CULTURE BEYOND EXTRACTIVISM: WHAT MIGHT A POST-GROWTH CINEMA LOOK LIKE?

In this article, I argue against the growth-based model of the cultural industries, focusing on cinema and thinking towards alternative pathways for a post-growth creative sector in Scotland. In the months since I started writing it, many of the things I argued about have ground to a halt due the Covid-19 pandemic. Production projects have stalled, venues have closed, awards have been postponed and festivals moved online. As people’s livelihoods hang in the balance, it needs to be said that this crisis is not a solution to the problems with the status quo. Indeed, its tendency is to reinforce the concentration of power, as the sector reacts defensively and closes down spaces for experimentation. Returning to this analysis while the situation remains very uncertain is a risky exercise, but I do it in the hope that, amongst the grief and the fear, there is also a critical desire for a different life in and out of this impasse.

Amongst the hardships that people have endured throughout the pandemic times, the closure of cinemas is amongst the least significant. That is, of course, unless you work in the film exhibition sector, in which case you are likely to be one of the millions of precarious workers who have found themselves unable to access furlough schemes or other forms of support. As screening venues closed their doors in March, film and TV production schedules also stopped, leaving their freelance crews unsure of when they may work again. Meanwhile, as sociability was curtailed in the norm for workers, without trying to salvage the many unsustainable aspects of their jobs. In order to think beyond this crisis and towards a post-growth film culture in Scotland, we need to centre the needs of people, communities, and the environment, rather than the profit of media corporations and their local retail outlets. As an industrial product, cinema has long been subject to the expansionist logic of investment markets, financial or otherwise.

Since the birth of Hollywood, the mainstream film production system has been an oligopoly, and it is now fully enmeshed in webs of corporate takeovers that span all branches of the media. Outside the US, the influence of this model has shaped local attempts to create an ‘industry’, whereby public money is used to subsidise infrastructure and appeal to investors. On the margins of these industrial dreams, cultural workers scrape a living from thoroughly insufficient public support, predicated on a model of the ‘creative and cultural industries’ tied to economic growth and competition. The current brake on this treadmill can help reveal the inequity of this approach.

As well as being economically unjust and culturally undernourishing, our dominant media models are wasteful, polluting, and underpinned by colonialist and extractivist processes. In her book *The Cinematic Footprint*, Nadia Bozak argues that “cinema is intricately woven into industrial culture and the energy economy that sustains it.” From the very beginning, the movie business has long been associated with tourism, local retail and their local inhabitants, and sends tons of timber to landfill, so it is worth considering whether all of this is justifiable.

As with most spaces where a degrowth strategy is needed, distinctions soon emerge between a concentrated, resource-intensive layer at the top, and a much more organic ecosystem below. In the media world, there are the blockbusters and glossy serials produced by a small number of media corporations. These titles have an oversize impact in terms of budget, resource use, box office and cultural visibility. According to UNESCO statistics, in 2016 just over nine thousand feature films were released. Three-quarters of these came from six countries: India, China, United States, Japan, Korea and the UK. However, the US alone captures over 70% of the global box office, while a single company (Disney) distributed seven out of the ten top movies. A typical film from Marvel Studios, now owned by Disney, has a budget of 200 to 400 million dollars, which is at least ten times as much as the average UK or Korean film. This is then a global industry where the profits flow towards a handful of corporations.

This mode of production demands programmed obsolescence, as each new film has to be sold to larger audiences, or more affluent ones. As Maxwell and Miller argue, “[t]here is a structural
homology between this disposable attitude to film production and forms of consumption oriented to fast fashion, fun, and a throwaway culture, where each fad must quickly make way for the next indistinguishable ‘unprecedented’ product. This high-stakes game is incompatible with the wellbeing of film workers and the reduction of environmental impact. While new voices and ideas may be incorporated every so often, overall the system manages risk by repeating itself, and hence reproducing its systemic racism, sexism, transphobia, and class-based gatekeeping.

There are strong movements for reform within this production model, from #MeToo and #OscarsSoWhite activism to the inclusion of ‘diversity riders’ in studio contracts. Since the 1990s, groups and ‘greenwashers’ have emerged within media industries, seeking to stave off external regulation and win over public opinion through voluntary schemes, such as sustainability consultancy, carbon offsetting, improved recycling, rechargeable batteries, and reuse of props and sets. However, these schemes often have an overly narrow definition of environmental impact, and their attachment to profit as a main driver means that they end up being ‘greenwashing’ or branding exercises, even when the efforts of the workers on set are genuine.

Most blockbuster-style films simply cannot be made sustainably, no matter how much they spend on carbon credits. See, for example, Kevin B. Lee’s video essay on the making of Transformers 4, with its multiple transcontinental locations, its explosions and helicopter shots. Perhaps it would be unfair to expect a film about big trucks to go for net zero, but it is easy to see how the financial logic of transnational coproduction encourages wasteful shooting practices.

Many countries, Scotland included, have hatched their cultural policy wagon to this continent-hopping location shooting, offering scenic landscapes, skilled workforces and tax exemptions to lure producers. And yet, regardless of how many lochs, glens and castles you can put on a location guide, they will be subsumed into what Jennifer Lee calls a ‘simulationist aesthetic’, with “fake trees made out of wood and artificial rain made with water”. In that system, films shot in Scotland may have very little to show or say about it; their relationship to the landscape and the people is an extractive one.

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distribution of new titles, which makes it comparatively difficult for independent, low-budget films from around the world to reach audiences. The suspension of filming due to Covid-19, and the closure of cinemas worldwide, has wreaked havoc with the film release schedule, which is organised around the summer blockbuster. This disruption of the franchise treadmill offers a moment of respite and a glimpse of what could be supported instead.

**REUSE: AGAINST THE COMING ATTRACTIONS**

MAINSTREAM FILMS HAVE always been sold as perishable items: they peak on the opening weekend and quickly fade from public awareness, replaced by the next star-fronted blockbuster. More specialised films may have a slower cycle, going through festival and arthouse screens, but such spaces also privilege new releases. Only a handful of films make it into the prestige lists to become occasionally resurrected as classics. Film circulation before Covid-19 had an absurdly wasteful cycle, like the best-before dates on long-life supermarket food. Unlike food, however, film doesn’t actually go off, and hence a lack of releases does not create scarcity. At home, audiences have been finding their way to older films. Repertory channels like Talking Pictures TV have seen their audience numbers soar, film archives have been presenting online programmes, and the Black Lives Matter movement has brought forward an overdue appreciation of Black film history.

The lockdown experience shows that if older films are seen, celebrated, contextualised and accessible, a richer film culture is possible with fewer new films. Each encounter between film and audience produces, in its localised way, a new film experience. Switching off the blockbuster hype machine gives audiences more chances to find the films that speak to them. This is not only a matter of availability. Back when Netflix was still a DVD mail-delivery company, Wired commentator Chris Anderson used it as an example of his influential model of the ‘long tail’ of online media distribution, which showed how the on-demand model would make old films commercially valuable. However, 15 years later, this blockbuster model has done little to challenge the dominance of a decreasing number of film productions. Instead, the streaming companies compete with one another by hyping up a constant flow of new content, while the back catalogues dwindle and fade from view. The dispersed library of global cinema available online may offer opportunities for film buffs with the disposable time and money to seek it out, but popular media consumption has continued to concentrate on a handful of crowd-pleasing products.

Algorithmic recommendation systems are designed as traps, optimised to swallow up leisure time so that the subscription becomes indispensable. They are more likely to serve up more of the same, with just enough variation. Recommendations are crucial to save consumers from feeling overwhelmed by choice, particularly in an anxious era where people are made to feel personally responsible for judging the ethical and environmental impacts of each decision. But we may need to look beyond algorithms in order to re-balance collective and individual consumption, to both fragment (filter bubbles) and concentration (blockbuster culture). Nothing new needs to be invented for this to happen: film clubs have existed for a hundred years, allowing people to get together and make collective choices, and to sustain a shared viewing experience that doesn’t depend on obsolescence cycles.

To combat the predictability and shallowness of algorithmic recommendations, we can look to the people who have been doing the work of choosing and programming films outside conventional new releases. Repertory programmers, cine-club and film society committees, archive researchers, librarians, and community organisers have been sharing their discoveries, presenting films that may not be new but are relevant to a particular situation or place, that resonate with an audience, or that are simply too good to forget. Their online activities during Covid-19 have allowed them to reach new audiences. However, the guidelines for safe public gatherings will affect their ability to resume screenings differently; while some may be better prepared than commercial cinemas, others may struggle in smaller, shared venues. Initiatives like Radical Home Cinema, where people visit each other’s houses and share hospitality as well as films, may take a while to restart, but can be one of the many variants of what cinema can be beyond the multiplex.

**RECYCLE: AGAINST SINGLE-USE FILMS**

WATCHING MORE OLD films would already reduce the need for new films, but expressions of the present are still important. Old films
again may offer a way to reduce the impact of creating new work. There is an ocean of footage lapping at our feet, and from its depths, new works can emerge, with no need for new shooting expeditions or energy-guzzling studios. Filmmakers are increasingly awake to the potential of archival and found footage as a creative element. Renewed images can have a conventional historical function, or they can be expressive, critical, experimental, and intriguing. Found-footage films have been around for a long time, allowing artists to create meaning and excitement without the expense of shooting. In doing so, they have provided an implicit critique of ‘the disposable nature of contemporary consumer culture.’

Remix films are another way of defying the obsolescence model in film culture. As a ‘metahistorical work’, the remix can contribute to urgent new waste. As a “metahistorical work”, the remixing as a folk practice doesn’t have to sacrifice its “adventurous and insurgent character.”

There are plenty of examples online, more recently on social media platforms like TikTok, to show that remixing and recycling media objects has the potential to be at the same time popular, accessible, and critical. This is not a niche or avant-garde corner of the art world, but an everyday vernacular. Reclaiming archive images can produce radical encounters with history, contesting racism as in *Handswoth Songs* (Black Audio Film Collective, 1986) or extractivism as in *Fly me to the Moon* (Esther Figueroa, 2019).

Scotland has its own crop of thought-provoking uses of archive, from the playful medley of *From Scotland with Love* (Virginia Heath, 2014), to the weaving of old and new analogue footage in *All Divided Selves* (Luke Fowler, 2011), or the surfacing of women’s perspectives in *Her Century* (Emily Munro, 2019). With a rich legacy of moving images to draw on, and new questions to ask of them, this can be a form of minimal-impact filmmaking that reclaims the throwaway and contests the disposability of the medium.

**WATCHING TOGETHER**

**WHILE ARCHIVE FILM IS thrusting online, it is important to keep utopian fantasies about the internet in check. Even The Economist recognises that, “as a business, entertainment has in some ways become less democratic, not more. Technology is making the rich richer, skewing people’s consumption of entertainment towards the biggest hits and the most powerful platforms.” Therefore, transforming creative practices needs to be accompanied by changes in media consumption.**

The solutions offered so far to the Covid-19 crisis in the screen industry have a pallid regard for the private. Streaming serves individual consumers and promotes an illusion of personal choice. It offers a technological remedy for social problems, such as the exclusion of disabled audiences and the geographical disparities in access to film. At the same time, new initiatives such as drive-in cinemas and exclusive screenings have emerged to cater to the better-served, affluent audiences. There is then a risk that the ‘new normal’ for the cinema industry is hollowing out of its public function, and a continuation of energy-intensive, wasteful practices. It is true that domestic screens have become increasingly efficient, but the amount of information flowing through circuits, cables, satellites, and data centres to serve on-demand media consumption is still ballooning. Although providers of web services have moved faster than other industries towards sustainable energy sources, the speed of growth threatens to outrun these efforts, with Amazon for instance turning back to fossils to power some of its data centres. So, even on this metric alone, the benefits of streaming need to be assessed critically. And I hardly need to expand on the case against drive-ins.

Getting together to watch films is a traditional practice that defies the imperative of convenience and personalisation. But if watching films together is to have a future in a low-carbon world, the purpose-built cinema is not the best venue for it. Instead, once it is safe to do so, we could have ephemeral cinemas in each neighbourhood: in people’s living rooms, in community halls, schools, parks, lecture theatres, pubs, cafes, and bike shops. There is no need for a cinema to be just a cinema; it may instead be one of the happenings that sustain a multipurpose venue. This premise is already in practice in the community cinema movement, in independent exhibition festivals such as Scaramara, and across several DIY spaces that have cinema at their heart, such as the Star and Shadow in Newcastle, the Cube in Bristol, or the Deptford Cinema in London. Christo Wallers of the Star and Shadow calls this a ‘relational’ mode of film exhibition, where “community is invoked as an act of cultural resistance to the transactional, individualistic structuring of dominant cinema”.

This resistance is both pragmatic and utopian. It is about sustaining a space where things can happen and people can meet. In the simplicity of this aspiration there is much to learn for the future directions of cultural activity.

**Notes**

1. grahamfoundation.org/grantees/5446-fly-me-to-the-moon
2. themoderndaymate.com/viewing-room/luke-fowler-all-divided-selves-1-2011
3. nls.uk/exhibitions/her-century

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