



## **SPA DAY FOR FILMMAKERS:**

Battling Exhaustion in The Analogue Film Community  
Lindsay Sorell

Name-tagged and toting bottomless cups of coffee, lab technicians, artist-run coordinators, and filmmakers filled the Engineered Air Theatre. This was the battle-planning commission, a two-day strategizing session on analogue film's next offensive: the 2017 Analogue Film Gathering in Calgary, March 23-24<sup>th</sup>. Amid passionate and inspiring liturgies on the vitality of film, I was struck by the exhaustion that is pervasive among us in the filmmaking community. Tired of defending the survival of the medium, the survival of a livelihood, we ask: film exists—isn't that enough?

With the goal of cross-referencing answers from across the national film community, I asked four filmmakers and coordinators across Canada—Amanda Thomson ([Iris Film Collective](#), Vancouver), Jesse Andrewartha (filmmaker, volunteer technical coordinator, [Cineworks](#), Vancouver), Nicola Waugh (former Programming Director of [CSIF](#), Calgary), and Patrice James (Executive Director, [IFCO](#), Ottawa)—about this exhaustion.

### **What is your dream for celluloid?**

**JESSE ANDREWARTHA (JA):** Simply that it remains accessible as an artistic choice. But for that, it requires not just the work of film artists—the medium itself has to maintain a momentum and continuing visibility in the public sphere to remain viable. Technology and the Internet is vital to this effort. It's not without a certain sense of irony that the technology and connectedness that has led to the rise of digital is also key to film's survival.

Furthermore, films like *Dunkirk* from director Christopher Nolan help keep film modern, and culturally relevant. There is a huge viewer response to seeing a film in 70mm; the industry switch to digital projection amongst theatres in 2006 was swift and yet despite the claims that film is dead, ten years later that emotional response to film shown by the public may ensure continued limited releases on celluloid. The efforts and influence of film advocates like Mr. Nolan and other directors such as Quentin Tarantino inspire filmmakers to experiment with film over digital. As long as this can continue, film can remain viable.

**AMANDA THOMSON (AT):** To have artist-run film labs in Canada that follow the French model: somewhere that one could bring their film and learn how to make

it themselves under the guidance of other more experienced filmmakers. From mixing chemistry to printing soundtracks, it would work on a sort of mentorship model with many people over a long period of time so the knowledge base multiplies.

Film bought in bulk and chemistry mixed from its component parts and replenished regularly doesn't have to be as expensive as it is to do it on one's own. The system as I've experienced in Vancouver relies heavily on an individual being able to work with very little guidance, and this is prohibitive in many ways.

I hear stories about the old NFB and I feel like we were so close. I wish that was something I could have experienced.

**PATRICE JAMES (PJ):** My dream for celluloid/emulsion is that artists and film devotees alike continue to have access to this original medium/technology that STILL demands great discipline, respect for process, a commitment to detail, and a reverence for craftsmanship and artistry. In my opinion, if we cease to learn, appreciate, and respect existing knowledge, I'm afraid we run the risk of 'reinventing the wheel!' And one of the most obvious problems facing us in this 'free-for-all' reality is that there is a true lack of understanding about the ethos of film. I want for film to continue to proliferate and thrive through the dedication and commitment towards propagating the medium, by artists, arts organizations, facilities, festivals, distributors and the entire ecosystem designed to support film's future.

### **In your opinion, what stands in the way of the sustainability and proliferation of analogue filmmaking?**

**AT:** The word "film" has come to mean so many things to so many people, that when we are talking about film we have to preface it with words like "analogue" and "celluloid." I think this is also reflected in the way that we approach film in Canada. We have these co-ops and societies that are expected to be too many things for too many people. I don't know much about many of them, but my sense is that analogue film is suffering for this.

Currently, skills and techniques are passed on in workshops which tend to want to make film accessible, to draw in a large group. There are ways to cut corners, to make things cheaper and/or easier, but as one takes on more of the process it gets complicated very quickly. There's a point at which someone decides they'd rather send it to a lab than do it themselves. And I think labs are a great service that we should support, but I think it's important to keep these skills in the community as well.

**JA:** Simply put: profit. The margins involved in a dwindling consumer base versus the industrial scale required by film must be substantial enough to

motivate companies to continue. The problem is that the investment capital and consistent quality required over the millions of feet of film prevents small scale companies from entering the market. We're at an interesting crossroads: Kodak is still struggling to find the happy medium where their film divisions can remain profitable enough, but are there any companies able to carry the torch if 'Big Yellow' decide they can't maintain the product? [ORWO](#) and possibly new film startup [Ferrania](#) are the only two that could possibly fill that gap.

**NICOLA WAUGH (NW):** The largest barrier is technical. The lack of new camera and projector technologies means that artists must use old, and often imperfect gear. Replacing parts is sometimes impossible, and I've seen filmmakers go to great lengths to rebuild a part, or make a Frankenstein camera from several others just to get one working. But again, this is the amazing, obsessive passion that is just so wonderful to be around. Even the type of film that people use has become harder and harder to get. There are also only a few labs that process motion picture film in all of Canada.

But that's not to say it'll never come back. A few years ago, Kodak released a great [new Super 8 camera](#) that merges with digital technologies. I think this is an incredible development – learning to incorporate digital, rather than fight it. Bring in the best of both worlds. Although purists might hate this, I think it's a nice middle ground. We've also seen the highly anticipated launch of Film Ferrania in the past few years, an Italian producer of high quality moving and still film.

**PJ:** There are a few actual and contrived threats facing the sustainability and proliferation of analogue filmmaking. Access to fewer emulsion service providers, especially labs, various types of expert technicians, machinists etc., is a pervasive and real threat. The idea that the language of film has become appropriated however, 'dumbed-down' and re-interpreted to satisfy a hyper-digital, purely consumerist driven creation machine, which dictates the obsolescence of film in order for this machine to thrive and excel, is a contrived threat.

### **What most exhausts you and your personal efforts in promoting the medium and community of analogue filmmaking?**

**AT:** That I can't pay the bills or buy groceries in volunteer hours. Work is work and there are only so many hours in a week. I know that it is more complicated than this, but when an organization or sector is dependent on volunteer work, at its best it privileges candidates who already have resources and at its worst punishes those who don't by bringing down the value of work across the board. The volunteer work and unpaid internships I have taken did give me experience that have helped me to get other jobs, but it wasn't without a cost physically, emotionally and mentally, not to mention financially.

**PJ:** I am continuously exhausted by the constant debate about film's relevance; the 'tug of war' between film and digital; the dismissal or relegation of film as a medium for the elite or the privileged; the questioning or constant defending by film artists as to why they choose to use film? And, I am mostly disappointed by the actions and observations of media art practitioners, supporters etc. who dismiss the viability and autonomy of film within a hyper digital reality.

**JA:** The fact that there is no easily accessible support network; that processing facilities and full service labs are in another province or even another country. This means we are required to often process our own film to keep any reasonable schedule. Also, the reduced cultural awareness of film means that travel with celluloid is complex: the potential for film damage from X-Rays or mishandling is real and is a practical issue in shooting film internationally or anywhere air travel is required and has become a major hurdle in using and promoting film.

We are also up against another pressure of the modern age. We have the world at our fingertips; we can access the worldwide web on our phones and consume any media at any time we choose, to purchase whatever we want whenever we want it. This has led to an impatience. When I am teaching others about film, they are excited until they learn that there is a process involved. That the medium does not represent instant gratification, but delayed gratification. One recent student bemoaned the 45-minute reversal process on his 100 feet of Kodak Tri-X and asked if he could take out his phone in the darkroom.

**Do you have a specific idea that could eliminate or lessen this exhaustion in the national analogue filmmaking community?**

**NW:** I think technology and skill-sharing are the two main issues that need to be addressed. Kodak has finally seen that there is a real demand for new analogue technologies and seems to be innovating to suit. Mailing lists ([Frameworks](#), [Forum](#)) are important hubs for analogue filmmakers, but, to my knowledge, there is nothing of this nature in Canada, and nothing that offers that offers the possibility of technology-sharing between people in the same city/region.

**AT:** It has been liberating and empowering to form and be a part of the Iris Film Collective. A group of us with an interest in working in Super 8 and 16mm were able to pool our knowledge and resources in a more formal way. This has allowed us to apply for grants and we are currently [in residence at the Falaise Park Field House](#). It's a multi-year program that provides us with a field house to use as a studio through the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation. Now we can go to each other when we need someone or something. Because the equipment is our own, we know it works and if it breaks down, we know how to fix it.

**JA:** There is little that can be done to mitigate the impact of lab closures, so we have to look at how we as filmmakers can provide that support network. Film cooperatives in Canada already have communication and connection, but I think we need to formalize these efforts. I'm thinking a centralized resource for film groups to lessen the firewall of film accessibility. A hub! A web page could feature news, resources, a network of film advocates and facilities that's indexed, maintained and easily accessible. It could include a national buy-in program on minimum requirement film stocks, whereby interested parties could buy units of film and once the minimum is reached, the order could be made. This would permit a wider democratization of film accessibility and also permit some purchasing power with Kodak. Furthermore, it could display a united front that demonstrates the interest and passion for film that exists in the filmmaking community.

**PJ:** What we can all do is commit to enabling our film support organizations to develop and sustain a community of film artists; push towards creating support systems for training new generation service providers, lab technicians, projectionists etc. And, be enthusiastic and mobilized towards keeping film going, not pessimistic and defeatist.

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**Amanda Thomson** is a filmmaker from the unceded Coast Salish territory known as Vancouver, BC. Her work focuses on perspective, the subconscious and other things she can't quite put her finger on. Yet she is drawn to film by the tactile quality of the medium, and by its shifting nature in grain and cultural significance. She studied Film Video and Integrated Media at Emily Carr University receiving a Bachelor of Media Arts in 2009. In 2014 she helped form the Iris Film Collective. More recently Amanda has been back and forth between Paris, Vancouver and Rotterdam where she's been developing her next 16mm film at L'Abominable, Cineworks Independent Filmmakers Society and Filmwerkplaats.

**Jesse Andrewartha** was introduced to the magic of light and film as a post-graduate in Scientific Photography. A twenty-year veteran of the motion picture visual effects industry, he is an active filmmaker and his films combine both the digital and analogue domains to explore themes surrounding human interaction with the natural world. Jesse is also Vice President of the Board of Directors at Cineworks Independent Filmmakers Society and Technical Coordinator at Cineworks Annex.

**Nicola Waugh** is an independent film programmer and communications professional based in Calgary. She holds a Master's degree from York University and Ryerson University's joint Communication and Culture program, and was the

Programming Director of the Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers (CSIF) and Director of the \$100 Film Festival from 2012-2016. She has sat on juries for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Calgary International Film Festival, Prism Prize, GIRAF Animation Festival, Yukon Film Fund and the Gallery of Alberta Media Art (AMAAS), and was a member of the M:ST Performative Arts Festival Board of Directors from 2013-2016.

**Patrice James** graduated from Carleton University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Film Studies. She has been the Executive Director at the Independent Filmmakers Co-operative of Ottawa Inc. (IFCO) for going on 12 years. She is herself a practicing filmmaker/media artist. Ms. James has contributed to the cultural life of Ottawa for nearly 20 years, as a strong advocate for the media arts both locally and at the national level. She was one of three finalists in 2012 vying to receive Ottawa's top annual arts prize; the Victor Tolgesy Award, which is given annually to an individual who has "contributed substantially" to culture in Ottawa. Patrice continues to live and work in Ottawa.

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**Lindsay Sorell** is an artist and writer in Calgary, Alberta. With a special interest in relationships, art ethics, and the implications of digital media, she has participated in numerous residencies, exhibitions, and lecture series across Canada. She recently collaborated with the Advanced Toastmasters of Calgary for the IKG Live 1 performance festival and completed two solo exhibitions of new work: Exercises in Healing at Contemporary Calgary and Buddha, Why Am I Alone? at AVALANCHE! Institute of Contemporary Art. She is currently working on a large-scale watercolour painting of food, she is the Editor of *Luma Quarterly*, and the Calgary correspondent for *Akimbo*.