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From Caves to Commons: DIY Cinema in the UK

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DECLARATION

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis draws attention to a DIY mode of contemporary film exhibition in the UK, evolving from subterranean roots in the early 1990s into a cinema of the commons during the first two decades of the 2000s. Much of the recent research on alternative film exhibition has been oriented around the experience economy. In contrast, the spaces and practices I attend to in this thesis are examples of a rediscovery of cinema as a form of dissent, prefiguring different possibilities for cinema-making as a spatially located 'social practice' celebrating community, democracy and freedom. Exemplifying an everyday utopian approach to the constituent relations of the cinema screening event - its place, apparatus, organisation, and aesthetics – this thesis proposes the term DIY film exhibition.

The thesis is researched and written from the insider perspective of a long-term participant. It explores a history of utopian film exhibition practice in the UK at the intersection of amateur, activist, entrepreneurial and institutional positions in order to locate a genealogy of DIY Cinema, focusing in detail on the significance of the Independent cinema of the 1970s and the arrival of Punk. It offers a theoretical and historical interpretation of DIY Cinema as a utopian method, expanding from the values underpinning the 'DIY ethic' to consider the roles democracy, spatial practice and cultural resistance play in shaping this mode of film exhibition. Using the testimonies of participants involved in the case studies of Star and Shadow Cinema in Newcastle, Cube Microplex in Bristol and *Losing the Plot*, a rural film retreat in Northumberland, the thesis explores the evolving tactics and strategies DIY cinemas have reflexively used to carve out and protect autonomous space from which to stage a pluralist, counterhegemonic film exhibition practice in the UK.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

This thesis argues for the recognition of a distinctive practice of film exhibition, traceable to the beginning of the 1990s and evolving to this day, that has consciously embedded the politics and aesthetics of DIY culture. Since the early 1990s, an overlooked network of countercultural screening spaces has developed across Europe and the US. Termed 'Microcinema' in the US, it has been practiced underground in the UK and Europe, but since 2000 its evolution has gone undefined, while bearing strong affiliations with underground and activist media culture, artist-run film labs and alternative film societies. In the UK a highly participatory ecology of such spaces has expanded based on a rejection of the accepted neoliberal consensus and its implicit harnessing of film culture as a commercial category within the creative industries. In contrast, the spaces and practices I draw attention to in this thesis are examples of a rediscovery of cinema as a form of dissent, prefiguring different possibilities for cinema-making as a spatially located 'social practice' celebrating community, democracy and freedom. Exemplifying an everyday utopian approach to the constituent relations of the cinema screening event - its place, apparatus, organisation, and aesthetics - I refer to this mode as DIY film exhibition.

From the outset, I want to assert that DIY Cinema is not a homogenous practice – it can happen on different scales of operation from a sitting room to a purpose-built cinema auditorium. It functions within different cultural fields, spanning punk, artist and activist subcultures to academic and community organizing. While precarious, it varies in its economic composition. It is driven by an ethic that embraces heterogeneity and difference. This leads me to explore a definition of DIY Cinema that examines points of connection and departure from other historical and contemporary formulations of film exhibition.

This thesis focuses on three regional case studies, two in the Northeast and one in the Southwest. The media industries in the UK have been historically concentrated in the Southeast, resulting in a centre-periphery narrative for British film culture. In order to contest this image I locate the progressive developments in DIY film exhibition in regional cities such as Bristol, Newcastle and Liverpool. This follows recent scholarship on the changing role of the regions within British film culture in response to reorganised funding infrastructures around the launch of the Film Council and its regional screen agencies (Redfern 2005;

Newsinger 2009). These examples which attend to film production predominantly, argue that the core-periphery model is being superseded, emphasizing the dynamics of co-operation and competition through which regions assert their place in British film culture. My choice of case studies adds a different perspective, pointing to a trend of grassroots mobilising independent of institutional control, emerging from and embedded in regional localities.[1] Rather than cooperating or competing within the framework of the film industry, they take up positions outside in order to contest the commanding logic of film exhibition culture in the 21st century.

This research is backed up by 19 years of practice as a community activist in the film culture I am addressing. Of the two Northeast case studies, I am co-founder and continue to be an active participant and programmer at the Star and Shadow Cinema in Newcastle, as well as its predecessors Cineside and the New Side Cinema Collective. I have organised the rural film retreat *Losing the Plot* since 2014, now in its 8th edition. I have also had long-term contact with the other case study, Cube Cinema. I first became a member of Cube in 2004, and I have collaborated with them on specific tasks and projects like the Kino Climates network, sharing programming, hosting filmmakers visiting or touring the UK or working on systems that can help both cinemas. There has been a longstanding pattern of mutual support between the two spaces since the early 2000s, and so I feel almost like a participant of The Cube as well.

In my comparative case studies, I use a combination of methodologies along with reflections on personal experience to look at DIY Cinema spaces and the people that watch and programme films in them, including oral history interviews and participant observation. I also use archival materials such as screening notes, programmes, blogs and websites related to the cultural output of these spaces. The growing peer-reviewed literature on British alternative film culture gives me an opportunity to place these DIY cinemas in a historical context, and the literature on exhibition/reception studies provides a theoretical framework for positioning this study. Blending participant observation and archival materials, my research lays out a narrative chronology providing micro-historical accounts of a 'minor cinema' (Gunning 1989) exhibition practice from below.

[1] My case studies are all based in England. Maria Vélez-Serna has analysed the situation in Scotland. More research would be need to locate such a film exhibition culture in Wales or Northern Ireland.

In the following chapters I explore the elaboration and evolution of counterhegemonic film exhibition practices in the UK starting with the Exploding Cinema Collective in London in 1991 and moving on to the regional examples: Star and Shadow Cinema, Cube and *Losing the Plot* film retreat. Contrary to the image of DIY projects as small, pop-up and impermanent, the case studies reflect large scale and longstanding interventions involving hundreds of people, for example Star and Shadow at the time of writing has 787 inducted volunteer workers[2]. I focus on the ways these groups have organised and constituted themselves in order to democratise the cinematic institution, bridging the gulf between the audience and the apparatus. I concentrate on attitudes to film programming, publicity and the screening event to interrogate the value systems at play in the provision of a pluralistic alternative film culture. I also address the issue of cinema as a physical space bound up in the urban discourses around the right to the city.

The time frame I have selected marks a distinctive break with the oppositional film culture of the 1970s and 1980s. In that fertile period a well-resourced, politically committed network of workshops, film collectives, distributors and exhibitors developed, intent on repurposing film culture to reveal and critique dominant ideology and thus effect change. By the early 1990s these initiatives were in a weakened state, yet parallel to their contraction a new movement of grassroots oppositional media started to expand coming from a different political perspective based not predominantly on class but anti-consumerism, environmentalism, non-professionalism and the creative freedom of the underground. In detailing how these new formations came into existence, what constitutes their practice and how they create and sustain physical spaces I set up a comparison between different stages of DIY, as the underground gave way to an open access approach evolving through the 2000s directed at inclusivity and participation.

My line of inquiry starts from the following questions: what are the distinctive characteristics of DIY film exhibition? How can it be theorised in order to understand the underlying motivations behind its practice? How do the aspirations of DIY film exhibition fit into the history of cultural film exhibition in the UK and what socio-political changes in the UK lie behind this trend? Articulating a response to these questions feels important for four

[2] 'Toolkit: Volunteers Summary Ordered by Name'. n.d. Accessed 20 November 2020. https://www.starandshadow.org.uk/volunteers/view/summary/. Not all volunteers join on account of the film programme.

reasons at least. One is to recognise this culture in contemporary exhibition studies, to show that while the filmic experience has dispersed into a myriad of platforms and flows, activists have sensed the need and importance for face to face community, to salvage the cinema space, as Anna Schober describes it, as a 'cave for politics' (2007). Secondly, in light of Left critics of DIY culture like Chantal Mouffe (2008), Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015) who see DIY as either an inconsequential folk politics, or a flight from responsibility to mount structural challenges to neoliberalism, it feels important to articulate a response. This historical and theoretical account can bring visibility and understanding to examples of small-scale film exhibition engaged in resisting hegemony and experimenting with alternatives in the here and now. Thirdly, as a marginal practice operating in the cracks of the austerity-weakened neoliberal city, this culture is under constant threat. Horse Hospital in London is threatened with the loss of their space. Liverpool Small Cinema had to close through an issue with their landlord. Similarly, Filmclub813 in Cologne and Cinema Nova in Brussels are struggling with their tenant rights. Cinema La Clef in Paris is trying to sustain their occupation and other similar campaigns have fallen through, like Cinema Zvedza in Belgrade. The case studies offer crucial examples of resistance to such an erasure of difference. Analysing cinema spaces offers a lens through which to view the contestation of rights to the city happening right now all over Europe and elsewhere. Cinema exhibition has lurched from crisis to crisis since the advent of television, but it is being tested like never before as I write. The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown everything up in the air, forcing cinemas to yet again reassess their value and sustainability in the face of extraordinarily difficult odds. This leads to the final reason, which stems from my role as an activist first, and a researcher second. As participants in a geographically fragmented culture outside of academic or institutional forms of dialogue, there have been few opportunities to collectively reflect on our own practice, to situate it historically and analyze why, how and what we are actually doing as a culture in our own right, in order to better consider the question: where do we go from here?

I adopt the term DIY for this practice, asserting that DIY (Do It Yourself) characterises a set of values that have persistently inspired critical, self-organised cultural activity since the beginnings of UK punk in the late 1970s. The concept is by no means free of friction and can be associated at one end of the spectrum with militant activism, exemplified by the road protest movement in the mid 1990s; or entirely pedestrian consumerist activities like assembling IKEA furniture. I am aware of these contradictions, but I join many scholars who

have used the concept as Stephen Duncombe puts it. 'Doing it Yourself is at once a critique of the dominant mode of passive consumer culture and something far more important: the active creation of an alternative culture' (2008, 117). To further position my use of the term, I draw on Holtzman, Hughes and Van Meter's (2007) definition of DIY as a two-step process, firstly foregrounding use value over exchange value, hence its closeness to anti-consumerism; and secondly reconstructing power dynamics through the creation of relationships or 'counter-institutions' predicated on horizontalism. DIY Cinema exhibition contends with these notions of 'value' and 'power' in a variety of ways. It describes a freedom in film programming, a sociability in the communal experience of cinema, and a sense of democratic, cultural and psychological empowerment whereby cinema can be activated as a cultural commons to resist and transcend the limitations of what Mark Fisher referred to as Capitalist Realism (2009).

Situating DIY film exhibition

Film exhibition, the process by which films appear on screens in public spaces, has received growing coverage within the wider discipline of Film Studies as the field has expanded to recognise cinema not only as a textual form, but as a social convention inflected by the dynamics of its political, economic and socio-historical context. Robert Allen in his 1990 article for *Screen* proposed an audience-centered approach to 'non-cinetextual historical questions' through Reception Studies (347). This drive incorporated four intersecting strands, all of which have generated substantial bodies of scholarship: exhibition[3] (the types and locations of institutional apparatus presenting films to audiences); audiences[4] (who went to which cinema and why); performance[5] (how additional elements surrounding the film screening have been used to attract audiences or increase the experience of cinema-going) and activation[6] (a reader-oriented approach to how audiences make sense or derive pleasure from particular types of film). The appellations used by Allen have not been taken up

[3] See for example Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Gregory Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896–1930* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

[4] See for example Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), Marc Jancovich, Lucy Faire, and Sarah Stubbings, eds., *The Place of the Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption* (London: BFI, 2008).

[5] See Charlotte Herzog, *The Archaeology of Cinema Architecture: The Origins of the Movie Theatre* (Quarterly Review of Film Studies 9, 1984).

[6] See Janet Staiger, *Interpreting films: studies in the historical reception of American cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993).

wholesale, and Reception Theory has adopted the 'activation' element and branched off to focus more on a cultural studies approach to analysing spectatorship and understanding how film texts and experiences are received by different groups at different times and in different places.

The other units of Allen's taxonomy have been gathered in a resolutely historical approach to analysis. Reacting to the theory-heavy methods previously dominant in the discipline, this programme rejects earlier stresses on ideology and psychoanalysis in particular, in favour of a positivist emphasis on quantitative and qualitative historical data. Gathering momentum over the last two decades, it has generated a strand of scholarship designated New Cinema History (Biltereyst, Maltby, and Meers 2019; Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers 2011). This body of work has meant that the discipline has had to acknowledge a much wider field of study beyond the film text, moving 'from a history of film to a cinema history' (Biltereyst, Maltby, and Meers 2019, 4). Much of the scholarship around film exhibition now takes place within this framing, yet theoretical approaches have still given different perspectives to film exhibition from the phenomenological experience of viewing to the discourses around cinema's 'death' and the resulting sub-discipline of post-cinema (Shaviro 2010; Hagener, Hediger, and Strohmaier 2016).

As Haidee Wasson noted in her 2016 introduction to the *Film History* special issue on film exhibition, movies don't just appear, they are presented. According to Ina Rae Hark (2002), the still-slim field of Exhibition Studies has considered as its core field of study the set of practices and discourses that come together at a certain place and time to enable viewers to experience a film. These include film programming, promotional materials, the architecture, objects and atmosphere of cinema buildings, and the sets of relations that are cultivated in specific movie theatres. The majority of this work has concentrated on the acts of consumption around theatrical exhibition, the sites and processes through which populations can encounter the newest films on offer. These have looked at the roles and rituals of the multiplex (Acland 2003; Hanson 2019; Moran and Aveyard 2013; Friedberg 2000) as well as the art house (Wilinsky 2001). Studies have focused on the technical, social, legal and economic conditions of 'going to the movies' (Maltby, Allen, and Stokes 2007; Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers 2011).

The accepted recognition that cinema is not only constituted by the film industry has meant that an expanding diversity of subjects are equally legitimate areas of study associated

with non-professional, voluntarist or amateur culture. In the recent call to recognise histories of amateur film practices and institutions as a 'constitutive part of film culture around the world' (Salazkina and Fibla-Gutierrez 2018, xix), the authors emphasise the impurity of amateur film cultures, as they pragmatically negotiate their viability, balancing artistic and political autonomy with varying degrees of support or distance from the state and the film industry. In some respects the field of exhibition studies can be divided into two categories: those investigating subjects inside the industry and those considering what stands outside. The discipline opens up then to the nontheatrical world of amateur film and film societies (R. L. MacDonald 2016; Ross 2013; Salazkina and Fibla-Gutierrez 2018; S. MacDonald 1997); histories of independent, underground and activist cinema (Schober 2007; 2013; Stanfield 2011; Ross 2013; Macpherson and Willemen 1980; Stoneman and Thompson 1981); film festivals (de Valck, Kredell, and Loist 2016; de Valck 2010; Iordanova and Cheung 2010); the presentation of film both in art galleries, and as art itself (Balsom 2013; Connolly 2009; Elwes 2015); and all of the proliferating formats in the educational, corporate and private spheres as a result of technological changes in projection portability and media convergence (Klinger 2006; Koch, Pantenburg, and Rothöhler 2012; Acland and Wasson 2011). As the screen has relocated away from the cinema auditorium, recent scholarship has also aimed to measure innovation in exhibition or reception within the contemporary film industry through the lens of the 'experience economy' (Pine and Gilmour 1999), for example the recent work in this country on Live, Event or Experiential cinema (Atkinson and Kennedy 2017). This perspective follows a rationale similar to what Thomas Elsaesser describes as 'the programmable city' (2005), where cinematic experience is eventized in order to find new ways of reaching audiences. Atkinson and Kennedy layout a growing trend toward the creation of a cinema that escapes beyond the boundaries of the auditorium whereby film screenings are augmented by synchronous live performance, site-specific locations, technological intervention, social media engagement and all manner of simultaneous interactive moments including singing, dancing, eating, drinking and smelling – what they describe as the broader field of Live Cinema (2016, pp139-140). While clear to point out that these strategies have been prevalent in cinema since its early days, they are right to recognise a contemporary boom in activity. Their threefold categorization into *enhanced*, *augmented* and *participatory* is a useful method for distinguishing between the various approaches organisers use to revive the convention of the cinema screening, particularly as a way of differentiating the

technical, economic and aesthetic factors that play into a diverse sector. Yet these categories are ill-suited to analyze DIY Cinema because they focus predominantly on innovative cinema events as a revived commodity spectacle in a hyper-competitive media environment. The last category, *participatory*, might offer something for considering more community-oriented practices, but their attention is trained on direct audience engagement with specific film texts through sing-along, dance-along and cosplay, the pinnacle being Secret Cinema, who regularly generate multimillion returns at the box office. The model of Live Cinema then fails to account for a film exhibition practice that is locally embedded, cannot simply be assimilated into the logic of a neoliberal experience economy, and in fact stands in resistance to it as an effort to engage in a more radical form of democracy through cinema.

Microcinema

Contrastingly, the literature on Microcinema presents an ecology of self-sustained screening projects in the US that are imbued with counterhegemonic potential. The term microcinema was coined in1994 by Rebecca Barten and David Sherman to describe their Total Mobile Home microCINEMA screening project in the basement of their San Francisco apartment. The 'Small is Beautiful' mindset of Total Mobile Home struck a chord with others working in a similar vein across the U.S and spawned a movement including spaces like Blinding Light! In Vancouver; Light Industry in Brooklyn; Basement Films in Albuquerque, The Mansion Theatre in an old funeral home in Baltimore; Orgone Cinema with its incredible screen printed posters in Pittsburgh; Aurora Picture Show in Houston; Echo Park in LA and The Other Cinema at Artists Video Access in San Francisco to name just a few. Interpretation of this culture has varied between academics, journalists and those activists writing from their own experience. Writing in the *New York Times*, Dennis Lim sees microcinema articulating a utopian vision for cinema as a place of social possibility, albeit in the context of long-tail economics, tailoring experience to niche crowds (Lim 2011). Rebecca Alvin (2007) adopts a mainstream-fringe dialectic in her piece for *Cineaste Magazine*, seeing microcinema as taking up the position left open by the absorption of arthouse cinemas into the mainstream and offering an 'alternative to the alternative'. Enabled by extremely low overheads, for her the microcinema model focuses on building communities of cinephilia through using non-traditional spaces and anti-commercial aesthetics. This conclusion may have stemmed from an interview with Other Cinema's Craig Baldwin, who she quotes at length. Baldwin argues that microcinema

represents a form of electronic folk culture, 'more neighborhood, more street, more underground, more contemporary, more a community kind of thing and not so much just the avant-garde sort of thing' (6). Latent in Alvin and Lim's analyses is the assertion that underpinning microcinema is a concern with subcultural distinction as a way to attract an 'in' crowd. Donna De Ville in her PhD thesis (2014) adopts a similar position, analysing microcinema as an example of a subculture first and foremost. The issue I have with this approach is that it neutralises the possibility of creating alternatives that can contest dominant systems. I would argue that Baldwin's quote illuminates something more significant and worthy of further analysis – that film culture can respond to the needs of local communities, rather than simply react to alternative patterns of taste and consumption.

Ed Halter in his essay for the *INCITE! Journal of Experimental Media* takes a different tack, considering it more in the tradition of the American Filmmakers' Co-op, or the DIY punk music scene. He sees the microcinema scene as substantially constituted by its own active participants, making it able to sustain self-organised tours and film festivals. His perspective locates this approach within an experimental film culture that is always 'gravitat[ing] towards one or both of the poles against which underground cinema often defined itself: commercial cinema or the institutionally-sanctioned avant-garde' (2013, 31). Rather than demarcating a truly oppositional exhibition practice, he sees the DIY ethos of microcinema as an 'operative ideal' according to which different projects oriented themselves depending on their needs and means. Certainly none of the literature that I have found regarding microcinemas goes into any detail regarding organisational methodologies beyond the vague notion of provisional economics. In order to assert DIY film exhibition in the UK as a counterhegemonic practice, questions of governance and participation are just as important for structuring the argument in my thesis as labeling the content experimental.

There has been some consideration of how microcinema might connect to emancipatory value systems, for example in the ways it balances a subversive, outlaw vibe with the encouragement of dialogue and interaction, disrupting the conventionally one-way experience of cinema through a DIY intimacy (Schaub 1997). For LGBTQ+ activist Scott Berry, microcinemas could offer queer-friendly spaces for programming, and his own project, Brooklyn Babylon Cinema, 'filled a void that other cinemas and microcinemas were missing: queer, young, political, short' (Berry 2003, 69). The yardsticks for microcinema are generally agreed as the libidinal 1960s underground and the 1980s Cinema of Transgression with

scarce mention of social movements external to the art world. This leads me to argue that in the British context, the connections between DIY and radical activism through the 1990s suggest that there is a specificity to DIY culture in the UK that warrants further exploration in order to understand its application to film exhibition in this country. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that rather than looking to his American peers, Berry invokes the influence of the London-based Exploding Cinema collective, who took a much more assertively political stance. Indeed Exploding Cinema were an influence on Barten and Sherman's Total Mobile Home, which suggests a European precedent that has gone unreferenced.

It is beyond the scope of this study to include an analysis of the alternative exhibition scene in Europe since the early 1990s, but two recent collections have made a start looking at the most contemporary iterations (Arnal and Salson 2019; De Clercq 2019). It is Anna Schober's work on the subject that has had a formative impact on my trajectory. I address this in more detail in Chapter 3, but I want to give a brief outline in order to show a quite different perspective to contemporary alternative film culture. If the constructive power of spectatorship has traditionally been considered in the ways we read, reproduce and embody films in our everyday life, Schober goes a step further. She suggests we can construct cinemas ourselves. She investigates 'initiatives created by film consumers who in this way turned into cinema-makers […] that is, they managed to gain a public presence by organizing cinema situations or by squatting in already existing cinema spaces' (Schober 2013, 4). Rather than seeing cinema as a subject-constituting process, she sees it also as a space-creating activity intervening in the social and political sphere. In a previous work she refers to marginal film exhibition practices as 'city-squats', and 'caves for staging a difference' where the controlled, surveilled and regulated spaces of the dominant cinema are rejected and in their place are created spaces of nurture or political possibility.

Ephemerality?

This utopian image for cinema exhibition is taken up most recently by Maria Vélez-Serna, who identifies in recent temporary and pop-up cinema projects in Scotland the 'yearning for a different social relation' (174). Her monograph *Ephemeral Cinema Spaces: Stories of Reinvention, Resistance and Community* (2020) is both the most recent work and closest in relevance to my line of research in the UK. She starts by tackling the *dispositif* (Foucault) of cinema as made up of acts of assemblage, constituted by both material configurations and

social protocols. She references the accepted material configurations of cinema (screen, projection, darkness, seating for an immobile spectator, co-presence) but alerts us to a missing ingredient – the labour that constructs these situations. For her cinema comes into being only as a 'consequence of decisions, practices and behaviors, that is, the result of collective labour, formal and informal, paid and unpaid, which allows cinema to crystallize as an emergent phenomenon' (30). This reflects a similar concern in my study which points to forms of labour evoked through an exploration of democracy and openness to participation beyond the already accepted notion of the 'active' spectator. She looks at a series of protocols that bring specificity to the material arrangement of cinema at given places and times based around temporality, public address, division of labour, behavioral codes and discursive marking. When applied to the non-theatrical modes of practice she explores in her examples, a lineage of site-specific and pop-up comes into view, indicative of a composite reconstellation of cinema's fragmented parts showing efforts to rebuild something communal in the 'post-cinema' ruins.

Some of these she demarcates as DIY, exploring the provisional nature of the term which at worst can be 'art washing' for commercial enterprise, but which can also present 'an opportunity to try out more just and equal ways of being together' (174). She describes a variety of tactical urban stances that expand beyond de Certeau's initial intention for the term, taking in both liberal, top down concessions as well as more radical, bottom-up interventions. The former is exemplified by socially engaged art practices in meanwhile spaces like the Pollockshields Playhouse, which negotiated landowner permission to house a cinema built of reclaimed pallets, on a brownfield site opposite the Tramway in Glasgow, for one year. Community participation was key to this project, but the context for its viability was the Turner Prize exhibition at Tramway featuring socially engaged architecture practice Assemble, which got the 'buy in' from funders to pay artists to deliver the project. The site is still undeveloped five years later, and while the community has strong and positive memories of 'Pollywood', the developer's agenda has not been contested, and time will tell if in fact the converse is true. At the other end of the spectrum, she references a project like the Tahrir Cinema in Tahrir square, which resisted the enclosure of public broadcasting, reflecting back crowd-sourced images of the revolution to its participants, enacting cinema as a radical commons, until its violent suppression. In the middle ground she outlines a 'legitimate DIY' stance, occupied by networks like Scalarama and the Radical Film Network, enmeshed in

institutional structures like the BFI or the University, but nevertheless built around a utopian kernel. From this analysis, certain conclusions emerge, firstly that there is no single, uncontaminated position for mounting forms of utopian cultural activity; secondly that where these practices do exist they are rarely free from interdependence with other agendas; and thirdly that autonomy and longevity are extremely difficult to attain, if possible at all in the context of the neoliberal city, precarious labour and austerity economics.

The final point brings me back to the titular thesis of her book, regarding ephemerality. In the temporary nature of these projects she reads the potential reproduction of a detachment between people and place symptomatic of precarity. In this case, transient cinema projects could manifest the underlying contradiction observed by Vélez-Serna that they 'may offer glimpses of new solutions to the crisis, solutions that lie outside of neoliberalism, but they may also normalize the loss and the harm' (16). The examples in my study show a different trajectory that recognises an evolution of thinking from the temporary autonomous zone mentality of the 1990s to a strategy of settling long-term in localities – or permanent autonomous zones. My focus is on stable projects that have adopted and adapted DIY methods of organising while staying alert to the contradictions spelled out above. This shows a trend in UK DIY cinema against ephemerality, and in favour of radical sustainability.

Programming and spectatorial agency

The below studies pertain to non-institutional, marginal screening projects, where the impulse to show and share films is considerably freed from concerns with economic effectiveness or canonical significance. In these zones, a culture of sharing, mutual support and reflexivity results in a reimagining of the role of programmer. The participatory nature of DIY cinema in the UK is indeed pronounced in its novel approaches to film programming, a thread that runs through all three case studies. There has been a surge in scholarly writing on film curation, predominantly located within film festival studies (De Valck 2010; Lee and Stringer 2012; Ruoff 2012; Czach 2016; Rastegar 2016; Winton 2020). While these important contributions to an emerging field approach the topic from a variety of critical positions, they are united in their understanding of the curator-programmer as gatekeeper between films and their audiences. In the case studies presented here, the relationship between spectator and programmer is far more fluid – less gate, more turnstile. The spaces and practices

addressed below follow radically democratic models that resist or reject the conventional concept of curator as guardian of taste, pedagogic interpreter or expert. Instead, the spectator is the programmer, more likely to curate events out of curiosity, political urgency, nostalgia, or a desire to self-educate. The spectator has historically been positioned in Film Studies as passive in their relationship to the cinema apparatus. This study follows the approach of Jacques Rancière, who recognises spectatorship as an inherently active process (Rancière 2011). I take this agency a step further by arguing for a hybrid spectator-programmer, distinguishing DIY cinema from the existing literature around film curation.

The overarching principle of film programming in this context is horizontal participation within a framework of volunteer labour. Both Star and Shadow and The Cube structure their organisations as open and participatory, meaning that anyone who is willing to support the running of the organisation has free rein to programme according to their interests. This individual liberty in terms of the 'right to speak' is moderated in both spaces by an open access programming collective or working group more concerned with the logistics of scheduling and technical presentation than arbitrating over taste or aesthetics. Additionally the programming collectives field external proposals from touring filmmakers or outside promoters willing to hire the space. At the Star and Shadow certain parameters evolved early on as a legacy of the preceding project, the New Side Cinema Collective, where cinema activists had programmed within four basic categories based on their enthusiasms – activist documentary, queer film, artists' moving image, with everything else bundled into a cinematic dérive outside of categorisation. At The Cube, their approach to film programming started more formally in an early effort to generate income but quickly proliferated into a profusion of sub-collectives mining particular seams of film culture, some of which would run dry for a while before being picked up or taken in new directions by other Cube activists. In the last case study, analysing the *Losing the Plot* film retreat, I explore a specific mode of programming I have reflexively developed that experiments with the application of ideas found in Rancières *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1991). Interpreting the dynamic between programmer and spectator as following the traditional relationship between teacher and student, I explore an approach that disrupts the implicit and naturalised power imbalance to propose a less hierarchical approach to curation. Taken together these modes of curation offer a degree of agency to the audience demos in stark contrast to conventional gatekeeper models of programming.

Writing from the inside

A common feature of most of the above studies is that they are written from an exterior position to their area of study. Qualitative research, the act of engaging people in a reflective process about their subjective experience within a group, community or setting, has been subjected to longstanding critique and reform since the rupture of post-structuralism and the 'crisis of representation' in the late 1960s and 1970s. The anti-essentialist turn has undermined previous ways of structuring knowledge, and scholars have paved several different routes within anthropology, sociology, business studies, psychology, medicine and geography in order to reconcile the distance between observer and observed. A reoccurring factor within these methodological developments is the emphasis on reflexivity in relation to the insider-outsider status of the researcher. In conventional research relationships, it is the researcher who is struggling with the ethics of their power relationship to the studied. I have found scarce examples of what Fals-Borda refers to as 'citizen-researchers' who are members of a group foremost and academics second. Forms of activist academia have emerged to confront this binaristic positioning (Chatterton, Fuller & Routledge 2007) where academics consider themselves activists first and academics second.

My position as insider researcher, or 'hybrid scholar/activist' brings its own set of ethical concerns. I am not so distracted by the dilemma felt by academics that they are 'extracting' information or exploiting informants. I do however want to make sure my purpose of theorising DIY Cinema reflects the collaborative nature of the culture and is genuinely representative. My research goals involve historicising and theorising the praxis of DIY Cinema from an insider position. It is a non-hierarchical practice, and as a consciously DIY movement is proactive in creating and sharing knowledge outside of the academic discipline. Priority beneficiaries of this research then are 'us' as practitioners of DIY Cinema culture in the UK and elsewhere.

My study fits into a small but important category of books, journal articles and doctoral theses researched and written from the cinema activist perspective, as a way of understanding and reflecting on our own practice and situating it in a historical context (Reekie 2007; Szczelkun 2019; Gall n.d.; Kilick 2017; Presence 2019b). These scholars have recognised the potential of academic research to both qualify their practice and to interrogate it from a different perspective. This process of reflection is critically important for

examining the relevance of our activism, when the everyday practices in which we are engaged leave little room for that process. Recent UK-based scholarship by participant-researchers has paved the way for my typology of DIY film exhibition. Sczcelkun's (2002) thesis on Exploding Cinema is an insider's historical account of activities at the London-based screening group in the late 1990s. He analyses it in relation to Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action. Exploding Cinema in this light is a highly permeable organisation with open programming, open management, and open dialogue offering a radically democratic forum with the capacity to 'nurture the swarming cultural values needed to underpin consensii' (374), a concern of vital importance in a diverse, plural democracy.

As one of the founder members of the collective, Duncan Reekie follows this study of Exploding Cinema with his own monograph *Subversion: the definitive history of underground cinema* (2007). Reekie is interested in exploring underground film exhibition as a bottom up form of culture that resists the encroachment of both capital and the modernist discourses of power that circulate around the avant-garde art world. Connecting back to the 'illegitimate popular tradition', through Bakhtin's reflections on the 'carnival', Reekie charts the gradual enclosure of culture into the world of bourgeois values, taking frequent broadsides at the state's control of cultural discourses through the 20th century. He asserts that underground cinema continues a hybrid of popular, counter- and anti-art culture that is in constant battle with bourgeois efforts to temper, assimilate, and mystify through high theory. In Reekie's view, the hope for a radical popular film culture lies in anarchy, in the volatile cabaret of Exploding Cinema and others in the 'volcano generation'. His testimony of underground cinema however largely passes over other forms of activist media dissemination, privileging aesthetic modes and relationships to the art avant-garde.

Allister Gall (2016) examines his own artistic practice in his thesis on 'Imperfect Cinema' a DIY production and screening collective in Plymouth, running since 2010. Talking more specifically about making and sharing films, than an approach to exhibition, Gall invokes the emancipatory potential of the 'poor image' from Third Cinema texts by Julio Garcia Espinosa (1979) to the post-digital reflections of Hito Steyerl (2009). He draws on a DIY methodology to cultivate a participatory approach to film and screening praxis that has 'imperfection' as its beating heart. His analysis is isolated from the broader currents in other UK regions, which evidences a gap that this thesis aims to fill in representing an established DIY Cinema culture in the UK. Anthony Killick, as a representative of the Small Cinema

project, speaks about the impacts of urban redevelopment in post-industrial Liverpool, and his collective's efforts to resist gentrifying forces through the collaborative commons, citing the stated aim of Liverpool Small Cinema to 'create cinemas not supermarkets'. He sees this form of social cinema as promoting well-being through people participating not only as spectators, but in the structural organisation of the project. Activating their 'right to the city' members of Liverpool Small Cinema evidence that 'mutual cooperation and solidarity are just as capable as the market in the reproduction of space'(Killick 2017, 11).

The structure of this thesis

The thesis proposes a mode of DIY cinema exhibition as a set of social practices rather than a static object of study, highlighting the overarching criteria of democracy, space and resistance as routes for distinguishing this approach to screening films in the UK. The dissertation is divided into three main parts tracing the utopian impulse in film exhibition through first outlining a history, then presenting a theoretical grounding and finally analyzing concrete examples of DIY film exhibition practice. In Chapter 1 I start from the recognition that there exists a significant cultural break in the early 1990s, separating contemporary activist cinema initiatives from those operating between the 1960s and the 1980s. Yet remnants of pre-existing operations have retained visibility, posing the need for enquiry into the commonalities shared by historically distinct groups. DIY is an inherently voluntarist approach, while practiced in the interstices between commercial creative industries and the state. I use the recent scholarly developments in approaches to amateur film culture as a way to look back at oppositional film exhibition campaigns developed by activists seeking change.

I track utopian impulses as they have converged and institutionalised tracing a line through the mid-century film society movement and into the struggle for an Independent[7] cinema as social practice. This transition saw the desire to resist a concept of film 'appreciation' in favour of a critically and politically aligned film 'culture'. I go into detail looking at the London Film-makers' Co-op and the Arts Labs to examine how an ardent counterculture explored different ways of staging cinema, showing a fluidity between social, political and artistic avant-gardes. I then move on to the 'post-RFT' venues committed to the integration of production, exhibition and education developed through the Independent

[7] I use the upper case for Independent when talking about the oppositional film culture articulated by the Independent Filmmakers Association, running loosely from the late 1960s to the end of the 1980s.

Filmmakers Association. At the apex of this period, a new cultural embodiment blazed a very different path in the form of punk music. I explore the influence of punk upon cinema exhibition in the UK as it embraced the aesthetics of transgression in contrast to the modernist formalism of the dominant theorists in the IFA. This alternative trajectory energised a new underground inspired by the Do it Yourself (DIY) principles of punk, marked by the jettisoning of the term 'independent' which had lost much of its oppositional value by the beginning of the 1990s. This leads on to an extended analysis of Exploding Cinema and the Volcano film festival in London as the first articulation of an authentically DIY mode of film exhibition.

The next chapter is in two halves, the first of which explains my choice of the term DIY. I start by reviewing the usage of the concept in popular culture to describe ways individuals and collectives have sought to regain a sense of agency outside of commodity culture, irrespective of their expertise or social standing, encapsulated in the DIY ethic. I then review the academic literature where the term has been deployed across disciplines, setting up an interpretive framework in order to expose different and more hopeful ways of thinking about alternative culture beyond the paradigm of subcultural studies. While cognisant of the risks and blindspots of the concept, its imperfections and impurities, I draw together materials in order to show a sufficiently large body of consensus around the political valency of DIY as a prefigurative practice. I add a theoretical element to this corpus, tying DIY to a methodological turn in Utopian Studies towards transformative everyday practice, seeing the utopian as a way of doing things, rather than an image or blueprint for a future perfect world.

In the second part of the chapter I present a theoretical basis for applying the term DIY to recent developments in UK film exhibition. I centre this around three interrelating methods that constitute the social practice of DIY cinema as democratic, spatial and resistant. In the first of these, I consider how the idea of equality is reimagined through a commitment to non-hierarchical organizing and direct democracy, a prevalent way of structuring DIY cinema practices since the early 1990s. This foundational principle influences how DIY cinema is configured not only as a public sphere, but also an open-access participatory community premised on autogestion, self-education and an equal 'right to speak'.

The second supposition considers DIY cinema as a spatial practice, invoking Lefebvre's model of the social production of space as a potentially political intervention into the urban

fabric. In this sense, DIY cinema projects are not simply bricks and mortar, but complex sets of social relations geared around community activation of space. Further to Lefebvre's conceptualization, I examine the concept of commoning as a way to interpret the decision taken by two of my case studies to take full ownership of their spaces through community buyouts, as a defiant exercising of the public's right to the city.

Finally I theorise DIY film exhibition as a form of counterhegemonic resistance. I explore the other ways counter-cinemas have been conceived before interrogating the meanings of 'resistance' in relation to culture. I then use Steven Duncombe's framing of form/content/context as a set of parameters for analysing the case studies in depth bringing in the types of film shown, the physical look of the spaces, their operational practices and the 'discursive markings' which suppress exchange value in favour of use value.

The contemporary case studies begin with an analysis of Star and Shadow Cinema. The impetus for undertaking doctoral research stems from a longstanding and foundational involvement with this cinema project in Newcastle upon Tyne. While it is not the first example in terms of chronology, it is and has been the locus of my germinating thoughts about this mode over many years. The chapter opens with the analysis of parallel local histories: those of the Leftist film collective Amber who opened and ran the Side Cinema in the late 1970s and 1980s, and the DIY punk music scene that gathered momentum over a similar period, particularly in the legendary venue the Riverside. This prepares the ground for an interpretation of the divergent influences on the group that I was part of when we took over the Side Cinema in 2001 – the New Side Cinema Collective. The thrust of this chapter is to interrogate the ways DIY sets up a cutural politics that is open and plural, in contrast to the umbrella of political or art avant-gardes. I explore the ways that the New Side Cinema Collective and subsequently the Star and Shadow Cinema have tried to reconcile the problem of impermanence commonly referenced in association with DIY culture. This involves acknowledgment of the negotiated contradictions between DIY practice and cultural policy. I tell the story of Star and Shadow's evolution, and the type of radical interventions into film culture it has staged and nurtured through the turbulent period period since the 2008 crash.

Cube Microplex in Bristol is the subject of Chapter 4. I lay the pre-history partly in order to evidence a highly developed regional film ecology evident in the Bristol Arts Centre, Arnolfini, the Watershed, but also smaller influential actors visible among unfunded independent cinemas. I then take a chronological approach looking at Club Rombus, an

anarchic event-based project that expanded into Cube Cinema. I consider the manner in which Cube has cultivated a 'reflexive ambiguity', what they might describe as the 'way of The Cube' which accentuates openness, play and resistance. I also use The Cube to explore the processes through which sustained DIY projects have to mature and adapt in order to stick to their values around democracy, plurality and inclusivity.

The analysis in the final chapter involves a return to my own exhibition practice as the 'Ignorant Curator', homing in on an annual film retreat that I organise and programme entitled *Losing the Plot*. This section interrogates the discursive spectrum surrounding cinema as a community, with a stress on participatory modes. I critically examine Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of 'relational aesthetics' and how it has impacted on contemporary understandings of avant-garde art. I explore to what extent this concept, if rescued from high art, can help understand the ways DIY film exhibition addresses the relations of participation from the perspective of the collective.

Chapter 1: An archaeology of DIY Cinema Exhibition in the UK pre-2000

The New Side Cinema Collective, forerunner of the Star and Shadow Cinema in Newcastle, occupied the Side Cinema as tenants of Amber Films from October 2001 to June 2005. The tiny projection booth where we taught ourselves how to operate a 16mm projector, make-up and break-down screening prints, and build steady audiences for 'out-there' cinema, carried the traces of its history in hidden and bewitching ways. A typed programme on yellowed paper from the 1970s showed an astonishing like-mindedness in terms of film selection. Posters on the wall alluded to a history of radical film that we had scant knowledge even existed. Three years earlier in Bristol, Cube Microplex took over what had once been the Bristol Arts Centre, a renowned home of independent film culture in Bristol through the 1960s and 1970s. Again, relics and shards hidden under old film cans and piles of 1980s arthouse programmes in the mouldy cellar hinted at a generation of activists unbeknownst to the new crowd. These cinema buildings are animated hauntologically by the groups who once occupied, then abandoned or were forced out of them, their histories only just out of reach of following generations. Only the lightest touch excavation on behalf of newer generations reveals the reassuring similitude between present and past activism. In the case of Cube and Star and Shadow, the gap in time is two decades or more. If it wasn't for the still-visible traces, the neoliberal rupture of the 1980s and early 1990s might have concealed from contemporary voluntarist cinema activists a thorough understanding of their own history. Significant precedents exist, considering that groups like London Film-makers' Co-op, The Other Cinema, London Video Arts, Cinema of Women, and Circles all started from 'volunteer-activist' origins (Knight and Thomas 2011, 39).

The DIY exhibition culture that emerged through the 1990s and into the 2000s seems the product of a cultural break, so different was it in terms of its tone, its aesthetics and its self-identity from its predecessors. Projects around the turning point of the millennium like the Volcano Festival in London, Club Rombus in Bristol, and Expanded Cineside in Newcastle felt entirely new, disinterested in the endorsement of the establishment, and more aligned to the cultural dreams and desires of post-punk and the underground. Displaying a lack of concern for the juxtaposition of high and low culture, avant-garde and trash, they harked back to the happenings of the 1960s, although unencumbered by the cerebral theoretical

debates of those times. They were making up a new cultural politics as they went, pragmatically fashioning their *bricoleur* stance from a toolkit of techniques and tactics borrowed or imagined from previous generations of activists to realise cinema as a social and political intervention.

DIY activists have been described as expressing a kind of 1990s counterculture, a combination of 'inspiring action, narcissism, youthful arrogance, principle, ahistoricism, idealism, indulgence, creativity, plagiarism, as well as the rejection and embracing alike of technological innovation' (McKay 1998: 2). Writing at the peak of 90s activism, George McKay critiques a lack of historical enquiry or curiosity in DIY culture, suggesting that while statements abound regarding the 'newness' and 'difference' of DIY culture, 'there's surprisingly little writing, especially from within, that starts "Are we? Is this new?"' (2).

The 'story' in Film Studies of alternative cinema in the UK through the 1970s and 1980s is heavily focused on the oppositional film culture developed in and around the Independent Filmmakers Association (IFA) and the Workshop franchises, theorised by Althusserian and Lacanian intellectuals in journals like *Screen*. Simultaneously in 1976, punk broke through into public consciousness, fracturing the traditional relationship between theory and practice in a radical revisioning of what culture meant to the individual as both a spectator and a participant. Although contemporaneous, these two cultures barely intersected save through broader campaigns like Rock Against Racism and occasional screenings with live music at spaces like The Other Cinema. By the late 1980s, the Independent cinema exhibition of the IFA era faced an ideological paradigm shift brought on by the Tory government. As subsidies changed or disappeared and a new ideology started to bite, the term 'independent' shifted in its association from cinema as a 'social practice' to a vaguer sense of economic distinction from the studio system. The commissioning policies at Channel 4, and the 1990 Broadcasting Act further cemented this shift, the latter introducing a 25% quota of independent production, which led to a commercialisation away from the progressive vision for a diverse 'film culture'. It took time for new growth to emerge in UK alternative exhibition, and when it did it came as a surge in DIY culture - re-wilded and estranged from its roots, even when occupying the same building.

The DIY impetus is in the first case a mode of action, without careful theorising. This approach has direct precedence in the punk movement, which interlocked the transgressive spirit of the underground with a valorisation of the amateur and the imperfect. In this sense,

approaching a historiography of DIY cinema entails investigating the interrelations of various (sub-)cultural positions, ranging from the underground, to avant-garde, to activist, to amateur, to institutional. This is not to say that activists in the DIY cinema milieu have avoided considering their cultural position. Duncan Reekie, interpreting the essence of what has been referred to as the 1990s 'Volcano generation' (Leister et al. 2017), argues that they were an eruption of the underground. When pressed by a journalist to explain what this meant[8], he distinguished the position from the dominant understandings of underground as an earlier stage of the avant-garde, or as an aesthetic position of sex, drugs and excessive degeneracy, instead couching it in a much further-reaching history of carnival, folk culture, he terms the 'radical popular' (2003). My contribution to this debate is not to re-label a culture in which I was too young to play a formative part, but to offer another angle to understand the proliferation of cinema activism around the turn of the millennium, through the frame of DIY culture.

Amateur cinema in the edgelands between industry and state

The concepts of both the radical popular and DIY touch on 'amateur' culture, an area that has seen a sudden surge of scholarship in Film Studies over recent years, with a particular interest in film exhibition. This chapter owes a debt to Masha Salazkina and Enrique Fibla-Gutierrez who edited and wrote the introduction to a *Film History* special issue broadening the concept of amateur cinema. Beyond the paradigm of the film industry, film culture expands into a liminal zone that interconnects citizenship, technology, commerce and space, demanding a rethink of the history of the medium in order to foreground the formative role of the 'regimes of sociality and community' that underlie such endeavours - the realm of amateur culture. Building on Vignaux and Turquety's (2016) reconsideration of the amateur as a new subject of film history, they argue for a comparative model that examines non-professional film as a creative practice that inhabits a space between the private and public; the state and the civic; politics and leisure, creating potentially emancipatory spaces for participants. Such a history should address issues like the ambiguous relationships between amateur groups, state institutions and the professional industry; the mobility enabled by technological developments in small-format film, particularly Super 8 and 16mm; and the

[8] Chris Darke, 'Film: Underground Hits the Streets', *The Independent*, 24 September 1998, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/film-underground-hits-the-streets-1200221.html [accessed 10 December 2020].

social and political effects of amateur cinema. Stefan Szczelkun's insider history of the London-based underground screening group Exploding Cinema presented in his PhD thesis makes a strong case for the significance of the amateur idiom, from the perspective of both production and exhibition (Szczelkun 2019).

The historical moment of the emergence of DIY, starting in the early 1990s, follows the declining strength of a Socialist vision for society in the late 1970s and 1980s and a period of unfettered growth of marketisation into every sphere of life, against a backdrop of environmental degradation and gross global inequality. To meet this paradox of the failure of the rigid, centralised-state examples of Socialism on one hand, and the political success of the neoliberal right, activists resorted to a '68-inspired guerrilla mode at the individual or local level, occupying trees at road protests, digging up pavements at Reclaim the Streets, and throwing illegal parties, actively living the change they wanted to see. Unlike other major periods of political intervention into cinema in the 20th Century, namely the 1920s and 30s and subsequently the 1960s and 70s, DIY culture deviates from the Marxist perspective, favouring an anarchistic mode of practice based on local, individual action. This having been said, it is rare for DIY activists to label their practice as explicitly anarchist. Elsewhere in this thesis, I explain the political valency of DIY culture as a form of everyday utopianism (Cooper 2014; Gardiner 2013). The 'everyday' follows the Lefebvrian concept of conflating art and life, while the 'utopian' aspect has its roots in a Blochian understanding of Utopia, combined with a reframing of utopianism as a *method* rather than a *destination* (Levitas 2013). Ernst Bloch, the mid-century Marxist philosopher, suggests that Utopia is best understood as an anthropological constant - an expression of desire for a better future inherent in human culture encapsulated in the title of his three-volume opus *The Principle of Hope* (1986). There is a risk that using the lens of utopianism acts to neutralise the anger and rage behind oppositional and underground culture when declared as Marxist or Anarchist, which is not intended. However, rather than focus on specific political or aesthetic trajectories to conjure a history of film exhibition, the notion of 'everyday utopianism' helps me position DIY film exhibition in a history of practices that share a utopian impulse, regardless of their political creed. The 'everydayness' of this utopianism is also important, considering so much utopian activity either started or remained at a voluntarist level. It also allows space for the contingent and pragmatic reasons that cultures bloomed in the way they did, through interpersonal networks, individual and entrepreneurial impulses and chance encounters

away from the influence of theory. To fill out this history, I will therefore alternate between abstracted reflections on the utopian impulse behind specific situations, and granular details of the 'hows', 'whys' and 'wherefores' that events and practices took place.

This chapter therefore explores exactly the tangled intersections of amateur culture, mentioned by Salazkina and Fibla-Gutierrez, with political activism, counterculture, pedagogy and experimental art in a variety of contexts. It follows similar directions contained within their line of questioning: what have been the purposes and motivations behind utopian film exhibition practices? What social and political spheres have they inhabited and what effects have they enabled? How do we understand these developments in relationship to each other and more importantly, how do they prefigure or lay the groundwork for DIY cinema exhibition? In answering these questions I argue we reach a clear understanding of how DIY cinema in the 1990s and 2000s can be situated as a historically specific expression of the anthropological constant of utopianism. More importantly it helps illustrate the extent to which activists have sought to make new 'caves of possibility' (Schober 2007) distinct from prevailing forms of cinema.

Casting the net interlaced by the above scholars allows me to include in this utopian history a diverse variety of actors ranging from film societies to the 1980s Workshops, to filmmakers, programmers and critics who flowed between voluntarism and state employment, artist collectives, distribution and the film trade. Radical histories of cinema show how traces continue across long gaps in time and space; for example the gap between Medvedkin's Cinema-Train in revolutionary Russia and Chris Marker's Medvedkin Group in 1970s France. Film Societies have regularly played a ground-breaking role in both forming and initiating major shifts in national film cultures, like the Film Society in London (Dickinson 1969), that launched at the New Gallery Kinema in Regent Street on 25th October 1925[9]. This has been similarly noted regarding The Film and Photo League in America (Chisholm 1992), or later Cinema 16 which ushered in a major shift in alternative film culture in the US (MacDonald 1997). Historical studies of British radical cinema in the 1920s and 1930s have delved into the manipulations and independent efforts of amateur organisations in distribution, exhibition and production to exploit the propaganda potential of the new art in

[9] 'The British Federation of Film Societies - a Brief History', *BFFS*, http://www.bracknellfilmsoc.org/LINKS/hist_bffs.pdf [accessed 10 December 2020].

building mass movements on the left (Hogenkamp 1978; 1986; Macpherson and Willemen 1980). Other scholars have emphasised the pivotal role of the avant-garde in this story (Hagener 2006; 2007; 2014), exposing the complex interrelationships of art, politics and civic activism particularly at the highpoint of the silent era before it transitioned into sound.

Histories and manifestos show that the impulse to explore the utopian potential of cinema exhibition is transnational too, exemplified in the mode of engagement within the Third Cinema movement. The 'interrupted screening' of Solanas and Getino's *Hour of the Furnaces* (1969) repositions the cinema event as a 'kind of enlarged cell meeting' of militants. Cinema has provided an important space for radical political groups to educate and organise, as noted by Miriam Ross in her chronicling of Latin American groups (Ross 2013; 2008). However, the utopian space of cinema is also in its potential to build community and belonging. Latterly, in the wake of the global revolutionary wave of 1968 new struggles for aesthetic freedom erupted in underground culture, for example the Japanese Jishu Eiga (Player 2017; Sharp 2008), or in the European avant-garde of X Screen, run by Birgit and Wilhelm Hein (Halle 2017). Ana Schober has investigated how these cultures have navigated the differing conditions of Western Capitalism and Soviet Communism in South Eastern European cultures, particularly in Vienna and in the former Yugoslavia (Schober 2007; 2013), describing them as 'caves' for staging a difference.

This chapter is however predominantly concerned with situating DIY film exhibition in a UK context with its specific cultural, geographical and governmental frameworks. The problem with periodising DIY cinema is more complex, because it arguably starts with punk in the late 1970s and continues to this day. What are the landmarks of DIY cinema history and how does one periodise a culture that spans such a long time frame? My bracketing of DIY Cinema starts with Exploding Cinema in 1991 as the ushering in of a distinctly new approach in film exhibition, and I map the early years of DIY exhibition from 1991-2000, the year of the fifth and final Volcano Film Festival. The turn of the millennium was a definitive moment of rupture, as the Lux Centre, intended as a grand synthesis of multiple groups associated with the 1970s Independent cinema closed in 2001 after only four years of operation. The same year the UK Film Council took over the reins of film culture, enforcing a retrenchment for the BFI, while Volcano Film Festival ceased and a moment of hiatus followed as the sector looked for clues as to the next direction of travel. While New Labour sought a third way of high public investment wedded to private sector partnerships, the desires and values formed in

the counterculture of the 1990s gathered pace in the anti-globalisation movement, prevalent in the increasing number of autonomous social centres[10]. In this context of change, groups took a renewed interest in creatively and radically exploring the purpose of film culture . This chapter starts however with a pre-history leading up to 1991, aimed at identifying the political valence of amateur and alternative screening practices at particular moments. The activists of the 1970s looked back for critical inspiration to previous 'traditions of independence' in the UK, specifically the 1930s (Macpherson and Willemen 1980). In the same vein, I will now look back to the traditions that informed and inspired contemporary cinema activists, notably 1960s and 1970s countercultures.

From film appreciation to action: mid-century movements

Through the years of the post-war consensus, cultural film exhibition was institutionalised through the BFI, the NFT and the British Federation of Film Societies. MacDonald notes that in the aftermath of WWII there was a boom in film societies from 18 in 1939 to over 200 by 1949 (MacDonald 2016, 41). The mass availability of the sub-standard[11] 16mm film projector, and access to expanding catalogues of film prints meant that film societies no longer had to meet in commercial cinemas and could gather in a variety of spaces, on the one hand forging links with sympathetic organisations like the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the Co-op movement and on the other scaling down in size as part of a small audience economy. Metropolitan film societies with members in the thousands now formed only one part of the picture[12]. In smaller towns and villages film societies proliferated, developing a DIY ethic of self-education, improvisation and conviviality. Film society activists had to 'prepare for the worst'[13] as they grappled with blackout material, draughty and ill-suited halls, and noisy and temperamental projectors. 16mm projection equipment had increased in production and use through and after the war, finding a place in schools, churches and clubs for 'all engaged in the screening of information, education and entertainment', as noted in specialist magazine *16mil Film User* (45). Rather than spaces for fomenting radical organisation as they had been

[10] Social Centres differ from Community Centres in that they are self-managed by volunteers running under anti-authoritarian principles, and often form around social justice movements. They draw influence from Italian Centri Sociali, affiliated with the Workers' Autonomy movement. For more information on the UK social centres movement, see (Autonomous Geographies 2008; Pusey 2010; Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006).

[11] The use of the term sub-standard is not intended as pejorative. It is a term, now used historically, used in the film industry to differentiate between 'standard' projection (35mm) and 'sub-standard' (16mm, 8mm, 9.5mm), to adhere to varying licensing conditions for different formats. Sub-standard film stock used an acetate base, whereas standard 35mm used a nitrate base which was highly flammable.

[12] By 1950, nearly two-thirds of film societies had fewer than 150 members.

[13] MacDonald cites a BFFS 16mm projection publication which recommended this maxim (42).

in the 1920s and 1930s, these film groups were more aligned with the traditional middle-class concern of 'film appreciation'. Moreover, there was institutional caution about mixing culture with politics. MacDonald notes that the BFI-supported Federation of Film Societies ruled out political affiliation in their new model constitution, and he gives the example of how the CPGB-affiliated[14] New Era Film Society struggled to gain membership of the Federation on the basis of political bias (51). Nevertheless, *Movie* critic Victor Perkins described his early experiences of film society screenings in the late 1940s as taking place amongst people involved in the WEA, the Quakers and the Peace Movement, disclosing that he 'acquired other involvements through [his] involvement with Exeter Film Society' (52). The inference that film society culture could be a gateway to more potentially radical activities is significant, and modifies the picture of film societies as being havens of bourgeois taste. We should also be wary of imagining that film societies formed a homogenous bloc. Each society was as unique as the community from which it sprang, and the publications, festivals and events that came out of film society culture attests to a diversity of opinion and political persuasion. Undoubtedly, however, where there was affiliation with progressive organisations like the Co-op movement and the WEA, it was part of a broader sense of social uplift initiated by the post-war Labour government, which moderated its focus on class struggle in favour of cultivating citizenship and self-improvement. If direct political involvement was less of a feature of film society culture at this stage, there still existed a strong ethic of self-directed, 'active participation', which carries through to contemporary examples of DIY exhibition: the practical aspects of exhibiting films, the democratic processes of selecting titles to screen, and post-film audience dialogue forming an educational mode of film reception divergent from commercial ends.

The struggle for an independent, regional, film 'culture'

The film society movement since its inception in the 1920s had proved itself a powerful, decentralised and regional network of film exhibitors. Within British film culture, the tension between the regions as self-determining on the one hand, and as subjects of institutional aspirations emanating from the metropolitan centre on the other, grew throughout the post-war period. Film Societies had strong and seasoned relationships with community audiences,

[14] Communist Party of Great Britain.

local authorities and citizens who could make things happen, and so it is no surprise that the BFI and central government saw potential to invest in this culture to scale up a more deliberate, subsidised circuit of cinemas. Consistent with the egalitarian but top-down model of 'improvement', there was a renewed urge to cultivate 'film appreciation' across the country. The 1964 report *Outside London,* by outgoing BFI director James Quinn, recommended that the institute 'stud the country' with a network of Regional Film Theatres (RFTs) notionally based on the NFT in London. The same year saw the election of the Labour government, and a new emphasis within the arts on distributing funds more fairly to the regions, a subject very close to the heart of the new Minister for the Arts, Jenny Lee. The BFI received large increases to its grant over the following years, in part for a programme of regional expansion.

The roll-out of RFTs was a somewhat hasty process, reliant on collaborations between film societies, local authorities and the BFI. They could vary from central control, as in the case of Newcastle's Tyneside Cinema, which opened in 1968, and was run remotely from London, to decentralised models screening in existing venues once a week or for one week each month. These part-time venues made up the majority, and their random distribution across the country was characteristic of the erratic spread of both financial resources and strategy from the BFI (Nowell-Smith & Dupin 2012). The post-war decline in audiences had hit the regions harder than London, with the North having lost more than 60% of its screens by the mid 1960s (120). Similarly, film societies were struggling with dwindling audiences, the competition of television screenings of film society fare and the growth of X-rated commercial cinemas[15].

Whether individual groups really offered a feasible basis for the opening of an RFT was also often in doubt. The roll-out of RFTs was therefore a process filled with risk and tension, illustrating the complex interface between amateur groups, local authorities and the agendas of national organisations. The Labour Party saw it as part of a grand agenda of democratising culture for the masses; the BFI interpreted it as a way of increasing film appreciation and extending the reach of the National Film Theatre. For local authorities concerned by a fall in cinema provision, partnership with the BFI might offer 'low-cost, high-

[15] Melanie Selfe argues that film societies shared the anxiety felt by the BFI that X-rated programming of continental cinema posed a threat to the idea of the 'serious filmgoer' (Nowell-Smith and Dupin 2012, 123–25) that the film society movement and more recently the BFI had done so much to cultivate. Little did they expect that the potential of blending the sacred and the profane would become a hallmark of alternative screening practices from the 1980s onwards.

prestige' opportunities (121), while for the film societies themselves there was on the one hand a sense of gratitude for the increased funding which meant some could actually pay themselves, and on the other consternation that their programming approach had to align to the centralised judgement of the BFI. There was considerable variability within the network of RFTs – not all were full-time, the degree of funding from the BFI varied drastically, as did the relationship between paid and volunteer labour. Furthermore, the difficulty of presenting the RFTs as a distinct circuit was problematic not only to the groups themselves, who lacked a sense of unity, but also to the distribution industry, who saw them as low-priority due to their small attendance figures and short runs. Perhaps in light of that complexity it is not surprising that the RFT circuit became an important terrain in the battle of ideas for a progressive film culture.

By the end of 1970, there were 36 RFTs spread across the country, a considerable achievement for visibly regionalising British film culture (Christie 1981, 61). In the same year however, a schism opening in the BFI between various contingents and across multiple fronts reached crisis point at the December AGM. A group of over a dozen BFI members going under the name Members Action Group (MAG)[16] handed in a manifesto appealing for wide-reaching reforms. Their demands were ignored and the only recourse available to them to influence BFI policy was to table a motion to dismiss the entire board. The first demand on their list was for 'a halt to the uncontrolled spread of the Regional Film Theatres'. This behest was only one of eight points from the MAG calling for the BFI to lead on a vision for a coherent film culture oriented around education, research, archival access and democracy, in contrast to what they saw as a hierarchical organisation in subservience to the industry. These ideas had been brewing within the Education department of the BFI for a number of years. Why, though, should the expansion of RFTs, a notionally democratising process of decentralisation, be so problematic?

One answer comes from a historian complicit in the 'productive turbulence' of the 1970s as a member of the MAG, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, in his study of the BFI. While seemingly blind to the double standard of both calling for democracy within the Institute and at the same time vilifying the democratic process of financing regional film culture, Nowell-

[16] The group included many of the leading figures of Independent cinema of the period, including filmmakers Maurice Hatton, Steve Dwoskin, Mark Forstater, Roger Graef and Simon Hartog; Other Cinema founders Nick Hart-Williams and Peter Sainsbury; Film critics and theorists Victor Perkins and Ian Cameron, Simon Field, Peter Wollen, Jon Halliday and Ben Brewster, Phil Hardy and Claire Johnson; and academics Nicholas Garnham and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith.

Smith avoids the possibility that there could have been any chauvinism on behalf of the mostly London-based detractors of RFTs. There could easily have been whiffs of discrimination against the 'parochial ambitions' (Christie 1981, 62) of some in the regions. Instead he argues on behalf of the MAG committee that the roll-out of RFTs was symptomatic of a pattern of failure within the BFI of scattershot, expensive and incoherent investment oblivious to changes in film culture visible globally in the New Waves. The BFI had received an almost threefold increase in their grant between 1964 and 1968[17], much of which had been intended for regional investment. Pumping huge amounts of capital into ill-conceived projects in the regions, based only on the concept of cultivating film appreciation seemed to the MAG a terrible waste of money and potential. Indeed Paddy Whannel, head of the BFI Education Department handed in his resignation partly on account of the failure of RFTs to integrate the showing of films with 'seminars, debates, discussions, exhibitions, etc.' (Whannel 1971, 43). Nowell-Smith avoids a partisan position in his history of the BFI, the result of a long-term AHRC-funded research process, but his detailed and enthusiastic recounting of events in the 1970s reveals his bias. It is structured around the dualism between 'film appreciation' and 'film culture', the former emphasizing outmoded notions of quality and art, the latter embracing cinema as an alternative pedagogy in order to deconstruct and critique the functioning of ideology, captured in the expression 'cinema as social practice'.

The 1970s saw concerted and organised efforts from the Left across production, distribution, exhibition and education to radically reshape British film culture. The central organ for infusing this widespread culture with energy was a largely voluntarist network - the Independent Filmmakers Association (IFA). The IFA had started out as a 'solidarity group' relating to a dispute over the BBC's misrepresentation of independent film culture in their broadcasting, but quickly became the 'nucleus for a national movement' that aspired to construct a film culture under the banner of 'cinema as social practice' (Johnston, Nash, and Willemen 1980, 21). The film industry was predominantly organised around a monopolistic triad of production, distribution and exhibition. The IFA members sought to create a truly independent film culture in which all parts of the cinematic process were integrated at the level of the filmmaker or collective, giving equal pegging to production, distribution,

[17] It rose from £126,000 in 1964/5 to £345,000 in 1968/9 (Nowell-Smith 2006, 454).

exhibition and, not least, education. Many of the collectives associated with this socially-engaged turn either started as screening groups (Cinema Action, Angry Arts Cinema Club), were active in production, distribution and exhibition (Marc Karlin in The Other Cinema and Berwick Street Collective) or founded their own cinemas as an integral part of their activities (Amber, Four Corners, New Cinema Nottingham). Additionally key spokespeople in the IFA were active beyond London, the metropolitan centre of gravity for the film industry, taking up roles in the regions (Rod Stoneman and Judith Higginbottom at South West Arts; Steve Neale in the Midlands; Alan Fountain at East Midland Arts).

The motivating energy behind the IFA's challenge to film exhibition was kindled through an Althusserian interpretation of the function of ideology through the state apparatus of the media, reinforced by the hegemonic norms instilled in everyday culture across family, religion and education. The cinema exhibition space was therefore considered an important site of resistance, where matters of taste or quality should be relegated in favour of the active interpretation of films as products of ideology. Rod Stoneman, in his 1980 essay regarding film exhibition in the South West Film Directory, critiques notions of 'quality' and 'appreciation' visible in the programming approach of the BFI/NFT, RFTs, independent arthouse cinemas and the large majority of film societies. For Stoneman, if film programming stemmed from such notions, then this was simply a replication of the model of product consumption established by the market-oriented cinema industry. Whether art films were 'better' than popular cinema was a question of taste and distinction, which in turn was based on class and education (Stoneman 1980, 122). Instead IFA activists sought to cultivate an 'active audience' who had the opportunity to read films critically as products of a wider context, braided into particular systems of class, race and gender. Cinemas therefore become 'not just screeners of films but centres of the creation of an understanding of film/cinema and its relation to the world' (123).

The London underground in the 1960s – LFMC and the Arts Labs

These concepts were by no means fashioned as a theoretical prologue to a praxis yet to come into existence. If anything, the IFA's launch in 1974 was the point of connection for a vibrant underground and oppositional film culture that had been growing both in London and regionally in the preceding decade. Many of the visions, aspirations and impediments of DIY cinema activists in the 1990s and 2000s were improvised, tested out and confronted in the

various exhibition platforms in London in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One organisation in particular is worth looking at in detail as it became a confluence of utopian values around art, cinema, and prefigurative politics - the London Film-makers' Co-op. The Co-op was conceived within the cultural vortex of London in the late 1960s, marked by deviation from conventional social norms around hierarchy, sexuality and consumerism. Projects like the underground newspaper *The International Times*, the London Free School, the UFO club and Notting Hill Carnival were emblematic of an anarchic and subversive alternative culture.

Film projection offered yet another tool in the deployment of culture to educate, liberate and give pleasure in equal measure. Live 16mm and slide projection at concerts for Pink Floyd and Soft Machine fostered new forms of creative practice that found their way into radical actions like the six-week Hornsey College of Art occupation, a significant part of which was frequent film screening parties that went on late into the night, showing films backwards, sideways, and out of the window onto trees and houses (Reekie 2007, 152). Better Books, a bookshop managed by concrete poet Bob Cobbing, was another nexus of cultural activity, and it was there that screenings started under the aegis of the Cinema65 film society.

Bob Cobbing's part in the history of alternative film exhibition did not start here. In Deke Dusinberre's 1975 audio recordings[18], Cobbing outlined the pre-history of the Co-op, charting a line that drew film society culture away from the safety of film appreciation and towards more emancipatory goals. Cobbing had co-founded Hendon Arts Together club (known as the HAT club) in 1953, which developed from an art cinema film society to something more experimental through the late 1950s. Inspired by Cinema 16, Cobbing renamed the HAT club Cinema 61 in 1961, giving it a final change when he moved to Better Books in 1965. Cobbing, Philip Crick and John Collins were all active in the London Federation of Film Societies, trying to push it in 'more diverse directions, and failing eventually' (Zoller 2006). However, with the well-known success of the New York Film-makers' Co-op, the expanding group wanted to include film-makers, keen to replicate something similar in London, and soon open submission screenings started to outnumber pre-selected programmes (Webber 2002, 6). One of these filmmakers was Steve Dwoskin, an American émigré who felt somewhat adrift in what he perceived as an inactive experimental film scene.

[18] Maxa Zoller made an audio documentary for the British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection based on Dusinberre's tapes.

He was quick to join as one of the few film-makers amongst the group, but to him it was clear that the priorities were around exhibition at the outset. As he confided to Dusinberre: 'the main interest was for people like Bob Cobbing and Philip Crick to meet people who were more like film society people in their attitude towards film' (Zoller, 2006). Perhaps this choice of words somewhat downplays the vision of characters like Cobbing. If there was any need for clarifying their sense of purpose, it was provided in the re-constitution of Cinema65 as the London Film-makers' Co-op in July 1966, revolving around plans for screenings, distribution, a newsletter and quarterly magazine. Equally importantly they started their own magazine, *Cinim*, and began to intervene in establishment publications like *Sight & Sound*. The tone differed, but the sentiment was consistent – that filmmaking and screening should be geared towards freedom. The filmmaker was envisioned as a 'lunatic, lover or poet' in *Cinim,* while in a letter to *Sight and Sound* in 1967, Simon Hartog described the ethical motivation of the Co-op thus:

> The Co-op exists to provide a context and a centre for a free (without quotes) cinema … We want to see, to make, and to make seen films which are not capital gains, films which are not made for the greatest number nor for the greatest happiness of the greater number. The only limits on the freedom of a film maker should be the limits of his imagination. (Hartog 1967)

The Co-op officially formed on 13th October 1966. Its initial modus operandus was to accumulate a catalogue of work ignored by both art house and mainstream cinema, akin to Cinema 16 or the New York Film-Makers' Co-op. The effects were immediately positive, and audiences grew. To some extent this was due to the underground prestige of Better Books, as well as the growing concern with experimental and avant-garde film emergent in the London Art Schools of the early 1960s (Miller 2017). The acceleration of activity around *Cinim*, the callout for Co-op membership and the increased flow of American experimental film-makers, passing through London for the 1963 and 1967 editions of Knokke-le-Zoute festival in Belgium, created an intense and exciting climate of enthusiasm and hope around underground cinema. Screenings proliferated at various venues including the ICA and Derek Hill's New Cinema Club at Mermaid Theatre (Webber 2002, 6). The latter had a more libidinal

appeal in its alternative title ‘The Forbidden Film Festival’. However to some people the compartmentalising of film as separate from other cultural media seemed regressive, and they wanted to forge a new type of organisation that sought to amalgamate all art forms in a single space, fulfilling the Lefebvrian call for emancipation from the everyday through creative activity – the Arts Lab.

The first Arts Lab was inaugurated on Drury Lane in 1967 by Jim Haynes, who, having set up the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, had later moved to London. While it only lasted two and a half years, its ambition was full of emancipatory idealism. On its closure in late October 1969 Haynes wrote a letter to friends and supporters explaining the mission of the Arts Lab: ‘The Arts Lab was many things to many people: a vision frustrated by an indifferent, fearful, and secure society; an experiment with such intangibles as people, ideas, feelings, and communications as well as a restaurant, cinema, theatre, underground television space, gallery, music, library and information point’. Disappointed by the Arts Council’s lack of support, he also expressed frustration at the way audiences misunderstood the set-up, writing in his letter that

> they asked, ‘What's the product? What's its name?’ The real answer was Humanity: you can't weigh it, you can't market it, you can't label it, and you can't destroy it. You can touch it and it will respond, you can free it and it will fly, you can create it and it will grow, if you kill it -- it's murder. The kids here don't believe it's the end and they're right for it will reappear in another form. We are the seeds of the tenacious plant, and it is in our ripeness and our fullness of heart that we are given to the wind and are scattered. (Haynes 1969)

The utopian conflation of various media in a single space to advance a higher goal of ‘creative freedom’ is crucial to understanding the intermedial approaches of DIY Cinema. These romantic manifestations of intent reveal the passion behind projects like the Arts Lab - an urge to create spaces for culture that radically departed from the conventions of quiet spectatorship, and distance between maker and viewer.

The Arts Lab started screening experimental work under the editorial line of David Curtis. Curtis had been a helper at the Better Books screenings, but in 1967 he became film

programmer at the Arts Lab and subsequently one of the founders of its successor the New Arts Lab (also known as the Institute for Research in Art and Technology) on Robert Street in North London. At the Arts Lab, connecting to the growing film underground of the US and Europe was for him an essential part of this cultural experiment. The screening context was considered as equally important as the film selection, and Curtis is attributed with pioneering a 'soft floor' cinema made up of mattresses rather than formal rows of chairs (Noel-Tod 2016). Curtis' film programme at the Arts Lab consisted of classic new wave films from the US and Europe, as well as landmark experimental films like Warhol's *Chelsea* Girls (1966) and Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954-6). Better Books, meanwhile, was sold to Collins Publishers who halted all cultural activities, and so the Co-op screenings needed a new home. With the weekly open screenings, the priority given to avant-garde film became more consistent. Cobbing suggests that there was a degree of togetherness between Arts Lab and Better Books people (Zoller 2006) - the Arts Lab had already hosted a pre-opening screening with the Co-op in August 1967, and it seemed like a natural fit. However Dwoskin is more frank about the tensions that started to rise between the Better Books originators of the LFMC, and the expanding group involved in screening at the Arts Lab:

> We proposed things like mergers with the Arts Lab but we even had trouble storing our films there. I mean we did get a so-called Co-op film show night at the Arts Lab regularly, which we operated, but it was a kind of patronising effort from the Arts Lab point of view. (ibid).

They marked their independence from the Arts Lab in screenings organised at the ICA.

More serious was the insufficient clarity about a core purpose – was this a group of film enthusiasts trying to promote film-making and film culture in general through the encouragement and distribution of new work, or was the Co-op born out of the need of London-based film-makers to organise around resources and screening opportunities? Arguably, Bob Cobbing was more interested in replicating the screening and distribution model of Amos Vogel's Cinema 16, while the newer activists wanted a practical resource to make films. Cobbing recounts new members calling for the discontinuation of funding for the publication of *Cinim* out of the Co-op's scant financial resources, as priorities shifted away from exhibition and critique towards production. In the meeting of David Curtis and the film-

maker Malcolm Le Grice, a new direction was forged, focusing on the Co-op as a workshop designed in ideological opposition to the prevailing cinema industry. Le Grice brought with him a more theoretical attitude to the politics of media, particularly around division of labour and alienation within the film industry. The Co-op could provide an alternative model where members had freedom to learn and explore every aspect of the filmmaking process from shooting to processing to editing, distribution and exhibition under one roof. Le Grice had instigated the building of a film processor and printer, and in the new constitution of 1968, membership of the co-op was only eligible on submitting a film to the LFMC catalogue (Noel-Tod 2016). Although a screening space was always a desired feature of the co-op's changing head-quarters, making, distributing and building the profile of film artists became the central priorities for the following decades of the co-op. Nevertheless, the constitution upheld even more radical values than its inspirational forebear in New York. Like its US counterpart, the LFMC placed no hierarchy on what films could or should be accepted[19], a contrast with its current successor LUX. Common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exhibition through equal membership and equal access to the resources of the Co-op were all hard-wired in its 1968 constitution.

It is important to reflect, too, on the difficulty of turning the establishment towards the underground in terms of financial support. While the Arts Lab had found it hard to get funding, the Arts Council and BFI became more and more interested in supporting culture from the alternative margins. Durgnat suggests that the Co-op had later success in fundraising only as a result of 'other people chipping away and not getting it' (Zoller 2006) so it was possibly a case of right-time, right-place for the Le-Grice-Curtis faction. In late 1968 events reached a head and Dwoskin, Durgnat, Cobbing and Hartog all left the group over conflicts around paid staff and funding, signalling the final split between the Better Books originators and the Arts Lab activists.

Dwoskin lays the blame for this early period of struggle on the fact that the Co-op lacked a figurehead like Jonas Mekas in its American counterpart; it lacked a core group of filmmakers and it failed in creating strong social bonds between members (Dwoskin 1975, 64–65). Knight and Thomas follow a route into the various issues at stake through the late 1960s and early 1970s, as volunteer-run groups transitioned from activist origins to

[19] This was dropped as a policy in 1989.

professionalised institutions, taking the LFMC as their case in point. Hindered by the difficulty of finding long-term premises, the shifting group led a 'peripatetic existence' (Payne 2015, 19–21) having to regularly relocate and rebuild in precarious tenancies offered to them by local authorities. This drew upon an enormous quantity of volunteer labour to source and produce films, mend and operate lab and projection equipment and build, renovate and co-manage various spaces. While the motivation to seek funding and therefore gain wider exposure came from specific factions within the organisation, Knight and Thomas conclude that the outcomes were not entirely positive if weighed against their original aims. On the one hand rather than predicating its strength on its volunteer base, it was 'destabilised' through an overreliance on annual funding. Secondly the hierarchical structuring of paid and volunteer workers led to a degree of passivity from members, a situation reminiscent of the IFA, who similarly had centralised, paid staff who were looked to for the general workings of the network (see Presence 2019). Thirdly, the transition from free, participatory culture to the agency-funded production, distribution and exhibition opportunities of the Artists' Films Committee, Arts Council and BFI directed filmmakers away from their common project to a more atomised relationship to the Co-op. For Knight and Thomas this meant an 'evisceration' of the scene as a result of the tense dynamic between amateur and professional. This was only one of many points of contestation within the independent movement of the 1970s, but at the risk of overstating the common ground, at least there was a forum to debate issues in the IFA.

The underground versus the avant-garde

Of critical importance within the IFA was its broad church attitude. Simon Blanchard described it as a pragmatic group committed to a 'dynamic partnership' of heterodox film forms and an 'integrated' conception of film practice linking production, distribution, exhibition, audiences and critical/scholarly debate, but that there was a pragmatic 'agreement to disagree' over political and aesthetic positions (Blanchard and Holdsworth 2017, 283) Both artists and activists could find a home and a support group within the IFA. 1975 saw the publishing of Peter Wollen's essay *The Two Avant Gardes* (1975) in which he defined two conflicting aesthetic positions according to different points of departure, one connected to visual arts, and the other Leftist, European feature film production. The anti-illusionist tendency of the structural/materialist film represented the former. The reflexive

political cinema, by way of Godard and Straub-Huillet on the continent and their nearest equivalents in Britain, groups like Cinema Action and the Berwick Street Collective, represented the other. Wollen's essay called not for synthesis, but for the two to be 'confronted and juxtaposed' and the IFA was the foremost space where this juxtaposition could take place. However, Wollen's article shifted the goalposts of a preceding debate, not between two avant-gardes, but between the avant-garde and the underground.

Regarding the rapid decline of the movement in the late 1980s and early 90s, Reekie bemoans the recuperation of the LFMC from its emancipatory beginnings to an organisation that was ultimately forced to resort to a hierarchical governance structure as a funding condition during the inauguration of the Lux Centre. He goes further to lament a deeper ideological struggle over nomenclature – the replacement after around 1970[20] of the term 'underground' with 'avant-garde', signalling a shift from the 'popular anarchy of the counter-culture and towards the legitimacy of art and the state'. Deke Dusinberre interpreted the distinction between underground and avant-garde in his M.Phil. dissertation in 1977 (Dusinberre 1977, 7-14) as two sides of the same coin, one 'repressed', taking place in the hidden spaces of the 'accommodatable fringe', the other suppressed in its over ground role through the term 'avant-garde'. The former, following Parker Tyler's angle, implied an anti-establishment 'taboo-busting' assault on conventional morality, including skirmishes with law enforcement around censorship and individual freedom. He quotes Dwoskin: '… it worked like the underground during the war; if you poked your head up the police were there'. The term 'avant-garde' was more applicable to aesthetic concerns. The underground's 'uncritical permissiveness' (Tyler 1969, 24) was perceived as a major problem by artists who saw themselves in the Greenbergian tradition of the avant-garde, as torch-bearers in the 'evolution of standards of quality' through a modernist interrogation of representational conventions. The social intervention of the underground was not explicitly concerned with canons of art history. The underground was more interested in freedom and equality, characteristics which took a greater hold in the arts lab movement than the cinema.

[20] Dusinberre notes that this was manifested in Tim Harding's proclamation that ' The 'underground film' no longer exists' in Oxford in 1970, and that Simon Field rejected the term 'underground' for 'avant-garde' in the second issue of *Afterimage*, due to the misuse and misunderstanding of the former (Dusinberre 1970, 15).

'Post-RFT': Intersecting histories of experimental exhibition culture

Nevertheless, the two positions were not as mutually exclusive as they might seem in Dusinberre's justification of the avant-garde and Reekie's defence of the underground. Nor is it fair to present the period as one dominated by structural/materialist film, as Gaal-Holmes has argued in her 'historical reclamation' of 1970s experimental film (Gaal-Holmes 2015, 1). Certain experimental strategies, particularly around organisational democracy, audience participation, cultural resistance and the spatial dynamics of the film screening, were consistent in both underground and avant-garde film exhibition through the period. The Co-op may have pioneered this approach through the last years of the decade, visible in its radical constitution and open access facilities. According to Dwoskin, however, this activity was met with a degree of indifference. The general perception was that the Co-op was simply a specialist distribution organisation concerned with a fixed idea about filmmaking (Dwoskin 1975, 68). This paints a picture of a rather fragmented and cliquey scene. Dickinson, however, testifies to the interconnectedness of the independent film culture at that time, remarking upon the period as an era of spontaneity and heterogeneity in the intermingling of levels of professionalism and modes of practice, recognising a flow between institutions like the BBC, LFMC, ACTT, and smaller distributors like Spectre and Politkino and production outfits like Liberation Films (Dickinson 1999, 8). A significant event was organised at the ICA in May 1969 to discuss the potential for a national 'parallel cinema' distribution and exhibition network, in order to contest the Rank, ABC duopoly of distribution and exhibition. Out of this emerged a new organisation, founded by Nick Hart-Williams and Peter Sainsbury, called The Other Cinema (TOC) which became a home to connect the various strands of independent filmmaking. Established in 1970, they distributed and exhibited much of Godard's later work, cinema from Latin America, Eastern Europe, China, Japan and India, but their first film was a classic of British underground cinema, *Mare's Tail* (Larcher 1969). Histories of distribution give an important window into exhibition, and TOC's catalogue of 1975 put facts and figures to the culture of independent film screening of the period, explaining that most screenings of TOC prints happened on 16mm in community halls, lecture theatres, pubs and factory canteens (Aylett 2015, 28). London had the scale of audience that could make or break a film though, and Hart-Williams recalls the important collaborations with the Electric Cinema, Paris Pullman, the Academy, Oxford Street and

Screen on the Green in Islington having theatrical success with films like *Punishment Park* (Watkins 1971), *Fata Morgana* (Herzog 1971) and *Themroc* (Faraldo 1973).

Cultivating these connections was a considerable strength of the activists of the period, and one that has gone under-appreciated. Events like the International Underground Film Festival, organised by the Robert Street Arts Lab, the Co-op, the Other Cinema and other independent film distributors (LUX n.d.) at the NFT in 1970 evidence a collaborative approach that was taken up again at a later stage in the strategies of the Volcano generation in London in the 1990s.

Where did all of this dynamic dialogue leave the film societies and the RFTs? The publication of *The New Social Function of Cinema* (Stoneman and Thompson 1981) at the turn of the decade brought together many of the various struggles and visions within independent film culture, introducing a host of screening contexts that attempted to put into practice new social approaches to film exhibition, in opposition to conventional notions of film appreciation. Ian Christie, who at the end of the 1970s was working within the distribution department of the BFI and therefore responsible for RFTs, comes off as one of the more conservative voices in the publication. He hoped the RFT network could provide a basis for the new independent film culture, rather than act as a threat or a nuisance, advising the movement against 'defining itself negatively' (Christie 1981, 60) through an oppositional stance to art cinema. With first-hand experience, he wanted to correct the prevailing misconceptions about how RFTs functioned, their only partial funding by the state, the considerable market pressures they faced and the resulting impacts on their confidence in screening independent cinema.

Changes within the BFI started to map the vision of the independent film culture onto the RFTs through a new department called Film Availability Services (FAS), which had a remit for programming support and distribution to the regions. Their urge was to create a 'debate cinema' which could challenge the dominance of art cinema discourse, introduce a wider field of study including popular American cinema and cultivate a highly developed critical awareness on behalf of cinema audiences. In order to disperse this agenda, FAS developed two strategies in particular. The first was 'structured programming', a polemic which sought to integrate film screenings with contextualising documentation, placing a similar weight on the educational rigour of the cinematic encounter as the pleasure of spectatorship. The second involved setting up a self-governing consortium in 1978 for RFTs to discuss and have

an active stake in the subsidised distribution/exhibition of specific film titles, cementing relationships between traditionally separated constituents in the production-distribution-exhibition triad.

The most creative and dynamic solutions to the problems of an 'integrated' film culture were happening further on the margins, in what Christie termed 'post-RFT' (1981) exhibition venues. In this mode of operation, film workshops created or linked up with screening spaces in order to establish a new relationship 'between makers and spectators, between production and consumption' (Harvey 1981, 97). Sites developed all over the country - Side Cinema, set up in 1976 by Amber Films in Newcastle; the New Cinema, Nottingham, connected to the Midland Group and East Midlands IFA; Chapter in Cardiff, and the Bristol Arts Centre. In these intimate environments (Side Cinema for example only had 50 seats) films were screened in situations which allowed for discussion and debate, encouraging direct audience contact with filmmakers and other speakers. Post RFT venues sought to experiment with conventions in two ways in particular – the dominant factor centred around thematic programming. Like 'structured programming' emanating from the FAS, the idea of thematic programming was to build screenings around issues, rather than following release schedules or selecting the 'best' from the canon of previous great works. New Cinema for example themed programmes around 'work', 'art' and 'sexual politics', incorporating films made by members of the Midland Group workshop, industrial and training films, shorts, amateur productions, study extracts, and contemporary and historical adverts amongst others, in order to get right under the issue at stake (Abbott and Neale 1981, 101). Their number one goal was education, in a manner that could be accused of didacticism. Who exactly attended these screenings is also unclear. Sue Clayton noted in diaristic form her experiences of touring *Song of the Shirt* (Clayton and Curling 1979), one of the best examples of integrated practice at work, detailing the quality of discussion, the technological hurdles and the difficulties in how to best sequence screenings and debates. The audiences were predominantly university students (Thames Polytechnic, Portsmouth Polytechnic, Lancaster University, Warwick University, Dartington College and Falmouth College of Art), although there were screenings at more accessible adult education resources in the WEA and City Lit. The South West Film Tour managed to engage Exeter Public Library, Plymouth Arts Centre and an un-named location in Barnstaple, the last of which captured the

essence of the project for Clayton. It is worth transcribing her notes to get a sense of what made a satisfying screening experience under the umbrella of 'integrated practice':

> As at Plymouth, a smallish audience (around 30) but everybody stayed for discussion and a good number of people spoke. The arrangement of the hall meant that fairly informal seating, combined with coffee/tea in the same place, meant that we were able to have two formal discussions (after each part) and some very elucidating chats, without people wandering off […] The audience was mixed in terms of interest: a group of women who'd come because there was hardly anything at all about women done in Barnstaple; some teachers and students, socialists, Film Society people from the town, and so on. (Stoneman and Thompson 1981, 126)

Not all IFA-related groups expressed their pedagogic zeal in the same way. Mary-Pat Leece of Four Corners Workshop describes the tentative steps to engage the community at the most local level, expressing anxieties around programming:

> things that local people will be interested in coming to and how to structure that so that we're not showing 'Carry on up whatever' but also that we're not starting off with Peter Gidal. It's difficult to talk about it. On the one hand you don't want to put people off but I don't want to put myself off either' (Stoneman and Thompson 1981, 149)

For a network designed around cinema as a 'social practice', most venues and workshops exhibited only a cursory interest in the layout of the space and the social possibilities of cinema as a convivial experience. Four Corners, however, boasted a shop front, which offered a distinctive amenity for screening film either as conventional projection with rows of seats or alternatively using the window for back projection and performance, as well as using the space as a daytime gallery for slide projections, tape recordings and photographs. Passers-by could see into the space, breaking down some of the mystique of the movie house. They had already been experimenting with the social arrangement of the cinema auditorium in order to establish trust with diverse audiences at the Half Moon Gallery, as part

of a script development process for *The Bethnal Green Film* (Davis and Leece 1982). Over six weeks, they invited groups of local women in Tower Hamlets to come and watch films and presentations and look at photographic displays providing critical contexts for discussing various women's issues. The infrastructure changed depending on what materials they would be using, for example one week a table would be required for reading materials, another week video monitors, 16mm or slide projectors and tape recorders. Each week they would rearrange the seating, the snack table and the tea urn, in order to breathe movement into the discussion. In contrast to the conventional cinema, where fixed seating made proper dialogue extremely difficult, the methods used by Four Corners were designed around maximum flexibility. Joanna Davis elaborated

> I think the significant thing is that the arrangement of the seats, the placing of the tea urn, the placing of us, became far more than pragmatic decisions. They became vital to whether the thing worked or not' (155)

This period was a fulcrum of experiment. It is worth briefly listing and outlining the variety of new approaches in exhibition for two reasons. Firstly, much of this activity has been analysed from the perspective of production or distribution, and the terminology in terms of film exhibition is weak or non-existent. Secondly, the diversity of approaches provided an entirely new set of tools that, when taken together, shine a light towards the modes and methods of DIY Cinema in the 1990s. These often interlinking models include a variety of cinema 'exhibitions': Expanded (deconstructing the cinema apparatus through performance projection[21]); Integrated (drawing connections between filmmaking, distribution, exhibition and critical debate within a single workshop); Direct Action (taking films directly to communities to support their activism, a practice used by Cinema Action particularly, and notably by Amber on *The Miners' Campaign Tapes* (Various, 1984); Trigger (groups not directly interested in cinema but who hired or produced films and increasingly

[21] A performative mode of expanded cinema became popularised through the early 1970s by the likes of Annabel Nicholson, Lis Rhodes, William Raban, Guy Sherwin and Anthony McCall. Through expanded cinema, the conventions of spectatorship and presentation were foregrounded and deconstructed, involving a degree of participation or awareness on behalf of the audience of the projection system, screen and auditorium, or 'cinema apparatus'. Kim Knowles takes this a further step with the inclusion of the performance-projectionist's body as a signifier in its own right - a live, physical element that is almost entirely absent in the cinematic encounter (Knowles 2017, 115-117).

video tapes in order to provoke discussion about a specific topic or movement[22]); Networked (collaborations between multiple entities on larger scale events like those at the ICA and NFT); Touring (filmmakers taking their films directly to audiences[23]); Modular (artists curating programmes of avant-garde film with contextualising documents, that were made available to be represented in a variety of formations[24]; and Festival (for example the First Festival of British Independent Film in Bristol, or the extensive programming and debate at Edinburgh Film Festival throughout the 1970s). Increasingly heterogeneous avenues were therefore emerging for screening film in opposition to the dominant mode, accessible to filmmakers, activists and amateurs, who were often the same people.

Was this symptomatic of a healthy, democratic film culture, or was it, as Sylvia Harvey wryly noted, the 'twitching' of the 'emaciated body' of cinema from 'injections of … film-makers' enthusiasm or British State capital' (Harvey 1981, 93)? For sure, from a trade point of view, cinema was in the midst of major crisis in the UK. Technological transformations drastically impacted mainstream cinema throughout this period, as spectators could access a diversity of film and media from their own homes either through television or VHS. Between 1979 and 1984, the already dwindling cinema attendance in the UK halved from 112 million to an all-time low of 54 million[25]. Blanchard, writing in *Screen* in 1983, already recognised the two major threats: films broadcast on television channels and the incredible speed at which VCRs were becoming a norm in the home (Blanchard 1983). Blanchard outlined the two arguments for the importance of cinemas for film exhibition – firstly, that cinema provided an important piece in the 'mosaic of public cultural life' as a space for enjoyment but also debate; and secondly that it was important to keep spaces open that extended options outside of the domestic and nuclear familial context of TV. The writing had been on the wall for some time, and an attempt to make a stand to a mass audience was undertaken by Marc Karlin and Steve Dwoskin in a fascinating broadcast document from December 1977 – the BBC's *Open Door*. Open Door was a late evening slot dedicated to 'access broadcasting',

[22] This mode is elaborated upon in histories of distribution (see for example Knight and Thomas 2011). It is also covered by Ed Webb Ingall in his study of 1970s community video (2017).
[23] In 1977, co-op member Mike Leggett organised the first South West Film Tour, a publicly funded programme of experimental and avant-garde film presented at mostly smaller venues in the South West. Not only was this an attempt to create opportunities for seeing artists' film outside of metropolitan areas, it was premised on the importance of direct engagement between filmmaker and audience.
[24] Guy Sherwin introduced this technique on behalf of the Artists' Film and Video Committee as a way of encouraging artists to make links with audiences through small-scale exhibition initiatives, and ensuring distribution fees went to the LFMC as well. This approach was soon after folded into the 'Umbrella Scheme' which paved the way for the Film and Video Umbrella in 1983 (Knight and Thomas 2011, 55).
[25] 'UK Cinema Admissions 1935 to Date'. *Launching Films*. https://www.launchingfilms.com/research-databank/uk-cinema-admissions [accessed 10 December 2020].

giving a platform and voice to those marginalised by mainstream media. Karlin and Dwoskin's programme was intended not only as a campaign call to demand the BFI step in to save the financially-ruined TOC, it was also 'an 'intervention' to challenge mainstream media assumptions' (Miller 2018)) amongst television audiences. It reads as an essay film representing the major concerns of the British political avant-garde of the time, contrasting the social space of the cinema, animated by bodies in proximity, smoking, watching, and debating, with the mono-directional communication of television, the illusion of the set of a current affairs programme and its 'designated structure[s] of power (Miller 2018). The TV programme sought to save the cinema, but history gave a final ironic twist to TOC. The television station campaigned for by the IFA and Karlin himself ended up occupying the building of TOC's headquarters, and the cinema became a preview theatre for Channel 4 programming (Aylett 2015).

What this historical mapping reveals is an interconnectedness and flow of ideas and modes of exhibition through the film society movement, into countercultural projects like Cinema 65, LFMC, the New Cinema Club and TOC. These activities, although sharing a sensibility, diverged in terms of aesthetics, organisational approach and tone, ranging from subversive, subcultural pleasure to avant-garde rigour, to activist debate. TOC fell back on its distribution arm after the Charlotte Street venture collapsed, and when it reopened with support from the GLC as the Metro in 1985, it ran a programme balanced more towards art cinema than radical independent film. LFMC similarly shifted its focus to production and distribution, and the game-changing opportunity of Channel 4 and the workshop agreement meant that the integrated stance of the late 1970s gave way to the hope of mass-reach on a mainstream tv channel.

If the designated cinema space had been the pre-eminent one for sharing film culture through the previous decades, through the 1980s the picture was more fragmented, as technological changes in colour television and home video left cinemas weaker than ever. With the Workshop Declaration, a network of filmmakers now had access to a mainstream audience through Channel 4. The audience for a terrestrial tv screening could dwarf that of a small cinema space, rendering it almost insignificant. Independent film culture still showed strong signs of good health even in the circumstances of a Tory government keen to tighten

the public purse[26]. However rather than putting energy into cinema buildings and ongoing organisations, some of the more progressive interventions of the 1980s took the form of smaller, one-off projects. Rather than attracting people to the cinema, an inverse tactic escalated among people wanting politically to link cinema with audiences by taking films to where people actually gathered, at work places, in community centres, youth clubs and music venues. Extensive film exhibition work took place within the women's movement and BAME communities happening throughout the 1980s and 1990s through agencies like the BFI and at the local authority level, working through smaller state-institutional platforms like libraries, education and community centres and youth clubs. Exhibition entails the question of distribution, and organisations like Cinenova, Cinema of Women, Circles, TOC and LFMC all had national reach, but required a customer base to survive, drawing on university film societies and women's groups but also local authorities. The film *Carry Greenham Home* (Kidron and Richardson 1983) circulated independently of conventional exhibition and distribution outlets, with the filmmakers making prints and VHS copies available for women's groups around the country (Mayer 2017, 68). Black and Asian workshops like Sankofa and Black Audio self-distributed outside of their Channel 4 remit. Festivals formed a focal point of presentation and discussion, such as the Black Film Festival, organised by Jim Pines and Parminder Vir in 1981, and the Third Eye festival. June Givanni, who programmed the latter event, records their use of theatres, cinemas, community and cultural centres as important places for bringing Black British and Third Cinema to audiences in 'locations they could identify with' (Givanni 2004, 67). The *Anti-Racist Film Package* toured schools, introducing the work of Ceddo and Retake, and early titles by Gurinder Chadha. Screenings at libraries and cultural centres helped resolve the poor release strategy for the UK Caribbean community of Euzhan Palcy's *La Rue Cases-Nègres* (1983) (68). Obscured from the mainstream, West African audiences hired private venues, and hosted filmmakers for one-off screenings of popular Nigerian films on VHS (73). This angle lays bare a network of interlocking film exhibition outlets that was regionally specific and community-oriented.

It is important to note that these efforts were state-subsidised throughout the mid-1980s following a left-leaning paradigm of cultural democratisation ingrained in the regional

[26] Margaret Dickinson argues this was a result of several reasons: the time lag between policy decisions and their effects on actual budgets; the strength of the Labour authorities up until 1986; and the scale of subsidy from Channel 4 that outstripped that which was lost to government cuts in funding (Dickinson 1999, 68).

arts associations. Dickinson and Harvey suggest this was in part due to the increasing influence of Pierre Bourdieu's critique of 'cultural capital' on higher education and social policy (Dickinson and Harvey 2005, 424). They outline the search at the Greater London Council (GLC) in the 1980s for alternatives to traditional arts subsidy which served to reproduce existing class distinction. Support was offered to raise the voices of independent cultural producers and marginalised communities in a new accessible, popular culture outside of the influence of big capital on one hand and the pre-existing dominant ideas of what constituted 'good' culture on the other (Dickinson and Harvey 2005).

Punk the system

There was another cultural undercurrent bubbling and forming through the late 1960s and early 1970s that channelled a more reactionary energy in its *détournement* of mainstream culture and bourgeois morality. J G Ballard's exhibition of crashed cars at the New Arts Lab, Anthony Balch's collaboration with William Burroughs, and Coum Transmissions performance pieces, not to mention their Hackney Studio the 'Death Factory' characterised a very different generative power based on negation.

What is noticeable about both the underground of the mid 1960s and the 1980s is their route into public consciousness through alternative music scenes, and the importance and pleasure of the intermedial experience of music, film and performance. This underground current was repressed through the organisational and theoretical leanings of the Co-op and TOC, but erupted in the mid-1970s in music culture as punk rock. Punk was a reaction to a British state going through a period of crisis exposed in rising unemployment, inflation and industrial action, and a coming-to-terms with its imperial past in attacks by the IRA and the increase of prejudice towards immigration from the far-right margins. As an avowedly anti-establishment outlet for working-class anger and creativity, punk quickly became a contested site for political factions from both the left and right, keen to capitalise on their energy and mass appeal in order to mobilise larger political youth movements. Matthew Worley advances a five-fold interpretation of the revolutionary potential punk presented in the late 1970s (2012). Firstly, that punk represented a working class and youth-led identity reacting to the socio-economic realities of the moment. Secondly, it had the potential to connect across racial divides. Rock Against Racism, a project started by the Socialist Workers Party to make a cultural stand against the rising frequency of National Front

marches, was quick to include punk bands alongside reggae artists on their bills. Bands like The Clash and The Slits were sincere in their debt to the reggae and ska music that had arrived in the UK through migration from the Caribbean in the post-war years of rebuilding. Thirdly, punk created a welcome opportunity for women to form bands and contest prevailing notions of gender and sexuality within the music industry and wider culture. The terrains of class, race and gender were similarly being fought over within left wing political movements, but what distinguished punk specifically, and paved the way for a shift in cultural tactics, was the provocative rhetoric of autonomy and demystification, through a call to democratise the process of production by 'doing it yourself', hence the explosion of punk labels and fanzines. Lastly, and as an extension of this principle, punk sought to dramatically break down the barriers between performers and their audiences, encouraging people to form bands, interact with musicians while on stage, dress wildly and foremost participate. The defiance punks expressed towards the establishment often included those 'self-appointed vanguards' (348) on the political margins, for example Joe Strummer reacted to the SWP's approach saying 'that's just dogma. I don't want no dogma' (345), and Johnny Rotten criticised the left as disconnected from reality and adopting an approach that 'comes across as a condescending attitude which isn't appreciated' (344).

What this meant for film exhibition is hard to gauge when analysing the moment, but becomes clearer with hindsight. A few filmmakers like Julien Temple and Wolfgang Blum documented the early days of punk, but perhaps watching films together in cinema spaces was too sedentary and passive an activity for the earliest eruption of punk. Duncan Reekie's historical analysis skips from the suppression of the UK underground in the late 1960s up to the early 1990s re-emergence. Unlike America, with its Cinema of Transgression and No-Wave film scenes of the early 1980s, he suggests that in the UK a clearly identifiable punk film scene failed to materialise beyond 'sporadic and fragmented instances' (Reekie 2007, 187).

Punk entered the cinema in 1976 through a few scattershot routes. Derek Jarman held events at 2B Butler's Wharf, a venue opened for the crossover cultures between performance, music, fashion and film presented by studio holders, and at least 30 of these included film[27]. Considering that the Sex Pistols practiced there, and that Jarman had some of

[27] Jarman already by 1971 was borrowing 16mm projectors and hosting screenings of alternative and avant-garde titles from LFMC in a home-made film club at Studio Bankside, the warehouse where he lived and worked near Southwark Bridge.

the earliest Super 8 recordings of them, Jarman and Butler's Wharf was clearly an epicentre of this rapidly developing culture, somewhat removed from the scene at LFMC or the Other Cinema. Malcolm McLaren, as part of his intensive PR campaign, organised a late August film event at Screen on the Green, an independent art cinema in Islington. He screened a Kenneth Anger double bill, and followed it with live performances by The Buzzcocks, The Clash and The Sex Pistols, making connections between the libidinal American underground and this new form of transgressive music. The exhibition space that really forms a bridge between the Independent movement and the punk subculture was the reformulated Scala Cinema. Scala had reopened in Kings Cross at the very cinema where TOC had premiered *The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo 1966) its theatrical hit in late 1976.

The Scala got its initial thrust from Steve Woolley, a key figure in this transitional phase. From a working class background, Woolley had in his own words a 'baptism of fire' (Woolley 2010) as an usher at Screen on the Green in 1976, starting a matter of weeks before the Sex Pistols event. He moved to the exhibition arm of The Other Cinema, so would have been imbued with the cultural standpoint of the Independent film culture. In the aftermath of the closing of The Other Cinema, Woolley reopened the space as the Scala. The fact that this happened with investment from Virgin[28] rather than an agency like the BFI is somewhat revealing of the direction underground culture was headed in the 1980s.
The Scala, a 'pirate ship on the stormy seas of Tory Britain' (Giles 2018, 9) stands at the absolute intersection of punk, Marxist and Neoliberal culture, expertly straddling all three, while contemporaneous collectives and groups continued the IFA route, taking up community video at the local level, and the possibilities of a new, mass television audience through Channel 4 at the national level. The Scala managed to combine the sense of purpose of radical and queer cinema with a camp delight in outrage evident in the trash and horror double and triple bills that proliferated through the 1980s. This is borne out by the top four most screened feature films over their 15-year high period: *Eraserhead* (Lynch,1977), *In the Realm of the Senses* (Ōshima 1976), *Thundercrack!* (McDowell,1975) And *Harlan County U.S.A* (Kopple 1976)[29] ranging in style and content from dystopian surrealism to camp art-porn-horror to protest film. While Woolley felt a responsibility to The Other Cinema

[28] Woolley collaborated with Virgin co-founder Nick Powell on a video distribution label called Palace Pictures, notorious for releasing one of the first 'video nasties' *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981).
[29] Jane Giles lists both the top ten most screened films, but also the top ten most appearances of titles in monthly programmes. The latter statistics show that programmers favoured the camp, illicit and profane, with the most reliable titles including *Thundercrack!, Salò*, *Un Chant d'amour*, *Scorpio Rising, Pink Flamingos* and *Supervixens.* (Giles 2018, 423).

membership, he was more a cinephile and an entrepreneur than a social activist, and this attitude continued through the programmers after Woolley stepped back. The Scala's aesthetic position followed a model closer to Derek Hill's New Cinema Club and the Electric Cinema in that it placed its accent on the pleasure of the fleapit, celebrating risqué programming, all the way up to its notorious demise in 1993, when screening the banned *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick 1971), resulted in a court case that left them in financial ruin.

Instead of a debate cinema, led by a pedagogic urge to reveal ideological systems of control, Scala offered a completely different education as a 'gateway to personal discovery' (Giles 2018, 28), fashioning a social form of cinema serving subcultural tribes attracted by the playful and delirious adventures into sex, drugs and rock and roll. A membership scheme added to this sense of audience ownership, but served the further purpose of getting round BBFC restrictions on unclassified films. This was a punk spectatorship - against the grain, by people who perhaps already acknowledged the problems of society, and sought to resolve them in the subversive revelry of the underground. If there was a utopian vision amongst programmers and staff, it was the celebration of freedom in programming and the community that it engendered – a community that was expressed at once socially in sell-out events but also in the earnest solitude of hardcore cinephiles who would travel miles to watch rare, cult films at awkward times. So much so that the Scala audiences reminisce as much about the down-at-heel glamour of the building, the terrible coffee, the roaming cats during horror films, and the people who frequented the place. Ralph Brown, aka Danny the Dealer in *Withnail & I* (Robinson 1987) served on the concessions stand and describes them as

> Film nerds, actors, auteurs, popstars, insomniacs, Psychobillies, anarchists, Chilean refugees, skinheads, the dirty-mac brigade, New Romantics, the properly psychotic… We had punks, queers, bikers and junkies, and Barry who never told me his last name and lived in a squat on Warren Street (Giles 2018, 13).

This was an audience that recognised itself as a community that could not be reproduced in either the multiplex, or in front of a VHS in your sitting room. This sense of community forms a central sense of purpose in DIY cinema exhibition as we will see later, but Scala was not the only site for gathering around alternative film culture.

Punk and post-punk film practice in the UK shows a degree of ambivalence about the social space of the cinema, drawing energy and audiences from the livelier forums of post punk, industrial and electronic dance music. A form like Scratch Video combined the ideas of Situationist *détournement* with the sampling and sequencing of New York hip hop and applied it to mainstream media via analogue video processing tools. TV news footage representing the negative effects of Thatcher and Reagan's policies were cut together rhythmically and rendered in low-res pop art colour schemes suited to club visuals. Post-punk gigs, parties and raves became the first point of exhibition for many of those associated with Scratch. For example, Nick Cope found an initial audience doing visuals for industrial bands like Cabaret Voltaire, Nocturnal Emissions, Psychic TV and Test Department. With its bright and youth subculture-friendly aesthetic, it could easily be assimilated into the mainstream through music videos and MTV. Alternatively, where punk had elsewhere allowed people to create their own cultural platforms, the institutional art sector also wanted to keep on the font foot, incorporating Scratch artists swiftly into their programmes. After live events in The Fridge in Brixton 1984, Scratch videos were screened at ICA and Tate in 1985 (Cope 2020). Meanwhile, cinema as a social space was awaiting reinvention.

DIY Exhibitionism: Exploding Cinema and the Volcano generation

The middle 1980s were seized by a completely new mode of exhibition – the multiplex. Replicating the business logic of fast food chains, multiplexes were based on the formula of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control in an economy of scale (Hanson 2000, 51). Giving an illusion of choice through the sheer number of screens, they had a conversely homogenising effect on film programming, reneging on any promises to giving over screen space to art cinema. Multiplexes did however manage to buck the trend and by the end of the decade admissions had doubled back up to their 1979 level around 100 million. By 1990 however, the notion of cinema as a social space with emancipatory potential had been almost entirely eradicated. Blanchard had been particularly prescient in his 1983 *Screen* article, recognising that the future of cinema would depend, amongst other things, on accepting and embracing the 'opto-electronic' rather than 'photo-chemical' technologies of video and digital media and equally celebrating the potential for cinemas to 'construct alternative cultural and political bases for themselves', and some small gestures towards this had been visible within club culture, notably Scratch Video, and rave visuals. However a

renewal was on the horizon. Totally rejecting the multiplex model of homogenised, predictable film experience, and arguably its near relative the Academy experimental film screening, innovative groups emerged who sought maximum unpredictability and celebrated being out of control.

A foundational moment in the history of DIY Cinema in the UK was the summer of 1991[30]. In June, a squatter collective called PULLITT occupied the COOLTAN, an abandoned suntan-lotion factory on Effra Road, Brixton. An autonomous social centre and arts space, COOLTAN offered space to local artists and activists to organise campaigns, throw techno raves, run experimental theatre and performance events and hang out in the café[31]. In the back of the ground floor was a cold storage room adapted into a screening space with a heavy metal sliding door renamed The Regal. Filmmaker Ken McDonald brought his regular Super 8 screening night REEL LOVE to COOLTAN as soon as it had opened, stimulating discussion and often drunken social interaction about experimental film. Out of this evolved a series of meetings amongst filmmakers to consider starting a South London Media Collective. To put this into perspective, the workshop movement had been heavily devitalised by lack of funding and a shift in priorities at Channel 4; the LFMC had been almost completely assimilated into the art world, and experimental film was nowhere to be seen. Reekie's droll temperature check of the independent film culture of the moment is epitomised by the February 1991 BP EXPO Festival of British and International Student Film and Video, sponsored by an oil multinational in the middle of the Gulf War, with key personnel in attendance from BFI, Arts Council and Greater London Arts, the three main funders of creative film in the area. Discussions at COOLTAN inevitably revolved around the lacklustre state of the art form, and what could be done about it both practically and ideologically. The concept of a media centre had roots in the video and film workshops of the 1980s, but the politics followed an anarchistic emphasis on individual freedom, akin to the early days of the LFMC.

The Regal was too cold and damp to be a reliable space for screening so the embryonic collective moved to a different space in the building, co-ordinating a fortnightly slot in the Cooltan Café, the old factory canteen, where audiences would lounge in a provisional cabaret style around empty cable bobbins as tables watching small format and

[30] Much of this history is taken from Duncan Reekie's insider histories online and in his book *Subversion* (2007).
[31] 'A Short History of Brixton Cooltan'. *Urban75*. http://www.urban75.org/brixton/features/cooltan.html [accessed 10 December 2020].

16mm films on a suspended screen. The screenings had inbuilt conviviality – hot food was cooked and served in the canteen, along with cheap beer, people took it in turns to MC the show, and screenings started to include performance as well. This mode was a conscious reaction against the well-mannered but devitalised screening scenario of the art establishment and involved the audience as an active part in talking or even heckling filmmakers, fixing projectors and ideally making films themselves. With zero funding, and a budget made of the previous show's ticket sales, they changed their name to Exploding Cinema, moved from COOLTAN building audiences as they went, reaching a high point at a squatted Lido in Brockwell Park which attracted over 2000 people.

Exploding Cinema exists to this day, still screening along the same principles fashioned in the early 1990s and is, at the time of writing, making preparations for their 30th anniversary in 2021. The collective has remained at a similar size of around 10, a good proportion of which have been involved for ten years or more, and a handful since the beginning. One can roughly chronologise their activities, marking a high period of development and activity starting in 1991 and running throughout the 1990s. The Volcano Festival[32] signified the apogee of this stage of DIY exhibition, culminating in 2000, since which time Exploding has continued to carve a singular niche in oppositional film culture in the UK. Members of the collective have joined and left, but screenings have continued on average bi-monthly in pubs, boats, museums and Horse Hospitals.

Written from the perspective of a participant researcher active in the Exploding Cinema group up to 2002, Stefan Szczelkun's thesis *Exploding cinema 1991-1999, culture and democracy* is situated in the discourses around autonomous art collectives. In contrast to traditional conceptions of culture as the activities of gifted individuals, he positions culture as a social process through which all involved 'evaluate, think and adapt to changing circumstances using all of our sense media' (Szczelkun 2019, 9). He had valued this process through involvement in previous radical art groups like The Scratch Orchestra, the International Mail Art Network, Portsmouth Arts workshop and all the way back to the Arts Lab mentioned above. From this foundational assumption he questions why autonomous groups of cultural producers are under-represented in our accepted body of knowledge. He uses Exploding Cinema as a means to argue for open-access, self-organised cultural

[32] 'Volcano 2000 - Events Listing', https://bak.spc.org/volcano/events.html [accessed 10 December 2020].

formations as noteworthy sites of cultural democracy. Various concepts are emphasised in his study, and it is worth picking up on some of them to see how they pave the way for DIY Cinema in the 2000s. Firstly, he highlights the informality of their mode of exhibition, geared around maximum sociality. He quotes Reekie talking about the early events at Cooltan:

> It was a night out! It was no longer this incredible sort of sacred concentration upon the screen. And people were talking to each other and it was actually fun, you know it was similar to going to a gig or watching television.

In contrast to a high-brow, austere experience in a darkened, silent room, the Exploding Cinema's atmosphere was more like a party. This came partially from a DIY spirit of celebrating and even glorifying the clumsiness of amateur presentation, exalting ineptitude, and building in the failures of second hand small-format projection equipment into the general atmosphere of conviviality. Reel Love screenings recalled the intimacy of a family home-movie experience, gathered round a projector watching Ken McDonald fumbling with a reel of Super 8 inspired them that anyone could do this, while the alcohol lent a freewheeling atmosphere to proceedings. On one hand this carries the flame for a punk attitude of demystification. On the other, the human or even domestic scale of this type of DIY screening links it more to the history of film society culture than the art cinema. Informality and amateurism are core components of DIY zine culture, and Exploding Cinema produced irony-laden zines, pamphlets, flyers and programmes along the celebrated aesthetic principles of punk self-publishing – collage, photocopying, and 'inferior' literary forms (Szczelkun 2019, 108) like lists, rants, reports and quotations.

The improvised mood of their screenings was further expressed in their choice of unregulated venues, ranging from squats to pubs, cafés, social clubs, abandoned swimming pools and roof tops – anywhere that a sense of freedom from the constraints of the conventional cinema auditorium could be felt. There were exceptions, but their exalting of informality didn't always sit well when working in partnership with other groups and agencies. When they collaborated with the revived Brixton Ritzy, Exploding's spontaneous autonomy was not always in tune with the more upmarket sensibilities of an art cinema, where events had to follow very strict time schedules, ticket pricing had to tally with existing

cinema prices, and you certainly were not allowed to stick up a pin board as an InfoPoint for underground and alternative filmmakers without authorisation.

Secondly, Szczelkun makes strong links between division of labour, economics and democracy within the Exploding Collective. While starting in single figures, by the time they moved to the Juggler's Arms in March 1993, the collective had increased to nearly 30. Szczelkun maps the specific tasks or areas of labour involved in presenting an Exploding Cinema show, including programmer, publicity designer, floor manager, décor, host, MC, projectionist, sound technician, transport, door person, drinks and stalls, programme production and distribution, venue finder, equipment maintenance, treasurer, secretary, webmaster, movie maker and decision making. While these roles may often be covered by the same person, he suggests around 150-200 hours of labour constituted a single event, which was in no way reflected in the cheap ticket price. The group quickly adopted an open-access policy which distributed the large amount of labour more fairly and across an expanding pool, improved by a role-rotation protocol to prevent individuals getting stuck with unsatisfying tasks. This approach was in stark contrast to the prevalent norm within the art world which prescribed a division of labour between artists, who should be solely focused on producing work, supported by a supply chain of curators, technicians and exhibition spaces. Reekie describes the incredulity of other artists who questioned why they should integrate the hard and dirty labour of event production into their art practice.

The open access manner also democratised decision-making, guided as it was by anarchistic attitudes towards hierarchies within the art and film worlds and beyond. While they haven't expressed party political or explicitly revolutionary aims, Exploding Cinema allied with projects like the Anarchist Bookfair; would frequently screen Undercurrents newsreel compilations which reported from direct actions; engaged with activist cultures through squatting and resistance to the Criminal Justice Bill. As a form of cultural resistance, however, their politics is explicit in relation to the art world. Exploding formed out of a sense of injustice in how funding and value was attributed to experimental and 'independent' film. They were vehemently against state funding, arguing it embodied 'dependence' rather than 'independence'. Their programmes, polemics and public interventions frequently took aim at the dominant avant-garde, the state funding institutions, and the ossified co-operative structures that to the Exploding activists were exclusive and based on a nepotistic network of art colleges and funding agencies out of reach of most people. This was expressed publicly in

antagonistic interventions at high-brow events, and followed up in print form in countercultural zines produced by Exploding Cinema, OMSK and magazines like Kinokaze and Filmwaves. One such example was the 1995 ICA Biennale, at which notions of what constituted independent cinema in the UK were hotly contested. The film selection was almost entirely publicly-funded films; John Wyver deplored the absence of an independent film culture outside of television, and Exploding activists called bullshit on the lot, stating that independent cinema, free from funding, free from curatorial gatekeepers, and free from market pressures was actually alive and well – in the underground. The ICA came in for further attack the following year in an article:

> Hats off to the L.F.F and the ICA for screening the 'in-your-face, raw, sexy and sometimes sleazy'. DIRTY AND DANGEROUS package of AMERICAN Underground film and video. Those of us in the London Underground are most encouraged by this historic breakthrough and also by so many anti-art and revolutionary tracts for sale in the ICA Bookshop. No doubt this first 'transgressive' step against establishment values will be followed by a wave of RADICAL REFORMS... Open access screenings of British Underground film and video... The abolition of hierarchical work practises... Democratic collective management meetings attended by all staff including catering and cleaning staff... Common ownership of the Institutes resources... Scandalous, sleazy, sexy, happenings in the ICA toilets.
>
> DONT HOLD YOUR FUCKING BREATH !!
>
> The truth is that all the radical action at the ICA stays firmly on the screen and the bookshelf, if you really want transgression join the LONDON NO BUDGET NO WAVE where hundreds of makers produce toxic gems despite the apathy and hostility of the LAUDNUM FILM FESTIVAL and the INSTITUTE of CO-OPTION AND APPROPRIATION. (Szczelkun 2019, 172)

Behind this was a strong 'anti-art' belief that with recent technological changes, the tools for creativity were available to everyone, and so should be the space to share it, irrespective of dominant canons of taste. In this emancipated vision for film production, they questioned why an administration, be it funding or exhibition, should arbitrate over what films were of value. Exploding Cinema firmly rejected this notion, proclaiming that they would show any film submitted, in chronological order of submission, and it was up to the popular audience to make sense of it. This leads to the core thrust of Szczelkun's thesis, that Exploding Cinema prioritises the enacting of a democratic forum, at the most permeable level of interaction. Open access and open submission also critically altered the relationship between filmmaker, exhibitor and audience.

The audience for Exploding events through the 1990s, according to Szczelkun's account, ranged from 'commercial film professionals to eco-warrior type radicals' (Szczelkun 2019, 158). While he laments the lack of a body of hard data to empirically interpret audience makeup, he makes a reflexive note about the intrusive nature of questionnaires and evaluation methods that have become ubiquitous through target-driven funding policies. In the late 1990s, the questionnaire was still heavily associated with marketing and the 'manufacture of need'. To thrust one in front of an Exploding Cinema audience risked invading their privacy and running against the grain of the atmosphere, which in most other respects was directed away from entertainment as consumerism. Their antipathy towards bureaucratic measures of evaluation did not mean they were uninterested in what audiences had to say, and vocal and raucous interaction was actively encouraged. The audience was seen as an important entity in itself, but as a subject, it was approached in a variety of often conflicting ways. In the promotional publicity and zines of the period, the audience was subjected to didactic tirades and rants, in theatrical form, decrying the static, passive nature of conventional spectatorship, and demanding active engagement. One zine included a seven point guide on 'How to be a Successful Spectator', while another from 1992 evangelised about the contradictions of the delineation between the world of the maker and the world of the spectator:

> Democratize Art! Audience, what a shame it is that you are constantly travelling from venue to venue and once arrived you are forced to sit in the darkness or wander around sterile galleries. Audience, how

> lamentable it is that you are all the time confronted with closed sacred objects produced by ambitious professionals. You are excluded from the art process and the trouble is that if you seek to end this exclusion by becoming an artist you will no longer be a member of the audience. Rather, this blissful union of art and audience must take place at the venue (Szczelkun 2019, 101)

Proclamations like this mark a contrast with the IFA era activists, whose earnest efforts at deconstruction lacked the sense of humour and reflexivity of Exploding Cinema's 'teachings'. Nevertheless there is a dual process going on that simultaneously positions the audience as a subject to be transformed, and at the same time seeks to absorb the audience into the collective, erasing the distinction between the two. Critics of ideological theories of spectatorship bemoan the reduction of the spectator to a universal, passive subject to be transformed, and it could be argued that early Exploding polemics reproduce this stance, albeit from a line emanating from Artaud, rather than the one emanating from Brecht, adopted in general by the IFA. Perhaps what Exploding were seeking was a 'hyper-active' audience, eating, heckling and getting drunk. Most preferably, the audience would be makers themselves. This mode of exhibition self-distances from professional film culture, where films are either products to be integrated into a commodity culture, mediated by adverts, critics, trailers and finally the dark anonymity of the screening room; or they are potentially inflated in their importance through curators, programmers, Q&As and interpretive texts as with the art cinema or the avant-garde. Instead it replicates the dynamic of the amateur cine-enthusiast who would have unpacked a recently processed roll of Super 8, and shared it with their family, all witnessing it together for the first time.

A further theme to Exploding Cinema culture is its extraordinary media-diversity, bringing together performance, video, super and standard 8, 16mm, slide, tape, live voiceover, musical accompaniment, sculpture and installation. Szczelkun's descriptions of taking responsibility for 'décor' at various venues in the late 1990s read as a cross between theatre designer, VJ, installation artists and AV technician. Certainly, the sense of spectacle was important to the occasion, but it was guided by the no-budget principle of seeing what was possible using equipment and technologies that were obsolete, celebrating an aesthetic of car-boot culture. One expensive new item was required – a video projector, which enabled

a shift through the decade from film to video. The cross-platform approach incorporated a carnivalesque quality that distinguishes it from previous modes of exhibition, and which for Szczelkun places it on the very fringes of Film as an academic discipline, arguing instead it represents an 'oral' culture rather than a 'literary' one, with roots in music hall and cabaret. The deep affinity with popular entertainment forms like variety are at the heart of Exploding Cinema's technological diversity, with just the addition of tools and techniques available at the beginning of the 21st Century. While for Szczelkun the boundary-hopping nature of Exploding films and performances negates a taxonomy, it does follow a trajectory started in the 1960s underground and the Arts Labs, captured in the term 'intermedia' coined by Fluxus founder Dick Higgins, and the version of Expanded Cinema elaborated by Gene Youngblood.

The lack of a critical discourse or institutional and archival attention around the films and events presented by Exploding Cinema has left a lacuna in terms of how this work remains in the public domain. At least there is an archive of the events, organisational machinations, and public interventions through zines and flyers. It does leave an uphill struggle for future programmers trying to account for this film culture, when the connections between the underground production and distribution were so underdeveloped. This marks a stark contrast with their forbears in the LFMC and the New York Film-makers' Co-op which prioritised distribution first and exhibition second.

Lastly, Exploding Cinema was an active agent in a rhizomatic spread of no-wave, DIY film production and exhibition across London, the UK, Europe and America. They foreran a burgeoning DIY culture of screening clubs in London, including OMSK, The Halloween Society, My Eyes! My Eyes!, Shaolin, Renegade Arts, Peeping Toms, Cinergy, KingKey Movies (Vito Roco), Kino Disobey, Uncut, David Leister's Kino Club and Films That Make You Go…Hmmm, who came together in the Volcano Underground Film Festival (1996-2000). This flare-up of alternative screening culture was not limited to the capital, but expanded regionally too with Vision Collision in Manchester, Head Cleaner in Coventry, Junk TV in Brighton and Dazzle! In Plymouth, and by the end of the 1990s Club Rombus in Bristol. Recent research has shown this was not simply an English phenomenon, as Glasgow had its own grassroots culture around the Glasgow Film and Video Workshop, Variant magazine, and particularly the New Visions festival, founded in 1992 by Doug Aubrey and Malcolm Dickson (Colta and Vélez-Serna 2019). New Visions programming remit was to cultivate an inclusive 'open scene' screening professional next to amateur, community campaign videos alongside experimental

films from abroad. The city-wide festival was held for three consecutive years, and attempted to bridge between audiences and communities in the institutional arts sector and the overlapping DIY music, film and visual arts scenes. Their hybrid format included screenings in the Glasgow Film Theatre, but also site-specific performance, music and installations in artist-run spaces. Colta and Vélez-Serna posit that New Visions was quickly assimilated into a larger narrative of culture-led urban renewal following a predictable process whereby DIY testing grounds full of creative hybridity and provisional aesthetics are 'developed' into professionalised creative industries. In the example of Glasgow, the selection as the first UK-based European Capital of Culture in 1990 had a transformative effect on the mindset of the creative industries, in-line with neoliberal cultural models of garnering inward investment, and festivals or 'event' culture was strategic imperative. The authors make an important note about what this process conceals – the self-organised methods and quantities of social labour involved in maintaining these DIY scenes goes unrecognised, and critically the spaces of encounter go under-valued. Festivals and events are easier to fund than the 'unglamorous work of holding space' (57). New Visions served a purpose in the ensuing festivalisation of Glasgow, and was then cancelled after three editions. New Visions offers an example of a more negotiated stance than Exploding Cinema, and bears out the tangled materialities of working at the seams between amateur, funded and professional arts.

Each of the projects referred to above had their own distinct characteristics, and not all followed the same rowdy format as Exploding Cinema. Ian White, describing the Kino Kulture club screening at London's Horse Hospital, defends the experimental nature of the wider London scene, while distancing his project somewhat, stating 'We have no disruptive MC, no insistence on the cross-questioning of the filmmakers and never, during a regular programme, do we include live performances' following the stance of the traditional repertory cinemas (White 1998, 9). The Horse Hospital also offered a building with a secure lease, and film screenings could link to other activities going on. By and large, however, the common threads between cinema activists in the UK were the twin commitments to demystifying filmmaking and providing a platform for exhibiting new films, driven by amateur enthusiasm. Whether this came from the abundance of student films coming out of the film schools in the capital, or from underground icons like Arthur Lager, there was a shared dedication to the short film form. Technology was clearly a major factor in bypassing the industrial structures for supporting film culture. Cheap and available cameras and film stock;

redundant archives of educational and training films; the burgeoning of mini-DV and non-linear editing; and the possibilities for networking and promotion of the internet meant that a grassroots ecology could grow without the need to turn to the institutions for funding or critical approval.

While the Volcano Festival was self-organised, extremely low-budget (the second edition was launched on a £300 budget) and anarchic, the diversity of the groups had both positive and negative impacts. Their diversity lay in the DIY fringes of the film production sector where it branched out into performance, art, comedy, cabaret, live music, clubbing and the more commercial media industries. Each film club could attract its own audience, giving a critical mass to the festival. The different points of view regarding relationship to the mainstream were somewhat downplayed, and a culture of collaboration was fostered, for example clubs offered two free places on a guest list for each other to reduce a sense of competition. Mmoloki Chrystie of Films that make you go…Hmmm has suggested that the key ingredient to successful collaboration, rather than doing it for free in the DIY spirit, was the simple fact that there was 'room' for them all to explore their distinct approaches, from the grassroots of Exploding to the glitz of Halloween (Monk 1997, 9). For him, the future was not so clear-cut, foreseeing a more competitive future should the space for Volcano start to constrict. While Volcano presented a unique point of convergence, entirely outside of the funded or sponsored film festival sector, by 2000 energy was flagging and the festival stopped. The fatigue of running a festival across multiple venues for free was beginning to wear, and started to impact on the shows Exploding wanted to put on independently of the festival[33]. Colette Rouhier ascribes a portion of blame to the subtle hostility of the London Film Festival, which never embraced the culture that Volcano stood for or represented. This reveals a tension within an underground project like Volcano, which simultaneously demanded the recognition but rejected association with the dominant film culture represented in the likes of the LFF. Another strain on the festival was the heterogeneity within the DIY scene reflected in the competing motivations of different groups. These ranged from long-term commitment to the tenets of underground oppositionality, as evident in Exploding Cinema, all the way to groups or individuals using the organisational energies of the DIY scene as an early testing ground or stepladder into a career in the media industries,

[33] Colette Rouhier, (Exploding Cinema founder member), interviewed by Christo Wallers, video call, August 2020.

even if only for the unreproachable need to financially survival in an expensive city. In 2002, The Halloween Society morphed into the more industry-focused, BAFTA-affiliated London Short Film Festival. The prospects of a change in funding structures with the new Film Council perhaps attracted the attention of the more entrepreneurial amongst the groups. Without an agreed set of red lines regarding funding or assimilation into the mainstream, ideologically resisting an increasing professionalism shared by some groups became too much trouble, until it was only Exploding Cinema left running events in opposition to the mainstream.

DIY distribution – the missing link?

Volcano was unable to provide sufficient glue to keep these divergent groups together. At various organised and public debates alongside the festival, there was talk of Volcano being able to support a truly independent film culture, either through a building, or an independent league similar to the IFA, but these concepts were never sufficiently developed. Part of the fun of Exploding Cinema was the sense of freedom and play in finding spaces and turning them into temporary utopias for a night. Moving venues provided a continuous stream of novelty, which was highly valued. Equally, the vehement compulsion to exist outside of institutional control, and even the law, meant that taking on a building would be too problematic. Rouhier describes it as the risk of 'accountability'[34] towards legal and bureaucratic systems, the apparatus for controlling, which was perceived as arts funding, and for Exploding Cinema subscribing to the small print threatened a restriction on their freedoms, which was too high a price to pay. Their greatest fear was the inevitable slide into moderation, stemming from the perceived 'failed utopia' of the LFMC. Reekie states 'my sort of hostility to the LFMC was really based on the fact that I really loved it and I really saw what an amazing dream it was to have this place… and so my hostility was based on fact that this dream of collective working, this utopian dream had been so betrayed in a way'. He qualifies the concept of 'betrayal' pointing out the contradictory desire of 'independence' with the reality of total 'dependence' on the state for funding, and so for him it was inevitable that with paid employees a specialised profession would emerge inherently negating the DIY ethos[35]. This caution towards over-reliance on funding has been a guiding principle of DIY cinema venues as they increased in the 2000s, and while it hasn't guaranteed long-term

[34] Colette Rouhier, (Exploding Cinema founder member), interviewed by Christo Wallers, video call, August 2020.
[35] Duncan Reekie, (Exploding Cinema founder member), interviewed by Christo Wallers, video call, August 2020.

sustainability, it has nevertheless been a significant factor in the survival and development of DIY cultural commons across the UK.

A building could have provided convenient storage for the expanding inventory of projection equipment, and reduced some of the workload of locating spaces for shows, particularly as London property became more sought after and landlords became more demanding. More importantly, it could have given Exploding Cinema and/or the Volcano groups a solid base from which to organise, programme screenings and archive work, with the option of developing a distribution arm. Unlike the New York Film-makers' Co-op and the LFMC, which placed exhibition as ancillary to distribution, Exploding Cinema and Volcano were first and foremost film exhibition entities, and so were very event-based. While this gave the collectives energy and satisfaction from direct relationship with audiences, they were never able to advance a circuit for short film in the UK due to a fundamental lack of distribution. Reekie imagined an underground exhibition circuit could work along the same lines as the DIY music scene, which gets its strength from the fact that every town has its venue where local bands put on shows and host touring bands, largely voluntarily[36]. In the same way small-scale, DIY filmmaking groups could screen their own films and invite filmmakers from further afield, or screen compilations. Dreams of an Exploding Cinema collective in every town however never quite materialised.

This approach became more of a reality in the US through the Microcinema movement which, like Exploding, focused predominantly on the exhibition of new underground and no-budget filmmaking. According to Reekie, the lack of state subsidy in the US meant that filmmakers had to find innovative ways of connecting and sharing work, which had a generative effect on the movement. Exploding had connections with this new culture, hosting groups from New York at Volcano and members of the collective screened at Total Mobile Home in California. The scale of the US may have been a further factor. While in the UK spaces to screen this work were few and far between, in the US the microcinema movement blossomed through the late 1990s providing a readymade touring circuit for DIY filmmakers. Similarly in continental Europe, where Exploding toured throughout the 1990s there existed a network of community arts labs, funded by their locality, and resourced with bars, workshops, event spaces and even printing presses. These spaces, which were often

[36] Ibid.66

squats formalised into open access cultural spaces, could support a hybrid mix of culture from live music, theatre and circus to zines and comic productions. Such a network had existed temporarily in the UK in the late 1960s and early 1970s[37], but formalised with state funding into more conventional art centres with hierarchical management structures. It would be another few years before The Cube and Star and Shadow reignited the vision of the arts lab in their respective regions.

Exploding Cinema tried out a distribution effort with a VHS tape compilation called *Vacuum* (1996), with the idea to run an annual compilation of highlights from the year's shows. However the first and only issue came out at the height of sample culture in both music and the nascent art of VJing and the compilation was full of uncleared copyright 'violations', limiting distribution to only the most underground channels. Equally the independent sector was more controlled through the sending out of new short films from the funders. The big question therefore was to whom would Exploding distribute? Going straight to the audience was the natural impulse and passion behind the project. The admin involved with promotion, packaging and posting and collecting payment was misaligned with the fun of the live events, and after the first edition the novelty wore off. Only a few years later, more sustainable projects would emerge like Brighton Cinematheque[38], The Cube, Side Cinema and institutions like CCA in Glasgow who could provide a network of screening venues for tours, but by this time the energy had dissipated.

The economics of this activity were, as with everything else at Exploding, based on voluntary labour and covering costs in the true spirit of DIY. Running a screening programme and engaging with physical venues left little time and enthusiasm for investing in larger scale distribution. It was video-activists within the DIY protest culture, eschewing exhibition in favour of production and distribution, that found more success with getting no- and low-budget films out there and seen. The 1990s and early 2000s saw activist film content proliferating on a variety of technological platforms, including VHS, DVD, CD-ROM and early experiments hosted online. Chris Robé has recently analysed this field in the context of 1990s US radical film culture (2017) and a similar seam was prevalent in the UK. Undercurrents in

[37] Very little has been written on the subject of Arts Labs, but Maggie Gray has written about the Birmingham Arts Lab and the Northampton Arts Lab in *Alan Moore, Out from the underground: Cartooning, Performance and Dissent* (2017).
[38] Michael Kemp, 'Changing Reels: Memories of Brighton Cinematheque'. *The Lazarus Corporation*. 1 February 2005. http://www.lazaruscorporation.co.uk/articles/cinematheque-changing-reels [accessed 10 December 2020].

Oxford and Conscious Cinema in Brighton both launched in 1994, the year of the Criminal Justice Bill, which severely clamped down on freedoms to congregate, protest and party, particularly within the traveller movement. They started distributing newsreels to activist groups, and engaging with protest movements, at first around the road protests and Reclaim the Streets actions and then more internationally through the anti-globalisation gatherings against the IMF, the World Bank and the World Economic Forum. The anarchistic approach of video activism in the 1990s had a marked influence on DIY Cinema exhibition as it evolved into the 2000s. Presence (2015, 14–15) describes this DIY ethic along three fronts. The first was the decision to draw clear distinctions between voluntarist and paid work, for example, Conscious Cinema did not charge for their films, but duplicated them onto re-used VHS tapes from London production houses and gave them away for free. Second was the primacy of action as opposed to theory. The third was the notion of the screening as a site of direct action itself due to its capacity to bring people together and activate political engagement. The birth of a new network of social centres, linking back to projects like BIT in the late 1960s, allowed a radical exhibition practice to emerge in activist spaces. A paradigm shift occurred as the technological possibilities of the internet became apparent, and early experiments in streaming gave activists a taste of a global reach impossible inside the four walls of the auditorium. Within the DIY culture of the 1990s a renewed and direct relationship between exhibitor and filmmaker was cultivated, akin to the open screenings of Cinema 65 and the LFMC at the Arts lab.

Conclusion

I have presented this history to show that countercultural film exhibition has been experimented with throughout the 20th Century as a utopian method to resist dominant cultural narratives around the purpose and potential of experiencing cinema – providing opportunities for audiences to gather in company, and find ways to imagine, test or prefigure alternative possibilities. I have argued that analysing a utopian impulse in film exhibition through the lens of the 'amateur' reveals a far more complex set of negotiations than the term 'amateur' would normally evoke, tangled between voluntarist activism, state influence, commercial entrepreneurialism and (do-it-your)self-education, placing amateur engagement at the generative heart of film history. Each case I have referenced above has inhabited specific social and political spheres based on their time, place and the direction of travel in

cultural politics, whether that be post-war egalitarian self-improvement, the socialism of 1968, the explosion of punk in 1976, or the anarchistic activism of 1990s DIY culture. Often these practices have evolved in reaction or opposition to what came before, but the purpose of this history is not to judge the merits and failures of past ways of exploring new possibilities, but to see them as historically specific, as products of their age, expressing in cinema the anthropological constant to find more just, and emancipatory ways of being. These cases touch on two enduring problems in particular which can offer a route into interpreting the distinctive qualities of DIY cinema exhibition in the UK as it manifested in the early 21st Century.

One is concerned with the possibility afforded by cinema exhibition to form a community that is self-organised and autonomous, in tune with Ana Schober's ideas of the 'cave of nurture' or 'cave of possibility' (Schober 2007) - places where audiences could feel safe in a community of identity, or to prepare for action. For DIY projects like Exploding Cinema and those I go on to discuss in my case studies, audience relations are considered as part of a different cinema *dispositif*, celebrating, for example, the fallible human operator's relationship with the spectator rather than the invisible operation of a machine that satisfies the spectator-as-consumer at all costs. Robert Stam and Ella Shohat capture this desire when writing that 'while the media can destroy community and fashion solitude by turning spectators into atomized consumers or self-entertaining monads, they can also fashion community and alternative affiliations' (2000, 381). In this collectivist vision of 'alternative affiliations' where the audience and the exhibitor are members of the same community, we can see an alternative direction for ideological critique, distinct from that mounted by the activists of the 1970s. In the 1950s this manifested in a thriving film society culture, galvanised by the post-war values of egalitarian improvement. While largely apolitical, film societies pioneered a screening practice that was convivial and autodidactic, disrupting the classical cinema apparatus with portable (and often faulty) projectors, audience involvement in film selection, and using rooms and spaces not designed with cinema predominantly in mind. The social sphere inhabited by film societies was local and community-oriented, functioning beyond the sole purpose of exhibiting a film. Participation either in post-film discussions or simply putting away chairs generated informal connections, which are routinely suppressed in conventional cinema. Film societies were however institutionalised through the BFFS and the BFI who exerted strong influence in the top-down cultivation of

'film appreciation', not least through the hasty rollout of RFTs. In the 1960s an emancipatory attitude towards community was explored in the underground, and the Arts Labs, where the cinema could be a place to turn on, tune in and drop out, as evident in David Curtis's screening space. This approach was further embedded through policies of open access to equipment, and organisational structures like co-operatives and collectives – in the case of the LFMC, this evolved to prioritise filmmakers themselves more than a broader coalition of cinephiles and enthusiasts, leading to splits in the co-op. For the Independent sector of the 1970s, theoretical influences had the effect of re-emphasising the distinction between the audience and those presenting or programming films. The 'apparatus theory' of Metz and Baudry rendered the viewer as passive subject, and film viewing as a condition akin to Plato's allegory of the cave rather than part of the specific lived experience of an individual. Independent cinema practitioners aimed to puncture ideological identification primarily through formal experimentation at the level of narrative and image, but as I have shown above, there were also plenty of experiments with the apparatus itself and the spatial dynamics of the auditorium, particularly in expanded cinema. However, the audience as a relational community was the least considered element of this reorganization of the apparatus. A project like Four Corners experimented with a degree of unpredictability in the physical arrangement of the screening space, but the effect did not necessarily build trust and mutuality between the audience and the organisers. In contrast, by the 1980s post-punk subcultural formations around art, fashion, music and film recognised cinema's potential to provide space for subcultures to meet and connect, around for example queer sexuality or psychotronic cinephilia, in such contexts as Derek Jarman's Studio Bankside screenings, or more publicly at the Scala. Reading films against the grain, according to their variegated cultural background, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, these audiences were self-aware and looking for a community they couldn't easily find in the independent sector.

This concern with community points to the critical issue of 'space'. The struggles through the late 1960s and 1970s for projects like LFMC and The Other Cinema to locate and secure a space in which to build an independent film culture placed huge strain on organisations both financially and logistically. The confused picture of RFT roll out is a further example of the problems of 'housing' an alternative film exhibition circuit, reliant on subsidy. For Exploding Cinema and the London no wave, the decision not to have a building was grounded in a fear of becoming institutionalised and accountable, born out of their early days

inhabiting squat spaces. Any desires to create a space would have had to confront the increasingly high rents in London, and both of these anxieties would be combined in the catastrophic demise of the Lux Centre in 2001. The urge to secure space on a long-term basis, in the context of gentrification and privatisation of the city would become one of the major priorities of DIY cinema exhibition sites post 2000. The fact that they emerged more readily outside of London may in part be accounted for the availability of affordable space in regional cities like Bristol, Newcastle and Liverpool.

The second argument relates to the tension around 'alternativeness', and the extent to which cultural resistance to assimilation is desired, necessary or even possible at the intersection of amateur, institutional and commercial practices. The extent to which countercultural film groups have negotiated their relationship to dominant institutions is of particular interest in trying to unpick how DIY Cinema progressed after 2000; how groups forged their self-image as autonomous, and what tactics they adopted to be sustainable. For Exploding Cinema, autonomy involved drawing strong red lines, and I have described how the collective considered their predecessors, particularly those closer to the art world like the LFMC, to be moribund, and worse, unfaithful to their initial ideology. The starkest paradox for activists in Exploding Cinema was the notion that an Independent cinema could exist in complete 'dependence' on the state. On one level this criticism seems overly harsh - perhaps it is aimed solely at the world of artists' moving image - but the history I have mapped out attests to a more nuanced reality. As noted above, state funding supported filmmakers, workshops, distributors and exhibitors to connect radical film with audiences through theatrical film exhibition, the education system and in local authority contexts, generating substantial audiences for films that critiqued the dominant mode of representation in form and content particularly around issues like youth, class, race and gender.

However, on another level the slow slide towards neoliberal assimilation was clearly difficult to resist, and ultimately ill-fated. Take for example the concept of self-management and co-operation. The Workshop Declaration with ACTT in 1981 had involved a commitment to co-operative and collective management as one of the linchpins of the agreement. As a culture of consultants and new management thinking began to permeate funding bodies, there was little mercy for utopian ways of working which were deemed inefficient. The 1988 report *Developing the Independent Film and Video Sector* argued that 'fuzzy historic notions of collectives and co-operatives should not be tolerated' (M. Dickinson 1999, 82). While

those involved in the actual practice of independent film were feeling the pressure of unfavourable funding policies, the theoretical vigour underlying the movement had retrenched into academia, a further sign of assimilation. By the end of the 1980s, the increasing recognition of artists' moving image by the gallery system, accompanied by enhanced funding for this type of work from the Arts Council had the effect of fragmenting the independent film scene. The aspiration of reconciling the 'two avant-gardes' ebbed out of reach.

Exposure to the changing winds of funding is clearly a problem that dogged the Independent sector. As long as the political will for it lasts, state support through subsidies, cultural endorsement and institutional infrastructure can give non-commercial film makers and cinema exhibitors financial stability and employment, access to larger-scale audiences, and the potential for broad-reaching impact. For the IFA era filmmakers and activists this was part of a Left vision for society in which the State should play a central role. However, these relationships also cultivate certain power dynamics and blind spots that affect people who cannot find routes into that culture. A group like Exploding clearly felt this to be the case, and organised themselves to avoid replicating those shortcomings, through extolling the virtues of No Wave filmmaking, ruling out funding, and a dedication to open submission. Taking a distanced stance from the institution, however, leaves one exposed to other risks: the dovetail between state arts funding on one hand and the critical currents within higher education and highbrow cinema and art journals on the other inevitably creates canons and protects certain histories over others. Nowhere is this more visible than in the statement John Wyver made in the 1995 ICA Biennial of independent film and video: 'in the mid-1990s in Britain there is no film and video culture. None – at least none of the kind so clearly identifiable 15 years ago and none with any significant presence' (Reekie 1996). While this confrontational quote fuelled the energies of Exploding Cinema and others to disprove Wyver's point, in resisting assimilation Exploding Cinema and the films screened therein have been largely excluded from historical view. This may change due to the democratising power of peer to peer archiving made possible by the internet. According to Reekie, many of the filmmakers who exhibited at Exploding have now started to upload their early film works to video-sharing platforms which provides a kind of folk archive of work[39]. Diligent curators and

[39] Duncan Reekie, (Exploding Cinema founder member), interviewed by Christo Wallers, video call, August 2020.

historians could feasibly cross-reference Stefan Szczelkun's list on http://www.archive.org with YouTube searches to track down some of these films, but they will continue to exist outside of dominant art cinema discourses until that happens. If the institutional space is not there to protect these histories, at least the online space exists for archival record, and Exploding Cinema have made swathes of historical material in terms of brochures, flyers, rants and chronologies available on their website.

Chapter 2: DIY Cinema exhibition and Everyday Utopianism

DIY, meaning 'Do-it-yourself', is a practice without a formal body of theory, a form of action thrust into the cultural lexicon by Caroline Coon in the pages of the punk fanzine *Sniffin' Glue.* It is not a unified social movement (Kempson 2015), nor is it tied to a specific political system. The term itself is amorphous, and in different contexts can connote everything from ultra-left activist tactics to the commodity culture of home decorating. DIY is nevertheless underpinned by a counterhegemonic system of values grouped in the DIY ethic which, as Stephen Duncombe puts it, is 'at once a critique of the dominant mode of passive consumer culture and something far more important: the active creation of an alternative culture' (Duncombe 2008, 127). Since its beginnings in the 1970s its usage as a concept has expanded to represent a proliferating variety of self-identifying activities, describing 'culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic or social structure' (Duncombe 2002, 5). DIY's impact on popular culture has in part come from an upfront disassociation with theoretical abstraction, placing the emphasis on 'just doing'. This threat to more formal pursuits of knowledge-building may go some way to explain the relative shortage of scholarship on DIY, for example even though the term has been used informally by filmmakers and cinema projects since the 1990s, it is almost invisible in Film Studies. Is there then a plausible case for placing the concept of DIY into the discipline of film exhibition studies, and if so, what would be its constituent components? What other theoretical frameworks might be required to bolster a concept that is so consciously resistant to theory? I recognise the irony in pursuing a theoretical schema for DIY, but I do so as an activist in DIY culture since 2001 looking back to make sense of our history.

This thesis seeks to position DIY Cinema as a recent alternative film exhibition culture in the UK that channels emancipatory, utopian desires into a concrete form. Drawing its energy from political and cultural perspectives that evolved through the 1990s in the road protest and anti-globalisation movements to (post-)punk music, underground and squat culture, DIY cinema exhibition also retains traits of the various independent film cultures and art movements that proliferated in the late 1960s and 1970s, notably the London Film-makers' Co-op and the Independent Filmmakers Association's (IFA) cinema as 'social practice'. In Chapter 1 I argued that DIY speaks to the no-wave underground cinema and

VHS/DVD radical documentary distribution culture that developed through the 1990s. It also encompasses the desires to engage beyond subcultural boundaries through going 'above ground' post 2000, illustrated in my three case studies Star and Shadow Cinema, The Cube Microplex and the film retreat, *Losing the Plot*.

In the first instance, I want to focus on the specificity of DIY culture to fill in a background for the term. In order to properly survey the literature this involves a detour away from film theory, into disciplines where the concept has been deployed more frequently, in order to make a case for its usefulness in the expanding analysis of cinema exhibition within Film Studies. I explore DIY as an interdisciplinary term that crosses between the humanities and the social sciences, within geography, urban studies, media studies, feminism, music, sociology and political science, as well as research into education, consumerism and leisure. In locating a politically transformative desire within DIY culture, historical lines of connection can also be drawn with previous avant-garde art movements from Surrealism to the Situationist International, who deemed the everyday a prime site for revolutionary emancipation. I therefore go on to address the more recent literature around DIY that positions this practice as a method or process within the terrain of 'everyday utopianism' (Gardiner, 2013). Indebted to earlier utopian theorists such as Bloch and Lefebvre among others, the growing field of utopian studies has widened the scope from a prevailing analysis of literary representations by the likes of More, Wells and Morris, what Bloch would term 'abstract utopias', to include ways the utopian has been used as an orientation, a *way* of engaging with spaces, objects, and practices stemming from a belief in the possibility of other, better worlds. Using this different compass, scholars have sought to counteract a common misrepresentation of utopia as a fantasy of the impossible, or worse a dangerous route towards totalitarianism.

The pinning of DIY to everyday utopianism is a way of preserving DIY's radical politics, and resisting its total absorption into neoliberal subjectivity. The politic DIY mobilises however is as an action-based prefigurative force for cultural change at the local level, rather than wholesale system change through macro-political affiliations with Marxism or Socialism. In the UK context of cinema exhibition since 1990, I argue that DIY marshals emancipatory desires for building geographically located cinema communities that are otherwise suppressed by the neoliberal status quo on one hand and the restrictive codes of high culture on the other.

DIY Hermeneutics: critique and creation

The origins of DIY have been situated further back in the culture of working class and lower-middle class home improvement developing through the 1950s. In part this was due to economic necessity and a make-do-and-mend mindset post war, but it was also indicative of a widespread realisation that peoples' skills could potentially match those of professionals (Oram 2004) threatening to erase artificial hierarchies produced in the commodification of expertise. Latent immediately after the war, it surfaced as a countercultural stance in the 1960s rejecting formal structures across education, community organisation and consumerism Gauntlett (2011), guided by the texts of Ivan Illich (1971), Saul Alinsky (1971) and the *Whole Earth Catalog* by Stewart Brand (1968-72). Working class punk culture flows directly from this amateurist self-belief, implicit in the quote from punk zine *Sideburns* 'here is a chord; here is another; here's a third, now form a band'.

The first substantial academic acknowledgement of DIY as a counterhegemonic tradition surfaced in George McKay's *DIY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain* (1998). The focus of his study is on the way DIY incorporates varied fields from political activism to punk and rave scenes with an emphasis on self-empowerment through positive, practical direct action. Following this line of thinking, Graham St. John (2004) refers to a 'global DIY culture', the radical political potential of which intertwines aesthetic protest and insurrectionary pleasure in the Temporary Autonomous Zone (Bey 1985) of 'protestivals' like 'Reclaim the Streets.'

Through the period of Conservative political dominance in the late 1980s and 1990s, DIY developed in both the UK and the US as a toolkit to enable people to autonomously shape their own worlds, create their own culture, and participate in democracy outside of the status quo, impacting upon publishing, music culture, and direct action. In North America, the most well-documented example of this tendency is in the zine culture and the network of DIY music scenes. As an intentionally lo-fi method for articulating deeply-felt personal, political and cultural positions in print, zines have been the subject of multiple studies relating to DIY (Spencer 2008; Triggs 2006; Duncombe 2008; Downes 2007). The relationships between radical politics and commerce in Straight Edge and hardcore punk subcultures have been explored for their tensions and potentialities (Kuhn 2010; O'Connor

2008; Haenfler 2006), particularly found in the symbolic differentiation between DIY and 'major' record labels, which has been a consistent propellant for DIY music to distinguish itself culturally and politically.

DIY music culture has been an important site of influence and provided useful models of collaboration for the film exhibition groups in my study. Analyses of the motivations, successes and stresses upon DIY music culture in the US have preoccupied academics across cultural studies (Barrett 2013; Culton and Holtzman 2010), particularly in relation to the spaces around which groups assemble and cultivate a scene. Barrett, looking at two punk venues on opposites coasts of the US, has argued that as sites of resistance, collectively-run DIY/punk spaces constitute an arena of direct action, both in the way they organise and the opportunities they create for members to develop their political principles. Similarly Culton and Holtzman have read the late 90s history of the Long Island punk scene through the literature on 'Free Spaces' (Polletta 1999; Futrell and Simi 2004) arguing that DIY bands utilise relatively autonomous spaces to build entities and relations that have 'structural isolation from the powerful' (2010, 280).

DIY has also been recognised as an alternative pedagogy, critiquing hierarchies of expertise. Without going into education theory in great detail in this thesis, self-organised and autodidactic learning as opposed to top-down, explicatory teaching is an important factor in DIY culture. Hemphill and Leskowitz (2013) have analysed a loose-knit community of DIY activists on the west coast of America forming 'communities of practice' seeking alternative approaches to knowledge sharing based on mutual aid and self-reliance. Activists in this case self-select and collaboratively engage in informal modes of learning ranging from open source media to zines, piracy and organised skill shares, in a countercultural emblem of Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory. Like many others Hemphill and Leskowitz acknowledge that the term is politically contested, nevertheless in DIY formations they perceive 'alternative systems of governance, education and living, through a minimalist, anticonsumerist, anarchistic, democratic political ethic' (2013, 57–58).

The above examples, many of which have been written by activists from the scenes they are researching, testify to the formative role DIY has played in punk and post-punk music culture, influencing space, participation and subjectivity. However more recent punk and post-punk scholarship within the interdisciplinary field of punk studies tempers the utopian promise of DIY, for example Woods strikes a more cautionary note in his study.

Focusing on organisers of gigs and their privileged relationships with bands, his findings reveal a contradiction in aspirations of inclusivity that mask the reality of a lack of diversity in those attending gigs, an issue that the DIY cinema case studies I look at similarly struggle to resolve. DIY spaces then are sites of contestation between subcultural scenes and social movements.

DIY in relation to Subcultures and Scenes

DIY activities are frequently correlated with subcultures, however I would resist that classification. Post-Marxist approaches to studying power and hegemony within the media, youth, class and race developed intensively at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the late 1960s and 1970s. One of the studies most commonly associated with the CCCS is Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) which held up working class youth cultures like punks, mods, rockers and Teddy boys as symbolic sites of resistance. Through the signifying characteristic of 'style', Hebdige interpreted a dissident practice 'to embellish, decorate, parody and wherever possible to recognize and rise above a subordinate position which was never of their choosing' (1991, 139). While Hebdige insists on the articulation of style as a kind of refusal, he also metaphorically underscores its potential as 'just so much graffiti on a prison wall', divesting it of any real power or even motive towards transformative change. Following this argument he explains the powerful ability of capital to recuperate symbolic forms of resistance through commodification, a fate that befell punk in quick order in the late 1970s. However focusing so heavily on style and the symbolic, he ignores many of the other important areas where resistance may be longer lasting or more concretely iterated.

If subcultural study is more concerned with analysing meanings around aesthetic positions, it is important to distinguish DIY as an 'ethic', rather than just a 'style'. Reducing punk, for example, to a merely symbolic politics, has led recent activist-scholars to contest subcultural categorization, arguing that in its longevity, organisational accomplishments and participant politicization, punk can constitute a significant site of autonomous struggle against neoliberalism, leading others to couch punk within DIY culture rather than the more generic notion of 'subculture' (Barrett 2013). Subcultural theory of the late 70s and early 80s has received criticism for an over-emphasis on young, white, heterosexual, working class males class that occluded issues of race, gender and sexuality (Griffin 2011, 247). While

recent scholarship has used the concept of subcultures to explore feminism in music (riot grrrl), and race in Asian urban music, hip hop and reggae, the issue of class fixity has been overtaken by more mobile and layered readings of class. The most significant impact on the terrain has come from Bourdieu's ideas on social or (sub-)cultural capital framed in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984). In this context, rather than 'rising above subordinate positions', the accumulation of subcultural capital as a scarce resource enables people and groups to reposition themselves in hierarchies of taste. Marc Jancovich for example has taken the idea of distinction and subcultural capital into film studies in his analyses of fan cultures and cult audiences for genre cinema (Jancovich 2002, 2011). Barbara Wilinsky (2001) has taken a similar path in order to investigate the emergence of art house cinema in the USA, situating it as a marker of taste. In the study of DIY cultural practices, electronic dance music and the rave scene have been recognised as formative areas of research, putting the 'party' in amongst the 'protest' (Wright 1998, and Rietveld 1998 in McKay 1998). Sarah Thornton introduced the idea of subcultural capital to this field in her exploration of club culture and 'coolness', based around three interconnected hierarchies of distinction (authentic/fake; hip/mainstream; underground/media) as strategies for 'transcending being classed … a means of obfuscating the dominant structure in order to set up an alternative' (Thornton 2001, 166). Thornton's invocation of a 'youthful will to classlessness' (167) constitutes a break away from the monolithic interpretation of class central to the Birmingham School approach following a line of thought that suggests, post-Thatcher, that the significance of class has diminished in how identity is constructed. As an important side note, not everyone agrees that delineations of class have dissipated considerably. Christine Griffin notes that there is little macro-economic evidence to suggest that class structures have significantly changed since the 1960s, and to the contrary, social and economic inequalities have increased in terms of health, education and employment (Griffin 2011).

Punk respects very few boundaries including class, and people have pointed out from early on the inaccuracy of the traditional Birmingham school homology between subculture and social class, (e.g. Clarke 1981). To account for the more complex reality O'Connor (2008) adopts Bourdieu's notion of 'Field' instead of subculture. For O'Connor, this aspect of Bourdieu's analysis provides for a much more accurate picture of the diversity and plurality of punk, seeing it as a set of relations rather than a definition of a culture. Field Theory enables analysts to discern how a culture 'works' in terms of roles and practices in relation to

class or cultural capital. Using the descriptor of parental employment gleaned from Michael Azerrad's *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, O'Connor notes the predominance of middle class musicians within punk culture in the late 1980s.

Post-subcultural theory looks towards other methodologies for inspiration to find alternative ways of describing collectivities that reflect the fluid and shifting nature of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000) in contrast to the Birmingham school's more rigid view of class structures. Two more commonly used concepts for looking at DIY punk and rave are 'Scene' and 'tribe'. 'Scene' has been used to describe musical collectivities since the early 1990s and could be fruitfully applied to the type of practices within DIY Cinema exhibition. DIY is often invoked not as an alternative to, but rather as a 'scene' in its own right. The term has mixed meanings, that move between local and global communities, spaces and places, and retains the weighty signifier of style. Will Straw (1991) analysed Electronic Dance Music (EDM) in the 1990s as a global scene that had multiple varying regional styles that connected people through club culture. Prestige and subcultural capital are also part of this cosmopolitan picture, visible in the contemporary image of the hipster, or its predecessor, the 'scenester'. The US Microcinema culture of film exhibition has been analysed in this light, for example Donna De Ville's (2015) suggestion that it is the abandoned, industrial parts of American towns where self-organised screening projects often surface that adds to their ephemeral, underground charm, playing an important part in their quest to be sites of countercultural distinction and taste. In contrast, the view developed by Shank (1994) while studying the Austin rock scene, emphasises the importance of both the local community and local place which he proposes cultivates a 'productive anxiety' between spectators, fans and musicians. This productivity is located in an impetus to participate, as he suggests 'spectators become fans, fans become musicians, musicians are always already fans' (131). For Shank, this impetus is energised by a potentially transformative opposition to dominant culture, characteristic of DIY scenes. For Hesmondhalgh, the term scene has been used 'for too long in too many different and imprecise ways' (2005, 11) for it to retain its usefulness in popular music studies. The issues of style, distinction and cultural capital occludes the potentially transformative politics within DIY culture, and renders futile the chances of overturning perpetually reproducing systems of inclusion and exclusion. Extensive sociological research would be required to understand how class for instance gets actively reconfigured within DIY cinema practices taking in both practitioners and audiences, but that is not the direction of

this piece of research. Nevertheless, there are systemic barriers at play that DIY cinema activists recognise impact on certain groups' capacity or sense of inclusion around volunteering. After 2000 this issue has been contested within DIY Cinema practice as it has gone 'above ground' (post-underground?), as the stylistic choices groups have made may require certain cultural capital to decode, and have to be reconciled with the importance of plurality, openness and inclusivity around participation.

DIY: present imperfect

The arguments above pose questions over where DIY culture should be positioned within the traditional political/cultural dualism, and there are plenty of critical voices reining in the claims of DIY culture. Stephen Duncombe suggests in *Notes from underground: zines and the politics of alternative culture*: '…[that] one could argue that underground culture sublimates anger that otherwise might have been expressed in political action'. This stance appears closer to Dick Hebdige's outlined above. Contributors to McKay's seminal UK study of DIY culture demonstrate the huge variety of positions adopted by activists in the 90s. The video activists who formed Undercurrents or those arguing a radical case for rave culture, embraced the notion of DIY, (or as the Exodus Collective prefer, 'DIO' - Do it Ourselves). However there are also sceptical voices like those from the libertarian communist journal *Aufheben*, concerned that the term DIY Culture 'serves to restrict our historical antecedents to post-war Britain, privileging explicitly cultural phenomena, at the expense of connections to, say, the Russian, German and Spanish revolutions, or the history of 'workers' struggles in the UK' (McKay 1998, 283).

For others the radical resonance of DIY shows its limitations in a practice unable to reconcile itself to capitalist regimes of labour and commodification. In *DIY citizenship: critical making and social media* Ratto and Boler are careful to include chapters revealing the failures and contradictions of DIY regarding issues like hidden labour, and corporate interests that are often served directly or through affiliation with or co-option of DIY. The co-option of DIY into mainstream lifestyle norms has been robustly expressed by Buck Clifford Rosenberg, (2005; 2011) who argues that 'DIY'ers' enact a 'neoliberal discourse of enterprising and productive citizenship advocated by lifestyle TV experts' (2011, 173). He sees the pattern of DIY self-empowerment as a productive example of 'serious leisure' (Stebbins), but simultaneously, and more critically, as an engagement with the discourse of 'neoliberal citizenship.' This late-

modern drive overshadows class division through consumer culture's capacity to present a society, organised seemingly consensually, around a set of universally accessible, market-oriented aspirations. He points to recent research within cultural studies demonstrating the neoliberal disposition towards 'governing at a distance […] as governmentality is outsourced through popular culture and privatized and enacted by populations' (Rosenberg 2011, 175). In this light, DIY activities constitute a form of 'responsibilized citizenship' in the absence of the state, and a central condition of neoliberal 'self-production' not only as good, enterprising citizen, but also as a form of symbolic protection from global risk (Beck, 1999).

Notions of citizenship are thus at stake if DIY practices can be interpreted as articulating a neoliberal logic of self-governing entrepreneurialism. Lisa Daily follows this path further in her contribution to Amber Day's *DIY Utopia: Cultural Imagination and the Remaking of the Possible* (2017). Speaking about certain types of entrepreneurial activism she frames DIY as a culture suffering under the contemporary capitalist utopian vision of ethical capitalism, which she argues does nothing more than naturalise 'individualized solutions to structural inequalities' (Day 2017, xi). This line of argument sees the DIY agent as merely trying to make Capitalism 'better', rather than test out alternatives, ignoring the collectivist nature of many DIY cultures, particularly those based on self-management, mutual aid and gift economies. While the perspectives I have outlined should encourage some critical caution to the claims made by DIY, I take the more optimistic view that DIY constitutes a form of action against, rather than improvement of neoliberal capitalism. Considering the sheer strength of neoliberal hegemony, where efforts to contest, undermine and experiment with alternative ways of being exist, we should value and encourage them. My study then firmly positions DIY activity as an emancipatory practice resistant to neoliberal agendas, in line with recent scholars who have outlined an alternative subjectivity under the heading DIY Citizenship (Crossan et al. 2016; Ratto and Boler 2014; Day 2017).

Everyday Utopias

I have introduced the variety of ways the term DIY has been deployed in different fields. I want to continue a theoretical underpinning for DIY that situates it within the frame of Utopian Studies (Day 2017) where DIY spaces and practices can be described, in Eric Olin Wright's terms, as 'Real Utopias' (Wright 2010). The type of DIY cinema exhibition practices that I am describing in my case studies at the Star and Shadow Cinema in Newcastle, and The

Cube Cinema in Bristol emerge less from organised revolutionary political movements, but they are nevertheless trying to achieve something emancipatory through what Rancière would describe as 'dissensus' – reorganising the 'distribution of the sensible' (2014). Looking at this through the lens of utopian studies helps clarify what DIY means in relation to this form of cinema exhibition, as an aesthetically and politically emancipatory project. I will now introduce the emergent field of Utopian Studies, show how it connects with my understanding of DIY, and demonstrate how this can lay the ground for a form of utopian sociology to structure this thesis, using the approach of Ruth Levitas' 'Utopia as Method'.

Over the last three decades there has been a marked increase in scholarship exploring efforts to dream, gesture towards and realise alternatives to late capitalist life, particularly in the Global North, to confront not only the pre-existing issues of alienation and commodification of everyday life, but also to critique a post-modern acquiescence that is anti-solidaristic with the struggles people face in their everyday experience. Tomas More's neologism 'Utopia', as Lucy Sargisson points out, is a term made up of tensions, based on the Greek words topos (place), eu (good) and ou (non, or not) a combination that results in a 'good no-place', and in this tension utopia can be read as either something to be aspired to and realised, or as something that can only ever be over the horizon (Sargisson and Sargent 2004, 3). Previous interpretations of utopia have conflated it with the catastrophes of the 20th Century, pointing to the 'malevolent nightmares' contained within the 'perfection seeking' goals of National Socialism and Stalin's totalitarian communism. In this light, Utopia as an overarching schema to be applied on a mass scale to society is a dangerous fantasy that should be resisted. The term Utopia has however undergone a 're-thinking' through a concerted effort to reorient it away from the 'blueprint' paradigm, and instead to see utopia as a reflexive, experimental, imperfect method that is simultaneously hermeneutic and actively applied in the everyday, to imagine and test out alternatives to a future ill-governed by neoliberal capitalism.

To this end, scholars have focused on the traditional texts associated with literary utopias, like the *Land of Cockaigne*, Thomas More's *Utopia*[40], Bellamy's *Looking Backwards*, Morris's *News from Nowhere* and work by 20th Century Science Fiction writers like Joanna

[40] Steven Duncombe, a scholar at the intersection of art, activism and DIY culture, has created the Open Utopia project – a creative commons version of Thomas More's original text that is 'open to participation, open to modification, and open to re-creation' as an act that gestures to the fulfilment of the primary precept of common property.

Russ, Bernadette Mayer and Octavia Butler (Moylan & Baccolini 2007). Tom Moylan (1986) in his analyses of American Science Fiction, has elaborated the term 'critical utopia' to describe trends in the genre that resisted the 'blueprint' model in favour of a dynamic conflict between utopias and their originary world, for example in Le Guinn's *The Dispossessed*. This approach leaves space for imperfection and improvement. The utopian text reveals a society's longings and visions for improvement, but imagining realizable alternatives is of equal importance. Erik Olin Wright's 'Real Utopias' are 'utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change' (Wright 2010, 98:4). Rather than 'tinkering' on the scale of micro-politics, The Real Utopias Project is an effort to direct research towards larger scale alternatives to capitalist economics like universal basic income, participatory governance and egalitarian family divisions of labour.

Both fictional accounts of utopia and thoroughgoing proposals for radical change, like Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015) recent *Inventing the Future – Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* exemplify the 'utopian impulse' as Frederic Jameson describes it. The parallel concern core to Utopia as a Method focuses on studying concrete articulations of utopianism impacting on the level of everyday life. This is a particularly productive route for analysing DIY cultures like DIY Cinema. Sargisson and Sargent's (2004) in-depth ethnographic study of over fifty Intentional Communities in New Zealand surveys communal and communitarian living experiments that try to create a microcosm of the change inhabitants would like to see in the wider world. The notion that intentional communities are somehow hermetically sealed from outside influence can give strength to criticisms that they are subject to a form of cultism that veers closer to the blueprint model. Sargisson and Sargent, however, see intentional communities as examples of 'searching' rather than static crystallisations. This dynamic quality is central to recent trends in utopia as method.

Davina Cooper has researched several practical efforts to circumvent the dominant logic of neoliberalism in her study 'Everyday Utopias' (2014). Looking at long-established practices like LETS economies, Summerhill School and Speakers' Corner alongside newer projects like a feminist and trans bath-house in Canada that supports a liberated sexual intimacy, she offers an analysis of social functions that exist cheek-by-jowl with existing institutions but carve out a 'utopian conceptual attitude'. For Cooper, rather than addressing

socio-political issues in a confrontational way, like direct action, or seeking to overthrow existing institutions, everyday utopias work by creating the change they wish to see, in acts of 'civil repair' (Cooper 2014, 9). She doesn't offer a totalising method for defining everyday utopias, but distinguishes characteristics that are common. She points out the dynamic quality of utopianism as an ethos applied to complex situations and processes in the understanding that the binaries of success and failure don't hold for these projects. She sees them as indirect sites of judgement that through posing alternatives, shine a light exposing the shortcomings of a reality deemed unchangeable. In their ability to impact on larger discourses, she sees everyday utopias as 'missing from prevailing maps of their field' possibly due to their scale but in contrast to the intensity with which they absorb those who participate. The crux of her argument is in the way she frames the everyday. Henri Lefebvre aims his 'critique of everyday life' at bourgeois decadence and the alienating bifurcation of work and leisure in capitalism, arguing for a 'rehabilitation' of everyday life by posing the question 'Is it not in everyday life that man should fulfil his life as a man?' (Lefebvre 1991, 127). As a utopian vision, with roots in the surrealist defamiliarisation of the commonplace, Lefebvre's critique raises the political stakes of the everyday. Cooper's method of 'extending the everyday into utopia' (2014, 6) focuses more on the pragmatic, mechanical and unsentimental qualities of the quotidian, the 'ethos of digging in and getting things done' (2014, 7) in order to survive. She adds a further element of potential described as a 'critical form of closeness', which comes from the juxtaposition of everyday utopian practices with their hegemonic counterparts, and which distinguishes this approach from something like intentional communities. These 'promising places' as she refers to them in her title get their conceptual strength from the oscillation between *imagining* (creating places to think differently, or create what Raymond Williams describes as new 'structures of feelings') and *actualising* (in the dissenting ways they give material form to critiquing everyday concepts like ownership, equality, care and democracy).

DIY Cinema spaces could certainly be examined as 'promising places'. I will return to how DIY Cinema culture performs this defamiliarisation of the 'everyday' in practical terms in a later section. Amber Day in her recent study *DIY Utopia: cultural imagination and the remaking of the possible*, brings the twin themes together in an edited collection that covers creative acts of resistance and utopian imagining that in her words are 'doing political work by encouraging the desire for alternatives' (Day 2017, xi). Reflexively cognisant of the

potential risk of recuperation she asserts the importance of the DIY utopian impulse on at least four bases. Firstly, like Cooper, she sees a *verfremdungseffekt* in rupturing the everyday through dissenting ways of living and working. She emphasises the significant sense of community that can coalesce around these projects and affirm to participants a shared vision for alternatives. Additionally she sees these practices as guided by a desire to reject cynicism and apathy, which follows onto the 'actual creation of ideas'.

Both Day and Cooper acknowledge the political quality to the Utopian projects they select as examples, but both downplay the militancy that has in many cases been associated with DIY direct action culture (McKay 1998; Stephen Duncombe 2002). Emerging from new social movement theory the term 'prefigurative practice' (Boggs, 1977) has been used to describe similar approaches to those I have described above. More recently, as the connection between reinventing the everyday, and effecting radical structural change has become more tenuous, scholars have sought to distinguish those practices which have a more militant position (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006; Yates 2015). The network of autonomous Social Centres, spaces that have taken inspiration from the autogestione movement in Italy, clearly exemplify similar tactics of creating space for change in the here-and-now, while aiming to connect these practices to wider social struggles that frequently have an anarchist or anti-capitalist stance[41]. Luke Yates (2015) in his article *rethinking prefiguration,* identifies a group of processes at play within the micro-political field. Some of these overlap with indirectly political acts of cultural resistance referred to above, like experimenting and reflecting on the politics of the everyday; developing critical perspectives and establishing new norms of conduct. However for activities to be classed as prefigurative in the way Boggs originally described, they must intervene in the material environment or social order to stake their place and perhaps most importantly diffuse these perspectives thus growing a movement. This last characteristic, for Yates, gives prefigurative practice its explicitly political edge and distinguishes it from sub- or counter-cultural activity. To what extent DIY Cinema performs prefigurative practice in the way Yates describes it will be explored in later sections of this thesis.

These articulations are enormously helpful in tracking the utopian characteristics of DIY, a postmodern culture that emerged in reaction to the totalizing rationale of socialist

[41] See (Autonomous Geographies 2008).

modernity on one hand and a negativist or apathetic relativism on the other. This study explores their application specifically in self-organised cinema spaces in the UK since the 1990s, and how they navigate the tension between emancipatory creativity and a radical, pluralist egalitarianism.

The genealogy of utopian thought I have traced leads to a contemporary mode or practice that seeks to critique and transform the everyday. This brings me to the overarching methodology for this thesis, the utopian sociology of Ruth Levitas' 'Utopia as method.' This method opens up three vistas that will help build a picture of DIY Cinema culture as distinct from other examples of art house or 'amateur' movements like Regional Film Theatres, pop-ups or film societies. Levitas' tri-partite method incorporates archaeological, ontological and architectural modes that together form the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society (IRS) in order to critically reflect on social realities and offer tangible proposals towards social transformation. The *archaeological* mode is a hermeneutic tool for analysing and critiquing the utopian impulse as it is expressed in the contemporary or historical context to learn from or rule out previous attempts. This offered me a useful lens through which to address a history of utopian film exhibition, from the London Film Society through the Federation of Workers' Film Societies, the leftist distributors post WW2 and into the independent film culture of the 1970s and 1980s. It also allows me to examine contemporaneous utopian ideas that DIY Cinema critiques, most notably the policies underlying the cultural industries under New Labour visible in the Arts Council's vision of 'great art for everyone', and the Film Council's effort to synthesise culture and commerce.

Between the archaeological and architectural modes, Levitas places the *ontological* mode, which she describes after Abensour as 'the education of desire'. Within this mode, she asks what forms of humanity utopian projects are seeking to advance. In her research for *Utopia as Method*, her utopian ontological quest is around grace and dignity. The ontology of DIY Cinema concerns egalitarian democracy and freedom, through what Lefebvre describes as 'poesis' or unalienated artistic production. DIY Cinema is also a location for egalitarian sociability and collectivity where there is a 'blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body' (Rancière 2011, 19). DIY Cinema then is also a screening practice that challenges or transforms the conventional relationship between the spectator and the filmmaker/artist as cultivated in the multiplex, the international film festival, the cinematheque and the art cinema press. In

hegemonic culture these relationships are structured hierarchically by power, status, and capital, both economic and cultural. Rancière states that 'an emancipated community is a community of narrators *and* translators' (Rancière 2011, 12). Within DIY cinema environments, the boundary between spectator and film curator breaks down – the DIY cinema is often built, run and programmed by its audiences, with democratic platforms for involvement.

The final element in Levitas' utopian method is the *architectural* mode, which she proposes for analysing or describing real world, concrete utopian efforts. Levitas uses the example of proposing the Universal Basic Income, but much of the recent work on 'prefigurative practice' would come under this heading. I will use this tool to explore the recent model of DIY Cinema culture in the UK, to tease out the utopian praxis it constitutes, offering some defining principles that gives DIY cinema its specificity as a film exhibition practice, marked by a commitment to spectatorship as a collective participatory practice, the enactment of pre-figurative politics and a critical reflexivity that finds its expression in ironic and poetic strategies to de-familiarise the neoliberal 'spectacle' so well served by dominant cinema. The 'architectural' mode flows through the case studies addressing research at the Star and Shadow Cinema, where I am a volunteer and co-founder, and at the Cube Cinema in Bristol.

To summarise so far, this chapter has introduced the ways in which DIY has been addressed in academia either as a prefigurative practice or an example of neoliberal 'good citizenship'. In order to ground my research in the former position, I have adopted the methodology of Ruth Levitas' 'Imaginary Reconstitution of Society', better known as 'utopia as method' which rather than pursuing blueprints for a 'no-place', considers utopia as a 'way of doing'. Levitas' method enables me to discern the existing or historical practices that DIY Cinema responds to or is in dialogue with, using the archaeological mode. Through the architectural mode it gives a framework for outlining the concrete ways DIY cinema activists articulate a counterhegemonic cinema at odds with current classifications of community and event cinema. The second part of this chapter follows the ontological mode, looking at four interconnected concepts through which DIY Cinema activists both reimagine, and make judgments about what constitutes a cinema 'otherwise'.

DIY Cinema in three concepts

In a sense, the next section has shades of a retrospective manifesto for a film culture that has been going for more than two decades. I have settled on three concepts to create entry points into the practice of DIY Cinema, that can be introduced through a set of questions: How does DIY Cinema democratise the exhibition and reception of cinema? How does it configure itself spatially? How does DIY Cinema enact resistance? Organised non-hierarchically and programmed on a participatory model, it is a *democratic* practice, creating a real-world public sphere where communities can explore ideas through cinema and dialogue. Whether fixed in a single building or itinerant, DIY Cinema is a physically located, *spatial* practice committed to providing a real-world refuge for participants to 'stage a difference' (Schober 2013). DIY Cinema is a *resistant* practice. Operating outside of the logic of both the commercial film industry and the state film institution, it resists the dominant narrative of exchange value and the top-down pedagogy or taste 'distinction' of the art establishment. It draws attention to the constructed and mediated nature of the cinema screening and its surrounding discourses by foregrounding the human in contrast to the professional. DIY Cinema, like other DIY practices, reflexively explores the utopian method as a 'complex process, whose failure and struggles are as important as success' (Cooper 2014, 4).

Democracy and Equality: the ontologies of everyday utopianism

I will look at how DIY Cinema expresses democracy in the real terms of collaborative and participatory methods of organizing, but first I want to lay the ground for how that constitutes more abstract notions of equality and legitimacy. To put DIY Cinema exhibition in its sociohistorical context, this practice has evolved through postmodernity and under the influence of postructuralist readings of domination and hierarchy that are irreducible to a single point of class struggle, as prescribed by Marx. Ownership of the means of production is only one amongst many points of struggle including gender, sexuality, race and ability. As a non-hierarchical culture, DIY Cinema follows the Rancièrian logic of equality as a presupposition, to consistently be tested for truth, rather than as a political operation distributed by an authority, and received by a subject. Todd May expands on the argument that liberal theories of equality retain elitism at their core. If there is general agreement that equality is concerned with what all people deserve, from another angle this suggests what

people should receive. These 'distributive' models are concerned with how social goods should be divided up and rolled out to a group or class who are inherently 'passive', objects of the distribution. Kristin Ross, in her introduction to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, describes a 'Bourdieu effect', a tautological loop where unequal social structures are reproduced already merely in the act of recognising them. By naturalising the objectification of the other's inequality, the feasibility of reconciling it remains remote. Althusser's Marxist ambition for equality was predicated on a vanguard of theorists, or the French Communist Party. This, augmented by Brecht, influenced the framework of the IFA vision for British film culture, as a tool for revealing ideological domination to those under its sway. Rancière's critique, laid out in *Althusser's Lesson* was that Althusserian thought focused the responsibility of theory in the hands only of intellectuals, whose revelations would spur the action of the masses. Rancière's rejection of Althusser is the 'rejection of the role of the intellectual as one of telling people who they are, who they should be, and how they should become it' (May 2012).

That implicit hierarchy is problematic for Rancière, so he proposes equality as a process and a point of departure, rather than a goal to lead people towards, which dovetails with the 'method versus blueprint' nature of current utopian studies, and the 'doingness' of DIY. I prefer this way of reading DIY cinema to a Bourdieusian perspective that emphasises subcultural capital and countercultural distinction, a route that has been followed by some scholars of punk music (e.g. O'Connor 2016), microcinema (de Ville 2015) and even the Cube Microplex itself (Mamali, n.d.). It goes someway to understand why the issue of class consciousness has slipped from the main agenda within DIY culture, to be replaced by a reflexive attention to equality. Within the example of the Star and Shadow, the diversity of active participants across class, age, gender and sexuality, if not always race, transcends the pigeon-holing of this as a subculture with closed codes. Equality as a value is cultivated above 'distinction'.

How can this attitude towards equality inform the ways democracy is conceived within DIY Cinema? In Chantal Mouffe's article 'Critique as Counter-Hegemonic Intervention' (2008), she clearly lays out two positions from which to stage critiques of democracy, one following the 'exodus' notion of autonomous organisation, which on first inspection would presumably include DIY Cinema; and the other engaging directly in the public sphere through a chain of equivalence between institutions, trade unions and political parties: the 'withdrawal from' and the 'engagement with'. These she sees as not only incompatible but

stemming from two distinct ontological positions. The former she associates with Hardt, Negri and Virno's 'immanentist', view that a future is possible without conflict, whereby the multitude (the proletariat revised for the era of Empire) creates a harmonious system beyond capitalism. This stems from a belief in democracy as a totalizing space of liberty and common action. The perspective she prefers views democracy as innately conflictual, and that staging anti-hegemonic critique should be done in the main arenas of hegemonic power – engagement with, rather than withdrawal from. Her issue with the 'exodus' conceptualisation is that it fails to account for the 'necessarily conflictual nature' (2014) of a pluralist democracy, and in its withdrawal, refuses to name an adversary, a potentially dangerous tactic that could prove disempowering. Davina Cooper's definition of everyday utopianism, however, allows for these two positions to co-exist, both staging the critique and experimenting with alternative approaches that do not close off passionate disagreement. For her, DIY spaces provide a site of judgement to both 'expose' problems and 'pose' alternatives (2014, 5). She emphasises the importance of 'critical closeness' (9) that flows from the productive disjuncture of radical activity within the otherwise hegemonic city space, and at the same time the pressure this can exert and the channels this can open up when working near or in collaboration with institutions.

So far, the reader could be forgiven for thinking DIY Cinema spaces are islands of autonomy unaffected by external forces, however this is far from the truth. All of the groups I would cast under this typology have greater or lesser relationships with institutional bodies like local authorities, universities, funding agencies, it is just that they seek to critique from as autonomous a position as they can, from a position of 'critical closeness'. The ontological aspiration of democracy then rests not in a Mouffian conception of pure agonism, nor entirely that of Hardt and Negri, or Virno's idea of 'Exodus', but in an everyday utopian position of trial and error. I would argue this contests Mouffe's preference of the 'institution' as the zone of agonistic critique. Parallel grassroots spaces for counter-hegemonic praxis are not examples of mere 'desertion', they are part of social movements that connect up into a larger chain of equivalence. As Szczelkun remarks in his conclusion about Exploding Cinema, 'it can be seen as a forum that could… act outside of, or at least relatively independent of, system interests. In this way it can compensate for the blind spots in systemically framed discourses' (364). The ontology underpinning this is neither 'democracy as conflict', nor 'democracy as harmony', but one that oscillates between these positions, resisting new

hegemonies because that is implicit in the reflexive attitude of everyday utopianism. There is no perfect end, only imperfect processes of improvement. In application, the functioning of these DIY spaces leans towards grassroots, direct democracy, where members of collectives decide directly on initiatives, rather than through representation or top-down management structures.

DIY pedagogy – communities of practice

Guided by the DIY ethic, this mode of exhibition recognises the potential to self-teach through cinema as both a language: the various forms of films; and an apparatus: how to project, how to even build an auditorium. Moreover, sharing that knowledge collectively, outside of professionalized or hierarchical frameworks, engenders a radical community of practice. Organised using transparent, open access methods of grass-roots management, considerations of democracy are incorporated into the fabric of the group. Film texts are operationalised to trigger broader conversations that look beyond cinema as an aesthetic realm, and towards lived experience on ethical, material, political and metaphysical grounds. This is not theorised as top-down pedagogy, as might have been the case with the 'cinema as social practice' of the workshop movement. Instead it is bottom-up, collective auto-didacticism, whereby the communal space afforded by the cinema activates a shared reading, often vocalised in the moment, in the auditorium or associated social space.

The Star and Shadow film retreat, *Losing the Plot* (LTP) is a case in point, and I look at that in detail later on in the thesis. At LTP, the audience of (*a priori*) emancipated spectators (Rancière) grows as a relational community over a long weekend of screenings, interspersed with meals and walks. The aggregated interpretive potential of the audience-as-collective grows with each film, and by the end of the event people are sharing and building group knowledge based on a very different pedagogic paradigm, one happening within and for democracy. Lave and Wenger's situated learning theory can be applied to this form of education, distinct from paternalistic approaches. Rather than occurring in traditional school-like relationships, reproduced in the 'lecture' format of the film specialist, or the TED talk, situated learning happens through participation in communities of practice[42].

[42] A 'Community of Practice' describes the way a group learns through practice and participation, following a process of 'legitimate peripheral participation' moving from newcomers, to novices, to mastery of certain knowledge (Lave and Wenger 1991).

For DIY Cinema, the film screening is only one aspect of a larger community of practice, where learning happens organically, and through self-determination, as a more equitable and democratic process. As communities of practice, acquiring the skills of film projection, curatorial research, sound engineering, how to clean the lines on the bar, film print logistics, fabricating spaces, mending technical equipment and where the mops are all happen outside of formal training processes. This follows into the way information, work flows and operational skills are democratised, particularly in the two case studies I am focusing on within this thesis, Star and Shadow and The Cube. Open access platforms for engagement are at the core of both organisations. Offline, this revolves around volunteers participating in the communities of practice I referred to above, alongside a schedule of open, facilitated meetings pertaining to film or event programming, or operational issues to do with the building.

Both organisations have embraced online, open source frameworks to facilitate an autogestive approach to running a cultural space. Although open source development methodologies have been heavily recuperated into the functioning of big business, through the late 1990s and early 2000s these approaches provided new possibilities for collective activity as a decentralised, distributed approach that differed from the tight, boundaried collectives of the workshop movement. The Cube has a long history of working at the intersection of art and open source culture, coding its own 'toolkit', an online content management system that effectively manages the operation of the building. The Cube and Star and Shadow both use wikis for hosting information to avoid 'knowledge ghettos' where one person is a gatekeeper. By posting instructional information like lists of film distributors, how to operate a DCP projector, where the switch to turn the heating off can be found, or contact details for beer suppliers, journalists or legal aid, participants can access the mechanics of the organisation quickly and independently. As part of the situated learning context, 'legitimate peripheral participation' is supported within the community of practice, so people seek help from the more experienced when they need to understand something better, rather than information being released in a hierarchical management structure.

Cultural democracy and the right to speak

Within the Film Society movement, committees and audiences have engaged in democratic processes of film selection. Extending and further democratizing the structures of the film

society movement, DIY Cinema hands over the right to speak to, and within, a body politic, to its participants, irrespective of identity. Participants can practice the freedom to explore and share ideas and desires, in cult, activist, avant-garde or popular cinema. This grounding gives legitimacy to a polyphony of voices, and the capability to represent a plurality of positions core to contemporary democracy. Stefan Szczelkun points towards this notion in his Habermassian analysis of Exploding Cinema as a public sphere designed around communicative rationality, that which is oriented to achieving, sustaining and reviewing consensus. This constitutes a significant, conscious shifting of focus away from exclusively aesthetics and taste cultivation that we find in normative modes of alternative film exhibition, towards the cinema as a community of practice. However, we have acknowledged that this process is contingent upon difference, and difference that is not always easily reconciled.

The right to freedom of speech has been a cornerstone of avant-garde and transgressive, underground culture, and within DIY Cinema it is inflected with a sense of mutuality that serves to regulate the flashpoints where free speech reproduces existing forms of oppression or falls into hate speech. This is a contested area within DIY Cinemas in the UK. Creating open, non-hierarchical organisational structures, and in some cases open programming policies can lead to conflicts that are hard to reconcile. Consensus decision making, a mechanism that has grown in popularity since the G8 protests, and which was used systematically within the Occupy movement, offers a process to resolve disputes, and reach agreement through direct democracy. This process creates a space for agonistic deliberation, but seeks collective reconciliation rather than a 'new hegemony' as prescribed by Mouffe. An example at the Star and Shadow Cinema in 2012 involved the programming of an Israeli jazz musician and filmmaker, Gilad Atzmon, who proposed screening films he described as anti-Zionist. This provoked strong reactions amongst the wider Star and Shadow community and its audiences, drawing objection on the grounds of anti-Semitism. Others felt that the cinema could provide an 'agonistic space' for confronting this issue, partly as a defence of freedom of speech. After a four hour consensus process where opposing positions were aired and discussed, a consensus was reached to cancel the event – conflict was made possible, as was reconciliation. This example points towards a greater complexity within the democratic structures created by DIY Cinema exhibitors, contextualising the broad 'right to speak' within a mutualist, consensus-oriented framing.

Furthermore, Mouffe seems to imagine an idealised citizenry who's political passions trump any other discourse of power present in the democratic space. Following my above arguments about the DIY mode's resistance to normative power relations, I would argue that the consensus-based format develops relationships of trust which empowers citizens to enact their right to speak, while the normative discourses of power within institutions tends to limit that. My own experience of Q & A sessions in institutional settings tend to bear this out, where audiences are tentative and risk-averse in their participation, and a hidden consensus hangs over the collective experience of the work in question, honouring the conventional hierarchical power dynamics of curator and audience. This places the importance of cultural democracy, as opposed to the exclusionary forms found in institutional settings, at the heart of DIY Cinema.

A Spatial practice - From Caves to Commons

The question of how space is produced has to be considered then, when forming an understanding of the distinctiveness of the DIY mode of film exhibition. While the exact procedures differ between cinemas organised around the DIY mode of exhibition, one thing they all share in common is the importance of the relationship between audiences and films, situated in a physical place. Technological developments have increased the scope for cinema to exist in all places, through network-connected smart devices, improvements in digital home projection, and multi-national, online media providers. While the expansion of television in the 1960s, and the VCR in the 1980s threatened cinema as a physical space, the film exhibition industry has shown a resilience to decline particularly over the last ten years.

In the growing field of New Cinema History, scholars have sought to move beyond the exclusivity of the film text to analyse the social history of cinema cultures, focusing on the site of cinema as one of social and cultural exchange (Maltby, Allen, and Stokes 2007; Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers 2011). The architecture, and the atmosphere of the cinema site, laden with symbolic value creates a set of spatial relations that combine with the personal experience of the individual to produce the movie-going experience as a spatialized social and cultural practice (Ravazzoli 2016). In this section I want to set the scene by following Anna Schober's research into the European counter-cultural cinema space as a 'good cave'. I will then draw on Henri Lefebvre's thoughts about spatial relations found running through theories of everyday utopianism, before offering some reflections on the spatial makeup of

DIY Cinema as one of human-scale and community-oriented, drawing conclusions about this mode of film exhibition as a place of social possibility in the urban commons.

In Schober's article *City-Squats: The cinema-space as a cave for politics* (2007) she likens cinema to the myth of the cave. She suggests that, as a space interlocked with the city as a site of consumerism, the cinema is a cave where we can hide from visibility and construct ourselves through aesthetic rituals and cultural gestures. A turn of phrase, a wardrobe selection, or a pattern of behaviour may be performed after discreet study in the cinema, and one can 'dream of ideal bodies and can forget one's own, perceived imperfect body' (31). However alongside these 'classical' cinema caves, she finds other tactics that create the cinema as a 'good cave'.

Basing her research predominantly on continental European examples, she presents two formations of the good cave – the first as one of sensuality, eroticism and bodily excess; where one can be united with others in a protected space, borrowing from the idea of Mithraic temples, often built into caves to conceal them from the public. For this womb-like cave, she submits examples from Peter Kubelka's uterine family envisaged in the *Invisible Cinema* (1970-1974), to Niki de Saint Phalle's[43] *Hon. She. A Cathedral. Factory. Whale. Noah's Ark. Mama* (1966), a giant, 82 foot sculpture of a woman, entered through the vagina, inside which could be found a coca cola machine, a 'lover's nest', a planetarium and a 12 seat cinema in the left arm. In these spaces, the cinema embodies an end point or resting place that dissents from patriarchal or capitalist orders, providing a haven for 'corporality, safety, equality, justice, refuge' (35).

Charting a leftist history of European film exhibition through Dadaism and Surrealism, the Cinema Lettriste, the Situationists, Expanded Cinema, neo-avant-garde collectives, cineaste, feminist and activist clubs and the squatting scene, her other image departs from Plato's allegory of the cave. Rather than accept the position of prisoner, she describes activists' efforts to use the screening experience to escape bondage, as a 'space from which emancipation can start,' (31) through deconstructing dominant myths and replacing them with powerful alternatives not just to shape cinema but a new world. She lays this argument out in a way that bears resemblance to the vanguardist culture of the IFA, where activist screening projects insist that the public should be 'induced, that is should be informed,

[43] Schober notes that de Saint Phalle courageously assumed authorship of this sculpture which involved the collaboration of Jean Tinguely, Per Olaf Ultvedt and others (Schober 2007, 33).

shocked or seduced to stepping from the cave of everyday life into a 'new' and 'better' life' (39). Her caveats are two-fold: firstly following the general critique of apparatus theory, she underscores the fact that this discourse relies on the 'prisoner of the image' back in Plato's Cave having no agency to resist or transcend this state of affairs. Secondly she points to the 'open contest' of ideas outside of the cinema where these visions have to do battle to become effective. Her defence is that these 'caves' have the effect of creating communities, and provide spaces from which to 'stage a beginning' (40) that could be continued deeper into the fabric of everyday life.

Thus there is no guarantee of emancipation, but there is still a potential that can be activated as a community. This is the streak of optimism I want to seize on in relation to DIY Cinema as a mode of exhibition that, while celebratory of the agency of the individual spectator to read, resist and play with the dominant image, is inspired by and catalyses the potential of the 'good cave'. Even though this does not necessarily entail lawless actions, she describes this as a form of 'squatting' cinema spaces, be they in actual auditoria, or ephemeral events in parks, abandoned shops, libraries and cafés (40-41), activating a conflict around the qualities of a common world. DIY Cinema continues in this tradition of occupying a space that can be seen simultaneously as nurturing refuge, and place of possibility. This type of space reasserts the importance of propinquity, and the role of face to face interaction in the building of public space. The spectatorial agency of DIY Cinema is therefore oriented towards the collective and the community rather than the individual.

The shifting notion of 'community' is contingent on the spatial relations cultivated in a particular place. Richard Butsch has produced work on the changes to the architectural space of cinema theatres in the early 20th Century as a redefinition of audiences 'from crowds to individuals' (Evans 2011, 329). Evans refers to Allen and Gomery's label of 'unstructured groups' (1985) and Ian Jarvie's suggestion, in the 1980s, that cinema can be nothing more than 'congregating strangers' (1985), sharing physical space but lacking any other ties. Evans follows Jancovich's conclusion, based on anecdotal evidence in Nottingham, that audiences have stronger interpersonal bonds, complicating previous theories. Moving on from Benedict Anderson's idea of 'Imagined Communities', Evans suggests that independent art cinema audiences need to be considered as 'indirect communities', who identify with each other 'based on taste, ideology and etiquette despite lacking direct, consistent interaction'. Evans links this form of community to a shared habitus, built around middle class values, etiquettes

and codes of behaviour. She does allow for a political dimension to step closer to the fore, in the way her research showed that audiences attend independent art cinemas because they want such spaces to thrive, lest they be lost, and at the same time offering an opportunity for audiences to 'break free from an overt commercial culture'. This form of community is taken further in DIY Cinema, because the spatial practice is one of community building, and the financial exchange is played down, or removed entirely in some cases. The likelihood of being simultaneously a spectator and a worker/volunteer means that 'direct, consistent interaction' is actually a possibility. Considering at the examples of The Cube and Star and Shadow, hundreds of people are oscillating between the role of spectator and worker, the sense of community is that much stronger, and emphasised at all opportunities.

The idea I am foregrounding here then is that space is not just bricks and mortar, but is produced and 'replenished by various and invisible charges: enthusiasm, fascinations, wishes, imagination, memories, fears, disavowals as well as various projects and projections' (Schober 2013, 19). This line of thinking rests on the shoulders of Henri Lefebvre's triadic interpretation of space as lived (*vécu*), designed or conceived (*conçu*) and perceived (*perçu*). His emphasis is on how hegemonic space is produced, which he refers to as 'abstract space' – the environments, riven with hidden or visible discourses of power, that create a complicit consensus around bourgeois values. The production of the normative cinema space can be interpreted through this system. The cinema space is 'perceived' by its user, as a material experience of 'spatial practice', through the everyday act of going to the pictures. What corridor leads where, which doors are accessible and which out of bounds, what areas are dark and require careful negotiation of others, how do you get to the bathroom mid-way through a screening. The emphasis here is on the physical experience of space, rather than a mental interpretation of space.

The second element of this triad exists in the realm of idealism – spaces are conceived by the stakeholders with most power, like architects, planners, developers and governmental institutions, according to the given dominant system. Conceptions include plans, maps, and visions, and constitute abstract rather than material 'representations of space'. The recent growth of boutique cinema chains could be considered in this light – what city-space is available and how can it be maximised for profit, or how can a cinema space be organised to increase points of sale, as we see in the large lobbies designed into multiplexes and arranged around concession stands. The conceptual transition of cinema from

amusement park to nickelodeon to movie palace to take advantage of the economies of scale, as described by Douglas Gomery (1992), offers a historical example of how 'abstract space' is produced and reproduced according to the values of the market.

The final process in Lefebvre's triad considers the lived experience of 'representational space', the way symbolic meanings are enacted in spatial form, and read, sensed, and contested by people that pass through. It embodies inhabitants' 'local knowledge' and feelings about the space they are occupying. It is in this 'moment' that Lefebvre sees the always-available potential to envision and realise alternatives. The posters and demonstrations of May '68 exemplified this urge for Lefebvre, as too did the avant-gardist tactics of the Situationist International, and the Surrealists, with whom Lefebvre had been actively involved. My understanding here is that the symbolic language of recuperation, through imagery, marches or demonstrations are an attempt to reconcile the disempowerment felt through the interplay between perceived and conceived space.

Hannah Winkle, in her blog about Chicago's Critical Mass, overlays Lefebvre's triad with the concerns of pro-bike activists, to point towards the possibility of change. The representational space embodies the ideals of critical mass participants as they represent their vision for a bike friendly city through occupying the streets. This inspires others to join and voice their opinions in front of decision makers, to alter the way conceived space is produced. City plans may start to include dedicated bicycle lanes, which improves 'spatial practice' for citizens as they perceive the possibility of cycling as an everyday rather than purely recreational habit, thus reducing dependence on cars.[44]

In some instances, DIY Cinema maps onto Lefebvre's triad in a similar way to Chicago's Critical Mass demonstrations. Screenings animate hegemonic space in order to bring attention to new possibilities. Cinematic interventions in squats, like Exploding Cinema's early days, or screenings at Hori-zone, the convergence camp set up to resist the Gleneagles G8, or the subterranean catacomb in Paris where activists ran a clandestine cinema protected by makeshift security including motion-triggered recordings of dogs barking, all point to this form of representational space.

These projects run parallel to another tendency, the effort to take full ownership of a space which extends beyond representation to include the act of conception too. Star and

[44] Hannah Anderson 'Chicago's Critical Mass and the Transportation of Everyday Life', [accessed 10 December 2020].

Shadow Cinema and The Cube, both of which are co-operatives run without wage labour, have taken the step of purchasing their buildings, in an effort to disapply the current logic of gentrification from their spaces. While the vestiges of private ownership remain in the legal structure of the co-op, because there is a distinction between a co-op's membership and the general public, it constitutes a step towards the commons, and the practice of 'commoning' that in its real-world application is fundamentally based on spatial relations.

The commons does not only exist in real space but online space too. Of significance to DIY culture's development through the late 90s and early 2000s is the digital commons, characterized by open source software development and free access to knowledge production and consumption through platforms like Wikipedia, alongside new IP legal attributions like creative commons. As both a physical resource and a social process of use has a long history. However in the UK the term 'commons' is heavily associated with the class-bound conflict of enclosure that saw peasant land-use restricted and private property rights exerted over land that once was shared. The term has gained favour recently after the Nobel Prize for Economics was awarded to Elinor Ostrom, in 2009, for her body of work exploring physical, intellectual and social commons. Commons provide space and resources for communities to gather and form under the auspices of an alternative value system – the commons. Under the pressures of successive neoliberal governments, the notion of public space has become contested, and trust in the state to steward its assets in the interests of its citizens has been damaged. The pattern is very common, of strapped local authorities placing their chips on big property developers to regenerate urban centres, bringing the latest in shopping and leisure precincts, luxury flats and student accommodation, often incorporating the alluring idea of cinema into their plans. 'Meanwhile spaces' have filled the cracks, allowing developers to minimise the running costs of their assets while they wait for the perfect moment to knock down and rebuild. DIY Cinema projects are only one of a number of likely cultural groupings to fill these 'meanwhile spaces'. The case studies I am looking at have pushed back at the market logic of urban development, by purchasing their buildings, and at the same time found an alternative route for sharing culture outside of an over-reliance on state funding. They represent a co-operative form of commoning.

Commoning, according to David Bollier is a verb that points to a set of social practices: acts of mutual support, conflict, negotiation, communication and experimentation needed to create systems to manage shared resources. Commoners 'reclaim their common

wealth' in both the material and political sense, rolling back the pervasive privatisation and marketization of shared resources, and reasserting greater participatory control over those resources and community life. In the case of DIY cinema, this is about creating the mutualized resources required for sharing film culture.

More recently it has been applied to degrowth economics and urban ecological activism such as rooftop farms and guerrilla gardening. For instance Euler and Gauditz refer to Commoning as a fourfold process that breaks with the exclusionary logic of private property, prioritising actual use rather than ownership, and is based on contribution rather than exchange, sharing what you can and using what you need (2016). Architectural scholar Stavros Stavrides sees commons as 'threshold space', a dynamic zone where social change happens. For him it is also a practice that he refers to as 'expansive commoning' (Stavrides 2014), emphasizing the important ways groups live the process of commoning to resist accumulation of power, and welcome newcomers to prevent commons from ossifying into enclaves or institutions. Hence commoning is a way of producing space.

The way DIY Cinema produces space follows this format closely, occupying space for the needs of a community rather than for profit, reinvesting creative labour into the community of participants, and opening up the means of production to the commons. DIY Cinema as a form of commoning focuses on the social possibility inherent in the cinematic event, situated in common space. While Schober articulates this with the metaphor of the cave, I argue that DIY Cinema has shifted over time from cave to commons, through a process of opening up, or 'open-source' organisational design. The concept of commoning is counterhegemonic because it runs directly against the privatising agenda of neoliberalism. I have shown above how democratic and spatial relations interact in DIY Cinema to point towards a different vision for cinema, but these also constitute forms of cultural resistance.

Resistance

How does DIY Cinema constitute a resistant practice? First, I want to explore the term and its relevance to DIY Cinema in contrast to others that have been deployed to analyse cinema critically outside of the mainstream, before moving on to analysing the specific terrains upon which DIY Cinema expresses resistance. The political film culture of the 1970s represented in the coalition of the Independent Filmmakers Association, has recently received a surge in scholarship. The first significant history of this period was compiled by Margaret Dickinson,

who recognising the 'tangle of political, economic and aesthetic motivations' (Dickinson 1999, 2) sets out a thorough exploration of appropriate terms. Foregoing 'independent', 'non-commercial', 'experimental', 'alternative', 'revolutionary' and 'avant-garde', she adopts 'oppositional' as a term that implies 'taking a position within a struggle' (4). The rise of cultural studies and critical theory has elevated the term 'resistant', which better characterizes the position taken by DIY Cinema. In the period between the IFA culture described by Dickinson, the co-ordinates of struggle shifted from an institutionally-integrated oppositional bloc to a scattered multitude of activists developing tactics to circumvent or experiment with alternatives to the neo-liberal status quo.

While 'oppositional' suggests a binary, monolithic fixity based on a negation, 'resistant' carries a more flexible, tactical approach to dissent, appropriate for a culture that tries to be simultaneously 'anti-', 'despite-' and 'post-' capitalism (Chatterton 2010 in Lawson 2013, 13). While it can be deployed with an explicitly political meaning, 'resistance' is often used to describe cultural acts and formations that provide a starting point for imagining new political subjectivities outside of capitalism. The expression of cultural resistance has been considered both as a 'problem' and for its 'promise'. According to Duncombe (2007) early 20th Century views within the Chicago School conflated resistance with deviance, seeing it as upsetting the equilibrium of the social order, and therefore as something that needed to be resolved. Rather than resorting to conservative acts of repression, these sociologists preferred the route of sublimation, creating useful and 'improving' activities for young people involved in dance hall or gang culture.

The CCCS saw a political potential in the forms of resistance displayed by youth cultures in the de-industrializing Britain of the 1970s. Informed by Gramsci's emphasis on the importance of culture as a battlefield for changing hearts and minds, the Birmingham School theorists saw the political promise of youth rebellion through punk, reggae and other working-class subcultural forms. Post-subcultural studies have complicated the picture of subcultural resistance, questioning the notion that subcultures were primarily working-class constructs, and casting doubt on the radicalism of stylistic codes that are so consistent with individualized, neoliberal patterns of consumption and escape. However recent scholarship around zines, DIY music scenes and activism have utilized the term 'resistant' to describe practices, sometimes subcultural, that attempt to consciously contest the discourses of power normalized within neoliberal social systems. Whether it be DIY tape labels, Reclaim

the Streets or screenings in squatted business premises, cultural resistance is a form of prefigurative practice to test alternatives to neoliberal norms.

For Foucault, power is not only expressed through 'sovereign' repression, but more efficiently through the discreet, normalizing patterns of everyday life in hegemony, as he termed it 'disciplinary power'. Creating a new set of norms through an ethical self-awareness of discourses of power inherent to patriarchy, class, race, sexuality, capital (both economic and cultural) is central to the forms of cultural resistance exercised by DIY Cinema, which attempts to problem-solve power and privilege while building empowering forms of political community, characterized as 'anti-oppression'.

Duncombe (2002) offers a typology of cultural resistance based around 'means' and 'scales'. Culture can convey resistance through its *content*, for example the lyrical content of punk music. The *form* influences the transmission of culture, as McLuhan is often quoted, 'the medium is the message'. Duncombe suggests that the meaning and impact of culture lies dormant until it is activated through the means of *interpretation* and finally the simple *activity* of producing culture resonates with political meaning. These various means of cultural communication play out on 'scales of resistance' that span from self-conscious, individual tactics of survival, through subcultural appropriation and rebellion to the ultimate ends of consciously political activity on the scale of society as a whole, or revolution. DIY Cinema calibrated against this scale oscillates between varying positions but gravitates towards 'rebellion' considering it operates within the framework of neoliberal, pluralist democracy, even if it seeks to contest the norms and codes of that regime. In isolation many of these characteristics could be applied to pop-ups, film clubs, or core-funded arthouse cinemas. DIY Cinema happens through a synthesis of these qualities calling for the recognition of a different position, one of alterity, or 'outsideness' as one Star and Shadow volunteer asserted[45].

I will look at various aspects of resistance as articulated in DIY Cinema, starting with the relationship between form, content and context. I will then move on to analyse how DIY Cinema resists hierarchical power relations both organisationally and culturally, before exploring the value system embodied in the 'DIY ethic', which prioritises use-value over exchange-value. I will analyse form and content together as that which is programmed for

[45] Adrin Neatrour (Star and Shadow volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, Newcastle, August 2018.

exhibition. Context covers the qualities of the screening experience, from the way a film is introduced, to the material conditions of the space, and the way it has been organised or marketed. The form and content of DIY Cinema is extremely variable, and spans conventional art house material on general release, to historical, cult and para-cinema, to Queer Cinema, activist documentary, amateur and avant-garde film, obsolete ephemera from archives of educational and industrial film, embracing a chaotic heterogeneity of points of view, ranging from the subtle to the explicit, the subversive to the didactic, the sacred to the profane. The screening of material marginalised by market forces due to its duration, aesthetics, or subject matter is a strong motivating factor within DIY Cinema, which separates it from the more uncontroversial forms of 'film appreciation' preferred by UK film society culture, and the more dependable fare from smaller distributors. The Collectif-Jeune-Cinema in Paris would term this material 'cinéma différent', in the publication they produced an astonishing twenty six times between 1976-1980. Geared towards forms of filmmaking that defied both market norms and 'official culture', they promoted a cinema 'expérimental, d'avant-garde, autre, indépendant, personnel, underground, même, d'intervention, parallèle, nouveau, singulier, militant, de création, d' art...' (Bassan 2014). The BFI's inscription of 'specialised' covers feature documentaries, subtitled foreign language film, and re-releases of archival/classic films, but this only scratches the surface of DIY Cinema's 'off-programming'. The Cube's programme mixes recent releases from the alternative end of the spectrum with archival oddities from the scrap-bin of straight-to-video. The Horse Hospital's KinoKulture[46] has been purveying a rich seam of weirdness and underground marginalia for a quarter of a century, as London's 'Temple of the Underground', with esoteric programme compilations like 'Satansploitation' and 'Kino Ketaminema'. Scalarama affiliated programming has injected almost 1400 films[47] into every corner of the land, inspired by the boundary-pushing selections of the Scala Cinema in London. Full Unemployment Cinema (FUC)[48] screened films about work and the struggle against it between 2007-2015 often at the Common House social centre in Bethnal Green. Similarly, films with a less explicitly subversive form or content are also screened commonly within these spaces, films that regularly show up on lists of the

[46] 'Archive', *The Horse Hospital*, https://www.thehorsehospital.com/archive [accessed 10 December 2020].
[47] 'Scalarama's Films' https://letterboxd.com/scalarama/films/ [accessed 10 December 2020].
[48] 'FUC Screening | Full Unemployment Cinema', https://fullunemploymentcinema.wordpress.com/category/fuc-screening/ [accessed 10 December 2020].

top 100, mainstays of global cinephilia. The content and form of films veers from the poetics of slow cinema to expanded events with multiple 16mm projectors, to activist DVDs. Low resolution material streamed from the internet shares screens with scratched and worn 35mm film prints. What marks these screenings as resistant is the context in which they are programmed, promoted and exhibited.

While there is no fixed context for DIY Cinema, there are tendencies in common that articulate cultural resistance through how and where films are screened and organised. I will explore this concept further in relation to DIY Cinema as a spatial practice, but by way of introduction, the context of cinema, as the prime interface between the film text and the audience, includes the combined effects of the physical environment and the possibilities that are brought into play through its activation of certain resistant discourses. In the conventional arthouse cinema, as in the art gallery, the concert hall, or other places deemed 'high' culture, a set of behavioural codes, or 'dispositif' (Foucault) sets the tone for what is imaginable as a participant-spectator. Values like silence, orderliness and restraint in the cinema auditorium are cultivated alongside a normalizing of the top-down diffusion of culture from specialist curators, programmers and critics, leaving scarce room for audiences to interact as a collective body. In contrast to the utilitarian efficiency of many multiplexes, decorated by cardboard simulacra of upcoming releases, the classically-driven aesthetics of contemporary arthouse cinema interiors, predicated on the public display of luxury in lush fabrics, elegant colours and comfort-gadgets like in-seat wine-coolers, co-ordinate the movie-going experience around the imperative to consume. The occasional q & a between experts is likely to be organised from on a stage or podium at the front of the auditorium, with audience interaction being logistically complicated and fraught with vulnerability. While recent trends to engage audiences in participatory programming, these are often tokenistic and limited in scope. In contrast to this normative mode of film exhibition, DIY Cinemas create a context that is architecturally, socially and culturally geared around the dynamic between the human and the collective, resistant to top-down modes of cultural classification and dissemination. The 'low' context of the DIY Cinema alters the possibilities of engaging with 'high' film culture, and simultaneously provides space for revaluing the discarded.

Where normative arthouse exhibitors invest in the exchange value of the cinematic experience, through restoration of movie-palace-era motifs and boutique add-ons focused on enhancing their unique selling points, DIY Cinemas use context to invest in the use-value

of screening films. Using unspectacular spaces, non-professional presentation and human interaction rather than an emphasis on customer service, the DIY screening context creates spaces and moments for the collective body to perceive itself, interact and generate new value out of the cinematic experience. This tactic has been characteristic of underground screening spaces, as Szczepaniak-Gillece describes in the case of groups like Anthology Film Archives and Black Gate[49] who embraced the 'potential of dystopia and the unglamorous but 'authentic' experiences of the experimental' (2018). In her analysis of American post-war movie-theatres, she proposes that the underground cinema invites comparison to Walter Benjamin's notion of the ruin. The dystopia of the derelict, post-industrial space becomes a site of potency.

The tendency for occupying derelict city space is characteristic of DIY Cinema. Liverpool Small Cinema set up in a former magistrate's court on Victoria Street in central Liverpool. Star and Shadow existed in a neglected warehouse in Newcastle's Ouseburn until they developed a new site at an old SCS furniture showroom. The Cube re-animated a building on the edge of Stokes Croft, an area that has been a crucible for consistent waves of grassroots counter-culture since the 1960s, alongside pawn shops and massage parlours[50]. Rather than invoking stability and closure signified in the foregrounding of aesthetic harmony within the normative arthouse cinema, these 'ruined' spaces become a potent site of allegory, capable (in stage 1 gentrification) of evading commodity fetishism, while simultaneously critiquing and pointing towards alternative pathways of progress consistent with the motivations of everyday utopianism. The dynamic between form, content and context then articulates resistance to a hegemonic value system dictated by the market. What value system does DIY Cinema enact as an alternative?

Holtzman, Hughes and Van Meter in their chapter in 'Constituent Imagination' (2007), refer to DIY as a two-step process. The first addresses a value inversion, in terms of foregrounding use value over exchange value, hence it is often considered as guided by anti-consumerism. Secondly DIY reconstructs power dynamics through the creation of relationships or 'counter-institutions' that are based on principles and structures that run

[49] The Gate was an underground cinema in New York.
[50] Armin Beverungen and Fabian Frenzel, 'Stokes Croft: The Saga of One British Neighbourhood Reveals the Perverse Injustices of Gentrification', *The Conversation*, http://theconversation.com/stokes-croft-the-saga-of-one-british-neighbourhood-reveals-the-perverse-injustices-of-gentrification-82010 [accessed 10 December 2020].

perpendicular to the vertical arrangements within capitalist production. The twin themes of emphasising use value over exchange value, and embodying a structural, organisational horizontalism, are key characteristics of a DIY approach to cinema exhibition. Cinema's relationship to the commodity is long and tense. Since cinema left the fairground and the music hall in favour of the theatre auditorium, it quickly evolved into an astonishingly efficient industry capable of generating enormous profits. How this fed back into film production, and the ways films are exhibited has been well documented and critiqued, nowhere more poetically than in Jonas Mekas' 'Anti-100 Years of Cinema Manifesto' (Mekas in MacKenzie 2014). Mekas exemplifies par excellence the impulse felt by filmmakers, exhibitors and cinephiles to fight for cinema's redemption from the power of capital. DIY Cinema is only one iteration in a long line of activities that subordinate the commodity value of film to the aesthetic, intellectual, educational or transgressive value of cinema. I have alluded to the form and content of DIY Cinema programming, that gives precedence to films pushed into the margins by market forces. Accessibility for audiences is a priority, so tickets are significantly cheaper than conventional cinemas. While significantly lower, overheads can't be dismissed altogether, however many DIY Cinemas have a policy of offering free tickets on a sliding scale particularly when programming with disenfranchised groups like asylum seekers and refugees. Films are presented often in connection with activist causes, or to represent smaller, artist-run collectivities with precarious relationships to arts funding. Often these screenings serve to create a grass-roots critical forum for engaging in alternative aesthetics, or the politics of identity, locality or issues that have a geopolitical impact like climate change, migration and globalisation. This engagement happens through building a community within the cinema space, made-up of equals, who are free and as comfortable as possible to express their views, concerns and ideas in the public sphere. The film text becomes one aspect of the cinematic experience, the collective reception rising to a position of equal significance.

It is not just in the presentation of film culture that DIY Cinema seeks to foreground use-value. DIY Cinemas offer a useful resource within local communities, because they have basic amenities, projectors, PA systems and social spaces. For community organising, open meetings and one-off screenings this is a priceless means of support for neighbourhoods and other communities of interest. In the neoliberal context of New Labour and the austerity measures of the coalition and Tory governments, expectations have been that organisations

entrepreneurialise and monetise their resources. The swingeing cuts to the public sector have disproportionately hurt those in the poorest areas (Hastings et al. 2015), and it is often in these contested grounds where DIY Cinema spaces operate. Between 2011/12 and 2015/16 in Newcastle, budgets were cut by 22% in real terms. 37% of the population of Newcastle lives within the most deprived 10% of areas in England[51]. The adverse effects of this impact on community spaces like libraries, youth centres and adult education resources as well as on cultural and arts funding. Making resources available to both artists and grass roots affiliations is a significant characteristic of DIY Cinemas bottom-up method of organising.

Understanding the terms upon which this open provision operates is important to get a clearer picture of how DIY Cinemas stifle exchange-value and strengthen use-value. A highly participatory model like Star and Shadow Cinema is predicated on the concept of collectively operating a space so that participants can create or present culture on their own, autonomous terms. This relationship is excluded in conventional cultural spaces like state-financed or boutique arthouse cinemas, where, if they exist at all, outreach film and screening programs select specific groupings to work with, guided by funding criteria which change, often failing to put in place long-term sustainable relationships. In these places, the ability to independently use a space, or program a film for public viewing is circumscribed. Similar to previous experiments in time banks and other bartering schemes, there is an exchange taking place within certain DIY Cinemas, but one that generates use-value rather than surplus capital: collective labour for free use, where to take the FLOSS[52] paradigm as an example, free means emancipated as well as free in terms of no money changing hands. By and large, whether groups are itinerant or fixed in a single location, they operate under open access, non-hierarchical structures, facilitated by online, decentralised systems of knowledge sharing and email-list collaborative working groups. How organisational horizontalism plays out in terms of cultural resistance is not restricted to online platforms. Open meetings, encouragement of new volunteer-participants, and visual and verbal reminders that the dynamic between audience and exhibitor is fluid at all points by way of signage, volunteer-audience interaction and other marketing. At Star and Shadow an A4

[51] Ibid, p13.

[52] FLOSS stands for Free Libre Open Source Software, the term preferred by the Free Software Foundation (FSF). Based on four essential freedoms, the FSF's definition of 'free software' protects the user's freedom to run the program as they wish, to redistribute as they wish, to study how it works and change it as they wish, and to distribute modifications as they wish. This relies on the source code being open and accessible.

laminated sheet pinned around the building declares 'Where's the Boss? There is no boss', going on to explain how people can get involved. Hierarchical organisational structures adopted in normative cinemas privilege the specialist, pedagogic film programmer and simultaneously submit them to profit-based restrictions or aesthetic constraints. According to this framework, the audience can only exercise their power as consumers to interject in the discourses presented by a film exhibitor. In DIY Cinemas, the audience can engage in selection, film programming is liberated from canons of taste or reputation and people can freely explore, termite-like (Farber 1962) the polyphony of voices within films many forms.

Collaborative, democratic practices like participatory budgeting, consensus decision-making and open working groups open up the means of control of the exhibition site to its audiences and communities. By handing back control of the process of production, the conditions of working and how they might affect us as participants, DIY Cinema fundamentally confronts aspects of capitalist alienation. DIY Cinema retains the creative and productive labour of its participants, rather than it being owned and exploited by either owners, or management who consider labour only in terms of wage labour. The means of production, in this case putting on film screenings or other social and cultural events, are controlled by participants non-hierarchically. Equally, the ability for groups to shape the world around them is reinforced by a rejection of the profit motive. We can organise our collective work around our own needs and those of our society, rather than being led by the market economy to offer only what might be profitable. The cultural resistance of DIY cinema celebrates a heterogeneity of oppositional positions, using form, content, context and organisational structures to contest hegemonic value systems and power dynamics. They point to a consideration of cinema's place within democracy, and democracy's place within cinema.

Chapter 3: Star and Shadow Cinema

In the spring of 2001, while on an exploratory errand with a friend to borrow the VHS back catalogue of Amber Films[53], I discovered the Side Cinema. This 52 seat screening room on Newcastle's quayside had been adapted as a dubbing suite for Amber's productions, but was still occasionally used for the odd private screening. It was intimate, and very small with red velvet seats, double ones at the back. It had a shallow raked floor and low ceiling so if you stood in front of the screen you could see and speak to the person on the back row without raising your voice or bending your neck. The projection booth looked like a car boot sale of redundant technology, while framed cinema posters lining the corridor up from the unassuming street doorway told the story of a politically committed and community embedded film collective. Within months Side Cinema became the site and the starting point for a new alternative film exhibition culture on Tyneside[54], to which I have devoted nearly twenty years of my life. The Side cinema had been installed twenty five years previously on a wave of optimism regarding film culture's radical potential, as a 'debate cinema – a place for rigorous discussion and the opportunity to experience film collectively'[55].

I illustrated in Chapter 1 how the oppositional project of Amber's generation was curbed through funding cuts, and the reshaping of film culture primarily as a creative industry rather than a social practice. Against this flow Amber Collective had survived and been able to maintain their cinema space which became our base to start something new and DIY. The sustainability of Amber's project set an inspiring precedent for us in the New Side Cinema Collective and subsequently Star and Shadow Cinema. Their achievement poses questions that inform this case study: How does DIY culture surface, and how do we prevent it from impermanence and being washed away? In seeking sustainable platforms, how do we avoid losing control of our own agenda? What does control of a base enable for intervening in film culture locally and further afield? I respond to these questions combining an analytical account of my own experiences as an active participant alongside archival materials supported by unstructured interviews with a range of volunteers, artists and activists

[53] Founded in 1968, Amber Films is a film and photography collective based in Newcastle upon Tyne with an aim to capture working class life in North East England.
[54] Tyneside is the conurbation of Newcastle and Gateshead. If I am referring to the eponymous regional film theatre, I will use its full name Tyneside Cinema.
[55] Amber Films. 'Side Cinema'. Amber. https://www.amber-online.com/side-cinema/ [accessed 10 December 2020].

engaged in the same processes. There are dozens if not hundreds of people who should be credited properly for their role in creating this culture in Newcastle, and I only name a few in this chapter. Those that I have named should not be considered the main actors, but representative of the multitude who have given their unpaid time to the collectives described below. This case study therefore also acts as a micro-historical record of a grassroots project in tribute to all of those people, and as a piece of 'militant research' starting from 'the understandings, experiences, and relations generated through organizing, as both a method of political action and as a form of knowledge' (Biddle, Graeber, and Shukaitis 2007, 9).

When considering our own efforts to cultivate a DIY film exhibition culture in Newcastle, we have always given first priority to the need for space. Recent studies of alternative community and pop-up cinema culture have noted it as a temporary, often site-specific intervention into space, and emphasised the persistent ephemerality of such activities (De Ville 2015; Vélez-Serna 2020). Vélez-Serna states that in its liberal form 'by and large, pop-up cinema in this context exists as a clearly bounded event, with a beginning and an end. Any oppositional menace is foreclosed by this promise of return to the status quo' (2020). In the examples I go on to explore, a fundamental urge has been to resist such a 'return'. Over time and in sequential DIY cinema projects this resistance has taken shape and been maintained in Newcastle, and I weave through this history an analysis focused on three areas in particular. One area addresses alternative approaches to organisational structure and the corresponding effects on what gets programmed, by whom and who comes to see it. A second acknowledges alliances with other cultural forms like DIY music or particular social movements. The third responds to counterhegemonic space for cinema in the urban centre in the context of competing agendas around investment in culture, regeneration and gentrification, acknowledging the role Labour-led local authorities have played in supporting grassroots scenes. I start by looking back to previous decades, as an interpretive tool to understand potential sources of the particular tactics and strategies that we have adopted to protect alternative cinema space in our city.

Radical film on Tyneside before 2000

Alternative approaches to film exhibition are by no means new on Tyneside. The Independent Labour Party Arts Guild convened a conference in June 1930 to discuss the possibilities of screening censored Russian films in private organisations (Hogenkamp 1986,

51). This meeting failed to bear fruit, and there are no obvious records of a Workers Film Society on Tyneside. Four years later and only 8 miles away from the metropolitan centre, Boldon Colliery screened *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein 1925) and *Hunger March* (Kino 1934) to nearly 400 miners as part of a tour organised by leftist distributor Kino. The police raided the screening and decided to prosecute not only the organisers, but also the trustees of the Miners' Hall and even the projectionist, threatening the survival of an important space for culture in a working class community. This resulted in the 'Jarrow Case', which ruled in favour of the colliery, and arguably secured Kino's right to existence, basing the defence on the licensing loophole of using non-flammable 16mm film (Hogenkamp 1986, 86–89). Meanwhile in December of the same year the Tyneside Film Society was actively promoting aesthetically progressive material at the Lit & Phil building, including a programme featuring experimental film *Tonende Handschrift* (Pfenninger,1932) consisting of hand-drawn visualisations of soundwaves ('News from Societies' 1934). This begins to reveal the fault lines in radical film history of the 1930s, showing that the stakes were considerably higher for those using film to organize in the workplace than for those keen to explore cinema's rich form in the comfort of an urban cultural centre.

Film Societies need spaces to meet and share cinema in a social and educational context and for many pre-war groups, their first port of call was the local cinema, which had the requisite projection equipment. With the growing strength of the BFI and the BFFS, the dynamic between the centre and the regions became more tense, as film societies managed opportunities to grow and institutionalise, but possibly at the cost of their programming autonomy. Central agendas could also be progressive, and film societies or RFTs could act as conservative forces, thwarting the potential of cinema's role in cultural struggle. Holding the purse strings, the BFI was in a position of power to reward or ignore groups dependent on their support for specific policies. The Tyneside Film Society exemplifies this contested process as a case in point. Formalised in the Newcastle News Theatre in 1944, by the 1950s it had become the largest film society in the country. The News Theatre ran into financial difficulties in the late 1960s and the BFI seized the opportunity to open it as Tyneside Cinema, one of their flagship Regional Film Theatres (RFTs), operating it directly from London. This arrangement soon became unsustainable and the cinema closed again in 1975, reopening the following year as an independent RFT. I have referred to the assertive role certain departments and personnel in the BFI wanted to adopt to disseminate a more radical

concept of film culture, including the distribution division Film Availability Services (FAS) with their 'key debates' agenda. To FAS, the RFTs presented a national network of organisations that could help disseminate a counterhegemonic mode of film exhibition through 'structured programming'. They achieved success when the 'key debates' policy was endorsed at the Annual Conference of Regional Film Theatres in 1976, an important organ of 'democratic centralism' for developing a 'tight-knit and supportive constituency' around a particular idea of film culture (McArthur 2001, 120). Building a movement through FAS was made easier again by the presence of departmental members at the interview stage for new RFT directors. Tyneside Cinema appointed consecutive directors with strong ties to the radical currents within contemporary cinema – Nina Hibbin was the film reviewer for the Morning Star before taking up post from 1976. Her successor was Sheila Whitaker, who had edited *Framework* and had been at the BFI around the crisis period at the turn of the decade. Not all RFTs however were keen on the direction of travel, defending their right to 'use their theatres simply for amenity and entertainment' (120) and some sent their concerns directly to the top of the BFI. FAS in return were prepared to switch funding away from recalcitrant theatres towards those which were on board to implement the 'key debates' policy, embracing other like-minded organisations informally termed 'post-RFTs' (Christie 1981). Amber, through the Side Cinema, was one such ally[56].

Conceived by a group of students from working-class backgrounds at Regent Street Polytechnic in 1967, Amber started as a film and photography collective committed to documenting traditional, regional working-class communities[57]. The North East became their base in 1969, and the focus for their 'socially embedded' work in representing regional, working-class identity (Newsinger 2009b). Situated on Newcastle's Quayside, Amber developed a film production facility experimenting with different approaches to writing, shooting and exhibiting film in the community, exemplified by screenings up and down the coast during the River Project in 1974. Having a dedicated space made it more possible for Amber to develop an integrated practice, but despite the favourable funding environment of Labour's government, securing space was by no means straightforward.

[56] Peter Roberts, the Amber cameraman and editor was also partly responsible for running the cinema and remembers the importance of the 'key debates' concept. Peter Roberts, (Amber Collective member), interviewed by Christo Wallers, Amber, June 2017.
[57] For more detail on Amber's film production, see (Leggott 2020)

The impression Amber has made on the cultural landscape of Tyneside has been described as 'place-imprinting', a process of interplay in the relationships between people, organisations and place (Hollands and Vail 2015). Newcastle's quayside was one site where Amber's place imprinting would have long-lasting impact. In the mid 1970s, the de-industrialized area of the Quayside was threatened with far-reaching redevelopment aims, and Amber mounted a photography and film campaign to protect the industrial heritage of the area. The development ideology of the mid-60s to mid-70s was informed by the twin strategy of improving the built environment, and investing in the arts. Supportive of both, Amber however strongly resisted any plans to demolish the quayside area, rich with social and industrial memory. They used photography, film and an exhibition in a passionate cultural intervention substantially influencing the resulting regeneration of Newcastle's Quayside. Allegedly collective member Murray Martin was even given a contact in the Department for the Environment who could list any building almost on demand[58]. In 1975, as buildings around the Quayside were being bought up, Amber were threatened with eviction and to stay put, they managed to cobble together £12,000 to purchase the workshops on the Side, enabling them to build a 52 seat cinema and a gallery to exhibit their photographic projects. Owning space, and other assets, was one way Amber could protect themselves from the unpredictability of state funding. For the time being the cinema was another string to their bow, and could provide employment for dedicated staff.

Programmed initially by Roger Buck, Side Cinema opened in 1977. According to Amber's Peter Roberts, in contrast to the mobile screenings in communities up and down the coast the cinema and gallery acquired their own logics in the formation of an exhibition policy now rooted directly at the Amber headquarters[59].The Side Cinema afforded space to delve deeper into the ideologies and discourses permeating British film culture, not only those emanating from the BFI. It also gave them a base which they could use to develop a stronger role in forming an independent film culture in the North. They organised the Writers and Audience Weekend in 1982, an event which brought together working class and socialist media practitioners seeking opportunities to connect with working class audiences through the Workshop Franchise[60]. Side Cinema also became a space for feminist film culture,

[58] 'Quayside - Amber Collection', https://www.amber-online.com [accessed 15 September 2020].
[59] Peter Roberts, (Amber Collective member), interviewed by Christo Wallers, Amber, June 2017.
[60] 'Jeremy Seabrook & Plenary Session'. *Amber*. https://www.amber-online.com/collections/writers-weekend-part-5/ [accessed 10 December 2020].

activated by collective members attendance of the ACTT[61] Women's conference, which encouraged a fluidity within the film elements of the Women's Movement. Elaine Drainville brought to Side Cinema the Working Women's Travelling Cinema, a film production and screening project that had started at refuges for women who had experienced domestic violence. They ran a crèche in the office upstairs while screenings happened in the cinema space, and the social aspect of selecting, watching and discussing films together was considered a political gesture in itself.

While the cinema was used extensively through the late 1970s and early 1980s, funding ongoing staff to programme and manage it proved to become more difficult. It has been suggested that Amber grew too fast in the early 1980s (O'Reilly 2009, 9), as generous funding flowed from Channel 4 and Northern Arts, leaving them exposed should the winds of funding policy change. In 1986, the Tories won a four year battle to axe the Labour-run Greater London Council, a major player in funding the workshop sector. This was part of a much larger, national scheme to abolish labour-led metropolitan county councils, which to that point had been critical partners in funding independent film[62]. In the North East, this meant Tyne and Wear could no longer strategically administer funds, reducing Amber's grant options. With the cuts, something had to give, and the Side Cinema was felt to be surplus to the needs of the moment, particularly because the energy had relocated from small-scale community screening to accessing a potentially much larger audience through Channel 4. In the late 1980s regular film programming stopped and the Side Cinema closed. As support declined for the filmmaking culture represented by Amber, the 'key debates' stance became more institutionalised in the education sector following an increase in Film and Media Studies departments. The dwindling support from the state for oppositional production corresponded with an increased focus on skills and training for the film and television industry. The cheap availability of technologies like video and Super 8 meant that for many in the amateur, art or activist arenas, making or showing films speaking to current social and cultural conditions aligned more naturally with DIY culture than the funded independent

[61] The Association for Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians was the trade union for the film and television industries from 1933-1991, and one of the architects of the Workshop Declaration.
[62] '1986: Greater London Council Abolished', *BBC News*, 31 March 1986, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/31/newsid_2530000/2530803.stm [accessed 10 December 2020].

sector. In any case, the focal point of cultural resistance on Tyneside was coming from music rather than cinema.

Anarcho-punk and 'do-it-yourself socialism' in the North East music scene

The Tyneside music scene of the 1980s and 1990s presents another angle for thinking about autonomous cultural space. While Amber has offered inspiration in the social function of film, post-punk music spaces and labels like *Slampt* have displayed grassroots, emancipatory ways of working that can equally be applied to cinema. The North East was an early hotbed of punk music, with bands like The Angelic Upstarts and Penetration capturing national attention, while closer to home, handwritten zines like Deviation Street occasionally even included movie reviews[63]. In Autumn 1980 DIY music collectives formed in Sunderland (Sunderland Musicians Collective) and Gateshead (Gateshead Music Collective), both frustrated by the lack of space available for practicing, recording and playing live music. Both negotiated the use of buildings, The Bunker and The Station respectively, through approaching the local authority. Star and Shadow volunteer Marek Gabrysh remembers his time at the Bunker in the late 1980s, praising a willingness on behalf of local authorities to support grassroots experimentation surmising the council's attitude that 'if these kids can make it work, then we will give them a chance'[64].

Both of these spaces were heavily indebted to anarcho-punk and DIY with its emphasis on active participation in culture in contrast to the traditionally hierarchical division between performer and spectator. Punk in the North East grew out of a lot of anger and disenchantment, as the rapid de-industrialisation of the area reduced opportunities for work for young people. Punk gave a sense of agency to resist systemic issues at the local level. As one regular visitor to The Station put it 'I left school in 1983. It was Thatcher's Britain – no jobs, no prospects. Got my Mohican haircut and a bunch of us – the South Shields punks – had a laugh and a great time. Life on the dole was hard, but we still enjoyed ourselves watching bands, like Crass and Conflict. Good times.'[65] While having a space to practice and play gigs gave respite from the unrelenting socio-economic conditions, it also opened

[63] Deviation Street was a short lived punk zine of three editions over 1977. In issue 3 it included a hand-written review of Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) screened with The Laurel-Hardy Murder Case (1930) although unlike the music gigs, there is no mention of the cinema this played in.
[64] Marek Gabrysch (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, September 2020.
[65] Lesley Oldfield, '40 years of punk in Newcastle & the North East: Fabulous photos and memories', *Chronicle Live*, 25 May 2016, https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/whats-on/music-nightlife-news/punk-40th-your-newcastle-photos-11380937 [accessed 10 December 2020].

participants to co-operative and collectivist structures influenced by anarcho-punk, allowing them to explore ideological alternatives to the status quo. Spaces like The Basement in Sunderland, and The Station in Gateshead were also proof of concept for collectives beyond the hardcore punk scene like the Riverside, a co-op music venue started by young people just out of their youth group.

The story of the Riverside[66] shows both what is possible from within DIY culture, but also what can go wrong if a group loses control of their agenda to the commercial music industry. The Riverside was a co-operatively run music venue developed through local authority-led community consultation with young bands who wanted a space to perform, host gigs and learn how to work sound and lights. The Recreation Department of the council had run sessions for local bands to develop the local music scene through a workshop called Special Projects, and through this relationship the 'youth workers involved helped attendees to arrive at a conclusion: […] that a venue was needed to help local bands become more visible' (Plater and Taylor 2011, 14). If the dynamic was really as clear-cut as that at first, the project built its own momentum spearheaded by the young bands themselves, gathering a 2000-signature petition to take to the council. 19 year-old Keith Jeffrey put together a business plan on the 'back of his A-Level Biology jotter' to take over the former Rex Cinema on Westgate Road, which if it had come off could have been a hybrid cultural venue prefiguring Star and Shadow. They formed the collective Lula Music, meeting regularly, often drawing 60 to 70 people.

With the support of the Head of Youth & Community Services, and the Northern Regional Co-operative Development Agency, they turned an abandoned printer's warehouse on Melbourne Street, just up from the Quayside, into the Riverside Co-operative. The enthusiasm from the funders was partly due to job creation, a pressing concern in 1980s Newcastle, and was supported through the Enterprise Allowance. The council not only bought the building for the co-op for £40,000 and covered the costs of its renovation and P.A. system, they also gave £20,000 per year from 1987-1991. A sense of community ownership gave the Riverside a vibe of inclusivity and friendliness, and the model was informally backed up by a reliable if high turn-over cohort of volunteers who wanted to learn skills and take part, partly due to the DIY politics of the original management committee. One

[66] I moved to Newcastle after the Riverside Co-op had disbanded in 1999. My main historical source is the recently published oral history *Riverside: Newcastle's Legendary Alternative Music Venue* (Plater and Taylor 2011).

regular called it ‘do-it-yourself socialism, not wait for the Party line socialism’, while Mark E Smith cut straight to the point describing it as a ‘youth club run by Communists’ (Plater and Taylor 2011, 198, 36). It was regularly difficult to cover costs for the low-paid staff but nevertheless Riverside put on a programme of gigs that is hard to believe for a grassroots co-op, including Throwing Muses, The Pixies, Nirvana, Happy Mondays, The Fall, Sonic Youth, Fugazi, Mudhoney and My Bloody Valentine, all before they could command large audiences.

Concerned about the financial side of running the place, they lost touch with the local DIY scene, which they had initially set up in order to support. In 1991 they shifted the ownership of the building into a second company with charitable status, and which could fundraise more easily, but three years later, on legal and accountancy advice the co-op was dissolved and privatised by Riverside Operations Ltd with Andy Balman in charge. The venue continued on the back of its reputation, changing its musical direction towards club culture but with the change in company structure there was no longer the same sense of collective endeavour. With property prices rising as regeneration plans were rolled out on both banks of the Tyne, the asset donated by the local authority back in 1985 was no longer technically owned by the co-op, but a private business that could respond to the buoyant market and sell at will. The building was sold in 1999, marking the end of an era, and the loss of an asset that should have been protected for the community. Riverside therefore provided both a precedent and a powerful warning of the hazards in maintaining community-led counter-cultural space in the context of urban renewal.

This diversion into the realm of DIY music on Tyneside serves three purposes. Firstly, it offers a co-existent, DIY parallel to Amber’s approach as a franchised workshop dependent on significant funding. For Amber the control of the means of production, distribution and exhibition was embedded with and amplified struggles in the union movement, standing against the casualisation and individualisation of the media industries. As an amateur, voluntaristic mode, DIY threatens this position and has drawn criticism for reproducing the expectation of working for free within the cultural sector, notoriously demonstrated in the proliferation of unpaid internships in the arts. Yet DIY cultures of the 1980s rejected that concept of career-oriented work, claiming emancipatory space for unalienated work, an attitude stemming with conviction from the anarcho-punk scene and further back in their inspirational forbears, the Situationists. The second purpose of digressing towards music is that in the absence of a resistant North East film culture in the late 1980s and 90s, an

epistemological gap exists between Amber and our New Side Cinema Collective which can in some way be accounted for by following the developments in DIY music culture. Thirdly, it sets the scene for the interdependence of cinema and music in a tentative way at the New Side Cinema, and much more significantly at the Star and Shadow Cinema which is as much a music venue as it is a place to show films. If film exhibition has been overburdened by the theoretical weights of Screen theory, the energy and participatory nature of the DIY music scene offers a potential route for reinvigoration.

Out of nowhere - The New Side Cinema Collective

Throughout the 1980s, the publicly-funded independent sector experienced the inexorable shift towards a new 'language of economic development' (Dickinson 1999, 82). The emphasis on efficiency and hierarchical management extolled by business consultants left a diminishing space for emancipatory politics in alternative film culture. By the late 1990s, there existed a lacuna between the 1970s independent film culture and an emergent alternative film scene, inspired more by DIY activism. Into this apparent void stepped two groups who synchronously rediscovered Side Cinema in 2001, joined by two more 6 months later. These four programming subgroups, informally known as the 'four sides' negotiated a mutually beneficial deal with Amber, the landlords, who in return gave us unrestricted use of the space. Looking at each group in turn, a picture emerges of diverse intents that coalesced around a countercultural cinema space. I examine the mutual and competing currents that influenced the course of events as we sought ways to protect ourselves from ephemerality.

The first new group at the Side in 2001 was Cineside, which I co-founded with Mat Fleming[67]. The other was a dynamic direct action group, the Tyneside Radical Film Festival (TRFF). Adopting a critical and playful style, Cineside was driven by our thirst for alternative, experimental cinema, born out of hobbyist super-8 filmmaking and a DIY attitude to contemporary art, cinema and music. Equally important was our desire to convivially assemble people together around culture in anti-commodified ways. For us, these values were best embodied in artist-run spaces and squats, free from the entrepreneurial cultural policies associated with New Labour. We were both recent arrivals to Tyneside, but on quite different journeys to Amber thirty years earlier. Newcastle for us two recent graduates was a

[67] Our project was open, and friends from the art college also got involved in various areas of operation. Flora Whiteley, Susie Green and Ilana Mitchell and later Debbie Bower were key participants.

friendly, open-minded place that offered freedom to both experiment with and draw people into social interaction with a variety of cultural forms from small exhibitions to zines, filmmaking projects and DJing. We had been habituated to good movies through watching cult videos together, Mat's experience living in Paris and my tangential involvement in Little Stabs at Happiness[68], the ICA's alternative screening event. Most of all our film education happened at the brilliant film society at Edinburgh University (EUFS), that promised over 60 films spanning the winter and spring semesters for a paltry £16. Founded in 1963, it was one of the leading university film societies, regularly winning wards at the British Federation of Film Societies (BFFS) ceremonies[69].

Living together in Newcastle, we shared a dissatisfaction with the conservative programming of the city's RFT the Tyneside Cinema, and imagined a local underground hidden out of view. We had heard of but not seen any films by Amber Collective, which constituted a big hole in our knowledge. The serendipity of finding the empty Side Cinema along with Amber's generous loan of videos at this point was an undeniable factor in setting the future course of our impulsive project. The new arrangement at Side Cinema launched in October 2001 with *Cineside Alive*, a free week of features and shorts. Supported with a tiny Northern Arts grant of £800 to simply cover the screening licences, the event was based on a traditional film society model of selling memberships for the forthcoming season. Starting with *Launch* (Amber 1974) and *L'Atalante* (Vigo 1937), the week continued with Hans Richter's experimental drama *Dreams that Money Can Buy* (1943), *Peeping Tom* (Powell 1960), *Le Samouraï* (Melville 1967), *The Harder they Come* (Henzell 1973), *Alice* (Svankmajer 1988), and *Songs from the Second Floor* (Andersson,2000). The Side Cinema, with its history of film and dialogue, was the dream location for Cineside to screen, and our enthusiasm was met with generosity from the Amber Collective, who hired the auditorium for £50 per night, which made it just about affordable to break even. Of greater significance, Amber handed us a set of keys which gave us complete control over the space and freedom to play around, decorate and experiment.

[68] My brother Ben Wallers (The Rebel, Country Teasers) was house DJ at the event, which I regularly went to and once DJed at myself. The event was organised by Mark Webber, and consisted of repertory avant-garde or underground short films followed by a longer feature before turning into a club night.
[69] EUFS. 'Edinburgh University Film Society'. http://bffsscotland.pbworks.com/w/page/5678037/EUFS [accessed 10 December 2020].

Mat Fleming had been inducted into 16mm projection and the process of making up and breaking down prints in Edinburgh, and already had a love of Super 8 as a no-budget filmmaker. By 2001, celluloid as a delivery format for non-theatrical film screening was already threatened with obsolescence, and distribution libraries were recirculating the same generation of battered prints, generally only replacing them with VHS, DVD or Blu-ray copies. To teach ourselves the art of 16mm projection felt a special privilege and often went wrong when prints barely withstood projection, or were wrongly put together. The frequent problems emanating from the booth were ameliorated by the layout of the auditorium. Side Cinema was tiny, and the door into the projection booth was directly connected to the seating area. Whenever anything went wrong, it was very easy to simply open the door and shout 'sorry!' to the audience, and turn on the lights. During these frequent disruptions, in such a compressed physical environment it was impossible not to start up conversation with audience members next to you. The contingent interruptions created an atmosphere of informality, good humour and appreciation for what was clearly a labour of love.

Steeped in the sociable cinephilia of student film societies, Super 8 filmmaking, underground screenings and home video, the parameters of what constituted 'quality' were stretched wide, the emphasis being on titles we hadn't yet seen, and whatever we could find on 16mm in the various distribution catalogues we could get our hands on. Underpinning our autodidactic model of curation was the assumption that if *we* wanted to watch a particular film there were probably a whole bunch of other people in the city who would like to join us, in the environment of an extended living room provided by the intimate Side Cinema. Having the space to ourselves, part-time jobs and boundless energy we started screening more regularly, often more than twice a week. We were solicited from further afield, hosting a retrospective of Karl Valentin films from the Goethe Institute, and delving into a history of avant-garde film helped by experimental film curator Mark Webber. When Webber brought the exhibition *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The London Film-Makers' Co-operative 1966–1976* to Gateshead, he not only introduced an inspiring model in the LFMC, he also insisted parts of the programme be screened at Cineside, including a 16mm print of David Larcher's epic film *Mare's Tail* (1969).

Completely independently, TRFF started their weekly program a fortnight after Cineside's Alive festival. Their first programme included screenings off DVD and VHS tape about the anti-globalisation movement, police violence against black detainees, and the

Zapatistas' fight for land reform in Chiapas, following up with a celebration of squatting, with films about the Exodus Collective and Christiania. TRFF came out of the direct action and anti-capitalist movement and saw film as a means to an end, a tool to inform and inspire action. In that sense they had little allegiance or affinity with cinema as an aesthetic discourse, instead seeing it explicitly as a site for education and recruitment. Alan Thornton, the most regular programmer for TRFF, suggests that their collective was sceptical of both mainstream and art cinema as incapable of exceeding either commodity status, or opaque elitism. However the pedigree of Amber's oppositional reputation, and the social potential of cinema as a popular form was sufficient reason for TRFF to experiment with screening in the ambience of the Side Cinema.

TRFF emerged from a growing, broadly anti-capitalist activist culture in the North East, focusing on environmentalism, the corporatization of the city, global and social justice campaigns. Galvanised by recent civil disobedience interventions in central Newcastle like the Reclaim the Streets action in September 2000 and the Eclectic City squat on Pilgrim Street in October 2000, activists were also involved with the well-organised, volunteer-run Newcastle Community Green Festival which gave a legitimate face to organising around environmentalism. Screening films in a publicly accepted space could reach new audiences and connect local activists to current, global struggles against and beyond capitalism, whether they be from Papua New Guinea or Seattle.

Most importantly, the Side Cinema gave TRFF an autonomous space to assemble a counter public that could discuss and debate modes of resistance. Unapologetic about the propagandist form of the films they screened, debate still took priority, rather than spectators 'miraculously agreeing and obeying' whatever change of behaviour was encouraged in the film[70]. TRFF accessed their selections from Schnews, Indymedia and through the opening up of the internet, various email lists and like-minded activist projects like London Action Resource Centre (LARC), or further afield in Portland and New York. Some films they paid rights for while others were free to screen, which allowed for a low ticket price of £3, and an easy break-even. Although Cineside's costs were considerably higher due to licensing and transporting film prints, we kept to the same price to make events as affordable as possible.

[70] Alan Thornton (TRFF organiser and Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, September 2020.

Following this eruption of activity a cross-pollinating community developed based on newly forged new bonds between cinema spectators, pointing towards a cinema formulated on social interaction, engagement and participation rather than consumption. Screenings for both Cineside and TRFF were popular, and would always be followed by an exodus to the great pub next door, the Crown Posada. The layout of the pub was even more cramped than the cinema, forcing audience members and organisers to cram onto corner sofas and around tiny tables, pressing them into encounters that overstepped the normal decorum associated with the cinema audience. For the first few months, Cineside and TRFF deferred on an active pursuit of collaboration, each producing their own aesthetically distinct promotional material. TRFF's publicity did not beat about the bush, it was clear and to the point, printed simply on double-sided A5 flyers to. Cineside saw publicity as an important semiotic playground. We adopted a skull and crossbones icon designed by artist friend A.K. Knol, a play on the homophone 'side' and '-cide', referencing both a cinema in its death throes, and a mutinous spectatorship of cinematic excess.

Soon Cineside and TRFF were joined by the 'Other Side', an LGBT[71] group exploring gender and sexual identity through cinema, and the A-Side, focusing on tactical media and other artists' film and video practices engaging with radical politics. John Nichlau, a café-worker at the Side Café who had strong links in the Gay community encouraged friend Julie Ballands to collaborate on a programming strand at Side. Both were working class activists wanting to retain the political bite of 1980s queer culture and resist its increasing dilution into consumerism. Ballands programmed the Other Side, bringing her experience of creating DIY queer social spaces and running nights like the *Big Pink Noise Collective*, *Rock'n'Doris*, *Calamity Jane's* and *The Velvet Kitten*. Attracted to the DIY aesthetic of Cineside's programme and recognising similarities with her own history, Ballands approached us wanting to push the boundaries of queer film, screening experimental documentaries, and films from the 1980s that attested to a longer struggle for rights.

The A-Side completed the complement of screening projects at Side in the early 2000s. Ele Carpenter had recently left the council-run Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art (NGCA) in Sunderland, where she had worked for five years as a curator. She delineates two

[71] Julie Ballands identified the stance in 2002 as Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual, at the turning point of formally incorporating Trans representation, and before Q,A and + were added. She indicated that for her it was important to say the words rather than the acronym as a political gesture to force hegemonic society to enunciate the terms of their sexuality.

obstacles in her experience working at NGCA which Side offered ways of circumnavigating. Firstly she had felt frustration at the conditions of the gallery for presenting artists' film and video. The chances for gallery visitors to deeply engage with more linear film works were compromised by the looped running on often small monitors, the unrestricted nature and timing of entering and leaving. To combat this inside the NGCA gallery she had even gone so far as to arrange for the construction of a cinema space for screening Sarah Tripp's work. The availability of Side provided a formal cinema space where Carpenter could experiment with artists' film in dialogue with the cinema as a viewing context, and she presented work by Johan Grimonprez, Forut Media Centre of Dakar and older works like Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1973). Her curatorial stance privileged the artwork as a traditional cinematic text, with accent on the sociable reception and discussion of work. A readymade cinema perhaps foreclosed possibilities for showing the work of artists working explicitly with the 'social temporalities of cinema-going' (Connolly 2012, 5) like Thomas Putrih, Rirkrit Tiravanija and others, but as it stood the Side project felt like a socially-engaged artwork itself.

The second issue for Carpenter at NGCA had been the problematic of working in a strictly hierarchical institution, instrumentalised through their funding relationships. The arts programme within a council-run gallery like NGCA was geared around increasing tourism and providing educational opportunities for local schools, as opposed to creating new knowledge, or working to evolve forms of culture. Carpenter states 'I wanted to be involved in something much more in depth, and less institutionally positioned'[72], where the relationship between artist and curator was less 'them and us' and more symbiotic and solidaristic. Equally there was no requirement to fill other agendas as expected in the institutional context - our existence was the agenda.

Simultaneously, the collective had a studio in an artist-run organisation, the Waygood Gallery, and members were using space there as Film Bee, experimenting with darkroom processes gleaned from zines (e.g Hill 2001). With the beginnings of a small-scale lab for Super 8 and 16mm, we invited David Leister, an active member of the London Film-makers' Co-op throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Leister had been running his Kino Club in London for years, recognised as a precursor to the 'new London Underground' exemplified by Exploding Cinema (Reekie 2007). He not only introduced us to a host of darkroom techniques, he also

[72] Ele Carpenter (A-Side programmer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, September 2020.

opened the door to an internationalist experimental film culture in the artist-run film labs network[73]. On the back of the experience of screening the *Shoot Shoot Shoot* programmes, we started to imagine the potential for a small-scale resource embodying the spirit of the London Film-makers' Co-op, combining a lab and a screening space. Inspired by lab-culture, and recent trips to Amsterdam and Berlin art-squats, our approach was infused with an emancipatory zeal, expressed in *Expanded Cineside*, freeform happenings in the mouldy, abandoned nightclub underneath the Waygood studios. Looped, re-purposed wedding videography adverts sat alongside double-16mm-widescreen film sandwiches and a super-8 version of *The Exorcist* (Friedkin 1974) projected onto a slide of the Side Cinema auditorium.

The four independent groups had rediscovered the Side location out of their desire and need for critical space for cinema, positioning themselves as grassroots and open to collaboration. While there were assumptions at play regarding one another's aesthetics and delivery of film exhibition, all were quick to realise there was more in common than not, and recognised organically the potential in organising more collaboratively. Perhaps because of their shared commitment to this 'promising space', traditional tensions around aesthetics and politics were contained and mitigated by the pragmatic, everyday work of running the space, the 'ethos of maintenance, of digging in and getting things done' (Cooper 2014, 7). To this end we constituted as an unincorporated group called New Side Cinema Collective , opened a bank account and consolidated our programming in a single brochure, using a graphic key to help direct audiences to the particular strands. In combining our specific programming interests in one place, we hoped that audiences would also cross over, building the profile and sustainability of the project. TRFF simplified their name to 'radical', and we became the four sides[74] - Cineside, Other Side, Radical Side and A-Side. Analysing our adoption of a collective structure, Carpenter sees it expressing signs of our political intent in the transition from loosely-related tactical interventions to longer term strategic alliance, building on the synergies between art, activism and social experience. For her this alliance held a rare potential to concretise the rhetoric emanating from the art world in theoretical positions like 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriaud) and 'tactical media' rooted in De Certeau's

[73] These loosely affiliated DIY spaces formed around the salvaging of 'obsolete' 16mm and Super 8 equipment brought on by the industry's shift to digital.

[74] There could have been more 'sides', and it is noticeable that while films by non-white filmmakers were screened regularly, there was little done to activate or reach out to groups exploring race and ethnicity. This would not have been helped by the fact that according to the 2011 Census, the North East had the highest percentage of White British people at 93.6%. 'Regional Ethnic Diversity', *Gov.uk.* 1 August 2018. https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest [accessed 10 December 2020].

1984 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Joining forces enabled our groups to explore the possibility of acting politically as programmers, not only in the films we screened, but also in the creation of alternative structures and power relations to share culture. However the conjoining of the worlds of activism and Art-with-a-capital-A meet in awkward and contested ways, not least around the subject of cultural funding. Our new collective's direction of travel was considerably expedited by the inauguration of Northern Film and Media (NFM), the Film Council's Regional Screen Agency for the North East. Pursuing funding could increase the scale and ambition of the project, but it could also be a sword of Damocles, coming with conditions that threatened our autonomy.

The contradictions of film policy and DIY practice

Over the summer of 2002, between us we were screening on average three events per week, unlike the usual film club approach of monthly sessions. The buzz of activity at Side, its quality and breadth but also its self-organised nature had reached funders at the national level[75]. For NFM, the New Side Cinema ticked a number of boxes due to its access to diverse audiences and programme of specialised film, and could provide evidence to build a case for generously funding a vibrant film culture in the North East. A mentality of start-ups and creative clustering factored into their method of working, and with the prospect of New Side Cinema formalising everything fell into place quickly, NFM offering a grant of £17,500 which seemed a staggering amount of money to us. Initially this funding was received with gratitude, as suggested by Thornton of TRFF, who considered funding a useful means to an end. As long as the process of getting it was not too arduous and the source of the money not too 'dirty'[76], if it helped mount oppositional film culture on Tyneside then all the better. This would however be the most NFM would ever give to the project and its successor, the Star and Shadow, revealing a contested relationship between voluntarist, activist agendas and the Film Council.

At the point of our constituting, the funding landscape was going through a period of tumultuous transition, as Northern Arts became Arts Council England North East (ACENE), and all activities relating to production and exhibition of film were rolled up into the remit of

[75] Julie Ballands remembers an early networking meeting for the Regional Screen Agencies where Robin Baker, one of the founders of the Independent Cinema Office and soon to be curator of BFI Mediatheque expressed amazement at the richness of New Side Cinema Collectives' film programme. She speculates that these 'noises' may have opened a path for funders to approach us. Julie Ballands (Side Cinema programmer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, September 2020.

[76] Alan Thornton (TRFF programmer and Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, September 2020.

NFM. The seeds of the Film Council had been sown by Chris Smith, the incoming Minister for Culture Media and Sport, whose commissioned report *A Bigger Picture* (1998), reached the conclusion that the film sector needed rationalising. The BFI, until then the mandated body for developing film culture nationally, was to be stripped of its umbrella role and reduced to a subordinate relationship delivering the agenda of the Film Council in the RFTs, education and the archive. The Film Council therefore had tabula rasa to develop a new approach to the sector, driven by New Labour's vision for the creative industries. The resulting body was an effort to reconcile the historically separated agendas of commerce - supporting a profitable film industry; culture - defending film art's 'intrinsic value' through notions of artistic 'excellence'; and thirdly a social dimension - that film could educate, should be accessible and inclusive and therefore had a role to play in combatting social exclusion. It was clear from the outset that the Film Council's priority was directed towards the market, visible in its opening summary to build a 'competitive, successful and vibrant UK film industry and culture' (Film In England 2000). Accordingly, the commerce-culture binary has been used by scholars integral to the 1970s Independent cinema to critique the Film Council's excessive reliance on trade interests to re-position the UK in relation to Hollywood dominance, rather than emphatically pursuing a pluralistic national film culture (Dickinson and Harvey 2005). The discourse of social inclusion played into this policy along two lines – one imperative was to better represent the diversity of the UK film industry labour force, and the other concerned barriers to accessing what was considered cultural or 'specialised' film.

While the issue of diverse representation on set is of prime importance it is the second which related directly to film exhibition and audiences. John Hill explores the contemporaneous 'uncertainty about the cultural ranking of cinema' (Hill 2004, 31) and its effects on accessibility. He applies the idea of cultural capital to explain the instability of a single notion of 'cultural film' demonstrated in the proliferating forms of 'high' and 'low' cinephilia that claim legitimacy. However he retains the class element, registering concern at the Film Council's 'Specialised Exhibition and Distribution' strategy which seemed unlikely to overcome the structural obstacles inherent to Bourdieu's theory around class and education. The policy focused on choice rather than social function, bringing back to me the recollection of hearing a New Labour MP on the radio use the expression 'redistributing the choice', a fundamentally neoliberal adulteration of the Marxist ideal. Hill questions the implicit bias in

the notion of choice, concerned that without better linking up with other progressive social policies, large demographic groups would still be excluded.

The tools used by the Film Council were fairly blunt, revolving around top-down, target-based interventions evaluated by key performance indicators and questionnaires that risked reifying diverse audiences into units on a spreadsheet. The social inclusion strategy was overshadowed by the priority of commercial viability, conspicuous in the contrast between NFM's stated objectives in 2002 and 2006. In their first set of accounts, filed in 2003, the core aim of the Film Council above was mollified by a localist agenda that was 'rooted in an accessible and diverse screen culture' and 'celebrates the region's cultural identity'[77]. Filing for the year ending March 2007, the language of these priorities had changed to 'the building of a commercial and expert regional media sector with an international reputation which thrives on creativity, competition and success'[78]. This approach felt light years away from our own mission at the Side Cinema where, to paraphrase Miguel Abensour (Thompson 1976), we were involved in 'educating our desires' for a grassroots film culture that was open, non-hierarchical and authentically participatory, one premised on self-education and real relationships rather than meeting targets – a process of finding the utopian in the cracks of the everyday following the 'method of the crack' as proposed by John Holloway (Holloway 2010, 8).

Lines of flight – from Side to Star and Shadow

Up until early 2005, our collective had grown, with new programmers actively encouraged through publicised requests for suggestions, and post-screening discussion with audiences. Other Side were jumping from Jarman to Riot Grrrl via films like *Mädchen in Uniform* (Sagan, 1931) while A-Side introduced Guy Debord and Ursula Bieman, counterpointed by Radical Side presentations of Oliver Ressler and Noam Chomsky. Cineside gave us a platform to say yes to almost any type of marginalised film culture, to continue our auto-didactic journey through film, in shared company. Responding to a post card questionnaire we sent out to try and promote cross-fertilizing of audiences, people expressed appreciation for the dialogue, the off-the-wall programming, the cinema's smallness and informality, that it was cheap, and

[77] Northern Film and Media. 2003. 'Full Accounts Made up to 31 March 2003'. https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/04357249/filing-history?page=4 [accessed 10 December 2020].
[78] Northern Film and Media. 2007. 'Full Accounts Made up to 31 March 2007'. https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/04357249/filing-history?page=4 [accessed 10 December 2020].

as one respondent suggested, 'the fact that the people who run it are just people – like the audiences'. The affiliated groups loved screening in the Side Cinema, and Amber was a source of continuous inspiration both in the way it was organised and in its archive. However, we had been exposed to different ideologies around the social function of art, so understanding the occasional opaque comments from Murray Martin about the 'end of dialectical filmmaking' took more time than he perhaps had patience for. The café at the front could never quite see the opportunity to collaborate more. It came as a surprise, however, to be told that the lease wouldn't be renewed at the end of their summer 2005 programme. Programming the Side Cinema became the prerogative of Amber once again, and we looked for other options.

The New Side Cinema Collective had breathed life into the Side, and with its collectivist structure shared similar Left politics to Amber. The explanations for Amber's rejection are therefore tricky to gauge. In one respect, we had shown proof of concept that the cinema could be a thriving part of operations down at the Side, and that funding was once again available to support it. Carpenter reflects the possibility that:

> Amber owned Side so much they weren't able to let it go. They kind of loved us and were jealous of us […] it was kind of complicated and they could be lovely and wonderful, but they could also be really prickly and tricky and we never quite knew where we stood and we never quite knew whether the programme could carry on […] it was very insecure. And the more successful we became the less they wanted us to be there […] they might be concerned that we were taking away from their identity in some way. Which of course was never our intention but I guess we generated a profile that went beyond their building and I guess they thought NFM should be putting that money into them, and not us.

The way things were progressing, the vision growing in New Side Cinema Collective would have been difficult to contain in the limited space of the Side. Another building was sought which, like the New Arts Lab in 1960s London, could place cinema at the centre of a radically open social space, spilling off the screen into other convivial forms of culture from gigs to parties to book fairs and workshops. Spurred on by experiences that an open-access space

had already made possible, ideas within the collective multiplied including a radical social centre and info shop, a film lab for small format filmmaking, and a media lab dedicated to open source culture. The fantasy was for a self-managed place where people could self-organise, self-educate, and self-express freely in a non-hierarchical environment. However to achieve this it required a clearer synthesis of the competing positions within the collective. We developed at the intersection of three paradigms - socially-engaged critical art practice, community cinema and social justice activism and we had now reached a crossroads over which direction would serve best us going forward.

To have followed the first of these routes risked alienating those who felt confused and excluded by a perceived elitism in the vocabulary of 'art-activism', which they would argue failed to speak to regular people who had not experienced a privileged education. Such a gap could potentially increase if the power dynamics around expertise were not carefully considered, reproducing traditional knowledge hierarchies. Pursuing the second avenue, for example in operating an independent cinema would involve a the business pressures of running a cinema, which in turn might force commodification for survival. The alternative of settling for a community film club along BFFS lines would have neutralised the politics of our project and so neither were given serious consideration. Crystalising as an exclusively activist space posed its own dangers of didacticism and came burdened with an assumed hostility to intellectualism and poetry. My hypothesis is that DIY, already embedded in grass roots practices across music, publishing, partying and activism, posed a constitutive ethical and conceptual framework around which we could consolidate our common attributes. The urge to go DIY was further mobilised by the 2005 G8 gathering in Gleneagles.

'Dissent!' an international anti-capitalist network organising in opposition to the G8 summit, facilitated the advancement of local groups around the UK, with small grants of around £10,000, one of which went to a Newcastle group. In April 2005, a meeting was hastily organised at an artist-run performance space Bookville to tentatively explore the possibility of setting something up as a larger collaboration between North East artists and activists, to which 27 people showed up and at least another 21 expressed an interest. To talk of 'artists' and 'activists' as separate entities simplifies the fluidity between our groups, but it does point to the historical tension between aesthetics and politics that I mention above. The impact of this meeting should not be understated, and in fact it defined the character of the soon-to-become Star and Shadow Cinema finding a consensus around a set of ethical values

core to DIY culture. Experienced in direct democracy from the anti-globalisation movement, activist participants proposed a set of guiding principles around consensus decision making; no hierarchies; working groups feeding back to general meetings; financial self-reliance as opposed to dependence on subsidy and a general attitude of open participation regardless of expertise. The focus was clearly on how a building might be run, rather than what might happen in it.

Although a set of values had been tentatively agreed for a shared endeavour, the meeting was inconclusive in combining the two projects immediately. Options for a separate autonomous social centre[79] were kept open by activists connected to Dissent. Meanwhile a core group formed with the immediate urge to get a screening space up and running. It was a process of reimagining what cinema could be or should be. Debbie Bower, a Cineside and Film Bee member who had finished art college and wanted to shape the new project, describes the exciting vertigo conjured by the potential move, reflecting that

> we were like 'Oh! The cinema could be in any way', so if you were making a cinema from scratch what would it be like? Because it didn't actually have to be rows of seats or something, and I remember us doing drawings […] you know just imagining things[80].

Always last on the agenda was what to name the new cinema so that it reflected the internal dialectics of the groups. Among a long list, two were standing out more than any others. For some, the favoured name was The Star, maybe because it was a well-known emblem of political struggle, or Newcastle Brown Ale. Others wanted to call it The Shadow, suggestive of the disguised, the unconscious, the irrational, the hidden and because it conjures the apparatus of the cinema as a form of spectatorship in thrall to the shadows. Consensus was reached when someone[81] suggested the two together: Star and Shadow. It sounded like a pub, and could provide a dialogic 'holder' for the mutually agitating forces of politics and aesthetics contained within the expanding group, while at the same time

[79] For more information on the UK network of Social Centres, see (Autonomous Geographies 2008, Harvie et al. 2005).
[80] Debbie Bower (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, video call, September 2020.
[81] This 'someone' was Noah Fisher.

sounding familiar and approachable. A new name opened the project up to many more people, but the group still lacked a space.

The issue of space has been central to the rise of the DIY social centres movement in the UK since 2000, particularly with regards to any trade-offs resulting from pursuing legitimate spaces in parallel with, or as opposed to squats or 'Temporary Autonomous Zones' (Bey 1985) like the autonomous convergence space at the G8 gathering. The act of going 'above-ground' was energised by the J18 Reclaim the Streets action in London in 1999, and the simultaneous rise in police repression of squatting (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006, 307). It was clearly a strategic direction in the anti-capitalist movement to build credible alternatives, evidenced in the pages of the social centres booklet *What's This Place.* The authors write 'These days social centres really try to avoid looking like 'ghettoised anarchist squat spaces' […] preferring to be professional looking, using familiar signs such as coffee machines, art exhibitions, and reading areas to be part of 'normal society' (Autonomous Geographies 2008, 84). For DIY activists to speak beyond their ideological silo, a change of tactics was required, and accessible public space in urban centres could increase the dissemination of radical ideas more widely.

For Star and Shadow activists, there was general unity around the idea that renting a space would meet the needs of all involved and avoid some of the subcultural barriers of squats. The local authority was also supportive and helped us negotiate a lease on a large derelict warehouse on Stepney Bank at the top of the valley. Once a set-building workshop for Tyne Tees Television, the symbolic rescue of a space from television back into the arms of cinema was wryly noted and we took a 38% stake in the building. The building was a shell with three long internal rooms, one which suited a cinema auditorium, and the other two a bar, and an office and lab space. Our needs were simple – some cinema seats and a screen; a bar, some chairs and tables. There was no clear pathway to getting support for a building project from NFM or the BFI, who were sceptical of the likelihood of our success. Wanting to keep the development low impact, cheap and accessible to participation, we devised a building festival, situating it as a socially-engaged art project in order to successfully attract £18,000 funding from the Arts Council. For this enormous sum we figured we could build a cinema and pay food and travel expenses for people to come and help, and have it done in two weeks. Work commenced the day we received the keys, 10 April 2006, launched with an open forum on site to define the vision for the space, what might be screened, and who

could help make it happen. Huddled around a gas brazier in what would become the auditorium, 40 or more listened, participated and signed up to working groups, including residents from the housing association flats across the road. In the following days 50 or more volunteers came to help from the North East, Edinburgh and London, complemented by a host of European artist filmmakers and DIY activists from Hungary, Portugal, Belgium, Germany, and France, familiar through shared networks.

The concept of the building festival revolved around an open call for people to come and physically build the cinema. Participants could teach each other practical building skills, watch and discuss films, consider alternative working models and eat together, while constructing an improvised cinema and bar. Importantly, anyone could come and help build 'our' cinema, and in building it, our sense of ownership might propel us into more active participation in film or event programming. Ownership should also be shared equally, hence the decision was taken to continue as an entirely non-hierarchical, voluntarist project. The subject of payment was frequently contested, but the radically democratic model we were leaning towards could not have been possible if everyone was paid, unless through a system like UBI. Bower remembers the contradiction of others arguing for paying some and not others 'I mean how can you pay a [film] programmer and not pay a cleaner? Things like that were really important to me. I hated the idea of subtle hierarchies'[82]. The building on Stepney Bank was sadly not completed by the end of the two week festival so we extended it and by November 2006, we were given the all clear to open as a licensed, volunteer-run, self-managed, multi-arts venue built around a cinema at its heart.

To argue this approach as motivated by cultural resistance, it is worth contextualising Star and Shadow's efforts to build a space for democratic film culture against the general backdrop of high investment in culture, and the trend for 'creative city' gentrification. The New Labour vision of regeneration through the arts had been spectacularly embodied in the gentrified Gateshead Quayside, now home to the £50million Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art and the £70million Sage Gateshead music centre. On the opposite bank of the Tyne, a small development trust envisaged a new 'cultural quarter' in the Ouseburn Valley. Recent changes in ward boundaries had disassociated the Ouseburn from its previous ward, Byker,

[82] Debbie Bower (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, video call, September 2020. This topic requires much more space than this PhD could allow, but for an entry point into the issues of waged and unwaged labour in artist economies, see (Kozłowski et al. 2014).

placing it as the symbolic heart of a rebranded zone. Important during the Industrial Revolution due to its connection to the river Tyne, by the early 2000s it was a mixed cohabitation of scrap yards, garages, and green spaces. Supplemented by Lime Street artists' studios, a community stables and a city farm there was a perception that it was in a gentrification process abandoning its working class roots (Whiting and Hannam 2017). While gentrification was underway in the Ouseburn, it was at a slower pace, sensitised to local social and environmental needs rather than fulfilling an urban renaissance agenda like the Gateshead quayside. In that sense it could be described as closer to the less harmful process of 'creative placemaking', a concept developed by Susan Stiefert and Mark Stern that marshals Jane Jacobs' distinction between 'cataclysmic money' for large scale iconic projects like those listed above, and 'gradual money' which stimulates regeneration through supporting social connections rather than direct economic impacts (Oakley 2015, 8). The supportive and sympathetic approach of the Ouseburn Development Trust to our plans outweighed any instrumentalised role in creative city policies outside of our control. We nevertheless sought to differentiate our project in other symbolic ways, reframing the creation of a cultural building as an exercise in skill sharing, community building, self-education and democracy. Rather than adding another expensive white cube media complex imposed from above we wanted something that rebalanced cultural power dynamics, sprouted directly out of local relationships, sought a low environmental impact, and could be made cheaply with the skills and materials we had available.

To create a DIY cinema in an abandoned space was still relatively rare in the UK, predating the surge in pop-up cinemas, but alternative models existed that strengthened our resolve - The Cube in Bristol and Cinema Nova in Brussels were stirring examples of cinema activists literally building something new in the shell of the old as both were based in pre-existing cinemas. However it is significant that rather than looking to the classical traditions of cinema for inspiration, we looked to self-organised spaces that consciously positioned themselves outside of the dominant discourses in film, art, or government-run community services.

'Outsideness', for septuagenarian volunteer Adrin Neatrour, is one of the distinguishing and legitimising aspects of the Star and Shadow. He asserts that our cinema stakes its place in film's cultural base, but is positioned outside of the industry which for him includes the state structures that support film, opening up new space for free

experimentation. Big movies are expensive things to make and to break even require the assembly line integration of production, distribution and exhibition for the machine to function. Positioning ourselves outside can be seen either as a simple statement of fact politically ambivalent to the workings of the industry, or it can be seen as taking an ideological stance that rejects the forms and modes of dominant cinema. Either way for Neatrour, adopting an outside position has enabled us 'to pursue our own goals…our own ends by our own means and not be in a straightjacket in which we are conformed by other people's intents and purposes'[83]. He further asserts that in the combination of outsideness and equal ownership, we have had the rare freedom to form a governing principle of openness. The openness at Star and Shadow has consensually-agreed ethical boundaries to which we try to hold firmly, but within those parameters the DIY philosophy prevails, proclaiming 'let's make it happen'. This value system is visible in the fabric of the building but also in the ways Star and Shadow functions as a DIY cinema.

Interventions in film culture: DIY cinema at the Star and Shadow

Having a base has enabled Star and Shadow to interrogate and experiment with the possibilities of film culture on various planes, from the local and every day to the networked and strategic. Star and Shadow has become a first port of call for the local demos to celebrate film culture, give platform to an issue or show new work. Starting from the baseline model of open, participatory programming, people have freely followed their own interests and enthusiasms to create alternative film culture ranging from the production of zines like Kino Bambino to inviting scholars, artists and activists to talk, to developing connections and friendships with other like-minded cinema groups across the continent. We have evolved a physical space with multimedia resources including DCP, 16mm and 35mm film, P.A. systems and technical equipment for live music and audio, offering open access to this equipment. Arto Polus quips that 'I wouldn't be able to use the facilities like these in any other place. If I wanted to go to the Tyneside [Cinema] and say I would like to project a film here they would laugh at me and close the door'[84]. By the same token we have created democratic online knowledge platforms, informed and supported by open source software development. In the early stages, a rudimentary wiki acted as a central, transparent space for collaborating and

[83] Adrin Neatrour (Star and Shadow volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, Newcastle, July 2018.
[84] Arto Polus (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, Newcastle, July 2018.

storing information ranging from meeting minutes to 'how-to' documents for projection or getting film prints collected. The purpose has been to avoid knowledge silos, so that anybody could potentially do anything, freeing volunteer confinement to a specific role. Technical and administrative expertise has been formalised and made accessible on the wiki rather than held only by individuals, and supported by open-access email lists and sub-collectives. The benefits of this approach increase democracy and accountability, has protected the group against a high turnover of volunteers, and enabled us to deal with emergencies if a particular person is uncontactable. It is by no means a perfectly reliable system but it at least makes the organisation considerably more transparent and accessible than the norm. However I now want to turn to individual testimonies to illustrate the areas where our DIY interventions into film culture stand out. These combine in a critical stance rejecting the structures of expertise and hierarchy underpinning both the hegemonic cinema industry and the dominant cultural film world of festivals, cinematheques and state-funded arthouses.

From the outset, Star and Shadow has adopted a method of participatory programming. The principle is based on a timeshare-style quid pro quo: if you help support the place to function through helping at the bar, projecting, cleaning or designing publicity or any myriad of other ways, the place is there for you to use, and Star and Shadow will underwrite all of the costs of what you want to do in film, music or any other audience-facing art form. There are intersecting systemic barriers to participation that as volunteers we try to regularly confront and chip away at in terms of class, race, gender, sexuality and disability, but we are explicit that the door is open to anyone to get involved, irrespective of their expertise[85]. A volunteer can propose an idea at a programming meeting; discuss it on the programming collective email list; input the event into the website; promote it with flyers, posters and social media posts; project the film and facilitate a discussion afterwards in an empowering and autonomous process supported by other volunteers. I will call them DIY programmers, because they are working for free, on projects that they love, with little formal expertise.

One such programmer, Stephanie Oswald first held off involvement, having heard of the project through publicity seeking helpers in the construction process. She admits she was initially 'quite scared' considering she was under skilled in building work. Passionate about

[85] Since 2018 there have been safeguarding measures instated that require new volunteers to disclose unspent convictions. At the end of the induction volunteers have to sign up to the safer spaces anti-oppression agreement.

cinema from a young age in France, she eventually started attending film screenings, and immediately appreciated first-hand the open atmosphere: 'What I liked very much when I stepped into the Star and Shadow was that I felt like it was ok to be weird […] I have often felt like I was not in the right place or didn't quite fit in to stuff'[86]. She describes attending a screening of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane* (Aldrich 1962), where mid-way through something went wrong with the 35mm print in the projection booth, and out came the projectionist to explain and try to smooth things over. She remembers 'I loved the feel of the screening that it was really relaxed'[87]. Her involvement grew and she started attending programming meetings, musing what to do with carte blanche access to a cinema auditorium. She notes an incredible sense of freedom to follow her own enthusiasms without having to seek permission from someone higher up or more expert than her, describing a pinnacle when negotiating a 16mm print of Andy Warhol's screen tests from the MoMA archive in New York, which she then screened with an improvised score by Habsburg Braganza, a stalwart of the local experimental music scene.

> I felt like people who would normally be allowed to programme whatever they wanted […] would be like the director of an institution in the normal hierarchical structure. I thought it was so empowering that I could just do that as a volunteer and I didn't need to check that I had the authorisation and that my choice was good enough.[88]

Oswald became a consistent programmer, and adopted a central role organising countless screenings and supporting others over the following six years. Exemplifying the plurality and complexity of positions within the open organisation, like others Oswald would contest the assertion that Star and Shadow sits entirely 'outside' of the film industry. Hoping to find a way into the film industry through working at Star and Shadow, she embraced the relationship with NFM and the support they could give. They funded her to go on a film programming course in London, which gave her a huge boost in confidence, and she was able to use her experience at Star and Shadow to secure a job interview at the funding agency.

[86] Stephanie Oswald (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, October 2020.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Stephanie Oswald (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, October 2020.

She finally got a break working in film festivals, but describes being met with a stark realisation:

> The ironic thing was that I loved the Star and Shadow but I wanted to be paid to work in film. It was funny because when I then worked for [film] festivals it was such a massive disappointment, because […] the one thing I really missed and which I realised was the most important to me was to have the creative ideas. I was just a co-ordinator. I could not programme films, I could not invite people…

Having seized the limitless creative freedom at Star and Shadow, she was frustrated by the consignment of her role to co-ordination in the hierarchical context of a film festival, to the extent that she was disillusioned and let go of her aspiration to work in the film industry.

Kate Sweeney, a working class queer artist, got involved in 2007, excited by the atmosphere and enthusiasm of volunteers to 'just do stuff'. She too emphasises the empowering thrill of writing directly to filmmakers, eliciting confidence from having an organisational identity like Star and Shadow to back her up. Making these advances as an inexperienced volunteer she felt she could give implicit reassurance to filmmakers because of the context, describing it as a 'mixture of cool and openness and chaos that you can offer that filmmaker', because 'it walks a line between a high art space, community space and generic cultural space'[89].

The reason to programme is not always related exclusively to the importance of the film in and of itself. Conscious that queer culture could also be exclusionary particularly for older queer women or those without certain types of cultural capital, she has consistently organised events that bring people together as a community. In 2018 she organised an event around *Framing Lesbian Fashion* (Everett 1992). She explains some of the motivations:

> Working class lesbians, if I was going to be very straightforward, don't get included still in things. Class and how that intersects with things is a massive thing […] I like it because my friends are doing it but I'm not

[89] Kate Sweeney (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, Newcastle, July 2018.

> *really* bothered about lesbian fashion […] What I *am* bothered about is getting people in and having a laugh and making sure that everyone feels like that might be interesting to them or at least giving them the option.[90]

In Chapter 1 I spoke about the emancipatory tendency in punk culture to exalt in imperfection, celebrated in Reel Love and Exploding Cinema screenings. This goes for more than just the projection mishaps at Star and Shadow, where the distance between the presenter and the spectator is reduced in a shared sense of humanity. Transgressing consumer relations, this mutual awareness can result in the spectator becoming producer. It has happened many times that someone in the audience has ended up in the projection booth, or spontaneously filled a shift at the bar after the screening if there was no-one else to help. Unburdened by overdetermined notions of active spectatorship, audiences literally get up and help at the Star and Shadow, and can then follow these entry points into other parts of the organisation. To account for this it bears repeating that this is an amateur culture which gives primacy to the informal and 'human'. Kate Sweeney asserts that this quality is a defining feature of DIY film exhibition practice at Star and Shadow, where 'human' means a 'form of antithesis to professional, and all of the negative connotations we should have when we talk about culture and arts and professionalism'[91]. This value permeates through the structure, exposing emotions and relationships that run counter to the ways affective labour has been theorised in the experience economy. She describes the unwaged, collegiate experience at Star and Shadow as producing affects felt in the body, distinct from situations of paid or professionalised work where emotions have to be suppressed, or enacted. She suggests that Star and Shadow structures a relational space where you can move out of your comfort zone and be supported to present films to a public from a place of inexperience while 'being able to breathe and think it will work, or people will understand if this hasn't quite worked or whatever'[92].

Staking relationships on a utopian interpretation of the concept of dis-alienated labour gives participants a high when it works out, but there is substantial reflexivity within

[90] Ibid.
[91] Kate Sweeney (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, Newcastle, July 2018.
[92] Ibid.

the organisation to recognise that the 'flipside can be quite dark […] the 'human' risks the dips as well as this high'[93]. Operating with radical openness and no hierarchies does not magically rid activist projects of systemic forms of oppression, particularly around class, race and gender. Micro-aggressions frequently go unchecked and the power dynamics of hidden hierarchies are stubbornly resistant. At Star and Shadow we have acknowledged that engaging people of colour on a longer term basis has been inadequate. For those actively involved over larger stretches of time, gendered oppression has frequently surfaced as a problem. The contradictions between the vision and practice have caused disillusionment in a number of female volunteers, and it is an area that autonomous groups have tried to shine a light on more recently (Downes, Hanson, and Hudson 2016). Regarding film selection, the few times a title has been programmed that significantly contravened the safer spaces agreement, the consensus decision making process has been a useful tool to work through the problem and retain unity, as in the case of the Gilad Atzmon event referred to above. Having the cinema as an authentic popular assembly[94] to discuss these issues is seen as a valid and significant contribution to local cultural democracy, deploying cinema in a different paradigm to entertainment or education, posing a radical question about the centrality of the film text to the cinema experience.

DIY programmers have used film seasons to explore and self-educate around various themes they feel affected by, for example mental health (the seasons *Mad Film Night, Madness on Film* and *Between an Elephant's Toes and Trunk*), austerity and government cuts (*Tyneside Anti-cuts Network*, *North East Against Austerity Community Festival*), feminism (*Revealing Women)* or the lack of BAME representation in cinema (*Unsung Sheroes and Heroes of Afrikan Heritage*). These programs come directly from lived experience rather than as top down curatorial provision. Openness to participation also generates unlikely collaborations through chance, resulting in an eccentrically plural film culture that would be impossible to reproduce in a normative setting. The email inbox has always been a legitimate if occasionally arbitrary resource to provoke DIY programmers into action, responding to solicitations from a below-the-radar film production culture that exists outside of commercial distribution channels. Arto Polus, a film school graduate from

[93] Ibid.
[94] Volunteers at Star and Shadow became aware of popular assemblies through films about citizen organisation in Argentina following the economic crisis 1999-2002.

Sunderland University, organically took up the opportunity to program, guided intuitively by his own interests in comedy with a season on the Kaurismaki brothers. As a filmmaker himself, he has taken on organising the regular open submission night *Eyes Wide Open*, but he is particularly animated by the possibilities of supporting an otherwise hidden film culture revealed through the open programming policy: 'people walk in with an idea and I never know what comes out of it and I find that to be the exciting bit […] its following interests from multiple sources and I think that opens doors to new places in my head'[95].

Openness to 'different' film cultures than those represented by distribution companies in the UK has led DIY programmers further afield, developing one to one relationships with filmmakers and cinemas beyond the UK, as well as archivists in the shadow economies of informal film distribution (Lobato 2012). Often it is the connections that carry as much meaning as the film programmes themselves, more akin to a solidarity than a shadow economy. Fostering connections with likeminded spaces has been a high priority, crucial for sustaining morale and building networks to give strength to alternative ways of making cinema. Inspired by the debates in Mute magazine around sustaining autonomous media networks, the conference 'With Not For' was co-organised with Variant magazine in March 2007 bringing together various UK groups who worked independently to screen and distribute films to 'provide a platform to celebrate each other's' activities, witness some much needed collaborative models, and aid in connecting groups that might not otherwise meet'[96]. A large group went to the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) in January 2010 to partake in the first Kino Climates gathering. Similar to the Film Labs network, Kino Climates formed to connect alternative and underground screening spaces around Europe under the common characteristic of freedom in programming. Since then Star and Shadow has hosted a Kino Climates gathering in 2014, sent many delegations to meetups and more recently has been the base for a zine for the network, *Filmo#.* Addressing the similarities and difference between DIY cinema in the UK and the wider European off-cinema ecology is beyond the scope of this thesis, but would be a worthy focus for research, to build a transnational understanding of countercultural film exhibition after 2000.

[95] Arto Polus (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, Newcastle, July 2018.
[96] ''With Not For' - Independent Media Conference', *Star and Shadow*, https://www.starandshadow.org.uk/id/294/ [accessed 10 December 2020],

While the cultivation and support of alternative film culture is important to those at the Star and Shadow who are dedicated to the form of cinema, the majority of volunteers are more drawn to the social and political implications of the project in its entirety, because it gives them a sense of ownership and power in a system that is designed to limit that. The significance of the potential for DIY to redistribute power is interpreted differently across the organisation, from those who resist categorisation in political abstractions out of concern for the sectarian conflict that can ensue; to those who see a direct political act in providing space and encouragement to people to 'do something they didn't think was possible for them to do before'[97]. Prefiguring the horizontal, leaderless strategies of Occupy, our collective methods of working have formed a strong appeal to new volunteers for whom the means of radical resistance are synonymous with the ends. Activists Yaz and Alice were attracted by the Projectile Festival of Anarchist Film and Culture, and the way the space was self-managed and self-built. Yaz states that 'when you realise it's been built by the people who are living around you there is something different. Maybe you don't directly start [volunteering] but it shows you can do things other ways'[98]. Both were quick to get involved and use Star and Shadow for building campaigns around food waste and then migration and border struggles. Rather than put an event on in a pub, they sensed Star and Shadow reflected a similar ethos to the wider campaigns they felt part of; that as an organisation it was 'aware of inequalities in the world and was trying to do something about them'[99]. Reflecting on her choice to use Star and Shadow in its first years, Alice plays down the focus on volunteers 'because now so many things are run by volunteers' emphasising instead that

> It fits with the political viewpoint of running things collectively, and by consensus or deciding together and creating something together. Although that ethos wasn't there explicitly […] from my point of view that was one of the main principles of the Star and Shadow[100].

Cinema in this case provides space for an activist culture premised on dialogue as much as direct action. As well as film screenings, the cinema hosts the Canny Library, an anarchist

[97] Kate Sweeney (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, Newcastle, July 2018.
[98] Yaz (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, Newcastle, July 2018.
[99] Alice (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, Newcastle, July 2018.
[100] Ibid.

book repository, enabling a cross-platform program of politically radical events and workshops extending well beyond the film screen.

I have touched on DIY programming as an affective, human process that encourages self-education, empowers people regardless of expertise, and redistributes cultural power, enabling a pluralistic film culture from the bottom up. I have also alluded to the open systems approach, underpinned by collectivist and non-hierarchical ways of working to present a counterhegemonic practice that departs significantly from contemporary liberal notions of the community cinema. Our final step has been to reimagine cinema as a commons outside the strictures of renter-capitalism, a process which has involved significant degrees of compromise and accountability. Below I lay out an argument asserting that this process still constitutes DIY activism.

Community cinema post-Crash: 'the Big Society' or building the commons?

The bulk of Star and Shadow's activity at the Stepney Bank building took place after the financial crash of 2008. In 2010, a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government took power introducing drastic austerity measures in an ideologically driven policy to reduce the structural deficit resulting from the banking crisis. Austerity shifted the brunt of the financial responsibility onto those that could least afford it, in cuts to local services across the country. Between 2010 and 2014 Newcastle City Council's government grants were cut by more than £89million[101] forcing the Labour leader of Newcastle Council to threaten a 100% axing of the arts budget. As volunteers we felt the harsh financial impacts of austerity more keenly in our lives external to the cinema, in the disappearance of freelance work and changes to the benefits system. With no staff costs, Star and Shadow itself was well-positioned to weather the storm and resolutely continued to provide a base for alternative film and music as well as a space for staging various forms of resistance to the cuts. We were less prepared for being implicated in prime minister David Cameron's philosophy of the Big Society. This political ideology sought among other things to reduce the role of the state in various areas of the economy through encouragement of the voluntary sector. Being totally volunteer-run placed us in the awkward and unwanted position of representing a desired

[101] Denten, Mark. 'Newcastle City Council Cuts: Who's to Blame?' *BBC News*, 16 May 2014, sec. Tyne & Wear, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-27437441 [accessed 10 December 2020].

Tory future of high civic involvement and low state spending. To show our resistance to assimilation into this agenda, the banner volunteers took to anti-austerity protests read 'Star and Shadow Cinema, 100% volunteer-run. No substitute for public services'.

The coalition government also had far-reaching impacts on film policy. Only two months after coming into power Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, abruptly announced that the Film Council was to be abolished, replaced by an under-prepared BFI[102]. The brief for film exhibition was passed to a chain of Film Hubs to distribute funds on behalf of the BFI Film Audience Network. Under its new remit, the BFI had to assimilate both personnel and ethos from the Film Council, while developing its own distinct strategic direction. From a policy perspective film exhibition culture was largely unchanged in its orientation to the consumer in 'boosting audience choice' (BFI 2012, 3). The concept of the film society was becoming outdated, and recognising the increase in pop-up screenings, the reduced costs of high quality video projection, and the diminishing gap between theatrical and DVD/Blu-ray release windows, the BFI reinforced its traditional emphasis on community film screening. The metaphor of consumer choice was tempered by a new, liberal philosophy pointing towards a socially inclusive and locally-integrated community exhibition culture embodied in 'Cinema For All', the name adopted in the rebranding of the British Federation of Film Societies in 2014 and further marked by the BFI's introduction of a Neighbourhood Cinema Fund.

Building relationships with the new Film Hub North was complicated considering their headquarters was at the Showroom Workstation in Sheffield, and as volunteers we found it hard to nominate a single spokesperson to strategically develop the relationship. Ultimately, as before, there was a degree of mutual mistrust because from our understanding, the model Star and Shadow presented posed a threat to the industry focus that underpinned the entire system. Maintaining a good relationship with the local authority was far easier, had less strings attached, and could pave the way for us to rebuild cinema as a radical commons in ways that were well beyond the means or agenda of the BFI. Debbie Bower backs this up, speculating that

[102] For more detail on the issues surrounding the demise of the UK Film Council see (Doyle et al. 2015)

> If you were to use funding as a way to reflect on what area we sat with more closely, then you are basically looking at the council, and the cinema as a community service, which it probably does fit with more doesn't it somewhat, even if not by its intention? Because […] they have always been the ones who have tried to make it happen[103].

On 4 June 2014, we got the bad news we had always expected as renters in a regeneration zone, that our lease would be terminated and the site redeveloped. The gentrification process around the Ouseburn had slowed briefly in the aftermath of the financial crash, but was picking up pace again with student and yuppie flats earmarked for development in an expanding zone around the ward. The twin exemplars of Amber, who still owned their building, and Riverside Co-op, who had been privatised and asset-stripped, presented us with positive and negative precedents in the fight to retain alternative and co-operative space in the city.

By the end of 2014 there was a unified resolution to continue, but this time we rejected the inevitability of our role in gentrification cycles, setting our sights on owning a building and turning it over to the locality as an urban commons. Reversing the logic of enclosure, it could shift the property relations of owning a building outside of the neoliberal real estate paradigm and into something protected for community culture in perpetuity, solving the problem of ephemerality that I posed at this chapter's beginning. However the practicalities of making this happen came down to a combination of macroeconomic conditions beyond our control, persistent self-belief, and well-tended relationships with the Arts and Culture department at Newcastle City Council.

At the north end of the Ouseburn lies Warwick Street, on the geographical edge of five wards covering the affluent Jesmond, to Sandyford and Shieldfield which are less so, with pockets of deprivation and a transient population in parts. The street sits on a Victorian landfill site, a limiting factor in the eyes of developers due to the poor foundations. Almost half of the street is occupied by a long, low building that during better times had been purchased by the local authority from the furniture sales company SCS, but in 2015 it languished as an overflow store for the council neighborhood services department.

[103] Debbie Bower (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, video call, September 2020.

Responding to our appeals, Andrew Rothwell, Head of Arts at the local authority, worked with a small sub-collective from Star and Shadow to negotiate the community purchase of the SCS building. Two agendas outside of our control had significant influence on the outcome. The first was that Newcastle City Council had been hit so hard by cuts, that it was looking to generate some liquidity from its assets. Even though they had bought the building for its asking price of £800,000 only a decade earlier, its commercial valuation in the current economic climate was only half that, and selling was still deemed the best option. The second was a legacy agenda of New Labour[104] included in Cameron's Big Society policy, encouraging community ownership of assets. Our strong track record gave the council reassurance, but Ilana Mitchell, one of the members of the sub-collective, asserts the importance of the relationship with a leader who had a clear overview of the inner workings of the local authority. She states:

> he literally has always known who all the players are in the council and how that works […] over the years it has been the same person and the fact that he has such an understanding of the Star and Shadow […] I don't want to put too much or put it all on him but it was a key relationship[105].

Recognised for its utility within community-led housing, we were alerted to a loan system under the Prudential Code which allowed local authorities to invest central government money as they saw fit. Grabbed by the simplicity of the arrangement, we borrowed money from the council to buy the building off the council. If we defaulted on the loan, they could repossess the building. The project seemed sufficiently low risk for Ilana Mitchell to delight in some punk diplomacy, putting her feet up on the table during a meeting with the council and requesting £500,000. The deal was made, and we took the next step towards our stated goal of radical sustainability. Between 2015-18, our collective was absorbed in a second building festival, to construct a high-spec cinema and music space for the commons. This version has been more expensive, higher profile, and bound by more restrictive regulation, qualities that

[104] The Quirk Review (2007) signalled that the transfer of public assets to community-based organisations should become a mainstream rather than an exceptional activity.
[105] Ilana Mitchell (Star and Shadow volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, Newcastle, November 2019.

bear down on Star and Shadow's mode of organizing, begging the question can this still be considered DIY?

To answer that, I return to the radical ethics underpinning the working practices that got us to this point in the first place, particularly in the valorising of amateurism as a way of staging resistance, to which I add some of the blind spots in pursuing this route. Over 500 people helped on the building site over 23 months, coming from the pre-existing pool of Star and Shadow volunteers, local residents, heavy drinkers from our old local pub, team building gangs from the Department for Work and Pensions, and other associations who were paired up through third party volunteer services, meeting corporate responsibility agendas or social engagement objectives. Visual signs took on special character – a spray can image of a toilet onto silver insulation promised the eventuality of proper facilities; a hacked 'men at work' sign had a pony tail and dress added to it pointing to reflexivity about gender and building sites; a whiteboard spelled out the Arabic names for various common tools to improve communication with Syrian asylum seekers who had found their way to Star and Shadow through Gateshead Council's outreach work.

The building site sustained a semi-clandestine programme of DIY screening events. In February 2017 some friends from the Kino Climates network came and helped and performed an impromptu evening of projections and improvised music, animating the yet-to-be-built cinema space. In September later that year, a screening of *Public House* (Turner 2016) was beamed onto a screen suspended on a scissor lift, with the projector balanced on a hybrid fork-lift trolley jack. The audience sat in 'gilets jaune', having been inducted as builders for the purposes of the screening. This tactic was repeated for a screening of George Clark's films alongside Raúl Ruiz works in March of the following year, as part of the final *AV Festival: Meanwhile What About Socialism Part II*. Offsite, a breadcrumb program continued to keep the idea of Star and Shadow alive while everyone was consumed with the building, including the film retreat *Losing the Plot* which I look at in greater length in Chapter 5.

The build became a refuge for people with turbulence in their outside lives, but it also generated its own turbulence that shook us all up. As a collective we aimed to tick all of the regulatory boxes, and meet our own, even higher ethical expectations of gender balance, skill sharing, open access and mutual support. While policies were in place to mitigate risk of physical and emotional harm, the reality fell short of this. The mental pressure of *coordinating* a project that was quickly escalating in both cost and complexity fell to an

unpaid few. The rosy glow of the initial visioning meeting in 2014 had well and truly worn off to leave the haphazard reality of an uneven distribution of work. The picture of the project facing the public, as one testimony put it 'Facebook likes clicked, magazine articles full of good news, surveys saying what a brilliant place the Star and Shadow was[106]', belied a lonelier reality for a few carrying the intense workload of co-ordination.

The questionable suitability of a large, anarchic organisation of utopian artists and activists to mutually protect one another and at the same time voluntarily manage a project of this scale was internalized by too few individuals in ways harmful both physically and emotionally, resulting in a dangerous form of hidden self-exploitation and burn out that rarely gets discussed in DIY projects. The physical pains of RSI from overuse of impact drivers, chronic back and arm pain, and mental stress went unaddressed. People reflected that the blind optimism at the beginning of the process was subsumed by a 'mentally unhealthy, narrowing, reductive purpose… I carried on the build because it is what I did'[107]. It was impossible to create and follow sensible processes of safeguarding people regarding hours spent on site and working on the project at home; how much responsibility people were taking on themselves; how to collectively manage conflicts and relationships breaking down; and how to manage the expectations we had of each other. As a volunteer collective we had arguably bitten off more than we could chew, and in swallowing it, we have still not yet recovered. One of the most committed builders, Stephen Turner expressed a rational desire that would have a seismic impact on a DIY culture like Star and Shadow: 'maybe UBI [universal basic income] would have helped. More people would have been able to be more involved as they wouldn't have as strong a need to earn rent money elsewhere.'[108] One crack of light coming out of this experience is our renewed acknowledgement of the primary importance of social relations within our collective, so ways of mediating conflict, resolving disputes and keeping true to our anti-oppression values are currently high on the agenda. Star and Shadow is a place where we have room to experiment and recover when things don't work the way we expected. Like all our intentions, policies and statements, they are a never-ending work in progress.

[106] Carmel McGrath (Star and Shadow volunteer) private correspondence, May 2019.
[107] Stephen Turner (Star and Shadow volunteer) private correspondence, May 2019.
[108] ibid.

Conclusion

In May 2018, local workshop Film Bee scattered light with handheld 16mm projections into every corner of the unfinished building in a wild opening ritual of Star and Shadow Cinema Mark II. Contesting the fetishisation of smoothness, professionalism and completeness, we wanted to embrace the mess and human imperfection of an unfinished space, so gambling with a licensing grey area, we opened the building to the public. Between 2018 and the end of 2020, almost 800 volunteers have been inducted to help at the bar, learn projection and sound engineering or programme films and events at the new venue. One volunteer put it thus: 'Sometimes I feel like laughing at the sublime absurdity of what we have accomplished, but whether that laugher would be joy or madness who knows. A bit of both? :)'[109].

In this case study I have outlined the developments in DIY cinema culture in Newcastle upon Tyne since the beginning of the millennium in order to consider how counterhegemonic screening practices have sought to avoid what recent scholars have noted as the common pitfall of transience. As a participant researcher 'on the inside looking in' (Greene 2014), I have laid out a microhistory underscoring the importance DIY activists have placed on securing sustainable, autonomous spaces from which to mount an alternative film culture. I have analysed the contrasting routes taken by the 1970s and 1980s independent film culture illustrated by Amber Collective; the punk and DIY music scene of the 1980s and 1990s, and social justice movements in the early 2000s to demonstrate how DIY cinema has surfaced in Newcastle in relation to other cultures outside of film. I then addressed two areas in more detail: one looking more closely at how collective ownership of space enables DIY film exhibition to pose a radical intervention into cinema culture, destabilising the conventional binary between spectator and programmer. The other pertains to the notion of autonomy, and the emergent adoption of an 'outside' stance in order to retain control of our own agenda. In building and maintaining these spaces we have had to navigate differing intents around film policy, urban regeneration and neighbourhood-level cultural development. David Graeber and Stevfan Shukaitis acknowledge the compromises with institutions and arrangements of power across which our lives are distributed, but they offer encouraging reassurance: 'The question is not to bemoan that fate but rather to find methods and strategies of how to most effectively use the space we find ourselves in to find higher positions of subversiveness in struggle' (Biddle, Graeber, and Shukaitis 2007, 31). I

[109] Ibid.

have tried to show the foundations on which we have built a transformative idea of cinema, one that develops post-capitalist social relations in the here and now.

Chapter 4: Cube Microplex, Bristol

In a 2009 article for Vertigo magazine, two Cube Cinema volunteers described how their artist-run microplex had

> involved itself heavily with exhibition of all manner of art-forms to paying audiences [… but] The real trick of the eye has been to pull this off while, slightly more privately, creating a very unusual allotment for the artists that inhabit the cubic structure to grow their work' (Hogg and Williams 2009)

This short quote reveals layers of ambiguity – The Cube is a cinema that shows films for paying customers; The Cube is a puzzle and uses sleight of hand; The Cube has porous boundaries between the private and the public; The Cube is an extradiegetic allotment for artists to grow their own work. What is to be gained for DIY cinema then in ambiguity? Furthermore, how does ambiguity map onto operating structures that seek radical cultural democracy?

Ambiguity is even part of the fabric of the building The Cube occupies. The common associations with movie house design are either the opulent picture palace or the mall-based multiplex, both of which visually announce themselves loudly and directly at the potential spectator. This is not the case for Cube Cinema. Located just north of the Bearpit, an underpass on the edge of Stokes Croft in central Bristol, The Cube is housed in premises that are hard to find and trickier still to interpret from the exterior. From one aspect, The Cube is a deceptively grand Georgian Terrace. From the opposite side, a down-at-heel alley. From the north side, Dove Street, a flat brick wall with a neon sign hints at something, but it is not immediately clear what. Looking down from the tower block behind, a huge fly tower and a curious rectangular lantern suggest community theatre. It is only once inside the old-time auditorium with red velvet seats and wood panelling that uncertainty is resolved.

Ambiguity has the potential to obscure and exclude through subcultural distinction, alluded to in a volunteer comment about the difficulty of actually finding The Cube: 'The Cube is not a warehouse party that needs to be kept from prying eyes […] those that want to

be there should be encouraged rather than being challenged to try harder IMO'[110]. However ambiguity can also be a sly or reflexive strategy to resist convenient packaging, to reconcile one's role in hegemonic systems beyond control, to conceal emancipatory practices from external homogenising forces and to allow a polysemy that enables plurality. While I argue in this thesis that DIY cinema in the UK tries to prefigure post-capitalist relations to culture, space and media, it nevertheless exists and functions within a capitalist reality. This chapter explores the various semiotic tactics and organisational strategies utilised by The Cube to cultivate what could be called a 'reflexive ambiguity' that balances plurality of content, openness to participation and resistance to recuperation.

The Cube also occupies a building that acts as a palimpsest of Bristol alternative film culture spanning the 1960s avant-garde, the 1970s state-financed independent film scene, 1980s entrepreneurialism, and into the late '90s and early '00s era of DIY. I lay out these stages to shed light on the wellsprings of DIY cinema culture in a regionally specific way, offering the chance to compare and contrast historical precedents. The first stage focuses on the history of the King's Square building under the auspices of the Bristol Arts Centre (BAC), exploring its complex relationships with the BFI, regional funders and the Arnolfini as exhibitors sought to create a film culture that responded to the political and aesthetic concerns of the moment. The second stage charts a transitional period after the migration of BAC management to the Watershed Media Centre. During this spell the building was taken over by an entrepreneurial cinephile as a small independent arthouse renamed The Arts Centre Cinema. By the late 90s the programme had diversified to include performances by Club Rombus, a loose collective running along similar lines to Exploding Cinema which I discussed in the history chapter. The sudden closure of the Arts Centre Cinema in 1997 paved the way for a third stage, as those involved in Club Rombus made a spontaneous decision to break beyond underground culture by taking on a physical building that could unify a wider public. The Cube therefore connects the late 1990s underground culture with the evolution of more open, participatory DIY modes developing in the early 2000s.

[110] This anecdote was shared by Marcus Valentine (Cube volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, 2019.

Bristol: a 'city of film'

On 31st October, 2017, Bristol was granted UNESCO status as a 'city of film'[111], as part of the Creative Cities Network. This demonstrates a global recognition of Bristol's importance for moving image culture, based partly on the city's prominence as a production hub, boasting the home of Aardman Animations and the BBC's Natural History Unit (Spicer and Presence 2017). Alongside this production ecology, the *Bristol Magazine* quotes Bristol as having '11 community-driven international festivals dedicated to film, 10 cinemas, and two major universities providing 28 film-related degrees'[112]. A contemporary look shows that the city supports a huge diversity of cinema experience. Major multiplexes and chain cinemas, like Showcase Cinema de Lux, Odeon, Cineworld and Vue cover for a mainstream programme. The notable outlier, the characterful Orpheus owned by the Devon-based mini-chain Scott Cinemas offers the newest 'event cinema' releases from the Royal ballet, NFT, Royal Opera and others. Arthouse audiences are catered for by national chains like Curzon (Clevedon), Everyman (Bristol), and the UK's first state-subsidised media centre, The Watershed. In the wake of Secret Cinema, experiential cinema producers Bristol Film Festival and Bad Film Club have cornered the growing market for spectacular experiences of cult films in unusual locations, while multiple smaller film clubs and screening projects like Truth Out Cinema, and the 20th Century Flicks video shop cinema, use the cinema screening to add value and create community around their dominant business. Within this mixed ecology, Cube Cinema stands out as a recognisably different kind of project adopting the apparatus of the movie theatre for the transformation of everyday life.

Eye to Eye – Bristol Arts Centre and Arnolfini

Claiming cinema as a site for emancipation is not new in Bristol. A closer look at the history of independent cinema culture in the Southwest shows a consistent trend of experimentation that started at least in the mid 1960s, continuing to the present day. A traditional criticism of the theory associated with 1970s Independent cinema is its top-down reduction of the spectator to a fixed, universal subject rather than an individual with lived experience who enters dialogue with what is on screen. This overly simplifies what was actually happening on

[111] Bristol Film Office, 'Bristol UNESCO City of Film', *Bristol Film Office*, http://filmbristol.co.uk/bristol-city-of-film/ [accessed September 10, 2019].
[112] The Bristol Magazine, 'Film: Rich Cinematic Culture in Bristol', *The Bristol Magazine*, https://thebristolmag.co.uk/film-rich-cinematic-culture-in-bristol/ [accessed September 10, 2019].

the ground, and the reality shows openness to collaboration and participation, foreshadowing the approaches developed at The Cube decades later. In Bristol in the 1970s 'independence' relied on 'interdependence', as noted by Steve Presence who has recently analysed the pre-history of the Watershed. Presence unpicks the notion of Independent cinema arguing it is both marked by 'varying degrees of mutual, negotiated dependence' and subject to the shifting agendas of those involved in its exhibition (Presence 2019a, 2). For Presence, the development of alternative cinema provision between the mid 1960s and early 1980s has been the story of two organisations – Bristol Arts Centre and the Arnolfini. To these exhibition spaces he adds a third actor in the BFI itself, who not only funded both spaces' conversion to fully equipped cinemas with 16mm and 35mm, but also financially supported programming. The Institute also played the most decisive partner in negotiations to synthesize the Arnolfini-BAC collaboration in entirely new premises, under the auspices of the Watershed Media Centre, more of which later. The Arnolfini was founded by three young artists in March 1961, keen to create a predominantly visual arts space for 'new, experimental and underrepresented artwork' (Owen 2015), however it was not until the mid 1970s that they started screening film. BAC on the other hand started as a theatre but quickly included films in their repertoire.

Since 1912 the BAC building had been run by the Bristol Christian Mission to the Deaf and Dumb, who after 50 years moved across the square. A group of creative theatre enthusiasts took over the site in 1964 and reconfigured the premises, converting the Institute's assembly hall into a raked auditorium, building a stage and a fly tower in order to present new plays and revivals. The entranceway to the new theatre was unconventionally discreet, as one visitor reflected it 'looked like a normal terraced house on Kings Square, but had an illuminated sign using the same green graphics as on the Programme notes sheets […] getting from the entrance to the auditorium seemed an airport walk' (Ounsted 2014). Film programming consisted of short one or two day runs of art house or cult fare, occupying one week per month, and focusing predominantly on national cinemas, or themes like Classics of Horror[113]. Catering for alternative tastes, BAC were also keen to embed cinema in a broader artistic community. They ran an annual membership system offering three types – active membership, for those interested in being creatively involved with the work of the Arts

[113] Programme of events for BAC: September - December 1967, TGA 20054/4/1/1/15, Personal Papers of Ian Breakwell, Tate Archives, London, UK.

Centre spanning all media; Associate Membership which offered a discounted voucher scheme; and Film membership, which covered all screenings for a year for 5 shillings. The membership scheme protected the curatorial freedom enjoyed by film societies while promoting the notion that audiences could have a greater involvement in a collaborative community.

I have discussed in the history chapter the BFI's policy around regional film theatres. In the same year that BAC was founded, the Quinn Report was released by the BFI, recommending the country be studded with a network of RFTs based on the model of London's NFT. Jennie Lee, the new Labour Minister for Culture made good on this suggestion and increased funding for film culture outside London, rolling out the first RFT scheme in 1966. According to Rod Stoneman, BAC in fact was the first RFT in the country (1980, 5). BFI funding subsequently supported the construction of a projection booth at the back of the auditorium at 4 and 5 Kings Square, and film programming commenced in February that year with a double bill of *Jocef Kilian* (Juracek and Schmidt 1964) and *Diamonds of the Night* (Nemec 1964). In the publicity material relating to the inaugural screening, they refer to screenings at the Academy Film Club on Oxford Street as testimony to the film's appeal, suggesting that at this point the approach to film programming was consistent with pre-eminent art house cinemas.

Building relationships with the BFI drew them into dialogue with new ideas circulating in the education department under Paddy Whannel, connecting the academic study of film with the social, cultural and educational debates of the day (Nowell-Smith and Dupin 2012, 136). While the film selection reflected the independent cinema of the period – *Daisies* (Chytilová 1966), *Closely Observed Trains* (Menzel 1966), *Weekend* (Godard 1967) – the Autumn brochure also lists a project titled *Insight*, a programme of Sunday afternoon presentations given by members of the BFI lecture panel George Brandt, Suzanne Budgen, John Huntley and Alan Lovell. Lovell, exemplifying the disdain in which factions of the new independent film culture held RFTs, considered these to be little more than marginally glorified film societies. He disparaged the scheme as 'essentially small-scale experiments, risking little and gaining little' (1971). This contradicts Lovell's vision for a diverse film culture

> where a large number of people, critics, teachers, film-makers, film society members, etc, would have regular access to as wide a variety of

> films as possible; […] where there were easy opportunities for systematic study and discussion of the cinema; where regular contact was made between critics, teachers, film-makers and informed audiences. (1971, 17).

Places like BAC could and did play an important part in the formation of such a culture. Educational screenings at the BAC increased, including for children, for example the afternoon programme of cartoons, each 'individually introduced by a knowledgeable chap who told you about the director, animation techniques, voice characterization actors, etc. whilst the younger tots fidgeted' (Ounsted 2014).

These exhibition practices characterise the pedagogic process constructed by the BFI Education Team. BAC however was not simply a classroom for the BFI. A night like *MIXTURE!* combined theatre, film and sound in an experimental assemblage infused with Dadaist spirit. Ian Breakwell, the multimedia artist, performed *Buffet Car News* there, which included projections behind a blindfolded man eating a loaf of bread suspended from the ceiling. The aesthetics of the promotional material foreshadow the punk, cut and paste style of Club Rombus thirty years later.

Arnolfini took later to cinema, and as Presence notes, had to negotiate a position between competition and collaboration with both the Arts Centre and the BFI. Arnolfini had become an art gallery of national significance, with the energetic directorship of Jeremy Rees, who had already added city-wide sculpture exhibitions, a music program and a bookshop to Arnolfini's offering. Cinema as an art form was becoming more prominent in the UK, and Arnolfini clearly considered it a worthwhile avenue to open dialogue with the BFI. Another factor could have been Arnolfini's interest in their landlord's involvement with Bristol City Council's harbourside regeneration plans, including a large arts venue that would undoubtedly include cinema. Between 1971 and 1973 the BFI negotiated between Arnolfini and BAC to develop an approach that would meet the needs of both, but leave room for a consolidation of their support in a single, flagship space in line with their revised RFT policy (Presence 2019a). When Arnolfini moved to the W Shed in 1973, BFI supported the installation of a 106-seat auditorium which film curator David Hopkins announced as a 'critical cinema' engaged in 'an ideological critique of cinema, a running commentary on ways of seeing, which are produced, reinforced or negated in the changing relationships between

audiences and films past, present and future'[114]. The ambitious programming generated exciting projects like the First Festival of British Cinema in 1975, co-ordinated with Peter Sainsbury and Laura Mulvey among others.

This type of niche programming could easily have taken place at BAC and so to avoid competitive tensions between the two centres a collaborative approach was instigated in 1977 under the title *Eye to Eye.* On one level this project sought to mitigate duplication, bringing coherent film programmes themed around a director, a country or an issue in a co-ordinated way to the two venues in the same way a film festival might run a retrospective across multiple venues. For the funders it simplified the logistics of supporting two RFT projects in Bristol, while intensifying a radically alternative film culture that responded to the 'urgent need to break from the outmoded and frequently reactionary exhibition practices of traditional film theatres' (Pinhay in Stoneman and Thompson 1981, 70). On the front page of the first *Eye to Eye* brochure in May-June 1977, the main article introduces *Screen*'s position in relation to *Cahiers du Cinéma*, referencing semiotics, psychoanalysis and the Althusserian interpretation of ideology, before launching an attack on contemporary film journalism as unspecialised, judgemental and lacking in proper analysis. Within a year, this unashamedly intellectual approach had been toned down to a more playful and pop style of full-page screen prints of characters like Warhol and Dylan. There still remained a resounding commitment to cinema as a social practice but by this point it was less dogmatic and more open to multiple readings. In the May-June 1979 edition of *Eye to Eye* Steve Pinhay, the film co-ordinator at BAC, publicised three preliminary meetings to launch an open film discussion group, linked to the *Eye to Eye* programme, writing that attendees would be

> looking at the films they contain from a number of perspectives. There is no one right view, but many views. These we will explore informally but systematically. Your ideas and thoughts will be a crucial factor in determining course activity, and these three preliminary meetings are aimed at gauging response and outlining possible course structures[115].

[114] Neil Cummings, http://www.neilcummings.com/bitcache/a465d7dd8467f67e3f6c1f511b6bb28bba152564?vid=1587&disposition=inline&op=view [accessed 12 September 2019].
[115] Pinhay, Steve. *Eye to Eye May-June 1979* (Bristol: BAC and Arnolfini).

The change of tone here balances a more relaxed, collaborative approach with an organised educational framework, departing from the didactic vigour of the first seasons and embracing something more provisional and audience-led. However the fluidity of audience engagement was not something Pinhay took to entirely naturally. There is an air of disappointment in his article for *The New Social Function of Cinema*, in which he tries to evaluate the impact of *Eye to Eye* in cultivating a renewed, critical film culture in Bristol. He describes audiences as seeing films 'in spite of' the programmed context, unable to resist the deeply embedded ideology of cinema as entertainment and showing a lack of sufficient knowledge and film literacy to be able to critically engage with the ideas presented. For Pinhay, this was a failure of pedagogy, and he argues for a productive exchange with audiences through integrated practice between filmmakers, teachers and exhibitors, where educators are the mediators who can activate an informed, 'spectator's cinema' (Stoneman and Thompson 1981, 71). While he argues the obstacles were to be found in limits to funding and the lack of democracy within decision making at centralised funding bodies, his omission of the audience as a productive partner is telling. One of the characteristics of DIY cinema as it evolved in the 2000s is the conscious permeability between audience and exhibitor that situates the spectator as both an indispensable actor in the creation of the cinematic experience but also one who can move fluidly between positions. DIY cinema distinguishes itself as a mode of exhibition that presupposes equality, positioning the audience not as a homogenous entity to be delivered lessons in ideological critique, but as a self-organised, self-educating community.

Vision in transition – Bristol film exhibition and alternative culture in the 80s and 90s

The next section focuses on the transitional period up to the mid 1990s. The 1980s saw increasing cuts to arts funding, while technological and consumer revolutions in TV and video through the decade left cinema exhibition behind as a major casualty, to the extent that by 1984, only 1% of over 35-year olds visited the cinema (Wickham, Mettler, and Marcarini 2005, 3). The second half of the decade saw the introduction of the multiplex, increasing from one site in 1985 to 41 sites by 1990, with an average of ten screens at each (4). As the Conservative Party entered a third term in June 1987, the solidarity campaign around the miners had been defeated, the GLC had been disbanded, and the concept of a 'film culture' was being superseded by the 'creative industries', aligned to new business management

procedures and efficiency drives. Not long after the publication of Pinhay's article in *The New Social Function of Cinema*, he was heading up the flagship Watershed Media Centre on Bristol's harbourside, in a complex public-private partnership. This was the BFI's frontrunner for a new approach to consolidate their RFT policy into fewer and larger regional institutions. It was also a bellwether for cultural regeneration, a process that would gather pace throughout the coming decades, reaching its apotheosis under New Labour. Steve Presence notes the precarity of the Watershed's public-private financial arrangements, arguing that it was only through astute leadership that the flagship media centre survived (2019). Sensing a shift in its role, and the appetites of the public, Watershed's programme of arthouse cinema was untethered from the rigorously academic restraints of projects like *Eye to Eye*. It broadened into a more commercially popular approach, catering for a larger audience, albeit one that enjoyed cinema in the controlled, comfortable setting of a flagship media centre in a rapidly gentrifying part of town. In a retrenchment from the concept of cinema as a social practice, notions of emancipation or political transformation were elided. Watershed's changing policy reflects the complex balance media centres had to tread between commercial populism and artistic direction as neoliberal economics started to gain ground.

Through the late 1970s and 1980s, Bristol's developing underground scenes spanning Punk, reggae sound systems and the growing DIY culture posed a different set of tactics underpinning support for and production of culture. Together they established a cultural antecedent for The Cube that contrasted with institutions like Watershed and Arnolfini. Events like the St. Paul's Riots showed an undercurrent of social resistance to dominant attitudes of policing and town planning. Additionally, Bristol was a hot spot for activists in the free festival movement. The Avon Free Festival attracted tens of thousands of New Age Travellers and ravers to the Southwest, culminating in the notorious Castlemorton Common Festival which precipitated the Criminal Justice Bill of 1994. Through squats, pirate radio, urban music and the graffiti scene Bristol became nationally recognised for its highly developed and regionally specific underground, one that combined the multiculturalism of Carnival, the DIY energy of punk, the utopian community building associated with New Age Travellers and the party spirit of the rave scene.

Squats formed around the Stokes Croft area, which split wealthier Kingsdown from St. Paul's, an area of cheap housing, high immigration and an epicentre of Jamaican culture. On Cheltenham Road in the early 1980s, an abandoned VW garage became the squatted

Demolition Ballroom, a venue for punk gigs, with a next door cafe, the Demolition Diner. Activist culture was strengthened by the Full Marks bookshop, and evidence suggests these were all still operational in the mid 1990s as organisational hubs against the Criminal Justice Bill[116]. Ben Hopkinson, a Cube volunteer, describes the Stokes Croft area as a space of possibility, outside of the gaze of the authorities, where culture could grow and disperse in an organic, self-organised way. If this was the case for alternative living, organising and socialising around music, cinema's stake in this changing landscape of self-organised DIY culture is harder to detect.

The other independents – The Concorde and The Arts Centre Cinema

In some respects it was the small independent cinemas that could foster alternative communities. By the late 1980s the term independent was losing its radical associations, replaced by notions of commercial authenticity in the face of corporate media. Tracking the changes at BAC sheds light on this process, but it was not the only indie in town. Journalist Eugene Byrne, a zine-publisher turned magazine editor, remembers a fleapit cinema on Stapleton Road named after Bristol's proud aviation export, the Concorde, which he describes as bringing together audiences from different positions of class and race, which in turn had a formative effect on the progression of Bristol's urban music subcultures. Concorde Cinema's role in this was to show *Wild Style* (Ahearn 1982) almost on repeat[117], drawing the middle-class visual artists from north west Bristol, and the working-class kids from the nearby youth project in Barton Hill, which had started to encourage kids into street art. The importance of graffiti and hip hop to the developing 'Bristol Sound', made famous by Massive Attack, Portishead, Tricky, Smith and Mighty and Roni Size may have been cultivated in a fleapit on Stapleton Road, Easton. Institutions were quick to respond to these new local forms, for example Arnolfini organised a 1985 exhibition of graffiti commissions directly onto the wall of the gallery, with breakdancing displays and DJ performances from The Wild Bunch[118]. However, these subcultures were ambivalent about legality and were therefore

[116] Aufheben, 'Kill or Chill – An analysis of the Opposition to the Criminal Justice Bill', *Aufheben 04,* Summer 1995, https://libcom.org/library/kill-chill-aufheben-4 [accessed 19 September 2019].

[117] Eugene Byrne (Journalist, Venue Magazine), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, September 2019.

[118] Neil Cummings, http://www.neilcummings.com/bitcache/a465d7dd8467f67e3f6c1f511b6bb28bba152564?vid=1587&disposition=inline&op=view [accessed 30 September 2019],

resistant to being tamed by the subsidised cultural sector, which in turn had to contend with the uncertainties of funding and the pursuit of 'bums on seats'.

Changes of management of the BAC chart the cultural and economic trends of the period. After the management vacated for the Watershed Media Centre, the Kings Square building was run by Steve Hagan as a small family business throughout the mid 1980s and early 1990s, fending for itself outside of the funding system. The approach of the Hagans at the Arts Centre Cinema brings to light a different ecology of film exhibition, representative of a swathe of small-scale businesses and micro-chains of rep cinemas that fought for survival throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Intent on capturing a more niche part of the market, these cinemas were nevertheless driven by the transactional logic of the entertainment industry, selling the commodity of the film experience in creative and unusual ways that often veered towards cult, trash and exploitation cinema. The Arts Centre Cinema was, for example, the only one in town to show *Romper Stomper* (Wright 1992), a screening that was picketed by anti-fascists (Askew 2015).

Predating the rise of the boutique cinema in the 2000s, John Wojowski, the Mancunian founder of Kino Short Film Festival and one-time cinema impresario, describes a vocational field of independent exhibitors in towns and smaller cities scattered across the UK, running completely outside of the BFI's sphere of influence or support[119]. The Arts Centre Cinema was one such place, targeting a second run audience with whom the family-based management could build personable relationships. Wojowski, who joined Hagan at the Arts Centre Cinema for a few years in the early 1980s, remembers Hagan as a friendly, philosophically-minded character with a symbiotic connection to his audience, to the extent that informal conversations would frequently lead to small scale music and comedy events in the auditorium in addition to film screenings.

Located between the more affluent Kingsdown, and the 'out of view' Stokes Croft, the Arts Centre gained a reputation as a hidden gem screening the most popular art house films after successful runs at the Watershed (Askew 2014). Hagan was an ardent film fan, member of the Bristol Theosophical Society and keen gambler[120]. The public programme presented

[119] The disconnection between this type of independent cinema and the funded sector is worthy of further consideration, as most were unable to survive to the end of the 1990s. The Concorde closed in 1990. Projects Wojowski was involved with including the Aaben Cinema in Manchester, and the 051 Cinema in Liverpool folded in 1990 and 1995 respectively. Hagan's cinemas, The Arts Centre Cinema and the Ritz in Belper, closed in 1997.

[120] Graeme Hogg, (Cube founder member), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, September 2019.

middlebrow fare like *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (Soderbergh 1989), *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Rappeneau 1990) and *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont 1994), screening alongside the newest Woody Allen films, venturing to slightly more cult provision like David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990) or *Delicatessen* (Caro and Jeunet 1991)[121]. After closing time the cinema reputedly provided space for more informal activities. Wojowski describes Hagan glorying in more obscure cult material, occasionally dusting off a 16mm print of the Mondo film *Shocking Asia* (Olsen 1974)[122]. Wojowski returned to Manchester to reopen the Aaben Cinema, with the support of Hagan as an investor and business partner, but this was short-lived. Hagan also took on a small cinema in Belper, the Ritz, as he tried to grow a precarious chain of independents, but ultimately, the market was not sufficiently friendly and Hagan concluded his business interests with rep cinema.

To summarise then, funded cinemas like Watershed held the advantage over smaller independents through state aid. However funded institutions of the late 1980s and early 1990s also had to deal with conditions attached that limited their programming freedom, toned down ideological critique and required careful relationship management with the private sector. Unsubsidised art cinemas had to struggle to thrive in a competitive entertainment market and so cultivated character to build familiarity and community around the cinematic experience. Both groups made gestures to the underground to connect with and develop new audiences, even though in the 1980s and early 1990s cinema was not a prime site for countercultural activity. However things were soon to change with the advent of Club Rombus.

Club Rombus - a shape of things to come?

This part of the chapter focuses on Club Rombus, the main forerunner of Cube Cinema. Club Rombus adopted a DIY approach, using hand-crafted flyers, zines, cardboard props and make-shift bars, and an anarchic form of circus showmanship to run irregular underground 16mm film screenings and performance nights. Regularly screening films from the canon of 1960s and 1970s experimental film from distributors like BFI and LFMC, their mode of presentation rejected any notion of deference shown in institutional spaces, styled more

[121] Phil Gyford, https://www.gyford.com/phil/events/venues/np6v9/ [accessed 19 September 2019].

[122] John Wojowski, (former business partner of Steve Hagan, Arts Centre Cinema), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, October 2019.

around the carnival or cabaret. Club Rombus was the inspiration of Graeme Hogg and Kevin Dennis, two circus performers who had been working through the late 1980s and early 1990s as itinerant stilt walkers, students of Fool Time, the progenitor of the Bristol-based circus school Circomedia. Cinema has recognised roots in the circus, a point emphasised by Exploding Cinema participants who similarly sought to reconnect the film event with older popular arts. Alternative circus companies like Welfare State and Forkbeard Fantasy were experimenting with the inclusion of slide and 16mm technology in their performances, exploring the interactive potential of projection. Circus holds a further relevance to Club Rombus stemming from its significance within DIY counterculture, particularly free festivals and the New Age Traveller movement. The connections between circus and New Age Travellers have been outlined by Kevin Hetherington (2000), who refers to both the nomadism of travelling showmen and the distinctive style of circus as influencing factors on traveller collectivities and aesthetics. The traveller movement had a constitutive impact on the politics and aesthetics of DIY culture and as I noted above, Bristol was a focal point for free festivals and organising resistance to the Criminal Justice Bill. The confluence of circus, DIY and cinema in Club Rombus set the scene for a convivial counter-cinema exhibition practice in the Southwest.

Rombus emerged directly from the practice of clowning and stilt walking. While masterminding new ideas for shows, Hogg and Dennis devised an experimental stilt-walking show inspired by Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), selected for the 1994 edition of the Welsh International Film Festival in Cardiff. This event had a formative influence on the two in a number of ways. Dressing up as a tripod with a camera on top was amusing and visually effective, but other qualities of the event struck a chord. A members' drinking club provided a festival hub location, where screenings continued after hours, alongside card games and general everyday social interaction, affirming the possibility of a far more sociable approach to film spectatorship. It was the same year that the KLF burned £1million on a Scottish Island in a shocking act of *détournement*, and Bill Drummond declared their notorious 23-year moratorium during a screening at the film festival. The combination of Situationist-inspired anti-art, convivial and cosy screening conditions and the DIY mentality underpinning their Vertovian circus performance was highly stimulating and prompted them to recreate this concoction back in Bristol.

Hogg and Dennis were renting office space in the Mivart Street Studios, a repurposed WW1 bi-plane factory, sharing with a veteran street performance group the Desperate Men. They suggested Dennis and Hogg manage an upstairs space called the Cauldron, perfect for experimenting with some of the ideas brewing since their experience in Wales. The first event in 1995, revolved around a screening of *Man with a Movie Camera* with a live soundtrack provided by a musician friend from Knee High Theatre, with an emphasis on improvisation. Billed as a predominantly film-focused event, the audience comprised an invited list of potentially sympathetic people from Bristol's independent media who turned up wearing stick-on moustaches. A citizen reviewer unpicked the event afterwards: 'I should have worked it out sooner: it was a Russian film! That's why the band were dressed as Cossacks; although the audience, with their pineapple dread-heads (de rigeur in Easton), looked like members of the Moscow State Circus'[123]. Subsequent events allowed the duo to explore different terrains, satisfying Hogg's curiosity for avant-garde cinema. Short films by Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Kurt Kren, Peter Kubelka and Daina Krumins were projected alongside Japanese silent *A Page of Madness* (Kinugasa 1926). A Dadaist sense of humour pervaded events like the simultaneous screening of the Murnau (1922) and Herzog (1979) versions of *Nosferatu*, with a fake letter of outrage turning to enthusiastic endorsement from Herzog in the accompanying zine.

Rombus tapped into the libidinal, carnival energy of the underground, in a politics of form if not explicitly in content. This was supported by the conscious use of outmoded technologies in combination with the new to create a media environment that could critique the dynamics of novelty, progress and consumerism ingrained in the mainstream. The 1990s saw the rapid rise of AV performance with rave visuals, VJing and other mobile projection techniques for live music and clubbing. AV artists combined the projection of old VHS tapes, computer generated imagery and small format film to explore cinema as a live form in dedicated social environments rather than sit down auditoria. Equally, the rapid rise of video as production, distribution and exhibition format, and its successors DVD and mini-DV, resulted in an accelerated obsolescence of super 8 and 16mm equipment, now readily available in car boot sales, or from school and college renovations. Kim Knowles explores the use of 'obsolete' photo-chemical film technology in this period of transition to digital as more

[123] My (Avant Garde) Life: A Review of 'Man With a Camera' at Easton Arts Studio, Photocopy, Cube Microplex Archives, Bristol, UK.

than mere retro-fetishism in her recent monograph, arguing for a politics of resistance 'where the critical power of the outmoded object meets the radical potential of the material surface' (2020, 17). Ardently attached to 16mm projection, where the projector itself formed yet another character in the proceedings, Club Rombus sought a material engagement with the space and the audience that was geared at creating a heady, transformative experience.

However Rombus was not explicitly oppositional, and furtively bridged the divide between underground and overground culture, seeking funding from both South West Arts and the South West Media Development Agency to stage events. Similarly, Rombus took part in Brief Encounters film festival, and struck up a collaboration with the Arts Centre Cinema. Strategic relationships with funding and screening institutions were persistently underplayed and destabilized by subversive press campaigns in a sign of the tactical ambiguity I mentioned at the start of this chapter. An example was the November 1996 event combining stalwarts of the New York underground Paul Sharits and Jonas Mekas with Walerian Borowczyk and the Brittonioni Brothers (aka Forkbeard Fantasy, old hands at performance projection). In the press release, the location was advertised as the Watershed 'Medium' Centre, which they proposed to shake up vigorously to create the 'conditions to reawaken the liberated parts that growing up has buried'. Following the classic exploitation publicity trope flyers insisted that 'nothing that has come before can compare with this'. What emerges from this account is a DIY exhibition practice that mixes subversion with conviviality; the conflation of highbrow and low culture; old and new technologies; while maintaining a Janus-like ambivalence to the Institution and the entertainment market.

To what extent spectators shared the same value system is hard to gauge without a deeper analysis of audience reactions, and there was no singular audience. Rombus certainly connected into other subcultures beyond cinephilia, for example the fetish scene around long running club night Spank or the diverse improvised music scene. This curated approach to the cultural margins drew a large alternative crowd. A further factor behind the success of Rombus lies in the strength of Bristol's media industries to provide the right conditions for hybrid experimental and entrepreneurial projects to form and grow in the late 1990s. As Spicer and Presence note, 'media organisations and educational providers play a significant role in the region's cultural ecology. Media organisations help to connect, support and celebrate companies and freelancers working in the cluster'(2017, 4). The combination of the BBC, Aardman studios and its weirder correlative, the Bolex Brothers, brought a community

of open-minded and curious film enthusiasts to the region, keen to be diverted from the relatively beaten track of the Watershed and the Arnolfini.

Although co-ordinated by Hogg and Dennis, Rombus was forming into a larger collective, and provided a subterranean space for industry technicians to unleash their creativity in (even more) unrestrained ways. Frank Passingham and Mike Gifford aka Tajel Film Services were two technically-adept projectionists who worked at Aardman. They had been long-term visual collaborators with underground band Startled Insects and offered to be projectionists, contributing their xenon projectors; Johnny Mann, a professional set builder furnished events with enormous cardboard props; a variety of musicians from the flourishing underground music scene scored films, including Anorakovak, SONAR 1 and The Newts[124]. Rombus was developing a model of film exhibition that celebrated participation and a sense of informality and collaboration between the audience, the films and the organisers. This expanding approach to cooperation not only introduced more people into the presentation of events, it set the tone for Rombus' evolution into Cube Cinema.

Adding dimensions - from Rombus to Cube

Club Rombus started at Mivart Street but soon became itinerant, staging events at festivals and other cultural venues, geared around a predominantly social experience of cinema. The choice of where to locate events demonstrates a desire for alternative space, departing from the immersive nature of the conventional auditorium. The perceived complications of working within institutions factored into the decision making, and like Exploding Cinema in London there was a clear preference for disused spaces. This changed however when under Steve Hagen, the Arts Centre Cinema hosted a live music night organised by a legendary local music promoter, Paul Horlick (aka Fat Paul), which opened up the possibility for Hogg and Dennis to enquire about using it as a potential space for a Rombus event. In September 1996, Rombus landed a slot at the Arts Centre Cinema, presenting a late-night compilation of stop motion animations by Wladyslaw Starewicz sound tracked by The Newts. The flyer emphasised the architectural fit, given the cinema had both a screen and the original theatre stage, upon which a band could comfortably play live. Rather than feeling institutional, the Arts Centre Cinema with its peculiar architecture, long corridors and slightly odd, family-run

[124] *Live on Film*, Venue, April-May 1996, photocopy, Cube Microplex Archives, Bristol, UK.

vibe provided a good match for the artisanal approach of the Rombus collective. By chance at the end of 1997, the core Rombus group were running out of ideas and unsure of what to do next when news emerged of the Arts Centre's sudden closure.

With a catalogue of beguiling events under their belts, the Rombus team had both a growing audience and reputation but what they lacked was a reliable space to consolidate and sustain their activities. I have explored this issue as a factor in the diminishing energies of the London Volcano generation of film clubs, and a central concern for Star and Shadow in Newcastle. For Rombus, the timeliness of the Arts Centre Cinema becoming available was almost sufficient motivation for them to grab the opportunity. The foundational principles were more ambiguous than simply screening films. Caught at the intersection of self-employment in the creative industries and the anti-establishment attitudes of DIY, the founding group of four[125] saw in the cinema business a way of bringing stability to their transient event programme, enabling them to stage performances in the auditorium, use the cinema as a base for other filmmaking activities, but more importantly to provide a means of income covering both wages and capital for film production. Fuelled by the idealism of their ephemeral happenings, and the back-of-the-envelope business acumen of freelance circus performers, the Rombus team responded to the news of the Hagans' departure from the Arts Centre by seizing on the concept of running it themselves.

The rationale was to continue with the Hagans' approach of second-run feature films, augmented by more creative and unlikely events around the core programme. With this plan in mind, they re-opened the Arts Centre under a new banner as the Cube Microplex in October 1998, with a Bristol-bound classic of British independent cinema, *Radio On* (Petit 1979). Twenty-six films were programmed in the first month, dispensing a diverse menu aimed at an alternative youth culture[126]. Repertory arthouse standards *Yojimbo* (Kurosawa 1961) and *La Maman et La Putain* (Eustache 1973) sat alongside *The Fifth Element* (Besson 1997), locals the Bolex brothers' *The Secret Adventures of Tom Thumb* (1993) and more cult movies like *Akira* (Otomo 1988), the Talking Heads film *True Stories* (Byrne 1986), *La Haine* (Kassovitz 1995), and the extraordinary *Themroc* (Faraldo 1973). October being Black History Month, fans of reggae and dancehall were enticed by *The Harder They Come* (Henzell 1972),

[125] The founding group comprised the main co-ordinators of Rombus, Hogg and Dennis, plus two local filmmakers, Julian Holman and Jack Davies.
[126] Film List, Accounting document for film hires, 1999, Printout, Cube Microplex Archives, Bristol, UK.

Stepping Razor: Red X (Campbell 1992) the Peter Tosh documentary, and two British dancehall films – *Babylon* (Rosso 1980) and *Babymother* (Henriques,1988). In a slice of historical irony, it was *Wild Style* that did the best, taking over £500 at the box office. A Warp night, a screening dedicated to Harry Partch, and the Sun-Ra film *A Joyful Noise* (Mugge 1980) pointed to the importance of alternative and esoteric music to the early Cube programmers. In stressful situations, it was hard to assimilate the value of artistic integrity with the need to bring in income, but the former was always more important. While the pragmatic balance between second-run cinema and experimental events would occasionally backfire, a Cube diary blog confessed in April 1999 'learn the golden rule (broken time and time again in moments of panic) never show a shite film...we do 2 this month - Shakespeare In Luv and Hilary and Jackie'[127].

The sheer intensity of this opening schedule was impossible to maintain[128], and they were unprepared for the demands of programming a cinema and pulling off the all-consuming events that had been their mainstay at Club Rombus. The financial returns for all the hard work were negligible. Hogg describes how audiences fluctuated wildly, and they still had November and December's programmes to fill. From a commercial perspective, the business model designed by the inexperienced team was showing its vulnerabilities, but unlike somewhere like the Watershed, the scale of the enterprise was still small, and the financial risks low. The rent was cheap, and artists could still survive on benefits[129] - Jobseeker's Allowance, a Tory reform superseding Income Support in 1996 was yet to really bite meaning that the pressure to conform to social expectations around work were reasonably manageable. For a crew used to living cheaply and surviving between gigs there was an underlying agility matched with an everyday utopianism which strengthened their resolve. Nevertheless, in order to survive, things had to change quickly. Intuitively following the collaborative style of Rombus, they decided to open the doors and encourage more people to get involved.

[127] 'Cube Diary 98-00', *Cube Cinema*, 2001 https://web.archive.org/web/20010905061223/http://www.cubecinema.com/lit/diary98-00 [accessed 11 October 2019].

[128] Graeme Hogg, (Cube founder member), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, September 2019.

[129] A number of older Cube volunteers attested in interviews to the importance of the dole in enabling them to follow DIY artistic practices and provide for basic needs through the 1980s and 1990s.

The Rubric of The Cube – openness, play and resistance

By necessity, and off the back of a stumbling but exciting inauguration, The Cube team forged an experimental, reflexive way of working that deconstructed cinema in terms of its space, its social relations, its visual forms and technological apparatus. Between the improvised November 1998 opening and temporary closure due to a fire in the Chinese restaurant cohabiting the building in July 2001, a pattern of intent started to crystalise. Over this period of experimentation, The Cube developed and formed its DIY cultural positioning, organisational mode and aesthetic sensibility, what might colloquially be referred to as 'the Way of The Cube'. This can be seen in progressive changes to organisational structure and the plural aesthetics that enabled; the freedom gained from having a space; but also in a subversive spirit of rebellion. The pre-existing hierarchy of a small group of Cube directors taking a wage supported by volunteers drew complaints of unfair power imbalances and accusations of a 'boys club' (as all the paid workers were male). To recognise these issues the organisation adapted to a horizontal structure. Registering as a workers' co-op but axing wages they decided on voluntarist self-management. This approach was both informed and made easier by various web-based tools for communication and programming, introduced by participants embedded in the early stages of net art, which I will explore later. Opening up The Cube undoubtedly ushered in a cohort of dynamic and impassioned creative activists interested in a variety of issues. Artist Lady Lucy came on board, bringing a feminist angle under the projects Independent Heroine and Ladyfest. Testing copyright grey areas, Mark Berry brought with him his collection of 16mm film prints, screened illicitly under the pseudonym Alan Smithee. Chiz Williams, who had ejected himself from the music entertainment industry, saw in The Cube a place to regain a sense of creative autonomy.

People quickly felt attracted to the sense of freedom enabled by The Cube's space. The scope of The Cube as a free space for experimentation cannot be underestimated, and it was perfectly suited to the development, presentation and celebration of alternative cinema culture outside of the intense demands of the market or the restrictions of funding criteria. The Cube was becoming a testing ground of openness guided by an ingrained sense of contrariness. Hogg describes the informing biases as influenced by culture jamming, play, and doing things 'wrong'. Chiz Williams suggests that a Situationist ethos had hold over core

members, who sought to 'turn everyday life and everything you do into an art gesture'[130]. Reflecting a broader renewal of Situationist ideas, this approach drew attention to the way capitalist culture attempted to pass itself off as smooth and clean. Adopting a reflexivity around using the debris of the dominant system to vision an alternative, The Cube's exhibition mode was the collision of low-brow culture with a radical philosophy of resistance and critique around the technological potential of salvage.

Club Rombus and Cube Microplex are articulations of new cinematic trends during a period of crisis and transition, as the conventional cinema apparatus (screen, projector, audience) dispersed into multiple platforms, and ways of viewing. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, the threat to the cinema as a space for encountering (celluloid) film has been routinely described in terms of a crisis, as it transitioned to digital. Anne Friedberg suggested that cinema has 'become embedded in – or perhaps lost in – the new technologies that surround it', both in terms of production and reception, as the cinema screen lost its exclusivity to television, VCR and the computer screen (Friedberg 2000, 439). DIY Cinema exhibition evidenced by The Cube shows that there are other ways of interpreting this transition. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, DIY Cinema exhibition offered an inversion of Friedberg's formulation, where the public space of the cinema exhibition site could be set up and utilised for exploring not only changes in technologies but also collective experimentation, utilising both old and new media to expand the possibilities of cinema as a space and a set of relations. The Cube organically fashioned a cinematic experience combining obsolete technologies like 16mm and slide projectors, skip-rescued computers and web streaming from within the cinema. It added decentralised, peer to peer networking methods that allowed a blurring of spectator and programmer, resulting in a new form of cinema space based on human interaction rather than atomised consumption. Moreover, it rapidly became a site for an alternative form of media convergence rooted in net art. Kate Rich, a media artist who had worked with Artists Television Access in San Francisco, joined hoping to realise similar ambitions in Bristol[131]. Heath Bunting, another pioneer of Net Art, introduced the organisation to the terminal window and incorporated The Cube into the

[130] Chiz Williams (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, August 2019.
[131] Kate Rich, (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, July 2019.

irational.org [sic] project, ushering in a new organisational paradigm emanating from FLOSS[132] culture.

From Proscenium Arch to Terminal Window

With the influx of hacktivists and new-media artists, the shape and emphasis of the organisation changed. Film programming was still a core part of the project, along with live soundtracks, and 'film jamming'[133], but the programme started to combine the oppositional aesthetics of culture jamming with the visual language of net art and the ideologies of FLOSS. In January 2000, the programme contained a mix of cult, music and indie cinema, with a debate on GM food included before a screening of the film *Microcosmos* (Nuridsany and Pérennou 1996)[134]. Playing with the semiotics of html tags, the intro recommends 'search for the Cube online using the term Microplex/refined/Bristol/volunteer/fanatics/cinebar/unusual/weird/slacktivist/autoprobe experimental/Linux/place-of-worship' which gives a fair impression of how the organisation saw itself. Only three months later, the programme boasted 'Molotov March 2000', with a cover image of a Molotov cocktail in a Pepsi bottle, and included screenings of *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask* (Julien 1995), activist coverage of the 1999 WTO conference with a conversation about Jack Straw's Terrorism Bill, and a ludic subversion of the vision-centric nature of cinema in a brand new project called *Blackout Sound Cinema*. In this experiment the auditorium was in total darkness, and the audience were party to an aural presentation of 'soundtracks for imaginary films'[135]. The cinema auditorium is conventionally associated with the comfortable security of being seated for a duration, reassured of a way out through the privacy of low lighting. By reducing the lighting to zero, attention is drawn to the cinema apparatus, as well as the vulnerability of the spectator. Losing your bearings is countered by a heightened sense of mutual responsibility as an audience. A different level of trust is required to be able to move in or out of the space in total darkness. Contrastingly the experience of the soundtrack becomes totally immersive, and reinforces the importance of sound to the cinematic form.

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[132] FLOSS stands for Free/Libre and Open Source Software.

[133] Film jamming is a form of playful expanded cinema, involving multiple film formats and projectors (slide, 16mm, super 8, video) combining in a space with live or DJ music.

[134] Cube Microplex, *The Cube 2000*, brochure, Bristol, Cube Microplex, 2000.

[135] Cube Microplex, *Molotov March 2000*, brochure, Bristol, Cube Microplex, 2000.

The void of a pitch black cinema as a site for collaborative exploration mirrors the terminal window demanded by their ideological adoption of Linux as a framework for the organisational infrastructure. Bunting was a major influencer in this move. A friend of Hogg's from the late 1980s, he had been on the road working as a successful net artist, but returned to Bristol, impressed at the potential of the building acquired by The Cube. His commitment intensified, simultaneously helping get The Cube online, converting them to Linux, and living on the roof of The Cube in a tent[136]. Bunting had a habit of intervening in disruptive ways to break down hierarchies[137], a tactic he exploited at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada where he had set up an email list for anonymous communication amongst workers[138]. He devised a systems approach in order to democratise working at The Cube, by way of experimental online interfaces. This started with a 'scratch pad', an early form of wiki that allowed people to pool ideas and access them remotely. Tools for an integrated management system were continually added over the following months to enable films and events to be booked, terms to be arranged, invoices sent, prints ordered and screenings managed in a workflow which could be entered into at any point if you had the single username and password. This bundle of online software tools was nicknamed 'toolkit', and went live as an integrated system in October 2003, bringing a decentralised transparency to putting on events and screenings at The Cube. The concept of the individual programmer was by now redundant as any member of The Cube with the password permissions could intervene with their own idea. The only limit was the programming meeting which could pass or veto proposals, although this was occasionally bypassed by individuals who downplayed the importance of collective due process. Describing the change, Bunting states 'the idea was that anybody could come in, and just pick up a project and just contribute to it somehow [...] We always worked on a principle of openness and that every person was replaceable, and that actually it was the organisation that was the most important thing'. People could literally walk in off the street and be given the login and the chance to start managing and co-ordinating things[139].

[136] Heath Bunting, (ex-Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, October 2019.

[137] Other volunteers contest this description, arguing that he had a divisive presence which came to a head in Bunting's 3 month suspension from The Cube.

[138] Tara Neish and A. Marsh Stevens, '@Banff', http://www.irational.org/at-banff/ [accessed 10 December 2020].

[139] Kate Rich talked about the 'entry' into The Cube, being given a broom and asked to sweep the floor: 'I liked this entry - You come in and there is a task and you are know how to do it and you are immediately part of something'. Heath Bunting refers to a volunteer coming in to the office off the street and being given access to toolkit to start organising events.

The introduction of Linux, and the development of Toolkit formalised the culture of openness and transparency, to the degree that The Cube became a real-world application of open source thinking. The intent to make resources common had no boundaries, so 'how-to' instructions about The Cube's management increased on their wiki, meetings became more open and The Cube even bought a shared car notionally available to any volunteer. Chiz Williams reflects on the attraction of this organisational methodology as being equal or greater than experiencing The Cube as a space for experiencing cinema:

> some people, like me, grew to get more and more involved in that, you know they had gone down there because they love watching films and they ended up going down there because they really like the way we want to organize ourselves[140].

To give a comparison to their advanced position, by February 2004, when Facebook was initially launched, The Cube had already home-coded a refined peer to peer model, an internal social network of email lists, chat rooms, and volunteer web-hosting space on their home-made server 'Sparror'. The sophistication of this setup was significantly more developed than neighbouring funded organisations like Arnolfini[141]. In The Cube then, a utopian stance regarding the potential of the internet as a digital commons became embedded and took on symbolic status as a constitutive factor in the rest of The Cube's activities. This has become a more contested issue due to the increasing corporate stranglehold of the online space, which I will touch on later.

Forging new methods and practices associated with making cinema resulted in a substantial departure from the norm, stretching the concept of film exhibition into new shapes. Cinema was no longer a place where you came to simply pay for a ticket, sit in the dark and watch a film. It was a staging point from which to explore media as content, form and a set of tools in a collaborative way. In The Cube FAQ from 2001, Hogg argues that they have 'invaded form', and are 'transforming the social activity of cinema and transferring it into other applications'. Hogg states 'we're not putting the cultural form before the

[140] Chiz Williams (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, August 2019.

[141] Marcus Valentine refers to conversations with another Cube volunteer who also worked at Arnolfini and expressed amazement that at Arnolfini people were still using a system of pigeon holes and written/printed notes for communication. Marcus Valentine, (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, August 2019.

organisation - to me the organisation is the content' to which Bunting, alluding to a deprioritised status of the projected image, quips 'we should shut the cinema down!'. The joke however held portent, for in July 2001 a fire ripped through the Chinese restaurant, rendering the entranceway to the building ruined and the cinema had to close. A year of frustration and bureaucracy followed, during which a mothball programme sustained The Cube's presence in the city.

A space of ambiguity

The fire had done little harm to the main parts of The Cube beyond smoke damage to the curtains in the auditorium. All the same, volunteers had to come up with a new route into the building. As with everything else this task could be undertaken in a spirit of DIY. The community-led construction of the theatre in the 1960s, which included a fly tower made somewhat precariously of a single course of bricks, set an encouraging precedent for amateur building. Heath Bunting 'liked the space because of the naissance, and it was made of wood and brick so anyone with basic DIY skill could maintain the building. It was built by people that didn't know what they were doing and now run by people that didn't know what they were doing!'. This self-deprecating position belies the recognition of collaboration as an iterative process, whereby the more a group puts into a place, and understands its history, the deeper the connection and sense of ownership. This is a factor I discuss at more length in chapter 3 regarding the self-build cinema projects undertaken by Star and Shadow in Newcastle.

The Cube has always boasted an architectural dissonance suited to its resistant aesthetic. Unlike the homogenised environment of the multiplex, the byzantine route into the pre-fire building took the spectator from the Georgian residential façade of Kings Square, along a worn and tattered corridor past a Chinese restaurant, the Mayflower, accompanied by the sounds and smells of a busy kitchen, catching glimpses of people playing Mah-jong, and into the cinema lobby with its orange vinyl décor and ice cream chest[142]. The resulting new entrance only increased the architectural ambiguity of the space. The new route came in off Dove Street, hidden by a large wall, with steps coming down to a small courtyard and an

[142] Ben Hopkinson, (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, email, October 2019. The building was owned by the Overseas Chinese Association, a community service operating off the back of a Chinese restaurant business, offering language classes, a group for the elderly, and other social and educational opportunities for the Chinese community in the Southwest History of OCA (SW Region), http://www.ocasw.org.uk/about/history/ [accessed 08 October 2019].

entrance into the cinema lobby. The only giveaway that you were in the right place was the neon sign of the Microplex high on the fly tower wall.

The space within The Cube is frequently commented upon by volunteers and audience members, who are keen to share their strong, affective relationships with the red velvet seats, the wooden panelling, and the smell of the place. For volunteer Ben Hopkinson, these qualities combine in a sense of neglect potent with spontaneous possibility, a feeling of comfort outside of the surveillant atmosphere of more upmarket places[143]. Hogg describes the building as 'an actor in itself' and staging events has always been a direct response to the building, its history and psychic identity. The Cube presents as a free space, a setting 'between private lives and large scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence and vision' (Polletta 1999, 3). It is not only in the home-made informality of the environment and its 'cosiness' that The Cube characterises free space. The alternative nature of the labour dynamics are equally distinctive and important, whereby the person on the box office is also potentially the programmer of the film. This leads to a more human interaction than that expected in the normative cinema environment, where roles are more clearly delineated between the audience, the ticket clerk, the projectionist and the curator.

The fire introduced conflicting conversations into the group. For some it was all about the building, while others questioned whether they should relocate. Was it more important that The Cube was a social system; an economic organisation where people could come in, take part and go out, able to persist even without a building? Or did the building offer something too important to let go of – physical space with a rich history, run in common in the centre of the city. The space was clearly too important to let go and The Cube reopened in September 2002 with self-reflexive taglines 'reignite your passions', and 'hotter than a Chinese oven'[144]. The 13-month break had given time for reflection, and they reopened, settling on a model of working and an approach to programming that has been largely consistent up to the present.

[143] Ben Hopkinson, (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, email, October 2019.
[144] Cube Microplex, *The Cube September*, brochure, Bristol, Cube Microplex, 2002.

Democracy: Cube programming, Cube organising

In this section I analyse the film selection process and the organisational structure to back up my claim that DIY cinema enacts democracy. I argue this facilitates plurality across three terrains in terms of those who can 'act' through volunteering, the voices who are legitimised to 'speak' through film programming model, and the freedom in what they choose to 'say' through the content they present at The Cube. Long-term volunteer James Vickery suggests that an enduring value at The Cube has been that 'we are our audience'[145]. While this trend had begun before the fire, the fluid movement of people from the seats of the auditorium into the more proactive areas of a complex organisation distinguishes The Cube from the 'family-run' fleapit, the state-funded arthouse, and even the community film club. Vickery backs this up by summarising:

> it's not for profit; it's about sustaining what we do […] a lot of times we try to do cheap tickets for stuff […] we want to be cheap. There's this idea that while we are not funded […] we want to make art and cinema accessible to people […] we are ideally a non-hierarchical organisation and people can get involved and do stuff; that it's not a closed shop or ivory tower situation. It's not top down, you know I think ideas of democracy speak to that […] it is in opposition to a lot of funded institutions where there is a clear hierarchy and this idea of gatekeepers to culture […] those things definitely feel like what's different about The Cube, and in terms of the content there are many voices rather than one voice so you get a lot of different perspectives which you would never get if you had this gatekeeper situation.[146]

This stands in stark contrast to conventional theories of film programming found in academic text books. Peter Bosma for example defines the core function of a film curator as 'gatekeeper' or 'cultural intermediary', placing them in a strict 'economy of ideas', rendered in the exchange value between 'special and lasting viewing experiences' and the price of a ticket. For Bosma this must come from expertise (Bosma 2015, 8–9).

[145] James Vickery (Cube volunteer) interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, August 2019.
[146] Ibid.

Rather than see it is a product of proficiency, DIY cinema considers the action of programming democratically as a 'speech act' in so far as it involves an individual or group using the medium of film exhibition to communicate something. From this perspective the content of The Cube programme exhibits a freedom of speech from the restraints of safe morality and the need to turn a profit. The participatory process reveals a freedom *to speak* on behalf of the volunteer community engaged with The Cube. Consequently there is a great diversity of autonomous groups that have affiliated with The Cube on ideological grounds in order to say what they want through film exhibition. These groups will often hire The Cube for a small fee, and be supported by the volunteers to present their event. However it is within the active volunteer body that the act of programming is routinely encouraged. Volunteers are emboldened from their first induction to consider using the space and resources to present their own take on culture, and this is structured into the programming group and its overarching curatorial direction. This is elaborated upon by regular programmer Amber Cropp:

> usually with film, anyone could be on it [the programming group] who wants to be…10 or 15 active people are on the list, and another 10 who seem to be nosy…the idea is you have to like the film enough to give up a night of your time to get people to come and see this […] If someone really loves something it should go in.[147]

This quote also conveys the importance of a personal, human connection to programming, in the way a zine-writer might write about a band. Film programming is therefore an act of sharing, either from the perspective of fandom, or furthering a self-education in cinema.

A longitudinal analysis of Cube film programming demonstrates how this plays out in a more detailed way (see appendix 1). I have looked at film selection and programming partnerships between 2002 and 2018 to examine the extent to which The Cube has prioritised marginal cultures and sought a plurality of voices. Live music plays a central part in Cube programming, often with visuals included and has been significant in sustaining the identity of The Cube as an important underground space. Occasional theatre, comedy and

[147] Amber Cropp, (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, August 2019.

fundraiser events appear alongside cinema, but my focus is on the core film content of The Cube which I classify in four categories – arthouse, activist, paracinema and multimedia.

'Arthouse' includes both recent releases and films that are from the dominant canon of world cinema 'classics', the type that would be in the BFI Top 100 Films of All Time list. The Cube has pragmatically relied on a strand of second run programming continuing the tradition of the Arts Centre Cinema before it, and this makes up around 50% of screenings per month, as well as giving the project financial sustainability through a tried-and-tested approach. Arguably, unlike showing activist films, arthouse programming does relatively little to contest dominant culture. However, I have tried to present DIY Cinema as a broad church in this thesis, and certainly for The Cube this curatorial approach serves a twin function. Hiring new releases from small-scale distributors supports a heterogeneity in the distribution industry, acting in support of independents like New Wave, Vertigo, Peccadillo Pictures and the like. This amounts to an ethical business practice in line with the ethos of the organisation. It is also a simple democratic reflection of the interests and desires of programmers to dictate their culture following their own interests, which may or not be aligned with radical form and content.

To look briefly at the second 'activist' category however, one can safely say that external groups have brought the predominant share of political film programming to The Cube, in particular long-term collaborations with Bristol Indymedia and Bristol Radical History Group. The majority of these events could be classified as expository documentaries organised by groups keen to communicate a clear message to educate and inspire action. The frequent appearance of these events in the schedule, and the fact that many of these titles are sourced from the activist media production culture rather than more legitimised documentary distributors like Dogwoof, suggests that The Cube has a strong affiliation with video-activism, and is considered a trusted space for organising and presenting this type of material.

The Cube identity is also heavily associated with cult, underground and trash films, often grouped as 'paracinema' (Sconce 1995) and has attracted volunteer programmers on that basis from the beginning. As a home to foster a transgressive sensibility, paracinema programmers might argue that The Cube constitutes a site of 'refuge and revenge' (379). Programmers create sub-collectives to explore specific lines of (sub)cultural enquiry, for example, *Hellfire Video Club* (trash aesthetics) or *Heavy Heads Disco* (cult music), and use the

social space of The Cube to build fan communities around an ironic counter-cinema pitched at negating elite, highbrow culture.

The final 'multimedia' grouping covers a DIY culture of media convergence using whatever is to hand to create playful and social events that push directly at the construction of the cinema environment. Spilling off a single screen, demanding audience mobility, breaking the fourth wall and actively involving spectators in constitutive roles challenge the notion of the cinema as a darkened box for sedentary experience. Events like *D.R.A.M* in March 2003 continued the custom of free-for-all film jams, as stated in the programme: 'We encourage you all to bring along gems from your own collections of slides/video/acetate/8 or 16mm film/ shadow puppets etc. and any portable projectors. Become part of a shifting stream of random imagery, both familiar and abstract'. In March 2009, a *No Power Party* flipped the cinema back to its origin myth of storytelling, fireside and shadows. Burlesque and cabaret have threaded moving image, performance and vaudeville, using screen and stage to hark back to a home-made Cinema of Attractions (Gunning 2006). All along, *Bluescreen* has offered filmmakers and artists in Bristol a platform for sharing and discussing their work on any and all formats. Visible in this almanac of Cube screenings are waves of temporally-specific cultures that have crested and broken, from the post-punk style of expanded cinema around the turn of the millennium, to the potentials of streaming and VJing in the early 2000s, through archive-hacking projects using VHS and not to mention the blossoming of access to film-related subcultural knowledge and community with the expansion of the web.

Over time, the emphasis upon technology and process has transferred towards identity, power, knowledge and representation. More recent years have seen a renewed vigour from DIY feminist, queer and intersectional perspectives, such as *Beacons, Ikons and Dykons*, *Palace Film Festival* and the *Cables and Cameras* project, aimed at creating a critical and social hub for filmmakers of colour.

Shifting from a small collective with defined roles, to a much larger network of volunteers, email lists and working groups, the programme has consistently engaged with a diversity of film cultures from grassroots positions. For many, it is not specifically the democracy of the programme that attracts or retains them, but the governance of the organisation. The Cube defines itself as an open system, and therefore roles fluctuate and are self-determined, as Cropp relates:

> I like the fact I can do whatever job I want to – if I wanted to learn to project [35mm film] I could just start shadowing and start to do it... one day I sign up to usher the next day I am F.O.H and the next day bar manager and I think it is important that everyone is doing lots of things, and that they realise things don't happen magically…[148]

The final point Cropp makes alludes to the importance of creating a shared understanding about the hard work of getting things done.

Structured as a workers' co-operative, The Cube additionally operates a non-hierarchical policy which notionally gives all volunteers equal say on issues relating to the project's management. Properly facilitated opportunities for all volunteers to have their voices heard equally are however rare, and where they do exist they tend to privilege the silent hierarchy of experienced volunteers. In The Cube's case, consensus is understood as an egalitarian form of veto, rather than a process towards group agreement. Agonistic conflict is therefore rife within The Cube's email lists and meetings, to the degree that many volunteers allude to The Cube as dysfunctional, suffering from a 'tyranny of structurelessness' (Freeman 1970). Valentine puts a wry spin on the structure of The Cube likening it to an onion: 'the outer layers are really flaky and the closer you get to the centre you end up in tears'[149]. Behind this joke lies a truth that while organisations like The Cube and Star and Shadow consciously or unconsciously have followed Jo Freeman's suggestions - investing a great deal of time in creating systems that restrict individuals accumulating power; distributing power more widely through working groups; enabling rotation of roles; prioritising a high degree of knowledge sharing; providing equal access to resources and information through email lists and wikis – power dynamics are still extremely resilient and difficult to eradicate. There has to be a continuous process of reflection and a desire to self-critique and change. Nevertheless, when contrasted with the hierarchical lines of decision making in conventional arts institutions, and the limited opportunities for workers lower down in those hierarchies to influence decision making and creative direction, The Cube demonstrates a radically democratic approach to the articulation of opinion.

[148] Amber Cropp, (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, August 2019.
[149] Marcus Valentine, (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, August 2019.

Space: The Film that buys the Cinema

The Cube space is therefore a site of productive ambiguity on the grounds of its architectural presence, and in terms of the social relations that allow for a multiplicity of positions and sensibilities to coexist and still represent symbolic acts of resistance. The Cube is also enmeshed in the spatial relations of neighbouring Stokes Croft, an area of Bristol that has undergone rapid gentrification. The anti-Tesco riots of April 2011 brought this issue sharply into relief[150]. The eviction of squats like Telepathic Heights, the rebranding of the area as the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, and the increase of hip cafes catering for a more affluent clientele follow a classic gentrification course. The completion of this cycle is evoked in the June 2012 article in the Guardian property section referencing 'bargain of the week' a seven bed Georgian house needing total renovation for a slim £525,000[151].

The precarity of renting in a gentrifying area placed a further pressure on the organisation, and when their original 15-year lease completed in 2013 they sought sustainability through owning their own building as an urban commons. Negotiations accelerated through the second half of 2012, and in December 2012, volunteers announced through their film brochure that they had struck a deal with their landlord to buy the freehold of the Kings Square building for £185,000, with a year to raise the funds. One year and 935 individual donations later, they had surpassed their target by over £20,000[152]. A large ACE grant of £80,000, and a significant one from the David Family Foundation were committed only on condition that they raised the full amount, but the most inventive appeal was *The Film that Buys the Cinema*. 70 people associated with The Cube (described variably as filmmakers, musicians, poets, amateurs, wrestlers, radicals and activist groups[153]) contributed one-minute takes to a compilation film that premiered at the BFI London Film Festival 2014. With this entity, The Cube became a production unit and distributor, with all proceeds from exhibition and DVD sales going into the fundraising kitty.

The timing of the community purchase is regionally significant as 'business-as-usual' development has placed pressure on other organisations in Bristol. Ability to secure and

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[150] Owen Bowcott, 'Bristol Riot over New Tesco Store Leaves Eight Police Officers Injured', *The Guardian*, 22 April 2011, sec. UK news, https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/apr/22/bristol-riot-police-injured [accessed 10 December 2020].

[151] Dyckhoff, Tom. 2012. 'Let's Move to Stokes Croft, Bristol'. *The Guardian*, 29 June 2012, sec. Money, https://www.theguardian.com/money/2012/jun/29/lets-move-to-stokes-croft-bristol [accessed 10 December 2020]. Over the period of my thesis, Bristol has become a very popular destination for people priced out of London, driving up house prices further.

[152] 'Cube Cinema Freehold', https://cubecinema.com/cgi-bin/freehold/freehold.pl?action=counter [accessed 10 December 2020].

[153] 'The Film That Buys the Cinema', https://cubecinema.com/cgi-bin/ftbtc/ftbtc.pl [accessed 10 December 2020].

protect long-term, affordable space has been a huge challenge to Bristol Experimental and Expanded Film (BEEF), while Hamilton House artist studios have been in the midst of uncertainty around proposed redevelopment into flats[154]. The purchase of a building is not an intuitive step for DIY activists, but it speaks to a materialist form of commoning, analogous to the 'digital commons' of open source software development already prevalent at The Cube and other DIY cinema spaces. Seen as a set of social relations, The Cube has always been a commons, where an open group of people have shared responsibility for the maintenance and governance of an urban space and its resources. The purchase of the bricks and mortar asset-locked within a Community Land Trust deals a symbolic blow to the neoliberal common-sense behind contemporary urban space.

Reflexive ambiguity: From Situationist antics to Relational Practice

An early t-shirt design for the Microplex pictures a hand-drawn, deserted cinema, with the message 'I may be empty…', and on the reverse, 'but don't ever call me shallow'. With sardonic humour the t-shirt speaks of the values that underpin The Cube – it isn't going to sell out in order to make a buck. This section considers how The Cube incorporates reflexivity to regulate ambiguity at The Cube, a strategy which helps situate The Cube as simultaneously oppositional and accessible. I am not referring to the reflexivity incorporated into Pixar animations, what Stam refers to as 'corporate avant-gardism', where 'intertextual parody and reflexivity have become mass media staples, as common and bland as white bread' (Stam, Porton, and Goldsmith 2015, 29). The Cube has tried to push beyond the comfort zone, deploying reflexivity in ironic postures of resistant humour, visible in brochures, marketing materials, signage and not least in the content staged by volunteers. The March 2003 brochure exemplifies the anarchic sensibility of The Cube's early days. They were playing host to Jack Stevenson, an American underground archivist of Trash cinema who toured with *Search and Destroy: Greatest Hits of War Propaganda*, and the brochure design was suitably inspired. In stars and stripes colour scheme, a chorus-girl sits astride a canon accompanied by the words 'Have a nice death', while Bert the turtle explains how to 'duck and cover' in the event of nuclear attack. A dollar bill with Osama Bin Laden pictured in the centre is

[154] Kate Wilson, 'Everything You Need to Know about Hamilton House Saga - a Timeline', *Bristol Post*, 22 November 2018, https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/everything-hamilton-house-saga-timeline-2247661 [accessed 10 December 2020].

complemented by a full width slogan on the inside fold-out stating 'The Cube: it's all about the dollar!' The brochure design communicates a feisty and pugnacious organisation open to transgressive and self-reflexive social critique.

The screening event has also been an important space for reflexive play, challenging audience expectations around the ritual of consumption associated with attending the cinema, from the muzak to the incessant adverts before the main feature. Chiz Williams remembers inspirational projectionists who would burn out frames of adverts on the 35mm projector by pausing the projector, or play adverts backwards replacing the soundtracks with hardcore techno. Instead of selling ice creams and popcorn, ushers pushed beer from Edward Hopper style concession trays[155]. These tactics breakdown and foreground the construction of hegemonic ideologies embedded in advertising, mainstream films or the multiplex viewing experience. In another way, they are also used to build reconnection through placing the relations of production of the screening experience centre stage, disrupting the distinction between the roles of professional, amateur and consumer and establishing new patterns of spectatorship. Hence conversation between the audience member and the box office attendant, the projectionist or the programmer (who might be the same person), is commonplace rather than an exception. Programmers explaining the personal passions behind their selections; audiences talking about films and experiences afterwards; or even the simple knowledge that everybody is working unpaid cultivate an atmosphere of human connection. The audience-participant is permitted to fully understand how the spectacle of the silver screen is constructed and likewise reconstruct it themselves. As Hogg articulates, 'we *are* the public, and we run it [The Cube] and the things *we* do *is* the audience doing things already' (my italics)[156].

Another example of The Cube's reflexive ambiguity can be analysed through their concessions stand with the case of Cube Cola. Recent scholarship proposes another direction for Exhibition Studies, looking away from the architecture or films programmed by cinemas towards a 'counterintuitive' assertion that the dynamics *within* cinema spaces can be richly analysed through objects, like 'hats, cigarettes and a showman's props' (Wasson 2016, ix). The economics of multiplexes rely heavily on the bucket-sized beverages supplied by multinational drinks companies and so it is only to be expected that The Cube would want to

[155] Chiz Williams, (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, August 2019.
[156] Graeme Hogg, (Cube founding member), interviewed by Christo Wallers, Bristol, July 2019.

détourne this feature of the cinema experience. Cube Cola is a soft drink syrup produced, served and distributed for trade from The Cube premises[157]. Contrasted with mainstream cinemas, Cube Cola carries greater symbolic significance than financial within the economy of the Microplex and is often used as a shorthand for The Cube's position around commodities. Cube Cola was developed by Kayle Brandon and Kate Rich in 2003 as an open experiment at Cube Cinema finally going live on the bar at the end of 2005. Cube Cola was designed to communicate the concept of Open Source to people through the contrast between a famously 'closed' proprietary recipe like Coca Cola, and an open recipe like Cube Cola. Kate Rich, reflecting on the 'black box' nature of closed systems of knowledge mused on a comment by Kayle Brandon that 'if you could make Cola, it's like you could make power stations'[158]. Like cola, cinema itself is a black box for most spectators, but the DIY mode of exhibition breaks this down, providing an opportunity for audience-participants to engage with the apparatus on a fundamentally different level, even when buying a drink.

Latterly, The Cube's event brochure has turned away from the confrontational style of the early years towards an aesthetic predicated on accessibility rather than negation. A series of recent brochures have doubled as origami exercises to deconstruct and reconstruct The Cube brochure itself. Most recently, and amidst some internal disagreement, The Cube had jettisoned their conventional programme all together. Beyond experimenting critically with the concept of marketing, they have been using the monthly budget allocated to print to comment on wider socio-political ideas, experimenting with resilience in a changing world of environmental and political disturbance. Williams proposes micro-disaster-rehearsal experiments, like publicising The Cube through seed packets because paper is scarce, or shutting down the website for a month[159] as a reflexive gesture towards a world in crisis. This has not always met with total approval, some seeing it as an overly abstract meta-activity which distracts from the core purpose of screening films and platforming live culture. It does however sustain and invigorate the playful puzzle that The Cube fabricates to resist assimilation and co-option into the bland terrain of the entertainment industries.

A second form of reflexivity has become more prevalent within DIY culture, which looks inwards at the organisation to evaluate where barriers exist to participation. The Cube

[157] Cube Cola is a featured product in Kate Rich's feral trade project, which uses social networks for a clandestine form of trading in staple goods like coffee, corn, and olive oil (see https://feraltrade.org].

[158] Kate Rich, (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, Bristol, July 2019.

[159] Chiz Williams, (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, August 2019.

has followed its logic of open systems to fruition, rather than curtailing it to entrench within a very specific cultural position of early-Noughties media activism. Putting the theory of open systems into practice it has grown from a close-knit group of friends to incorporate more and more audience-participants. In the process of opening up the organisation, the intensity of The Cube as an intentional community has lessened, replaced by a more socially 'imagined' (B. R. O. Anderson 2006) sense of community. The increase in volunteers means that it is harder to forge strong bonds between everybody, and cliques and factions develop. While effort is made to adhere to the abstract ideas of consensus and non-hierarchy, in becoming a more plural public space The Cube has become a crucible of conflict over how common space for culture can be produced and maintained. For some this manifests in the distribution of (sub)cultural capital, inclining them to follow Bourdieu's thinking in analysing The Cube as a regime of taste and distinction (Mamali 2014). In Mamali's approach, different groupings of volunteers are demarcated as 'devotees' or 'appropriators' (170) in language that fixes motivation as entirely subcultural. Other volunteers have articulated the different camps within The Cube in often binary ways, pitching 'idealists' against 'pragmatists', or 'artist-focused' volunteers against 'audience-focused' ones, inferring battle lines over Cube praxis.

These assertions, however, play down the reality that cultural shift at The Cube has been an iterative process, testing ideas, reflecting on them through non-hierarchical mechanisms, and evolving new habits. It has mutated from an underground, cinematic speakeasy run by DIY enthusiasts living in precarity, to one of the most cherished public spaces in Bristol, popular with a broader demographic. In contrast to the early days of activist survival on the benefit system, latterly volunteers divide their time between part-time or full-time day jobs seeking something more liberating in the space of The Cube. For some the development from activist cell to accessible space is not necessarily a marker of success, reflecting instead a dwindling of activist motivation combined with a general desire for simply accruing cultural capital bereft of structural critique[160]. Others would argue that the influx of audience-participants less articulate in the language of DIY subculture indicates success in cultivating a space with low barriers to participation, particularly for volunteers experiencing mental health distress who can access The Cube and build skills and confidence. The result has meant The Cube has had to deal with a generational tension between protecting older

[160] Heath Bunting, (ex-Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, October 2019.

DIY values of anti-capitalism; autonomy from bureaucratic and procedural interference; and anarchic subversion, with wider notions of equality, accessibility, inclusion, organisational rigour and public safety. Arguments over whether Facebook advertising should be used to promote cinema events point to the complexities of a DIY organisation 'growing up' and opening itself to a broader cross-section of participants, or as volunteer Marcus Valentine would posit 'selling out'.

An issue that DIY collectives have historically struggled with is how to understand and resolve systemic oppression and imbalances of power that are reproduced within activist organisations, particularly around class, race, gender, sexuality and disability. There remains a tension around privilege regarding who can afford to enjoy the freedom of a non-hierarchical, volunteer-run arts organisation. Marcus Valentine notes that early on The Cube relied on people who fell outside of the 'rules of normal employment', hinting at the possibility of class distinction in this arrangement. He tempers this ambiguity, expanding on the different social security conditions of the late 1990s and the 2010s:

> There were a smaller number of people with more time on their hands compared to now, where there is a larger number of people with fewer opportunities to spend all day at The Cube doing stuff […] I guess because either people are older now and they have other stuff going on and also the whole economic system doesn't lend itself quite so easily to doing that.[161]

Valentine's point is that those who can afford to access The Cube have to be in a reasonably secure position financially due to the unpaid nature of the labour involved, and this inevitably has an exclusionary effect on those who cannot afford that time.

Guided by the Situationist tradition of resistance to recuperation, one volunteer cautioned against defining or trying to categorise The Cube, 'it's like the Alexander Trocchi quote, when you talk about something, you invoke the measures for its confinement'. Instead of looking at The Cube as a pure Platonic solid with clear facets that follow mathematical logic, one could approach it as a 'Necker', or 'Impossible' Cube. The Necker

[161] Marcus Valentine (Cube volunteer), interviewed by Christo Wallers, telephone, August 2019.

Cube, an optical illusion from the 1830s described by Swiss mineralogist Louis Necker is a two dimensional wire frame drawing, offering no visual clues as to its orientation, leading to a perceptual trick as the viewer subconsciously interprets the 2D drawing as a 3D object in two different planes. In M.C. Escher's print *Belvedere* (1958) a youthful character sits at the base of a building full of structural contradictions, staring at a drawing of a Necker Cube on the ground. Escher's illusion is intensified by expanding the wireframe into an impossible cube, a three dimensional form in the youth's hands that provokes a mixture of fascination and puzzlement in that it looks stable but rejects the physics underpinning the concept of stability. The form constantly folds in on itself in a reflexive trick that refuses to be contained in geometrical convention. The perceptual trick of appearing stable but perpetually slipping free of confinement lies at the heart of The Cube's identity and captures the reflexive ambiguity that encourages participation but resists assimilation.

Films listed in The Cube public brochure for the month of March

Year	Arthouse	Activist	Paracinema	Bricolage
2003	Last Temptation of Christ, City of God, Punch Drunk Love, Man Without a Past, Dreams	Bristolian Election Rally	War Propaganda Films, Heavy Heads Disco, Scumrock, Repo Man	Klinker Club, D.R.A.M, Punker-size, Blackout Sound Cinema, Bluescreen, Ladyfest, Star Wars Special
2004	Decasia, Touching the Void, It's All About Love, Secretary, Three Colours White, Elephant, School of Rock, Pirates of the Caribbean	Palestine Films from Enlighten, Myanmar: A prison without Bars; Bristol Indymedia (BI) Film night,	Jesus Son, Minor Threat at Heavy Heads Disco	Street Logos graffiti night. Serge Gainsbourg night, Bluescreen, Aelita Queen of Mars (soundtrack by Cube) Dutty Girl presents Bling Bling, Sparror Review Gala.
2005	Coffee and Cigarettes, Riding Giants, In the Mood for Love, 2046, The 400 Blows, A Very Long Engagement, Amelie,	Extravabhangra: In aid of Comic Relief Tsunami Appeal, BI: Focus on Media, Another World is Possible…In Venezuela,	Moog, Heavy Heads Disco and psychedelic tv	rePUBLICof digital cabaret, One Night Stand, Steal from Work: Depth Charge + Kung Fu Hussle, Bluescreen, Storytelling,
2006	Brokeback Mountain, Good Night and Good Luck, Grizzly Man	Global Living Film Festival, Userland: Free and Open Systems, BI night	Calvaire, The Hills Have Eyes,	Bluescreen, Movieoke, In
2007	La Ultima Cena, The Fountain, Science of Sleep, Last King of Scotland	BI: middle East, Bristol Radical History Group (BRHG): Slavery, hidden history, Soldier Soldier (20thC Flicks)	Frankenhooker, Of many Delights: Inferno of first love; Heavy Heads Disco (Kurt Cobain videos)	Malarchy, Semiconductor v Antenna Farm, Zuleika Ziegfeld's cabaret of curiosities, Bluescreen,
2008	No Country for Old Men, Dr Strangelove, Los Olvidados, Cloverfield, Be Kind Rewind, Juno	BI: Women and Spanish civil war, Zapatistas: chronicle of a rebellion	Perils of Gwendoline, Heavy Heads: Beyond Black and White,	French New Wave and Ye Ye

				J-Punk night, Zulieka Ziegfeld's Cabaret of Curiosities, Bluescreen
2009	Times of Harvey Milk; Black God, White Devil; Slumdog Millionaire; North Face; Frost/Nixon; Che pt.2	BI: Sir, no, sir; Cinema Klandestino Movimiento Cinemachete;	Mountain Films	Free Cube Slow Travel; battlespace (Sparror), No Power Party
2010	Nowhere Boy; The Road; Ponyo; A Single man	BRHG: The 43 Group; Cinema Klandestino: When the Clouds Clear; Hell's Pavement	Thundercrack! (Fly your Freak Flag High); The Exiles; Heavy Heads: Dirt Road Psychedelia;	Haiti Kids Kino Project; The Paper Cinema; Cabaret of Curiosities; Bluescreen
2011	On Tour; Uncle Boonmee; True Grit; Nanette; Howl	BI: Wapping Dispute	River's Edge; Over the Edge (Beta-Maxx); Amer; Twin Peaks night; Practical Electronica: The sound world of FC.Judd;	Out of the Shadows (ski films); nanoplex: More than meets the eye; Cabaret of Curiosities; Bluescreen; Cherry Kino shorts
2012	Patience (After Sebald); Shame; A Dangerous Method; Martha Marcy May Marlene; The Artist; Scarlet Street	Bristol Radical Film Festival (BRFF)	Bowie Night; Dirty Martini and Burlesque; Hellfire Video Club (HFVC): Italia Violent; Talking Heads Night	Cabaret of Curiosities; Alternative Miss Bristol; Bluescreen
2013	The Art of Rap; The Ghost of Pyramid; Uprising: Hip Hop and the LA Riots; Ghost Dog; Grabbers	BRFF & BI: They go to Die; Reel Iraq Festival	HFVC: Challenge of the Tiger; Scorpion Thunderbolt; Burn Hollywood Burn	Lion Paw Cinema and Rebel Instinct; Bluescreen
2014	Only Lovers Left Alive; Stranger by the Lake; Her; Network; Dallas Buyer's Club; Grand Budapest Hotel	BRFF: Enemies of the People; The Square (Egypt)	HFVC: Euro Zombies;	The Odd Folk: How not to be in a band; Bluescreen; Kill Your Darlings
2015	Inherent Vice, Kumiko, Ex Machina; White God; Duke of Burgundy; Appropriate Behaviour;	BRGH: Going through the Change	Coherence; HFVC: Night of the Night of the…	Qu Junktions: Good Sad Happy Bad (plays The Cube), Bluescreen
2016	Innocence of Memories; Remake/remix/rip-off; The Hateful Eight; Havana Club Rumba Sessions; Portland St. Blues; power in our Hands; Spotlight; Lee Scratch Perry's Vision of Paradise; Hitchcock/Truffaut; The Survivalist; The Birds; Next to Her		HFVC: The Last Wave; Killer Constable	Tridentfest; Beacons Ikons and Dykons (Last of England); Bluescreen; Cabaret of Curiosities
2017	Prevenge; Toni Erdman; Woman Under the Influence; South West Silents (SWS): The Fire; Homo Sapiens; Moonlight; Strike a Pose; The Love Witch; 20th Century Women; A Silent Voice; Black Narcissus		Found Footage Festival; Multiple Maniacs; Don's Party	Bluescreen; Torrey Pines animation
2018	Columbus; The Messenger; Phantom Thread; The General Line; The Shape of Water; Ponyo; A Fantastic Woman; Lady Bird	BRHG: Spiridonova	Ms45	Cables and Cameras: Black Pyramid archives; Queen Cut; Bluescreen

2019	Khrustalyov, My Car!; Can you ever forgive me? If Beale Street could Talk; Medium Cool; SWS: The Ancient Law; Under the Silver Lake; Border; Ray and Liz; Ringu		HFVC: Marketa Lazarove	Cables and Camera; Palace Collective Film Festival; British Psychology Society; Bluescreen

Chapter 5: *Losing the Plot* – DIY Cinema as community

Losing the Plot (LTP) is a weekend film retreat in rural Northumberland, set in a small alternative community. The underlying principal of LTP is to cultivate the relationships that bind the cinematic audience. These relationships are not solely contained within the auditorium, but ripple out into the everyday beyond the cinema space. The audience comes together for shared meals and film screenings, social moments while camping and around fires or walks. Films that deprioritise conventional narrative are brought into a situation of shared viewing and living for a weekend every June. LTP moves consciously away from the positioning of the spectator as isolated individual, cultivating a consciously collective space within the auditorium and its surroundings.

This runs counter to the theorisation of film spectatorship as a solitary and introverted activity. Here is Christian Metz's impression of the isolated spectator:

> …the straggling solitary individuals filing one by one out of some movie palace…these spectators still covet their privacy and want to shield themselves from questions and discussion. Perhaps they come out in couples, having dreamt a single dream, or so they believe. It is a dream not ready to be given over to the harsh lights of civilization. (Andrew 2002, 162)

It is tempting to cling to the cinephilic romance of this image, the delicious hypnosis Roland Barthes considered in 'En sortant du Cinema'. Barthes, using himself as the example, describes the individual viewer as 'glued' to the screen, and by extension the ideological discourse conveyed. He envisions an 'amorous distance' on behalf of the spectator, both glued to the image-repertoire on the screen, and simultaneously distanced through a readiness to 'fetishize what exceeds it: the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of the other bodies, the rays of light, entering the theatre, leaving the hall.' (Barthes 1989, 349) This fetish is not shared by everyone. Each viewer in the cinema, whether seeking lone or shared pleasure, brings to bear their own individual experience and subjectivity. In the cinema event they may share intensities in common, the 'affective audience interrelations' referred to by Julian Hanich (2010). He argues that when strong

emotions come into play, the degree of awareness of our relationship to others in the auditorium is changed both positively and negatively, pushing our experience as viewers either in the direction of 'unattached individuation' or toward 'collective integration'. His focus, like Barthes', is on the psycho-social conditions of anonymity within the film theatre. These images of the private, individual experience of the cinema only give a partial impression of the myriad public rituals produced within the art form. Andrew lists multiple examples of cinematic presentation that substantiate a much greater tension between the public and the private, the 'fairs, traveling exhibitors, Japanese *benshi*, parish and factory screenings' that veer away from the classical ritual of 'going to the movies' (Hark 2002, 164). Wasson and Acland, exploring this terrain in more detail, paint a picture of 'useful cinema', using the non-theatrical world of amateur, industrial, training and educational film and the film society movement to challenge preconceptions of what cinema is (2011). The dichotomy between public and private ritual therefore is as old as cinema itself, and is always in degrees of tension, whether in the IMAX, watching football in the pub or the 'distracted reception' of the video artwork in the gallery (Osborne 2004).

My research makes the case for contemporary DIY cinema not as a space of anonymity, but of intentionally created opportunities for building human connection through dialogue and shared experience, placing the question of collective experience centre stage. I start this chapter with an investigation into how the individual-community dialectic plays out in different screening settings, working from the transactional logic of traditional, dominant cinema and through various iterations of art cinema, from arthouse to film club with the following questions in mind: How does cinema invoke community? What is the purpose of community within the cinema? Is community a means or an end? My quest in this chapter is to use the annual Star and Shadow film retreat LTP as an example of how recent cinema-groupings have been creating new, counter-hegemonic models of communal public space that enact a resistance to cultural norms around spectatorship. I want to interrogate a relational model of film screening that borrows from recent articulations of the relational and interstitial in artistic and cinematic practice, to describe everyday utopian efforts to celebrate the collective potential inherent in the cinema auditorium.

The spectrum of community

I want to situate LTP in a counter-hegemonic set of relations that open up the utopian potential of cinema as a contemporary space of premeditated collectivity. The normative experience of cinema is set within the relations of consumption. The spatial experience of the box office, the concessions stand, the usher and the darkened auditorium leaves scarce space for social interactions, which are even more heavily proscribed once the lights are down. Time is heavily controlled within these spaces, consistent with the commercial logic of the industrial cinema. While the mainstream cinema is a locus of social life, ever popular as a destination for leisure and entertainment with friends and family, as a space it more often than not controls and limits collective social experience, and wherever possible elides the realities of life outside of the cinema in a form of suturing consistent with the camera and the edit suite. This analysis runs the risk of being reductive, and other scholars have noted the subterfuge made possible by the standardised, darkened auditorium, as a place for erotic encounter or refuge (Acland 2003; Casetti 2011; Ross 2013). Most recently, with *Blue Story* (Onwubolu 2019), gang conflict spilled off the screen into the auditorium of the Star City multiplex in Birmingham, resulting in police officers being called out to a mass brawl.[162] While there can be no universalised categorisation of approaches, one can detect shades of hegemony. Different tendencies reveal patterns within film exhibition in the UK that articulate different positions on a spectrum where community is invoked as a precondition of the screening experience, or it is suppressed almost entirely. It is clear where the out-of-town multiplex or the megaplex of the urban entertainment centre sits on this spectrum, but when thinking through the organisations that present themselves as the alternative it becomes more difficult. The broad brush stroke of 'art cinema' fails to relay the diversity of independent and boutique screens, publicly subsidised film theatres, event and live cinema, and the diversifying community film ecology.

The audience has been the subject of an expanding field of audience-based research (Allen 1990; Dickson 2015), but understanding how cinema space creates or sustains community is still only a nascent topic (Hanich 2014; Hollinshead 2011). Butsch (2007) describes the shift in attitudes and architectural space through the 18th and 19th centuries from which ensued an audience of individuals in contrast to the crowd associated with the

[162] 'Cinema Chains Pull Gang Film after "machete" Brawl', *BBC News*, 25 November 2019, sec. Birmingham & Black Country, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-birmingham-50541204 [accessed 10 December 2020].

early cinema. A spectrum of audience formations has been described variably as 'congregating strangers' (Jarvie 1985), 'unstructured groups' (Allen and Gomery 1985), and 'indirect communities' (Evans 2011). Evans' study draws connections between a dispersed grouping of audience members for the Midlands consortium of Phoenix Square in Leicester, Broadway Cinema, Nottingham and QUAD in Derby, likening them to sports or music fans, or 'any other space in which people who are otherwise strangers come together due to a shared cultural identity'. This borders onto how subcultures form and identify, but doesn't account for the deeper intensity of fan relationships like those formed at horror all-nighters, like the long-running event at Cameo Cinema, Edinburgh.[163] A number of scholars have employed Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and symbolic capital, 'habitus' and 'field' to interpret the motivations of both exhibitors and audiences for art cinema, that result in communities of exclusion (Hollinshead, 2011; Marx, 2014).

Communities of taste

In the case of the flourishing of art cinema in the US throughout the 1940s and beyond, and the financial interests vested in its growth, Barbara Wilinsky concludes that the US film industry was reacting and adapting to post-war shifts in taste and culture (2001). For her, the community of exclusion cultivated in the art cinema offered audiences a sense of distinction, status and prestige associated with intellectual culture. Furthermore she suggests this was a natural reflection of the economics of market segmentation: that for every type of consumer there should be a service attuned to them (138). This oversimplifies the motivations of people seeking out alternatives to Hollywood like *Rome, Open City* (Rossellini 1945) or *The Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica 1948), whether as exhibitors or spectators. She reserves a softer judgment for more avant-garde cinema, less concerned with its stake in the entertainment market, citing the example of Cinema 16. This important way marker in the history of alternative exhibition celebrated the extremes of cinematic art in order to point to cinema's potential to effect social change. According to Wilinsky, while Cinema 16 actively advocated for an alternative culture, more conventional art houses merely promoted 'the status of being associated with such a culture' (131). Her defence of Cinema 16 is not total, suggesting

[163] 'Artist Thomas Anderson on Why You Should Attend All Night Horror Madness', *The List*, 25 February 2014, https://www.list.co.uk/article/58846-artist-thomas-anderson-on-why-you-should-attend-all-night-horror-madness/ [accessed 10 December 2020].

that the audience were still 'people of means'[164], and she folds it into her overarching argument, following Bourdieu, that culture is a way of creating class distinction, no less true for the clientele of Cinema 16. Reducing art cinema to taste and distinction casts efforts towards social transformation as mere 'naïvetés of hope' (Ross in Rancière, 1991). While the codes and behaviours of these spaces can lend themselves to Wilinsky's gloomy interpretation, it over-simplifies a complex audience.

Latterly, art cinemas, and the funding agencies that support them have gone to great pains to reject the label of 'exclusive', arguing that they indeed do serve diverse audiences, or at least recognise the issue. The tensions around how and which communities should be served by cinema provision are very much alive in state-subsidised film theatres, and the community cinema sector in the UK. Marc Jancovich probes this complexity through the example of the Broadway in Nottingham in the socio-economic context of state-funded cinema in the through the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, as the traditional industrial base of the regions declined, cities had to recognise that cultural capital was critical to their ability to attract investment, as they competed on the globalised playing field. Iconic centres of culture formed an important piece in this jigsaw, and culture-led regeneration became the norm up until the financial crisis of 2008. Cultural centres like regional film theatres became implicated in fashioning the image of a city, to encourage tourism and further investment, a gambit that required a reimagining of the purpose of cinema and what community it should serve. This was in part to do with the triangulation of funding between central government (BFI, Arts Council) and local authorities and developers. Being a piper playing tunes for a variety of paymasters makes finding one that appeals to all very difficult. Publicly subsidised film theatres have therefore had to chart a tricky course, embracing or at least accepting the Thatcherite economics of the cultural industries, wary of the bottom line, while simultaneously retaining distinction from the mass-culture of the multiplex. Publicly-funded art cinemas had to foster the 'imagined community' of cosmopolitan urban renewal[165] – the idea that a city like Nottingham's self-identity could be moulded and improved by a certain

[164] She notes that the membership fee was $10 in 1948, rising to $16.50 in 1962. She argues that irrespective of the oppositional stance of Vogel's 'subversive' art, membership gave audiences the prestige and status of joining with the New York elite.

[165] Jancovich refers to the way the Broadway media centre was 'produced out of, and participated within, the city's need and desire to compete within regional, national and international markets where its image was central' (2003, 215). This agenda was reinforced by the local newspaper, the Nottingham Evening Post who claimed 'Nottingham looks set to become the Hollywood of the Midlands' (215).

type of cinema – while simultaneously protecting the types of indirect community that kept regulars coming through the door[166].

As I suggested above, one of the biggest battles for art cinema has been its struggle with the label of 'elitism'. Jancovich refers to the lengths the Broadway Media Centre went to in order to distance themselves from the radical film culture of the 1970s and to make themselves palatable to a wider demographic, while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from the mainstream multiplex. He quotes the director of the Shots in the Dark festival, Adrian Wootton thus: 'As subsidy slips away, it's impossible to run a show without doing the business. The Media Centre walks the tightrope between artistic integrity and financial health. You just can't do that in Jesus sandals' (Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings 2003, 220). This caricature sets up a distance between a notionally 'accessible' cinema, directed at the 'community at large', and the utopian practice of the 1970s, which arguably served a much smaller but close-knit community. Jancovich also studied audience data to show the complexity of opinion between those who identified and disidentified with Broadway, revealing huge variations in the sense of place it evoked in different people and communities. For some it was seen as 'challenging and intellectual' while for others it was 'snooty' or 'arty farty'. For others still, they clung to an incorrect belief that the cinema actively excluded them through a membership requirement.

Screening in the community

Since 2000 there has been even further market segmentation, picked up by Atkinson and Kennedy in their research into live and experiential cinema. The number of agencies advertising screenings in unusual or historic spaces has increased dramatically, and claims have been made for the sense of community made possible by sing-a-long or fancy dress events. Casetti describes a performative turn in spectatorship, away from mere 'attendance', which he defines by way of a series of 'doings' (sensory, cognitive, emotional, technological, expressive and textual as well as relational – the way spectators, after watching films by themselves, 'are often motivated to construct a group with which to share their own experience' which is then expanded via social media or messaging (Casetti 2011, 7).

[166] Jancovich quotes an article arguing that: "patrons who visit the Broadway Media Centre have a tendency towards long skirts and/or beards, belong to minority groups and only eat wholefood. True… They are students. True… They are middle-aged intellectuals with a degree in philosophy. Probably true as well… But they are also old age pensioners, schoolchildren, factory workers, professional executives, shoppers… just ordinary people like you and me, in fact … The truth is that times, they are a-changin at the Broadway Media Centre and its appeal is extending to an increasingly wide audience'. (ibid, 219).

Moreover, BFI funding streams have focused on accessibility and inclusion, supporting improvements in provision for parents and babies, hard of hearing audiences, or autism and dementia friendly showings. The recognition that lived experience informs audiences' engagement with the cinema screening has informed programming and accessibility.

One such agency delivering this work has been Cinema for All. Cinema for All is the national support and development organisation for community-led cinema, representing a movement of over 750[167] projects in the UK spanning the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to towns, cities and villages in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is a trading name for the BFFS which has been supporting the film society movement since 1946, a name change which represents the diversification of the heavily regulated film society movement of the post-war period into a variegated ecology of pop-up screenings and community partnerships as well as traditional film clubs. Cinema for All defines community cinema as 'any volunteer-led and non-profit organisation that shows films in its community.'[168] They emphasise a set of five 'special' characteristics that differentiate community cinema from a predominantly mainstream model of movie-going. Firstly, as projects run by audiences for audiences, they 'give communities power to choose the films that they want to see, when they want to see them'. As a 'social heart of their community', community cinemas specialise in a warm and friendly atmosphere, providing opportunities for people to discuss films and create connections. They take film culture seriously, testing out adventurous programming as well as screening mainstream, recent releases, and making it available to audiences in places that are poorly served by commercial or art cinema provision[169]. The emphasis on 'film appreciation' recognised by Richard MacDonald, in his study of post-war film societies, has since shifted to more social targets, and the BFI's centralised approach of rolling out 'good' cinema to the regions has been replaced by efforts to put power into communities. Significantly, Cinema for All talks little about specific types or canons of film, promising to help 'communities across the country to develop and sustain the type of film screenings they want.'[170]

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[167] 'Cinema For All - Helping Communities Screen Films', *Cinema For All*, https://cinemaforall.org.uk/ [accessed 10 December 2020].

[168] 'Starting a Community Cinema: Cinema For All Starter Pack 2015', *Cinema For All*, https://cinemaforall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Starting-a-community-cinema.pdf [accessed 10 December 2020].

[169] Ibid.

[170] 'Cinema For All - Helping Communities Screen Films', *Cinema For All*, https://cinemaforall.org.uk/ [accessed 10 December 2020].

The film society movement in most cases is an agent of local community building, particularly in small towns and villages where access to cinema is unavailable, and plays a critical role in reducing isolation, providing moments of sociality in places where populations and resources like pubs and cafes are sparse. The atmosphere of the film society informal, and is commonly based on pre-existing local relationships, in contrast to the conventions of its mainstream alternative. Film clubs make the best of their multi-use spaces, stackable seating and unreliable acoustics, celebrating social bonds through home-spun extras like food, drink and conversation. They also build communities of interest around alternative cinema, not dissimilar to those who frequent the Broadway.

Miriam Ross contends that these less formal screening scenarios constitute examples of 'interstitial film viewing'. She uses the idea of the interstice, the space in between structures, often likened to the cracks in the pavement, to situate community film exhibition between the movie theatre and the home-viewing environment (Ross 2013). For her, spectatorship always entails a participating viewer, configured in a relationship with the film object. To what extent that relationship places control of the exhibition apparatus in the hands of the spectator, or leaves it in other hands is of great significance (455). The technology is important to her – portable digital equipment and internet-viewing has enabled a participatory culture to bloom, with a far greater 'proximity' to the apparatus. Proximity itself does not cultivate community, as made obvious by watching YouTube clips on a phone. Ross does emphasise, however, the potential of highly localized exhibition in contrast to the increasing uniformity of cinema chains. She celebrates the 'unruliness', and 'messiness' of screening projects in the interstice between the movie theatre and the home cinema. However she conflates examples that have very different political positions - Grupo Chaski and Cine Libre in Latin America, who affiliate publicly with the radical left, alongside The Traveling Film Show in New Zealand, a state-organised project connected to the New Zealand Film Archive, which rather stretches the point that these equivalently represent counter-hegemonic exhibition practices. Like Cinema for All, the Traveling Film Show may promote films that have critical content, and support a culture of dialogue, but they don't explicitly call into question the dynamics of the mainstream entertainment complex. Unlike Grupo Chaski, absent in their form of 'community cinema' is any explicit notion of critique or resistance to dominant film culture and its position in wider society. This role has been played by the outliers of alternative film culture – the groups like Expanding Cinema, OMSK, or the early

screenings of the London Film-makers' Co-op, describable as ‘caves for staging a difference’ (Schober 2007). This leads to a second formulation of community, the collectivised practice of making cinemas, which also has a rich history in the workshop movement, the underground and the 1960s film co-ops.

Cinema-making, collectivism and avant-garde art

Why might cinema makers be motivated to form in collectives, by which I mean groupings that consider democratic organisation to be fundamental, in contrast to a film society which may follow conventional hierarchical arrangements of chair, secretary, treasurer and so on. Cinema is an inherently popular form, in contrast to the traditionally more rarefied pursuit of experiencing art. Almost all of the above examples are sub-categories of the popular film world. There is an alternative ecology of film practice that is more comfortable connecting to discourses around the avant-garde, often associated with concepts found in art history. Models of organising that are normally found in radical politics have been a consistent feature of alternative and oppositional cultural groups from theatre makers to architects, artists, musicians and filmmakers. The importance placed on the avant-garde has featured throughout the period of modernism, from the Futurists and the Dadaists, through the Surrealists, Fluxus and the Situationist International, all groups who constructed themselves as a vanguard with the role of forging theoretical paths for the masses to follow in revolutionary social formations.

Art discourses have always been braided into cinema history showing that the divisions between the two in production, exhibition and reception are extremely blurry. As a concept, the ‘artistic avant-garde’ has preoccupied filmmakers and cinema activists for most of the 20th Century. The connection between experimental cinema and avant-garde art is visible in the American underground, Fluxus, the Vienna Aktionists, expanded cinema and the film co-op movement and is on the fringes of the new waves in Brazil, Japan, Yugoslavia to name but a few. In his oft-cited article, The two avant-gardes (1982), Peter Wollen envisions the synthesis of two separate forms of radical cinema. The first was the Structuralist Materialist form associated with the London Film-makers' Co-op and other such co-ops in mainland Europe, or filmmakers like Malcolm Le Grice, Peter Gidal and others. He tracked the source of this stream to cinema’s earlier connection with Cubism and painting, represented in the 1920s by artists like Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling. The second form was associated

with Straub/Godard and the European counter-cinema rooted in the history of constructivist theatre and writing pursued by Eisenstein and Vertov. He points out the basis of Co-op production in artisanal production, in contrast to the Straub/Godard avant-garde's roots in the commercial system, with its stars, big crews and big budgets. DIY Cinema exhibition feels closely associated with the artisanal as referenced by Wollen. Many spaces have strong links with artisanal film lab culture – the Star and Shadow has a film lab, The Cube is connected to BEEF; alternative screening projects go hand in hand with photochemical film lab culture across France, Spain and Germany, supported and connected by networks like Kino Climates. DIY Cinema, like underground cinema before it, has more in common with artist-run or artist-led activity than institutional cinema or even the film society movement. DIY cinema could be seen as another expression of the flourishing of participatory, artist-run activity through the late 90s and early 00s[171]. These utopian screening practices since the early 1990s echo activities in artist-led projects because the nature of DIY cinema borders closely onto the area of emancipatory arts. The distinction lies in its relationship to the avant-garde. David Graeber (2003) places the three main avant-garde movements (Dada, Surrealism, S.I) in a Marxist lineage. Graeber is an anarchist, who rejects the vanguardism of Marxism. He simplifies the Marxist avant-garde to a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy, which he contrasts to anarchist 'non-vanguardism' as an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice. Referencing the Occupy movement, the Zapatistas and the anti-globalisation struggle, he suggests that anarchist organising principals have replaced Marxism as the driving force of social movements since the early 1990s, underpinned by direct democracy. This extends into the cultural world, for example in her thesis about artist-run projects in London, Jacqueline Cooke notices as prevalent themes mutual support, autonomy/agency for artists, space for innovative art forms, resistance to commodification and radicalism (Cooke 2007). These terms correspond with the core ethic of DIY. What this leads to is a completely different orientation with regards the avant-garde. Graeber's argument then is that anarchism, before anything else, insists that one's means must be consonant with one's ends, and rejects traces of vanguardism as elite. I suggest that this tendency can be tracked via recent popular terms embraced by art theory, like 'tactical media' (Garcia and Lovink 1997). More relevant to the concept of participatory communities

[171] See for example http://www.criticalnetwork.co.uk/.

within the cinema is relational aesthetics. I approach this body of theory not on behalf of the art establishment, but in order to actively reclaim it as a non-vanguardist stance existent in DIY culture throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

Relational aesthetics

Following the above line of reasoning, then, DIY Cinema can be seen as a non-vanguardist approach, or an everyday utopian practice that forms inclusive participatory communities guided by open experimentation. This strategy was recognised and deployed by curator Nicholas Bourriaud to describe a particular turn in art making in the late 1990s. Bourriaud coined the term 'relational aesthetics' around the time of the 1996 exhibition *Traffic* at CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, developing it into an eponymously titled book published in 1998. The thrust of Bourriaud's thesis tracks a shift in the priorities of artists through the 1990s, from the individual object towards the Situationist notion of the 'constructed situation'. Bourriaud identified that for these artists, the aesthetic value of the artwork transferred from the individual object to the relations between people, institutions and objects. He describes it as 'an art form where the substrate is formed by intersubjectivity, and which takes being together as a central theme, the 'encounter' between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning' (Bourriaud 2009, 15). Bourriaud positioned a group of artists[172] at the forefront of a political turn in contemporary art, focused on the formation of temporary microtopias. In contrast to previous artistic avant-gardes, he defined this approach as political through artists' desire to produce small changes in the here and now; to cultivate community; and experiment with new social relations predicated on conviviality and participation. Bourriaud oriented the political valency of his concept around the Marxist idea of the social interstice, the practices that 'elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit' (16), using the examples of bartering or self-sufficiency. He argues that the art gallery provides a free space, outside of the exchange logic of capitalist relations that has seeped into every area of everyday life. In this free space, a different set of human relations is possible, and he argues that contemporary artists, by turning this relational potential into an issue, are 'definitely developing a political project' (17). Irrespective of the validity of this claim, the

[172] See for example Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, Carsten Höller, Philippe Parreno, Vanessa Beecroft and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster among others.

result of his theorisation has been of enormous significance in the art world, launching the stellar careers of artists and curators in major galleries, museums and biennials.

Cinema has also provided an important source material for contemporary artists including many of those associated with relational aesthetics. It is a historically populist form, and therefore does not have the same exclusivity as the art world. As an art form based on mechanical reproduction, the film screening has less auratic value than a work of visual art. One could further argue that participation is set at roughly the same level for every film and audience member, in contrast to the unstable negotiation of an individual gallery visitor who must navigate a constantly shifting set of forms, installation arrangements and participation dynamics in the art exhibition. Cinema therefore offers a potentially more stable interaction, as well as providing a rich source of social heritage. Rirkrit Tiravanija's 1999 installation *Community cinema for a quiet intersection (against Oldenburg)* during Glasgow's City of Architecture Festival positioned four screens at a cross-roads, with a Thai café running a programme of screenings programmed by the community. Schober notes that Tiravanija's stance is one of collaboration and co-operation, in opposition to the Oldenburg protest to which it responds. According to Schober, Oldenburg's proposal for a cube of concrete at a similar intersection with names of the Vietnam war-dead was intended to 'irritate' or 'awaken' audiences to reflect on their attitudes (2013, 14). Analysing the prevalence of art projects taking the social form of film theatres, Maeve Connolly refers to the lure of cinema as 'just one amongst many popular cultural forms to be referenced and explicitly staged by artists as part of an exploration of social relations since the early 1990s, referring specifically to relational aesthetics. She momentarily deviates from the art world to mention The Cube and Star and Shadow as examples of a volunteer-led or underground film practice exploring social, non-hierarchical ways of screening. Her focus however is on artists working within the art world who 'amplify' the promise of public sociality held within cinema in 'localisable' ways (15), which she acknowledges may make them attractive to commissioners and funders, particularly when they evoke nostalgic relationships to cinematic memory. This leads into a core tension between the funded, institutional art world and the more autonomous sphere of DIY culture, giving rise to some fierce criticism of relational aesthetics in particular.

Critiquing relational aesthetics

Bourriaud's proposition has drawn considerable critical judgment, much of which has revolved around the unexamined promise relational aesthetics holds for social change. Critics have questioned the autonomy of art and the argument that the social spaces of relational art create 'zones of exemption from capitalism and hence are asserted as emancipatory sites' (Dohmen 2016, 16). Furthermore, interactivity does not simply equate to critical consciousness-raising, and at worst amounts to little more than 'self-congratulatory entertainment' (16). Claire Bishop, the most outspoken critic of relational aesthetics, takes aim at what she sees as the politics-lite underpinning these everyday interactions in the gallery space. She follows Mouffe in arguing that conflict is the fundamental law that must be respected when approaching models of plural democracy. Bishop prefers political modes of art that reveal and occasionally revel in the contradictions and paradoxes of the contemporary moment as it cuts across class and privilege. She prioritises artists like Santiago Sierra, the Spaniard who creates notoriously disquieting explorations of labour and exploitation, in an effort to mirror uncomfortable truths about gender, class and power in capitalism back at a higher status art audience. He has paid homeless women to stand facing the wall of a gallery, or paid prostitutes to be tattooed, or hired Iraqi refugees to wear protective clothing and be sprayed with expanding foam to create a sculptural image of Abu Ghraib. Sierra and Bishop share a distaste for relational art's 'denial' of the complicit structures of the art world in maintaining 'business as usual'. If we briefly return to the above dialectic between avant-gardism and non-vanguardism, Bishop's position fits with the idea of a Marxist avant-garde, while Bourriaud's describes a more anarchistic relationship to 'living the change you want to see'. More to the point, while these arguments play out in art history, neither approach is capable of out-manoeuvring the art economy's ability to recuperate and capitalise.

The problematics of relational aesthetics are made clearer still by the short-lived, transnational artist-activist group Radical Culture Research Collective (RCRC). For them, RA is a 'gallery-based game [in which] relational practises are cut off by an institutional divide from those who could use them' and simultaneously converted into an asset, dematerialised or not. Their critique takes in Bourriaud's thesis and the resulting dialogue circulating since, arguing that what these debates reveal most of all 'are the potentials and limits of art discourse itself' (Radical Culture Research Collective 2007), because the politics of these

discourses fail to be grounded in social movements and struggles, and fall short of any attempt at systemic change. RCRC note that the radical processes of social experimentation attempted by relational art practices, the 'compensatory gestures' referenced by Bourriaud, are happening more effectively elsewhere in the 'ongoing work of creating counter-publics and counter-institutions… wherever people are trying to organize themselves to find a way beyond the system of exploitative relations' (ibid).

The purpose for this theoretical detour is to return Bourriaud's analysis to its basis, in order to reclaim it for DIY practice. Following the view that artists are products of the social conditions within which they are working, Bourriaud recognises the influence of contemporary culture on relational aesthetics. He cites the shift in modernity towards the collective practices of DIY, techno music and the internet as factors in the production of a 'relational approach to the exhibition' (Bourriaud 2009, 81). Grassroots, DIY cultural formations, whether they be cinema or art, make more sense of the political logic of relational aesthetics than either the art museum, biennale or the film theatre. Hence it feels appropriate to reclaim relational theory for analysing the DIY practices and efforts of The Cube and Star and Shadow Cinema to move artistic activity into autonomous zones, and away from the potentially compromised politics of the institution. In The Cube and Star and Shadow Cinema, experiments in alternative forms of conviviality are embedded within structures that are more self-reflexive examples of the 'interstice' referenced by Bourriaud, embedded as they are in specific localities and social struggles (gentrification, gender and sexuality, anti-capitalism). Unlike subsidised or private art institutions, DIY screening spaces like The Cube and Star and Shadow are democratic commons that allow for relationships to grow and strengthen over time, controlling the means of production, and retaining the collectivised social and economic capital that is produced within the communities they serve.

Relational exhibition and *Losing the Plot*

Where has this mode been operationalised in the UK? In Liverpool and its surrounding area, the Small Cinema Project has utilised film screening as a way of consciously activating critical community in Moston, Widens, Kirkdale and central Liverpool. Deptford Cinema in London, Imperfect Cinema in Plymouth, and the Radical Home Cinema project from Glasgow's Cinema Up collective all emphasise the conditions of the screening as a way of critically engaging with the screening space and its relationships with audiences. Scalarama has been a major player

at the forefront of this thrust since 2010, with its ambition to 'fill the nation with cinemas'. The film retreat Losing The Plot is also an example of this relational turn. I will focus on two aspects of LTP in order to back up this claim, specifically the spatial production of community through collective participation as the underlying means of engagement; and the distinctly non-hierarchical curatorial approach, which together fashion a relational mode of film exhibition.

In contrast to the film festival as 'multiplex of cinephilia' (De Valck 2005), the predominant site for viewing alternative film, LTP is defined as a film retreat, celebrating the mixed meanings that are carried in the term 'retreat'. In light of the above argument for 'non-vanguardism', retreat takes on an ironic weighting. To retreat can suggest moving in defence, or going backwards, in contrast to the spearhead of the avant-garde. But the term has accumulated new meaning through the popularity of holistic health and 'wellbeing' culture. The retreat now communicates a space of self-care or renewal, or going deeper into internal states, protected within the safety of a temporary community who consent to live with one another over a period of time. The dual meaning allows for a potential renewal of the social act of cinema exhibition through this process, and a nod of defensiveness to the threat posed to public cinema exhibition by media convergence. It so happens that LTP has flourished alongside a massive increase in cinema attendance, but the two types of experience could not be more different.

LTP takes place in a small rural community called Burnlaw, in the North Pennines. It is an upland environment, austere, beautiful, and sparsely populated. Burnlaw is an old Quaker Farm, and it carries the inscriptions of its past in the burial ground, the carved lintels and mullions, and the cobbled courtyard. Burnlaw sits in an area supporting the traditional and class-striated economy of livestock rearing and pheasant shooting, on patches of privately-owned land amidst tenant-farming of estate land. Burnlaw is a small oasis in this landscape. It was set up in 1980 as a new age alternative community by three families who shared a commitment to ecological and spiritual life. In the early 1990s, new residents in the community sought to reorganise the ownership model and it reverted to private equity. Burnlaw is now populated by a broad inter-generational mix of over two dozen people. While there is no foundational document or deed of intention signed by residents of Burnlaw, the spirit of collaboration and mutual aid permeates the physical, social and spiritual space of the community. In 2000, residents converted a barn into a simple retreat building, the Burnlaw

Centre, with a kitchen, reception room, bunkbeds and a large hall above, floored with Elm boards milled from Burnlaw trees that had died from Dutch Elm disease. The Centre is encircled by houses inhabited by Burnlaw residents who run the Centre as a volunteer collective. The cobbled courtyard has become slowly overgrown with grass and briars, but a recent addition of a pizza oven and a fire bowl has made it the focus of a variety of community celebrations – the slow fireworks event at the end of November; social gatherings across the year; the Non-Violent Communication family camp in the summer. While the pasture land at Burnlaw is now grazed by cattle or protected as herb-rich hay meadow, the fields and woodland nearest the Centre have organically evolved into community spaces, with a herb garden, bunk barn, a play area and compost toilet, a small rotunda for reflection, and a camping field. Groups hire the centre for retreats and residents organise art sessions, a play group, a kindergarten, gigs, storytelling, poetry readings, shared meals and film screenings. Burnlaw thus fuses the everyday lived experience of community with outward-facing events and classes that bring people into the Centre in a steady flow.

LTP and the home-made cinema: the spatial production of community

The screening space at LTP is unarguably amateur - a spectator would be hard pressed to find a wine cooler in their seat. The space resembles a classic film society setup, with a few make-shift upgrades (home-made raked seating for easier legibility of subtitles; a 'help-yourself' concessions stand with an honesty box). Technological changes with digital home projection and AV systems have brought unprecedented levels of quality within the financial reach of small-scale cinema projects, so the image and sound is of a high standard. A low table repurposed from the Monday playgroup becomes a provisional projection booth, with sound desk, Blu-ray player and laptop. The lack of professional infrastructure, and the way the space is arranged helps build an atmosphere of easy and autonomous participation, as evoked by Ross in her analysis of 'interstitial film viewing' (2013). The delineations of space at LTP are important, allowing space to quickly become 'shared' for a variety of interactions on the level of the everyday as well as the abstract. The screening room is by no means the focal point, but one amongst a host of other spaces that inform the social relations of LTP. In the courtyard a large tarpaulin, a 'woodman's awning,' provides a generous covered area for simple log and plank seating, where meals take place. The courtyard faces onto the Burnlaw Centre building, with a flight of wooden steps up to the first storey screening room, and on

the ground floor an entrance into the shared kitchen, and bunk bed accommodation. Moving between social, utility, and presentation spaces breaks hierarchical distinctions between the 'high' activities of watching and discussing films and the 'low' activities of cooking and eating.

The event has been devised as a way of situating cultural activity within a more everyday context. The boom in music festival culture has carved out space for families and different generations to celebrate together in much bigger groupings, in spaces where different levels and registers of culture are on offer. This is considerably less common in film festivals and art contexts, where the codes of behaviour are delimited to standardize experience, to keep out or to subdue messy and chaotic life. Beyond the strict parameters of the compartmentalized outreach and educational programs within cultural institutions, families and family life pose the threats of messiness or 'dumbing-down' incompatible with cerebral activity. In contrast, LTP has been designed to allow families to engage in the way that suited them, while folding the lived realities of family life, like mealtimes and play, into the event itself. Through premeditation, the quotidian realities of hunger or playtime are reconciled with discussing the form and content of cinema. The inclusion of family into LTP also recognises the still gendered nature of balancing childcare with pursuing cultural interests like art cinema. Parents can share childcare or get together with other parents to self-organise childcare to allow for attendance at specific films.

The focus on children ripples through the event, from making popcorn on the fire to providing resources for them to play and explore. LTP has oscillated between the different economic states of un-funded and under-funded[173] evolving into a completely DIY event, both dependent and expectant on active participation of adults and children. In previous years, a small caravan has been pressed into service as a kids' screening space. Painted black inside and out, it has been fitted with a projector and speakers, and renamed the Cine-marauder. This was designed as a 'meanwhile' screening space during the renovation of the new Star and Shadow building, and because of its intimacy, it has added a different dynamic to Star and Shadow's screening facilities. For example, an un-previewed screening of *Pain Is…* (Dwoskin 1997) at the Berwick Film Festival was attended only by me (the programmer) and one other, a retired female resident of Berwick. The conditions of the space built sufficient trust for her to share a traumatic story that had been brought up by the content of the film,

[173] Film Hub North supported edition 1 (2015); AND Festival commissioned edition 2 (2015); Forum Cinema, Hexham supported edition 3 'in kind'. Edition 4, 5 and 6 have been unfunded.

resulting in a long personal conversation impossible in conventional screening conditions. The cine-marauder has been used as a children's cinema at LTP, programmed by a couple of young teenagers, children of volunteers at Star and Shadow. Recently it has been retired in favour of the *Ping-Pong Cinema*. On one side of the courtyard at the LTP site is a large barn, used for wintering cattle and storing hay, a corner of which has been partitioned as a stable for many years. Cleared of years' worth of discarded furniture, tools and unwanted materials, the stable has been repurposed as a cinema, not dissimilar to Philip Hoffman's Film Farm, with the addition of a fold-up table tennis table. [174] An atmosphere of spontaneous human intervention in a semi-domestic space attests to the DIY ethic of 'make do and mend'. The screen is an 8x4' sheet of plywood hung from a joist of the stable roof. The projector is suspended from the central beam with a shelf bracket and part of a wooden bread bin. Film selection for the ping-pong cinema was an *ad hoc* process involving children, parents, and the combined DVD collection of Burnlaw Community, comprising some studio Ghibli films, the Moomins and some experimental animations gleaned from Flatpack Festival. The proximity of the stable to the courtyard and the firepit meant parents could confidently leave their kids watching or playing in the ping-pong cinema and go up to the main screening room themselves.

The remoteness of the location plays an important role in the spatial dynamics of LTP. An expanse of hills surrounds Burnlaw and the absence of city noises, replaced by those of the countryside, all feed a very different construction of cinema to the hermetically sealed, urban black box. Attendees of LTP either camp in the field or stay in bunk bed accommodation in the centre. The lines connecting different spaces at Burnlaw – between the play area, the courtyard, the screening space, the camping field – all intersect, cultivating constant and unscripted social interaction. It is a sensorial experience for everyone, not least for those who are unaccustomed to time in the Northumberland countryside. The views of moorland surround you, on clear nights the stars are intensely visible and the smells of wood smoke, wildflowers, cooking and occasionally two stroke from some machinery or other contrast to the sickly staleness of popcorn. Everything is contained within earshot, so when a child has hurt themselves on the trampoline you know about it, or if a screening or a mealtime is about to transpire, ringing a hand bell or shouting is sufficient for everyone to be

[174] Kim Knowles recent book *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp150-151) features a description of the screening space at Hoffman's film farm.

made aware. This curious extra-diegetic soundtrack informs the film screening in a number of unforeseen ways. Children wander in to question a parent, the sounds of birdsong and farmyard machinery enter through the window, the noises and smells of kitchen work emanate from beneath the floor, reminiscent of Lav Diaz's reflection of the importance of everyday life outside of the frame[175]. Linda France attested to this in the beginning of a poem she wrote in response to the LTP screening of *Norte, the End of History* (Diaz 2013):

> On the other side of the blind, a bird
> is singing. I hear Tagalog for the first time,
> how it's a scramble of unexpected consonants,
> then U.S. English. The international language
> of beer, mobile phones, ATMs and fuck yous;
> some things I never knew and other things
> I'm reminded of. And all the while the bird
> is singing[...] (France 2016)

The cinema space is not hermetically sealed and boundaries between inside and outside are porous. Windows (covered by blackout blinds) are open to the elements, meaning the contingent everyday has the potential to defile the sanctity of the cinema space in surprising and often humorous ways, reflexively bringing attention to the audience's environment and interrelationship. An example is the jerry-rigged blackout material used on the large skylights in the auditorium. Without a budget for proper infrastructure, all manner of opaque materials have been deployed to keep light leaks from spoiling the image, from tin foil to cardboard. Invariably the adhesive on the tapes used to stick materials to the window cannot withstand the heat of the mid-summer sun, and huge squares of material occasionally peel off the window mid scene. The film is paused and out comes the ladder and the roll of tape to rectify the situation. Audiences take it in their stride and even enjoy it as a de-professionalised element within the screening. It brings them closer to the apparatus and deconstructs the black box suturing of conventional film exhibition while affording another

[175] Christo Wallers, *AV Festival 12: Lav Diaz Interview*, 2013, https://vimeo.com/57586100.

moment for recognising and enjoying the shared experience in a kind of post-cinephilia, where the primacy of the film gives way to the primacy of the collective encounter.

Collective participation and the LTP community

In the urge to break with the privileging of the individual as the preferred system in film exhibition, there are still multiple risks at play. The spectator inevitably still desires that immersion, the hypnotic power described by Barthes, and they are left feeling vulnerable and exposed at the end of the peculiarly public yet intimate experience of viewing film in a cinema. The audience 'collective' is never a pure entity and is always made up of individual subjectivities. If audience expectations are not clearly managed or articulated then the trust required for community will be hard to build, and perhaps audience members don't want to be considered as a community. Unwritten communities exist which by their nature exclude – who has not experienced the sense of 'not belonging' at an event or screening, where some people already know one another and subtle hierarchies influence the way audience members are greeted, or when the film start time is delayed for so-and-so to arrive. Informality does not per se equate to social cohesion and the process of community doesn't necessarily happen evenly for all stakeholders. How to get into the 'right' group is another question, reinforcing the notion that cultural space replicates the theory of 'field', (Bourdieu 1984) and the rules regarding which social actors can 'play', or what amounts to sufficient cultural capital, are subtle and guarded. Conversely, consistency of a standardised approach ought to have an equalising effect. However, counter-institutions are freer to disrupt and experiment with non-hierarchical conditions and community building, both in design and in transmission.

LTP is explicit in its efforts to structure film screening around the idea of community. The first piece of publicity emailed out to promote the inaugural edition in June 2014 states:

> The 'Losing the Plot' weekend film retreat is all about playing with the idea of cinema as a collective experience: extending it from 90 minutes in the dark to a whole weekend away together in the wilderness. The weekend is an immersion in contemporary 'specialised' film - documentaries, narrative and experimental films for anyone keen on cinema, and particularly those who live in wild places like rural

> Northumberland. Come for a single screening, but coming for the whole weekend will be really special.
> A weekend pass gets you accommodation, meals, a load of film screenings, reading material, walks and discussion time in a VERY beautiful place. Inspired by non-hierarchical learning environments, this weekend will be about helping ourselves towards a deeper understanding of cinema as an art form.

The publicity materials emphasise a premeditated focus on audience collectivity, placing importance on simple shared experiences beyond the screening room, like eating or walking together, and sharing domestic duties like washing the dishes. Evidently, people who come to LTP have to self-select, be able to afford the time and the price, and overcome various structural and psychological barriers to participating in something that is clearly alternative. Prices are advertised very low to be as affordable as possible – the basic pass for LTP (£50) including food, accommodation and film screenings for a full weekend costs less than a Millburn Stand ticket to watch Newcastle United play in the premiership[176]. Pre-publicity also offered the space to present the critical parameters of the event, and give the audience the sense of tone, and a glimpse of the aesthetics. In the social media posts for LTP#5, the thematic structure of the BFI publication *The New Social Function of Cinema* was introduced by an image of the book in which 'cinema' was overlaid with 'Losing the Plot #5' or scattered with pencil-written information on torn bits of cardboard. The new padded stacking chairs were also wryly highlighted as a 'usp', in contrast to the seemingly effortless comfort of the movie house or art centre. These elements playfully reveal the construction of the screening space as something that involves fallible human beings; informality is preferred over professionalism in order to set the stage for social interaction. A more professional design approach delimits the possibility of participation, it suggests that the curators or organisers have reliable or 'bankable' authority. By disrupting the smoothness of these communication flows, attention is drawn to a potentially different relationship, one that celebrates the

176 'Select Tickets for Newcastle United v Norwich City: Newcastle United Ticketing', *NUFC*, https://book.nufc.co.uk/en-GB/events/newcastle%20united%20v%20norwich%20city/2020-2-1_15.00/st%20james%20park?hallmap [accessed 21 January 2020].

amateur, the ability of anyone and everyone to 'have a go' core to the spirit and ethic of DIY and punk.

Through the scheduling of the event, people are brought into active social contact with each other, opening up chances for participation or activating deeper conversations sparked by screenings, the aesthetics and content of particular titles, and the intentional or unintentional links that appear between films. The opening event is a shared meal taken in the courtyard, so before any films have been screened, relationships between audience members can germinate. There is no formality to this process, or expectation, it is simply a point of departure for the rest of the event. By eating and clearing up together people start to feel part of a group, a community that is more intentional than the 'indirect community' of the art cinema referred to above by Evans. Some audience members may also be attending filmmakers, presenting their work; others are volunteers at Star and Shadow or similar projects, who are familiar with DIY, collective activity and will independently get involved in moving chairs, setting up the projector or helping gather the audience from the corners of Burnlaw when screenings start. If 'proximity to the apparatus', as suggested by Ross, is significant for advancing participation in film exhibition, then LTP meets that requirement. A number of participants have returned to multiple editions, building a relational community over time. Others may be taking a bigger risk in attending something that plays by unorthodox rules outside of their comfort zone, and the informality can become a barrier. One attendee on the autism spectrum, who had previously self-organised a season of films at the Star and Shadow concerning Autism, found the informality of screenings, the erratic time-keeping and open-ended group discussions too uncomfortable and so only stayed for the first day.

While the film selection and curatorial process isn't by nature participatory, it is theorised from a non-hierarchical perspective, about which I will go into greater depth shortly. The moment of the film screening itself is still the fundamental crucible of community activation at LTP, most evident in post-screening discussions. Rather than doing Q&As or panels with filmmakers, or looking to academic specialists to expand on films as one might find in the traditional art cinema (which also happens at Star and Shadow), the focus is placed on aggregating the knowledge and interpretation of the whole audience. After the first screening of the weekend, confidence to speak may not be forthcoming, but by the end of the final film it is noticeable how freely people talk about their interpretations of the film,

unconcerned by how that reflects their cultural capital. My conclusion is that through a committed attention to building trust, films are opened up in a completely different way when the primacy of subjective experience normally associated with cinephilia gives way to an intentionally collective viewing process. Taste and opinion are less static; the aesthetic choices of filmmakers are received more openly and the simple magnitude of having made a film outside of the conventional aesthetic logic of industrial film is celebrated. Slow cinema is imbricated into a fabric of slow community. This is unfamiliar territory, when the habit of post-film privacy is so deeply ingrained. This takes me on to an analysis of the programming methodology and the role of the curator in opening up the collective potential of the film screening.

A relational model of programming - The Ignorant Curator

The curator's position is conventionally fixed within a traditional set of pedagogic relations – the curator knows and presents, while the spectator receives and discovers. The programming of LTP diverges from this norm, setting up a less hierarchical relationship between programmer and audience. The content of LTP is programmed under the moniker the Ignorant Curator, a position inspired by Rancière's analysis of Joseph Jacotot (1991). Jacotot's distinctive teaching practice formally recognised the 'equality of ignorance' present in the relationship between himself and his class. He was unable to speak Flemish and they were unable to speak French. From this starting point of equality, he included a third item, a body of knowledge of which he had no prior experience – the dual-translation of the Telemachus in French and Flemish. Students responded to questions posed by Jacotot through comparison and translation. In the process, they were teaching themselves knowledge in a way that contradicted conventional pedagogy – they taught themselves the French language independently. Jacotot volunteered himself as an 'Ignorant' schoolmaster through the realisation that his role need not be the 'banking' style of knowledge transmission, as critiqued by Paolo Freire, but simply creating the conditions for all present to embrace their innate capacity to learn. Following Rancière's appraisal of education, the role of the teacher could just as readily be the role of the artist/curator, and the student replaced by the audience, a mirroring that is explored in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011). In order to explore relational film exhibition through a DIY ethic or praxis, I speculated with positioning my curatorial self as equal to the audience in order to see what effect that had on

the relationship dynamics. While there is no defined teacher-student relationship between film programmers and audiences, it is implicit within the power dynamics of hierarchically-structured institutional culture. Experimenting with the idea of the Ignorant Curator, I wanted to move away from the notion of the curator as an expert, to the notion of the curator as an inquisitive audience member, willing to create the conditions for co-exploring cinema texts as a community of practice.

By way of illustration, it is worth doing a closer analysis of elements of the film programme at LTP. Firstly, the films are programmed blind – when the screening takes place at LTP it is the first time I, as the programmer, have seen it. The research happens over several months, in the same way a cinephile tracks upcoming films they want to watch. Through studying UK release schedules and reading festival brochures, blogs and reviews, a shortlist is drawn up. LTP is not a high-profile festival but a small retreat so attracting films on the festival circuit is tricky unless they have already premiered in the UK. The admixture has tended to include historical films that pique curiosity, current feature and documentary films in distribution in the UK, and artists moving image. Occasionally a theme has emerged, for example 'Europeanness' in the lead up to the EU referendum in 2016. The 2017 edition was inspired by the BFI publication *The New Social Function of Cinema* (1980), particularly around the ideas for film exhibition described by Four Corners in Bethnal Green. Some curatorial decisions come about through network effects of Star and Shadow Cinema being part of Kino Climates and associated with the Film Labs Network. Through these email lists, touring filmmakers can connect with screening spaces that share their ethos and build long term relationships. The live performance by Richard Tuohy from Nanolab, Australia at LTP#1 happened through a serendipitous email he sent wanting to return to Star and Shadow and the Film Bee lab after his memorable experience there in November 2011. Similarly, the screening of Anna Grabo's new film, *Pictures I didn't take* (2018), at LTP#6 was the result of relationship building through Kino Climates meetups – as well as a filmmaker, Grabo is a cinema activist at B-Movie in Hamburg and had visited Star and Shadow in 2014. Rather than being led by exclusively by taste or canonical quality, the screening of her film at LTP in 2019 was a choice based on relationships.

The programming of new releases in UK distribution for LTP follows a different rationale. Forging friendly relationships with distributors has not come so straightforwardly, when screening their releases is infrequent and hardly lucrative for the distributor. Within

the programming rubric of LTP there is however a desire to support risk-taking in UK distribution, even in the most modest form of a single screening license. The initial concept of LTP was to screen films which deviated from formal norms or had open-ended or opaque plots, to see if changing the screening context opened up the legibility of alternative media. At LTP#4, the *Arabian Nights* (2015) trilogy by Miguel Gomes was screened in its entirety, broken by meals and fresh air. The running time of the three films adds up to a little over six hours, which makes it a difficult proposition for broad cinema release. *Arabian Nights* might be considered a 'festival film', described by critic Jonathan Rosenbaum as 'a film destined to be seen by professionals, specialists, or cultists but not by the general public because some of these professionals decide it won't or it can't be sufficiently profitable to warrant distribution' (Falicov 2016). After a successful festival run, gaining nominations and winning awards in France, USA, Portugal, Germany, Spain, Australia and Poland,[177] it was picked up for distribution in the UK by New Wave. They released each part of the trilogy independently over three weeks, from 22 April 2016 to 6 May 2016.[178] The first part was screened in 9 cinemas across the country, grossing £4304.[179] Over the following consecutive weeks, parts 2 and 3 played at 10 and 11 screens, accruing respectively £2297 and £1450.[180][181] The geographical spread of the successive film's distribution increased, but ticket sales halved. If £10 is an approximate average ticket price, then one could estimate that the final part was viewed by less than 150 people nationwide in the main release window. Does this mean that the release strategy failed, or that *Arabian Nights* is a bad trilogy of films? Or conversely, could one argue that a film project like *Arabian Nights* is an extremely poor fit for contemporary viewing patterns and exhibition formats? Culture that is densely layered with meaning takes time to decode, and life leaves scarce room to digest and interpret.

For some, the film theatre is really the only place that allows the spectatorial contract demanded by works of 'slow cinema' to be met (De Luca 2016). As the proponents of slow cinema are attracted ever more regularly into the art gallery context, de Luca's point is to contrast the stillness and attention offered by traditional film theatre with the distracted

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177 'Miguel Gomes', IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0326937/awards [accessed 10 December 2020].

178 'Past, Present and Future Releases to Past, Present and Future Releases | UK Recent and Upcoming Movie', https://www.launchingfilms.com/release-schedule?filmSearch=arabian+nights [accessed 22 January 2020].

179 BFI, 'UK Weekend Box Office Report: 22-24 April 2016', *BFI,* https://www.bfi.org.uk/publications/corporate-documents-publications/film-industry-statistics-research/box-office-reports-2016 [accessed 22 January 2020].

180 BFI, 'UK Weekend Box Office Report: 29 April-1 May 2016', *BFI,* https://www.bfi.org.uk/publications/corporate-documents-publications/film-industry-statistics-research/box-office-reports-2016 [accessed 22 January 2020].

181 BFI, 'UK Weekend Box Office Report: 6-8 May 2016', *BFI,* https://www.bfi.org.uk/publications/corporate-documents-publications/film-industry-statistics-research/box-office-reports-2016 [accessed 22 January 2020].

nature of viewing in the gallery. However, he stops short of fetishizing unwavering attention in the film theatre, pointing out that the combination of attentiveness and 'drift' that makes up the experience of slow cinema affords a reflexive awareness of the cinema as a collective space. He tempers this analysis, making clear he does not see such an experience as 'cooperative in that it may result in collective action, but that it is political insofar as its reflexive, social, and interhuman configuration restores a sense of time and experience in a world short of both' (41). The potential held within this co-awareness is undoubtedly influenced by the specific conditions of the film theatre, which are somewhat universalised in his account along the lines of the auditorium he mentions from *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (Tsai Ming Liang 2003).

More grassroots contexts offer an opportunity to realise a more concrete form of community. When Lav Diaz screened *Melancholia* (2008) at Star and Shadow Cinema, programmed as part of the AV Festival, the director went so far as to invoke the audience community as a phalanx, albeit somewhat humorously: 'Those who follow my films are well prepared - they are warriors! They are formidable. They sleep and eat well before and then have a two-hour intense discussion afterwards'.[182] The reviewer who recorded this comment also described the collective experience of *Melancholia* at Star and Shadow: 'The festival presented it with a couple of intervals. During the second, around the six-hour mark, tables and chairs were put together in the Star And Shadow Cinema's bar space, so everyone could have a shared meal. When the film was over, we each re-joined the table with a beer and the post-screening Q&A was conducted in the most equal way I've seen, audience members taking turns to ask the director questions'.[183] Nevertheless, conventional screening situations are the norm, rather than the exception, and 'slow cinema' can serve as a critique. The awkwardness of slow cinema works by Gomes, Lav Diaz or Bela Tarr[184], in terms of their duration and aesthetics, draw attention to the homogeneity of leisure time around which cinema exhibition is organised.

This homogeneity is partly in response to the way time is divided in the capitalist work-life temporality. The accelerated reality of late modernity has moulded the social experience of cinema around the 90-minute standard, while consumers of film face an

[182] Kate Taylor, 'No Rush: AV Festival's Slow Cinema Weekend Explored', *The Quietus*, https://thequietus.com/articles/08274-av-festival-2012-slow-cinema-weekend [accessed 24 February 2020].
[183] Ibid.
[184] *Norte, the End of History* (2013) and *The Turin Horse* (2011) have been screened at previous editions of LTP.

intensifying time squeeze as they try to balance their work and life commitments, and their attention is fought over by ever faster, louder and more colourful modes of entertainment. The concept of even 'paying attention' is contested when an analyst like Jonathan Crary decries that 'any act of viewing is layered with options of simultaneous and interruptive actions, choices, and feedback' (2013, 52).

The market response is to avoid deviating from convention or get left behind. Film festivals succumb to a similar logic of intensification, embracing the growth mentality, and increasing the number of films to dazzle spectators with choice. LTP resists this urge, and is designed to slow things down, to extract art cinema from the adrenalised entertainment market and place it in a situation where time and thus social relations can operate differently. Maria, one of the attendees of the sequential *Arabian Nights* screenings remarked how important she felt it was:

> to be able to spend some time doing the important things that I don't usually make time for: people, thinking, learning. (About the Arabian Nights Trilogy) I would never have got around to watching it otherwise – so glad I did and that it was here where the profound human companionship and solidarity of the film spills out into a temporary community, and where the film's attention to place, environment, and sound can resonate with the rich real experience of birdsong and fog.

As a counter-gesture in LTP#6, I wondered how a blockbuster might fare in these differentiated screening conditions. I decided to programme the highest grossing US film of the year at the point of going to print with the schedule. The Marvel/Disney production *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) was duly selected, again un-previewed following the programming rubric of the ignorant curator. This superhero film follows the struggle around control of the mythical precious metal vibranium to protect the highly-developed African country of Wakanda. It played alongside *A Fantastic Woman* (Lelio, 2017), *Property is no longer a theft* (Petri, 1973), *Lek and the dogs* (Kötting, 2018), *Zama* (Martel, 2017) and *Meteors* (Keltek, 2017). These films were not programmed according to a specific theme, but they all dealt with identity and power, many with a post-colonialist focus. When the time came for screening the blockbuster I was prepared for either a surge of relieved excitement or a mood of ironic aloofness. In fact the film was received in the same spirit as the more esoteric fare.

The lengthy and intense conversation that followed the projection had the same atmosphere as the other screenings. LTP is not guided by an exclusionary cinephilia, predicated on individual 'longings and discrimination' (Elsaesser 2005b, 27), connoisseurship and cachet. Instead all films take on an equal status, reflected in the equality of the audience, which engenders a form of post-cinephilia – the LTP cinema provides a collective point of departure, rather than escape, refuge or site of fetish. *Black Panther* presented a reflexive way of pointing to the hegemonic entertainment industry within the context of a film retreat, while further opening up ideological terrains to do with race and power.

It is not only the selection that follows an autodidactic motivation. In the small team of one that organises LTP, technical complexities cannot be simply delegated to other departments, and there is satisfaction in autonomously exploring how things work. An example might be the problem of subtitling using .srt files. The screening of *A Question of Silence* (1982) by Marleen Gorris involved painstaking stitching of American subtitles to the German DVD, made difficult because of different frame rates and colour systems (PAL and NTSC). The American-English subtitle file was available on an open source resource online (opensubtitles.org), but the DVD was only available from Germany, since the rights lapsed with Cinenova. The end result worked as it should, caused new knowledge to be developed and offered a nice anecdote to introduce the screening.

While the Ignorant Curator is positioned as one amongst many willing learners in a cinematic community of practice, there is another role being played. In relational film exhibition, the curator's guardianship is focused as much on the audience as the films and filmmakers. Jacotot's role in the analysis of the *Ignorant Schoolmaster* was not rendered redundant, it was just that the power dynamics needed to be re-calibrated in order to recognise equality between those who 'know' and those who 'don't'. His function was not to 'fill the jug', but to support the pedagogic possibilities of the classroom, for himself as well. Similarly, the Ignorant Curator's role recognises the importance of cultivating and drawing out the potential in the collective act of viewing, against the grain of audiences who may find stepping out of individual subjectivity into a group process somewhat uncomfortable. It does require careful and sensitive facilitation to render this possible. Lindsay, one attendee at LTP offered the following feedback:

> [I] felt able to join in and partake in discussions. They were open and inclusive and gently guided/facilitated. I think I have felt nervous about coming to a film festival, but really it's about changing my pace… [it] opened my eyes and challenged my understanding. Sometimes of the film, sometimes of others' response, or made me feel I knew a little more than I thought. [It} feels like you have time to get to know people, and I think I've got past a barrier of usually not wanting to talk about a film straight after watching… all the discussions here have really helped me see a lot more in each film.

Conclusion

Going to the movies in DIY cinema spaces is a negotiation of not just public and private rituals but collective ones too. In contrast to the historical theorization that sees cinema exhibition enabling the singular consumer to fulfil private desire in public space, multiple other readings exist to demonstrate that community is deeply interwoven with the experience of cinemagoing. Wilinsky suggests that, in the bourgeois art cinema, community is arranged through exclusion to create enclaves of taste and distinction, admissible to those only with the right habitus. Alternatively, in the case of post-Thatcher publicly-funded film theatres in the UK, they feed a sense of 'imagined community', where cinema carries signifiers of cosmopolitan, urban progress. The collective identity made possible in urban art cinemas is captured by Evans in her term 'indirect communities', while the community sector, endorsed by Cinema For All, utilises cinema to plug the gaps left in local community by receding public services.

LTP does not follow any of these formulations of cinema and community. Reclaiming Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics for the grassroots, DIY activity that gave it its inspiration, I argue that new forms of DIY film exhibition are prioritising the cinema as a micro-utopian site for community and collectivity. Maria Vélez-Serna (2020) has tracked a diverse field of ephemeral cinema events in Scotland (Radical Home Cinema, Cinemor) alongside guerrilla screening projects in Egypt, Greece and Spain; and connected into national and international networks like Scalarama and the Radical Film Network to claim cinema as a commons. By nature, commons are open to all rather than enclosed for the few. New formations of cinema exhibition are enacting Stavros Stavrides' notion of 'expanding commoning' (2016), trying to open up counterhegemonic screening spaces for diverse

audiences to collaborate in egalitarian ways. *Losing the Plot* is one such project, exemplifying a pattern of DIY exhibitors who reflexively draw attention to the expected norms and roles of cinema-going in often non-hierarchical ways and in spatial and social contexts that challenge and resist the hegemonic doxa. It draws to mind Julie Perini's manifesto on relational film production, that 'relational films are *co-created* through careful and playful interrogations of the roles performed by the people and materials involved with the film's production and reception: artists, subjects, passers-by, audiences, environments, ideas, and things' (2009, my italics).

Conclusion

Both Star and Shadow Cinema and Cube Microplex are in the situation where they have programming freedom and the technical, spatial and organisational resources to make and sustain a democratic film culture as they see fit. Through a process of commoning the cinema space, they have made the shift from spontaneous, tactical occurrences to strategic cultural organisations, if not institutionalising the encounter then certainly encountering the institution. Through accepting the accountability that comes with legal, legitimate space, they have taken on serious responsibilities, unlike the ephemeral but fleet-of-foot pop-ups in meanwhile spaces. They have matured and evolved, but retain identification with the DIY ethic. The premise behind this thesis has been to formally recognise a counterhegemonic film exhibition practice in the UK since the 1990s, underpinned by this DIY ethic.

In the closing thoughts of his thesis, Duncan Reekie outlines a dilemma faced by the filmmakers and activists of the new underground surrounding Exploding Cinema and the Volcano Film Festival, the epicentre of 1990s countercultural film exhibition. Options open were to devote years more unpaid labour in the hope of building a parallel network to the state and the mainstream film industry; relaxing their hard-line values and working within the funded sector; or cultivating a radical praxis that could inspire and bring onboard other activists while remaining 'ideologically and industrially toxic to the State sector' (Reekie n.d., 282). My research shows that the underground has evolved into an impure combination of these positions and more. I have outlined a shift over three decades from subversive negation to a non-vanguardist pluralism. Rather than following the vision of the underground or the avant-garde, the case studies have utilised a utopian method to build resilient structures from which a radically alternative popular culture can be authentically mounted. To this end, the term 'underground' has diminished in its potency and relevance. I have laid out arguments for the adoption of the notion of DIY in its place.

In this thesis I have employed a mixed methodology of historical research, storytelling and participant observation, starting this journey as an archaeologist. I look back at the utopian impulse in film exhibition in the UK, focusing on the independent and avant-garde cinema stretching from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s. The historical examples of transformative, socially engaged or utopian film exhibition practice in Chapter 1 represent the mobility of practitioners between amateur, entrepreneurial and institutional positions as

different avenues and alliances enabled them to fulfil their goals more effectively. I have looked at how mid-century film societies were one driving force in the bid to think beyond cinema as simply an art form for connoisseurship. For IFA-era practitioners a few years later, their interventions into the BFI and other governmental agencies can be seen as part of a 'long march through the institutions of power'[185], to create change from within. Film exhibition became a primary space for cinema as 'social practice' well into the 1980s, led by artist and avant-garde filmmakers, film workshops, 'post-RFT' screening projects, tour organisers, regional agencies and local authority departments. However, changes in government policy left groups over-exposed as they relied heavily on state aid which, once pulled, substantially impacted their capacity.

That the advent of punk reshaped cultural resistance is undeniable. The stratified nature of The Independent cinema was based on a pedagogic division between makers and spectators, driven by a didactic impulse to reveal to audiences the basis of their ideological subjugation. Punk broke that apart proving firstly that it was a false division, and secondly that transgression was the preferred route out of the power imbalance. I have explored how a countercultural cinema like the Scala became a space of refuge for specific identities and subcultures, while for others the cinema auditorium was no longer necessarily the primary site for film. Into this space materialised a first stage of DIY film exhibition manifested in the Exploding Cinema's carnivalesque screenings in squats, bars and abandoned places.

I propose a paradigm of radical democracy and equality as the prefigurative centre of DIY cinema, using the concepts of spatial practice and cultural resistance to fill out this ontology. I have considered how equality is conceptualised within DIY cinema as an everyday utopian presupposition. I have sought to open up DIY as a prefigurative practice, albeit one that is imperfect and contingent. I have been at pains to express the importance and significance of space as a priority for the DIY film exhibitors in my study. I have explored various cave metaphors to allude to the meeting of needs for nurture, community and self-organizing. In this sense, DIY cinemas are examples of spatial practice, rather than aggregates of materials arranged in a specific way to accommodate an audience watching a film. I have explored the relationship between Lefebvre's triadic schema of space and the concept of

[185] *Rudi Dutschke - 22 November 1967, 'Politics v. Christian Utopia' Panel* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_r_XahzELY&t=97s> [accessed 13 July 2021].

commoning. The case studies exemplify an urge to push beyond the counterhegemonic representations of an older group like Exploding Cinema, which tend to be ephemeral. Instead they show a desire to conceive spaces of their own, collectively owning and operating them as urban commons.

A characteristic of the recent case studies that I have explored is that they prioritise the process of film programming and screening more than the synthesis of film production and sharing. This is not without exception, as a project like Imperfect Cinema in Plymouth goes to show, and events like *Blue Screen* and *Eyes Wide Open* at The Cube and Star and Shadow respectively show a faithfulness to local filmmaking scenes. Nevertheless, in the 1990s DIY exhibition culture started with groups of filmmakers needing space to screen, and that pattern has changed. The ease with which filmmakers can upload and share work online has meant that their needs for an audience can be met more easily. The proliferation of film festivals, and the increased availability of art funding (as opposed to film funding) for experimental film has resulted in a dislocation between those making films and those wanting to screen them.

Another way of looking at this situation is that while film culture is often centred around communities of filmmakers, this thesis suggests that it is also produced by communities of spectators. Rather than sharing filmmaking practice, the case studies here reflect a common urge to actively curate and socialise public media environments in ways that resist pure commodification and build community. This democratizing trend has grown parallel to the rise of the social web, where people share dream playlists; organise 'watchalongs' and embed video in social media posts. Yet cinema for many is nothing unless it is experienced in physical space with other people. My analysis of the film retreat, *Losing the Plot*, seeks to investigate the DIY screening space as one of relational community. Moreover, cinema as a place is still deeply imbricated with the notion of urban space. Both city space and the flow of media have yielded to the power of neoliberal hegemony. For Star and Shadow, The Cube and *Losing the Plot*, the cinema is an ideal site to contest this state of affairs and becomes an experiment in and a metaphor for cultural resistance. This resistance takes shape inside the screening room but extends into a discursive field that includes every aspect of the cinema, including space, governance, trade, training and technical resources. Indeed, I have shown that an important factor in distinguishing DIY film exhibition from other examples of community, film society or pop-up film screening is that DIY film exhibition

groups are not content to simply provide subcultural zones for cinephilia, they want to utilise cinema to contradict and counteract larger socio-cultural norms in public space.

Understood through the above terms, my thesis shows roughly generalisable phases within DIY film exhibition culture in the UK. In the 1990s, DIY Cinema was focused on a carnivalesque, underground spirit, articulating post-punk reflexivity and subcultural conviviality. In examples like Exploding Cinema and Omsk, activists created their own spaces embodying the 'party and protest' attitude outlined by George McKay (1998) following the current of countercultural dissidence around rave culture, squatting and emancipatory arts. Using the language of subversion and irony, they were reacting on one hand against commodity culture and rising neoliberalism brought on by more than a decade of Tory rule, and on the other an avant-garde and Independent legacy that to them seemed more concerned about protecting itself than advancing social and cultural transformation. In this sense they were aligned to a radically autonomous interpretation of independence. Like the early stages of the London Film-makers' Co-op or the New York Film-makers' Co-op, they were committed to an open, participatory model of film practice. Hence 1990s DIY film exhibition was interdependent with no wave and low budget filmmaking culture spawning zines, discussion forums, festivals and interventions. Groups were made up of, or directly connected to, filmmakers who wanted to screen their own work, pre-eminently short, experimental and performative film formats. Primacy was given to the act of film exhibition, the live moment, and the joy and liberation that could ensue from a socialised screening experience outside of the auditorium. They were less concerned with place-making or community on a scale larger than the collective, and more interested in the utopian possibilities of found spaces as Temporary Autonomous Zones.

In the decade following the turn of the millennium, I argued that the mode shifted from underground to overground, while retaining a determination to protect autonomy, offering points of convergence in urban centres for cinema and radical democracy. Through the development of The Cube and the Star and Shadow, DIY film exhibition was cemented as open access and participatory, extending the logic of participation by embracing models of accessibility and inclusion, consensus, non-violence and anti-oppression. The case studies demonstrate a strength of connection with earlier groups, through the occupation of buildings which carried the traces of counterhegemonic film cultures from the 1960s onwards. Equally strong influences came in the form of situationist-inspired art practices, the

organisational ethics flourishing in global justice movements and open source computing, requiring a sophisticated balance between subversion with something much more pluralist. I explore how Cube Microplex exhibits a reflexive ambiguity in order to reassure a Bristol public of its openness to participation, but at the same time retain the critical teeth to bite whatever they are ideologically opposed to. Celebrating improvisation, experimentation and the human touch, these versions of DIY cinema have held onto much of the spontaneity and emancipatory joy of the previous decades, channelling it through anarchic uses of space, technology and social interaction.

Through the 2000s, connections were retained to filmmakers and underground archivists to a degree, particularly hosting representatives of the microcinema scene in the US. Arguably, the increase in public funding took oxygen away from DIY cinema as a filmmaker's culture, as low budget makers sought financial security through arts funding, and the gallery/curator system increased in its acceptance of moving image work. DIY Cinema in contrast then became a place-making activity focused on free expression and cultural democracy through programming and screening films. As groups expanded, different enthusiasms and impulses were reflected in the programming selection, incorporating educational and agitational film screenings, representations of diverse identities and an autodidactic approach to film history. At this stage one could recognise various narratives both driving the development of, and being reconciled within, DIY cinema from socially engaged art practice, to social-centre activism, to underground film.

A noticeable through line in Star and Shadow and The Cube is that as they went 'overground' they did so with caution regarding over-reliance on funding. This was guided by a critical position towards the top-down New Labour rhetoric of social inclusion. On one level, this policy failed to significantly move on from earlier perspectives, based on the hierarchy of expert and novice, teacher and student. On the other it was suspected of providing a thin veil for arts-led regeneration which left neighbourhoods behind in favour of urban centres. DIY cinema activists have instead sought to create non-hierarchical communities of practice where participants create film culture from the bottom up. I have explored the negotiated outsider stance Star and Shadow Cinema has adopted to resist the twin fates of ephemerality and recuperation.

These groups show an ambivalent attention to the role of DIY cinema in the wider structures of UK film culture. Like the collectives in the 1990s, zines have been a popular way

of growing a grassroots film culture. Unlike their forbears though, there were no regular publications distributed beyond local audiences. While inspired by experimental film and squat culture in Europe, and developments in open source and net art, these examples show a general detachment from official UK film policy. Arguably this went hand in hand with a DIY methodology established on action rather than strategy. In this sense there is a contrast in the scale of intervention compared to the Independent cinema of the 1970s, and 1990s projects like Exploding Cinema and Volcano Film Festival. This is slowly changing with the inauguration of the Kino Climates network at IFFR 2010, which exists to build connections between DIY and alternative, 'off' cinemas in Europe. This poses a significant area of future research, considering Kino Climates is made up of 46 cinema projects across 16 countries. Further analysis of alternative cinema exhibition in the context of Europe would give productive, transnational perspectives on DIY cinema in the UK. It would be important to look further still, to ensure this is not seen from a purely Eurocentric perspective. The alternative film exhibition cultures in Latin America, the Philippines and Indonesia all point to this being a global approach to cinema culture.

Through the last decade, DIY film exhibition has adapted again with a visible increase in temporary event culture, like the Scalarama festival every September, or the pop up and ephemeral projects in Glasgow referred to by Vélez-Serna in her recent book (2020). The impacts of the 2008 financial crash, the policies of Austerity and the short-lived Big Society added to a recognition of the harmful effects of gentrification have resulted in a doubling down on radical sustainability and long-term protection of the commons, through community purchase of buildings. This self-directed strategy should protect an autonomous, grassroots film exhibition culture into the future. It would require further research to determine whether projects like The Cube, Star and Shadow and Exploding Cinema have born significant influence on the wider community film culture through the participatory turn, certainly later organisations like Deptford Cinema, Liverpool Small Cinema and Scalarama recognised, communicated and even participated with the above groups. Equally, new nomadic collectives have emerged plotting a separate course to DIY as paid workers. With the support of the BFI Film Audience Network, a diverse, socially engaged exhibition ecology is growing through projects like Club Des Femmes and We are Parable.

This thesis has been researched and written during the global campaign for racial justice through the Black Lives Matter movement. Black representation in mainstream media

has increased, while intersectional analysis of privilege and oppression has begun to move from the margins into the mainstream. While these issues have been at the heart of anti-oppression policies and aspired to for many years through horizontalism, the DIY mode of film exhibition is no panacea. I argue at the theoretical level that equality is a presupposition in the DIY ethic, yet participants exist within and reproduce systemic problems. The groups I have analysed remain predominantly white and middle class, ill-equipped to reconcile or sometimes even recognise systemic problems and break down barriers to participation from diverse groups, particularly among people of colour.

Similarly, the voluntarist basis of DIY Cinema should be further interrogated in its relationship to precarity. The creative industries have come under considerable scrutiny for poor labour rights. Little Wing, a recent grassroots film festival in the UK, points out that 'work in the creative industries shouldn't be reserved for those with the privilege of being able to work unpaid'[186]. Similarly, a recent report concludes that 'for younger, or early career individuals, and those from less affluent, working class social origins, working for free was primarily a form of exploitation' (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2018). I have asserted that DIY cinema practice should be read through the prism of unalienated labour, but there lies a paradox in how solidarity can be fostered between groups who demand better employment rights and those who seek to merge culture and everyday life. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of mutual aid networks and voluntarist support, offering an alternative vision for society. It has also revealed the vulnerability of workforces in big cinema chains[187], and the urge to overlook the genuine danger to workers and audiences in running cinemas during an airborne viral pandemic.

These issues expose areas of research that are currently critically important beyond the realm of cinema activism - how to reconcile the desires and dreams for post-capitalist economies and cultural projects with an intersectional understanding of privilege. It should be reasserted that the projects I have assessed here are primarily focused on their locality, rather than film strategy at the national level. As Jemma Desai (2019) argues from her perspective as a cultural worker embodying difference in the cultural film sector, inclusion

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[186] 'About | Little Wing', https://www.littlewingevents.com/about [accessed 30 November 2020].

[187] Jasper Jolly, 'Cineworld to Cut 45,000 Jobs as Covid Closes Cinemas', *The Guardian*, 5 October 2020, sec. Business, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/oct/05/cineworld-close-uk-us-cinemas-covid-bond-film-regal [accessed 30 November 2020].

policies since New Labour have been limited by a 'mile wide, inch deep' attitude to change. These focus on targets and indicators, and often instrumentalise the diverse groups they are proposing to support. She calls for a reorientation of purpose in UK film culture against one-size policies. Perhaps the DIY film exhibition examples in this study can follow the counter-rationale, inch wide and mile deep.

In final summary, the DIY mode sustains. It has evolved from the prevailing image of the underground squat into a form of 'communal luxury' (Ross, 2016) in well-resourced cinema spaces, run and programmed by their audiences. The topics in this thesis are constantly sliding away from the central issue of the film screening, but this is intentional, opening up new relevancy for the bricks and mortar cinema space. What DIY cinema can offer for the future of the screening experience is yet to be written, but it certainly has a role. Cinema is a popular art form that can both entertain and provide space for dialogue. The resources for making, showing and collectively interpreting should be available to all, equally and outside of the enclosures of the market or the determination of the state. The examples I have addressed prefigure a cinema of the commons for the 21st century around which neighbourhoods and communities can self-educate, self-express and collaborate in person, and the film text is just one element in a larger discourse about space and cultural democracy.

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List of Interviewees

Alice (Star and Shadow Cinema)

Julie Ballands (New Side Cinema Collective)

Debbie Bower (Star and Shadow Cinema)

Heath Bunting (Cube Cinema)

Amber Cropp (Cube Cinema)

Elaine Drainville (Amber Films)

Rosa Eaton (Cube Cinema)

Mat Fleming (Star and Shadow Cinema)

Brian Hoey (Biddick Farm Arts Centre)

Graeme Hogg (Cube Cinema)

Stewart Mackinnon (Trade Films)

Ilana Mitchell (Star and Shadow Cinema)

Adrin Neatrour (Star and Shadow Cinema)

Stephanie Oswald (Star and Shadow Cinema)

Michael Pierce (Scalarama)

Arto Polus (Star and Shadow Cinema)

Duncan Reekie (Cube Cinema)

Kate Rich (Cube Cinema)

Selina Robertson (Clube de Femmes)

Collette Rouhier (Exploding Cinema)

Peter Roberts (Amber Films)

Roger Shannon (Birmingham Film and Video Workshop)

Kate Sweeney (Star and Shadow Cinema)

Alan Thornton (Star and Shadow Cinema

Peter Todd (Ayton Basement, Trade Films)

Marcus Valentine (Cube Cinema)

James Vickery (Cube Cinema)

Dan Wallder (Star and Shadow Cinema)

Chiz Williams (Cube Cinema)

John Wojowski (Kino Manchester)

Yaz (Star and Shadow Cinema)

University of Reading
Research Ethics Committee

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ANNEX C

Consent Form

1. I have read and had explained to me by **CHRISTO WALLERS** the accompanying Information Sheet relating to the project on:

   DIY Cinemas in the UK – Emancipating Contexts for Spectatorship

2. I have had explained to me the purposes of the project and what will be required of me, and any questions I have had have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to the arrangements described in the Information Sheet in so far as they relate to my participation.

3. I understand that participation is entirely voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw from the project any time, and that this will be without detriment.

4. ***Researcher to delete (a) and (b) if GP will not be contacted, or (b) if no response from GP is required***

   a) I authorise the Investigator to consult my General Practitioner.

   b) I authorise my General Practitioner to disclose any information which may be relevant to my proposed participation in the project.

5. This project has been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct.

6. I have received a copy of this Consent Form and of the accompanying Information Sheet.

Name: ……

Date of birth: ……

Signed: ……

Date: ……

Information Sheet

DIY Cinemas in the UK – Emancipating Contexts for Spectatorship

Aim
This interview is part of a research project looking at a recent mode of film exhibition practise in the UK – DIY Cinema. I am interviewing participants of DIY Cinema culture and previous film exhibition practices in order to draw conclusions about the roots of this culture, what constitutes this practise and why people are drawn to this approach to film exhibition.

Arrangements
The interview will be carried out in person, over the phone or via the internet; it will be digitally recorded. The recording as a digital file, will be stored on an external hard drive under the care of Christo Wallers. Any further use (e.g making interviews available over the internet) will only be done with permission of the interviewee.

Researchers
Christo Wallers will conduct the interview.

Confidentiality
Purely for University records, you must supply your name and address and sign the consent form.

Records
The Department of Film, Theatre & Television will retain the name and address of the interviewee, filled in on the Consent Form, for five years.

Ethical Review
This application has been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct.