwide is experiencing in production, distribution, and consumption.

These innovators will make movies about faith that intrigue viewers by questioning assumptions and challenging prevailing viewpoints. Many will be directed by women, some will be documentaries, and all of them will be distributed online. For discerning viewers who make a point to seek them out, these will be movies to remember and re-watch. ∎

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The future of cinema is the future of us all

Gabriella Lettini

The early days of filmmaking led scholars, artists, and intellectuals of the era to engage in heated discussions on whether cinema was an artistic expression at all or merely a new form of technology and on how cinema was different from any other art.

While some like to imagine a particular golden moment in cinema's history or the right way to do filmmaking, in reality cinema has always been a great many things, often in contradiction if not in contrast with each other. In the last one hundred and twenty-five years, we learned that film, like any other medium, can be used for very different ends: escapist entertainment, meaning-making art, totalitarian propaganda, commercial exploitation, societal challenge, historical revisionism, religious edification, and more. We have also witnessed that cinema can reflect, create, challenge, and reimagine the world we live in.

It was unavoidable that cinema would change, as any other human-made reality does. But we should not believe that there is any linear way to predict what the future will hold. We can anticipate trends, keeping in mind the complexity of reality, and knowing that the future will still surprise us, will always contain unexpected elements, some welcome and some devastating.

As we face a new wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, we know the crisis movie theaters are facing. Many never recovered from the first wave of the pandemic. But the crisis of theater-going had started much earlier, progressively brought on by television, then VHS videos and DVDs, and finally by streaming platforms. It is now pos-

sible to watch most of what we want whenever we want it, from home or almost anywhere there is a good internet connection.

The crisis of theatre-going is part of the future of cinema, yet it is not the whole story by far. While many of us will forever love the ritual of watching movies on the big screen, in the dark, and as part of an audience, as a collective event, new technologies have reshaped our lives and changed the theatre business. It is possible to imagine that theater-going will never altogether die, as small special realities will continue to struggle to exist thanks to the passion of individuals and groups that cherish the traditional cinema experience. With the advent of new technologies, we have witnessed many businesses drastically change, given up for dead, and reappear in new forms for niche audiences. People had predicted that greeting cards would go out of business because of the advent of electronic mail. Surprisingly, in the last few years, that trend was reversed, as many people are reclaiming some of the old forms of communication.

Similarly, vinyl has been making a comeback as people cherish a different listening experience. Traditional gaming circles have not been entirely replaced by online gaming. Industrial food production has not replaced artisanal food. The advent of platforms like Etsy shows how many people still crave artisanal manufacturing. Nothing can and will stay the same, yet changes, while drastic, may not mean the complete obliterations of old realities. Movie theatres have mostly not been profitable for decades and may cease to exist as profitable businesses. But communities will keep smaller theatre-going experiences alive, like The Palace Cinema, Longridge, in North West England, or the New Parkway Theater in Oakland or the Roxie Theater in San Francisco. Every local reality has its example.

Sharing different kinds of viewing experience

Watching movies as a community experience does not need to be identified only with theatre-going or even physically getting together. During the current pandemic lockdowns, people worldwide have creatively imagined different kinds of watching parties so that they could still share a viewing experience, chat during it, and discuss after the movie afterward. Human beings are creative and adaptive, and if they keep understanding the value of communal experiences, they will keep finding ways to create them. Ultimately, the issue may be how to keep alive the spirit of connectivity than the theaters open.

In fact, because of Covid-19, in the last months several film festivals had to be canceled, and many have yet to be rescheduled in person. Yet we have witnessed how film festivals were still able to take place as people streamed movies, followed Q&A sessions online, and discussed them on social media. Some collective experiences will drastically change, only to adapt to new times and circumstances. It is possible if the passion is kept alive.

The latest experiences with online film festivals should also give us pause for thought and

challenge us to reconsider if the enormous costs big international film festivals have on our environments are worth the thrill of the experience for a small minority, as rewarding as it may be. International air-travel alone is devastating to our planet, and climate disruption is significantly affecting the most underprivileged communities, usually not part of the film festival crowds. So, I hope that the future of cinema will address more issues of environmental accountability than the use of plastic bottles and utensils and include climate justice.

That point also brings me to ask whether we have a right or entitlement to endless forms of entertainment, like the variety of constant new films and series available for streaming that people are binge-watching. Cinema as business, entertainment, and art cannot be above concerns about how it may negatively and massively affect people's lives and our planet's well-being. The future of cinema needs to include critical ethical questions about accountability and impact.

One of the ways cinema has changed and hopefully will continue to change dramatically is that people traditionally underrepresented, erased, or stereotyped in film are progressively doing more cinema themselves. Cinema used to be ruled by white males, telling their visions of the world and their versions of history, mostly reinforcing the paradigms of oppression that put them at the top. The struggles for equal rights, liberationist movements, and the advent of digital filmmaking and streaming have enabled new groups of people to speak for themselves, interpret their own realities, correct sexist, racist, and homophobic portrayals and stories, challenging male and colonial gazes on the "other."

This is a change that is still happening too slowly but will only continue. It is true that US and European movie studios are still largely focusing on and financing white and male stories, actors, and directors. Yet, alternative voices are not only emerging but taking center stage. I am thinking of artists like Ada DuVernay, Barry Jenkins, Jordan Peele, Dee Rees, Ryan Cogler, Aurora Guerrero, Natalia Almada, Patricia Cardoso,

Taika Waititi. The future of cinema will include a much greater variety of human experiences. It will be Black, and Brown, and Latinx, indigenous, transgender, queer, and allow people to tell their stories in their own voice. The future of cinema will also hopefully be less sexually exploitative, as women of all colours write, direct and produce and refuse to be objectified.

The future of cinema may also continue to include an increasing number of independent movies funded directly by the audience through crowdsourcing, as people are willing to share resources so that more diverse and complex stories and identities can be presented on screen. Artists like Sean Baker, Mark Webber, Joe Talbot, Jimmie Fails, and Lara Hewitt brought us some beautiful stories through crowdsourcing, and there are examples of independent filmmakers doing the same all over the world. If the studio industries do not invest in people's stories, people will because storytelling is a primary need for communities, and people need to see themselves and their lives represented with truthfulness.

A collective endeavour

As voices traditionally erased are taking center stage, we are also strongly reminded that cinema has always been a collective endeavor. In the future of cinema, we will see how the idea of the director as original auteur, lonely creator, and artistic genius will be replaced by a sounder recognition of the collaborative and ultimately always co-creative nature of cinema. It will be interesting to see the different ways that we will start hearing of art, and not only movie industry, as collective.

In addition, we have already seen examples of filmmaking that invites the audience not only to interpret, but to suggest, the development of a story, as in the case of 2018's *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. Interactive film will be part of the future of cinema and create hybrid realities that bridge gaming and traditional filmmaking and animation. The future will continue to generate more interactive, participative, and hybrid realities.

Not only film buffs but regular movie watchers will continue to watch a greater number of international movies, as streaming platforms are normalizing the use of subtitles for international cinema, something that used to be off-putting to some audiences, like the US one. This trend will hopefully open new windows to different worlds and worldviews.

Digital filmmaking and streaming have also allowed for the production and dissemination of an unprecedented number of films of unequal quality. While people can have direct access to anything, the choice can be overwhelming. The future of cinema will need even more than before trustworthy guides and curators to help people make informed choices that support quality filmmaking, centering traditionally unrepresented voices. Theologians, spiritual leaders, and faith communities will need to keep part of these efforts to curate and guide not as a renewed form of censorship but as a way to enrich and nurture people's meaning-making and community building.

We cannot imagine the future of cinema as one story. It will be stories plural, and it will look like the many futures of humanity. ∎

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Erase una vez el cine

Carlos A. Valle

El secreto de las películas es que son una ilusión. (George Lucas)

Este es un mundo absorbido por un océano de desarrollo tecnológico del que dependen cada vez más los estados para su funcionamiento como las empresas mismas y la economía mundial para sus transacciones, sin entrar a detallar como ha ido modelando la vida privada. El celular, la computadora, los juegos electrónicos habitan permanentemente en una gran franja de la sociedad moderna, como si fuera una extensión más del mismo ser humano.

Es este desarrollo incesante y creciente el que también ha penetrado muy marcadamente en el mundo del cine trastocando los contenidos y la estructura de sus presentaciones. Se puede hablar de escenarios creados por las computadoras, arsenales con armas altamente sofisticadas que abruman por su eficacia. Mientras eliminan seres sin pausa la sangre corre raudamente.

A esto se suman grandes cataclismos de la naturaleza, explosiones que destruyen ciudades enteras, sin faltar invasiones de seres extraterrestres, mayormente de extraña fisonomía, y con intereses destructivos. Muchas de las historias carecen de un sólido argumento aunque nunca falta el héroe que salva finalmente al mundo de un inminente fin. Las mujeres han mejorado su presencia e importancia aunque hasta cierto punto

Las lecciones del pasado

Frente a esta realidad no debe olvidarse que en su comienzo, hace un poco más de un siglo, los creadores del cine no estaban demasiado preocupados por el futuro desarrollo de su invención. Lo consideraron un experimento científico y no esperaron que fuera usado para propósitos masi-

vos. Sin embargo, muy pronto el cine entró un en proceso de masificación industrial. Sus objetivos comerciales determinaron su desarrollo y crearon una estructura particular a su alrededor. Vale la pena recordar brevemente esta vertiginosa historia.

Para atraer a grandes audiencias fue necesario ofrecerle material atractivo. Las películas muy pronto llegaron a ser populares, convirtiéndose en un invalorable vehículo de comunicación. No podemos entender el mundo actual a menos que reconozcamos el papel del entretenimiento como parte de la vida pero, al mismo tiempo, que no deja de ser un factor ideológico. El entretenimiento no es neutral. Asume una determinada comprensión de la vida y el papel de hombre y la mujer en la sociedad. Se puede estar de acuerdo o no con una visión particular, pero no se debe dejar de lado las implicancias de lo que llamamos "entretenimiento".

La trascendencia del cine

El filme tenía un carácter popular y, en aquel momento, las iglesias no tenían un testimonio significativo para las masas, en contraste con el importante lugar que le atribuyó la revolución rusa a las películas, como en el caso de la obra del recordado director Sergei Eisenstein.

Los filmes llegaron a ser un instrumento en la lucha por el poder y la dominación. Joseph Gobbels, el muy conocido ministro de Propaganda de Adolf Hitler, quiso estudiar los filmes rusos en su búsqueda por dominar a la sociedad. En su momento, a su manera, esto se reflejó en el cine que empezó a dominar en Hollywood insuflando el "American way of life".

Las iglesias en general se manifestaron con actitudes negativas a este nuevo mundo. Algunas tenían una cierta aversión contra el entretenimiento como tal. Aceptaban películas educativas, pero no con argumentos. Esta actitud de las iglesias no detuvo la marcha de la industria. Se establece otra estrategia. Si no se puede evitar su rechazo hay que encontrar atajos que lo contengan. Esto se inicia en EEUU por el 1920, con un movimiento de censura-autocensura, con la introducción del llamado "Código Hays", que siguió vigente hasta 1956.

Este código estableció, lo que se llamó una victoria pírrica. El código se impuso pero la gente no estaba convencida, por lo que llegó a ser un deporte bordear los límites de la censura. Así lo hizo el director Cecil B. DeMille con películas basadas en temas bíblicos En este Código, por ejemplo, el pecado fue identificado con el sexo, otras formas de pecado fueron pasadas por alta. Así, el amor se resumía al romance. El erotismo y la sexualidad llegaron a estar disociadas del amor, estableciendo una separación peligrosa entre amor y violencia.

El cine y la experiencia humana

El cine ha compartido la experiencia humana a un nivel nunca antes soñado. Cuando arribó la imprenta, los maestros se asustaron porque su sabiduría quedaría en manos de muchos. El compartir el conocimiento le restaría todo poder y perdería su control. A su manera el cine abrió el debate a muchos temas humanos. Así, Kevin Brownlow, historiador y cineasta, en *Behind the Mask of Innocence, (1991)* analiza la importancia de los filmes sobre la conciencia social en la era del cine mudo.

La gente pudo verse y oír cómo eran y como les gustaría ser. El cine entró en lugares antes vedados. Estuvo cerca a la vez de los pobres y los poderosos. El cine mostró a los seres humanos en su gloria y también en su miseria. Así se puede entender que no tardaría en aparecer la censura.

El cine y la política

A medida que los medios se privatizan, su poder sobre la política y la cultura se amplía. Ya en 1940, cuando Orson Welles produjo *Citizen Kane*, considerado hoy uno de los más grandes filmes de toda la historia, mostró lo explosiva que puede ser que una película, a partir de un personaje de ficción, criticara a un magnate de la prensa, cuya semejanza con el real Randolph Hearst era difícil de negar, abre la caja de Pandora de todo lo que se ocultaba de los medios mismos. El cine, que

muchos relacionaban solo con el entretenimiento, se convertía en un instrumento de crítica social.

Todas las presiones posibles fueron ejercidas para impedir su proyección, desde represalias económicas hasta la revelación de historias turbias de personajes conocidos. Esta trama secreta del funcionamiento de los medios sobre los poderes y entre los poderes, irá encontrando una sofisticación y alcance cada vez mayores. Al menos en aquel momento, lograron que la difusión del filme fuera muy limitada y sufriera muchos perjuicios económicos. De todas maneras, nunca lograron que su fama y valores se perdieran, por el contrario, se acrecentaron con el tiempo. Una demostración de la paradoja de los controles que no pueden impedir que salga a luz aquello que querían destinar al olvido.

El cine en la sociedad post moderna

En las décadas del 60 al 90, el tratamiento de la religión cambia significativamente. Esta etapa está marcada por varios cambios en la sociedad, una era de post guerra y guerra (Corea, Vietnam), revueltas estudiantiles, liberación femenina. Revueltas también en el Este (Praga 1968, Revolución cultural en China, etc).

Es también la época de un fuerte desarrollo de los medios audiovisuales y de la sociedad *post moderna*. Una sociedad que ha perdido los valores tradicionales, ha acrecentado el individualismo, el pluralismo cultural. La religión institucional sufre una severa crisis, que abre la puerta a formas de retracción fundamentalista o a la amalgama de diversas expresiones religiosas.

Los cambios en el cine a partir de la década del 60 se destacan por el incremento comercial y una mayor necesidad de entretenimiento. Hollywood empieza a dominar el mercado y así sigue hasta hoy.

En Europa se acepta al cine como una nueva forma de arte. En Francia se destaca la *Nouvelle Vague* (Truffau, Bazin, etc.) Se abren otras perspectivas: neorrealismo (Rosselini, De Sica) cine de autor (Bergman, Fellini, Passolini, Buñuel, etc.) son quienes reflejan más directamente la problemática religiosa.

A pesar de todo, los temas, las preguntas "religiosas" siguen inquietando a los teóricos, el arte. Lo santo y lo sagrado permanece como un tema dominante (aunque a veces disfrazado) en el arte moderno. George Steiner ha afirmado que hoy Shakespeare sería cineasta.

En su momento, la imprenta produjo un enorme aporte al desarrollo de la cultura y a la difusión del conocimiento, pero sus alcances fueron limitados, entre otras razones, porque la capacitación requerida para acceder a sus productos y sus costos dificultaba la posibilidad para ser accesibles. La aparición de los distintos medios electrónicos se produce en un período más breve; su alcance se torna masivo muy pronto, y para acceder a ellos no es necesaria ninguna capacitación previa.

En la era del control

Mucho se ha hablado sobre el control de los medios y el control de las mentes como una relación inevitable. Lo cierto es que las intenciones de dominación no siempre logran los resultados buscados. Del control de medios al control de mentes hay una gran distancia. Habría que considerar la influencia de los elementos sociales, culturales y religiosos. Decía Ignacio Ramonet, destacado investigador de la comunicación, que el problema no está en decir que la televisión nos manipula. Para él, el problema está en saber cómo manipula y esto no es tan evidente.

Aquí vamos a concentrarnos en la gravitación que el cine ha tenido y tiene en la vida de la sociedad La enorme importancia de los medios de comunicación audiovisual, concentran cada vez más poder en el ámbito mundial, ejerciendo una gran influencia en la conformación de la sociedad y sus valores. Esta inusitada concentración de poder está determinando ciertas estructuras en la sociedad que limitan el desarrollo de una sociedad plural. Esta concentración de poder establece sus propias reglas de juego sobre el llamado "libre flujo de la información".

El cine, como otras manifestaciones del arte, nos enseña que una seria reflexión y cuestionamiento emerge de la atenta cámara, desa-

fiando. Por eso, no se trata de alabar un filme por sus buenos atributos morales o porque está de acuerdo con propias convicciones. Se trata de establecer un diálogo con aquellos que buscan entender al ser humano.

¿Hay un futuro para el cine?

Este complejo mundo está sumergido y, en buena parte, direccionado el área del cine. ¿Hay algún camino alternativo al que se pueda acudir?

En la tercera parte de su obra "Soñar con los ojos abiertos", Fernando Birri, un creador que ha trabajado con los sectores más humildes, procura entrelazar su visión con un proceso de alimentación del que se nutren los directores de cine, destacando que hay también un proceso de retroalimentación en el encuentro con la cultura.

En la utopía que pregona Fernando Birri la libertad y la creatividad juegan un papel clave. Su invitación está acompañada por "una conciencia profunda de la antiutopía" Para que la utopía se torne realidad se requiere un marco social donde se comparta una común visión del mundo. Mientras esto no sea posible ¿qué deberán esperar los nuevos cineastas? ¿Cómo se prepararán para enfrentar un mundo donde el medio audiovisual se desarrolla como industria con objetivos solo comerciales? El valor de esta obra reside en su espíritu testimonial, en la riqueza de la experiencia y en la búsqueda permanente por lo "nuevo", acompañado por un dejo de nostalgia junto a una particular visión de la historia.

¿Es el arte una ensoñación que busca hacernos olvidar o siquiera negar las dolorosas verdades que enfrenta la humanidad? ¿Es por eso que las propuestas que sostuvo Andrei Tarkovsky sobre el arte y su manifestación, se diluyen como ilusorios caminos sin salida? ¿Hay que resignarse a creer que se trata utopías inalcanzables? Tarkovsky parece proponernos un camino en su última gran obra, *Sacrifice*. En las primeras escenas el protagonista Alexander y su pequeño hijo están regando un árbol seco (foto arriba).[1] El niño, habiendo sido operado de la garganta, no puede pronunciar palabras y escucha en silencio la historia que su padre le cuenta acerca de

un monje ruso que regó un árbol seco por años hasta que el árbol floreció. En la escena final el niño, que está solo regando el árbol, rompe su silencio: "En el comienzo fue la palabra." ¿Por qué Papá? Porque solo la comunicación puede evitar el aislamiento, romper las barreras de raza, de religión, de género y permitir crear el encuentro.

¿Hay motivos de esperanza? La respuesta, dice Tarkovsky, "la da quizá la vieja leyenda del riego paciente y perseverante de un árbol seco que he elaborado en esa película… Porque el monje, que contra toda razón fue subiendo año tras año los cubos de agua a la cima del monte, creía de forma concreta y fiel en los milagros de Dios. Por eso, un buen día se le reveló uno de esos milagros: por la noche, las ramas secan había florecido."[2] ∎

Notas
1. Birri, Fernando, *Soñar con los ojos abiertos*, Editorial Aguilar, Argentina, 2007.
2. Tarkovski, Andrei. *Sculpting in Time,* The Bodley Head, London, 1987.

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New trends watching films in Australia

David Griffiths

2020 was supposed to be an epic year of cinematic blockbusters. It was a year where the box office was supposed to be dominated by some of the biggest franchises in cinematic history. Daniel Craig was set to return as the iconic James Bond, the Marvel juggernaut was set to roll on with the release of Black Widow *while their rivals DC Comics were set to release* Wonder Woman. *Then of course there was also Christoper Nolan's new film* Tenet, *while the cinematic territories that I write the most for, Australia and Thailand, were also eagerly anticipating the releases of* Mulan *and a new* Fast & Furious *film.*

Then a global pandemic hit and for both countries the cinema screens went dark for the first time in a generation. Thailand's lock-down was short lived, the virus was brought under control relatively quickly and cinemas quickly opened with restrictions in place. Australia's experience though was very different. While most of Australia was able to follow in Thailand's footsteps, a dangerous second wave of the virus in the state of Victoria saw cinemas go through a soft re-open before closing again. At the time of writing this, November 1st 2020, Victoria currently has outdoor drive-in cinemas while indoor cinemas remain closed with no re-opening date yet announced.

At the same time this was happening, the major studios were changing release dates left, right and centre. Some movies were moved to late 2020, then pushed back to 2021 while other films like *Mulan* and *Trolls: World Tour* were released as video-on-demand. By the fact that Melbourne's drive-in cinemas managed to sell out the first week of screenings for *Trolls: World Tour* when drive-in cinemas re-opened in late October you could argue that the online release was not as successful as hoped.

The re-opening of cinemas at a time when major distributors were delaying the release of their blockbusters opened up a market in Australia and Thailand that nobody expected – suddenly local product and indie films were pushed into the spotlight in a way that they had never experienced previously.

A new trend

The first sign that the cinema re-openings were starting a new trend was when Thailand's SF Cinema chain announced that it would be screening new Australian crocodile horror film *Black Water: Abyss*. In the three years prior to this, no Australian film had been released in cinemas in Thailand. That announcement then led to an even wider release for the film. "It ended up selling right around the world," says director Andrew Traucki. "It sold to China, then Europe, then America and then to the UK. It went out on one hundred screens in the UK and once again that was a Covid thing because normally a film of this size would never get that kind of release, but because of Covid we did. Despite the Covid restriction the film was also among the top films at the box office during its opening weekend."

Back in Australia *Black Water: Abyss* also did well at the cinemas that were open at the time and it started a trend that few would have predicted. Suddenly Australian films like *Rams* and *Never Too Late* became hot property with commercial television and radio even promoting the films, something that has been a rarity for Australian cinema over the past decade. By the time top-rating news program *The Project* were doing a feature piece on local documentary *The Leadership* it was finally clear both local and indie product had now very much found a place at the forefront of "pandemic cinema".

That extra exposure in the media has also transferred to much higher box office success for locally made films. Comedy film *Rams*, which stars Sam Neil and iconic Australian actor Michael Caton made $1.27 million in its opening weekend placing it right up alongside American films like *Tenet* and *After We Collided*.

The news thrilled Joel Pearlman who is the CEO of Roadshow Films in Australia. "Roadshow has continued to support Australian Exhibition throughout this difficult year, and RAMS' opening weekend result proves that Australian audiences are enthusiastic to return to cinemas," he said in a written statement. "We are thrilled with these numbers and anticipate that strong word of mouth carries these results through to the end of the year, especially once Victoria's cinemas are deemed safe to re-open."

The movement wasn't only clear with cinemas and drive-ins either. Australian genre film *Blood Vessel* shot to worldwide attention on streaming platforms right across the world while it seemed like the up-and-coming platforms were falling over themselves to acquire new product – no matter the size of the budget.

Award-winning Indie director Jake Horowitz was certainly one filmmaker who noticed the smaller streaming services becoming more open to showing indie and local films. "I actually released two films during the pandemic," he explained to me. "My first film, *All About Who You Know*, was released back in May when all of this was very new to us. That one really got lost in the pandemic so with my second film, Christmas comedy *Cup Of Cheer*, we wanted to make sure that everybody would get a chance to see it safely, whether that be at Drive-In cinemas or watching it in the comfort and safety of their own home on VOD."

"But of course at the moment the big streaming platforms are only looking for films with stars in them," he says as we discuss how the smaller streaming platforms are dealing with the pandemic. "They are not willing to even consider smaller movies, no matter the quality or the reception or anything... they won't even look at it. So we had an exclusive deal to screen on Tubi for a few weeks, and like you said it is a huge up-and-coming platform and they are a real competitor for Netflix. This is the kind of movie that we think people will really love and it will be spread by word-of-mouth and by letting it screen on Tubi which is free for subscribers we thought that would really work."

More recognition for local productions

That of course leaves a big question – will the trend of local and indie cinema receiving a wider audience continue once cinemas re-open with Hollywood product or will things return to normal. Australian film journalist Kyle McGrath says he believes the movement has triggered a change that will be permanent when it comes to what the average cinema watches and how they go about watching films.

"There has always been that knowledge when it comes down to whether a cinema patron will watch a new Australian film or number 10 in a franchise of superhero films that the superhero film will win," he says. "With films like the new James Bond and the latest *Fast & Furious* film being pushed back by more than a year it means that people will be more open to these films if they want to see something new. While the real cinemaphile might go and see a film like *Space Jam* at a retro cinema like The Astor, the average cinema goer wants something new so the result will be that Australian films will be getting more recognition."

McGrath is a member of the Australian Film Critics Association and during a career which has spanned nearly twenty years he has worked as a producer on Arts And Entertainment television show *X-Wired* as well as being recognised as a film critic on the popular *The Popcorn Conspiracy* podcast. He says that this is one of the biggest changes he has seen in cinema over those twenty years. That leads me to ask him whether he believes that people being exposed to more Australian films might actually see the stigma that "Australian films are bad films" become eroded in the local market.

"I think it will, yes," he says. "People are always going to notice the difference that happens because of the fact that the Australian films don't have the same budget as huge blockbusters. But I think that stigma will go which I see as a positive because you have films like *Danger Close* which I felt was one of the best movies of last year but it was largely overlooked by the local audience. If something like this (the pandemic) had happened last year then a lot more people would have gone and seen it, they would seen that it was a great movie and that would have challenged their negative view of Australian films. I am hoping that is something that really does come from this."

For a similar reason McGrath says he feels that people being exposed to open air cinemas and Drive-In cinemas may also change the way a lot of people want to watch their films going forward from here. "For a lot of people this will be the first time in their lives that they have ever attended an open air or drive in cinema," he explains. "Now people are being encouraged to do that more and a lot of them discovering that it provides them with a really unique experience. In fact for people in Victoria it is more than just be encouraged, it is the only way that they can see new movies right now so they expand their horizons and realise that there are other options out there rather than just going to your regular multiplex cinema over and over."

He added, "People are going to realise that the drive-in experience is very different to the cinema experience, they can talk in the car, they can have fun with their friends – it is not as cramped, the seats aren't sticky, they aren't being forced to sit next to a complete stranger - the things that people often hate about cinemas. Some people will realise you don't have any of that at a Drive-In and they won't want to go back to the cinema."

"Having said that though," he says continuing. "There are some films that I think are better for people to watch in an actual cinema. I would never dream of watching *Tenet* at a Drive-In. That is the kind of film that needs the full cinema experience so while some people will fre-quent Drive-Ins a little more I don't think it will ever do away with cinemas."

While the pandemic has also seen a rise in the number of people subscribing to streaming platforms, McGrath says he believes the jury is out on whether that is one trend that will continue or not. "I think they will," he says when I put it to him that people might let some of their subscriptions lapse once cinemas re-open. "The past would suggest it may. Disney+ found that when people had finished watching *The Mandalorian* season one they let their subscription end and then took up a subscription again when season two was released.

On the flipside though a lot of distributors are really looking at ways to enhance that digital experience, that was obvious with what they did with *Mulan* and *Trolls: World Tour*, but there is certainly going to be a drop off with people subscribing once people can return to cinemas and get out of their homes more... that is only natural. For streaming to remain alongside cinema both have to focus on bringing out new films – that way people will always be able to expand their horizons."

While many people have basically just written 2020 off when it comes to cinemas it is clear from talking to film journalists, distributors and filmmakers that the events of this year may have just opened up a future for cinema that no-one saw coming. It seems likely that there will be a chance for people to watch movies in more ways, to be more open to local and independent films and to do it all in a way that they feel more comfortable with. At the end of day that certainly cannot be a bad thing. ∎

Dave Griffiths has worked internationally as a film journalist for over twenty-five years now. During that time he has been a film critic on television, radio and print and has been recognised as an expert in Australian and genre cinema. Currently he writes for *The Book, The Film, The T-Shirt* in the UK and for *The Phuket News* in Thailand. In Australia, he has a weekly radio show on J-Air and is the Arts & Entertainment Editor for HEAVY Cinema and Subculture webzines. Dave has also been a member of the Australian Film Critics Association for over ten years and is currently the organisation's Treasurer.

Ten significant themes in cinema development in the 2010s

Peter Malone

Film critics and reviewers are sometimes asked to list their top ten… for the year, for the decade, for all–time. This article looks back over the 2010s and chooses ten significant aspects of popular cinema as we move into the 2020s.

Religion: Of Gods and Men / Des hommes et des dieux

Religion has been a staple of cinema since the late 1890s, especially with biblical themes, but also the introduction of contemporary stories with religious dimensions (as in *Intolerance*, 1916).

While Asian cinema has focused on Buddhism (Japan, Korea), Hinduism (India), Islam (Iran), the various denominations and forms of Christianity have been dramatized in Europe, Latin America, the United States.

Religion on screen in Western cultures has been quite popular, often sentimental. From 2010, with the decline of Christianity in the West, cinema trends with religion have gone in the direction of serious themes (*Spotlight, By the Grace of God*, and other films dealing with clerical sexual abuse) or, especially after the commercial success of *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), an increasing number of American "faith films" with substantial budgets and technical accomplishment which have proven very successful with evangelical audiences and at the American box office.

However, the 2010s saw a number of serious films with Christian themes. And the decade began with *Of Gods and Men* (2010), winner of the special jury prize at the Cannes Film Festival, Tim Burton the head of the jury. Audiences worldwide found it a very moving film, the story of the Trappist monks in Algeria, the contemplative of life of prayer, their ministry with the locals, Muslims, the government move against them and their being murdered. One of the words to highlight the themes and treatment is "profound".

This led the way to other "profound" dramas such as the Irish *Calvary* (2014), the life of a parish priest in Sligo, ministry as well as the theme of anger at clerical abuse. It also led to Martin Scorsese's completion of his ambition to film Endo's *Silence*, going back to the Jesuit missionaries in Japan in the 17th century.

Serious religious themes were seriously acceptable.

Black cinema presence matters: 12 Years a Slave

Looking back at black presence in American cinema during the 20th century, there is a transition from exaggerated comic styles and subordinate roles to transitions in the films of the 1950s (intense dialogue between Sidney Poitier and Richard Widmark in *No Way Out*, 1950, is worth seeking out) and, especially from the Civil Rights key year, 1963, into the 1960s. There were the Blacksploitation films of the 1970s. As the century ended, there was stronger presence in front of and behind the camera.

2020 saw an escalation of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations.

During the 2010s, there was a lot of comment on how few nominations for Oscars there were for African-American talent. At some Oscar events, there was quite some verbal protest. However, 2013 saw a significantly different emphasis: the Best Film Oscar went to *12 Years a Slave*, directed by black British director, Steve McQueen, who won best Director Oscar with Lupita N'Yongo winning Best Supporting Actress. (Later, Mahershala Ali twice won Best Supporting actor; and Spike Lee won Best Screenplay for *BlackKklansman*.)

The race issue is particularly prominent for the US industry. However, race issues have been

to the fore in the United Kingdom (*Sapphire* in 1960), in France (with stardom for Omar Sy), and with other colonial nations fostering race issue stories from former African colonies.

The race issue is also key to the Australian film industry, more indigenous stories, examinations of conscience, presence of aboriginal performers as well as significant directors.

In fact, the most prolific film industry, black film industry, is that of Nigeria, Nollywood. Significantly, quite a number of Nigerian films are streamed by Netflix, giving them potential world distribution and prominence.

Women: Wonder Woman

The 2010s has been a significant decade for an increasing world consciousness about women, their dignity, their status, issues of equality, issues of abuse and harassment. Female commentators would insist that there is a long way to go. In Western consciousness, this came to a head in the Me#Too movement, significant articles, exposes, challenges, court cases, imprisonment (including Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein).

For many decades, there had been complaints about roles for women, unequal salaries, conditions, comparatively few female directors – and criticism of the Academy Awards to women (still only one woman winning the Oscar for Best Director, Kathryn Bigelow).

One of the major breakthroughs in progress for the presence and status of women was, perhaps surprisingly, in the superhero world of DC comics and films, the character of Wonder Woman. Critically, *Wonder Woman* was one of the most favourably received of the superhero movies. And, it was significantly popular at the box office. Gal Gadot impressed as a forceful screen presence in the title role. But, importantly, the film was directed by a woman, Patty Jenkins. (Brie Larson as Captain Marvel soon emerged; Scarlet Johansson had her own movie as Black Widow.)

And, there is a sequel to *Wonder Woman*, Gal Gadot directed again by Patty Jenkins, and, as they say, a third film is in the works.

The Me#Too movement and an increasing number of films directed by women, from studios as well as with independent films, is just one step in a movement that will (must) continue to develop.

Imagination: Tenet

Cinema has always appealed to the imagination. It has relied principally on images, more than on words. It has relied on the impact of moving images (frequently accompanied by music and other sounds). They make an immediate impact on the senses – providing material for the imagination and the mind. One has only to look at the Disney inheritance and its many imitators.

The latter years of the 1970s saw enormous challenges and changes to the popular imagination – 1977 and *Star Wars*; 1978, *Superman*; 1979, *Alien*. The way was open for all kinds of imaginative explorations: time travel, close encounters, parallel universes, mind experimentation… Audiences now take all this for granted,

consolidated by so many features and so many television series.

In 2020, the world was primed for a new work by Christopher Nolan, *Tenet*. Expectation was enhanced by the closure of cinemas because of Covid-19 and uncertainties about re-opening, further delays, limited release fostering envy from those still in lockdown! The hype encouraged curious speculation. Christopher Nolan's films became something of a yardstick for the power of cinema and imagination and mind games, reinforced by re-release of his two classic mind game films prior to *Tenet*, *Inception* and *Interstellar*.

Inception played its mind games in the levels of human consciousness, awake, in dreams, subconscious and unconscious. *Interstellar* moved from the psychological to the physical, life in time and in space. (And, way back, he had told a story, beginning at the end and taking the audience back to the beginning, in *Memento* – and then three *Dark Knight* movies.)

Which can lead: who knows where?

Superheroism: The Avengers Endgame

In so many ways, *The Avengers Endgame* (2019) saw the apotheosis of The Marvel Universe, the world of the superheroes. (With the D C Universe and its *Justice League* coming in second.)

We can make the comparison with the impact of *Star Wars* and its continuing popularity for over four decades (from 1977) with that of the Marvel Comics, the range of the influence of graphic novels, the popular characters, mainly male but changing with the feminisation of Captain Marvel and the increasing popularity of Black Widow.

Year by year, from 2010 (although, of course, there had been previous Marvel heroes, particularly Iron Man and The Hulk), there was an increasing number of popular films where audiences, mainly younger, could relish derring-do exploits, enhanced by ever-increasing and specialised special effects. Think *Thor*, for instance.

In 2012, *The Avengers* brought together six

of the superheroes, a rather crowded film in its way as each of the heroes lined up for their particular battle as well as for combined efforts. By 2015, *Avengers: Age of Ultron,* had the six back again but adding three next tier heroes. Infinity, suggests unlimited, and so 2018, *The Avengers, Infinity Wars*, had the central six, Iron Man, Thor, The Hulk, Captain America, Black Widow, Hawkeye and, with the popularity of blockbusters, Dr Strange, Black Panther, Spiderman and the cast from *Guardians of the Galaxies*. Rather bloated in its way.

However, with *The Avengers Endgame*, everybody was present and the plot was intricate enough to provide both drama and excitement rather than the line-up for individual battles.

Which has meant that the Marvel Universe is a worldwide cinema phenomenon, completing its first phase and venturing out to the 2020s with individual heroic exploits again.

Sensibilities and sensitivities: The Nightingale

Over the decades, the two principal issues for censorship and classification have been portrayals of sexuality, portrayals of violence. Decisions have depended on local cultures, and changes in attitudes, whether tightening of control or of greater permissiveness. There is a perennial question: how graphic can a film be in its portrayals of sexuality and violence?

It is clear that in the 21st century, there is a greater degree of frankness, especially in American cinema, concerning sexuality (and language). It is also clear that boundaries concerning violence are continually being broken, with more images of brutality.

However, the positive consequences of such breaking of sexual and violent boundaries is the presentation of adult themes with greater maturity. This also demands greater maturity in audiences, greater discernment concerning the issues raised by these themes.

A good case in point is the Australian film *The Nightingale*, screened and winning awards in Venice, scooping the pool in Australian awards in 2019. There were reports that early in screen-

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF THE BABADOOK

THE NIGHTINGALE

★★★★★
"A NEW KIND OF SCARY."
TIME OUT
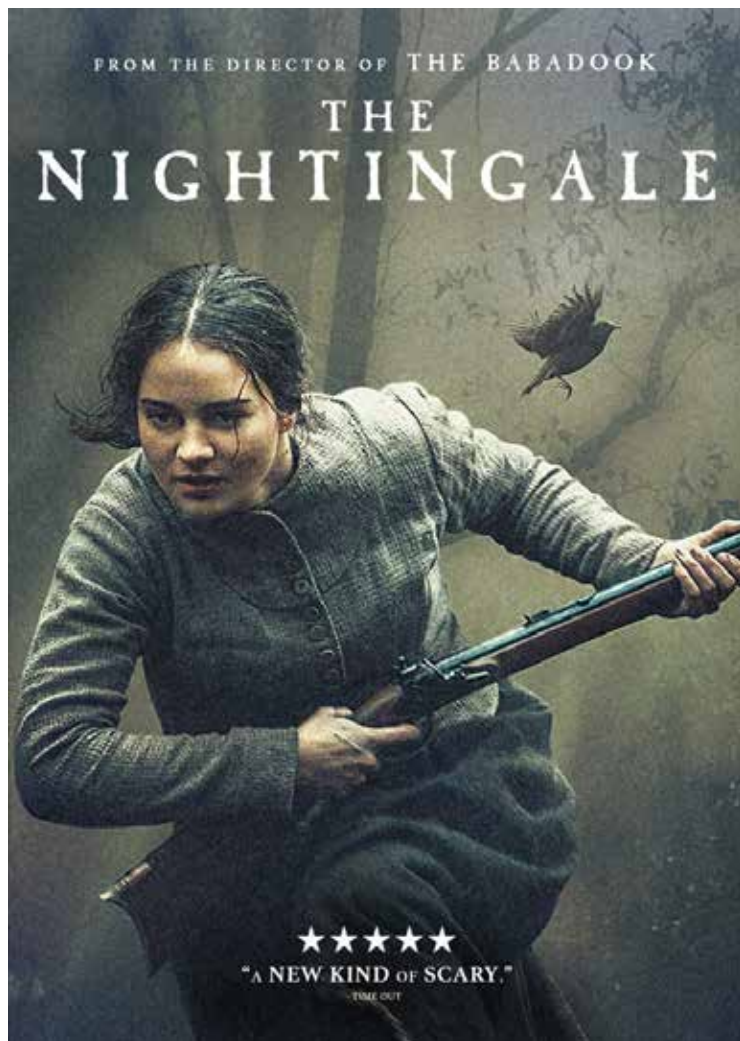
ings, where there is the brutal death of an infant, many audiences walked out, allegedly in disgust or horror. Obviously, *The Nightingale* was not condoning child murder but presenting this as a terrifying fact, especially in the convict and military setting of Van Diemen's Land in the 1820s.

There are also strong aboriginal themes throughout the film, aborigines as targets of murderous violence and violation-sexuality. The fact that the film was honoured, was seen by wide audiences, many of whom found the experience challenging, is an indication that any human experience, however repulsive, however repugnant, however shameful, can be the subject of good art.

Not that every audience has to see such productions – but they are part of human culture, a challenge to educating and refining sensibilities, the criterion for successful art residing in "how" these themes are presented.

From a religious point of view, words by Pope John Paul II in 1999 are a challenge against moral self- or community- cocooning and refusal to acknowledge these realities: "…even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice

in a way to the universal desire for redemption" (John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, 1999.)

Language: Joker

Unfortunately, when one sees the word language associated with cinema, especially in the context of censorship and classification, it usually evokes "bad" language, consumer advice of "coarse language" (or "frequent coarse language"). And there is no shortage of coarse language in the movies of past and present decades.

One could say that the abundance (or more than that) of this kind of screenplay filler is a mark of lazy writing – after all it was not available until the late 1960s and creative writers had to do without it. WTF, as they say.

But, imaginative screenwriters appreciate that they have an enormous resource in the creativity of the orchestration (to borrow from music) of words and phrases. We are fortunate that there are still many versions of classics that make their impact through words, their sounds and power, their evocative excitement.

Take *Joker*. There are some four-letter exclamations (more in context and character than in so many films) but they do not dominate. In fact, while the audience is caught up in Joaquin Phoenix's extraordinary performance, Arthur Fleck is quite articulate. In his madness, he has quite a lot to say and says it arrestingly. *Joker* is a reminder that so many films underplay their use and power of words, underestimate the stimulation of wider vocabulary choice, of metaphor, of phrasing.

There was excitement in the late 1920s with the introduction of the talkies, a transition from dialogue cards to the human voice, words, intonations, verbal emotional expression. This need not be lost in four-letter lazy alternatives.

Horror: Get Out

There has been quite a propensity for audiences to like horror films, almost from the beginning of cinema. It came to the fore with German Expressionism (*Dr Caligari*) at the end of World

War I. In the 1930s, universal studios produced classics of *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*. At times, some countries banned horror films – and the studios resorted to spoofs. In the 1950s came the British Hammer studios and reworkings of the classics – and beyond. The latter part of the 20th century produced such horror films, and television series, in abundance.

With changing sensibilities and sensitivities, there was more explicit blood and gore. The popularity of monster films and variations on the themes led to worldwide festivals of horror. However, more serious filmmakers began to incorporate horror elements and conventions into their films, seen especially during the 2010s in the American films produced by Jason Blum and Blumhouse (for instance, in the box-office popularity of the 2020 remake of *The Invisible Man*).
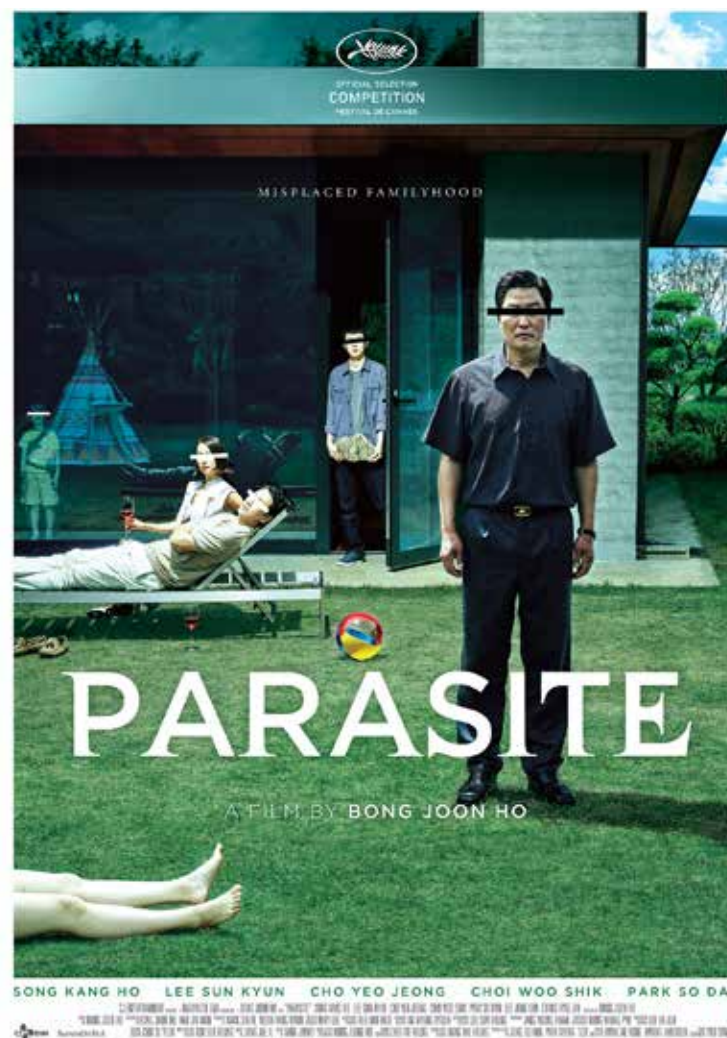
Symbolic of the change in the move to more "respectability" and acceptability by wider audiences of horror films was Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. This was a horror film for a wider audience, better defined characters, creativity and the situations, relying on a sense of menace rather than the presence of blood. It was significant for this change in perceptions of possibilities for horror films that *Get Out* received Academy award nominations, winning for Best Original Screenplay (and, according to the IMDb, another 152 wins and 201 nominations from Festivals and Critics' organisations worldwide). Peele was to continue with *Us* (2019) and developing television series like *Lovecraft Country* (2020).

Repeating the point made earlier: by 2020, horror films, rather than the small-budget blood and gore exercises, had won an improved status.

Beyond Hollywood: Parasite

While Hollywood has dominated the popular imagination for the movies, cinema industries were set up in many countries in the early 20th century. Production and distribution were impeded by both world wars, leaving the way open for American dominance.

After World War II, there was greater recognition of films from various national indus-

tries. It was cinema from European countries that initially made impact. However, Japan was also notable, (Ozu, Kurosawa). By the end of the 20th century, acknowledgement was made that India produced the greatest number of movies each year though few were seen beyond India itself or Indian communities around the world. Another industry that featured well by the end of the century was that of Korea. There was also worldwide respect for Iranian cinema.

In the mid-2000s, with the advent of Netflix, a great number of films from industries beyond Hollywood and the United States were featured, often with subtitles. Many films from Spain and Latin America screen on Netflix as do many Indian films – and, surprisingly for many, quite a number of Nigerian films. It is worth noting how Netflix has contributed to such broad access to films from diverse nations.

The reason for highlighting *Parasite* is its success at the 2019 Academy Awards. Not only did it when the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film but it surprised many (more than many) around the world with its success and recognition Oscar for Best Film and Director. The film

was re-released, greater numbers of audiences going to see it, an acknowledgement that, from an English-speaking point of view, subtitled films from anywhere in the world should be screened and seen.

Screening/streaming: The Irishman

First, audiences went to the movies, the pictures, the cinema. Then they rented 35mm and 16mm prints for school and social functions. Then there were movies on television. Then came video, VHS, DVD, Blu-ray… And then came cable channels. Then came VOD, video on demand, as well as availability, especially of older films, on Youtube. Then came the streaming companies, Netflix and the various other platforms. (And, unfortunately, and illegally, there was piracy.)

The choice of *The Irishman* to illustrate streaming highlights the popularity of the variety of streaming platforms. And, this came to the fore, so unexpectedly, and suddenly, with the lockdown of cinemas because of Covid-19. Everybody around the world, or, at least, those who could afford streaming, were at home watching the movies, the television series, the documentaries, the programs on Netflix and other platforms.

There were ideological and practical conflicts with the streaming companies financing feature films (and whether they were eligible for festivals and for competitive awards). Netflix financed *The Irishman*, gave it some theatrical exhibition before it began its streaming life. *The Irishman* was viewed by millions within a short time. The streaming companies finance their own productions as well as picking up a wide range (from low quality to high quality) of films. Films from countries like Nigeria, India, Spain, and Argentina find greater distribution worldwide through streaming than in cinemas.

A 2020 perspective

A 2020 retrospect on the trends of the previous decade. A film which encapsulates so many of the emphases on developments is *The Old Guard*.

First of all, it was released on Netflix, reminding everyone, especially in the context of Covid-19, that movies on streaming platforms offer enormous availability, could be relied on for immediate viewing at home. Figures for *The Old Guard* came in at 72 million viewers in the first week of release.

And for the other trends? The central character, the leader of the troop of Old Guard heroes is female, Charlize Theron. No question that she was in charge. So, as with *Wonder Woman*, there

were no bounds in theory for strong female presence and leadership. And, in *The Old Guard*, the audience was introduced to the second central character, the new guard, who was also a young female, who served as a Marine in Afghanistan, (KiKi Layne).

And not only the emphasis on gender, but the fact that she was an African-American. Gender and race equality emphasis. The other members of the Old Guard were from Europe, from Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, secondary in the group, male. There was a glimpse of another of the guard, female, who suffered a dire fate but who seems to resurrect in order to be in the sequel. She is played by Van Veronica Ngo, born in Vietnam.

Africa? An ostensible villain, but whose heart is in the right place, is played by Chiwitel Ejiofor. (And, as in so many American films, the villain is British!).

Two of the old Guard, European men, are gay, with speeches about the intensity and nobility of their love.

Another feature of *The Old Guard* is that there is no specific reason given for the immortality of the Guard, their sufferings and deaths and their continued resuscitations. There is no mention of the supernatural – but, without a rational explanation of the immortality, there are intimations of some transcendent power.

And so, into the 2020s. ∎

Peter Malone is a Missionary of the Sacred Heart who has taught Old Testament Studies and Theology at the Yarra Theological Union, Melbourne. He also headed the Catholic Film Offices of the Pacific and Film Offices at world level, including being President of SIGNIS (World Catholic Association for Communication) 2001-2005. He has written a number of books of religion and film, especially Screen Jesus. He has been reviewing films since 1968.

Why film festivals can (not) inherit cinema culture

Lars Henrik Gass

Let's not dogmatically discuss the meaning and purpose of online festivals but find more tolerance for complexities in this area. For me, at least, this is not a question of ideology or attitude towards film and cinema, but a fragile temporary answer to a social crisis that calls for new solutions.

A solution that is wrong for one festival may be right for another. There is a difference between a large international film festival with a long tradition and competitions or a festival without competitions with a more regional reach, a short film festival, an archive film festival or whatever. Film festivals have a historical substance, a specific character and sometimes completely different target groups. What seemed possible and necessary for a festival in May, might prove to be wrong or insufficient in November. Our answer in Oberhausen would probably have looked different two months earlier or later. It's not about an either/or, streaming or cinema. In short, what might have made sense for us in Oberhausen cannot be transferred to others.

So, we are not only talking about temporary answers, but also about non-transferable answers. I trust neither a crypto-cineaste fetishization of cinema nor an affirmative technological vision of the long-distance society. At best, this is how you get out of the good old days or into the brave new world. Both are equally scary. I am more interested in what individual answers film festivals find to different conditions, i.e. how credible, creative and plausible the respective answer turns out.

Transformation of cinema culture through film festivals

When we had to cancel the event in Oberhausen in spring 2020, three questions were in the foreground: What does the cancellation mean for the filmmakers, for the freelancers and, above all, for the development of the festival itself. Here, too, the answers had to be individual: As far as the filmmakers were concerned, we saw the need to carry out already finalized programs and competitions. As far as the staff was concerned, we recognised the social responsibility of securing their salaries.

Last but not least, the online edition represented the seriousness of a collective training for ourselves, in which we could question the conventions and self-images of a film festival. Our individual and temporary answers were also intended to initiate a structural change in film festivals in general. This was because the commercial as well as cultural relevance of cinema has been dwindling for decades: a structural change from market to brand, from mediation to exploitation, in other words: a transformation of cinema culture through film festivals.

Why does a film festival have to be limited to place and time? On the contrary, why shouldn't a film festival use digital resources to give people who cannot or may not travel access to films? Here we are also talking about a possible new democratization of film culture at a time when cinema had largely left this role to digital media long before Covid-19. Anyone who wants to see a decent film today either has to travel a long way or preferably stay at home and make use of streaming.

The decline of the cinema cannot be understood and prevented by the fight against technology alone, but also politically is a struggle that frees the cinema from economic interests and places it on an institutionally equal footing with the other arts.

So why not try out whether and how a festival can be done in a completely different way in order to convey film culture? No one has yet claimed that festivals should now take place permanently online. But if cinema and television for the public communication of film culture are increasingly failing, the festivals themselves will have to step in. Whether the festivals, which have long since ceased to be (or never wanted to be) a "market", will thus have to become a "trade mark" is then no longer a question of marketing.

What we have learned and achieved in this process helps us to better shape the future of the festivals. We are not advocating the abolition of cinema, but the development of new strategies for the benefit of filmmakers, film culture, and the audience. It is not about a dreary replacement for an event in the "real" world, but about a new, continually flourishing idea of festival. This is basically a social question, not just a cultural one.

Structuring the social question

In Oberhausen, we set up a streaming portal with about 350 films and over 60 programs in two months. And in an even shorter time we set up a festival blog, which grew to about 130 contributions by mid-June. The blog was driven by the idea that a festival could be a space from which to think about everything, to connect everyone. The blog was an attempt to make visible the process in which we and others found ourselves. It contained contributions from many to many, freely accessible. Our conditions were that it must not be about short film and not about our festival.

For the streaming portal we had hoped for 1,000 festival passes sold. It became almost 3,000. So why shouldn't we have shown these people films, films that were worth seeing and for which there was obviously an audience? We had set a price of 9.99 euros, a psychological price – a nod to the price structure of streaming portals. We didn't want to charge more than a cinema ticket and at best we wanted to set the threshold so high that the risk of disappointment didn't seem immeasurable.

Our evaluation showed that we reached half of a completely new audience. That was the real success. Without a doubt, we also lost people who didn't want to watch films on the Internet. We reached children and schools, people over-

seas. People joined together to form viewing communities, others bought festival passes to support the donation. The income was donated for social purposes.

I think that shaping the social question is the unmistakable parameter of the attitudes that are represented in this debate: what exactly we do for those who make films, who want to see films, and those who make sure that this is possible. This is a collective task, not an individual one, a political one, not a cultural one, just like the fight against the climate crisis.

The place is the festival, not the city

We don't do online festivals because we see them as a last resort, but because cinema is currently forbidden to us; because we have to protect those who want to go to the cinema; because we want to offer those who now don't know where to show their films an opportunity to show them to others; because we want to support people economically; because we want to look for new solutions, think and talk. In short: because we want to make film culture possible even during the crisis and we understand that film festivals have long since taken on a new responsibility in the communication of film culture.

Now the genie should be put back in the bottle; the potential of the Internet for festivals and thus for film culture would be best seen as regulated. The number of possible viewers for a program on the Internet should be limited, digital reach of the programs should be as close as possible to the city's horizon: replication of the province on the Internet.

But an online festival should not re-establish geopolitical borders. The place is the festival, not the city. The vital political negotiation process among all participants on how to deal fairly with questions of geo-blocking or festival premieres in the future is buried in an ideological conflict. Sooner or later, against the backdrop of the dramatic erosion of the cinema landscape, which is not being stopped politically, festivals will have to consider how film culture can still be communicated with very limited resources. That would be a battle to be fought together.

A plan for the future

However, it is gradually becoming clear that cinema no longer fits in with the structural change of a public sphere in which people actually only like to act as if they were private. In every art exhibition you can "switch", not so in the cinema. In cinema, consciousness is subject to a technical regime: a view of the world. Cinema, once considered a place of entertainment, protects us as a media-historical relic from arbitrariness, from distraction, by referring us to the world in which we live.

There is no place in cinema for a subjective approach to the world. This distinguishes cinema from the arts and new technologies in equal measure. And that is radical about cinema and has always remained so. It is a cultural practice, a changed relationship to the world, not just a new art form. And this is precisely what made cinema so suspicious and prevented its recognition in the established bourgeois culture, also in its critical expression in advanced art discourse, which always wants to perceive only art in the cinema and not what is more radical.

Cinema box-office revenue has been declining for decades and has been in free fall since before the Covid-19 pandemic. Politics reacts at best with emergency aid, not with planning. Thus cinema is left to the market, while governments try to save business models in a crisis that has no end.

Cinemas committed to film art have their backs to the wall. From the outside, this does not feel like a desire for the future, but rather like a fear of doom, of streaming platforms, of the overpowering art world and so on. And yet action is urgently needed now.

* Firstly, cinemas committed to film art will have to be maintained by public funding, at least in the big cities. Against the background of social and technological developments, most associations are hopelessly overburdened with the rescue of the cultural practice of cinema in the 21st century.

* Secondly, the future of cinema will have to be realized in the context of advanced cultural buildings, in order to be able to offer urban societies a plausible cultural program with a quality of stay.
* Thirdly, cinemas will have to be supported in a structural change that would also include streaming offers, i.e. the expansion of the role model. Cinemas could thus also become digital screens, to the benefit of all those involved.

A cinema of the future would thus have to paradigmatically redeem the media-historical specificity of cinema and at the same time solve completely new tasks. These include reaching an audience through the quality of architecture, gastronomy, work opportunities, participation; not understanding the contrast between the digital and analogue world, between reception and production in an antagonistic way, but creatively, and also meet the highest ecological and technological standards.

The social loss of significance of cinema, which in its history has always been driven by commercial demands and was subject to grotesque designs, has created a momentum for its rediscovery as a cultural practice. It is only the process of the historicization of cinema that has brought the possibility of a regulated museumization into consciousness: that the business model can be allowed to die and cultural practice saved at the same time.

The lack of acceptance of cinema culture is also due to the fact that it has never been possible to free cinema in public space from the commercial interests and functional contexts of other cultural sectors. Cinemas have either been banished to the cellars of museums or buried under investor architecture. Since the 1960s, cinema has hardly been considered a cultural building like a museum, a philharmonic hall or a theatre. Therefore, the bourgeoisie could never be interested in it. Moreover, such a cultural building was never understood as a contribution to urban development or as an intelligent contribution to sustainable climate architecture.

The task now is to discover cinema culture as a living social space again. It will have to adapt to societal changes in the work and leisure society (cinema on demand, video on demand, etc.), rediscover co-working spaces and the connection to the film-related arts in appropriate spatial conditions (performance, expanded cinema, etc.). A cinema of the future would have to be a place that forces the individual to be perceived collectively.

In short, one will have to rethink cinema as a cultural building aesthetically, architecturally, socially, technologically and in terms of urban planning, and thus also as a living component of urban culture. This cinema could be much cheaper and more sustainable than other cultural buildings by allowing for individual scaling and uses. In the future, cinema as a cultural practice will have to convince socially through architectural and urban planning impulses. ∎

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The end of cinema at the edges of social life

S. Brent Plate

The global coronavirus pandemic has prompted a new round of apocalyptic predictions for the survival of cinema as we know it. During the 2020 lockdown, while corona cases were continually tallied, news reports told of the imminent end of the glorious pastime. Variety *asked, "Will Movie Theaters Survive Corona?"* CNBC *said, "Dire outlook for cinemas as coronavirus resurges in U.S.,"* while CNN *noted, "Movie theaters are struggling to survive the pandemic."*

The end of cinema would seem to be just around the corner. Or maybe not.

Cinema's demise has been repeatedly predicted over the past one-hundred years, challenged by television, home video, and streaming services. The latest round of challenges will undoubtedly alter the structure of movie production, distribution, and audience experience, but something of it will continue, as cinema evolves to meet new demands.

The real and lasting changes in these media mutations will be modifications of the human body and social relations. Like all technological inventions – from the wheel to the alphabet to the railroads – cinema is not simply a tool used and forgotten about when the usage is over. Cinema is a technology that shapes and reshapes how human bodies move, perceive, and live together. Its transformation into something new impacts human life on a physical, social level.

Cinema's bodily rituals

Every movie needs an audience. The mythic history of the birth of cinema does not begin with the physical development of movie cameras through the 1880s and 1890s. Instead, the beginning of cinema is generally tied to the year 1895, when the Lumière brothers held a public screening of a few films in Paris.

Since then movies have been screened in cafes, traveling carnivals, church basements, town squares, living rooms, as well as the specially built places we tend to think of when we think of cinema: movie theatres. It is the sense of socially shared viewing that defines the idea of cinema, and it is this very nature that is under threat today with the need for social distancing.

Movies need an audience, and more specifically they need bodies. It is what makes cinema what it is: a projected image on a screen with an audience that sits, listens, watches, and sometimes cries, laughs, screams in fright, and squirms in anticipation.

As much as cinema is about a space in which films are projected, it is also an event that occurs in time, in the shared presence of human bodies, simultaneously gathered together.

Because of this, cinema can be thought of as a special type of ritual. As with all rituals, the experience goes far beyond the dialogue of a movie or the spoken words of the rite. They are performances, acted out in specified times and places in which certain actions are permissible and others are not. Behaviours within the ritual are distinct from behaviours outside of ritual, as participants get the chance to inhabit another world.

Throughout history, rituals have always been deeply sensual experiences. From the floating candles of an *arti* offering seen from the banks of the Ganges river in India to the visceral pilgrimage of the Camino de Santiago in Spain to the bitter herbs of Passover in a Brooklyn apartment, rituals connect people together by stimulating the body. Humans participate in rituals by smelling, looking, touching, hearing, and tasting.

For the cinematic ritual, words matter, but

so do colour and rhythm and music and movement, not only on screen but felt within the bodies of those in their seats. Audiences get to see and experience actions that may not exist in their lives outside the movie, at least not in the same ways: love and murder, espionage and space travel, heroic actions and historical reconstruction.

In this way, the movies move people beyond the audio and visual into the tactile, as heartbeats quicken, skin gets goose bumps, and tear ducts swell. More rare, but not unheard of, olfactory and even gustatory senses are stimulated as synesthetic qualities are unleashed when the big screen offers close ups of food being prepared, a smoke-filled room, ocean waves and a cool breeze.

People laugh when others laugh in their seats nearby, connecting movie audiences together, even if it's a room full of strangers. A kind of strange intimacy is created, conjured out of light and sound. In the presence of humans – strangers and family alike – movies gain an emotional power that keeps people coming back for more.

This is all shattered with a global lockdown, as people are forced to watch movies in new places, in new ways. Of course, streaming services were already challenging the longevity of cinema, and the pandemic has brought to the fore many practices that have been emerging for two decades. Even so, there were challenges before this as well.

Cinema pre-Covid

To be clear, this isn't the first time cinema has been on trial.

The Golden Age of Hollywood lasted from the 1910s to the 1960s. Across two world wars, women's suffrage, the Great Depression, post-war affluence, the influx of the automobile and related birth of suburbia, the medium of film dominated the collective, media unconscious of the United States.

While film production companies fuelled the American Dream for over a half century, they were eventually hobbled by antitrust lawsuits and, crucially, the rise of television, especially when

colour was added to the domestic appliance. Already by 1950, the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Variety* were running stories on the demise of cinema in the face of television's increasing popularity.

With television, the same sights and sounds of big screen theatres could be appreciated in the comfort of one's own home. And as public space shifted, from the streets and town centres to the interior of one's own house, the nuclear family also rose as a key social force. The mass distribution of television in the mid-twentieth century not only *reflected* the primacy of the post-war nuclear family in shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, television actually helped *create* the nuclear family by the ways the medium was consumed.

Fast forward a few decades and the same stories were trotted out in the same publications about the rise of movies on VHS, and eventually DVD, and how these new modes of consumption would destroy cinema. Alongside this, cable and satellite television became a major force.

Remember that HBO, the longest running subscription television service, begun in 1972, is "Home Box Office". It was self-consciously bringing the cinema theatre home. And it was HBO that most fully infused television shows with film-like qualities. *Oz*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and others were hour-long shows with high impact visuals, strong acting, and sophisticated editing. The difference between cinema and television was greatly reduced, especially when home television screens grew larger, connected with state of the art sound systems.

Into the twenty-first century, streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime are again challenging cinema. These platforms, along with the rise of smart phones, create the ability to watch movies in one's own time and space, challenging not only the old communally based rituals, but the nuclear family structures as well.

Cinema, stories and social life post-Covid

In 1981, Michael D. Eisner, then President of Paramount, wandered through the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas and marvelled at

the new technologies that were part of the "video revolution." He admitted to some bewilderment and wondered about the future of movie production.

Arguing against the McLuhanesque wisdom that the "medium is the message", Eisner revived the message, rebuking the technophiles and their prophecies of cinema's imminent collapse. He claimed, "whether it is on a 25mm screen, or a 25 inch or 25 foot screen or cassette or cable, it is all still entertainment and all still needs the basic values of story and plot and interpersonal relationships."

A similar argument can be made today, as movie streaming becomes the dominant mode of content delivery, and as a microscopic virus threatens to finally dismantle the dream machines of twentieth-century cinema. Stories will survive new technologies, and stories will survive the virus.

There's something to Eisner's point, and the importance of narrative and interpersonal connections continues to hold true. Yet, that's not the whole story.

Humans need narratives, big and small, but stories are always sensed: heard, watched, touched. They are not free-floating entities, but deeply embodied, visceral, mediated, and shared with others. Because of this, the medium has a large impact on the story itself. It is simply not the same story if told around a fire pit, viewed on a 10-meter screen, heard as an audiobook while commuting to work, or watched on YouTube in between class periods.

This isn't just a change in modes of production with a set of winners (e.g. Netflix) and losers (e.g. Paramount film studios). It's about a change in cultural practices, the ways our bodies move around in space and how we bump up against each other and our technologies. Each of these media evolutions alters the ways human bodies perceive the audio-visual productions, the ways we embody the stories we live by, in and out of ritualized time.

Every new media technology collapses time and space just that much more. Using the Greek prefix *tele-* (meaning "far"), a string of technologies through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries allowed people to stretch their communications and stories over long distances. The tele-graph assured people of "far writing", the tele-phone gave "far hearing", and the tele-vision "far seeing".

These media brought the ideas, sounds, and sights from far away closer to us in the here and now. As they represented voices and writing and visions from somewhere else, they brought with them the presence of the far, far away.

Now, with the "world wide web", video conferences that fuse dozens of people in their own homes through a single screen, and audio-visual narratives at one's ever-present beck and call, media technologies have reduced the size of the world and condensed time so everything is seemingly *immediate*.

There's a paradox at work here, and the reality of the paradox is central to understanding audio-visual media in a streaming, post-Covid age. Every new media development in the history of the world – paper, printing presses, telephones, televisions, and networked computers alike – have promised to collapse time and space to the point where the medium disappears, so it feels as if it is "im-media-te", without media. We can call this feature of new technologies "mediated immediacy".

As we shift our prime modes of media participation we also shift key experiences of our bodies and social lives. We move from large screens to ever smaller screens. We change from theatres that were built for consuming movies at specified times to ubiquitous viewing on commuter trains, in bedrooms, classrooms, and walking down the street. And we turn from viewings in the company of others to individualized usage. Media is always on, accessible anywhere, and seemingly beyond media.

If television helped break down the extended family into nuclear family units, current video ubiquity, propelled by Covid-enforced social distancing, breaks the nuclear family into atomized units of individuals.

Only it doesn't stop there. A social fabric built on mediated immediacy fragments even the individual self, that bedrock invention of the modern age. And good-bye to all that really. Individualism is vastly overrated. But what then is to be said for interpersonal relationships? The imagined nation? Religious traditions? What is common among the community? The commonwealth?

The answers are far from clear. But it seems imperative to realize that shifts in media consumption are not merely economic shifts, nor technological ones. New media technologies entail new social structures, new arrangements of human bodies in time and space.

I offer one parting thought. For everything else Covid has wreaked on humans, every once in a while it created some reflection about our media consumption. As a professor of media studies, I have never had so many conversations with students, friends, and family about media itself than I did during 2020.

We talked on Zoom, and talked about talking on Zoom. We messaged, and became grateful for the messaging systems. And we streamed videos, sharing our latest ways of passing the lockdown with whoever would listen on social media.

Refusing the illusion of mediated immediacy, it's almost as if we became, for a moment in time, aware of the media we used, at the same time we were using it. If anything might create a shared sense of story, it may be those moments. ∎

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Richard Attenborough's Oh! What a Lovely War

Philip Lee

Cinema has seen hundreds of war films. Many glorify heroism. Many depict horror. "What sets the best war movies apart, though, is their ability to never lose sight of the real human cost of war. The true masterpieces of the genre can deliver spectacle, yes, but they also tell us something more essential at the heart of every epic struggle in human history, something that unites us all no matter which side of the battle we may be on."[1]

In 1961 the military historian and politician Alan Clark published *The Donkeys: A History of the British Expeditionary Force in 1915*, a revisionist account of the early years of British involvement in the First World War. In 1963 Joan Littlewood, a British director famous for developing the left-wing Theatre Workshop, produced a stage musical called *Oh, What a Lovely War!* based on Clark's book and on a few a scenes adapted from Czech humourist Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*. In 1969, British director Richard Attenborough transformed that musical into a film involving many of the leading stage and film actors of the day.

The stage musical is traditionally performed in Pierrot costumes, using images of war and shocking statistics projected onto a backcloth in stark contrast to the satirical comedy of the action. The stroke of genius of director Richard Attenborough and his screenplay writer Len Deighton was to recast the stage version in a *mise en scène* combining "reality" with end-of-the-pier

burlesque.

Actually filmed on West Pier, Brighton, a seaside resort on the south coast of England, and caricaturing the class distinctions between officers and "other ranks", the statistics of war dead are presented on cricket scoreboards. Some critics, notably the American Pauline Kael in a review originally published in *The New Yorker*, felt that this treatment diminished the impact of the appalling numbers of deaths.[2] Yet the desperate irony was not lost on other viewers, who recognised British sang froid, and it is considerably reinforced by the film's overall tone and its powerful ending.

Oh! What a Lovely War places some thirty First World War ballads and music hall numbers within a fanciful but coherent historical narrative. Wartime euphoria is juxtaposed with life and death in the trenches and with the constant flow of maimed young men returning home from across the Channel. The songs comment on the misery and banality of life at the front and the horror and absurdity of war. One is sung to the tune of the hymn "What a friend we have in Jesus" and acts as a counterpoint to the army padre's blessing of soldiers before they go into action:

"When this lousy war is over
No more soldiering for me.
When I get my civvy clothes on,
Oh, how happy I shall be!
No more church parades on Sunday,
No more putting in for leave.
I shall kiss the sergeant-major,
How I'll miss him, how he'll grieve!
Amen."

The film

It is 1914. The film begins with a pageant of the crowned heads of Europe and their prime ministers cavorting on a giant map. Each country assures its neighbours of its peaceful intentions while simultaneously preparing for hostilities. An emcee-like character, who reappears throughout the film, gives poppies to the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife. The photographer's flashbulb explodes and they are both dead. A senile Emperor Franz Josef is tricked into signing a declaration of war and the nobility assure each other that the hostilities to come will not change their personal affection for each other.

The assassination of the Austrian Archduke, aided and abetted by a tangle of aristocratic alliances, deceit, and diplomatic ineptitude, throws Europe into chaos. In England, a rousing patriotic campaign ensures widespread enlistment and optimism for a quick victory over the "Huns". All the conscription-age males in the Smith family – representing the common person – enthusiastically join a sea-front march by the Grenadier Guards, obtaining their entrance tickets to the pier (whose fun-fair sign reads "World War I") at a booth run by the arrogant and career-minded Lieutenant-General Douglas Haig. The theme of an incompetent and class-bound military leadership throwing thousands of men into battle on a daily basis for weeks, months, and years recurs throughout the film.

In the music hall at the end of the pier, the Smith women watch their sons, husbands and sweethearts being enticed on stage by vaudeville artiste Ella Shields (the "Southern Nightingale", who sang the original music hall song "Oh! It's a lovely war"). Before she appears, a chorus of girls carrying lacrosse sticks perform against a back-cloth that represents the elitist Roedean School for Young Ladies (situated close to Brighton) – reinforcing, for those who recognize the allusion, the film's class divisions. The music hall act is the lure; reality strikes when the men step on stage to meet a garishly made-up and overlit Ella Shields who immediately hands them over to the kind of recruiting-sergeant familiar from Kitchener's famous "Your Country Needs You" poster.

Most of the songs in the film are about the miseries or daydreams of the soldiers at the front. Some are given a macabre twist: "Hush! Here comes a whiz-bang ... and it's headed straight for you!" In another scene a group of scruffy and unruly Australians sing "One staff

officer jumped right over another staff officer's back", lampooning the officer corps that kept a safe distance from the front. At the other end of the spectrum, "Stille Nacht" (Silent Night) is sung during the so-called "Christmas Truce" that took place on the Ypres Salient in 1914 when soldiers from both sides left their trenches for a few hours to greet each other in No-Man's Land.

The military high command conduct their campaign at one end of the stylized and sanitised pier from which only distant gunfire is audible. On a tower high above the pier, now Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig peers at the French coast through a spyglass while, in the ballroom below, the cricket scoreboard shows the name of the current battle followed by the daily tallies: "60,000 soldiers killed. Ground gained: Zero". Back in France, wagonloads of simple white crosses are being delivered to the front lines and the soldiers are digging mass graves. We begin to realize that the Smith boys and their comrades are unlikely to be coming home.

We hope God will look kindly on our attack

Oh! What a Lovely War is not overtly anti-religious. Yet the hypocrisy of supporting the futile stalemate of trench-warfare, the connivance of officers and the established church, are underlined in a number of scenes claiming that God is on the side of the British. At New Year 1916, Haig affirms that "God is with us" and "Every step I take is guided by Divine Will." However, this is the stubborn, self-righteous, and inflexible "Butcher of the Somme" speaking. The attitude of many of Haig's contemporaries, and the assumed stance of many clergy serving in the army, are encapsulated in the padre's speech given in a ruined church on the eve of yet another attack:

"Dearly beloved brethren, I am sure you will be glad to hear the news from the Home Front. The Archbishop of Canterbury has made it known that it is no sin to labour for war on the Sabbath. And I am sure you would also like to know that the Chief Rabbi has absolved your Jewish brethren from abstaining from pork in

the trenches. Likewise, His Holiness the Pope has ruled that the eating of flesh on Fridays is no longer a mortal sin. And in faraway Tibet, the Dalai Lama has placed his prayers at the disposal of the Allies. Now brethren, tomorrow being Good Friday, we hope God will look kindly on our attack."

This scene initiates a series of prayers. Haig prays: "Oh God, show thy face to us as thou didst with thy Angels at Mons" (a reference to a group of angels who supposedly protected members of the British army during the Battle of Mons at the outset of World War I). One of the Smith family, who has joined Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service, prays: "Lord, I beg you, do not let this dreadful war cause all this suffering... I know you will answer my prayer!" She is answered by gunfire. Haig again: "I thank you God. The attack was a great success. The fighting has been severe, but that was to be expected. There has been some delay along the Menin Road, but the ground is thick with enemy dead." The film is scathing about the British Empire's enlistment of divine providence.

At the end of the film, one of the Smith boys is the last solider to die before the Armistice. He follows a red ribbon leading from the trenches, through No-Man's Land, to the pier-end ballroom where a peace treaty is being signed. In this dream sequence, he runs in shirtsleeves and bare feet on the green grass of England's South Downs. Three of the Smith women are picnicking a few yards away, but cannot see him.

In the film's final shot, the camera pulls back from a single white cross on the Downs to reveal the Smith women in their white Sunday dresses moving between rank after rank of white grave markers. The screen fills with hundreds of crosses that blur into a shocking expression of the numbing reality of millions of lives wasted.

The scene is reminiscent of the grim epilogue to the film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), when the ghosts of German soldier Paul Baumer and his comrades march through a sea of white crosses in fields strewn with corpses. Today,
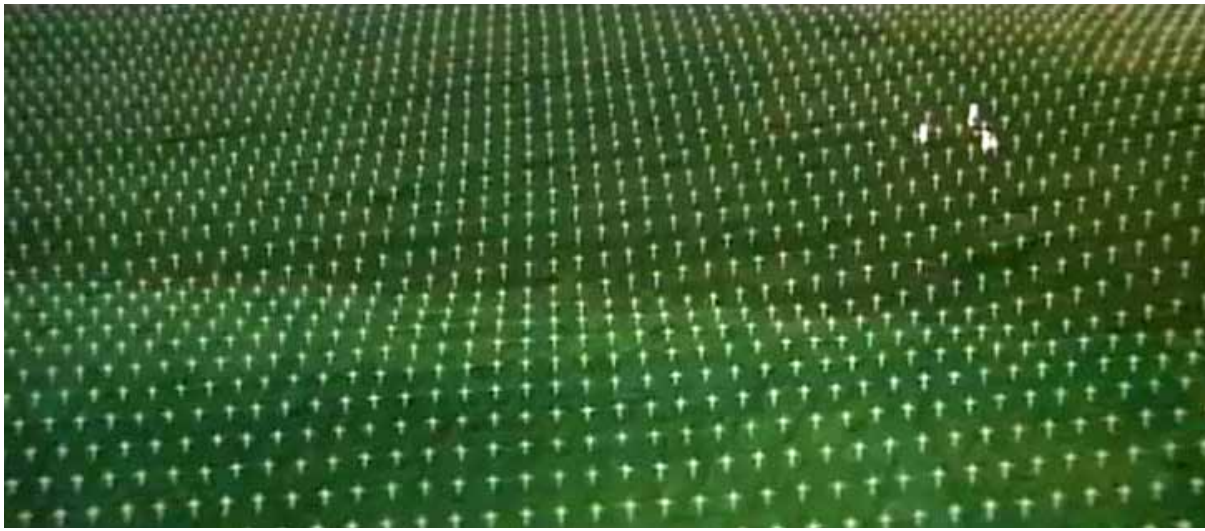
both are mirrored in graves elsewhere in Europe: at Srebrenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The anti-war film as a civilising influence

There are clearly different perceptions of the First World War in the national histories (and mythologizing) of the U.S.A. and Great Britain. American film critic Vincent Canby, writing in *The New York Times* (3 October 1969) described *Oh! What a Lovely War* as "focused on a dim, far-off era that now seems almost as remote as the time of the Wars of the Roses." That was not the case in Britain, where an annual ceremony of national remembrance – with the poppy as its chief symbol – and a growing number of revisionist history books kept World War I in the public gaze. Robert Ebert, writing in the *Chicago Sun* (30 October 1969) thought that, "the deepest impact of the film comes from the realization that there have been wars even more horrible since this one" – a significant comment.

It is a paradox that the great achievements

of civilisation – literature, music, art, cinema, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) – are not in themselves capable of civilising humanity. Yet cinema can still be – in the words of Australian film critic Peter Malone – a "moral compass" for the great issues of life and death. Anti-war films question the expected allegiance of ordinary people to geopolitical and economic ambition. They don't ask what are you fighting for so much as why are you fighting?

They underscore what the poet Wilfred Owen called "the old Lie: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori."

We need films like *Oh! What a Lovely War* to remind us of our common humanity. It challenges what is brushed under the carpet: political expedience, disinformation, lies, and the brutalities that inevitably ensue. It challenges what Samuel Earle calls the allure of war, "a kind of ideal: a time when everyone knew their place and happily fought together against a foreign threat."[3]

The sad fact remains that, in a world in which governments flout the UDHR and disparage the United Nations system, in which geopolitical and economic interests outweigh the lives and dignity of millions of human beings, in which inequality and poverty are seemingly entrenched, the striking lessons of films like *Oh! What a Lovely War* have yet to be learnt. ∎

Notes
1. Jackson, Matthew. "The 25 Greatest War Movies of All Time". Mental Floss. 9 January 2020.
2. Kael, Pauline (1973). "Off with the statues' heads!" in *Deeper Into Movies*. Boston: Atlantic Little Brown.
3. Earle, Samuel. "Remembrance Day is an exercise in collective amnesia." *The Guardian*, 8 November 2020.

Philip Lee is General Secretary of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) and Editor of its international journal *Media Development*. His publications include *Public Memory, Public Media, and the Politics of Justice* (ed. with Pradip N. Thomas) (2012); and *Expanding Shrinking Communication Spaces* (ed. with Lorenzo Vargas) (2020).
Leipzig (Germany) 2020

ON THE SCREEN

Leipzig (Germany) 2020

At the 63rd International Leipzig Festival for Documentary and Animated Film (DOK Leipzig) held October 26 – November 1, 2020, the Interreligious Jury awarded its Prize to *En route pour le milliard* (Downstream to Kinshasa) directed by Dieudo Hamadi (Democratic Republic of the Congo, France, Belgium, 2020).

The Prize of the Interreligious Jury is endowed with €1500, jointly donated by the Interreligious Round Table Leipzig, the Oratorio zu Leipzig and the VCH-Hotels Deutschland GmbH - in the Association of Christian Hoteliers e. V. including the Hotel MICHAELIS Leipzig.

Motivation: This film (still below) was made in the midst of much obstruction from various sides. Yet it magnificently shows how people wounded and handicapped as result of the atrocities of a six-day war in their city Kisangani gradually accepted their conditions and subsequently made the best of it. They decided to head to their country's capital to claim the money that the government received in order to restore their living conditions.

In the meantime the audience sees how people determined by their being victims take their lives in their own hands again and become men and women celebrating the victory of the opposition in the elections. In their misery, they increasingly show up well. This is something found in many religions: that God inspires people to struggle for justice for themselves and for others.

Members of the 2020 Jury: Freek L. Bakker, Netherlands (President of the Jury); Anna-Maria Kégl, Germany; Seyyed Mohammad Hossein Navab, Iran; Anita Winter, Switzerland.

Lübeck (Germany) 2020

At the 62nd Nordic Film Days Lübeck held November 4-8, 2020 (online), the INTERFILM Jury awarded the Church Film Prize, endowed with 5000 € by the Evangelical Church District Luebeck-Lauenburg, to the film *En helt almindelig familie* (A Perfectly Normal Family) directed by Malou Reymann (Denmark, 2020).

Motivation: The film succeeds in an excellent and sensitive way in telling about what it is like to be part of a family. There are no heroes or villains - only people who love each other and yet are incompatible with each other because we are all people with different needs, hopes and dreams. The perfect normal family story takes us beyond of the boundaries of the ordinary, only to show that true human values can overcome all obstacles and are present in all situations. In our opinion this is highly relevant because it does not concern the topic of gender reassignment itself, but the fact that changes in identity are a challenge to our relations. The film is very well executed and a

jewel of acting especially by the two girls.

In addition, the Jury awarded a Commendation to the film *Tigrar* (Tigers) directed by Ronnie Sanndahl (Sweden, Denmark, Italy, 2020).

Motivation: The gate is narrow, the right path is narrow - this could underline the theme of this well told story. It shows the tense situation in professional sports and brings a topic of today's society to the point: The fulfilment of dreams is put above everything else, in this case in football. On the one hand, the football players are gilded by society. On the other hand, they are cut down to their outermost limits. *Tigers* is a film that makes the viewer think a long time after the screening. It is an excellent work that is authentic and contemporary in its narrative style.

The members of the 2020 Jury: Ingrid Glatz-Anderegg (President of the Jury, Switzerland); Guntars Laucis (Estonia); Inga Meißner (Germany); Morten Sternberg (Denmark).

Mannheim-Heidelberg (Germany) 2020

At the 69th International Film Festival (held online 12-22 November 2020) the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize, endowed with €2500 by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the Catholic Film Commission for Germany, to *Una promessa* directed by Gianluca and Massimiliano De Serio (Italy, France, Belgium, 2020).

Motivation: The film (still below) tells the story of a widowed father and his son forced to work as illegal farm laborers in southern Italy. Framed by a scene of familial warmth and tenderness and told through an intensely personal aesthetic, *Una promessa* shows the deeper significance of love in a world of poverty, humiliation, and death. The film leaves us with a strong statement on human dignity and the need for breaking the circle of exploitation and violence. A sign of hope remains with the boy who can begin something new.

In addition, the jury awarded a Commendation to *The Slaughterhouse* directed by Abbas Amini (Iran, 2020)/

Motivation: The film follows the fate of three men who cover up the traces of corpses they discover in the company meat freezer. Shot as a crime film with a stark visual palette, the film places an internal moral crisis at the heart of the narrative rather than representing a more straightforward external conflict with the authorities. The film asks us, how can we be human in inhumane circumstances and in that sense bears a universal message that echoes well beyond the borders of Iran.

Members of the 2020 Jury: Gergely Hajnal, Hungary; Michael Kranzusch, Germany; Uta Losem, Germany; Mina Radovic, United Kingdom; Rianne Wijmenga-van Dijk, Netherlands.

Editor's note: The latest film by the twin brothers Gianluca and Massimiliano De Serio – Spaccapietre (Stonebreaker) – was screened at the 77th Venice International Film Festival in September 2020.