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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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DRIVE-IN

NOSTALGIA

MOVIES

AUDIENCE

[6]

"If You Say You Watch the Movie, You're a Couple o' Liars": In Search of the Missing Audience at the Drive-In

Karin Fleck

This short piece deals with the 2020 resurgence of the marginal *dispositif* of drive-in theaters by focusing on the (dis)placement of the audience, nostalgia, and its modes of movie and music experience, which anticipates that of pandemic media.

*Jenny was sweet. Show a smile for the people she
needs. I'm trouble, let's drive. I don't know the
way you came alive.
Sniff 'n' the Tears*

On May 12, 2020, German comedian and musician Helge Schneider released a short video message for his fans:

In the near future, I won't be able to perform. I would thus like to clarify that I don't perform in front of cars, I don't perform in front of people who have to sit 1.5m apart from each other and wear a face mask and I also don't perform on the internet via streaming programs. To be honest, I also don't want to familiarize myself with that because in streaming services, a crucial part of my work is missing, which is you! If things continue as they are, that's it. (2020)

Helge Schneider misses his audience, but what he states actually refers to a live audience at a concert venue, neglecting the fact that within a month his video message had already clocked up almost 800,000 views. The audience had shifted elsewhere a long time ago but Helge refused to follow.¹ His nostalgia is clearly bound to a place shared with many concert venues and currently endangered due to the pandemic, but also to a state, which is the collective ecstasy of being part of a live-audience: the collective singing, clapping, swaying, dancing, cheering, and sometimes even the shabby band shirt that fans wear even many years after the concerts—a material souvenir of the experience.

But a closer look reveals that his statement is about more than his music and concert experiences. It is about audience experience and spectatorship, which also makes it relevant to think about another currently endangered institutional form, namely the cinema. Since there is no material proof that can be taken home as a souvenir from the cinema (except the ticket), it is the memory of the collective experience that persists: the laughter, the chat afterwards, the annoying couple sitting next to you, and the taste of the popcorn on that day. What is thus missed in these pandemic times is not the movies as such but a certain place to experience them in, especially new theatrical releases. The idea of consuming movies from home was embraced by streaming services such as Netflix, Prime, and Mubi that extended their range. Movies available at the touch of a button are today's more comfortable alternative with no greater risks involved.

Cinema releases, however, were postponed. Time froze. If you walked past your favorite cinema, the film ads hanging above the entrance were still those from mid-March at the moment of their closure. So venues in which to experience music and movies were closed, enabling two different ways of responding, and in turn conjuring up the Schneider conflict: mourning or moving? The movies have moved since their early days at the end of the nineteenth century, along with the music and the audience. Compared to Schneider, movies like to play at different places and find new niches. Lately, they even like to resurrect old places they formerly inhabited: because movies don't mind playing in front of cars! The sudden, drastic lockdown of the cinema and its spectators in its classical *dispositif* as analyzed by Jean-Louis Baudry and Jean-Louis Comolli at the end of the 1960s has given rise to the resurgence of a marginal *dispositif* during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020: an extremely American invention called the drive-in. Understanding its socio-cultural implications means returning to the prosperous post-war America of the 1950s.

1 He is 65 years old and likes to experience music the way he used to as a teenager: via records and gigs.

The first drive-in was patented in 1933 by Richard M. Hollingshead on a seven-acre field near New Jersey as an outdoor theater with automobiles parked on inclined ramps. However, they did not reach their economic breakthrough until they peaked in the late 1950s, when there were over 4,000 drive-ins in the US alone (Fox and Black 2011, 272). The reasons for this cinematic configuration's success were the country's prosperity, the availability of vacant, accessible, and cheap land, and the rise of a car culture that established American's "emotional relationship with their cars" (Segrave 1992, vii). Part of the baby boom and the concomitant suburbanization while also part of an attempt to cushion the rapid spread of TVs in households, drive-ins (or ozoners) developed as "focal points of local communities" and as a "midpoint between domestic and public spheres" (Goldsmith 1999, 158–59). Combining a family-friendly environment with an occasion to live out obsessive car love,² drive-ins became the comparatively cheap and comfortable alternative³ to urban theaters and solved the truly American dilemma of "deciding which he likes better, the movies or automobile riding" (Valentine 1994, 160). Additional services and facilities such as diaper machines, bottle warmers, playgrounds, petting zoos, swimming pools, and flea markets clearly situated movies as just one part of the overall experience: a cinema where the attraction is the distraction.⁴ Technological aspects (apart from seasonal and temporal constraints) in drive-ins were always imperfect compared to their indoor rivals with sound delivery systems shifting from huge, fixed speakers to hanging intercom speakers, and later FM radio transmission (Fox 2018, 32). But their technological inefficiency did not matter because the movies did not matter, a phenomenon that became even clearer in the 1960s. The Beach Boys' 1964 song "Drive-In"⁵ showed that they understood everything about it: "Forget about the plot and take your dates to the drive in." The drive-in as a site for sexual adventures became the sassy supplement to the history of family

- 2 Proof of this love can also be found in the numerous pop songs around car culture by artists such as Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Tracy Chapman, Janis Joplin, the Eagles, Steppenwolf, Rose Royce, Lana del Rey, and Iggy Pop, to name a few. This trend, just like the drive-in, was also adopted in songs by European bands such as Roxette, Sniff 'n' the Tears, Madness, Golden Earring, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones.
- 3 By comfort, I am referring here especially to the informality of dress. The drive-in was just one step to liberate family members from the pressure of dressing up when going out. Instead, families could enjoy a shared activity without having to worry about babysitters or dinner. The kids could be taken in their pajamas, while food was either guaranteed through the offer of snack bars and drive-in restaurants or through self-supply, which was allowed in drive-ins as opposed to cinemas downtown.
- 4 The term "cinema of distraction" was coined by Ben Goldsmith in his 1999 article about Australian drive-ins.
- 5 "Every time I have a date there's only one place to go, that's to the drive in. It's such a groovy place to talk and maybe watch a show, down at the drive in. Forget about the plot, it'll do very well, but make sure you see enough so you're prepared to tell, about the drive in. If the windows get fogged, you'll have to take a breath, down at the drive in...If you say you watch the movie, you're a couple o' liars..."

drive-ins, including fogged windows and cars parked in the last row, known as “Love Lane,” bouncing up and down. Cars parked on “Love Lane” had to pay additional fees but considering the more prudish and restrictive educative methods of the time, most adolescents welcomed drive-ins as the only place for secret getaways. “Love Lane” indeed lost a bit of its popularity when the gear stick in car models started to be placed between the two front seats, instead of next to the steering wheel. In this design, the “separated” seats were more reminiscent of those in downtown cinemas, where the last row continues to be the favorite place for getting closer in touch with a date.

Meanwhile, the first drive-ins were culturally exported to Europe.⁶ The first one opened in 1960 and still operates today in Gravenbruch, near Frankfurt. A curiosity and another product of American Cultural Imperialism, this element of the American lifestyle was sold as described by film scholar Nils Peiler: “There was an outdoor-cinema for individualists who wanted to watch a movie from their cars while eating Burgers at a time when US soldiers were still stationed and ‘Fast Food’ was a foreign word” (Peiler 2016, 12). The drive-ins’ leap to European destinations happened at the end of the 1960s: a time of change in audience demographics and the beginning of Hollywood’s restructuring process, targeting a younger audience. The ultimate result of this early New Hollywood is *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1968), which promotes a successful date between the two protagonists at a drive-in, chatting and eating burgers to Simon and Garfunkel’s “Big Bright Green Pleasure Machine”—a wink to happy, consuming Americans. The failed version of this date follows ten years later in the musical comedy *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978), which reveals the worst-case scenario⁷ of being stuck next to grabbing, abusive, and infectious company in the enclave of the car. Here lies the fallacy of the presumed safety in cars, luring consumers with their elaborate designs and controllable gadgets to feel safe and sound, or, as in Karin Bijsterveld et al.’s twisted formulation “sound and safe.”

6 But compared to their wide extent in the US, they never really exceeded the status of curiosities, because in Europe the pragmatic notion of cars as a means of transportation prevailed.

7 This only pertains to worst-case scenario for dates at drive-ins. The real worst-case happens in the film *Targets* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1968), where the drive-in becomes the target for a killer’s rampage.



[Figure 1] *Trapped in the Car* (Screenshot: Karin Fleck 2020, 5)

In the scene, Danny's (John Travolta) advances to the shy, well-behaved Sandy (Olivia Newton John) are constantly rejected. As the screenshot above (fig. 1) shows, the front of the windshield is the most telling: Not only does its frame, visually separating them, anticipate the upcoming conflict, but the windshield as a whole even replaces the screen (or is the screen), and reveals what the drive-in experience is really about, meaning what happens inside rather than outside the car. The windshield could thus be described as a double-sided screen. It is a projection surface for the disastrous drive-in date, or, put another way, a movie about movie experience at drive-ins, whereas from the opposite perspective behind the wheel, the windshield also works as a mirror, reflecting the drive-in spectators' distracted attention. To a great extent, the spectator's drift towards other activities is also provoked by the radio transmission of movie sound and the car radio as a personally controllable audio device enabling what Bijsterveld et al. called "acoustic cocooning" (2). Auditory information is received differently through the radio than during a live-concert, which makes listening a culturally learned but also hierarchized process. Anahid Kassabian categorized radio music as "ubiquitous music," which is "the kind of music that we listen to as part of our environment" and which could "invisibly accompany any kind of activity" (2013, 4). But the sort of distraction activity Danny pursues is offensive in Sandy's eyes, so she ends the scene outraged by leaving a devastated Danny alone at a drive-in movie,⁸ shouting desperately after her: "Sandy, you can't just walk out of a drive-in!"

8 Which is also the title of an instrumental song of the same name, featured on the *Grease* record single of *You're the One that I Want*.



[Figure 2] A heartbroken Danny sings the soundtrack to the silent ads at the drive-in. (Screenshot: Karin Fleck 2020, 6)

The feeling of being alone at a drive-in is not only the dramatic consequence of Danny's failed date but a sensation that is symptomatic for drive-ins, where spectators are sitting isolated in the self-enclosed space of the car: a private bubble in the public drive-in area, which tends to feel even more private once the space is filled with darkness at night. Drive-ins thus bring the "outside experience" of cinemas to the inside of one's own four wheels, provoking closer contact between those inside the vehicle while keeping everything outside at a close distance. But there is something about Travolta's filmography in particular that predestines him as the iconic figure of these emptied pandemic cinematic spaces. In fact, the look of lonely Travolta at the drive-in as in the screenshot above (fig. 2) is not unfamiliar, given that the GRK "Configurations of Film" chose a specific configuration of the "Confused Travolta GIF" for their website, which shows him in the more than ever abandoned space of the cinema with empty rows of red seats. The GIF is a future outcome of the expert of nostalgic resurrections, Quentin Tarantino himself, who revived the figure of dancing Travolta for *Pulp Fiction* in 1994. The scene preceding his famous dance at the Jack Rabbit Slim's Twist Contest served as a basis for the GIF. Commissioned by his boss to take out his wife, the contract killer Vincent Vega (John Travolta) needs to pick up Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) from home, where she communicates with him via a semi-hidden intercom speaker. The confusion in the scene stems from his irritation as to the source of her acoustic voice, while Mia Wallace is in control of Vega and the operation of the speaker.



[Figure 3] Confused Travolta at the Cinema (Website Configurations of Film 2018, 5)

What confused Travolta is looking for in this reconfigured version of the GIF from the Website Configurations of Film (fig. 3) is the missing audience. Part of that missing audience is currently sitting in one of the many hundred drive-ins⁹ in Germany, a well-visited extra setup for movie entertainment during the pandemic. Even my small hometown Zweibrücken in southwest Germany set up a drive-in at the former airport site¹⁰—a military relict from Canadians, North Americans. The 2020 drive-in scenario intertwines two kinds of audiences, namely the absent audience of the pandemic and the sustained restructuring of the audience effected by the drive-in. The former is reconfigured by dispersion, whereas the latter is distracted by the re-configuration of the apparatus.

In the trailer for the 2019 documentary *At the Drive-in*, a female narrator explains the current fascination of younger generations for this format with nostalgia in the sense of an ache: an ache to return to that unknown place of the drive-in. But I don't think this is a quest for a lost space. In fact, I think we have been here before many times in the movies. This is about something different: the fatal pattern to repeat and the visual drive, driving us in hope for moving experiences in times when we are told not to touch, nor to get too close but keep a social distance. The automobile as an obstacle, separating

9 Another resurrection of Tarantino in his latest movie *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood*. In this love letter to the cinema as a place, the stuntman Cliff Booth lives in a trailer behind The Van Nuy's Drive-In Theater, which first opened in 1948. According to the *L.A. Times*, the theater was demolished because of financial problems in 1998. The drive-in scenes were filmed at the Paramount Drive-In Theaters.

10 Something Zweibrücken did not come up with is the idea of Ed Brown, who opened the first and only "Fly-in/Drive-In Theater" to cars and planes in Wall Township, New Jersey in 1948. He operated an airport at the very same property and would allow up to 25 planes to park at the back of the theater grounds.

rather than connecting people, has already been thematized by Jean Baudrillard in *The System of Objects*. It is this proximity to his audience and between audience members that Helge Schneider misses and that is lost through the drive-in movie experience, regardless of the content being shown, which ranges from concert broadcastings to Hollywood blockbusters. In other words, drive-ins miss out on something, which lies at the heart of the movie experience at cinemas beyond displacement through streaming devices, the pandemic movie suppliers. The drive-in experience thus needs to be located between that of classical cinemas and that of streaming devices, while incorporating aspects of both. It is cinema, but one that maintains enough safety distance between the screen and the audience (and its members) to make it an approved leisure entertainment during the pandemic, while allowing all sorts of side activities during the screening as granted through streamed movie consumption. Comparable to big stage performances of music stars that are surrounded by security for safety reasons, drive-ins assume the role of protected and protective starlets among cinemas during the pandemic. Their history is one of secluding, distracted movie entertainment in line with current social distancing advises: a pandemic media space that was active even before the pandemic. Therefore, drive-ins not only celebrated a comeback during the pandemic, but most of all they reflect consumer preferences of the domestic movie experience in the twenty-first century through the windshield of the car, which is both a screen for an outward projection and a mirror of distracted, displaced, and dispersed spectators.

Movies will continue to move, but Baudrillard also notes that “a whole civilization can come to a halt in the same way as the automobile” (2020, 137). Some driving schools in Germany are called “Walk in-Drive Out,” which is also a catchy ad slogan at the same time. In conclusion and in contrast, however, I suggest: If the place of the drive-in turns out to be a disappointing distraction from the movie, you can always just walk out of a drive-in, as Sandy did in *Grease*.

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**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger,
and Antonio Somaini (eds.)**

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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