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Authors	Lake, Kaitlin
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Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film, by Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon. University of California Press, 2023, 374 pp.

Kaitlin Lake

It is a truth—mostly *un*acknowledged—that the majority of film projects are incomplete: thwarted, aborted, lost, paused or ongoing. Often, the material lack which by nature constitutes the incomplete film, begets a reception that construes these absences as an indicator of deficiency. As a result, rather scant attention has been paid to incomplete works in film theory and history. Additionally, the circumstances that impede completion are often intricately bound up with conditions of race, class, and gender—factors in and of themselves that have been overlooked in efforts to assign film a tidy and singular history of film. It is out of these manifold relegations and absences that Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon's collection *Incomplete* arises. Spanning thirteen chapters, Beeston and Solomon's collection adds to a growing scholarly interest in "unproduction studies"—taken up by James Fenwick, Kieran Foster, and David Eldridge's *Shadow Cinema: The Historical and Production Contexts of Unmade Films*—that has emerged alongside the recent attention paid to cinematic ambiguity, such as Hoi Lun Law's *Ambiguity and Film Criticism: Reasonable Doubt* and Kelli Fuery's *Ambiguous Cinema: From Simone de Beauvoir to Feminist Film-Phenomenology*. Where the latter two works deftly consider the absences, ambiguities, and incompletions that arise within the formal and narrative patterning of particular films, such as open-ended narratives, Beeston and Solomon's *Incomplete* augments the parameters of incompletion by taking the conversation beyond analyses of profilmic expression. This capacious interpretation of incompletion includes not only what we might deem the clear-cut understanding of filmic incompletion—that is, works that were intended for completion, but for whatever reason did not eventuate—but also works that are physically and permanently lost, that are deliberately ongoing, that partake in the appropriation of extant footage or images, and even, purely notional works of cinema that exist only in the minds of those without the resources for their creation. *Incomplete* reframes what is missing as not only rich in and of itself, but generative of a feminist reorientation of not only film history but its very ontology.

Perceptive reflections on notional cinema anchor one section of the collection's introduction, where Beeston and Solomon reference "The Missing Movie Report", a large, collaged poster created by Miranda July in 1996 as part of her zine project *Joanie 4 Jackie* (originally named *Big Miss Moviola*). July's report, for which she photographed twenty-four women in Portland and asked them to speak about the kind of movie they would make if they could make one—their imagined projects are included in cutout block quotes underneath each of their images, forming a grid of unrealised women-made films, brings an awareness to all the movies July sees as missing by their not having been made. By extension, July invites readers

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of her zine to mourn these movies, to miss the missing. But the absences that July documents in her report should not merely be considered as markers of a deficit; instead, Beeston and Solomon write that the "report produces a desire for what is absent, a thirst for the unmade that is also a thirst for the making" (16). Beeston and Solomon take up a similar attunement to filmic absence, loss, and incompletion as demonstrative of the tenacity of the woman filmmaker, rather than as evidence of her absence. This is one of the many pathways laid in their introduction-cum-manifesto to feminist incompletion. The capacious expansion that feminist thinking bestows incompletion as a concept is one that extends throughout the volume's four parts, and the remainder of this review hinges on the question of whether these sections speak to the possibility of a feminist incompletion that extends beyond the theoretical. The answer is resoundingly in the affirmative.

The three chapters in Part One of the book are thematically oriented around what Beeston and Solomon term "Unfound Objects"—films which scholars will always have an incomplete record of or incomplete access to, specifically as a result of the historical processes which have engendered their loss (as is the case for many films from the early silent era.) Rather than a bleak catalogue of film projects thwarted by the patriarchal forces of history, Jane Gaines' chapter offers a "counterfactual speculation" that asks us to reframe speculation as productive; to pivot from "never" to "what if?" (41–45). This speculation becomes concretely practical, in that it not only gestures to a mode of reception beyond canons and auteurs, but primes a particular mode of imaginative thinking that the reader of *Incomplete* is encouraged to take up and bring to their reading of subsequent chapters. In Chapter Two Maggie Hennefeld considers that which has been lost from the archive: an estimated 75 to 90 percent of all films made during the silent period (65). Hennefeld's search for the anonymous actress who performed the character Léontine in the 1910s, demands an intellectual plasticity and an evasion of the affective conditions of neoliberal capitalism, constituted in what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism" (63). With recourse to Berlant, Hennefeld sidesteps (mis)placing her faith in a hope that what is lost from the archive might one day be magically found. Although Hennefeld warns of the perils of a nostalgia for that which remains desirable only by virtue of its irretrievability; unlike the established, unfound objects stay "open to playful new forms of knowledge in their gesture to blow up the canon" (78). In the third chapter, Katherine Groo continues the consideration of the silent era—and its ambiguities—by examining an archive of nitrate film stills. Groo reads the stills as an index of labour: indices of the encounter between the anonymous, *visible* women within the frames and the anonymous, *invisible* women who colourised them. For Groo there emerges a solidarity between the in/visible women: "what comes into view here is a kind of visual and literal fellowship between the signs of women, an index of their coming into contact" (97). The archive Groo considers is fragmentary, consisting of disconnected and de-narrativised stills—most two to three frames in length—cut with scissors from reels containing films made between 1897 and 1915. These fragments are taken by Groo as "autonomous texts whose meaning depends on their fragmentation" (97). Abstracted from the complete, the fragmentary encourages a new way of thinking that emphasises encounters between the visible and the invisible.

The second part of the work, "Refusals and Interruptions", gathers contributions that take up a more semantically traditional interpretation of the word "incompletion" in that they consider works which were started and intended for completion, but for whatever reason have not eventuated in a finished movie product. The three chapters in this section are particularly useful for film historians, or those engaged with the works of the underdiscussed filmmakers covered. In Isabel Seguí's chapter, in which she discusses the careers of Peruvian and Bolivian women filmmakers, Seguí reminds us that the archive does not simply exist: it is *created*. This,

she reminds us, is particularly true of the feminist archive. Seguí reflects on her own work with archives, including the personal archives of the filmmakers she studies, emphasising the emergence of the personal connections which are fostered in the creation of such archives. Seguí draws on treatments, scripts, shooting plans and preproduction images, allowing for the birth of filmic works never actually recorded to film. An engagement with the archive becomes an activation of "the latent qualities of the unfinished" (122). Similarly, Elizabeth Ramírez-Soto's chapter on women filmmakers in Chile draws on archival material to bring attention to the thwarted plans of three women filmmakers who set out to collaborate on a feature-length film from 1972 to 1973 before their exile. Where the material archive fails—the directors, living in different parts of the world, had only fragments of the treatment—Ramírez-Soto turns to oral history. The reconstruction of the incomplete project marks the creation of a film shaped by the experiences of exile and resurrected through feminist archival imagining. This approach is echoed in the writing of Mathilde Rouxel, in her chapter devoted to Lebanese filmmaker Jocelyne Saab, in which the author reflects on her own personal history of working with Saab. She writes:

> Unrealized film projects can reveal the conditions and working practices of an industry at a particular point in history, but they can also reveal how the creative process involves adaptation and transformation, requiring filmmakers to remain flexible and open to the evolution of the work if it is ever going to exist. (150)

Like Seguí and Ramírez-Soto, Rouxel too considers nonfilm archives, "which carry the invisible or intangible beyond the cinematic" and which offer evidence of incompletion as generative, as treatments for films shift, revealing the conditions that led the filmmaker to such creative metamorphoses (151).

Part Three, entitled "In Process", considers unfinishedness as a deliberate strategy in the filmmaking process by virtue of its contravention of normative practices. Chapter Seven sees Leo Goldsmith in conversation with experimental filmmaker Peggy Ahwesh, who often uses found footage in her work and for whom the incomplete constitutes a core part of her body of work. Ahwesh's films are not incomplete in themselves, but they are often comprised of the repurposed, including outtakes and fragments. Ahwesh's work thus celebrates the malleability of images; the generative potential of the fragmentary. Co-editor Stefan Solomon's chapter considers seriality, historically positioning this mode within realms of female production and consumption. Solomon's examination of closures and reopenings focuses around the experimental works of Leslie Thornton and Lynn Hershman Leeson, who each produced ongoing, episodic works starting in the 1980s. Out of protracted projects—remade, reworked, and reopened—Solomon reveals "that additional possibilities arise: of new modes of circulation and reception, of new means of appraisal, and of the abiding sense that these are works that belong as much to our own time as to the decades before it" (206).

These works are "never over", to quote the chapter's final heading (206), an approach we might adopt when considering all of the works discussed in the collection, and an awareness we might bring more generally to our engagement with films, whether extant or not. Karen Pearlman's chapter draws parallels between the creative processes of film editing and dance through an examination of the "chorographic sensibility" of filmmaker Shirley Clarke's editing style (211). A practising writer, director, and editor for the screen, Pearlman reads Clarke's editing as correlate with her dance training and also the unfinished as a kind of intrinsic quality of film editing:

> When the film finally ends up on screen, we leave unfinished all the other possible ways we could have made it. We could try to correct the truism and say that in an editing process one possible film is finished, the others are abandoned, but that isn't really true either. There is another level at which editors always leave a film unfinished, which reflects an irreducible principle of editing. An edit relies on the activity of the viewer's mind to be completed. (214)

Sophia Siddique's chapter fittingly follows from this; she reflects across six "epitaphs"—a term she creatively deploys in the subheadings that orient the sections, which can be read non-chronologically—on the incomplete film *Shirkers,* whose production she was involved with in 1992. She refers to the film as *Shirkers 1.0*: a 2018 follow-up documentary distributed by Netflix—titled *Shirkers*, and that Siddique refers to as *Shirkers 2.0*—details the circumstances of the original film's incompletion, using surviving footage and interviews with those involved with the original project, including Siddique. Siddique explains that "*Shirkers 2.0* foregrounds the aesthetic potentialities of incompletion and its advantages for understanding the creative process" (228). She reframes the experience as an alternative way of understanding Singaporean film history, using a lens of "occult space-time" as a means of navigating the "elsewhere" and "elsewhen" of the incomplete film (229).

This temporally experimental approach offers a fitting segue into Part Four of *Incomplete*, "Posthumous Returns", which comprises writing on the repurposing of already extant images and footage in works, a practice of reuse which then conceptually positions all images as participating in a kind of incompletion by way of their potential for appropriation. Alix Beeston's chapter on filmmaker Kathleen Collins endeavours to transcend a framework of recovery (and discovery) in the consideration of Collins's works. Beeston adopts Collins's penchant for the elliptical into the structuring of the chapter, and its layout on the pages, reframing the ellipsis not as something indicative of a lack, but as something which speaks to the "vital rhythms and continuities of [Collins's] work-in-process" (249–50). Karen Redrobe positions the feminist legacy of murdered artist Helen Hill as "unfinishable" in her chapter on Hill, examining the archival material—plans, storyboards, notes, illustrations— relating to Hill's posthumously "completed" and released short film *The Florestine Collection* (2011). Katherine Fusco's chapter considers the ethics of the posthumous employment of images of dead women, using as a case study celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, "a living-dead thing that continues to labor, even after death" (301). Fusco identifies the parallels between the exploitation of Monroe's image, for instance, and the broader treatment of women in the film industry, arguing that film studies must take up the issue of posthumous image rights as a matter of feminist ethics.

The final chapter's peripheral allying with a thematics of the lost woman offers an opportune progression to Giuliana Bruno's postscript for *Incomplete*, "The Ruined Map, Relinked", where Bruno reflects on her own *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* (1993). Bruno writes here that "[t]he act of treating absence not as an accidental or incidental factor but as a marker, a place in itself, generated by specific conditions, [makes] it a presence in its own right" (325).

The return to Bruno's work some thirty years later positions it, like many of the films and archives mentioned in *Incomplete*, as something continuously engaged with, reworked, resurrected and therefore ongoing. It is—and perhaps all good scholarship should be—in a sense, incomplete. *Incomplete* exhibits an attunement to that which is often overlooked, identifying the hidden (or ignored) plenitudes of filmic incompletion. The ontological reorientation of what we

might take to be a film has implications not only for film theory and history: an active prioritisation of the incomplete offers much for a renewed approach to pedagogies of film studies. A resistance of the totalising visions of film enables a renewed understanding of film practice, its labour history, and champions a theory that is explicitly feminist.

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Kaitlin Lake completed her PhD in Film Studies at The University of Sydney, where she also teaches and lectures on a casual basis, in September 2023. Her doctoral thesis located resonances of the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre in open-ended narrative films. Her research explores ambiguity, open-endedness, and absence. She has been published in *The Australasian Journal of American Studies*, and has a chapter forthcoming for an edited collection at Berghahn Books.