

# Cancellation of Emerson's Bright Lights Cinema Series sparks pushback, grassroots campaign

October 23, 2024

By Claire Ogden



An audience attends a screening of the film "How to Blow Up a Pipeline" in September 2023 as part of the Bright Lights Cinema Series at Emerson College. (Courtesy Malone Murphy)

Over the summer, Emerson College announced the cancellation of its Bright Lights Cinema Series. Citing budget cuts and a lack of direct connection with “core academic programs,” the 12-year run came to an abrupt end and curator Anna Feder was let go. Many staff and faculty suspect there are political forces at play.

Established by Feder in 2012, Bright Lights was a free screening series that was open to the public and held in the Paramount Center’s Bright Family Screening Room.

The series was “a gift that Emerson gave to the community,” Feder said. It welcomed working filmmakers, often alumni, to the college and focused its programming on social justice-centered cinema.

Feder and Vinicius Navarro, an associate professor at the college, confirmed that the annual budget for the series was approximately \$25,000, not including Feder’s salary, and went toward paying licensing fees, captions and filmmaker honoraria, among other expenses. The annual cost, in other words, was approximately half of a year’s tuition for one Emerson student. At the time of its cancellation, Bright Lights screened 24 films per academic year.

While the college would not confirm the budget for the series, Michelle Gaseau, Emerson’s associate vice president of strategic communications and media relations, said, “I do want to ask you to consider the size of a program that had a full-time staff member associated with it, hosted several films each semester and speakers, utilized facilities and staff at the institution.”

The cancellation came as a shock to Feder. “You’re running this successful series. Everyone loves it,” she said. “And then that sort of just all evaporates because of decisions made by people who had never been and did not consult me.”

Emerson College has made the difficult decision to end the Bright Lights Film Series, effective summer 2024, as the result of necessary budget reductions and our commitment to support core academic programs. The Bright Lights Film Series and those who have led and engaged in it have played an important role at Emerson, and we are grateful for all of the work that has gone into realizing this series.

Emerson College is fully committed to filmmaking and storytelling and we will continue to screen films and media, especially from our students and alumni, in the Bright Family Screening Room and our other screening locations in Boston, Los Angeles, the Netherlands, and beyond.



A screenshot of an announcement posted to the Bright Lights Instagram account about the series' cancellation. The account was deleted in early September.

## 'Israelism' and the spring 2024 encampments

Though Emerson cited budget cuts for Feder's dismissal, faculty and staff suspect the administration was uncomfortable with the politically-charged topics of works programmed in the series, particularly "Israelism," a 2023 documentary about the American Jewish relationship to Israel.

The screening was originally scheduled for Nov. 9, 2023, but Feder said that the college administration forced her to reschedule to the spring after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack.

Feder had collaborated on the screening with groups like IfNotNow, Jewish Voice for Peace and the Boston Palestine Film Festival.

"When I show something and I think there's going to be concern from members in the community, I do a lot of work around it," Feder said. "And when someone from Emerson or who's a cinema-goer reaches out to me, I take that very seriously."

Before the Feb. 1 screening, Feder said she was subjected to a targeted campaign of over 1,000 emails pressuring her to cancel, most of which came from outside Emerson. She also said that upper administration expressed security concerns, all vague. Emerson denounced the screening on Jan. 24.

Yet “Israelism” was “the most successful screening,” Feder said. It was a packed house in the 174-seat theater, and “50 or 60 people who we didn’t have seats for went off and held their own [private] screening,” she added.

“It was a love fest,” Feder said. “It was a perspective they were waiting to see.”

Feder had been a vocal supporter of the Emerson chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine and participated in the 2024 Emerson student encampments, which ended in late April with over 100 arrests.

In the first half of August, Emerson warned there was going to be an approval process for Bright Lights screenings in the coming year. But on Aug. 13, Feder was laid off. Because of her contract with SEIU 888, a union that represents state, municipal and education workers across Massachusetts, Emerson had to give her 60 days’ paid notice before dismissal. Despite still being employed by the college through Oct. 12, Feder was only allowed back on campus three times when granted permission by the university.

“Anna received a comprehensive layoff package from the College,” union representative Joe Montagna said over email, “that, in addition to the minimum requirements provided under our contract, included additional benefits in exchange for a waiver of rights, which is not uncommon. Only Emerson College can answer why Anna was instructed to stay off campus.”

Emerson declined to comment on Feder’s situation, stating, “As is typical and legal practice to protect the rights of those affected, we cannot confirm any specific individual was part of this reduction in force.”

The Emerson union filed a grievance over Feder’s layoff, Montagna said, “due to the appearance that it was motivated by factors other than, or in addition to, cost-cutting.”

Nine other staff positions were eliminated. But Feder’s was the only union job.

Feder was not allowed to work on anything related to Bright Lights for the last 60 days of her employment, except for building an archive of past screenings. She was going to run a student trip to the Camden International Film Festival in Maine in September. Instead, that happened with another Emerson staff member, despite Feder still being on staff.

“Thank god for the union,” Feder said. They have “given me a kind of dignity in all this.”



An audience attends a panel and screening of the film "How to Blow Up a Pipeline" in September 2023 as part of the Bright Lights Cinema Series at Emerson College. (Courtesy Malone Murphy)

## **The local film community reacts**

Bright Lights was one of the main ways that Emerson film students could interact with working filmmakers.

Film and media production is the most popular course of study at Emerson in 2022, according to U.S. News & World Report. Per Emerson's 2023-2024 enrollment data portal, 1,740 out of 4,145 undergraduates were enrolled in the Visual and Media Arts department.

For Navarro, the series was particularly important for him when he first came to Emerson in 2014. "I didn't know anyone in Boston," he said. "I was trying to get to know people in the college, to make friends, to be part of the community."

"That's how I started to feel like I was part of Emerson," Navarro added. "So I will always remember that."

The series was also an important source of support for local film festivals, many of which are small and volunteer-run.

Brian Tamm and Nancy Campbell, both Emerson alumni who co-lead IFFBoston, had collaborated with Feder on several screenings. IFFBoston would promote the screening with their audience, and Bright Lights would cover the screening fee. For IFFBoston, that partnership was invaluable.

"It just feels like such a slap in the face to the film community from what is theoretically a film school," Tamm said. "If you can't count on a film school to do this [programming], I don't know who you can count on."

## **The aftermath**

In June, the Emerson administration announced that there would be layoffs but gave no specific details until August.

"Decisions were made during the summer," Navarro said, "and we were not consulted about them."

When asked about whether faculty and staff were part of decision-making, Rosemary Lavery, Emerson’s director of external strategic communications said, “When considering reductions, the College sought input from senior leaders throughout the institution and focused on supporting mission-critical academic programs.”

Union representative Montagna said they commend Emerson for limiting cuts to staffing, but "our members believe one layoff is still one layoff too many."

During the pandemic, he said, “Emerson weathered that period without a single layoff that we are aware of” by freezing retirement contributions, reducing pay for senior staff and delaying annual wage increases. “We’d like to see the same level of creative thinking and shared sacrifice in response to this situation,” he added.

Faculty and staff will continue to organize screenings, but this will be an additional responsibility, not a dedicated role.

According to Lavery, Emerson remains “fully committed” to filmmaking and screening films, particularly from students and alumni. However, she shared, “Additional programs throughout Emerson College may be changed or eliminated in the future based on the need or opportunity for structural and functional improvements.”

On Sept. 3, faculty began a campaign to bring back the Bright Lights series, starting an Instagram account and organizing an online petition to share with the administration, which now has over 3,000 signatures. On Oct. 17, Navarro and three other college faculty published an opinion piece in the student-run Berkeley Beacon calling for the resignation of Emerson President Jay Bernhardt.

Though Feder is no longer employed at the college, the “Bring Back Bright Lights” Instagram account remains active, and her union grievance is moving forward starting the week of Oct. 21.

She is currently working as a consultant on “[The Palestine Exception](#),” a film about the pressure to not discuss Palestine in higher education institutions. The film is nearing completion, and Feder is organizing a screening for later this year.

Feder said the community support has been a lifeline over the past few weeks.

“Usually, you have to wait to retire to hear the impact of the work you’ve had,” she said. “So that has been the greatest silver lining.”

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