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# **Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory**

edited by

**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed,  
Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini**



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**FILM LIBRARY**

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**HOME VIDEO**

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**STREAMING**

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**VAULT**

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**GATEKEEPER**

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**PANDEMIC CONTENT**

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# Opening the Vault: Streaming the Film Library in the Age of Pandemic Content

Jaap Verheul

**“Opening the Vault” examines the renewed currency of the film library—or a catalog of existing content—during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the production of new motion pictures came to a halt, and subscription-based streaming services such as Netflix, Disney+, and Mubi unleashed a copyright war to obtain the licensing of film titles which they subsequently reissued on their home video platforms. In the process, these non-theatrical distributors and exhibitors augmented the value of their vaults while solidifying their position as principal gatekeepers of the circulation of moving images. This chapter reorients the study of global screen cultures away from the production of new content or its exhibition in theatrical screening spaces and toward an understanding of the film library as a significant site of our engagement with pandemic media.**

*For inside him there are spirits, or at least little genii, which have seen to it that for a collector—and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be—ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.*  
 Walter Benjamin (1968, 67)—“Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting”

The film library shapes the lives and afterlives of motion pictures, and has been doing so since the genesis of moving image culture. Between 1896 and 1923, manufacturers in the United States, Europe, and the United Kingdom designed more than twenty portable projectors for non-theatrical screening venues such as homes, schools, social clubs, churches, and railway stations. By 1906, the Ikonograph emulated the quality and design of professional projectors in theatrical exhibition spaces, and its New York-based manufacturer began to buy the rights to films from producers while subsequently cutting the 35mm stock in half (i.e. 17.5mm) in order to bring down the costs. Indeed, non-theatrical exhibition remained a privilege for the happy few who could afford to buy the projector and the reels, both of which exceeded the cost of admission to a nickelodeon show. By the end of the decade, most manufacturers had lost faith in the commercial viability of a commercial market for non-theatrical film screenings (Singer 1988, 37–42).

A significant shift occurred in 1912, when multiple manufacturers entered the home cinema market while developing new projectors that were on par with the quality and single-reel-length of features shown in theaters. Four factors contributed to this revival. First, the base for home cinema consumption had been expanded by professionalization of commercial exhibition into a full-fledged industry. This transition coincided, second, with a predilection for vertical integration as two leading production companies entered the market for home projection. In 1912, Pathé developed its first home cinema projector, Pathé Kok, which ran on a unique, non-flammable 28mm film stock. At the same time, Edison released its Home Projecting Kinetoscope in the United States, introducing a 22mm substandard gauge film to the non-theatrical screening market. A key asset of both systems was their innovative distribution system, which made it easier and cheaper to circulate films from their catalogs. Edison, for example, established a distribution-by-mail exchange service that circulated the Kinetoscope films in a metal container, which the consumer could return by mail in exchange for another film in the same category (Singer 1988, 42–46). Third, business buyers like motion picture exhibitors—then referred to as “exchanges”—began to cement their position

as gatekeepers, entering into agreements with amateur exhibitors who rented their titles. This practice was facilitated, fourth, by the regulation of patents and the formation of a national distributor, the General Film Company (GFC), which introduced a pricing system based on a film's release date and flat rental fees. This legislative framework necessitated the standardization of film distribution and exhibition, which in turn enhanced the value of film negatives (Hoyt 2014, 23–24).

It is at this point that the film library began to consolidate its position as a gatekeeper of the circulation of moving images. Eric Hoyt (2014, 11) identifies four developments which contributed to this evolution between 1903 and 1915: the introduction of copyright laws, a star system, feature films, and distribution and exhibition infrastructures. By 1917, the profits of film distributors surpassed those of producers while pirated prints circulated widely, thereby undermining the value of film collections. Studios and manufacturers such as the Triangle Film Corporation accordingly began to institutionalize their film libraries. The appeal of these vaults broadened after 1923, when small-gauge film collections were introduced in France and the United States. The French 9.5mm small-gauge system called "Pathé-Baby" fared well in Europe and Latin America in the 1920s, aided by its cheaper, smaller 9.5mm film stock on the one hand, and Pathé's extensive film library on the other. Charles Pathé actively pursued the inclusion of well-known films in his "*filmathèques*," which were available for sale or on a rental basis, and ranged from silent shorts to animated features such as *Félix the Cat* (1925–36), popular comedies with movie stars like Max Linder and Charlie Chaplin, and European classics such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) (Schneider 2007).

In the United States, meanwhile, the introduction of the 16mm gauge in 1923 reduced the cost of previous formats while enhancing the portability of both the reels and the projector. The 16mm gauge emanated from an agreement between three pioneers in the motion picture industry, who had established their reputation as the manufacturers of cameras, projectors, and film stock: Bell and Howell, Victor-Animatograph, and Eastman Kodak. This consortium designed the new gauge as an American response to Pathé's sway over the non-theatrical screening market, tapping into the international distribution and rental system which Kodak had established for its photography outlets. By the 1930s, the cartel had institutionalized their film libraries: Bell and Howell's Filmo Library and Kodak's Kodascope Library, supplemented by Pathé's Pathéscope Library and a range of smaller agencies, created a network of film circulation and exchange via stand-alone rental agencies and distribution in department stores, drug stores, camera shops, and mail-order systems. Their catalogs were comprised of entries produced by companies that had gone out of business, or new features that had already gone through their first release window. Meanwhile, Hollywood studios such as Universal—which,

unlike the vertically-integrated majors, did not own a significant distribution network—firmly embraced these small-gauge film collections in order to solidify their position on the market for home movie entertainment. As a result, by the 1930s, Haidee Wasson (2007, 21) has demonstrated, “the commercial film library was the imagined and material stage on which the cinematic world came together and was stored, reorganized, and redistributed along specific logics to newly atomized film audiences.”

While it is tempting to understand these shifts exclusively in terms of innovations in technology or infrastructure, Hoyt reminds us that the film library also flourished in the wake of the emergence and growth of specific markets, such as business buyers like motion picture exhibitors and, later, television stations. It is not so much that these intermediaries tapped into a cinephile sensitivity for older films; rather, the exploitation of the film library signified a conservative business strategy that enabled these distributors and exhibitors to reissue older films at a fraction of the cost of a new film, while these features were also predictable in their marketability because of their proven star power, popularity, and artistic merit. In other words, Hoyt (2014, 6) argues, “What constitutes a library use depends on the subject’s position in the marketplace. A studio that owns a library considers different uses than an exhibitor that is considering buying (or, more accurately, renting) films from a library.” In the early 1930s, for example, the film library gained in value as studios began to produce derivatives—such as remakes, shorts, and cartoons—of their copyrighted originals, but by the late 1940s they had turned to their vaults to distribute reissues at a relatively low cost but high profit margin.

It is at this moment that the vault emerges as a principal gatekeeper of moving image culture, enabling manufacturers, production companies, and movie studios to augment the value of their libraries. In the 1930s, Warner Bros. systematically began to survey its existing collection of silent films in order to identify those titles with limited reissue value, and to extract stock footage from those films which it could monetize in the future. The surplus of remaining silent footage was intentionally destroyed. Copyright anxiety was a key driver for doing so, as Warner annihilated the silent films it completely owned while saving the films from independent producers to which it was no longer entitled. Copyright in the age of film (and later, video) carefully coordinated the relationship between public interest and private property, safeguarding the owner’s right to exploit the work while granting the public access to these commodities (Hilderbrand 2009, 80). The standardization of sound film in the 1930s encouraged Warner in its pursuit of such planned obsolescence (Hediger 2005, 138). As with television in the 1950s, VHS in the 1980s, DVD in the 1990s, Blu-ray in the 2000s, and Video on Demand in the 2010s, such an economy of scarcity allowed content producers, as Caetlin Benson-Allott (2013, 7) contends, “to increase profits by multiplying exhibition platforms” while

animating them “to develop and cater to new media platforms even while venerating older technologies.” Akin to the first decades of moving image culture, however, film studios, movie theaters, and streaming platforms remain at the service of the production of desirable new content in order to maintain if not augment the market value of their existing collections and staying competitive by doing so. Reminiscent of the block booking practices in the age of vertical integration, digital content producers still acquire most of their revenue from the sales of packages (mostly for television) and thus require fresh commodities in order to stimulate those sales (Hoyt 2014, 12–13, 196).

What, then, happens to content when it is stored in a vault in the midst of a pandemic? At a time when the production of new motion pictures has come to a halt, we might contend, firstly, that a film library increases in market value and, secondly, that this added value cements the position of the gatekeeper who circulates this archived content between producers and audiences. For content producers such as movie studios, the film library has historically been comprised of a catalog of films that have already gone through their first cycle of distribution and exhibition, usually as an exclusive release in theaters or on home video, video on demand, pay television, or syndicated television—or, increasingly, a combination of two or more of these release windows. For the users of this content, meanwhile, the film library traditionally operates as a personal archive which remodels the audience into a collector who is at liberty to curate their own catalog. At both ends of this “flow” (Williams 2003, 77–120), home video platforms are increasingly adjusting their film libraries to the operative logic of the vault, transforming streaming services into gatekeepers who regulate the relationship between producers, texts, and users.

The Corona crisis brought these shifts to the fore. For movie studios whose distribution network does not yet include a home video platform, such as Warner Bros., Universal, or Paramount, the pandemic restores their control over the circulation of vaulted content to levels unseen since the heyday of vertical integration. On the other hand, for home delivery platforms such as Netflix or Mubi, who do not have much of a vault to guard or who have only recently started to produce their own features, it becomes imperative to license existing content from these vaults in order to maintain the currency of their own, subscription-based catalogs—usually a curated library which, for the time being, cannot be amplified by the production of new content. In this media landscape, the convergence of the vault, content producer, and platform distributor gains currency. The launch of Disney+ in November 2019 attests to this heightened significance.

The COVID-19 pandemic expedited this *modus operandi*. In March 2020, when the production of new film and television content was halted in the wake of the virus’s global spread, film studios, video platforms, and content producers such as Netflix, Amazon, Apple, and Disney faced a conundrum. On the one

hand, they sought to maintain their competitive standing by postponing the theatrical release of new features to a post-viral future, as was the case with the twenty-fifth James Bond film, *No Time to Die* (Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2020). On the other hand, these companies became the key providers of new content by releasing some of their new films exclusively and instantaneously on their streaming platforms, as evinced by the release of Spike Lee's *Da 5 Bloods* (2020), a Netflix original which, akin to Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* (2019), was scheduled to have a limited run in theaters before being dropped on the video platform (Smits 2020).

At the same time, however, the film library has solidified its standing in this pandemic media landscape. With a business model that thrives on the streaming of archived content from the vault (Crisp 2015, 62–67) and, as we have seen, on the production of new, exclusive content in order to maintain the market value of that archive, companies were compelled to extract the collections from their vaults, and to unleash a copyright war to obtain the licensing of existing film and television content in order to augment competitive standing of their libraries. In April 2020, at the height of the pandemic, Netflix accordingly teamed-up with the French distributor MK2 and licensed part of its catalog for the French market, thereby offering its subscribers access to such classics as François Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* (1959) and Jacques Demy's *Les parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964). Disney, meanwhile, declared that its vault had now been “opened” in an attempt to promote its new, subscription-based video platform Disney+, awarding its subscribers with access to a deluge of titles which had been buried in its archive for decades.

Indeed, it was Disney who first understood the strategic importance of the vault in an increasingly converged and conglomerated media landscape in which content would migrate across technologies, platforms, formats, circuits, and borders. Since the re-release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) in 1944, Disney began to store its films in a vault—the infamous “Disney Vault”—and would, for a moratorium period, not make them available again in either movie theaters or on home media delivery circuits—a practice it maintained during the heyday of VHS in the 1980s and DVD in the 2000s. The idea was that this economy of scarcity would augment the market value of the Disney library while enabling the media behemoth to strictly regulate the circulation of its catalog on legal or illegal distribution circuits. The arrival of Disney+ in the midst of a pandemic, in other words, seemingly retired the concept of the vault because it strengthened the competitive standing of the home video platform in the streaming wars while granting Disney even greater control over the distribution and exhibition of its collection. Some of its more controversial animated features, however, such as the blatantly racist *Songs From the South* (1946), remain buried in its vault indefinitely in the hope that they will eventually be forgotten.

The film library, then, reorients our understanding of pandemic media away from the production studio or the movie theater and toward a conceptualization of the vault as a significant site of our engagement with pandemic screen cultures. Now a meticulously guarded if no longer a material vault, the film library has become a gatekeeper which governs the lives and afterlives of film. In this closed circuit, the public's access to the vault—or the lack thereof—is translated into economic and cultural currency. In economic terms, subscription-based video platforms such as Netflix rely on the shrewd design of their interface in order to create an illusion of choice and textual abundance in what ultimately remains a finite catalog. In other words, as Ramon Lobato (2019, 37) elucidates, the home video platform is “closed, library-like, professional; a portal rather than a platform; a walled garden rather than an open marketplace.” Such a business model thrives in pandemic times, when the scarcity of content is simultaneously programmed and inadvertent. Indeed, during the COVID-19 lockdown, Netflix emerged as a chief beneficiary of the pandemic, attracting millions of new subscribers worldwide as an unprecedented 15.8 million new connections were added to its existing user-base. Meanwhile, the value of its shares skyrocketed by almost 40 percent, revamping the streaming service into one of the high performing tech-stocks of 2020.

If the vault generates profit, it also governs our cultural and affective engagement with pandemic media. This is in itself nothing new. If, as Walter Benjamin (1968, 67) already noted, libraries shape our subjectivity, the streaming of the film library in pandemic times similarly topples our liaison with film. At the level of nationhood, geoblocking protocols ensure that digital content providers operate mostly as “territorial catalog systems” (Lobato 2019, 179). In spite of the pretense that video platforms such as Netflix or Amazon provide instant and absolute access to their subscribers in all four hemispheres, IP (internet protocol) addresses nonetheless restrict the infinity of the vault by geographical location and thus control which titles users may have access to. Netflix's “reliance on territorial copyright licensing,” Lobato (2019, 70) elucidates, “means that it may be best understood as a series of national media services stitched together into a single platform.”

In this geoblocked screen world, the pandemic vault monitors our cinephilia. The advent of the digitized library in the twenty-first century facilitated the gradual erosion of the personal, domestic archive which had demarcated the first hundred years of moving image culture. As Erkki Huhtamo (2013, 50–51) notes, pre-cinematic projection and optical toys, such as the Thaumatrope (1824) and the Phenakistoscope (1833), were already available for purchase in the early nineteenth century, engendering a proto-cinephile culture that introduced a “persistence of vision” which would come to define a century of celluloid, magnetic, and digital cinephilia. This material economy of cinephilia lingered well into the era of VHS and DVD, when home video formats enabled

the film library to realize its democratic potential (Greenberg 2010; Klinger 2006), and “a specific topology and materiality would support and determine cinephile practices” (Hagener 2016, 184). The digital vault, in contrast, dematerializes our affective cinephilia while eroding its democratic potential in the process. As evinced by the COVID-19 lockdown, it is the pandemic content provider who determines what we are able to watch, when we are able to do so, and at what cost. Pandemic cinephilia thus marks a modality of signal traffic that flows through interfaces, algorithms, protocols, formats, technologies, and infrastructures. Subscription-based video platforms such as MUBI or Netflix now operate as gatekeepers of access and curators of taste, circumventing the principles of excessive user-choice and consumer autonomy which these streaming services sell to their user-base. In the process, the home video platform consolidates its “binary role as tastemaker and educator” (Smits and Nikdel 2019, 29).

Indeed, the pandemic film library has begun to mold the university in its own image. At a time when higher education is under pressure to evolve into a dislocated and disembodied protocol in which learning occurs online and at distance, lecturers and students are at the mercy of the operative logic of the vault. While in-class screenings become ephemeral as social distancing can no longer be maintained, the teaching of film will be organized in terms of what will be available for streaming online. As Lucas Hilderbrand (2009, 231) reminds us, however, such “convergence usually means content redundancy across platforms,” which will have profound implications for how our pedagogy will engage with global screen cultures. What will remain in our curricula? Hollywood fare? Cheap content—the “fillers”—that has been licensed to promote the release of Netflix originals or Disney classics? A much-needed activist alternative is provided by Leshu Torchin (2020) and the Centre for Screen Cultures at the University of St Andrews. In the wake of the worldwide closures of cinemas, festivals, galleries, and collectives, the Centre curates an online collection of video resources that connects the audience-in-lockdown to independent films, documentaries, and avant-garde works which have managed to escape the all-consuming vortex of the vault. Perhaps, then, it is up to the media scholar to preserve, study, deconstruct, and shape our pandemic screen cultures of the twenty-first century.

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Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these “pandemic media” reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and politics with which they are entangled. Highlighting media’s adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.

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