

UNFINISHED



Women
filmmakers
in process

Chapter Arts Centre
17—20 November 2022
by Cardiff University

**LOST
INTERRUPTED
DESTROYED
STOLEN
REFUSED
ABANDONED**

An unfinished film is the funding that dries up, the collaborators who can't seem to get along, the censors who get in the way, the timing that doesn't work, or, more simply, the luck that finally runs out.

Unfinished films are usually consigned to the dustbin of history. They're seen as minor or marginal works, as marred by gaps and flaws, and as inappropriate for exhibition or dissemination. We tend to think that the history of film proceeds through a series of successful, finished aesthetic achievements. Most often, we attribute these achievements to the heroic efforts of individual directors. Most often, those directors are men.

Yet unfinished films—especially those made, or unmade, by women—don't fit neatly into narratives of progress and completion. Instead, they stand for frustrated plans and unfulfilled hopes. They also stand for process and possibility.

UNFINISHED IS A CURATED FILM SERIES THAT APPROACHES THE UNFINISHED FILM AS MORE THAN A SIGN OF THINGS GONE WRONG.

More than evidence of loss and failure, unfinished films can allow us to see the aspirations and ambitions of filmmakers in action, on the go. They can reveal the practical conditions of film production, its economic and cultural realities. They can enable the recovery of projects and filmmakers marginalised or ignored by film industries. And unfinished films can help us to recognise our role as spectators in an open-ended creative process—realising the promise of the unfinished.

UNFINISHED features independent films made by women in diverse parts of the world from the 1960s through to the present. From Wales to Australia, from Afghanistan to the United States, unfinished films take us

behind the scenes of filmmaking practice, offering insight into issues of equality and access for women artists and practitioners.

For each of the featured filmmakers, unfinishedness is also a deliberate strategy and a source of creativity. By cultivating the unfinished, these filmmakers question the overarching stories we tell about the world. Unfinishing our histories of film as a medium and an experience, their films also unfix our view of society, art, and culture, unravelling our assumptions about how the world works—and reimaging its unfolding futures.

To be unfinished is to be in process.

Thurs 17th Nov

Opening Session

Presentation:

Investigative Re-Animations

by Dr Karen Pearlman,
Macquarie University, Sydney

6.30pm, Cinema 2

Academic research meets professional practice in Karen Pearlman's signature "investigative re-animations" of the lives and methods of historical women filmmakers. Her creatively ambitious films traverse period drama, documentary, and hybrid forms, searching for ways to tell stories of unfinished films and overlooked women using the techniques that they pioneered. In this presentation, Pearlman will screen three short films and unpack some of the creative questions with which she grappled in making them and the many possible but ever unfinished films that she encounters in her filmmaking process.

Films included in Presentation

Woman with an Editing Bench

15 minutes, 2016, DCP

Inspired by the life and work of Elizaveta Svilova, editor of the 1929 masterpiece **MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA**, **WOMAN WITH AN EDITING BENCH** imagines her experience and visualises it by using her kinetically exhilarating montage style. This film reveals Svilova's fierce tenacity and fleet thinking as she dodges the bureaucracy and sustains revolutionary filmmaking.

After the Facts

5 minutes, 2018, DCP

AFTER THE FACTS is a documentary about turning facts into thoughts. It looks at film editing techniques that revolutionized thinking and understanding of stories and asks: what happened to the stories of the women who did the editing?

I want to make a film about women

12 minutes, 2020, DCP

I WANT TO MAKE A FILM ABOUT WOMEN is a queer, speculative, documentary love letter to Soviet constructivist women. It brings to life revolutionary women artists of the 1920s and speculates on what they said, did, and might have created had it not been for Stalin's suppression.

Critical praise for Karen Pearlman's trilogy has been bolstered by 30 film festival and industry guild awards for best directing, editing, documentary and creative achievement.

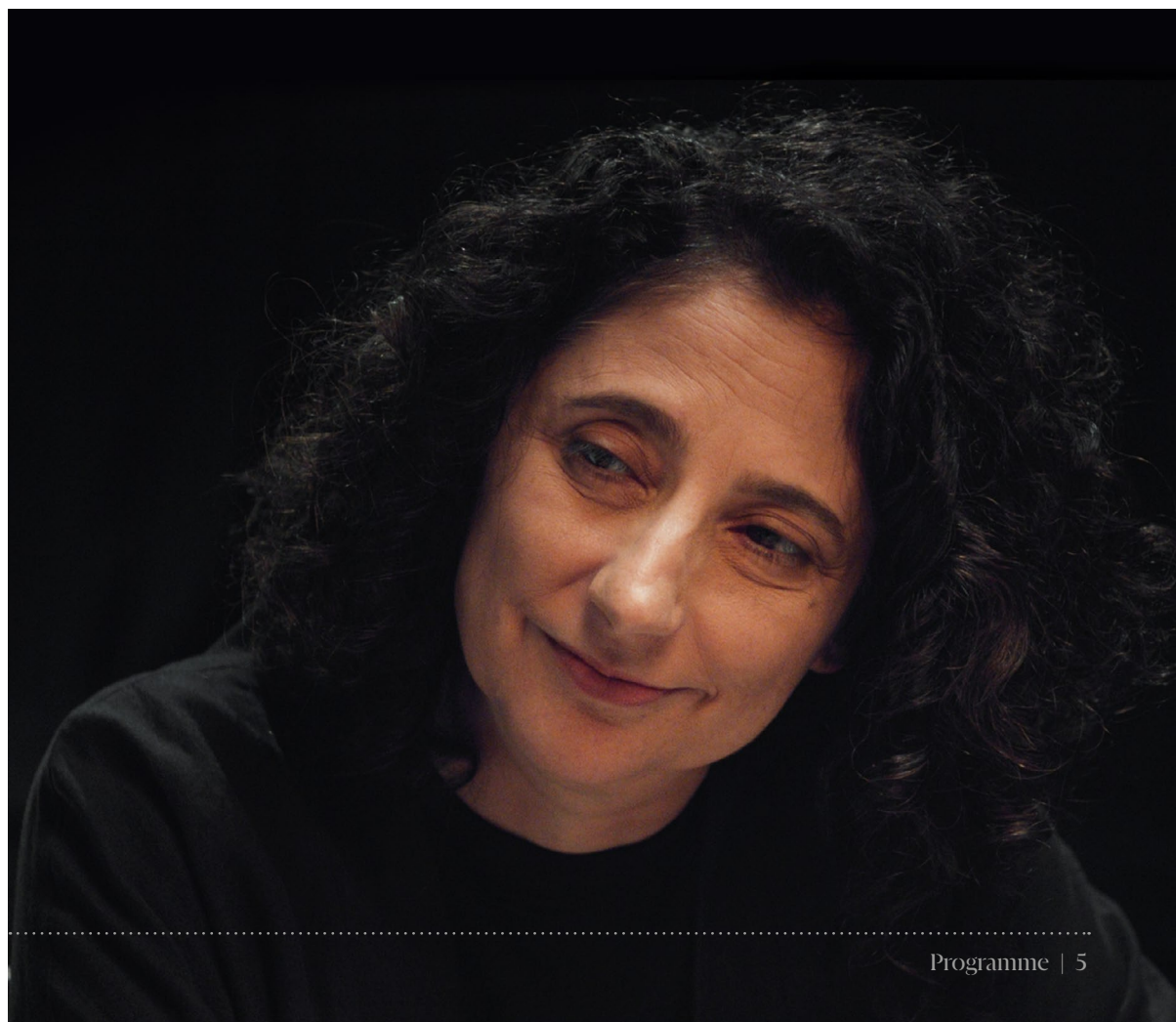
Films courtesy of The Physical TV Company

Roundtable: Women Filmmakers in Process

What does it take to finish a film? What do unfinished projects reveal about how films do and don't get made? How do they make manifest the challenges faced by women and non-binary filmmakers? And when might it make sense not to finish a film—to leave it unpolished or fragmentary?

This roundtable takes us behind the scenes of film production. Independent women filmmakers working across the world discuss the realities of filmmaking practice in various national contexts. Their conversation considers barriers to women's creative labour—social, political, economic—along with the impacts of structural sexism and the pressures of censorship. Finally, the panelists explore how unfinishedness can be used strategically by filmmakers, especially to reflect the uncertainties and messiness of everyday life.

Chaired by Dr Alix Beeston (Cardiff University) and featuring Carys Lewis (Wales/Canada), Tina Pasotra (Wales), Karen Pearlman (Australia), Mathilde Rouxel (France), and Sophia Siddique (Singapore/USA).



Fri 18th Nov



Screening 1: Shirkers

8pm, Cinema 2

Dir. Sandi Tan (Singapore/USA),
96 minutes, English, 2018, DCP.
Film courtesy of Sandi Tan

Singapore-born filmmaker Sandi Tan pieces together the fragments of her first feature film in this Sundance award-winning documentary. The original **SHIRKERS** was made in 1992 by Tan and her collaborators, Jasmine Ng and Sophia Siddique. But the reels were stolen from the young women before they could be edited. The film vanished; it existed only as a fading memory and an imagined possibility.

Two decades later, when the film materials were miraculously returned to Tan, she decided to return to Singapore to confront the ghost of her unrealised film. Combining footage from the original film with interviews with those who worked on the project and letters, drawings, and photographs from Tan's teenage years, the second **SHIRKERS** is a feminist act of reconstruction and revision. Transforming an object of loss and betrayal into something new, it imagines an alternative history of Singaporean cinema—a shadow history of how things might have been.

Introduced by Dr Alix Beeston (Cardiff University) and followed by a discussion with producer Dr Sophia Siddique (Vassar College) and audience Q and A.

Sat 19th Nov



Screening 2: Selections from Helen Hill

1.30pm, Cinema 2

Dir. Helen Hill (USA), *Madame Winger Makes a Film: A Survival Guide for the 21st Century*, 10 minutes, English, 2001; *Scratch and Crow*, 5 minutes, English, 1995; *Mouseholes*, 8 minutes, English, 1999.

Dir. Helen Hill and Paul Gailiunas (USA), *The Florestine Collection*, 31 minutes, English, 2011. Films courtesy of Paul Gailiunas

Helen Hill was an experimental animator from Columbia, South Carolina, who championed a DIY approach to filmmaking throughout her career. Beginning her career in animation at age 11, Hill practiced hand-crafted techniques such as stop-motion and drawing and scratching on celluloid, and worked consistently on short film works until her death in 2007 at the age of 36. Living in New Orleans with her husband, Paul Gailiunas, Hill was murdered in a home invasion.

At the time of her death, Hill was working on **THE FLORESTINE COLLECTION**, a project about a local dressmaker that would be “completed” posthumously by Gailiunas. Joining that film in this program is **MADAME WINGER MAKES A FILM**, about low budget filmmaking and processing; **SCRATCH AND CROW**, a film without dialogue about “the secret life cycle of chickens”; and **MOUSEHOLES**, a fond obituary to Hill's grandfather made before his passing.

Introduced by Professor Karen Redrobe (University of Pennsylvania) and followed by audience Q and A.

Complimentary Afternoon Tea 3pm, Café/Bar

Screening 3: Selections from Jocelyne Saab

4pm, Cinema 2

Dir. Jocelyne Saab (France/Lebanon), *My Name is Mei Shigenobu*, 8 minutes, English and Japanese, 2018, DCP; *Les femmes palestiniennes (Palestinian Women)*, 15 minutes, Arabic and French, 1973, DCP.

Dir. Jocelyne Saab and Jörg Stocklin (France/Lebanon), *Le Liban dans le tourmente (Lebanon in a Whirlwind)*, 75 minutes, Arabic, English, and French, 1975, DCP. Films courtesy of Association des Amis de Jocelyne Saab

Jocelyne Saab remains a vastly underappreciated activist filmmaker, who moved between documentary and fiction films throughout her storied career. Although she was from Lebanon, Saab was in sympathy with revolutionary causes across Asia and the Middle East and was present at major events in political history, including the 1982 siege of Beirut during the Lebanese civil war. After she died in 2019, Saab left behind a number of unfinished projects, as well as an archive of completed films.

Her final film is a brief and incomplete six-minute portrait of Mei Shigenobu, the daughter of the founder of the Japanese Red Army, and represents the culmination of her commitment to radical political movements. This film is shown here alongside two of her earliest works that have been largely unseen: **LES FEMMES PALESTINIENNES (PALESTINIAN WOMEN)**, commissioned for French television but censored and never screened in that format, and the feature-length **LE LIBAN DANS LE TOURMENTE (LEBANON IN A WHIRLWIND)**, which was barely completed after the crew was attacked and their camera destroyed in a Phalangist training camp.

What does it mean for a filmmaker to have worked for so long in such precarious circumstances across multiple revolutionary situations? How is the contingency and urgency of her life's work still felt today, in the little-known films she has left the world?

Introduced by Dr Mathilde Rouxel (New Sorbonne University, Paris) and followed by a discussion with Dr Stefan Solomon (Macquarie University, Sydney) and audience Q and A.

Dinner Break 6pm, Café/Bar

Screening 4: What We Left Unfinished

8pm, Cinema 2

Dir. Mariam Ghani (USA/Afghanistan), 71 minutes, Dari and English with English subtitles, 2019, DCP. Film courtesy of Good Docs

In the archive of Afghan Films, the state-run film company of Afghanistan, Mariam Ghani came across five unfinished feature films from the Communist era (1978–1991). Ranging from thriller-adventures to melodramas, these projects were filmed but never edited, either cancelled by the state or abandoned by their makers. Evading the censor's gaze, these unfinished materials offer a view of the nation not only as it imagined itself but also, in glimpses, as it really was.

Ghani's **WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED** brings this rediscovered and restored footage to the screen for the first time. This docufiction stages a conversation between the present and the past, between Ghani and the original filmmakers. This is a conversation about the evolution of a national cinema in a period of conflict and repression, about the inextricability of art and politics, and about the cinema's power to document the past—and, perhaps, to define the future.

Introduced by Mariam Ghani and followed by a discussion and audience Q and A led by Dr Alix Beeston (Cardiff University).

Sun 20th Nov



Screening 5: Something's Got to Give

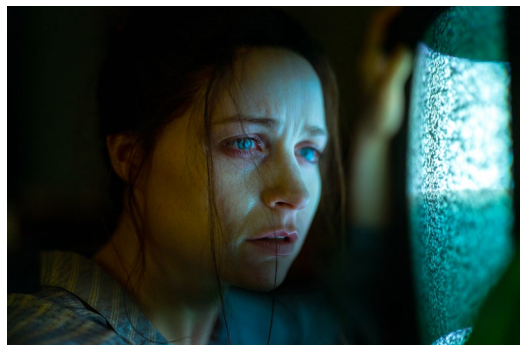
6pm, Cinema 2

Dir. George Cukor (USA),
37 minutes, English, 1962/1989, DVD.
Film courtesy of Disney

In her last appearance on screen, Marilyn Monroe starred as Ellen Arden, a mother of two who is missing, presumed dead, at sea. Her husband, Nick (played by Dean Martin), has remarried in her absence, only for his wife to return miraculously home.

But this screwball comedy would never be completed; after multiple bouts of illness that caused delays to the shoot, Monroe was fired in June 1962 by director George Cukor, and would be found dead only two months later. Although replacements were sought for Monroe's part, the film was soon abandoned. Fragments circulated for some time, but a rough reconstruction was not made until 1989, and still only offers an abridged version of what might have been.

*Introduced by Dr Stefan Solomon
(Macquarie University, Sydney) and
followed by audience Q and A.*



Screening 6: Censor

8pm, Cinema 2

Dir. Prano Bailey-Bond (Wales),
84 minutes, English, 2021, DCP.
Film courtesy of Vertigo Releasing

Welsh director Prano Bailey-Bond's debut feature follows Enid, a film censor whose job it is to protect the unsuspecting public from overly gruesome scenes on screen. Haunted by the loss of her sister, Enid strives to focus on her work while becoming embroiled in the exploits of a notorious filmmaker and his mysterious new project.

Drawing narrative and aesthetic inspiration from the so-called "video nasties," a collection of low-budget horror films released subversively on VHS in the 1980s, **CENSOR** imagines the effects of repression both in cinema and in life. What does it mean for cinema when a finished film is not allowed to circulate? How might such censored projects continue to haunt the film landscape today?

Introduced by Dr Hannah Hamad (Cardiff University) and followed by a discussion with Prano Bailey-Bond and audience Q and A.



WAYS SAFE EST

EDITING AN UNFINISHED HISTORY



Films by Karen Pearlman
Words by Stefan Solomon

The archives of film history continue to surprise us today. No sooner do we feel confident in identifying the “first” instance of a particular technique on screen, or the author of a certain screenplay, than new discoveries emerge, upending our idea of what cinema was or could have been. Historians entering the archive trawl through all manner of receipts, letters, scripts and film stills with a sense that the story of cinema is not yet complete—and in reality never will be.



For the scholar and filmmaker Karen Pearlman, archives are storehouses of “unfinished lives, unfinished careers, and unfinished credits,” in which received stories of film history might be ripe for what she calls “investigative re-animation.”

This is particularly true for the story of women involved in Soviet filmmaking in the 1920s, whose achievements have until recently been relegated to the historical margins. Across a number of films, which focus on the central position of women editors in this period, Pearlman encourages us to look anew at how a film is made, and who might be responsible for the shape it takes on the screen.

In among all of the labour that helps to make a film idea become reality, editing is key. However, while we are ready to praise the director as the most visible creative presence on a film project, we often forget the individuals who stitch all of the images and sequences together—many of whom, particularly in early cinema, were women. In the context of Soviet cinema, while Dziga Vertov’s radically experimental **MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA** (1929) is often touted as one of the greatest documentaries ever made, its editor, Elizaveta Svilova, is rarely mentioned in discussions of the film. Inspired by this untold story, Pearlman’s **WOMAN WITH AN EDITING BENCH** (2016) channels Svilova’s ingenuity, and imagines how she negotiated the difficulties of making revolutionary cinema at the end of the 1920s.

In a similar vein, Pearlman’s short film **AFTER THE FACTS** (2018) re-centres the efforts of such editors as Svilova, and seeks to show how one of our most ingrained ideas about editing needs to be renamed. For, while the “Kuleshov Effect”—the principle of changing the significance of two shots by juxtaposing them in different ways—is named after the filmmaker Lev Kuleshov, Pearlman argues in her film that it should really be known

more broadly as the “Editor’s Effect,” in acknowledgement that it was not the invention of one particular man. “All of these ideas about editing that we attribute to individuals,” Pearlman says, “are ideas that those individuals observed being put into practice mostly by women editors, both in Soviet Russia and in the United States.”

While the film is clear about highlighting the innovations and what Pearlman calls the “complex cognitive work” that women editors would regularly undertake, what is also apparent is how editing might be seen as part of the unfinished process of cinema. “How open or prescriptive are we trying to be with the juxtapositions we make?” Pearlman asks us to consider of the editor’s task. “How open am I leaving this for you to make your own interpretation? Or how sharply am I cutting it so that I know what it’s going to do to your brain?”

Even if we tend to think of the editing suite as the final stage in the production line of a film, as Pearlman notes, the life and value of any film extends beyond this stage: “It’s you, the audience, who are finishing the film; the editor is setting up the juxtaposition, but it’s you the viewer who makes meaning from it.”



“Editing is thinking; the edits are the thoughts,” says Pearlman of Esfir Shub—the most prominent female filmmaker in the early Soviet film industry. Shub was fascinated by the possibilities of the archive, and particularly the power of editing existing images together in new ways. Shub, Pearlman says, “is recognised as the key progenitor of the ‘remix’ film” for her found footage documentary **THE FALL OF THE ROMANOV DYNASTY** (1927). Remarkably, Shub was also responsible for the first synch-sound documentary interview in the 1932 film **KOMSOMOL – CHIEF OF ELECTRIFICATION**, and had she succeeded in making her unfinished documentary film from a script titled “Women,” Pearlman says, “she basically would have invented the character-driven documentary—she’s never credited for that.”

Pearlman’s **I WANT TO MAKE A FILM ABOUT WOMEN** (2020) borrows its title from an essay of the same name that Shub wrote, about the need to demonstrate the centrality of women to the proletarian revolution, and so to celebrate their equality with men. In conceiving of this film, Pearlman worked with “the desire expressed in that article,” a desire that was ultimately never fully realised. “Shub was thinking that if we can see the work that editors do as work, as productive and substantive in its contribution to the Soviet project and the world, we’ll begin to see what Shub called ‘the magnificent rhythms of work,’” Pearlman argues.

While a script survives of Shub’s unfinished “Women,” Pearlman’s idea was not to complete it but to imagine speculatively how the filmmaker might have collaborated and conversed with her contemporaries, including the author and “muse” Lilya Brik and the Constructivist artist Varvara Stepanova. We see these women talking, working together, choreographing their movements and tasks in a workshop space as they think through the different aspects of the filmmaking process. We see Shub and Brik share a kiss. We see a kitchen transformed into a film laboratory. We see Shub playing mediator as the

tensions rise between the two big men of Soviet filmmaking: Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein.

Unlike Eisenstein, Shub, says Pearlman, had “a desire not to be centralised, which is why the film is not just about her.” In this respect, her efforts to sacrifice herself to the collective interest were very much in line with Soviet ideals. Pearlman says,

“One of the underlying themes of my film is what is called ‘distributed cognition,’ which is about the way that thinking isn’t confined to an individual’s skull and bones, but we think together, and create together: creativity is distributed among us now, just as it was then between Shub and Brik and Stepanova and their co-workers.”

But these collective creative possibilities were stymied on different fronts: not only have the women of Soviet cinema yet to receive their proper dues owing to a continued emphasis on their male counterparts, but their efforts were curtailed by the establishment of totalitarian rule. In one of the final sequences of Pearlman’s film, a bold, obtrusive slab of text appears on the screen reading “SUPPRESSION,” announcing the abrupt arrival of Stalinist censorship and the end of the 1920s heyday of Soviet cinema. At this point, quite unexpectedly, the actor playing Shub (Victoria Haralabidou) says, “Karen, are we cut?” Esfir Shub and Karen Pearlman sit down in front of the camera and proceed to have a conversation. “I ask the character Esfir Shub what she would have said, what she would have done, and she says ‘look at my work—that’s what I have to say.’ But,” Pearlman reminds us, “there’s a lot of work that never got made,



so we can only look at what's there, what she wrote, and what we know about the context. In researching these women, I faced a choice:

I could either continue the film historical traditions of ignoring their participation in the generation of film form or I could speculate. I felt a responsibility to speculate.

In this sequence where I appear on screen," Pearlman continues, "I am naming my frame, if you will, identifying myself as the speculator, the filmmaker. I'm taking responsibility for the imaginative possibilities I put onscreen as I investigate what might have been their creative process in films they never made."

While Shub's achievements in cinema have been recognised only recently, and several of her film projects will never be realised, Pearlman finds in Shub's story inspiration for thinking productively about notions of incompleteness: "My films offer a reconsideration of how work is created, of how ideas are generated; we can understand the work of women as generative of ideas in the editing process, but we can also understand the work of audiences as generative of ideas in the circulation of cinema. My film as such is an image of the rhythm of work, the rhythm of process, the rhythm of thinking."

To watch Pearlman's films is to be in communion with the women whose editing was foundational for the last century of cinema; but it is also to see this work as not buried in the past, but rather as continuing to create images and thoughts in the viewers of today.

Film by Sandi Tan
Words by Alix Beeston

THE SOUND



OF LOSS





Cut to interior, a living room in lime paint and afternoon shadows. Two children, a girl and a boy; a woman in a nurse's uniform; and S, the teenage assassin of director Sandi Tan's dreams. The cut is also a click, the sound of a slide projector operated by the girl, locking an image under light.

Suddenly there is silence. Their living room—and my own, as I watch them from my blue-grey couch—feels thick with it, weirdly swollen.

The girl presses the button on the projector to release another image and a beach scene slides noiselessly into view. S laughs, toothy and soundless, but her amusement is cut short when the girl has an epileptic seizure. As the nurse calms the girl down, cradling her in her arms, the whirring of the projector fades up. It's jittery and tense, but it's still a sign of life: a mechanical heartbeat where none was to be found.

Silence in **SHIRKERS** is the sound of loss, the flat line of creativity and innocence. The footage of S and the others watching the slideshow is from some 70 reels of film shot in Singapore in the summer of 1992 by Tan and her friends, Sophia Siddique Harvey and Jasmine Ng. The 19-year-olds were high on unchecked ambition and cinephilic passion. "We're going to be the Coen sisters I swear," Tan declared in a letter to Ng.

The young women spent an intense two months putting Tan's original screenplay onto 16mm film: wrangling free stock and gear from Kodak, pulling together a ragtag cast of neighbours and family, sending out classmates as location scouts across the island, and shooting around day jobs and household chores.

But then the raw materials for Singapore's first road movie were stolen from Tan and her friends. Georges Cardona, the

mysterious older man who had come on to assist with the making of the film, had vanished with the lot. Reels, sound recordings, storyboards, scripts, notes—even receipts.

The lush, kitschy footage from that summer is the spine of **SHIRKERS**, Tan's documentary account of her film's making and unmaking—so we know, as the story of its theft unfolds, that at some point it must have been returned to her. Almost 20 years after shooting, in 2011, Tan receives a call from Cardona's ex-wife. Cardona is dead, he's left behind the film reels, and they're in pristine condition, preserved, improbably, against the degradation of humidity and time.

But this moment with *S*, the children, and the nurse in the green-walled living room, when silence fills the space, stuffing it like so much cotton wool: this is when we learn that sound has been severed from image. The sound recordings are gone, forever, and all that remains are mute bodies, roaming around Singapore's pastel-hued streets in the brittle sunlight, their mouths gaping after speech.

It's a devastating revelation, held back until the last twenty minutes of **SHIRKERS**, and especially so after the discovery of the lost footage and its promise of a film restored, of cinema history rewritten.

Like all unfinished or lost films, Tan's documentary asks what if: what if things had been otherwise, what if Cardona wasn't such a cruel jerk, what if the film had been a clarion call for Singaporean indie film in the early 90s, ushering in the country's own New Wave?


SHIRKERS' mood, in other words, is a subjunctive one; it evokes hypothetical possibilities. In some alternative dimension, Tan found the freedom and fame she sought as a precocious, untrained, talented young filmmaker; she, alongside her cinematic alter ego *S*, saved the world with nothing more than "toys, games, and imagination."



In this sense **SHIRKERS** doubles the recovery work of feminist film scholars, who raided the archives of cinema's past—like Cardona's stash—to uncover women's forgotten or erased creative labour. In the silence of **SHIRKERS'** unheard voices echoes the vast history of women stymied or refused in cinema history. Perhaps, then, the girl's seizure in the green room is a reaction to lost sound, registering its absence as physical distress.

Tan has concealed the absence and teased us over it throughout **SHIRKERS**. The scenes from the original film are synchronised with diegetic sounds—the click of the projector, the giggles of teenage girls, the clatter of objects falling to the floor. At several points, *S* goes to speak and Tan cuts away, both hiding and foregrounding the words that won't, can't, pass *S*'s lips.





Sometimes Tan ventriloquises her younger self, reading lines of dialogue from the screenplay. This ventriloquism, like the musicians' re-recording of the film's intended theme song, is a deliberately imperfect dubbing of the original. It reckons with the film's irrevocable loss while also re-voicing it, rearticulating it.

SHIRKERS is the old film with a new soundtrack. When Tan was nineteen, the collaboration essential to film production turned sour as her mentor, a man bent by unfeeling egotism, absconded with her work. Yet for Tan, to stitch together image and sound, past and present, is also to bring

together old friends, to use the space of documentary film as a site for community. As the melancholy theme song plays, she tells us, "I know I'll never get all of my friends in the same place, at the same time, ever again. But here they all are, with me."

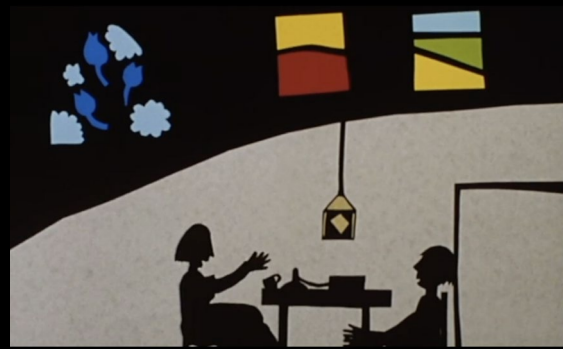
By the magic of editing, Tan's friends are here, in the film, sharing space with one another as interview subjects—and also with us as viewers. And so **SHIRKERS** metaphorically returns us to those sweaty summer afternoons in 1992. It crowds us onto the couch so that together we can watch a slideshow of images, one replacing another in a flickering, fragmentary series.

Films by Helen Hill

Words by Karen Redrobe

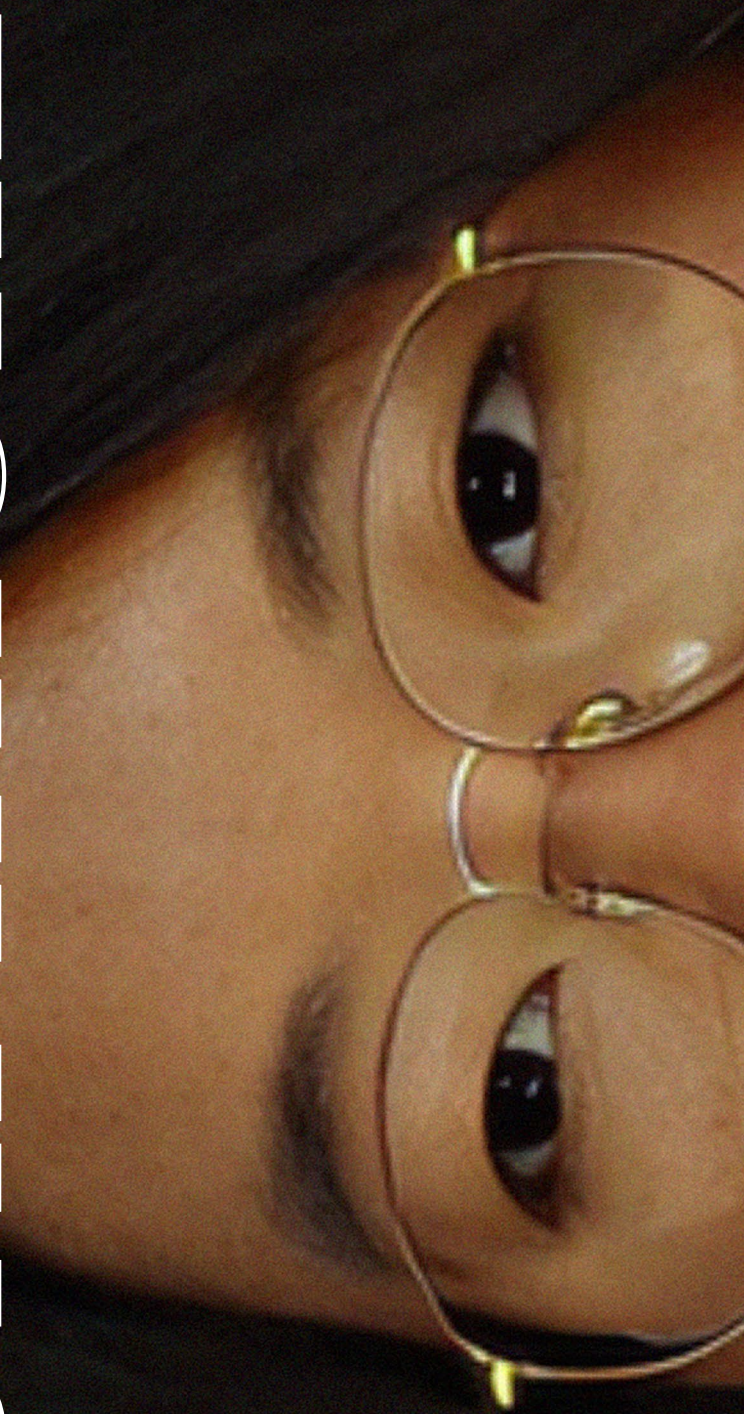


FINISHED OR UNFINISHED?



Helen Hill (1970–2007) was a white experimental animator/filmmaker and social justice activist from Columbia, South Carolina. After graduating from Harvard University in 1992, Hill relocated to New Orleans with her classmate Paul Gailiunas. She then completed a Master of Fine Arts at CalArts in 1995 and moved to Nova Scotia while Gailiunas finished his medical degree. There, she made films and taught animation before returning to Mid-City, New Orleans, in 2000.

UNFEMISHED





Women filmmakers in process

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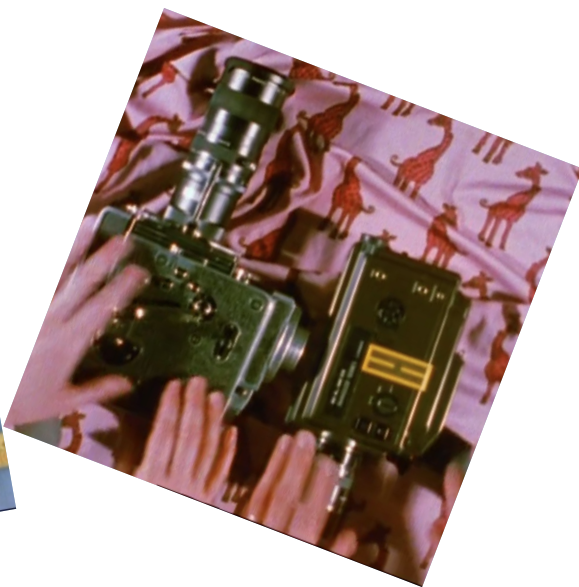
In New Orleans, Gailiunas founded an affordable healthcare clinic and Hill taught animation through the New Orleans Video Access Center and cofounded the New Orleans Film Collective. The couple was involved in a variety of community activist projects and participated in Mardi Gras and Halloween, punk anarchism, and DIY culture. Hill cared deeply about cultivating ordinary people's opportunities to express their creativity. She saw small-scale community-based celluloid filmmaking as a vehicle for this, as we clearly see in her 2004 short film, **MADAME WINGER MAKES A FILM: A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY.**

Though Hill operated under the radar, her filmmaking gained national attention after an intruder entered her New Orleans home and murdered her on 4 January 2007.

The intruder also shot Gailiunas several times as he protected the couple's son, Francis Pop, although both Gailiunas and Francis Pop survived. Hill's was one of a spate of New Orleans murders that remain unsolved.

Hill was a dedicated trash-picker, and on Mardi Gras morning of 2001, she discovered a pile of over a hundred discarded handmade dresses and took them home to wash and repair. As a filmmaker who prized the handmade, collage, and vibrant colors, she felt a kinship with the maker and decided to make the dressmaker the subject of her most ambitious project, which would ultimately be released as **THE FLORESTINE COLLECTION.** By talking to neighbours, Hill learned that the dressmaker was Ms Florestine Kinchen, also known as "Sister Kinchen," an African American deaconess who had recently passed away on 12 February 2001, at the age of 95, shortly before Mardi Gras day.

Hill had used audio recordings of her grandfather just before he passed away in her beautiful film **MOUSEHOLES** (1999), which explores the mediation of one person's experience of the liminal state between life and death, as well as the relationship between the living and the dead. She returned to this technique for **THE FLORESTINE COLLECTION** and began to make audio recordings of conversations with Ms Kinchen's neighbors and friends from church. She had planned to make more recordings, and she was also exploring how to combine Super 8 footage of New Orleans with animation that compared her creative life with that of Ms Kinchen.



Hill had often completed films within a year or less. Yet she began **THE FLORESTINE COLLECTION** in 2001 and worked on it intermittently over the next six years through a series of life-changing events, including childbirth and a year's displacement from her New Orleans home to Columbia, South Carolina, after Hurricane Katrina flooded her house and damaged or destroyed many of her artistic materials, including work for this film.

When Hill returned from Columbia to New Orleans, she did so with an altered understanding of the city, having observed Katrina's unevenly dispersed devastation.

With the damaged remains of her film in progress in hand, she was determined to continue with—and perhaps to finish—the film. Hill's murder interrupted her evolving process, but the life of the film and the dresses that were its inspiration have continued.

THE FLORESTINE COLLECTION both is and is not a finished film. It was finished posthumously by Hill's husband, Gailiunas, using the materials that were in process at the time of Hill's



death—this is the film screened as part of **UNFINISHED**. It combines Hill's plans with Gailiunas's elegiac explanation of why he, and not Hill, completed the work. Gailiunas was meticulous in his efforts to keep Ms Kinchen in view and to give proper credit to those members of her community who had assisted Hill in her research efforts. But inevitably, given the circumstances, the film becomes primarily a work of mourning for Hill, even as Gailiunas sustains a sense of another incomplete film haunting the one he completed. An opening title describes the work as "A film by Helen Hill completed by Paul Gailiunas." Yet in the final minutes, Gailiunas states, "And that is how the story must end: an incomplete film and an incomplete life."

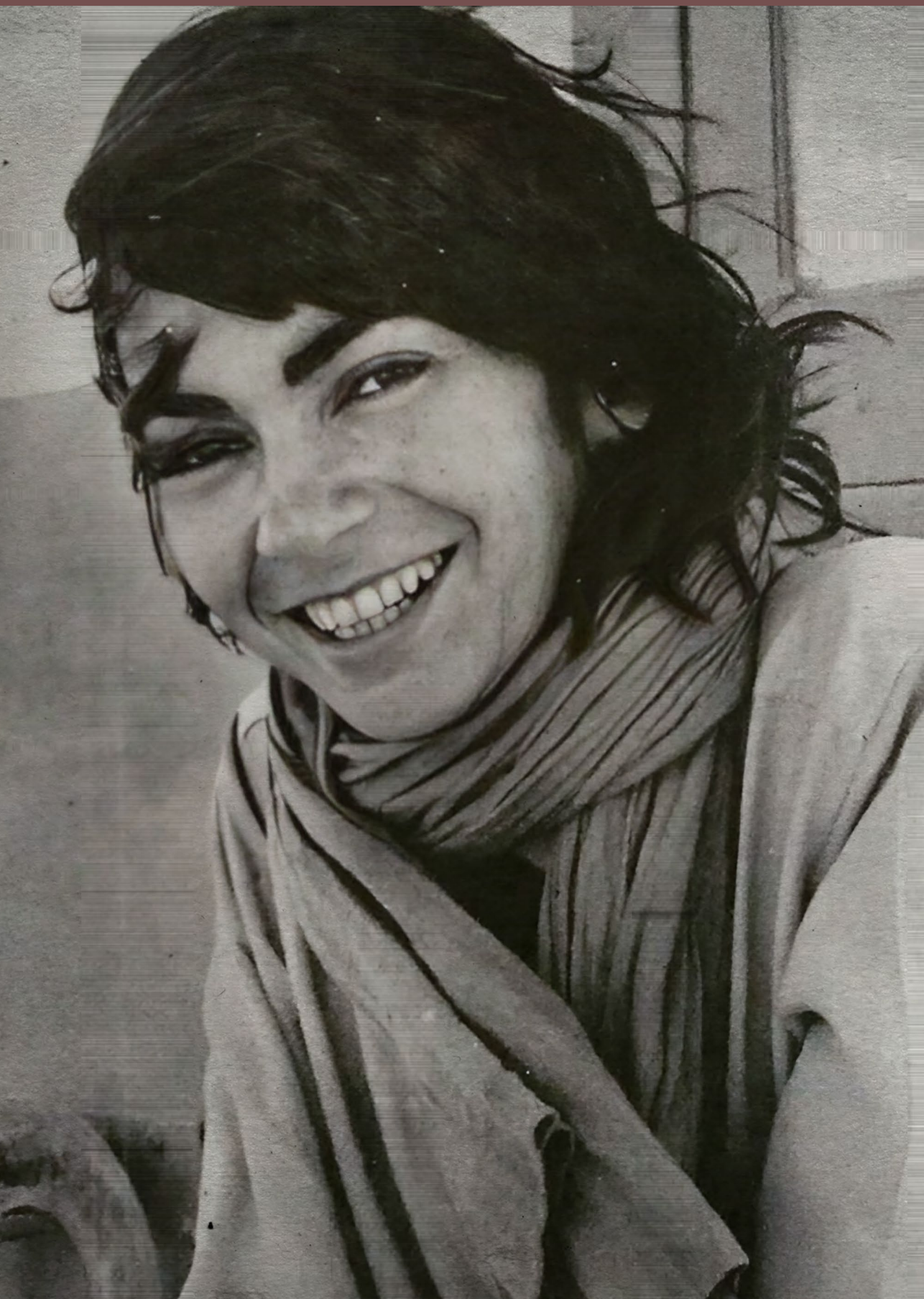
A working draft of the script from 14 September 2007 ponders the issue of authorship, and toys with the possibility of "A Film by Helen and Paul." Reflecting in a notebook after a screening of the film for friends, Gailiunas writes, "Randall: Maybe contextualize earlier (at the beginning) so that people understand that film is finishing Helen's film (maybe in titles)." He later adds, "(A film started by Helen Hill Completed by Paul Gailiunas?)." Gailiunas wonders in the same notebook on 18 June 2009, "Do I need to say it is 'incomplete' as I wrote? Film feels complete."

How do we understand film completion as a feeling? As I discussed the film's completion with Hill's wide circle of family and friends, it emerged that the film component of the Florestine Project was incomplete at the time of Hill's murder in part because Hill had been experiencing a "block" on the film and had rethought it more than once. Hill's post-Katrina scribbles confirm that she was fully reimagining her film: "Get going." "Rewrite script and storyboard/index cards." "Draw draw draw ink paint." Once I began approaching **THE FLORESTINE COLLECTION** as the overlapping, messy fragments of an interrupted work-in-progress, people and processes began to overshadow the desire for a final product, and the spectre of a different kind of film history entered the room.

Films by Jocelyne Saab
Words by Mathilde Rouxel

A FEARLESS & TIMELESS FILMMAKER

With an energy that the French actress Juliet Berto admiringly described as “monstrous,” Jocelyne Saab (1948–2019) began her film career as a war reporter.







Born in Beirut in 1948, she lived all of her life between Beirut and Paris. While working for French television, covering the October War, the war in Kurdistan, and the Palestinian resistance in Syria and Lebanon, she encountered censorship for the first time: a report she made on the armed and cultural resistance of Palestinian women in Lebanon was refused by the channel for which she was working.

This film, which she entitled **LES FEMMES PALESTINIENNES (PALESTINIAN WOMEN)**, was never printed as a positive film copy or broadcast during her lifetime; the “unpublished” film was discovered for the first time in 2019 after the Jocelyne Saab Association took charge of Saab’s archive.

This refusal was experienced by Saab as an act of political violence. She decided to become an independent filmmaker at the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) and made her first documentary film for cinema, which was also the first film devoted to the nascent conflict: **LE LIBAN DANS LE TOURMENTE (LEBANON IN A WHIRLWIND)**, shot with the Swiss journalist Jörg Stocklin.

Saab tried to represent multiple sides of the war, but her film proved controversial, and her crew were even attacked while filming in the Lebanese mountains, their 16mm camera broken and footage destroyed. Although the film was completed, and first screened at a cinema in Paris in 1975, like LES FEMMES PALESTINIENNES, it too was barred from playing on French television.



Until 1982, Saab filmed Beirut and Lebanon to bear witness to the unbearable violence of the war and the destruction of her country. The departure of the Palestinians from Beirut in August 1982, forced by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the two-month siege of the western part of the Lebanese capital, marked a great period of disillusionment for Saab. Already dreaming of fiction, she decided to stop making documentary images of the war. Her relationship with cinema became different: she no longer acted in the urgency of the event, but now constructed her projects.

Saab's desires led her to Asia, and more particularly to India, Vietnam, and Turkey, where she wrote several unfinished documentary and fiction projects. Perpetually reworked, Saab's unfinished projects are protean, and ideas migrate from one project to the next, retaining the memory of the passions that the filmmaker experienced during her research. The work that she undertook always found a purpose at some point, often in a form that was quite different from the original project, but which nevertheless reveals the filmmaker's creative journey.

Saab's last short film, **MY NAME IS MEI SHIGENOBU**, completed a few weeks before the filmmaker's death, is an exemplary case in this regard. The film is a trace of a very large hybrid feature film project, at the junction of documentary, animation, and fiction. It was to tell the story of Fusako Shigenobu, the founder of the Japanese Red Army in Lebanon, and her daughter Mei, whose identity was concealed for 27 years to protect her from Israeli intelligence. The project, entitled "Shigenobu: Mother and Daughter," was the result of three years of research and writing. It was particularly close to Saab's heart, as it was a way for her to talk about the 1982 siege, which she lived through in Lebanon. The story of Mei and her mother also allowed Saab to explore her relationship to the resistance, as well as her bond to her family, which deteriorated considerably during the war, notably for political reasons.

MY NAME IS MEI SHIGENOBU does not tell this story: this very short film simply marks the filmmaker's meeting with Mei, with whom she had felt a very strong affiliation. Ill, the filmmaker appears in this film travelling through the places she had already filmed in **LEBANON IN A WHIRLWIND**: the places of the Beirut of her childhood. She sought all her life to preserve the traces of her experience in incredible projects, often left unfinished, that we have yet to discover and make ours.



AN UNTIMELY



Film by Mariam Ghani
Words by Alix Beeston

CINEMA



The old headquarters of Afghanistan's state-run film company stands empty. Under sweeping ceilings, dust settles gently into grime, a greyish crust forming on cloth-covered furniture and tracking the stairwells where steps once fell. The camera carries us through the rooms, navigating around thick Tuscan columns before pausing, for a long moment, in a meeting room hung with a chandelier. Glinting and still, this glassy fixture is suspended like time within these walls.



The building insists on its solitude. **THERE IS NO ONE HERE. THERE IS NOTHING HAPPENING.** Only the dance of dry particles, spinning in slow motion through windowed shafts of light: a performance that seeks no audience.

Yet we are here, with the camera as our guide and companion. And we are not exactly trespassers. We leave no signs of forced entry; we bear a leisurely composure known only to the most experienced, or foolhardy, of thieves. We're more like ghosts—the ghosts of other people, those who once occupied these seats and passed one another in these halls. We shadow these past bodies, inexactly imitating their movements as we roam the space. Our presence makes their absence felt. We, along with the building, memorialise activity curtailed, affluence lost.

Someone was here.
Something was happening.

In her documentary feature **WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED**, director Mariam Ghani presents the abandoned Afghan Film site as a monument to a national film industry that flourished in the years of Communist rule. Its faded opulence is a reminder of the vast resources required for feature film production—money, equipment, infrastructure, people, expertise—as well as its subjection to the whims of the state, the upheavals of political change, and the vagaries of cultural norms. It is a reminder of how national film industries are conditioned by specific configurations of power. The fortunes of the film industry are the fortunes of the regime, and their shared fates are given form in this dilapidated building.

Supported by the Soviets, the Communist government in Afghanistan took up the cinema as a weapon of propaganda, giving filmmakers resources and political influence with strings attached. Censorship was baked into the production process.



Government officials revised scripts before approving them for filming, adapting tales of star-crossed lovers, feuding families, and drug smugglers to naturalise state power and demonise its opponents and detractors—particularly the mujahideen, the militant Islamic opposition groups.

“In moments of dramatic and often violent reimaginations of the state by its politicians,” as Ghani has written, Afghan Film was tasked with rendering in celluloid the state’s imagination of itself: “the future-possible state, rather than the present state.”

But the reality disguised by this dream-state appears, intermittently and sketchily, in an archive of unfinished film work dating

from this period. These projects completed principal photography but were shelved prior to postproduction. Never before shown, the films find their way to the screen in **WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED**. Ghani’s documentary draws on more than a decade of work in partnership with Afghan Films and incorporates a series of in-depth interviews she conducted with filmmakers, actors, and others involved in the original productions.

In some cases, political unrest proved uncongenial to the protracted and interdependent processes of filmmaking. **THE APRIL REVOLUTION**, for instance, was an exercise in glorifying the 1978 Communist coup, directed by Daoud Farani. But in the middle of shooting, in 1979, the regime whose rise the film celebrated was overthrown in another coup. The unfinished film materials, confiscated by the new government, became an object lesson in a nation’s upheaval and its ideological churn, its successive and competing acts of mythologising itself.



In other ways, these unfinished films register the gap between the real and the ideal, between lived experience and its speculative reformation on film. “We took from the realities of our lives,” declares the filmmaker Latif Ahmadi as he sits before Ghani’s camera. “Whatever was the truth, sweet or bitter, I’ve put into my films...I shoved reality in my films and they objected to that.” Two of Ahmadi’s films, *AGENT* and *ESCAPE*, were rejected by the censors—and also, therefore, unedited by the censors. They are left unsmooth and unpolished, all raw edges, rough cuts, outtakes. Life, a moment in time, is preserved in unfinishedness, like fruit in canning jars—sweet or bitter, as Ahmadi says.

Or perhaps these unfinished films are preserved like a chandelier suspended in a disused building. Such a building is, after all, as apt a metaphor as any for an unfinished film. If unfinishedness can be a kind of fixative—holding the past in place—the longevity it offers is always limited, its permanence more or less illusory. Indeed, it’s something of a miracle that Ghani can work with these unfinished films today. In 1996, the Taliban made a bonfire of film prints in the courtyard of Afghan Films, destroying some 200 or 300 films. But as the fires blazed outside, a large mass of negatives and prints were concealed inside, behind a bricked-up entranceway covered by a poster of mujahideen commander Mullah Omar.

Spared destruction, the unfinished films of Ahmadi and others nevertheless comprise an archive of objects marked by signs of decay and neglect. Film canisters bearing discoloured labels, names and dates slipping slowly out of the historical record. Reels of celluloid spliced with cheap tape, at risk of breaking when you feed them through a projector. *WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED* recognises the contingency of film history, the sheer vulnerability of its materials and the chanciness of their preservation. It also works against these things, as part of Ghani’s dynamic practices of archiving and disseminating film.

Ghani is no more a trespasser than we are; her work with Afghan Film’s holdings is essentially collaborative and responsive, a dialogic approach that extends to the interviews that form the basis of her documentary. For Ghani, seeking out and consulting the original filmmakers was not merely “a matter of intellectual curiosity.” It was also “an ethical prerequisite for taking their unfinished work and recontextualising it within a new artwork.” This is, Ghani says, “a work of facilitation rather than a work of appropriation.”

Late in the documentary, Ghani asks Ahmadi if he would finish *AGENT* if he could. “There’s only one way,” he replies. “We would need a way to link the past to the present, intellectually, in a new script.”

WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED isn’t this new script. But it shares Ahmadi’s belief in the untimeliness of the unfinished film, how it belongs to a time no longer our own. Temporal impossibility, the lure of potentialities foreshadowed and foreclosed: this is what gives the unfinished film its poignant, elegiac beauty. In this, too, the unfinished film finds a cogent symbol in the Afghan Film headquarters—deserted, dilapidated, yet undeniably gorgeous.

Film by Prano Bailey-Bond
Words by Hannah Hamad

CENSORED



DIRECTED BY PRANO BAILEY-BOND



NIAMH ALGAR

CENSOR

"One of the best horror films in years."
THE INDEPENDENT

"Magnificently over-the-top."
TIME OUT

"A visually-stunning debut."
THE PLAYLIST

"A mind-bending nightmare."
BLOODY DISGUSTING

YOU CAN'T EDIT REALITY

MARKET RELEASING: BEYBLAMA & FILM CYNTHIA WALKES PRESENT A SHIVERS SALT FILMS PRODUCTION
IN ASSOCIATION WITH KODAK MOTION PICTURE & CINELAB LONDON "CENSOR" NIAMH ALGAR MICHAEL BURKS VINCENT FRANKLIN SOPHIA LA PERA ALBION SCHILLER AND MICHAEL SMILEY
CAST: NIAMH ALGAR, TINA PROSSIN, PAUL LEVENS, GREGORY J. SHERIDAN, CALLAN, JAMES BUTLER, PEASE, PAULINA RZESUTOWSKA, HARRY TOMAS, ANITA ANOJA, SIMONE SON
PRODUCED BY ANDY SPARKE, AUNT TRIPSON, KIMBERLY VIKNER, NICHOLAS VERBET, LAUREN DANK, OLIE MULLERT, DANIEL BUTSKA, HARRY BURKE, KIMBERLY VIKNER
WRITTEN BY HELEN JONES, DIRECTED BY PRANO BAILEY-BOND, EDITED BY ANTHONY FLETCHER, PRODUCED BY PRANO BAILEY-BOND



It is both apt and ironic that one of the content warnings issued by the British Board of Film Classification to accompany its ‘15’ certification of Prano Bailey-Bond’s 2021 debut feature film *Censor* is “sexual threat.”

The streaming platform MUBI, upon which *CENSOR* can currently be viewed in the UK, likewise advises viewers at the outset that the film “contains sexual assault.” Such content warnings are apt because the role of bodies like the BBFC in mediating or negotiating filmic depictions and treatments of sexual or sexualised violence against women is central to the subject matter of *CENSOR*. They are somewhat ironic because the film works hard to complexify and complicate some longstanding assumptions and fears about what it means for audiences, but especially in this case women audiences, to view and find meaning in media content that depicts such violence. In fact, the film lays bare the extent to which attitudes and understandings about the politics of censorship, age certification, and content warnings have shifted over time alongside changing cultural values around these things—and a mediascape that is dramatically altered from the film’s depicted historical context of the mid-1980s.

The film opens with a piece of video footage playing of a young white woman being stalked from behind by what appears, via the first-person point of view shooting so familiar to viewers of horror cinema of the period, to be a menacing predator with violent intent. Hearing something behind her, the woman turns, and the camera viewpoint switches to hers as her eyes search around for the source of the sound. She runs from her pursuer, trips and falls, and is dragged backwards from behind by her unseen assailant. Then the image freezes before perspective shifts to reveal that we have been watching through the eyes of protagonist Enid (Niamh Algar), who is viewing the tape in her professional capacity as a film censor.

It is 1985, a time broadly, though not precisely (in line with the filmmaker’s determination to keep the action at something of a remove from the full historical reality of its subject matter) consonant with the moral panic and censorship debates that ensued from the so-called “video nasties” scandal of the early 1980s. This saw a swathe of films bypass the BBFC’s classification and certification process to exploit a legal loophole that enabled them to be released on video instead. This loophole was quickly and controversially closed by the passing of the Video Recordings Act of 1984.



As Enid backs up the tape to review the scene she has just watched, a close-up on her hand also reveals the notes she has made during her viewing of this apparent horror film, highlighting its “overblown blood and gore” and its depiction of “eye-gouging” which, Enid insists, “must go.” What really stands out from her notes, though, is her assertion that the “treatment of female characters [is] derogatory.” In this way, Enid engages with a feminist debate that was raging at the time concerning the relationship between media texts and their contexts, as they pertain to the depiction of men’s violence against women in media, and the enactment of men’s violence against women in society.

Explaining this were some concurrent developments in the years leading up to the “video nasties” phenomenon. On the one hand, some changes in 1970s UK film culture gave rise to the normalisation of imagery

that featured the sexualised objectification or violent brutalisation of women, or both. On the other hand, there was a shift in focus in the women’s liberation movement, which in the late 1970s increasingly campaigned against men’s violence against women and emphasised feminist anti-violence activism. These developments among feminists were partly fuelled by women’s outrage over the then-ongoing Yorkshire Ripper murders. In 1980, activists even successfully campaigned to halt the pre-production of a planned MGM film on the killings at a time when the perpetrator was still at large. To this day it remains unmade.

All of this produced a climate in which some feminist activists were prepared to take direct action to protest what they saw as film’s complicity with rape culture, which, they argued, created a socio-cultural milieu that normalised and therefore enabled men’s violence against women.

At the outset, Enid's stance on this seems very clear: "I do it [censorship] to protect people." She, like the anti-violence and anti-rape culture activists of the 1980s, sees a relationship between cultural texts and actual violence.

Enid connects the filmic manifestations of violent misogyny, of the kind in which she intervenes through her work as a censor, to the enactment of men's violence against women, of the kind to which, it is implied, Enid's missing sister fell victim. Enid too must endure the consequences of the latter, through her experience of victim-adjacent guilt and trauma.

As her story progresses, though, Enid is beguiled by the tales of violent misogyny that she encounters first in her workplace viewing room, and later from behind the counter of her local video shop. The substance of her trauma begins to be enmeshed with her changing relationship to violent misogyny in horror. This is later compounded by her survival of attempted rape by the producer of the very films with which she has become obsessed.

To an extent, we can understand *CENSOR* as a study in one person's changing understanding of the relationship between media and violence, and more broadly between culture and society. Enid's understanding of her victim-adjacent trauma, her sense of self that is defined by guilt over what she perceives to be her failed, childhood custodianship of her sister, and her professional acts of cultural gatekeeping shifts over the course of the film. That gatekeeping is driven, up to a point, by her ostensibly (but arguably problematically) feminist urge to censor, limiting the accessibility to others of what she sees as misogynistic media content. But as Enid's

story unfolds in *CENSOR*, the film reflects more nuanced, contemporary understandings of the relationship between media and audiences, and between women and horror.

There is now a rich and growing body of writing about these topics, which have moved far beyond the "ill effects" debates of the horror-related moral panics of the 1980s and 1990s. *CENSOR* captures this richness and nuance through Enid's narrative and characterisation, but in ways that allow space to acknowledge some of the still-unresolved questions concerning the feminist stakes of the censorship of rape culture. And it does so with dark and compelling beauty. All the same, we are still grappling with the gender politics of many horror films of this period (many of which were indeed cut, censored, or banned—albeit not generally on feminist grounds), as well as the feminist potentialities of censorship.

This essay is dedicated to all victims and survivors of violence against women, and to the late Professor Martin Barker—one of the first to write seriously and conscientiously on the "video nasties" phenomenon, and one of the first to sidestep the question of feminism and deflect the concerns raised at the time by activists of the UK women's movement.



Unfinished: Women Filmmakers in Process is curated by Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon. This programme emerges from Beeston and Solomon's *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film*, a forthcoming collection of essays by scholars and filmmakers out with the University of California Press in June 2023.

Alix Beeston

Alix is Senior Lecturer in English at Cardiff University and the author of *IN AND OUT OF SIGHT: MODERNIST WRITING AND THE PHOTOGRAPHIC UNSEEN* (Oxford University Press, 2018).



  @alixbeeston

Stefan Solomon

Stefan is Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at Macquarie University and the author of *WILLIAM FAULKNER IN HOLLYWOOD: SCREENWRITING FOR THE STUDIOS* (University of Georgia Press, 2017).

 @stefansolomon7

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An earlier version of Alix Beeston's essay on *SHIRKERS* was published in *DOCALOGUE*. See docalogue.com/july-shirkers



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