

# Streaming Hope, Streaming Despair, Still Streaming

B. Ruby Rich

It is a human habit, perhaps, to project the present into the future—a default mode that drives forward even when the road has crumbled. So it was with film in Year One of the pandemic, characterized by a state of denial shaded with panic. By the end of 2020, film festivals were adjusting their schedules according to an imaginary “after” as if the vaccine were set to materialize imminently, universally, and magically everywhere, to step out from behind the curtain and restore life to what it used to be: movie theaters open, film festivals under way.<sup>1</sup> Presumably in the screen version, in the new “normal” world, the more than a million dead will be rendered living again (if only).

Are film scholars and cinephiles uniquely programmed for this kind of fantasy? Perhaps the alternative has been just too awful to imagine. But for anyone already weary of screens, screens, screens, there has been scant alternative, even in terms of column inches across publications. A lot of attention, including in *FQ* editorials, has been focused since the start of the pandemic either on the public spaces of film festivals and movie theaters or on the private accommodations of home viewing and mediated participation.<sup>2</sup> Somewhat perversely, every form of page-only, noninteractive “dumb” media has offered its readers an education in companies and platforms: Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, RingCentral, Microsoft Teams, and the new one that has probably arrived by the time you read this. At the same time, in the digital domestic sphere, there has been a barely remarked reproduction of the pervasive social inequities outside: no computer, few computers, bad internet, no Wi-Fi, less access to platforms and interfaces, less or no income, less or no childcare, less or no access to extended family (at least, not without significant risk). The pandemic is more than a pundit assignment, and it was killing massively at press time.

In terms of the public sphere, plenty of ink has been spilled opining as to the future of movie theaters, with theaters still shuttered and commercial chains declaring



Chicago's Pickwick Theatre, expressing the sentiments of many.

imminent collapse.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the art-house sector found a way to continue (though its finances may not look that way) through building out and sharing portals to retain a loyal audience—and perhaps may even be able to follow the bookstore model of in-person and online retention in the days to come, in spite of Amazon, Netflix, Apple, and the other emergent behemoths.

However, the COVID era has had and should continue to have a more extensive impact on the fields of film and media studies and production, one that bears examination. Let me be clear: this isn't my first time on such an assignment. I delivered an earlier set of concerns and predictions after 9/11 in the pages of *The Nation*.<sup>4</sup> Back then, I was correct about some things (film production would return to genre) and wrong about others (no new film noir ensued). But 2020–2021 is of a different order of magnitude. And as the film and television and streaming world has amply displayed since 2016, it is easier to produce escapism or personal dramas than to construct new kinds of narratives, structures, or characters to help audiences imagine routes out of the real-life nightmares currently being enacted.

Consider the past four years of fiction releases. Since the election of November 2016, what nondocumentary work has emerged to make sense of the US turn to fascism? Instead, there has been a deliberative or inattentive or supposedly market-driven turn to escape: the escape of science fiction, the escape of the costume-budgeted past,

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Joan Micklin Silver, 1935-2020.

the escape of decontextualized interpersonal drama, the escape of animation, and, of course, the escape into the political struggles or victories of the past. Certainly there are lessons offered in past movements. But not enough for today's challenges.

Rather than new narratives or mere tales, I'm calling for a sense of modeling, a hint of how to advance into a wholly different future here on earth, in the United States, in the current decade. I am not asking for a blueprint—not from Hollywood, not from the indie sector. Rather, I am asking for a conjuring, for someone to seize the reins of the moment and issue a proclamation.

And the same for cinema and media studies, while I have your attention. The profession continues apace, even in a time of academic constriction, but continues to be far too bound in homage to the theoretical constructs of its moment of emergence in the US academy. Those proud citations of 1970s journal articles and 1980s dissertations have ossified. As American Studies has evolved rapidly, taking on the most groundbreaking theoretical approaches of decolonializing, of race-specific constructions, of decentering whiteness and reinscribing a whole world of analysis previously missing from the canon, as film studies still waits.

I've written all this before, I know. But writing on the cusp of a new year, with a full moon in the sky and a victory celebration for legal abortions in Argentina in the streets, with a US inauguration in the works and a breath of hope in the air, I want the field in which I've spent my entire life—first as a curator, then critic, in public philanthropy, then journalism, on radio and television, as a scholar, in the academy, as an editor—to mobilize itself. May COVID be a



Nelly Kaplan, 1931-2020.

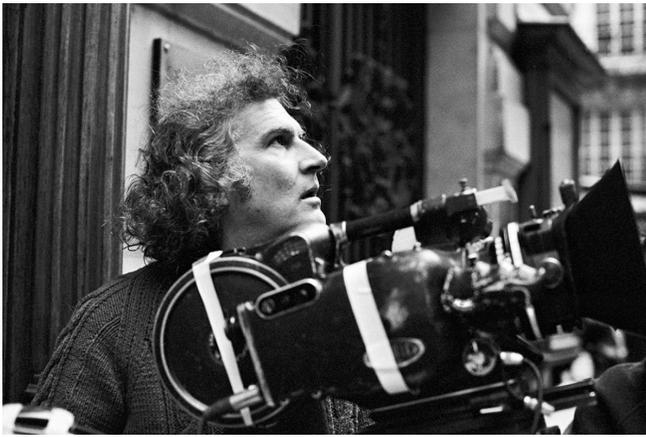
prompt to change the world for the better, and may a near-year of confinement and millions of deaths and illnesses result not merely in loss but also in a shift of settled habits that allows folks to imagine a different future. And if film and media can't help with that imagining, well, it will be a great loss.

### R.I.P.

Meanwhile, many losses of life occurred in late 2020 in the field of cinema. Here I choose to note three in particular.

Joan Micklin Silver was one of the first women to emerge as a director in the wave of feminism's expansion in the 1970s, well in advance of the "indie cinema" explosion that opened so many new pathways to the screen. Her debut feature *Hester Street* (1975) did for Jewish immigrant life on the Lower East Side of the early twentieth century what Martin Scorsese did for Italians in *Mean Streets* (1973), albeit in an entirely different register. Among the many other films of her sustained career, *Between the Lines* (1977), and *Crossing Delancey* (1988) stand out and mark her as a predecessor to Susan Seidman, Nora Ephron, and the others who created a female-attuned, audience-friendly New York cinema. RIP, Joan Micklin Silver (May 24, 1935—December 31, 2020).

Two other key figures, both Argentine, died of COVID. One was Nelly Kaplan, the Argentine-born French filmmaker who had emigrated to France in her twenties, arriving in January 1953, and meeting her mentor/lover Abel Gance soon after. She was profiled by Joan Dupont for *FQ* in 2018 and was interviewed by Dupont on video in 2019;



Fernando Solanas, 1936-2020.

see the *FQ* website.<sup>5</sup> Kaplan was one of the pioneering filmmakers (re)discovered by the women's film festivals when, in the early 1970s, they went searching for women directors who had surely existed but been almost entirely erased by the patriarchal machinations of official film history and auteurist myopia. She was best known for *La fiancée du pirate* (*A Very Curious Girl*, 1969), produced like all her others by her lifelong partner Claude Makovski. She died of COVID complications, a few months after Makovski's death. RIP, Nelly (April 11, 1931–November 12, 2020).

The other loss, Fernando Ezequiel Solanas, known universally as “Pino,” required no rediscovery. He blazed to attention in the 1970s for his collaboration with Octavio Getino, which resulted in their codirected masterpiece *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968) and the founding of the Third Cinema movement. Their film and coauthored manifesto “Toward a Third Cinema” were landmark critiques of capitalism and colonialism that sparked countless film imitations. Threatened under the dictatorship, Solanas, like Kaplan, also moved to France, living there from 1976 to 1983; unlike Kaplan, he lived in Buenos Aires after the return of democracy.<sup>6</sup> He served as a deputy and senator several times, at one point opposing the resurgent fascism of then-president Carlos Menem so openly that he was shot in the legs as retribution. He reinvented his style with *Tangos: El exilio de Gardel* (*Tangos: The Exile of Gardel*, 1985) and numerous other films, as well as continuing in politics. RIP, Pino (February 16, 1936–November 6, 2020).

I've chosen the last two to honor in these pages because I knew both personally across the years. Monumental figures who blazed their own trails at a key point in the history of the medium, the politics of feminism, and the antifascist struggle, they were very different embodiments of the best of their time.<sup>7</sup> Their visionary leadership will be missed.

## In This Issue

It's rare in the life of an editor that every feature stands out as special, but such is the case in this wonderful issue.

Cameron White's study of the media battleground in Hong Kong, “Pixels, Police, and Batons,” is a compelling analysis of the streaming video that emerged from the 2019 protests, seen in the context of the earlier tradition of Hong Kong gangsters-and-cops movies and the rather shocking new Chinese videos generated online in support of the anti-protest police actions.

Patrícia Mourão de Andrade's essay on the life and films of Helena Ignez is a revelation. She traces Ignez's key involvements in Brazil's Cinema Novo and Cinema Marginal movements as a boundary-crossing actress, then discusses her reinvention as a director at the age of seventy-eight, alongside her director daughters, in the contemporary world of Brazilian film.

Christian Rossipal considers the aesthetic implications of recent documentaries that explore the refugee experience in the Mediterranean region, assessing what form can yield in terms of both justice and understanding, and makes an argument for a “poetics of refraction” to etch the subjective experience of border crossings into the record.

Sarah Kessler takes up the role of gender in humor (and vice versa) in her astute consideration of both Hannah Gadsby's series *Nanette* and *Douglass* and in *Work in Progress*, starring Abby McEnany and cocreated with writer-producers Tim Mason and Lilly Wachowski. Kessler credits these series' audience-pleasing prominence (on Netflix and Showtime) to a “butch middlebrow” that may be a tad too comforting.

Joan Dupont introduces filmmaker Michelle Porte, a French documentarian with television training and a specialization in literary figures. If her name is not familiar, that of her major subject and collaborator will be: Marguerite Duras. Porte was a close observer of postwar French cultural life through finely attuned documentaries that trace its evolution.

*FQ*'s columnists in this issue are concerned with issues of suppression, repression, and danger across a range of new works. Bilal Qureshi writes on the importance of Asim Abbasi's *Churails* and its “veiled avengers” righting the wrongs committed against women in Pakistan, while placing his enthusiasm in the context of a history of Pakistani censorship. Manuel Betancourt links the example of *El puto inolvidable*, about the life of the out gay Argentine activist Carlos Jáuregui, to such recent Latin American works as *Rainha da Lapa*, *Indianara*, *Lemebel*, and *Bixa Travesty*,

arguing for queerness as a longtime revolutionary presence that deserves official recognition in the annals of cinema.

For a report on fall film festivals, see my thoughts on the Toronto International Film Festival and the New York Film Festival, both “attended” through streaming, of course, together with my jury report from the DOK Leipzig festival.

In this issue’s “Page Views,” Bruno Guaraná interviews scholar Lúcia Nagib about her latest book, *Realist Cinema as World Cinema: Non-Cinema, Intermedial Passages, Total Cinema*. As her title makes explicit, Nagib charts a path from nothingness to an all-encompassing totality, through an “intermediality” that she traces with close textual analyses of key works. Notably, her inquiry results in staking out a version of film history that privileges “realism” over the problematic term “world cinema.” Note that, as always, the “Page Views” interview also appears on the *FQ* website along with a free download of a chapter from Nagib’s book; see the website, too, for copies of the webinars with authors now presented along with every “Page Views” selection.

Carrie Rickey’s lead review in this issue takes up Frederick Wasser’s new book, *Twentieth Century Fox*, which arrives with ironic timing just as the name has become defunct under its new Disney ownership. She notes with surprise how much of the company’s century-long history can be found intact right in the beginning, when it was launched in the 1920s by its founder, William Fox (born Fuchs), a Jewish Hungarian immigrant with a business acumen inspired by the real-life “sex, scandal, and blood” of the tabloids then ruling New York. He built an empire on that foundation that continued right up to the Zanucks and the Murdoch age.

In other reviews, Tom Klein assesses Kit Smyth Basquin’s *Mary Ellen Bute: Pioneer Animator*, Martin L. Johnson reviews Haidee Watson’s *Everyday Movies: Portable Film Projectors and the Transformation of American Culture*, Jessica Scarlata considers Susan Liddy’s edited volume, *Women in the Irish Film Industry*, and Carlos Kong assesses *Making Worlds: Affect and Collectivity in Contemporary European Cinema* by Claudia Breger. Yet again, it’s a great time to be reading.

## Notes

1. Ben Dalton, “2021 Film Festivals and Markets: Latest Dates, Postponements and Cancellations,” *Screen Daily*, December 21, 2020, [www.screendaily.com/news/2021-film-festivals-and-markets-latest-dates-postponements-and-cancellations/5155284.article](http://www.screendaily.com/news/2021-film-festivals-and-markets-latest-dates-postponements-and-cancellations/5155284.article).
2. For one such analysis, see Bryan Walsh, “The Death Spiral of Public Life,” *Axios*, December 12, 2020, <https://apple.news/AgPruWOKNQ7S11pXdEMQk3Q>.
3. See, among others, T.C. Sottek, “Warner Bros. Believes That Theaters Will Still Exist in 2023; We Just Don’t Know Which Theaters Will Survive,” *The Verge*, December 24, 2020, [www.theverge.com/2020/12/24/22199173/warner-bros-mad-max-furiosa-2023](http://www.theverge.com/2020/12/24/22199173/warner-bros-mad-max-furiosa-2023). Sottek makes the ominous observation that “Warner Bros. ruffled some feathers when it announced it would release all of its new 2021 movies simultaneously on HBO Max. . . . AMC has warned investors that it will run out of cash in the middle of January if it can’t find \$750 million.”
4. B. Ruby Rich, “Back to the Future,” *The Nation*, October 15, 2001, 44–45.
5. See Joan Dupont, “Searching for Nelly Kaplan,” *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (Summer 2018): 22–32, <https://filmquarterly.org/2018/06/08/searching-for-nelly-kaplan/>. Dupont’s video interview with Kaplan, as recorded by Manuel David in 2019, can be accessed at <https://filmquarterly.org/2019/04/21/nelly-kaplan-in-conversation-with-joan-dupont/>.
6. He returned to Paris in 2019 as ambassador to UNICEF and died of COVID-related causes there.
7. Their obituaries appeared in the “Those We’ve Lost” series reserved for deaths from COVID in the paper of record: Neil Genzlinger, “Nelly Kaplan, Whose Films Explored Female Strength, Dies at 89,” *New York Times*, November 20, 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/11/20/movies/nelly-kaplan-whose-films-explored-female-strength-dies-at-89.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/20/movies/nelly-kaplan-whose-films-explored-female-strength-dies-at-89.html); and Daniel Politi, “Fernando Solanas, Argentine Filmmaker and Politician, Dies at 84,” *New York Times*, December 4, 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/obituaries/fernando-solanas-dead-coronavirus.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/obituaries/fernando-solanas-dead-coronavirus.html).