

Terri Simone Francis, editor

Introduction: Film Programmers Speak

This In Focus comprises essays by film programmers and editors about their crucial work in the summer of 2020, in the wake of the protests after the murder of George Floyd and as the COVID-19 pandemic re-shaped public life. Whether these presenters engaged issues of racial justice or the pandemic directly in the method and material they programmed, attention to the work and professional contexts of those who make our current screen experiences possible is not only timely but urgent. As institutions from universities to museums seek to foreground cultural values of inclusivity, film programmers, exhibitors, and distributors join academics and archivists in the mission of film preservation and wield significant power to shape the public's imaginary through the films they decide to introduce, screen, or protect and how they present them to the public.

Looking at film culture from the perspective of film presenters makes it clear that film communities, especially scholars, need to attend to the work of bringing movies and people together. Film programmers labor behind the screen in a variety of roles, managing both the endless concrete details of administrative work and the abstract conceptual work that film exhibition seems to both require and devour. As such, they are well positioned to speak with authority about the effort that cultural change requires. The particular film programmers and curators sharing their wisdom in this In Focus are Melissa Lyde, founder of Alfreda's Cinema; Maya Cade, creator and curator of Black Film Archive; Brett Kashmere, director of Canyon Cinema; Livia Bloom Ingram, film programmer and vice president of Icarus Films; Daniella Shreir, founder and programmer of Another Screen; Jon Dieringer, editor of *Screen Slate*; and Heitor Augusto, film programmer and co-founder of NICHÓ 54. Typically, these professionals remain in the background, ceding center stage to the films and filmmakers they cham-

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pion. But here, for the first time in some cases, they write candidly from their unique vantage points as institution builders. Together they theorize what I call this “years-long 2020” as an era that both requires and allows for renewed frameworks of care, rest, and creativity. Such frameworks not only facilitate what audiences watch on-screen but also bring critical attention to how they watch and process those experiences.

This years-long pandemic of uncertainty, grief, and loss has revealed yet again the fragile bonds and railings that hold American society just to this side of total collapse. Or are we in the aftermath of collapse and still falling? At this writing, over six million have been lost to COVID-19 globally; on February 7, 2022, the bells of the National Cathedral tolled 900 times in remembrance of 900,000 US deaths. What will the death count be when this *In Focus* collection on film programmers and their efforts to expand the film imaginary is published? This years-long period of devastation is further marked by lives lost to what I can only think of as a centuries-long ongoing crisis of anti-Black state violence enacted chaotically and brutally—killings that are unsettling for their random yet systemic nature. Invoking this crisis, I remember Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, who were killed in 2020. I am further shaken by news of Amir Locke’s murder on February 2, 2022, as he slept huddled in a blanket in Minneapolis. And yet somehow the streets are filled with traffic, with people flowing to and from social events, campuses, and shopping malls. As a society, many of us, across demographics, go on. Institutions have gone on. I go on. Yet however necessary I am told that it is to return to normalcy (or whatever this is), it still feels like a betrayal of my hopes for the questioning and changing of norms, for justice and expanded equity.

I still recall my feelings of relief in mid-March 2020 as my calendar of overproductivity cleared. One by one, various obligations were postponed or canceled, and my days became quiet, became mine. Where my overcommitments had been were now emptiness and disappointment, to be sure, but also relief: breathing space even as breathing became dangerous in a new way. That’s how I would define the years-long moment of the COVID-19 pandemic: an exhausting cycle of sighing to exhale and then suddenly catching and holding my breath at the latest horror, worrying always about what I was breathing in.

It’s now spring 2022, and a big part of my mind is still caught in horror, as if suspended in amber at the events that precipitated this years-long 2020. That suspension arises in part from the death all around us but also from my deeply felt sense of betrayal and abandonment. In March 2020, I felt something close to optimism, because questions of power, justice, and equity were front and center, including the urgency of addressing climate change, honoring the #MeToo movement, and affirming that #BlackLivesMatter. It seemed that even regular (not specifically activist) white people were upset about the corrosive effects of racism, and not just in the abstract but in the lived realities of actual people.

I miss the sound of protests today, because I wonder if as film educators and curators we haven’t all missed the chance to rethink and reimagine everything about what we do, how we do it, and why we do it. It seems now

that the range of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statements issued from colleges and universities, multinational corporations, and museums reflected less solidarity than the co-optation of genuine movements for change. Are small mission-minded film distributors, programmers, and curators more trustworthy? What is the name for the particular kind of preemptive, protective exhaustion people of color (I) feel at the thought of returning to contexts that leave them (me) vulnerable to being targets of microaggressions, not to mention the ever-present possibility of violent trivialities interrupting or even leading to the taking of their lives? Where do we (I) find rest?

This In Focus on film presenters comes out of my desire to recognize and explore the often unsung creativity and originality involved in the hard work of truly expanding the visual narratives of Black and brown lives by making sure forgotten films are seen and new films find their audiences. Film presenters facilitate access. They are conduits between audiences and the movies. As social changes spotlighted the stakes of being together, it is fitting to hear from those administrators, curators, and entrepreneurs whose missions involve throwing open the gates and bringing audiences into community with one another through film exhibition and distribution. In their roles, these cultural leaders responded to the long 2020 moment in creative ways that challenge how we see and show the movies. What's more, they expanded access to rarely seen and urgently needed material. Their exhibition work and the forums they created constitute a crucial form of film preservation in that they document expanded visions of film history in the present while contextualizing this work with new ideas and original writing.

As contributor Melissa Lyde writes, “[r]est seems rather minor alongside the colossal and endless loss of life magnified by COVID-19 these last few years.” Yet with her illuminating discussion of “ecstatic rest,” Lyde inspires readers to reframe their moviegoing as a creative act. All of the essays touch on the pivot to virtual exhibition in 2020 and what was gained or lost in that turn. The essays illustrate the many forms of work and creativity that go into making film culture more inclusive. Expanding the range of available film materials is the product of goodwill and serendipity as much as professionalism, as Livia Bloom Ingram points out in her reflective essay on the restoration and re-release of Madeline Anderson’s films. Both Ingram and Brett Kashmere, who writes about Toney Merritt’s films and their material life, explore this years-long moment through historical narratives about crucial cultural organizations and the restoration work they do. Consequently, I see this In Focus as bringing the many magicians—or rather, the *workers* behind what appears to be the magic of film presentation—out from their projection booths and offices to share their perspectives on what it means to show movies right now: a time of diminished resources when many of us have new and multiple care responsibilities and reduced social infrastructure for support. Jon Dieringer calls for compassion for film workers; he notes that “[e]xhibiting film—particularly on film—requires a great deal of labor that is often unseen or unacknowledged. It depends on an ecosystem of programmers, print traffickers, projectionists, distributors, communications and social media personnel, managers, ushers, and other front-house staff.” Dieringer’s

thoughts echo across the collection, but his contribution highlights the interdependent workers and systems that move movies onto the screen.

To assemble this collection, I invited film distributors, media center leaders, collectors, and programmers to write about their work in the years-long moment of 2020–2022. I opened the door to anecdotes, rants, manifestos, essays, personal perspectives, or historical narratives that would address what it means to be a film programmer now. I encouraged authors to reflect on what it means to collect, sell, screen, stream, aggregate, distribute, and otherwise center film and media in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the #BlackLivesMatter protests of summer 2020, the 2020 US presidential election and subsequent insurrection, the ongoing climate change crisis, and the #MeToo movement.

Many of the contributors are entrepreneurs working with small groups of collaborators or on their own both to conceptualize their projects and to bring them to reality. They are driven by personal passion and social mission; as Maya Cade writes, “The most pressing impetus for Black Film Archive’s birth was an ongoing conversation in the Black community regarding Black trauma in film” that predated the 2020 protests. And Black Film Archive has in many ways sought to make encounters with Black images, on a variety of themes and historical moments, enticing and informative. Sparked by feeling “desperate” to show Italian filmmaker Cecilia Mangini’s work, Daniella Shreir’s *Another Screen* “aims to place films in their historical context and, through interviews, essays, and the films themselves, give them a new or more extensive life through translation.” Subsequent short-term screenings on this free-to-view platform have featured rarely seen work by Fronza Woods, six Brazilian films about labor and work, Marguerite Duras’s French television documentaries, and more. Formed during the pandemic, these creative and visionary portals bring rarely seen materials to new audiences within new critical frameworks. All the *In Focus* contributors speak from deep ethical commitments to audiences and love for the movies that draw our attention, as audience members and scholars, to a vulnerable and changing infrastructure that requires compassionate and participatory spectatorship. To that end, Heitor Augusto engages the very project of film presentation, calling on programmers of Black film in the United States to decenter US perspectives and to engage more with Latin American artists. Like all of the contributors, Augusto writes in the first person from a place of expertise and experience, providing both analysis and a form of memorial. Thus, the authors of this *In Focus* mark but also look beyond our collective experiences of this years-long 2020 moment. Through their work, audiences of all kinds have found new ways to be together apart as we explore a new future amid the horrors, amid the possibilities.