

## Film Exhibition in Crisis

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**ABSTRACT** The COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic has led to a generational crisis for film exhibition around the world. Since the pandemic began in 2019, movie theaters have been forced to close their doors temporarily or permanently, alter their modes of presentation and the parameters of the theatrical experience, and transform their operations in countless other ways. But COVID-19 is certainly not the first crisis in film exhibition, nor the only one in process locally and globally. The introduction to this special section examines the concept of *crisis* in the study of film exhibition and the historic and contemporary crises that have altered cinemagoing practice. It argues that these crises open opportunities for scholars to analyze a broad array of social, political, and industrial impacts that influence film exhibition and related areas of cultural and creative practice across time and space, introducing new research that employs this analytical lens.

**KEYWORDS** Film exhibition; film history; movie theaters; cinemas; COVID-19.

The COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic has led to a generational crisis for film exhibition around the world. Since the pandemic began in late 2019, movie theaters have been forced to close their doors temporarily or permanently, alter their modes of presentation and the parameters of the theatrical experience, and transform their operations in countless other ways. But COVID-19 is certainly not the first crisis in film

exhibition, nor the only one in process locally and globally. Instead, the pandemic has drawn our attention to the transformative effect that crises, both past and present, have had on film exhibition as a mode of cultural practice, as a set of institutions and actors, and as an object of research in film and media studies. This special section examines the concept of *crisis* in the study of film exhibition and the crises that have altered cinemagoing practices over time, opening opportunities to analyze a broad array of historical and cultural impacts in the process. In this approach, we follow the work of authors like Laura Baker (1999), Phil Hubbard (2003), Gary D. Rhodes (2011), Caetlin Benson-Allott (2021), and Carolyn Jacobs (2023), who have studied risk, danger, vice, contagion, and violence at the cinema. In addition to these issues, we hope to illuminate the relationship between exhibition and crisis in its philosophical, industrial, cultural, existential, and disciplinary forms.

Film historian Rick Altman (2004) has proposed a “crisis historiography model” to examine the social construction of new media technologies like cinema and the “identity crisis” that characterize them. Narrowing our focus to film exhibition, we seek to consider crisis as a useful axis of analysis about the past, present and future of his practice and its study. At a moment when audiences are rediscovering the importance of collective viewing and the film and film exhibition industries are charting new paths forward, we ask: How does this moment encourage us to think broadly about the crises of exhibition’s past? How does it encourage us to think expansively about its present crises, building on the reflections of journalists, industry actors, and other scholars during the pivotal three-year period from 2020 to 2023?

Film exhibition’s death has been declared many times in the hundred and thirty years preceding its most recent existential crisis. In assembling this special section, we did not wish to replicate these speculative, hasty, and often inaccurate narratives of theatrical exhibition’s long decay or inevitable demise. Instead, we rooted our approach in a consciousness of film exhibition as a longstanding cultural experience that has persisted in part due to its changeability, adaptability, and its modulation of crisis. We see the exhibition industry as heterogeneous, and its fate as indeterminate. However, in bringing together the research that follows, we also sought out scholarship that looked beyond the notion that exhibition is always and only a highly systematized commercial practice. In this, we recognize the work of scholars like Anat Helman (2003), Nicholas Balais (2014), Donna De

Ville (2015), Solomon Waliula (2018), and James Burns (2021), who have drawn attention to cinemagoing practices that often take shape outside the traditional movie theater industry or film festival circuit. This framing does not preclude moments of loss, degradation, or failure in particular modes of cinemagoing, but nonetheless allows us to grasp crises as coinciding with moments of transition and adaptation instead of the collapse so often predicted in popular narratives about film exhibition. While many articles in this special section analyse exhibition's commercial dimensions, the perspectives of these and other scholars enabled us to expand our understanding of the effects of exhibition's historical crises as they impacted issues related to access, nonfiction as well as fiction film, race, and local filmmaking and distribution, over and above exhibition's purely commercial function.

Recent exhibition research, such as that done by scholars of “new cinema history” (Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers 2011; 2019), has made major strides forward in the study of exhibition practices within film studies. But the continued US- and Eurocentrism of film exhibition research – in which the largest number of monographs, edited collections, and peer-reviewed articles are focused on topics related to exhibition or moviegoing in Europe, the United States, and Canada – is a problem that requires redress. Scholarship by Luciana Corrêa de Araújo (2013), Laura Isabel Serna (2014), Nolwenn Mingant (2015), Lakshmi Srinivas (2016), Laura Fair (2018), and Jasmine Nadua Trice (2021) offers compelling examples of the possibilities for global cinema research. Even outside Europe, the United States, and Canada, however, English remains the lingua franca in the large cache of research written on this topic, such as in work from or on Australia, India, New Zealand, and South Africa. Research by Rodrigo Fagundes Bouillet (2020), Alejandro Kelly-Hopfenblatt and Nicolás Poppe (2022), Diana Paladino (2018) and Pedro Butcher (2019) suggests emerging efforts in this area that we aim to further. For us, the film exhibition crises of the past, present, and future and the internal crises of US- and Eurocentrism present opportunities and not just challenges for the creation of new directions and new models of research on film exhibition. Responding to these geographical, linguistic, and structural issues, we sought out scholarship from around the world that grasped moments of present and historical crisis as opportunities to generate and disseminate new questions, new arguments, and new vistas for research. Our own varied global positions resulted in a dossier which, while focused on the Americas, contextualizes exhibition in five distinct national contexts

and three languages. The articles within also explore the place of modes of production and distribution often treated as peripheral, including documentary, art-house, Black, and local-language film in contexts beyond the US and Europe, building out a rich picture of the diversity of exhibition practices across the globe.

Understandably, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences for film exhibition drew the attention of many of the authors in this section. They further early work unpacking the pandemic's impact on the exhibition industry from scholars including Kate Fortmueller (2021) and Vicki A. Mayer, Noa Lavie, and Miranda Banks (forthcoming), not only in tracing the immediate impacts of the crisis but in contextualizing it in light of past and parallel crises in exhibition and connected sectors. Even where the pandemic is a central focus, the scholarship featured here highlighted key histories that extend beyond the current moment, illuminating broader issues in exhibition research that will resonate into the future. It has also brought the diverse and uneven impacts of the pandemic across a variety of national contexts and sectors of the film industry into stark relief. Across their diverse topics of analysis, each article expands the concept of *crisis* beyond its simplest definition, exploring the unexpected historical origins, social and political stakes, industrial and creative adaptations, and consequences of the crises they trace.

The article “What Crisis and For Whom? The Role of Cine Arte Normandie and Film Exhibition in Chile (1982–2001)”/ “¿Qué Crisis y para Quién? El Rol del Cine Arte Normandie y la Exhibición de Cine en Chile (1982–2001)” by María Paz Peirano, Claudia Bossay, and Iván Pinto Veas analyzes the history of a single movie theater, the Cine Arte Normandie in Santiago, over a period of two decades. By focusing on the troubled trajectory of this important theater dedicated to art cinema, the authors discuss different crises, both local (related to the Chilean dictatorship that ended during that period) and global (involving economic, cultural, and technological changes that affected the international film market as a whole).

Peirano et al. examine the trajectory of the Cine Arte Normandie between the 1980s and 1990s, identifying characteristics such as: the remodeling of a grand, historic movie theater for its new function as an art house cinema; the complexity of the theater's confrontation with state censorship bureaucracy; the difficulties of accessing prints of art films that impelled the exhibitor to also act as a distributor; the fact that

it was an enterprise carried out with private capital; and the theater's appeal to a younger audience attracted by the still seductive aura of *auteur* cinema, both classic and contemporary. Through this case study, Peirano et al. offer a rich, complex, and well-synthesized view of the relationship (or lack thereof) between Chilean public policies for cinema and the dynamics of the local theatrical film market. Without neglecting local specificities, the article encourages a transnational, comparative analysis within the scope of the history of art film exhibition in the face of evident similarities with other cases in Latin America and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

An analysis that also expands and nuances the idea of crisis in film exhibition is presented in “The ‘Asterisk Year’ in Argentina’s Film Exhibition: Acceleration of Ongoing Processes?”/ “El ‘Año Asterisk’ en la Exhibición Cinematográfica en Argentina: ¿Aceleración de Procesos en Curso?” In it, Leandro González and Santiago Marino argue that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a previous crisis in the Argentine theatrical market, characterized by audience decline and the loss of theatrical exhibition as the exclusive premiere window for films due to factors such as the rise of streaming platforms.

Viewing the effects of the global health crisis on Argentine exhibition in a broader perspective, the authors raise the fundamental question of whether Argentina’s cinemas faced an especially difficult, but momentary, situation due to the pandemic or if the challenges to the national exhibition industry are symptomatic of a longer structural change. The authors lead us to reconsider superficial generalizations by examining critical trends in the years prior to the pandemic, including falling Argentine cinema admissions and the role of Asian markets in driving the growth of the worldwide theatrical circuit. Ultimately, González and Marino encourage us to reflect on the dimensions and characteristics of exhibition crises in the short, medium, and long terms, and from the point of view of national, regional, and global markets.

Elli Fabiane Mobelli’s article, “Paths and Diversions in Spaces for Audiovisual Exhibition and Dissemination in Brazil: Festivals, Film Societies, and the Internet”/ “Rotas e Desvios nos Espaços de Exibição e

<sup>1</sup> It is inevitable to think, for example, about the similarities between the Chilean Cine Arte Normandie and the Brazilian *Estação* movie theaters, also created in the same period, whose trajectory was recently described in the exhibitor Marcelo França Mendes’ autobiographical book (2022).

Difusão Audiovisual do Brasil: Festivais, cineclubes e internet,” similarly employs a narrow focus in its study of the film exhibition market but extends the temporality of its study beyond the last three years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The author investigates the circuits of distribution and exhibition of documentary films, with a closer look at the circulation of short documentary films in southern Brazil over the last decade.

Mobelli frames what would usually be considered “diversions” or alternative distribution niches in relation to the mainstream theatrical market such as film clubs, festivals, itinerant sessions, and the internet as the primary ways audiences were able to access documentary films in the region, since Brazilian documentary has had very restricted space in the traditional theatrical circuit despite a recent growth in titles. In a similar vein to González and Marino’s discussion of the Argentine context, she asks whether, in Brazilian documentary distribution, the pandemic marked a radical transformation or a deepening of a long-running shift to the internet as the main channel of access to these kinds of films.

In “Possible Embraces: Interdictions and Resistance in Film Exhibition of Peripheral Images”/ “Abraços Possíveis: Interdições e Resistências na Exibição Cinematográfica de Imagens Periféricas,” Scheilla Franca de Souza, Angelita Bogado, and Jorge Cardoso Filho use the metaphor of “interrupted embraces” during the prohibition of face-to-face contact during the pandemic to think about the circulation of “nonhegemonic Brazilian cinema” in recent years. This study, too, emphasizes both the continuities and the discontinuities of pre-pandemic conditions and pandemic impacts: in this case, de Souza et al. investigate the historical difficulties of access to the Brazilian theatrical circuit by peripheral cinema, with the internet as a possible alternative path that is facing new challenges from streaming services.

The article analyzes three types of audiovisual products and how their circulation occurred (or did not occur) during the pandemic, enabling the delivery of those interrupted embraces. De Souza et al. examine two feature films, *Café com Canela* (2017) and *Ilha* (2018), produced in Bahia by mostly Black film crews; the live transmissions of Dona Dalva Damiana (September 23 and 24, 2020), performed in “replacement” of the religious ceremonies of African origin that could not take place due to the pandemic; and the powerfully emotional music video *Cleane* (2021) by Black rap singer Criolo. In these cases, the local and the global, the historical and the momentary are intertwined, evidencing the special

difficulty of circulating moving images made with and by Black artists not only due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also under the far-right government of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. However, as with the other moments of crises that are part of this special section, we are reminded once more that these challenges are not new but, to the contrary, have been longstanding issues in creative, industrial, social, and political life.

Finally, the timely interview “Looking Out the Window(s): How US Film Exhibitors Survived the Early Years of the COVID-19 Pandemic. An Interview with Jackie Brenneman and Bryan Braunlich of the National Association of Theater Owners and The Cinema Foundation,” by Charlotte Orzel and Ross Melnick, complements this special section. Orzel and Melnick outline the history of the US exhibition industry’s adaptations and resiliencies, framing its response to perhaps its most daunting crisis yet: the COVID-19 pandemic. Occurring in the thick of a major push by US distributors to build their new streaming platforms, the pandemic became a major stress test for exhibitors beyond the challenges of lost audiences and revenues due to the pressures towards new distribution models. Interviewees Jackie Brenneman and Bryan Braunlich, of the National Association of Theater Owners (NATO) and The Cinema Foundation, recount the earliest days of the pandemic as they transpired within NATO and outline the organization’s evolving responses to the challenges of the crisis from 2020 to 2023.

Brenneman and Braunlich are as attentive to the opportunities, openings, and even optimisms resulting from the pandemic as they are to the disastrous consequences of the health crisis for US exhibitors in its first years. In addition to indexing the perspective of NATO membership and the film industry at large on the place and purpose of the exhibition industry, they also trace their efforts to capture this energy through a new cross-industry nonprofit organization, The Cinema Foundation. The interview provides not only an essential time capsule of a major trade body’s industrial and legislative response to the pandemic crisis, but also evidence of how crises in general can lead to moments of plasticity, relief, and renewal in their aftermath.

While this body of work makes strides in exploring some of the challenges, crises, adaptations, and regenerations that have taken place in global exhibition practice over its history, there are many rich areas for research that remain. As we have alluded to throughout this introduction, the study of crisis in exhibition is a rich area for which

existing research and the contributions here have only scratched the surface. Crisis has marked the practice of film exhibition since the earliest screenings, and the historical record is filled with un(der)explored instances where such ruptures altered the cultures, social practices, and industries that surround cinemagoing. To conclude, we wish to outline several dimensions of crisis that have come to the fore over the last several years and that provide rich ground for further research. Even as audiences return to global movie theaters and, in some markets, the number of screens and moviegoers are growing beyond their pre-pandemic numbers, significant challenges remain for exhibitors and exhibition research, not all of them related to the pandemic or competition from streaming services.

The COVID-19 crisis in theatrical exhibition coincided with corresponding crises in archival access and film historiography. In the first years of the pandemic, physical and digital access to global archives vacillated between unpredictable and impossible. This has had a deleterious and global impact on film historiography and, therefore, on the study of theatrical exhibition and moviegoing, which may be extended in the wake of pandemic-era upheaval in state and institutional budgets and changing corporate management and ownership. In addition, longer standing inequities within governments, loss of funding to private and public institutions, increasing reluctance from corporations to donate their archives or grant access to existing collections, and inconsistent digitization and access initiatives have led to local, regional, sectoral, and national crises for scholars seeking archival materials.<sup>2</sup>

Aside from this disciplinary crisis in exhibition research, exhibitors have faced many challenges beyond the pandemic since 2019 that offer new material and entry points for exhibition research. Some of these were political crises. Following the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many US and European distributors ceased distribution to Russian cinemas. In Ukraine, many cinemas were closed or damaged, challenging exhibitors who had weathered the pandemic only to have to withstand shifting borders of violence and armed control. War also

<sup>2</sup> A case in point was the crisis that hit the Cinemateca Brasileira (Brazilian Film Archive) in São Paulo even before the pandemic, but which was prolonged because of it. The institution had all its staff dismissed and remained closed for sixteen months between 2020 and 2021. See Diez and Felice (2020), Morettin (2021), and Sadlier (2021).

continued to impact movie theaters and exhibitors in Yemen and Sudan and countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria have continued to operate scarcely, under extreme duress. Official and unofficial censorship also remained a challenge for exhibitors in countries such as China, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where Hollywood's encouragement of greater representation on screen (often in relation to sexuality and gender) ran afoul of dominant local social and cultural norms.

Economic and environmental concerns also wreaked havoc during this same period. Skyrocketing oil prices led some US and Canadian exhibitors to close or contemplate closure. Weather events impacted by climate change stressed movie houses and their budgets. Labor costs and shortages and falling productivity within and beyond the film industry's exhibition branch impacted both cinema owners and audiences. Factory closures, supply chain disruption, and other residual effects of the pandemic on goods led to delays in theater construction, renovation, and chip shortages for projectors, servers, and other technology. The rise of warehouses for online shopping resulted in a push to acquire land, driving up the valuations of drive-in theaters (sited decades earlier at the intersections of main roads) and leading more exhibitors to cash out. Bankruptcy filings and reorganizations, alongside other equity crises, reverberated around the world for exhibitors from China to the United Kingdom.

And yet, crisis, as it often does, also drove innovation. Exhibitors leaned back into local and industrial communities, innovative programming, technological solutions and upgrades, membership programs, cinematic nationalism, civic engagement, fandom and extensible franchises, and other tools to bring audiences back through both hard ticket sales and the appeal of monthly memberships. These and other adaptations proliferated as exhibitors shifted operations, first to survive and then, in some cases, to renew themselves.

Given all this and so many other topics not raised here, the opportunities for new scholarship on film exhibition in relation to industrial, political, social, cultural, environmental, and legal crises and adaptations is vast, in line with the complexities of the world in which these cinemas operate. For film exhibition studies to continue to grow, it must recognize that film exhibition, like any cultural practice, is not fixed and stable; it is not predestined to endure. But neither is it inexorably bound for decline or extinction. Film exhibition is a cultural practice that

appears, reappears, and transforms not only despite, but because of its encounters with moments of disaster and challenge. Confronting crisis, its complex origins, and the transformations it engenders therefore brings us closer to grasping the nuances and significance of cinemagoing across time and space, enriching our collective knowledge of this diverse area of film culture.

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## As Crises da Exibição Cinematográfica

**RESUMO** A pandemia de COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) provocou uma crise geracional para a exibição cinematográfica em todo o mundo. As salas de cinema foram obrigadas a fechar suas portas temporária ou definitivamente, a alterar seus modos de apresentação e seus parâmetros de experiência coletiva, e a transformar suas formas de funcionamento de diversas maneiras. Mas a COVID-19 certamente não representa a primeira crise na exibição de filmes, nem a única em curso local e globalmente. Este introdução à sessão especial examina o conceito de crise no estudo da exibição cinematográfica e as crises históricas e contemporâneas que alteraram as práticas da ida ao cinema ao longo dos anos. Os autores argumentam que essa crise cria oportunidades para os estudiosos analisarem uma ampla gama de impactos sociais, políticos e industriais que influenciam a exibição cinematográfica e práticas culturais e criativas relacionadas, ao longo do tempo e espaço, apresentando novas pesquisas que contribuem para essa forma de análise.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** Exibição cinematográfica; história do cinema; salas de cinema; cinemas; COVID-19.