Obscure Cinema

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The tidal wave of upheavals in the world's politics and society that accompanied events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the addictive misuse of social media, the growth of regressive ideologies, and the emergence of artificial intelligence—not to mention the slower but all the more pervasive effects of global warming—is posing a major challenge to the cultural sector, unavoidably torn between the competing options of adapting to the status quo or seeking alternatives through persuasion, grassroots advocacy, or outright rebellion. The field of moving image creation, preservation, and presentation is not alien to this predicament (Meden 2021).[1] Willingly or not, practitioners of these activities must now cope with a conglomerate of crises and transformations at the planetary level, of such magnitude as to make the days of twentieth-century cinema almost unrecognizable.

The symptoms of this phenomenon are especially felt in the area of education. For more than half a century, film museums and archives have raised generations of archivists and curators through on-site internships, followed by introductory and specialized courses—first through summer schools organized by the International Federation of Film Archives since 1973, subsequently with the certificate program of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at the George Eastman Museum, established in 1996—designed after traditional models borrowed from the humanities.[2] Academia belatedly followed suit, eventually formalizing the achievements of the "arts and crafts" method of hands-on training into formal graduate and doctoral programs—early on at the University of East Anglia in the UK, at the Eastman Museum in partnership with the University of Rochester, and in more recent years at the University of Amsterdam and other institutes for higher education—with a stronger theoretical emphasis. Despite their undisputable value, these approaches perpetuate an unsustainable cognitive model, dangerously detached from the urgency of the

issues that have emerged at the dawn of the third millennium.

What follows is a preliminary outline for the establishment of another kind of school for filmmakers, curators, archivists, and exhibitors as a response to viewing practices that encourage retinal bulimia, and to the allegedly positive correlation between the number of films watched and the expertise derived from their experience.[3] Apprenticeship, a millennia-old learning path at the service of an art or trade in which trainees had to know their tools before being allowed to use them, is the backbone of the program. Its admittedly utopian framework is also far from new: some of its guiding principles are found in both religious and secular philosophy (Iyer 2025; Karlin 2025), from early Buddhism and Hinduism (Segnit 2021, 103–06, 139–42) to the teachings of Georges Gurdjieff (Bennett 1973), down to the extremist stance adopted by the Unabomber's manifesto (Dooling 2008). The proposed curriculum makes no direct reference to any of these traditions and systems of thought, but hopes to cultivate an "out of the box" mode of thinking about why moving images are being made in the first place; how they may assist in building a more equal and just society; and how they might be preserved for posterity in order to achieve this goal without further contributing to the destruction of our environment. Regaining a sense of necessity in seeing moving images, making sense of them, and safeguarding their life for the benefit of future viewers is the central preoccupation of the program. The blueprint offered here has sacrificed many important details in the name of synthesis; it is hoped, however, that its fundamental components are portrayed clearly enough to encourage a long overdue debate on the future of audiovisual ethos and politics.

The program spelled out below can be adapted to the specific needs and available resources of the host organization, as long as it remains faithful to the school's key principles: the prolonged and self-imposed abstention from the experience of artificially-made moving images and recorded sounds; the use of mechanical and analogue tools as the exclusive means for achieving the goals and objectives of the training program; understanding the moving image through manual work, championing the virtues of materiality in opposition to current digital normativity but also to fetishism and nostalgia; the direct involvement of students in manufacturing, designing, and presenting audiovisual works, with no external intervention or support; the merger of traditionally distinct actions such as making, exhibiting, experiencing, commenting upon, and preserving images that move and speak into a cohesive whole. In a nutshell, the school intends to nurture a genuine engagement with audiovisual perception, spectatorship, and imagination as non-commodified values to be harnessed through personal accountability, participation, altruism, and determination to regain a sense of wonder for the moving image in itself. When it comes to film preservation in the broadest sense of the word, being a good spectator and a good citizen are one and the same thing.

Year One: The Year of Withdrawal

Reflecting on cinema *in absentia* is not the only way to achieve an enhanced awareness of its possibilities and limits, but it does have the advantage of confronting the

student with the implications of its presence in a drastically unfamiliar territory. The introductory year of the school—stripped to its essence—is a full immersion prologue in reverse mode, the aim of which is to make the students more conscious of the media environment they come from. To this end, all participants will voluntarily refrain from perceiving analogue or digital moving images and recorded sounds of any kind, both during classes and in their personal lives.[4] There is no AI imaging software, social media, television, radio, video game platform, or playback device at their disposal. Should this kind of apparatus be part of their domestic settings, they will not use it under any circumstance. Computers and smartphones will be muted and programmed in a way that enables students to read or exchange text and still images only, alongside normal telephone conversations. They will not, of course, watch any film or video in a theatrical context or at home. The self-imposed embargo will be maintained during the first five years of the program, with the sole exceptions of training exercises and practicums assigned by instructors to each participant or to the class as a whole.

It is expected that students will experience a feeling of acute media deprivation; its repercussions will be explored and regularly discussed at a collective and individual level. The detox procedure finds its counterpart in an intensive program of readings, lectures, workshops, and seminars on cinema and the moving image in general, organized with the aid of a well-supplied library of books and periodicals to be used for the entire duration of the course (this component of the program will not be mentioned in the following sections, but its ongoing presence should be assumed). This activity will be structured along four research strands of equal weight: a) film history, theory, criticism, and curatorship; b) filmmaking in all its aspects, from budgeting to scriptwriting and cinematography, from set and sound design to acting, costumes, and post-production; c) moving image technology including, but not limited to, cameras, sound recording, sound and colour grading, projectors and other exhibition tools; and d) film conservation, preservation, and duplication. It is of critical importance that the four components be organically blended: none of them is to be pursued to the detriment of the others.

It should also be noted that students will not study film theory and history in a vacuum. By virtue of their personal backgrounds, they will necessarily relate to the social and cultural contexts they come from. Lectures, readings, and activities will be informed by the memory of both high- and low-brow incarnations of audiovisual ecosystems, ranging from social media, video games, and streaming platforms to film festivals, art gallery installations, experiments in virtual reality, and image processing by means of artificial intelligence. The live performance of music, theatre, dance, poetry, and other readings—together with the study of other forms of aesthetic expression such as painting, sculpture, and architecture—will be encouraged inside and outside the classroom, and promoted through dedicated events. For their mid-term exam, students will draft a narrative text of 1,000 words (its theme will be previously discussed and agreed upon with the instructors) to be defended in a public session; from that moment, on a bi-monthly or quarterly basis, the same text will be resubmitted in shorter versions of 500, 250, and 100 words, culminating in a final

paper of 25 words. This text is very important, as it will serve as the foundation for a personal project to be developed through all activities to come.

Year Two: The Year of Concealment

The haiku-like project description that is part of the first year's final exam sets the stage for its follow-up, a curriculum characterized by the exposure to analogue moving images and recorded sounds in highly fragmented form. The voluntary withdrawal from access to audiovisual media remains in place, but is tempered by daily classroom sessions in which the students are shown randomly chosen films, projected with a special masking device that reveals only a small portion of the image. Its position changes according to unpredictable patterns, and at irregular intervals. The exposure will be gradually increased throughout the year, each time with a different film. In the last viewing session, the same section of the frame remains visible for the entire running time of the chosen work. The films will be narrative and non-auteurist in content, style, and technique, to discourage easy recognition of the excerpts and differentiate the exercise from a mere quiz-like game.

The opposite learning curve in the discipline of "close viewing" is applied to the "close listening" to recorded sound: in separate sessions held on a daily basis, two other films—also picked at random each week—are "shown" by making audible only the dialogue, sound effects and music, both jointly and separately. In each consecutive session the sound effects, dialogue, and music are progressively shortened until the last week of classes, when scattered one-minute soundbites are made audible to the attendees. For the mid-term exam, students are asked to identify a feature-length film shown in a combination of sound and image snippets as they were exhibited in the preceding months. As a final test, they are given a group of similarly incomplete image and sound extracts, which they are invited to arrange in a logical sequential order. The word "test" is to be understood as an evaluation only in a heavily mediated sense of the term: students will not pass or fail, but they will be required to provide a cogent justification for the outcome and significance of their reconstruction.

Meanwhile, a preliminary storyboard for a fictional or non-narrative film based on the sentence created at the end of the previous year will be drafted in no more than one drawing for each noun, verb, or adjective used in the text. Striving for necessity and seeking what is essential will be the students' core assignment. The storyboard will be defended in front of the school's instructors, who will act in this case as the imaginary producers of a film to be made.

Year Three: The Year of Perception

It is now time to get acquainted with film as an object and its physical characteristics. At the beginning of the third year, students will be allowed to "see" sensitized motion picture stock by holding it in their hands as short and disconnected strips of 35mm negative, with the opening and closing credits removed so as to prevent their easy authentication (its accidental or conscious achievement is irrelevant per se, but may negatively affect an unbiased scrutiny of the artifacts). The number of titles, their length, and the nature of the work assigned for close analysis are left to the discretion

of instructors, provided that only one film at a time is given to each participant. A separate set of strips will be handed over to each student for the purpose of exposing them to the natural elements, therefore accelerating their physical decay. Their effects will be studied and discussed in periodically held special sessions.

The amount of time allotted to each exercise also varies, depending on the total running time of the film and its complexity, but it is expected that during the first semester the examination of the fragments will take a minimum of one week but no more than one month. No viewing device will be used in the course of the year, other than a magnifying lens and a film inspection table with manual rewinds. By the end of each research cycle, students will be expected to arrange the 35mm strips in a plausible chronological order; to give each film a working title; and to draft a narrative report summarizing its overarching structure and aesthetic vision.

The formulation of hypotheses about the title of the film or its author is purely optional, as this is not the main goal of the third year in the program. For this reason, instructors will be encouraged to renounce the use of canonical titles. In the second semester, each inspection cycle will be held with miscellaneous shots from two different films of similar look, made in the same period, with identical aspect ratios and type of soundtrack (if applicable), with the goal of reconstructing both to the best of the students' ability, without the aid of any viewing or projection equipment. For the final exam, the working titles of all the films examined at this time will be listed according to their presumed year of production, along with a research paper outlining the rationale of the proposed chronological sequence. During this year, students will not be allowed to show the film clips to each other, but will be encouraged to communicate about their findings in oral or written form.

There will also be a practicum exam in which participants are asked to reassemble a five-minute sequence, presented to them as bits and pieces of 35mm positive stock. The sequence to be reconstructed will be one and the same for all students. All the various versions thus compiled will be compared in the classroom with the aid of multiple film inspection benches and discussed with the school's faculty. These will be the first and only artificial moving images actually viewed by the students in complete form—albeit as objects only—within the first three years of the program.

Year Four: The Year of Craft

Moving image carriers and apparatuses are historically dependent variables, subject to malfunction, decay, and obsolescence; knowing how they are made, operated, and repaired when necessary is the goal of the next two instalments in the program. Their implementation is predicated upon the awareness that shifting demands in the audiovisual marketplace will eventually lead to a complete stop in the production of analogue film. The fourth year will be therefore spent on manufacturing motion picture stock in a dedicated laboratory adjacent to the classroom. The first semester is divided into six parallel strands, beginning with basic courses in optics and chemistry, and the manufacture of 35mm film base from a set of organic chemicals provided to the students. The stability, transparency, and tensile strength of the base will be tested in collaboration with a team of technicians and scientists recruited as

guest faculty members for this occasion. The second strand is devoted to the making of photographic emulsion and developers. Contrary to common practice in the photo-chemical industry, however, the emulsion will be obtained and processed without recourse to animal remains and chemicals that are harmful to the environment; for instance, macroalgae or other materials may be used instead.[5]

For the third module, students will perforate the freshly made stock with various kinds of manual and semi-automatic equipment provided by the school. In the first three modules, students will work as a single team; each participant will be required to personally supervise every phase of the process, according to working shifts previously discussed with faculty members. The fourth module entails the drafting of a project for a small, non-polluting conservation facility where the films manufactured at the school will be kept for long-term storage under controlled levels of temperature and relative humidity.

Sound and applied colour are the themes of the fifth and sixth research strand. Each student will learn how to make a variable area optical soundtrack, and acquire the basic skills involved in tinting, toning, hand-colouring, and colour filtering techniques for motion picture film, bringing the first semester to its end. In the second semester, with the freshly made 35mm film stock at their disposal, participants will take their final exam by creating their own film with a camera and sound equipment, also provided by the school: its subject matter will be based on the previously drafted one-sentence text and its storyboard.

After shooting, students will process the resulting camera negative and a 35mm projection print, in both cases with the stock they have manufactured during the first semester. In doing so, if appropriate, they will personally apply the tinting, toning, hand-colouring, or other colour techniques to their film, as well as a synchronized optical soundtrack. They will have to wait another year, however, before seeing it on the big screen.

Year Five: The Year of the Machine

The entire fifth year of the program will be focused on the construction and operation of film projection equipment. In the first semester, students will learn how to build, disassemble, and reassemble two pieces of apparatus: first a 16mm projector, then its 35mm equivalent, both chosen by instructors from a range of models manufactured before 1980 (the reason for the chronological threshold is that the equipment should exclusively consist of mechanical and electrical parts). The learning process will also involve the installation and operation of analogue sound equipment for the projection of variable area and variable density soundtracks. For the mid-term exam, each student will be asked to assemble a projector from an assortment of scattered pieces. During this period, readings and classroom discussions of technical manuals on manufacturing film projectors and operating them will take precedence over the other three strands described in the first year's curriculum.

The second semester consists of a personalized introductory course on film projection. The prints used in the training sessions will be the very films made by the students in the previous year, with each student using a projection print made by an-

other participant in the course. The final exam is divided into two parts: in the first, all students will work as a team and install from scratch a film projector and sound system in an auditorium, with SMPTE picture and sound loops for pre-screening tests; in the second part, they will finally project their own film, in the presence of all other students and faculty members.

Upon completion of the exams, the self-imposed embargo on access to artificial moving images and recorded sounds will be permanently lifted, as spectatorship cannot exist without their perception. From now on, students shall be free to use all kinds of playback equipment without any further restriction, both in the classroom and in their personal lives, unless otherwise instructed in the two remaining school years.

Year Six: The Year of Spectatorship

The experience of cinema as a theatrical event is the theme of the sixth year in the program, articulated into monthly or weekly modules. For each of them, the instructor selects a feature-length or short film to be screened without opening and closing credits.

Fragmentation fosters reconstruction. In the first session, the work is presented in the form of complete but scattered shots exhibited in random order, with no sound, and later discussed in one or more plenary sessions. The same film is subsequently shown in the same way, but with sound only (or with the live performance of casually assorted music themes, if the film is silent), then with a combination of unassembled images and sounds (for silent films, musicians may perform the music as an improvised suite of motifs or arias). In the fourth instalment of each module, the film is projected in its entirety but backwards—from the end to the beginning—without sound, thereby compelling students to focus upon non-narrative aspects of the work; in the fifth, the complete soundtrack is played (the recording of a live performance may be used for silent films) with no accompanying moving images. At the end of each teaching module, the film is projected once more as a complete work, with the inclusion of opening and closing credits. Classroom discussions—again, in one or more sessions—follow each phase in the process.

The selection of films will be thoroughly international in scope. Films made in a language different from the mother tongue of the student body will be shown with their original sound, without subtitles or dubbing. Additional screenings with subtitles or in dubbed versions will be organized on a case-by-case basis, with the possible addition of standalone teaching sessions on dubbing and subtitling practices and techniques. For the mid-term exam, each student will be given a copy of the same unassembled short film to be edited in a logical order, as in Year Three, but with the aid of viewing or projection apparatus. Again, all the edited versions will be compared in one or more screenings, followed by collective appraisals of each iteration.

At the end of the year, a complete film with no opening or closing credits will be projected, and each participant will be asked to deliver a one-hour evaluation of the exhibited work in the presence of students and instructors.

Year Seven: The Year of the Show

The program finds its fulfilment in a comprehensive process of design, preparation, and implementation of a one-week film retrospective (each program not exceeding two hours in length), without limitation on the media, formats, and number of titles shown, provided that at least one title per day is shown on a photochemical carrier; the students' inexperience in handling non-photochemical carriers will be addressed by specialized staff hired for the occasion.

In collaboration with the other participants, each student will personally execute on a rotational basis all the roles involved in the organization of the film retrospective, including the selection of the works to be projected, the procurement of screening material from distribution or archival sources, and the negotiation of financial terms for their one-time exhibition; the inspection of film elements; the writing of program notes and their reproduction in a printed and online festival catalogue; management of the theatre where the screenings are to be held, also taking into account possible improvements to its interior design, acoustics, and atmosphere; public announcements of the film series; the actual projection of all the films, one of which will be held on a portable device in an open-air venue; and a brief live introduction to each program in front of a paying audience, tailored to what the community of spectators anticipates to see and hear.

Consequently, a key aspect of the exhibition programs is that their structure and content must be strictly site-specific: rather than working in a non-existent intellectual abstraction, the curator has the duty to consider the geographic, cultural, and socio-economic environment where the film series is to be screened, including audiences' profiles and expectations. In a similar vein, students are responsible for drafting an actual or imaginary collection policy aimed at the long-term preservation of the exhibited films in a museum or archival context, compatible with the physical and climatic conditions of the pertinent territory. Additional tasks may include the training of volunteer or paid performers of music for silent films in dedicated masterclasses.

The instructors' team will only play an advisory role in the process, which constitutes a *de facto* practicum doctoral dissertation. While each participant is required to cover all roles in partnership with the student body as a whole, all of them will exercise the role of project managers and curators for the one-week program (one for each student), whose outcome will be discussed as a narrative report in the form of an essay to be submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed or independent journal. Students who have successfully completed the film program will have the option to present it as a touring show in other venues under the aegis of the organizing institution. They may also be selected as mentors or instructors for the next cycle of the school, either as permanent staff or on an occasional basis.

Year Zero: A Pilot Program

Under the parameters outlined above, students are free to tailor their own education and cultural interests to their personal taste: no limitation whatsoever will be applied to their reading lists or to the nature of the film they will choose to make. Admis-

sion criteria include neither a particular background nor previous experience in the field, but priority will be given to candidates showing proficiency in writing, public speech, and manual labour, both individually and in collective modes, as well as a technical problem-solving attitude. While a letter of motivation may be required for the selection process, the very willingness to formally accept the course's admittedly demanding rules of engagement and readiness to champion them constitutes in and of itself sufficient proof of the candidate's suitability to the school.

The syllabus may also be reconfigured as a one-year pilot program where the basic principles applied in each of the seven years (a lengthy period indeed, but necessary to an authentically in-depth learning of an arduous and multifaceted discipline, more so than what is warranted by existing courses) are highlighted and implemented in a simpler format. This abridged variant is not to be construed as a potential substitute for the full curriculum, but should be presented instead as evidence that its seemingly idealistic concept can actually find its embodiment in a private or public institution endowed with the appropriate film collection, curatorial personnel, technical infrastructure, and openness to imagine a different world.

Either way, it must be emphasized that employment in a film collecting institution is not the primary driving force behind the program's philosophy and organizing principles. Job placement is, of course, a desirable goal; the main impulse to join the project should, however, be quintessentially vocational in nature. The term "vocational" is envisioned here as a back-engineering of Max Weber's concept of professional *Beruf* ("calling"). In aspirational terms, honing practical skills and developing students' attention, perception, and personal commitment (toward film materials and the world at large) are strictly interconnected in the Obscure Cinema program, nourishing each other through "the practice of systematic self-control in pursuing constant goals or purposes" (Barbalet 2000, 329) deliberately reframed here in direct resistance to the ethics of capitalism.

Notes

[1] A preliminary sketch of the concepts discussed here was presented under the title "The Lindgren Manifesto, Part 13: A Modest Utopia on the Story of Cinema, Followed by its Practical Application," the keynote speech for "All the World's Montage: From Cine-Eye to Cinemetrics," a conference in honour of Yuri Tsivian hosted at the Logan Center for the Arts, University of Chicago, on May 12, 2018.

[2] It is worth noting that the early manifestations of education in film preservation did not necessarily follow the modus operandi of filmmaking academies and film production courses within and outside universities in the last quarter of the twentieth century. This program proposes a transversal approach to the ethics of film culture, where making moving images and foreseeing their future preservation are both key constituents of an ecumenical view of media awareness.

[3] For a discussion of the working hypotheses underlying this project, see the dialogue between myself and Jurij Meden (Cherchi Usai and Meden 2023, 112). My gratitude goes to Meden, Curator and Head of Film Exhibitions at the Österreichisches Filmmuseum in Vienna, for his review and comments to earlier drafts of this essay.

[4] In the context of the proposed school, an "academic year" corresponds to a calendar year, foregoing the customary schedule followed in colleges and universities with the intention of avoiding the detrimental effects of frequent interruptions in the workflow. Students live and work in a dedicated campus where vacation time is allocated by the same standards used in a non-academic workplace. It is the students' responsibility to ensure that their daily activities, jobs, travels, and leisure time are not in conflict with the methods and requirements of the program. No monitoring whatsoever will be exercised in this respect, thus making participants accountable only to themselves in their compliance to the behavioural principles described here.

[5] At the time of writing, there is no known chemically stable *and* commercially viable alternative to animal-based gelatin for photochemical media. Independent research has shown, however, interesting possibilities for the use of non-polluting agents in the production of still and moving image works through analogue photographic methods. Dutch artist Esther Urlus has developed alternative methods for the manufacture of silver gelatin emulsion, as well as film developers involving the use of horse urine. See https://estherurlus.hotglue.me/research. Julia Parks also made a short film on 16mm stock, *BBC Bladderwrack* (2018), made and developed with a mixture of seaweed, washing soda and vitamin C. See https://juliaparks.co.uk/bbc-bladderwrack/ and an interview with the filmmaker (Parks 2021). The Sustainable Darkroom project of the London Alternative Photography Collective also used seaweed as film. See http://www.londonaltphoto.com/sustainable-darkroom-about. A recipe for developing motion picture film stock with macroalgae is reproduced in King (2021). For a discussion of sustainable techniques in photographic media, see Melody Jue, "Holding Sway: Sustainability and the Photomedia of Seaweeds," a lecture delivered at "The (Un)bearable Lightness of Media: Critical Approaches to 'Sustainability' in Film and Audiovisual Production, Circulation and Preservation," the 29th International Film and Media Studies Conference in Udine, Italy, on November 3, 2022, https://ff2022.filmforumfestival.it/keynotes/melody-jue. All websites listed here were accessed on December 19, 2023.

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