

Mark Toscano

The communal and community experience of sharing a film screening together, beyond being potentially enriching and fun, is marked by various embedded and intersecting personal and political dimensions. The collective experience — not limited to cinematic events, and certainly not limited to film as a medium — is something that the majority of us understand to be a distinctive and extrasensory phenomenon which transcends the physical space and the activities occurring in that space. It tends to have a unifying quality, even if, like me, you're someone who gets particularly annoyed by other people using their phones or talking during the movie, or having a conversation right next to you when the musicians are playing.

Cinematic events in particular carry their own qualities of history, memory, and experience, and these aspects seem to be extended and elaborated the more obscure the film and its surrounding context is. This sense of uniting around a noncommercial, marginal, and marginalized cinematic culture is inherently political, but also vividly, intrinsically social, as it suggests a desire to share an experience with others which is not so readily and obviously available. Obscurity breeds camaraderie in this sense, a solidarity enhanced by the knowledge that there's no easy safety in numbers. Of course, some would certainly insist that the social and collective aspects of these cinematic subcultures are not what they're there for, but the work wasn't made in, and doesn't exist in, a vacuum divorced from these qualities.

A weekly engagement

Furthermore, the political nature of an eagerness about and adherence to an analogue photographic medium is a specific one, based on a belief — for some, very foregrounded, for some, subconscious — that this medium of expression, now considered industrially nearly obsolete, has personal, emotional, and artistic value distinct from its original commercial underpinnings. And everyone in a cinema watching a 16 mm experimental film in the 21st Century, knows this. This prioritizing of these qualities instead of and despite its latent commercial origins can be considered essentially a rejection of some basic tenets of capitalism.



Since at least the 1970s, there have always been accusations of empty fetishism or myopic nostalgia which have cyclically swelled and subsided over the years when discussing filmmaking on film. The joke on the adamant film skeptics is that they so often think in absolutes that they imagine to be objective, like conservative, party-line atheists who can't conceive of the relevance of any data not apprehensible to them. Taste is another story, and obviously everyone has a right to their preferences. But really it doesn't matter if one's engagement with a medium and its surrounding culture is indefinable or nonspecific or just based on pure subjective aesthetic preference. And in 2021, these warring camps of medium purists/antagonists aren't terribly present anymore anyway, as if everyone finally realized it's all quite fragile and a rarified expression and the argument was pointless to begin with. But with digital presentation being the overwhelming norm in most cinematic experiences, film projection has taken on an extra layer of appreciation and fascination for many.

Accusations of nostalgia no longer make sense, since the majority of audiences for and practitioners of analogue filmmaking don't have a long personal history, or much memory, of the film medium as something ordinary in their past. Afterall, it's the ordinary and everyday things of our pasts, which have now disappeared, that we seem to approach with nostalgia. And fetishism, which is not an inherently negative thing of course, needn't be the same as a personal fascination with the physical qualities of a medium that is by its nature intensely material, especially when that materiality is largely in service of the immaterial and ephemeral—I mean, how much more poetic can you get than that?

So in 2020–2021, how does/did this all work? With the pandemic specifically precluding the ability for people to gather in spaces, which then precludes the possibility of experiencing communal presentations such as film projections, what do we do? What did we do? Organizations, festivals, and individuals who thrive on these kinds of film gatherings either put their activities on hold, or transitioned to an online approach to presenting work. I think many of us felt this was of course the only thing that could be done, despite the extreme limitations this created in our potential experience of the work, particularly in terms of our engagement and its resonance. The spectrum of online presentation approaches really extended from the most simple posting of a link with an accompanying text to quite elaborate stagings of live, real-time exhibition, often with accompanying discussions, commentary, and other bells and whistles. The normalization of online presentations definitely has had its benefits, whether it be the much easier ability to have non-local guests at your event, the much wider potential audience, or perhaps the ability for an audience to experience a work at different times which suited their work/life schedule better.



I for one really enjoyed the unexpected semi-normalization of chat windows during screenings, particularly during school shorts programs and other DIY events. Although such a thing during a public in-person screening would be incredibly weird and disruptive, I think for an online screening it actually enhanced the otherwise largely absent feeling of collectivity in the experience of viewing films. This surprised me, but it made sense.

Another thing that surprised me was the response to the first live stream I presented, on March 30, 2020. Not yet called *Remains to be Streamed* (that would happen the following week), the first one was a very informal experiment that wasn't intended to replicate the cinematic experience or even be an ideal way to share films which might be difficult to access otherwise. I mean, I had pretty much no faith in the reproductive quality of filming a wall projection with an unpredictable smartphone camera and earbuds dangling over the projector's speaker to pick up the audio. It's definitely better than I expected, but still quite a huge distance from the quality of a good public projection. As a film preservationist, I work really hard to make sure the restoration work I oversee represents the films at their best, so this was an amusing seeming contradiction of that.

Also as a film preservationist, one of my favorite things to do—and an absolutely crucial part of the preservation process in my view—is to share the work with others, which this does do in a way, although I always hope that eventually everyone will somehow be able to see better cinematic presentations of these films. My live stream fails in a variety of ways, including in picture and sound quality and in its curatorial semi-randomness (not my usual approach!), but its informality and its interactivity (I love the comments feed) have been strangely resonant for me, and I think for the many folks who tune in occasionally or regularly. It's not always about the rarity or unavailability of the films. I've definitely projected films which can be seen in better quality digital versions online, and yet there's something different and engaging about the experience of seeing them rephotographed off a 16mm wall projection, with the sound of the projector always audible in the background. And the often extensive on- and off-topic talking I do throughout the show between the films has several times been characterized to me by people as being reminiscent of a podcast, rather than regular film introductions. There's a quality of live performance to it,

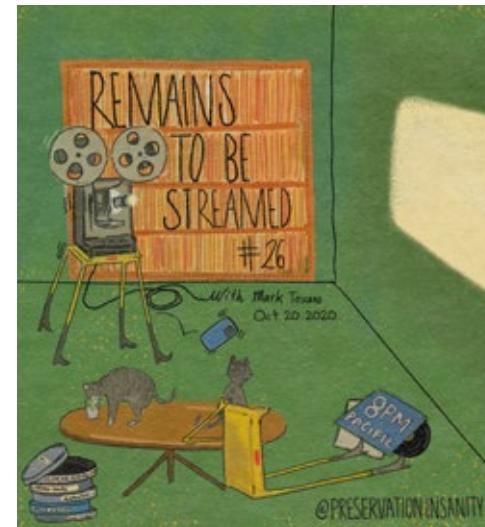
I suppose. Whereas a link sitting online to be watched has a sort of removed, abstract quality, a live stream of 16 mm film projection perhaps carries a resonance for the audience who knows that right at that moment, on a Tuesday night in Los Angeles, this guy is threading up a 16mm projector and showing these films in his apartment for whoever wants to tune in. But this is not at all to say my weird little thing is better somehow — it just seems to underscore some other part of the filmgoing experience that is hard to capture and translate. It's such an odd convergence of elements which make my Tuesday night presentations what they are, for better or worse. I have friends who can't bear to watch it, because they can't engage with the films this way, which I completely understand. And then some folks have told me that the live stream has been something engaging which has really scratched a bad itch they've had during the pandemic, which is wonderful to hear, and which, in all humility, I also understand, as it's done the same for me.

The thing I didn't expect to learn, from both the pandemic and my own eccentric cinematic response to the inevitable isolation it created, is that the things I love about filmgoing — especially as part of this unusual community of experimental cinema — is that what makes the whole experience special is an impossible and ephemeral blending of numerous variables. But the most crucial and complex of those variables is, at least for me, communal (and, by extension, community). The first night I did this live stream was only two weeks into the US experience of the pandemic, but I'd already had to cancel my next public *Remains to be Seen* show and was definitely feeling a bit isolated. And although I had no sense of how long this would ultimately last, it was already all so uncertain and disruptive in ways many of us probably didn't expect. As soon as I hit the button to start the first live stream, I genuinely teared up a little bit when I saw a whole bunch of usernames populate the room — many of whom were people I knew in all sorts of places around the world — and felt exhilarated at the virtual flooding of community that had seemed so distant only one second before going live.

Normally I would write something about film without making too obvious and unnecessary references to the specific time period, in the hopes that it would allow the writing to avoid becoming too dated in superficial ways, but it feels like the opposite is needed here. I'm typing this out on the afternoon of Monday, July 5, 2021 in Los Angeles,

California. Although a lot is still a bit nervously uncertain and tentative, in the US much is re-opening and public activities are resuming, despite the pandemic being far from over. Outside of the US, many countries and communities are badly struggling. I'm doing my 60th *Remains to be Streamed* show tomorrow night and people have asked me periodically if I'll keep doing them when the pandemic is over. Right now, I have no idea, and of course the pandemic won't be over for everyone all at once, so even if I can resume my public shows in the next few months, I still like the idea of continuing the live stream beyond that point. I started it missing the community and collectivity, and missing sharing these films with others, and was surprised that

it was embraced and enjoyed by a lot of people, despite not being a proper substitution for the 'real thing'. But I suppose it's become its own kind of real thing, not a substitution but a parallel engagement with films and filmmaking and each other, which taps into some similar well of desire that underscores all of our interaction through this medium. And 'engagement' seems the right word to me, since it's something I've generally struggled with since March 2020, as many of you probably have too. My engagement with film, music, art, culture, and



Poster: Angie Amaro

community has been wildly compromised by the separation and isolation that came with the pandemic. A medium like film, dependent in some ways on its presence and physicality, but more so on the communal experience of it in space and time, is especially fragile in this kind of global situation. So although I'm eagerly awaiting a time when I can show and attend films with you all in person again, this weekly little bit of engagement is a big help, and regularly reminds me of all the things I love about film which exist outside of its material and expressive capabilities.