

THE HUMAN VOICE

Rebecca Prime

Because of the particularities of *Film Quarterly's* production schedule, this editorial is being written during the closing days of 2023, a time of EOY reflections and New Year's resolutions. Even for an inveterate optimist, it's impossible not to feel concerned by what 2024 may have in store. The sense of living through history is hard to ignore, if equally hard to understand.

My inclination is to look to the past, my thoughts bending—melodramatically, I hope—to 1939. As war spread throughout Europe, Hollywood enjoyed what is often considered a golden year, when the studio system attained a pinnacle of achievement with films such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Stagecoach*, *Ninotchka*, and—for better or for worse—David O. Selznick's adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's best-selling novel *Gone with the Wind*.¹ But while these films epitomized Hollywood's unique facility for distraction and fabulation, across the Atlantic, Jean Renoir's *La règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*) presented a very different picture of troubled times, its critique of the decadence and rot at the heart of French society so scathing that it was banned by the government.

Fast-forward seventy-five years, and Hollywood appears firmly committed to the trend to “Franchise Everything!” (the title of a timely panel that *FQ* presented with USC in January); at least half the films on the *Hollywood Reporter's* list of the most anticipated releases of 2024 have a 2 or a 3 following the title.² Spin-offs and remakes abound, from *Mean Girls* (adapted from the Broadway musical) to Marvel's *Madame Web*; even Mary Shelley gets a campy, young-adult reboot with *Lisa Frankenstein*. A significant number of these new releases were originally scheduled for 2023—a reminder that the aftershocks of the past year's labor strikes are still being felt. With Hollywood playing catch-up, as in 1939, it may

be prudent to look abroad for more current commentary (that is, unless you're a fan of Alex Garland, whose *Civil War*—yes, it's about what you think it's about—premieres this spring).³ What is certain is that *Film Quarterly* will continue to call attention to film and media that strive to create empathy and understanding, to be a voice for humanism in polarized times.

In Memoriam

At the close of 2023, the writer, producer, and activist Norman Lear passed away at the age of 101. Getting his start in Hollywood as a writer for comedians including Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Lear made his television breakthrough with *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971–79), a sitcom that transformed the television landscape by taking



Norman Lear (1922–2023)

Film Quarterly, Vol. 77, No. 3, pp. 5–7. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2024 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2024.77.3.5

on the social issues of the day with bracing candor. Archie Bunker, *All in the Family*'s bigoted paterfamilias, railed against a society in upheaval and in doing so reflected the country's tensions. In addition to shows addressing the women's movement (*Maude*, CBS, 1972–78) and single motherhood (*One Day at a Time*, CBS, 1975–84), Lear was a trailblazer in minority representation, developing some of the first black sitcoms, including *Sanford and Son* (NBC, 1972–77), *Good Times* (CBS, 1974–79), and *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975–85). Rejecting one-dimensional stereotypes, Lear brought a much-needed depth and humanity to the depiction of Black lives on-screen, becoming an inspiration to a later generation of Black showrunners including Tyler Perry and Kenya Barris. In his later years, Lear continued to champion social issues both on and off the screen, supporting democracy and civic engagement through his progressive advocacy group People for the American Way and serving as executive producer on the Netflix Cuban-American reboot of *One Day at a Time* (2017–20). His very long life offers a tonic to despair, showing that change is possible . . . and humor helps.

In This Issue

The journal's first issue of the new year opens with one of 2023's most powerful releases (and one of the reasons my thoughts have been drifting toward 1939): Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest*. Amy Herzog's masterful analysis of this ambitious film unpacks some of the strategies Glazer uses to develop a new visual language for representing fascism. As she writes, "[V]oyeurism, extended takes, and unstable points of identification create an ethical crisis for the viewer, who is left questioning the mechanics, and the limits, of empathy." While in dialogue with the history of Holocaust cinema, *The Zone of Interest* is deeply invested in awakening new generations to the connections between that history and the present moment. Herzog saw the film when it screened at the New York Film Festival on October 8, one day after Hamas perpetrated the deadliest attack against Jews since the Holocaust. Writing about the film in the shadow of the ensuing war in Gaza, in which Israel's bombing campaign has led to the death of tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians, Herzog argues for the urgency of *The Zone of Interest*, which asks viewers to "consider their own capacity for violence."

Next up is Chris Berry's tribute to a filmmaker who sustained a profoundly humanist vision in the face of authoritarianism: the Tibetan director Pema Tsenden, who passed away prematurely last May at the age of fifty-three.

Berry, who had known Pema for over a decade, asks how his friend had managed the "seemingly impossible feat of being loved and admired not only by cinephiles around the world and Tibetans inside and outside China, but also by Chinese filmmakers and audiences, and even the Chinese authorities." He finds an answer in the openness of Pema's narratives, which made it possible for "people with absolutely opposed perspectives on Tibet to accept the stories his films tell."

As Amy Villarejo, Rebecca Wanzo, and Patricia White note in their introduction to this issue's special dossier, "Lesbian Trouble," divergent opinions regarding Todd Field's *Tár* prompted B. Ruby Rich—then wrapping up her ten-year tenure as editor in chief of this journal—to suggest that the time might be ripe to reconsider lesbian representation in contemporary film, television, and popular culture. From this initial prompt, these guest editors—all *FQ* board members—brought together an impressive array of scholars whose work explores lesbian media in all its diversity, from Janelle Monaé's music videos, to reality TV, to the aforementioned *Tár*. The dossier, which is US-centric due to space constraints, is also a tribute to Rich's legacy and definitive role in lesbian film culture over the past four decades, starting with her contributions to *Jump Cut*'s 1981 special section "Lesbians and Film."⁴

Rich, in her new role as editor at large, contributes a wide-ranging interview with the noted philosopher Paul B. Preciado focused on his acclaimed debut film, *Orlando, My Political Biography* (2023). When Rich saw the film at the 2023 Berlinale, she pronounced it "the first trans masterpiece" in the pages of this journal and elsewhere.⁵ Now, after seeing the film again at Telluride and sitting down with its creator, she proposes that *Orlando* goes even further, "posing as much of a challenge to notions of 'documentary' as Preciado already posed to concepts of masculinity/femininity." Following on the special dossier's exploration of lesbian signification, Rich's interview with Preciado feels like a more intimate extension of the conversation at the bar after the party.

Anastasia Kostina, who contributed a profile of Marina Razbezhkina to the journal's Spring 2020 issue, interviews another influential Russian documentary filmmaker: Vitaly Mansky.⁶ Starting in the 1990s, Mansky has created an oeuvre notable for its stylistic diversity, which encompasses found-footage compilations, contemplative observational films, dynamic political exposés, and participatory documentaries. A vocal critic of Russia's actions in Ukraine, Mansky has lived in exile in Latvia since 2014; his latest documentary, *Eastern Front* (2023)—codirected with the

Ukrainian filmmaker Yevhen Titarenko—follows a brigade of volunteer paramedics who work directly in the war zone, providing a graphic depiction of the drastic consequences of Russian aggression.

Unusually, this issue is devoid of columnists. But never fear: Caetlin Benson-Allott and Laurie Ouellette will be back in the summer issue, along with queer cultural critic Ramzi Fawaz, who will be contributing his first guest column.

In Page Views, Bruno Guaraná offers a preview of Kartik Nair's highly anticipated new book, *Seeing Things: Spectral Materialities of Bombay Horror*. Taking the materiality of the filmic image as his starting point for investigating a forgotten, yet haunting, past of Bombay cinema, Nair brings a welcome spotlight to Indian cinema's horror wave of the 1970s and 1980s. Although popular with audiences, these independently produced horror films were poorly received by critics and long disregarded by scholars of Indian cinema. Abounding in close readings, *Seeing Things* takes an innovative approach that addresses the gaps in the historical record (missing sources, incompatible oral-history accounts, unreliable official documents, decaying or disappeared film copies) by treating the films as archives in and of themselves, "their mise-en-scène consisting of records to be deciphered, pursued, catalogued." As Guaraná observes of Nair's methodology: "Failure here becomes [Nair's] Rosetta Stone—the privileged site of interpretation, where history becomes tangible."

Wrapping up the issue, the books section runs the gamut from silent-screen sirens to the transgender Internet. Daniel Moore reviews *Tracking Loach: Politics, Practices, Production*, David Archibald's timely reexamination of the British filmmaker Ken Loach, who in 2023 announced his (likely) retirement at the age of eighty-seven. In her consideration of Lois Banner's *Ideal Beauty: The Life and Times of Greta Garbo*, Gabrielle Stecher observes that this new biography places a notable emphasis on context over chronology, framing Garbo within the discourses around beauty, gender, celebrity, and sexuality that shaped the star's life and career. Charting documentary's progression from Hollywood's margins to the bread and butter of online streaming platforms, Nora Stone's *How Documentaries Went Mainstream: A History, 1960–2022* is a "refreshing

addition to the history of nonfiction film," according to Devin Thomas. Ari Gass reviews Christopher Goetz's *The Counterfeit Coin*, which explores how contemporary media forms—including action movies, anime, manga, and video games—offer audiences and players a shared set of empowerment fantasies, while Basil Dababneh considers Avery Dame-Griff's *The Two Revolutions: A History of the Transgender Internet*, which examines the influence of digital communication on the development of transgender identities and identifications. Closing out the section, and the issue, Henry Neim Osman reviews *Crisis Vision: Race and the Cultural Production of Surveillance*, by Torin Monahan, a study that offers "an incisive critique of not only surveillance but of surveillance studies' own methodological reliance on visibility." Rigorous and stimulating reading for the year ahead!

Notes

1. Thomas S. Hischak, *1939: Hollywood's Greatest Year* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Mark A. Viera, *Majestic Hollywood: The Greatest Films of 1939* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2013).
2. Aaron Couch, "Most Anticipated Movie Releases of 2024," *Hollywood Reporter*, January 4, 2024, www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/most-anticipated-movies-2024/.
3. In his comprehensive roundup of films to watch for in 2024, David Hudson notes that it's shaping up to be a banner year for French cinema in particular, with new films from Olivier Assayas, Leos Carax, Julie Delpy, Arnaud Desplechin, Audrey Diwan, Bruno Dumont, Chiara Mastroianni, and André Téchiné. See David Hudson, "The Most Anticipated Films of 2024," *The Daily*, January 3, 2024, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/8350-the-most-anticipated-films-of-2024>.
4. Edith Becker, Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, and B. Ruby Rich, introduction to the special section "Lesbians and Film," *Jump Cut*, nos. 24–25 (March 1981): 17–21.
5. B. Ruby Rich, "Film Festivals in Winter," *Film Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (Summer 2023): 84–92.
6. Anastasia Kostina, "Hunting for Reality: An Interview with Marina Razbezhkina," *Film Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (Spring 2020): 21–27.