Unessential Cinema: Performative Curation of Obsolete Films

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The history of the moving image has witnessed the emergence and obsolescence of countless technologies, many of which have, in recent years, been the focus of media-archaeological studies. However, it is not only the technologies of production and projection, but also films and videos themselves, that become subject to obsolescence, decay, and forgetting. In this article, I pursue an investigation of why certain films are considered timeless, "essential" classics, while others are claimed to be "unessential" and become obsolete. In answering this question, I explore the politics of archives and the curatorial strategies related to the exhibition of obsolete films. The core case study of my research consists of an analysis of the approach that archivist and curator Andrew Lampert implemented in his Unessential Cinema screening series at New York's Anthology Film Archives. With reference to his practice, I suggest that the performative exhibition of obsolete, unessential films is a productive lens through which to approach cinema as an event. Studying films not as timeless masterpieces but as impermanent media reveals that, above all the imposed labels and categories, cinema is a form of ephemeral entertainment.

Anthology Film Archives is a legendary archive and screening venue in New York founded in 1970 by Jonas Mekas, Jerome Hill, P. Adams Sitney, Peter Kubelka, and Stan Brakhage. The original purpose of the initiative was "to encourage the study of the medium's masterworks as works of art rather than disposable entertainment."[1] With time, the institution expanded its initiatives to encompass a film preservation program and an extensive library. Whereas Anthology is still primarily focused on film-as-art, many other types

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of films ended up in its vaults. The most obscure and neglected of them formed the basis of the Unessential Cinema series.

The Unessential Cinema screening series ran from 2004 until Andrew Lampert's departure from Anthology in 2015, several shows each year. The series, according to him, "was an attempt to share the actual wealth of Anthology's collection with audiences who were most familiar with the works that were being preserved, canonized, and promoted."[2] The impetus of the project was Lampert's regret that the audience saw only a small percentage of Anthology's holdings—the canonized works—and was completely unaware of all the other materials in the collection. This observation holds for museum collections and archives in general. In the case of Anthology, a vast majority of the "unessential" materials were films or elements of obsolete films orphaned by their previous owners. For instance, some were saved from film laboratories that were closing, others found in dumpsters or just brought to Anthology from one's home collection. These films had no apparent artistic value or historical interest. However, Lampert was determined to retrieve films from the darkest, shabbiest corners of the archive and conduct an in-depth exploration of these disregarded, dismissed, and neglected films.

The title of the Unessential Cinema series was an ironic wordplay on the name of Anthology's main screening series, Essential Cinema. The latter program was comprised of 330 films that were pronounced to be essential by the archive's founders. This canon included such popular films as Buster Keaton's *The General* (1926), D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), and numerous artists' films that are more or less widely known. When Anthology started in 1970, the chosen films were said "to define the art of cinema,"[3] and the series was intended to constantly expand and undergo changes in its contents. However, this vision was never fulfilled and, as a result, the canon was not very inclusive, featuring only five women filmmakers and almost no filmmakers of color, which has not significantly changed since the mid-1970s, and these films are still exhibited at Anthology in repeated cycles. For this and many other reasons, Lampert felt "a personal mission...to blow up the canon that had been created...by the Essential Cinema showcase." Lampert's attempt to "blow up the canon" was radical in the sense that, unlike many other initiatives aimed at contesting outdated canons, he had no intention to claim that the films he showed were the "great" ones. He wanted to show underrepresented films out of the belief that "everything that was shot or ever made should be seen once at a minimum by a public." Lampert wanted to design a

more balanced screening program allowing Anthology's audience to see that the archive's holdings outnumbered the few masterpieces it was known for. Furthermore, as the majority of the films in the collection were practically unknown to the public and, thus, had no chance to be preserved, Lampert saw screenings to be a kind of alternative preservation for such films. He supposed that if even one person saw a film and remembered it, the life of that film was extended in the form of a memory.

No film is inherently significant or unessential, relevant or obsolete. For this reason, when talking about canonized and neglected films, one should consider the powers that decide which films are to be anointed and saved and which have no value and could painlessly be subject to obsolescence. I suggest regarding archives, canons, and curatorship as the three institutions entitled to assign value and therefore decide which materials are "essential" enough to be preserved. The three institutions are closely related and directly affect each other. Archives are, to a great extent, formed by canons. However, those very canons, over time, rely on archives to preserve the canonized materials. The relation between archives and curatorship is similar to that between archives and canons. What circulates more widely in the first place has a greater chance to enter an archive, as there are more copies of the film or other materials to be saved, including those saved by chance. And with time, only the materials that are preserved in the archives can be exhibited and thus visible to the audience and researchers. The exchanges between canons and curatorship function in the same cyclical manner. The crucial aspect of the threefold exchange is that archives and curatorship can use their strategies to support canons as well as to extend or challenge them. Whereas the Unessential Cinema program fell into the last category, as the series worked against the Essential Cinema canon and its canonization, most archival and curatorial initiatives either reinforce or expand existing canons. For a better understanding of how the category of unessential can evolve in these practices, I will discuss certain restrictions inherent to archives, canons, and curatorship that define their politics and, therefore, their performance.

Canons and Archives: Production of (Un)Essentiality

Why can't archives save everything, without having to make exclusive evaluative decisions? The major obstacle in the way of total archiving is the scarcity of resources, which is true of archives in general. Archives are materially unable to accept and retain every document and artifact ever produced on an

enduring basis. This constraint results in the necessity of archival appraisal, through which archivists select which materials to care for to ensure their permanent survival. The remnants of the appraisal are to be excluded from the archives and in a short time inevitably destroyed, erased from memory.[4] Thus, archival appraisal is the first major step toward ascribing value, the lack of which results in the creation of the categories of unessentiality and obsolescence. This process, as archival theorists Terry Cook and Mark Weber note, is highly subjective and often relies not only on the resources available but also on the personal impact of the archivist performing the appraisal: namely, their inclinations and knowledge.[5]

Several constraints are paradigmatic to film archives. The first is the very nature of the material. The fragility and rapid decomposition of the physical carrier, be that nitrate, celluloid, or polyester film, videotape, or digital files, make preservation not a one-time action but a continuous process requiring constant revision and care. The activities are labor-intensive and demand ample financial support. Archives have to make hard decisions about which materials to acquire and which to pass on. They also face the need to prioritize certain films for preservation and put others at the back of the line. This decision could be based on many variables, "such as the condition of the carrier...access demands, copyright status and potential for cultural and educational re-use."[6] The other criteria for choosing preservation over disposal is the loss principle: "if there is any reason of form, content or external association why the loss of a particular item would be regretted in the future, there is a case for preservation."[7] The material conditions of the archiving profession define archival politics, which results in the assertion of a certain system of values. What is more, every archive has a mission (e.g., preservation of a national film heritage in the case of the Library of Congress, or of film-as-art in the case of Anthology) and is less willing to collect and preserve films that fall outside the scope of their primary goals. At times, the choice of which materials to preserve might also be influenced by outside donors, who grant money for preservation of particular titles or collections, by the market (in case of commercial archives), or by interested scholars. Karen F. Gracy notes that whoever makes the choice, it "is always subjective in some way or another."[8]

In other words, archival appraisal builds on the significance of a particular document as part of a heritage, either historical, artistic, or cultural, and the already existing visibility of the material. For a film to be preserved,

it should be remembered and circulated. Paolo Cherchi Usai argues that the better a film is known to the public, the higher the chances are for it to be preserved, even if the preservation would be redundant (i.e., undertaken despite the film already having been preserved elsewhere while lesser-known titles face decomposition).[9] Therefore, films that are primarily invisible and not in demand have fewer chances to escape obliteration and obsolescence.

The system of archival appraisal is biased and consistently reflects the canons of the field it is devoted to. But how do cinematic canons function, exactly? Which types of films are most likely to enter them and become marked essential and which are more commonly excluded as unessential ones? In her seminal article on the politics of cinematic canons, Janet Staiger argues that cinematic canons are shaped by film criticism, film history textbooks, and academic writing, as certain films are repeatedly referred to as prominent examples or cited for their influence or aesthetic significance. Like archives, canons are also involved in the sphere of politics (i.e., they are not neutral and value-free) and as systems of inclusion and exclusion they are affected by shifts in the criteria determining canon formation. Elaborating on this claim, Staiger points to three distinct kinds of politics: admission, selection, and the academy.[10] The politics of admission is emblematic of early cinematic canons that were formed to prove to skeptics that motion pictures were not just mass entertainment, but could be considered art. In many instances, including in the writings of early film theoretician Rudolf Arnheim, not all films were thought to meet the standards of art. Therefore, the majority of moving pictures were not incorporated into the canon, which consisted exclusively of exemplary films. Several decades later, once it was commonplace to think of film as art, the paradigm of canon formation shifted toward the politics of selection. The primary rationale behind selection was to choose only the finest and most representative works out of the tens of thousands of films made during the history of motion pictures, which was convenient as no one could possibly watch every film ever produced, and having a canon to turn to narrowed down the choices. The downfall of this strategy was that a "masterpiece-only" evaluative approach associated with the hegemony of "auteurism" as a universal criterion of artfulness became the primary method of selection, which still influences film scholarship and, by extension, film preservation and the promotion of archival films today.[11] (The Criterion Collection is strongly indicative of the canon-making strategy.)

As determined by canons, historiography, and other external factors, as well as by internal politics, every archive contains films that are of more or less value and essentiality to it. Each film archive has its own unessential cinema. However, there are several patterns to unessentiality that are worth teasing out. Most of the films historically neglected by film archives belong to practices of low status that have no value in the film-as-art paradigm or for history broadly conceived. Such practices include amateur, student, educational, and industrial filmmaking, as well as home movies. Unedited footage and partial elements of films, as well as unidentified and orphaned films, all fall into the same category. Thus, unessential cinema might be understood more broadly as films that are excluded from canons and not recognized as valuable. Defined in this manner, unessential cinema is not a definite pool of films but a condition. It is possible for films to move from the unessential to the essential domain as they garner recognition or popularity, and vice versa. However, defining the unessential as a condition would be insufficient, as it tells us nothing about unessentiality.

The Notion of Unessentiality

I suggest defining unessentiality as the quality of being of no interest either as an artwork or as a historical document. These qualities cannot be adequately defined by the labels of ephemeral, orphaned, and so forth, as none of these terms address the notions of essentiality or significance. Ephemeral films have been defined by Rick Prelinger as "films made for specific purposes at specific times, such as advertising, educational and industrial films."[12] Prelinger's definition encompasses both the content of the films and the function which the films served for a short time and do not serve anymore, as well as their physical ephemerality (i.e., the fragility of the medium itself). However, Prelinger eventually noticed that, with the help of emerging scholarship on ephemeral films and the growing academic interest in them, these films are now recognized as documents of industrial and other histories and thus serve new purposes and cease to be ephemeral.[13] Orphaned films, in turn, are united by their lack of copyright and defined authorship and by the complications these conditions pose to their preservation, which clarifies nothing about their artistic, documentary, or other values. "Bastard films"[14] and B-movies, despite conveying the attributes of low quality and suppression, are not unessential by definition either. Unessential films do not have

any rational value. They are not considered timeless masterpieces. And they are rarely treated with care in archives.

Unessentiality is an attitude to films that emerges in the process of screening. The essential or unessential attitude and hence aesthetic effect depend on the curatorial strategy chosen by the curator or programmer. The vast majority of screenings are held in the realm of essentiality. Films presented in this setting can be commonly perceived as essential as a result of their popularity (e.g., blockbusters or retrospectives of famous directors). As nobody doubts the significance of the "masterpieces" in such screenings, attention is instead centered around the content of the films and their artistic qualities. Another variant of essential screenings aims at introducing previously disregarded films and proving their worthiness. These events could feature individual films or masses of them. The Orphan Film Symposium, a biennial gathering of scholars dedicated to orphaned films, hosts both kinds of screenings, as well as presentations intended to promote the academic study of orphaned works. MoMA's recent exhibition, "Private Lives Public Spaces"—another project implementing the essential attitude—granted home movies entrance into the space of a major art museum. The exhibition opened in fall 2019, but was not the first of MoMA's initiatives aimed at the expansion and even contestation of cinematic canons. Since 2003, MoMA has been organizing the annual To Save and Project film preservation festival. Later, the museum also included "Orphans at MoMA" screenings, organized in collaboration with the Orphan Film Symposium, in the festival program. Josh Siegel, the museum's curator of film, suggested that MoMA's preservation program makes "no differentiation between so-called high and low culture," as, regardless of labels and awards, different films can be meaningful in unique ways.[15] Rick Prelinger's endeavors to preserve ephemeral films can be seen as an example of similar curatorial thinking.

The strategies targeted at enhancing the significance of films can be employed regardless of the types of films featured. Any film can appear essential if the curator or programmer creates a setting in which the spectator apprehends the films to be valuable. The reverse is true with unessential cinema programs: no matter which films are screened, they appear to be unessential and insignificant. However, as detailed above, some films are more prone to unessentiality than others. What is the unessential attitude, exactly? How does the curator stage it? What is the role of films and their aesthetic effects in the unessential screenings? Answering these questions, I examine in

detail Andrew Lampert's approach to the Unessential Cinema film program at Anthology. Although there are similar initiatives—for instance, the Bits and Pieces project at the EYE Film Institute Netherlands—focusing exclusively on Unessential Cinema in this article allows me to delve deeper into the curatorial strategies of one programmer, institution, and film series.

In programs that do not aim to elevate films to the level of essentiality, the featured films play a secondary role. They are subordinate to the overall curatorial concept and simply perform the roles necessary to fulfill the programmer's idea. Essentially, the curator's strategies involve compilations of films. For that reason, most of the unessential programs, including the Unessential Cinema and Bits and Pieces projects, employ short films or elements of longer ones. The quality usually shared by the films in the unessential screenings is that they are unidentified and thus virtually anonymous. Devoid of their initial context, these films are able to adapt to new settings and adopt new meanings more completely than their identifiable and authored counterparts. In this sense, unessential films are similar to anonymous footage edited together in reels but are still not fully identical to it. For instance, the Unessential Cinema series is, first of all, about a form producing a particular attitude. This attitude desacralizes films and allows their reuse in various contexts, regardless of their original purpose and meaning. Being liberated from the spectators' expectations to be presented with something significant, the images can perform their intrinsic characteristics, allowing us to move away from the film-as-text and film-as-experience approaches and focus on the bare films, transforming an unessential screening into the ultimate cinema-as-event.

Performative Curation of Unessential Cinema

Before elaborating on the theoretical aspects of the unessential aesthetic, I will give a detailed summary of Andrew Lampert's curatorial method in the Unessential Cinema film series. As mentioned above, the screenings were devoted to exhibiting underrepresented reels from Anthology's archive. In most cases, the films were unidentified (or even unidentifiable) and no longer served their primary intended purposes. Thus, they had no context of their own. Instead of trying to interpret the films and create new contexts and new narratives for them, Lampert presented the films as they were, almost as ready-made objects. He suggests that "the lack of context often made films much more curious or enjoyable, or fascinating." Usually, he chose films for

screenings "based on intuition." At the same time, the selection of materials was not random but based on an idea or a theme. According to Lampert,

> Every show pinched on some kind of idea. The idea came first, the theme for the show came first, and then the material was selected. In most cases, I never previewed the films beforehand. I inspected them or I had them inspected to make sure that they were projectable, that it would not damage them to be screened. But I never pre-watched them and the ordering of them in the shows was always intuition.

To him, Unessential Cinema was a didactic series, as every program addressed an issue around archiving, preservation, or cinema in such a way as to challenge presumptions and assumptions about how cinema works. For instance, Lampert could project the selected films at the wrong speed[16] or show only an element of a film (e.g., an optical soundtrack) on a screen. The ruptures of the normative projection process allowed viewers to shift focus from the content of the films to filmic elements and the spectators' experiences of watching them. What is more, the Unessential Cinema screenings, as a rule, had a humoristic sensibility. At times, the content of the films was eccentric (e.g., the raw footage of a student film); at others, the eccentricity lay in the way the films were projected. For instance, Lampert frequently screened films side-by-side or on top of each other. The juxtapositions produced new—at times comic—meanings and effects.

Sometimes Lampert invited the audience to engage in the screenings actively. For example, he mounted a show titled "Choose Your Own Adventure," where he would place ten cans with films in front of the audience and read the labels on the cans out loud without supplying any additional information. The audience had to vote on which films to watch and in which order. The viewers had a collaborative role in the screenings and participated in a form of collective curation of a preselected number of reels. "Should We Keep This?" was a similar screening that addressed the issue of archival appraisal.[17] The audience was invited to "examine bits, pieces, and entire works that have been dumped on [Anthology's] doorstep by strangers, widows, and weirdos, all of whom figured that we are the proper place for their movies to live for the rest of time."[18] As in the case of "Choose Your Own Adventure," Lampert did not preview the films himself, so they were entirely new both to him and to the audience. The engagement of the audience also created a communal setting for the screenings and allowed for communication between viewers, which was of utmost importance to Lampert. He saw the

screenings as ephemeral performances: the shows were one-time experiences, and the audience necessitated the liveness.

Lampert never thought of himself in the curator-as-author paradigm. He was more interested in the "ways films speak to each other or a subject" than in highlighting his way of putting the program together. He also never perceived the screenings as a type of found footage film of his own design. However, Lampert did not erase himself from the shows altogether either, as he realized that he was the creator of the concept and the framework, and the audience just helped "to fill the context." What is more, in the screenings Lampert often acted like an exhibitor of early cinema (e.g., when reading off the titles of the films), and this added to the liveness of the screenings. He wanted the experience of watching the films to feel more significant than his authorship. I suggest calling this approach "performative curation," as Lampert did not conceal himself but did not make statements as a curator-as-author either. He built frameworks and delegated the speaking and statement-making to the films. The programs were always shown in theaters, partly because Lampert never had an opportunity to screen the films in nontheatrical settings, and partly because projecting the films on the walls of a gallery would have focused more attention on the curatorial or artistic authorship. Lampert, as a curator, wanted his curation to be as ephemeral and unsignificant as the films he screened. The films themselves were not as essential to him as the viewers' experiences.

Whereas the series promoted the featured films and made them more eligible for preservation, most films, with only a few exceptions, returned to the dark corners of the archive and were never preserved or screened again. The preservation did not happen as it would have been inefficient, primarily because the films were largely unknown and nobody would ever request them, but also because the scarcity of resources pushed the archive towards prioritizing the preservation of more essential titles. By comparison, the unessential films are obsolete and irrelevant to the present day in their technology, function, and aesthetics. However, their very obsolescence allows them to be exhibited not as timeless, inherently valuable masterpieces but as mere technology. The unessential nature of the films invites us to reexamine what cinema is beyond film histories, theories, and taxonomies. The Unessential Cinema series indicated that cinema is, primarily, an event. Moreover, it is a performative event, which is made more evident in unessential than in traditional screenings.

Cinema as a Performative Art

Film scholar Erika Balsom suggests that cinema is inherently a performative art. She notes that, whereas reproducibility is the key attribute of cinema as a medium, some artists and experimental filmmakers suppress that quality in favor of ephemerality, which is emblematic of performance art. The reasons behind such a gesture might range from a filmmaker wanting to preserve "the integrity of the primary aesthetic experience" to the difficult technical requirements of the projection.[19] Often the performative screening strategies are bound to photochemical film since that medium is no longer associated with wide circulation. As a result, screenings of photochemical films tend to appear as special events "marked by a sense of liveness." The eventfulness is intensified by asserting the viewing experiences to be a "face-to-face public encounter with a work in its original format" and using strategies that would be impossible to stage at home. For instance, a filmmaker might be present at the screenings, or an exhibitor (or a curator) might employ performative practices such as live narration, musical accompaniment, manipulations with the projector, or other methods of imposing unusual screening conditions to draw the mode of exhibition further away from the ordinary.[20]

Elaborating on the relationship between eventfulness and photochemical film, Balsom argues that photochemical film is associated with authenticity and uniqueness, which makes analog films closer to a human rather than a machine and marks them as performative events rather than repeatable objects. Referencing Paolo Cherchi Usai's film *Passio* (2007), Balsom stresses that film, like a human body, is "a mortal and material thing subject to aging and gradual degradation."[21] When photochemical film became obsolescent as a medium, it ceased to be reproducible and ubiquitous and became a rarity. This new status granted photochemical films the quality of authenticity. Under these circumstances, an exhibition of moving images preserved on film is perceived as "a special event, marked out as an encounter with an original."[22] (This encounter is not only with films as integral performing bodies but also with the filmic apparatus.[23]) Building on Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura," Balsom argues that the authenticity of the photochemical film encounter is irreproducible.[24]

Just as irreproducible is the presence of the audience, the collectivity of a screening as a performance with liveness, and the impossibility of saving an event characteristic of performance art. Not available for reproduction, each screening is an event marked by difference, as films require "a performative

enactment in order to be realized."[25] The "enactment" happens in variable conditions and is marked by a lack of authorial control. When cinema is understood to be an event of projection, it is no longer restricted to interpretation as a static object or text. The appeal of engagement with obsolescence, in this case, can be located either in a hope to recover the utopian qualities characteristic of the technology at its birth (the Benjaminian approach to authenticity) or in an elitist "thrill of experiencing something difficult to access" (the Adornian approach).[26]

The Unessential Cinema program functioned in alignment with Balsom's suggestions. The restricted circulation and irreproducibility of the films, however, was not intentional but resulted from the nature of the materials. The films had little chance to be screened and preserved not only because they usually belonged to obsolescent 8mm and 16mm film formats but also because of their irrelevance and fragility. Watching them was a unique opportunity to encounter neglected films that one would never see again outside the series. As a rule, each of the films was screened only once, and the screenings were not documented or restaged.[27] Lampert employed performative exhibition techniques and engaged the audience in the process of curation and discussion, creating a sort of community around the screenings. All of these features ensured that each screening was a one-time live experience.

The unessential films themselves, because of their insignificance and lack of context, could perform any role the curator assigned to them. In the case of the Unessential Cinema series, Lampert did not use the films as proof or evidence of any of his ideas. On the contrary, he created a setting in which the films could perform their imagery and materiality, a fundamentally unessential and obsolescent one. The logic is similar to what Claire Bishop calls a "delegated performance."[28] Bishop assumed that when an artist does not perform with their own body, but delegates performative actions to the bodies of non-professional performers (who usually come from particular marginalized social groups) and presents them in the performance, the artist, in return, receives a guarantee of authenticity. The authenticity might be produced by "the phenomenological immediacy of the live body," as well as "through their proximity to everyday social reality, conventionally denied to the artist who deals merely in representations" and a certain degree of unpredictability of the performers' actions.[29] Whereas each performer possesses unique qualities, the performers are still "infinitely replaceable," just like the films in unessential screenings.[30]

What are the identities that unessential films perform? First of all, they perform their unessentiality, irrelevance, the lack of apparent value or interest. Secondly, when spared of imposed meanings and significance, films reveal the inherent photogenic qualities of the images. Moreover, the films perform their materiality, which shows through outdated media and projection technology, as well as the marks of decay. They perform their age and their obsolescence.

These remarks connect the unessential mode of screening to the early practices of moving image exhibition, which Tom Gunning has referred to as the "cinema of attractions."[31] Apart from the entertaining sensibility produced by the movement of the filmed object and the performative exhibition strategies, viewers of early motion pictures were attracted by the novelty of both the medium and the machinery that enabled the projection. Present-day screenings of films in obsolete formats, on the other hand, attract the viewers by their very obsolescence, by offering the audience an opportunity to engage with objects and images from the past and see them in action. In these screenings, the films themselves and their content are not as important as their novelty, rarity, and antiqueness. Just like early films, which were principally ephemeral and fragmentary and considered unworthy of archiving and preservation, obsolete, unessential materials are subject to the same fate. Although obsolete films are more bound to unessentiality than those considered of timeless value, I suggest that screening any film in the experimental unessential manner might be a productive approach to studying "bare" cinema outside of imposed values, theories, categories, and interpretations—just as cinema was when first conceived as a form of ephemeral entertainment.

Conclusion

Exhibiting obsolete media in the mode of unessentiality allows for a shift of focus: whereas essential films draw one's attention to their imagery and content, outdated, unidentifiable films bear a mark of media specificity. Thus, regarding a film as an unessential one invites a spectator or a researcher to focus not only on the film's materiality, but also on their own experience of cinema as a performative event encompassing a set number of practices, among these spectatorship, curation, and preservation. Relative indifference to the contents of a film pushes us to pay more attention to our experience of cinema, as well as to the status of given materials. It encourages one to

inquire as to why some films are regarded as essential and worthy of preservation, while others are deemed obsolete and are neglected, and to be more sensitive to the practices and institutions involved in the process. The prospective findings allow us to further investigate the ways in which we engage with the moving image.

That said, there are several directions in which the research could be extended in the future. The first possibility is to turn to the topic of personal memory as a substitute for analog or digital preservation of unessential media. One could approach and interview those who participated in the Unessential Cinema screenings, and read the interview through the lens of such notions as "film-souvenir" (a term from Jean-Pierre Meunier[32]) or "archival imaginaries" (an idea stemming from the intersection of archiving and human rights). Another path to pursue is to explore how the concept of unessentiality functions in the realm of media archaeology more thoroughly: for instance, the idea that early cinema might be the key to understanding new moving image phenomena, suggested and developed by Tom Gunning ("the cinema of attractions"), Thomas Elsaesser,[33] and others. Extrapolating the notion of unessentiality to such novelties as TikTok videos or Instagram reels, which, as a rule, appear on a user's feed only once, could potentially support the above-mentioned intuition that instant entertainment is the primary purpose of the moving image, which proves to be highly perishable by nature and rather insignificant in its contents, and help one better understand the experiences of early moviegoers and the public reluctance when it came to establishing the first film archives.

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ENDNOTES

[1] "Anthology Film Archives: About - Overview," Anthology Film Archives, accessed May 9, 2021, *http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/about/about.*

[2] If not stated otherwise, all quotes of Lampert's, including details on the archival and curatorial practices related to the Unessential Cinema series, are taken from an interview conducted by the author on February 5, 2021.

[3] "Anthology Film Archives: About - Essential Cinema," Anthology Film Archives, accessed May 9, 2021, *http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/about/essential-cinema*.

[4] Terry Cook, "'We Are What We Keep; We Keep What We Are': Archival Appraisal Past, Present and Future," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32, no. 2 (2011): 173–189, 174.

[5] ibid., 177; Marc Weber, "Self-Fulfilling History: How Narrative Shapes Preservation of the Online World," *Information & Culture* 51, no. 1 (2016): 54–80.

[6] Ray Edmondson, *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles* (Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok, 2016), 67.

[7] ibid., 64.

[8] Karen F. Gracy, *Film Preservation: Competing Definitions of Value, Use, and Practice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007), 189.

[9] Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 117.

[10] Janet Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 3 (1985): 4–23, 4.

[11] ibid., 4–11.

[12] "Rick Prelinger Archives," Rick Prelinger, accessed May 9, 2021, *http://www.panix.com/~footage/*.

[13] Patrick Vonderau and Rick Prelinger, "Vernacular Archiving: An Interview with Rick Prelinger," in *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, eds. Patrick Vonderau and Vinzenz Hediger (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009): 51–62, 51.

[14] Bastard films, according to the Bastard Film Encounter website, are films that are "ill-conceived or received; embarrassing or beyond the bounds of acceptability; poor in conception or execution; undesirable to those who should be caring for them; proof of something that should have never happened." Bastard Film Encounter, accessed May 10, 2021, *http://bastardfilmencounter.com/*.

[15] Josh Siegel and Katie Trainor, "To Save and Project: A Conversation with Josh Siegel and Katie Trainor," *MoMA Magazine*, January 8, 2019, *https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/24*.

[16] "Unessential Cinema Presents: More or Less Than 23FPS," Anthology Film Archives, accessed May 9, 2021, *http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/film_screenings/calendar?view=list&month=12&year=2014#showing-43613*.

[17] This approach reflects Terry Cook's call for more community engagement in the process of archival appraisal (participatory acrhiving), but in a strictly performative way. In other words, inviting the audience to participate in appraisal was only a part of the screening and never adopted by Anthology as an institutional policy. For more information on participatory archiving and other community-based approaches, see Terry Cook, "Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms" in *"All Shook Up": The Archival Legacy of Terry Cook*, eds. Tom Nesmith, Greg Bak, and Joan M. Schwartz (Chicago: Society of American Archivists and Association of Canadian Archivists, 2020): 444–71.

[18] "Unessential Cinema: Should We Keep This?," Anthology Film Archives, accessed May 9, 2021, *http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/film_screenings/calendar?view=list&month=03&year=2014#showing-42390*.

[19] Erika Balsom, *After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 167.

[20] ibid., 168–70.
[21] ibid., 171–73.
[22] ibid., 174.
[23] ibid., 179.
[24] ibid., 175.
[25] ibid., 180.
[26] ibid., 187–88.
[27] The only exceptions to the rule were the "Greatest Somethings or Others" anniversary screening in July 2014, which featured the "all-time favorite finds," and a traveling Unessential Cinema show, the venues of which included the Austrian Film Museum. The selection of films was based both on Lampert's personal preferences and the previous positive reactions of the audience. The same logic applied when Lampert chose to preserve a small number of unessential films. One can argue that these anniversary shows were distorting the original idea of the series, as the screenings were composed of films selected as worthy of preservation and subsequent projections.
[28] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2011), 219–40.
[29] ibid., 223, 237.
[30] ibid., 231.
[31] Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006): 381–88.
[32] Vinzenz Hediger, "Engines of the Historical Imagination: Towards a Phenomenology of Cinema as Non-Art," in *The Structures of the Film Experience by Jean-Pierre Meunier: Historical Assessments and Phenomenological Expansions*, eds. Hanich Julian and Fairfax Daniel (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019): 321–35.
[33] Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).