

Jon Dieringer

Filmgoing's Often Unseen Labor

The repertory and art house theaters in New York City started to announce that they were closing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on March 12, 2020. Within a few days, any holdouts were shuttered by then Governor Andrew Cuomo's executive order to close the in-person operations of all non-essential businesses. By the time theaters were given permission to reopen in March 2021, several factors had changed the operating ecosystem of repertory and art house cinema, including their venues, distributors, staff, critics, and archives.

The pandemic accelerated technical trends that had been growing over the preceding decade. During that time, celluloid film exhibition became an increasingly rarefied (and in some cases fetishized) experience; discourse around film shifted online as print publications and alt-weeklies closed; and streaming platforms increasingly pulled consumers away from the cinemas to consume film and television series through a constellation of personal screens and devices. Even before the pandemic, these developments presented the public-at-large with a nagging question: Why pay to see a digital video projected in a cinema when you can watch it at home, at your convenience, and process the experience entirely online? The analog cinephilia of film prints, in-person viewing, lobby chatter, and thoughtfully edited print publications was already in jeopardy; the COVID-19 pandemic put it on an indefinite pause.

If one knew where to look, though, there were occasional signs of cinematic life. Like many of my friends, I made several pilgrimages to the Mahoning Drive-In in Leighton, Pennsylvania, a longtime destination for weekend-long marathons of 35mm prints (often exploitation films from col-

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lectors/presenters such as Philadelphia-based Exhumed Films). In 2020, the Mahoning felt like a godsend for those of us withdrawing from lack of grain and flicker in our images. Back in New York, experimental filmmaker Bradley Eros occasionally threw socially distanced outdoor expanded cinema screenings on rooftops, in gardens, and in parking lots. And despite *Film Comment's* abrupt and disconcerting hiatus at the onset of the pandemic, there was an unlikely resurgence of film culture in print. This revival included new zines such as the *Infuriating Times*, a xeroxed compendium of notes, manifestos, and dispatches from the projectionist/archivists at the Chicago Film Society; *No Cinema*, an illustrated publication of essays; and critic Nick Pinkerton's *Bombast* zine. (*Film Comment* did relaunch as an email newsletter one year after it ceased print publication.)

But if this narrative of accelerated cultural decline seems trite, perhaps less so would be an account of how shifting attitudes about labor have changed filmgoing, not to mention how other practical and often invisible aspects of the film exhibition ecosystem have contributed, for better and for worse, to the uncertain ecosystem of film presentation in 2022. Before March 2020, cultural workers at institutions such as the New Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music began to unionize, and this continued through the lockdown as employees of Film at Lincoln Center and Anthology Film Archives also voted to form unions.¹ This wave of labor organizing can be seen as an inevitable reaction to the untenable wages of cultural work in New York City today, not to mention the absurdity of a system in which healthcare is tied to one's employment as a public health crisis shuts down the economy. Few, if any, executives at cinema nonprofits lost their jobs during the pandemic, but many front-line employees were laid off, including box office staff and managers as well as programmers, projectionists, publicists, and marketing assistants. At mission-driven nonprofits that rely on momentum and routine, such as nonprofit theaters, most workers are only paid a fraction of what executives earn. When the economy shut down in March 2020, it was inevitable for employees in all industries including film institutions to ask, What am I doing here, who is benefiting from my work, and am I being valued at my worth?

As of this writing, repertory and art house cinemas in New York have reopened, and it's useful to take stock of how things have changed. In January 2022, the Omicron variant led to rapid fluctuations in new COVID-19 cases and created a period of renewed challenges and uncertainty. Exhibiting 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.

For programmers, obtaining prints has only become more difficult since the pandemic started. In my own experience programming at Roxy Cinema Tribeca, getting written confirmation of a 35mm booking is now often only

1 For example, see "Anthology Film Workers Hold One Day Strike in Fight for Fair Contract," AFL-CIO New York City Central Labor Council, accessed April 17, 2022, <https://www.nyclc.org/news/2022-04/anthology-film-workers-hold-one-day-strike-fight-fair-contract>.

a tentative guarantee of its availability. Both myself and other programmers I've talked to have announced screenings only to receive soundtrack elements instead of a film print. That was my experience with *Def by Temptation* (James Bond III, 1990) in October 2021; the venue announced that the film would be screening in a digital format before the distributor informed us that a print materialized, only for it to not be a print at all. At other times, distributors send something with a vaguely similar title. That happened with a Metrograph screening of *Unfaithful* (Adrian Lyne, 2002), which they received by mistake instead of a planned-and-canned show of *Unlawful Entry* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1992). Film programmers have begun to swap notes about the respective failings of FedEx (faster but less reliable) and DHL (once slower but more reliable, but now the worst of both worlds). Shipping delays were not unheard of before, but anecdotally they seem to be more frequent. Perhaps it's a mix of pandemic fatigue at all points of communication plus the difficulty of accessing physical archives when many people are still working remotely. Due to labor issues and employees being stretched thin, there often aren't opportunities to do a proper print inspection in advance.

As a filmgoer, I wonder what my own expectations for COVID-era exhibition should be. Although I care deeply for analog film exhibition, I am sometimes surprised to hear others vent their frustrations about last-minute format changes or venues being slow to communicate schedule changes. Maybe cinema's typically escapist or immersive nature makes a less-than-ideal presentation feel like a betrayal even when it becomes necessary due to trying circumstances. However, the future of film exhibition depends on acknowledging the often unseen labor that goes into screenings. It depends on patrons being respectful to front-of-house staff during these uniquely uncertain times. When film worker unions communicate with their audiences about what they can do to help, it's important to listen and follow through. As in so many other aspects of professional and social life, film exhibition is a place where people come together to imagine a more equitable future. To me, such a future must involve workers being compensated fairly relative to owners, executives, and managers. As filmgoers, it's our role to support them however we can.

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