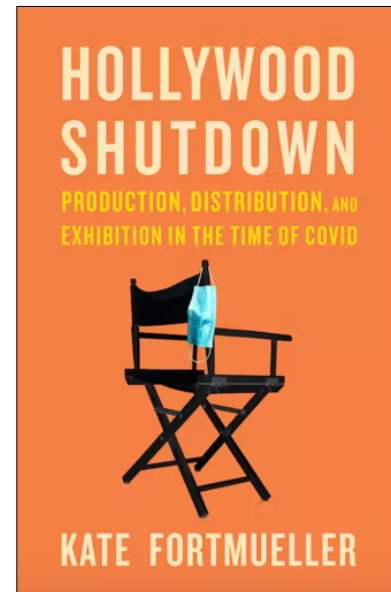


Kate Fortmueller, **Hollywood Shutdown: Production, Distribution, and Exhibition in the Time of COVID**, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021, 156 pp., \$18.95 (paperback).

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As daunting as it may seem to reflect on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the entertainment industry, Kate Fortmueller, author of ***Hollywood Shutdown: Production, Distribution, and Exhibition in the Time of COVID***, sets out to do just that in her compact yet detailed book that examines the first nine months of the pandemic and its ramifications on Hollywood practices. This task is especially difficult given that we are still living through the pandemic and frequently dealing with new variants and surges, but the author is aware of her limitations and states early on that it is impossible to objectively study the recent changes made to the industry until the pandemic has truly passed. Since we do not yet know when this day might come, the book thus serves as a crucial historical record of what happened to Hollywood's production, distribution, and exhibition practices between late March and December 2020. By reviewing the modified practices that were implemented in this nebulous period of time, Fortmueller also posits ideas on what might be next for Hollywood in a postpandemic world.



Hollywood Shutdown is conveniently divided into three sections, each one examining a distinct aspect of Hollywood's entertainment industry (i.e., production, distribution, and exhibition). The author gives each of these practices careful attention and analysis in their individual sections, tracking the changes that took place within each sector and providing case studies of notable events or decisions that had an impact at the time of occurrence. Fortmueller covers a lot of ground in her book, but what unifies it is the common underlying argument that the pandemic accelerated "changes and transitions that were already in progress" (p. 3) within the industry before 2020 began.

In the first section, Fortmueller gives an overview of how Hollywood first reacted to the pandemic by shutting down sets and halting production for films and television programs. The stop in production had varying effects across the industry. For instance, cast and crew members who could not avoid physical proximity saw the most considerable changes to their labor practices, whereas those who worked in postproduction and animation were able to continue their work virtually. Moreover, the pandemic highlighted a preexisting problem within the entertainment industry: many of its workers hold multiple jobs to sustain themselves when their media work is not enough. This meant that workers who held additional part-time jobs in the service industry (e.g., restaurants, hotels, bars) faced an even harsher fate when those businesses shut down as well.

The section also looks at the creative methods that were devised by productions to continue their work during the shutdown. While some studios and networks commissioned films and series about quarantine and the pandemic (often filming via Zoom or providing actors with the necessary tools to film themselves), others took a different approach, such as hiring an animation team to create a one-off special episode or reinventing a late-night show's practices in a way that embraced the pandemic rather than ignored it. When Hollywood was allowed to return to set, it did so by following safety guidelines and measures that were often being renegotiated as more information was revealed about the virus. However, basic strategies of restricting access to sets, implementing a novel zoning system, and hiring new safety supervisors all seemed to be accepted as part of the industry's return-to-work plan.

Distribution faced a different set of challenges. While orders to stay at home first seemed favorable for streaming services like Netflix, which could profit from the public's desire to watch film and television at home, other companies were not as prepared for this major shift in viewing habits. Although the industry was already shifting toward an increasing reliance on digital distribution and strengthening its streaming practices, the disruptions to production accelerated changes in distribution at a much faster pace than originally anticipated. Legacy media companies had already launched their own streaming platforms such as Apple TV+, Disney+, and HBOMax by 2020, but they quickly learned that merely offering original programming (as was the case for Apple TV+) or a library of existing content alone (such as with HBOMax) was not enough to sustain the attention of viewers. Instead, streaming channels needed a combination of both familiar favorites and new releases to entice their audiences, the latter of which was granted with the oft-contested introduction of premium video on demand films.

Moreover, film festivals were brought to a screeching halt in the beginning of the year. Fortmueller explains that "festivals offer more than just a communal viewing experience" but also allow meetings that are "integral to the production and distribution of film" to occur in intimate and high-energy settings (p. 48). Because festivals are such an important site for both screening and selling distribution rights for finished films, cancellations negatively affected the chances of independent films to be viewed during and beyond the festival season. Fortmueller also highlights how festivals make significant contributions to the regional economies that host them, given the thousands of visitors who attend these events, as is the case with the South by Southwest (SXSW) festival in Austin, Texas. Hence, the cancellation of these major events had an impact beyond the global film economy all the way down to the local level.

Changes in distribution were inherently tied to changes in exhibition practices, especially with the early-pandemic decision to shut down movie theaters for an (at the time) unforeseeable amount of time. The traditional theater exhibition model was already being challenged with increasingly shortened release windows—the period of time in which films are shown exclusively at theaters, which exhibitors rely on to generate a profit—and exhibitors had been fearful of declining theater attendance for quite a while. As the pandemic forced distributors to make hasty decisions about how best to release films and prompted them to experiment with digital and hybrid releases, exhibitors were left even more concerned on how to sustain their businesses.

Although viewers were unable to watch movies together in crowded spaces, people still sought ways to share their viewing experiences through drive-ins or browser plug-in extensions. Fortmueller recounts her own experiences of watching during the pandemic, setting "movie dates" with friends and family to be shared

virtually via text or Zoom. The author confirms that those weekly occurrences strengthened her personal relationships during the pandemic, revealing just how invaluable the experience of movie watching is to people's social well-being. Due to varying decisions on the reopening of public businesses, theater closures and openings played out differently in separate parts of the United States, as well as across the globe. Even when theaters reopened, production shutdowns meant that there were fewer new films to be screened. This prompted theaters to get creative with their sources of revenue by relying on retail offerings, providing exclusive group viewing sessions, or screening more independent and classic films.

While we cannot know the long-term effects of the pandemic on the entertainment industry or just how much of these new and modified practices will be retained in a post-pandemic world, Fortmueller suggests that Hollywood "also needs to consider the possibility that we might experience another pandemic" (p. 98) and prepare for this unpleasant likelihood. As such, it is inherent to look back on the changes that were made and the makeshift solutions that were suggested in these first nine months to learn from the failures and better understand the motives and intents of Hollywood studios and networks. Moreover, Fortmueller reminds us that the pandemic was not the only defining event of 2020. Other forces such as social justice movements and anti-sexual harassment campaigns had already been working on reshaping the industry for some time and could be just as crucial as the pandemic to understanding what the future holds for Hollywood.

While countless articles and think pieces have been published about the impact of COVID-19 on the entertainment industry since the onset of the pandemic, Fortmueller's book is the first of its kind to offer a historical record, as well as a critical examination of all the changes that took place in those nebulous months in one comprehensive place. Fortmueller tracks the major shifts observed in the industry while also paying attention to specific phenomena through case studies, effectively communicating overarching issues as well as minute details of the pandemic's effects to a broad audience that may not be as familiar with Hollywood's practices as seasoned professionals. As such, Fortmueller's book acts as a useful and extensive recounting of Hollywood's response to a global health crisis, and may prove to be a crucial artifact when we turn back to reflect on the pandemic's effects in the future—at a time when perhaps the events and details of those critical first months may become more blurred than ever.