

Stuttering Cinema, Stuttering Democracy, Stuttering Globalism

B. Ruby Rich



Cannes 2021 jury president Spike Lee flanked by fellow jury members.

As the year 2021 crept along, it became increasingly schizophrenic. Emerging from pandemic lockdowns was euphoric—until news of the redubbed Delta variant began to dash hope and cause doubt or panic. Still, theaters announced their reopenings and cinephiles flocked, some nervously, some exuberantly. The Pacific Film Archive, profiled in this issue, set September 1 as its indoor reopening date. Cannes

took place, as promised, with glazed looks of believe-it-or-not excitement on every face on the red carpet and Spike Lee presiding as jury president at last; it concluded just as France began a new round of restrictions. Venice, the last festival to take place before lockdowns, said it would throw open its doors again. Telluride revealed that its 2021 edition would take place, following last year's cancellation. And, inevitably, as the summer wore on, folks abandoned Zooms to dip their toes in the literal waters. In some places, drive-ins began to close as movie theaters opened back up, while in others, festivals instituted outdoor screenings to jump-start audiences again. Some rushed to mingle and toss away masks; others rushed to remask and headed out of interiors again.

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One friend compared the world's current status to that moment at the end of a horror movie when, just as the credits are rolling and everyone's feeling safe at last, a hand shoots up out of the muck and, boom, the monster's back, a sequel is on the way, and as the screams in the theater announce, nobody is safe any longer. I hope the screamers are wrong; I fear they're not. As always, I dream that perhaps some film in production now, some book in press, some exhibition in the planning will offer, if not answers, at least hints or maps to a way forward.

In the meantime, the reappearance of boundaries and borders is notable: not only the divide between the masked and unmasked, the vaccinated and the unvaccinated, on the global stage, but also a renewed guarding of national borders and an escalated resurgence of nationalism amid lockdowns and the promise/threat of vaccine "passports." These moves are not incidental to cinema. In April 2021, Konstanty Kuzma and Moritz Pfeifer wrote in the newsletter of the *East European Film Bulletin* that there was a global openness and collaboration early in the twentieth century that was extinguished by the first flu epidemic, citing a key US law that "curtailed migration from Southern and Eastern Europe, introduced in 1924, [and] was in part motivated by fear of disease transmission. The global cooperation and migration that could be observed prior to 1914 wasn't reached again until the 1970s."¹ It's a chilling history. Kuzma and Pfeifer are clearly aware of its proximate relevance, adding that already "it will require a concerted effort to (re)build international partnerships and a more inclusive form of mobility."

These are concepts that were echoed in a more specific and geographically precise manner on the official website of the Berlinale's Forum & Forum Expanded website: "At a time when withdrawing into one's own country, city, neighbourhood, flat or family is what's being suggested, there's a considerable risk that our realms of perception will shrink accordingly."² The theme was further elaborated by Berlinale Forum director Cristina Nord in her essay on resurgent racism and its cultural artifacts, also published on the Forum & Forum Expanded website: "Anyone seeking their fortune in universalism in the face of all these dilemmas also won't get very far: as this position takes a utopia as reality, it tends to forget real existing misery. Yet this implies that some must wrestle far more violently than others in gaining entry to the paradise of a discourse without dominance. Their limbs are thus already heavy, and they've already lost a few teeth before they get to stroll among those who are all free and equal."³ Nord rejects the defense of cultural autonomy, opting instead for "the open expanse" that does not require

guarding the entry door. I, too, opt for that open expanse (though I worry that the thugs are indeed making it necessary, for quite opposite reasons, to begin guarding doors).

With the cultural sector currently engaged in a bit of long-overdue soul-searching, post-BLM and post-#MeToo, it's a good moment for an assessment. Also, there's a generational turnover in film in general, as members of the "Great Generation"—the one that steered film culture post-'68 and founded the first film study departments—move into retirement or off the mortal stage entirely. There is an unprecedented opportunity to reconfigure systems of cinematic meaning, to readjust expectations for streaming, festivals, and exhibition sites, and to make a determination that the groundswell of political will must be directed toward reestablishing a society with meaningful representation, justice, and governance for all.

The rise in fascism and authoritarianism worldwide must be met, immediately, with a refusal to continue, and in fact to reverse, the film/television/streaming industry's long-standing and increased emphasis on the individual. It is an individualism that has colonized the imagination in the years since Ronald Reagan ascended to the US presidency, one that has withstood any number of events and emergencies (floods, fires, COVID-19) that ought to have diminished its power of blindered singularity. OK, perhaps the individual today is Frances McDormand rather than the John Wayne of yore. But without social entities represented on-screen, without any representations of social action, modes of organizing, cooperation,



Frances McDormand in *Nomadland*.

or collaboration, there's little hope of a robust challenge to the dark forces trying to take over completely. It's time for film and television, streaming and episodics, to remind the public of the joy of organizing, the libidinal energy of collective action, the giddiness of feeling that the future of the planet, or at least the neighborhood, is at stake.

I worried that perhaps my pinning the blame on the film world's addiction to individualism as an essential scripted trope might be excessive. But within hours of my drafting these lines, no less an authority than historian Heather Cox Richardson, whose analyses had kept me and thousands of others sane throughout the 2020-21 election season and pandemic, wrote in response to a Roxanne Gay column about why people seem so angry with one another. Dissenting from Gay's explanation (powerlessness in the face of larger forces), she tries out a few other options and then seems to shrug: "Maybe instead it's all the movies celebrating individualism?"⁴

So allow me to hope, for one more *FQ* issue at least, that somewhere, today, there is a screenwriter hard at work at imagining and picturing a new world that is more than a Marvel comic or a galactic charade, that revels in the power of the many and the sexiness of revolution as it once existed. The Stonewall commemorations of 2021 can point the way to how massive social change, sparked by libidinal grace and kick-ass responses, can be carried out in community and fellowship. The long reign of Ayn Rand surely deserves to be over and done with.⁵ If, for every "Q" there is an "A," as any festival attendee can attest, perhaps it's time to open up the alphabet a bit and turn to "S." Solidarity is the great-grandparent of allyship, waiting in the wings to be rediscovered as a force with the means to carry the interpersonal into the social/political zone and to break the bonds of nationalisms in favor of cross-border action. Here's hoping.

RIP: Lauren Berlant (1957–2021)

This editorial would not be complete without marking the loss of one of the most influential thinkers, theorists, and pedagogues in the fields of literary and cultural studies. Journals, blogs, and FB posts have lit up with reminiscences and testimonies of influence.⁶ The author of the groundbreaking *Cruel Optimism* (1991) and the designated founder of "affect studies," Lauren Berlant has a great relevance for thinking about film and television as well. Consider, in one small example, filmmaker Kimberly Peirce's testimony to Berlant's influence in shaping *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), dating to Peirce's time at the University of Chicago



Lauren Berlant, October 31, 1957-June 28, 2021

as an undergraduate in the late 1980s. I suspect that Berlant's posthumous influence will be keenly felt in the fields of cinema and visual studies far and wide, for years to come, though I am reluctantly forced to give up the fantasy of one day having Berlant write for this journal.

In This Issue

Kathleen McHugh provides a road map to a forgotten past, retrieving anger as affect and offering a route back through its feminist expressions. Centering Audre Lorde as inspiration and theorist, she turns to Sara Ahmed and others to articulate contemporary witnessing. Through a lens of intersectionality, McHugh locates transformative anger in early classics by Julie Dash, Lizzie Borden, and Jane Campion and proposes a new "aesthetics of anger" in such recent works as Rungano Nyoni's *I Am Not a Witch* (2017), Jennifer Kent's *The Nightingale* (2018), and Gina Kim's *Bloodless* (2017).

Yasmina Price analyzes Garrett Bradley's multi-awarded feature documentary *Time* (2020) alongside her earlier *America* (2019), a film as well as an installation. She unpacks Bradley's meditations on black life to reveal an "accumulative strategy of generating counternarratives" in order to enact a filmic strategy of "communal world making." It is through the counterposing of filmic texts, both autobiographical and historical, that Bradley weaves an "abolition poetics" that makes her work so powerfully evocative.

In this issue's "Special Focus" section, "Binge-Watching after COVID-19," four scholars assess the effects of such streaming in pandemic times. Section editor Neta Alexander reconsiders the precepts of streaming and adds

new items to the nine maxims proffered in an earlier essay by other scholars. She posits the binge-watch rhythm as a “metronome whose dominant affective reactions are pleasure and relief.” Tina Kendall considers the pandemic’s abject inertia and its “bored body problem,” finding hope in TikTok micromovies that are “modeling examples of what idealized #StayHome citizenship looks like.” Tanya Horeck examines claims for binge-watching as “healing” and considers its links to self-care, plumbing “the inventive ways in which people used technologies and platforms to negotiate new forms of digital intimacy.” Finally, Kartik Nair moves back in time to analyze a notorious case—Chase Robinson’s binge watching of *Friends* as workplace fraud or sleep-inducing aid—and to consider the implications of Robinson’s behavior, its rationale, and the case against her.

In 2021, meanwhile, Berkeley’s Pacific Film Archive (now half of BAMPFA) marks its fiftieth anniversary. *FQ* pays tribute to its history, legacy, and importance with two articles centered on key individuals: Edith Kramer and Albert Johnson, who in fact often collaborated. Speaking with Kramer, Kathy Geritz probes her approach to a lifetime of influential film programming and gleans stories of her formation, influences, and curating highlights. Writing on Johnson, *FQ*’s Josslyn Luckett recalls her own undergraduate past under his tutelage and traces his early years as a pioneering, globe-trotting cinephile who was also, and not incidentally, Black. To contextualize the two essays within the institutional history of the PFA, I’ve added my own perspectives and involvements from the 1970s through the 1990s. Note, too, that the PFA has been an important collaborator with *Film Quarterly*, most notably with two Brazilian programs tied to *FQ* dossiers: its retrospective of Eduardo Coutinho’s films in 2016 and its virtual exhibition of the New Brazilian Cinema in 2020.⁷

FQ’s columnists supply essential perspectives on the field and points of significance. Manuel Betancourt, who covers Latin America in his “Cineando” column, considers a pair of dystopian visions that he finds disturbingly prescient. Bilal Qureshi takes up the Tunisian film *The Man Who Sold His Skin* (Kaouther Ben Hania, 2020), as seen in an actual outdoor screening in Sharjah, UAE. Finally, let it be known that with this issue *Film Quarterly* is pleased to welcome a new columnist and contributing editor, Rebecca Wanzo. Here, she takes up the Black gentrification film and parses its terms of engagement through a look at *Residue* (Merawi Gerima, 2020) and *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* (Joe Talbot, 2019), among many others. Wanzo first appeared in the pages of *FQ* as a participant in the *Watchmen* roundtable.⁸ In “Page Views,” *FQ*’s print and

online conversations with authors of new books selected from the season’s releases, Bruno Guaraná speaks with Rashna Wadia Richards about her *Cinematic TV: Serial Drama Goes to the Movies*. Noting the “rhizomatic quality of television,” Guaraná appreciates her book’s emphasis on intertextuality and its “intermedial relationship of appropriation, drawing on four key intertextual practices: homage, evocation, generic borrowing, and parody.” From *Mad Men* to *Dear White People*, Richards traces “generic hybridity” and examines how “serial dramas handle such cinematic hauntings.”

Shifting focus entirely, *FQ*’s chief book critic, Carrie Rickey, engages with Christina Rice’s *Mean . . . Moody . . . and Magnificent!: Jane Russell and the Marketing of a Hollywood Legend* and finds there’s more (and less) to the star than met the eye via the industry’s PR image. This is, sadly, Rickey’s last column for *FQ* after five years of reviews, with a particular focus on film history, industry analysis, and women filmmakers. Based in Philadelphia, she is now immersed in researching and writing a new book on Agnès Varda.

Reviews by Mariana Johnson, Sudhir Mahadevan, Philana Payton, and Frederick Wasser round out this issue’s attention to new studies of film and media written or edited by James Leo Cahill and Luca Caminati, Debashree Mukherjee, Usha Iyer, *FQ*’s Terri Francis, and Jonathan Rozenkrantz.

Please note, in conclusion, that “Page Views” columns now feature an online reprise with the author, and that past conversations are available in the “Videos” section of the *Film Quarterly* website. Similarly, the ambitious program of webinars that *FQ* has conducted over the past year is easily accessible at <https://filmquarterly.org/> in the “Videos” section. Take a look and see why so many readers and faculty have been tapping this *FQ* resource to dig deeper into important issues covered in the journal and expanded in discussion. Thanks, as always, to the Ford Foundation JustFilms for making such public initiatives possible.

Notes

1. The newsletter exists only as texts to subscribers and an email list, but Kuzma and Pfeifer are the editors of the wonderfully informative *East European Film Bulletin*. See <https://cefb.org>.
2. <https://forum.arsenal-berlin.de/en/forum-forum-expanded-program-forum/>.
3. Cristina Nord, “Inconceivable without Movement: Some Thoughts on How Film Culture Can Open

- Itself Up to the Demands of the Present,” <https://forum.arsenal-berlin.de/en/forum-forum-expanded/news-page/inconceivable-without-movement/>.
4. Heather Cox Richardson, “Changes in culture?,” *Letters from an American*, Substack, July 19, 2021. There were 1,674 comments on her Substack subscribers’ site within seven hours of her sending out this message, which was an addition to her daily column, <https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/>.
 5. For an excellent primer, see Lisa Duggan, *Mean Girl: Ayn Rand and the Culture of Greed* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019). See, too, Jennifer Szalai, “Think We Live in Cruel and Ruthless Times?: ‘Mean Girl’ Says to Thank Ayn Rand,” *New York Times*, May 22, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/05/22/books/review-mean-girl-ayn-rand-culture-of-greed-lisa-duggan.html.
 6. For an in-depth view of Berlant’s works and influences, see Judith Butler, Maggie Doherty, Ajay Singh Chaudhary, and Gabriel Winant, “‘What Would It Mean to Think That Thought?’: The Era of Lauren Berlant,” *The Nation*, July 8, 2021, www.thenation.com/article/culture/lauren-berlant-obituary/.
 7. The exhibition was planned in conjunction with *FQ*’s “Dossier: Eduardo Coutinho,” *Film Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (Spring 2016), edited by Natalia Brizuela and myself. Its virtual Brazilian cinema exhibition, presented online with interviews with the filmmakers, was tied to the dossier on the New Brazilian Cinema, edited by João Luiz Vieira and myself, in *Film Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (Winter 2020).
 8. See Michael Gillespie, “Thinking about *Watchmen*: with Jonathan W. Gray, Rebecca A. Wanzo, and Kristen J. Warner,” *Film Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (Summer 2020): 50–60.