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Imperfect Cinema: Making Futures?

Making Futures: The act of 'future-making.'

Making Futures: The future of 'making.'

Gathered here today are writers, artist makers, educators and policy makers, for whom this title must have an imperative resonance. For all of us this title should present a challenge to affirmative action, for others with a more reductivist imperative, this title should sit very uncomfortably indeed.

For Imperfect Cinema, the key questions emanating from the title of this conference are concerned with those external forces and pressures which shape the future of making, (and the practice of artist makers) and those external forces which shape future-making (how future generations of practitioners are being prepared for their own practice). For the film artist these questions are most certainly marked by an imperative resonance, and for cinema as craft in an expanded field, this resonance has become seismic. To succinctly frame key thematic areas of discussion in this paper I have prepared the following questions:

- What external forces mediate the act of 'future-making' and will these futures effectively sustain 'making' (and the practice of artist-makers)?
- What external forces mediate the future of 'making' and how might this impact the practice of artist-makers?

'In the realm of artistic life, there are more spectators now than at any other moment in history. This is the first stage in the abolition of "elites." The task currently at hand is to find out if the conditions which will enable spectators to transform themselves into agents — not merely more active spectators, but genuine co-authors — are beginning to exist. The task at hand is to ask ourselves whether art is really an activity restricted to specialists, whether it is, through extra-human design, the option of a chosen few or a possibility for everyone.'

Julio Garcia Espinosa (1969).

Jacques Ranciere has argued that the primary political concern should be the lack of recognition by those dominated in society. He considers that the responsibility of one who has influence, is not to talk on behalf of the masses, but rather to use their privileged position to facilitate the self-expression of new voices by opening up potential for new dialogues and knowledge exchange. The central political act of Imperfect Cinema is aesthetic, in that it produces a rearrangement of a social order, where new voices can be heard in a participatory context outside of the academic and industrial mainstreams of film culture. Imperfect Cinema's aim is to create a democratic and sustainable underground Cinema with the central aim of providing an alternative venue for participatory activity.

We take inspiration from Espinosa's Third Cinema call-to arms and Jacques Ranciere's fundamental theoretical framework *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Far more than just academic research, our aim is to create a dialectic venue in which the problems of both exclusivity and sustainability in mainstream film culture can be interrogated in open forum. As Dr Duncan Reekie, author of *'Subversion: The Definitive History of Underground Film'* (2007) has observed the short-form film has for too long been the exclusive preserve of an academicised elite, or alternatively viewed as merely a *juvenile* 'stepping stone' to a more easily commercially exploitable commodity, the feature film.

This is an incredibly revealing observation as it draws attention not only to the abundant inequalities existent within these mainstreams of film culture, but also to a political economy which positions the capital of short-form as either 'an exclusive preserve' or 'immature product.' Our aim is to find new means of exploring and articulating these problems, by bringing together a tactile network of film activists, and by adopting trans-disciplinarity as a means of critically reframing the short form film. Of course, issues of sustainability have arguably become part of the zeitgeist, but this issue is not only economic and environmental, it is also social. Positioning practice, criticality and form in a hierarchy which is potentially inaccessible to most does not bode well for the either the sustainability of our art form, or indeed for its chances of discovering new territories of thought and practice. Added to these concerns is an imaging industry which has become economically reliant on obsolescence; where the functional life of technology is far greater than its operational use. Just think how many television sets you have been told represent the latest in the televisual home viewing experience in the past decade alone. Where do they go when the new one arrives? For the film artist the concern is also one of paints and brushes. Sometimes we paint with Ektachrome and a Nizo brush, sometimes with an Alexa & binary. Of course what Arri won't tell you is the fact that one is not 'better' than another, just different. In the age of obsolescence, the work of the film artist is problematised by technological redundancy, and we are in real danger of losing many of our paints and brushes as the detritus of this economic model. This, argues Imperfect Cinema, provides us with a unique opportunity to become activists; to activate a dialogue through practice where the very use of that which has been cast aside by the new, might find new life and new context. For Imperfect Cinema the act of making is both a political and necessarily dialectic act, with which we can explore, confront, concur or criticise these and other issues existent in film culture and beyond.

Imperfect Cinema employs a DIY punk methodology to produce, disseminate and socialise a popular radical film practice. We outlined key aspects of this methodological approach in papers which we presented at the British Radical Screens, and the University of Plymouth 'Dirty Hands' symposia which argued for a shifting of the contextual lens through which 'punk' is to be understood in relation to our Imperfect Cinema project. For us the numerous coffee table tomes & hip ephemera of first wave punk are nothing more than a manifestation of an industrialised nostalgia, an anodyne window from which to view a repackaged revisionism devoid of context. Imperfect Cinema's methodology is instead firmly rooted in our own experiences as initiates of the comparatively underground DIY and anarchopunk movements, where collectivism did not result in aesthetic consensus, but rather provided a unique venue in which divergent ideas and insights were able to creatively collide. Anarchopunk did not aspire to create platforms, but rather sought to eradicate platforms in favour of open fora. In recontextualising punks' relationship to cinema we are able to activate key methodological techniques of this subculture to describe, position, interrogate, disseminate and socialize a dialogue which addresses key issues of concern to contemporary film culture.

Julio Garcia Espinosa's 1969 Third Cinema manifesto 'For an Imperfect Cinema' called for an end to filmmaking as an elitist preserve '*...our future filmmakers, will themselves be scientists, sociologists, physicians, economists, agricultural engineers, etc., without of course ceasing to be filmmakers.*' Our research aims to mobilise a film community by celebrating participatory activity, and by problematising both capital and the political economy of hierarchy construction.

As author Patricia Zimmerman has argued PROFESSIONALISM suggests the pursuit an objective in return for 'capital,' whereas 'AMATEURISM indicates the pursuit of an objective '*for the sheer love of it, as its' Latin root – AMARE- denotes... In amateurism as a social and historical phenomenon, work and free time are not locked into simple binary oppositions; rather the absence of one defines and imbricates the other.*' (Zimmerman, 1995, p1)

This statement does not reject out of hand the notion of 'professionalism' but rather problematises the hierarchical framing and valuing of both methods and *results*. Espinosa states, '*a future imperfect cinema is 'the opposite of a cinema principally dedicated to celebrating results (and) is no longer interested in quality of technique. It can be created equally well with a Mitchell or with an 8mm camera, in a studio or in a guerrilla camp in the middle of the jungle'*,

Our practice-based research is an interrogation of methodology rather than artefact and in that respect we are afforded relative freedom from value-laden assumptions and preconceptions of what exactly a film should be.

As Dr Brad Mehlenbacher has suggested in '*Multi-disciplinarity & 21st Century Communication Design*' (2009) one of the ultimate goals of **trans-disciplinarity** is the solving of significant *real world problems*, by interrogating the methodologies and practices of other disciplines so that these might provide new insights and opportunities in ones own discipline. In this respect one might argue that Imperfect Cinema is a trans-disciplinary practice as by recontextualising punk's relationship to cinema we are able to activate key methodological techniques of this subculture to describe, position, interrogate, disseminate and socialise a dialogue which addresses 'real world problems' within contemporary film culture.

Imperfect Cinema has always aimed to utilise easily understood cultural frameworks of reference to facilitate aesthetic ownership by our community. For example the challenge of the first Imperfect Cinema event framed the three-minute film thus; '*The Ramones created three-minute masterpieces and so could you!*' This statement works in a number of ways, firstly it references Julio Garcia Espinosa's (1969) call for a democratic and participatory cinema and the egalitarianism of Tony Moon's (1976) punk axiom: '*here's three chords: now form a band.*' This statement also serves to re-frame the short film by its comparison with the duration of a typical punk rock song. Just as these were arguably not viewed as being merely *juvenile* versions of more lengthy '*adult*' progressive rock songs, but as distinctly different forms, so short films can also be viewed as being distinctly different rather than inferior to the more commercially exploitable 'professionalised' format, the feature film. '*The Ramones created three-minute masterpieces and so could you*' is not only an egalitarian expression, but also as a means of repositioning the short-form film. For example, much of the available financial funding for short-form film work within its industrial-capitalist context situates short-form as a 'stepping stone' to feature film production (such as '*First Take Films*' '*Cinema Extreme*,' '*Digital Shorts*' and the recently defunct UK Film Council). The main source of funding for the non-commercial short form film arguably supports the work of '*artist filmmakers*' with awards available from Arts Council England & NEA etc.. and here obfuscation by design abounds! Try to find a guide to filling out an arts council application. A free and readily available guide. Try it. Try to ask someone recently in receipt of an arts council grant to help you with yours. Try it. Don't know anyone who has received one? Where next?

When considering this in terms of cultural capital, the future might appear somewhat bleak for the short-form film. Or does it? Capital by its very essence is a value-laden term, which is simply incompatible with a non-hierarchical ideology. Imperfect Cinema seeks to provide a venue for participatory activity in which short form film can be shared, regardless of its content, means of production, or intended output. By removing the 'capital' from the artifact, Imperfect Cinema facilitates free exchange of thought and practice as the actual emanation of our methodology.

So, when considering issues of exclusivity in contemporary film culture, how might the adoption of a trans-disciplinary practice methodology help to address this real world problem? More specifically could a dialectic convergence between DIY Punk and the Imperfect Cinema practice provide a venue for this discussion of this issue? Both DIY

punk and film practice arguably rely upon the vehicular aspect of media technologies to facilitate the description and dissemination of 'information.' Just as punk was arguably empowered by the economic necessity of re-appropriating of amateur and juvenile technologies, might an alternative film practice find similar means to express dissatisfaction with similarly alienating aspects of mainstream film culture?

In their 2009 paper '*Obsolescence: Uncovering Values in Technology Use*' Jina Huh, Mark S. Ackerman describe the inherent unsustainability of a technology industry which has become increasingly reliant upon 'planned obsolescence.' Indeed during the course of their discussion they make direct reference to a trend which is termed the 'disposable technology paradigm' which ascribes concern to contemporary patterns of technology use, where usage lifespan is much shorter than functional lifespan. As Huh and Ackerman point out, a technology industry which is then built upon planned obsolescence actually relies upon unsustainability. When considering the 'global problem' that this unsustainable pattern of usage potentially presents, how might one directly address this issue in a film practice? Indeed, as Huh & Ackerman suggest, could the notion that obsolescent technology is worthless be challenged by harnessing its potential for comment on the very real ecological problem which the disposable technology paradigm presents? Could the audio-visual aesthetics of economically 'redundant' technologies be re-contextualised as having transgressive potential, by harnessing their associations with juvenility, amateurism and technical necrosis? Just as the reactionary de-evolution of a set of 'professionalised' production values resulted in the low-fidelity aural aesthetic of anarchopunk, could a similarly positioned audio-visual production value system aesthetically re-arrange the industrialised / professionalised social order by using the detritus of the disposable technology paradigm?

Stacy Thompson (2004) suggests that: '*(W)hen punk passes into film, it demands of film that it offer up material traces of its production, that it open itself up to its audience as an "open" text by pointing out how it came to be.*' From this revealingly Marxist perspective could the crude black and white low-fidelity images of a Fisher Price Pixelvision toy video camera, or the horizontal jitter and focal imprecision of super-8 cameras actually provide thematically potent apparatus for the audio-visual detournement of the high definition digital technologies which represent the current techno-philic pinnacle of the industrialized tele-visual experience?

So what future for the film artist-maker? In her February 2011 article for the Guardian newspaper, artist-filmmaker Tacita Dean laments the obsolescence of analogue media and cites this as a direct result of the economic drivers of the contemporary imaging industry. Dean (2011) argues that obsolescence is having a '*devastating impact (on a) growing group of contemporary artists, the galleries and museums that show them and the national collections that own their work*' (2011). This observation not only serves to highlight the problems of non-commercial film-makers reliance on an economically driven imaging industry, but also has a certain epigraphic quality in its call for action:

'In the end, the decision is more cultural than fiscal, and needs to be taken away from the cinema industry. What we need in the UK is a specialist laboratory for conservation-quality 16mm and 35mm prints, possibly affiliated to the BFI. This needs to happen quickly, before the equipment, technology and experience is irreparably dismantled.'
(Dean, 2011)

Again, this a very revealing analysis. Rather than celebrating the technical innovation and experimentation of the contemporary imaging industries, Dean rather paints a bleak picture where economic competition has become a tangible threat to the sustainability of her own practice and most notably I feel, identifies its inadequacies in preserving *knowledge*. The gravity of her call for external intervention should similarly not be underestimated. In December 2010 the ubiquitous colour reversal film stock, Kodachrome, was finally consigned to history. So what I hear you say, things must

surely move on? In its' large still-image format, Kodachrome bore witness to countless iconic moments of the Twentieth Century, from the Nuremburg Rally, to the Apollo Moon landings. In its small moving-image format, Kodachrome bore witness to the intimate moments of familial life. In 2009 Kodak ceased its production of this stock, and despite an outcry, film artists were satisfied that at least there remained at least enough stock out there to sustain practice for some years to come. However, as with all silver-based imaging, this stock would require specialist processing in order to reveal its images. And this was the problem. When Kodak ceased production of Kodachrome, so it became economically unviable for laboratories to continue the specialist K14 processing for this stock. Despite a well-publicised campaign which called for the preservation of K14, this process was forever consigned to history when the final place in the world to offer this service (Dwayne's Photo in Kansas USA) finally and inevitably bowed to financial pressure and were forced to discontinue processing, and with no external agency willing to intervene, its K14 apparatus were sold as scrap.

Next time you are able, visit a car boot sale or a thrift store. Chances are that somewhere amongst the jumble you will find a super-8 camera. Look in the little window on the right panel side of the camera and chances are that you will see a little yellow sticker looking back at you. This is a cartridge of Kodachrome 40, the ubiquitous super-8 film stock...and guess what? You will never be able to reveal its colour images. Imagine the plight of an archeologist who is aware of a fossil hidden beneath a layer of rock, but is unable to reveal its image as the hammer and chisel have been 'uninvented.' That is the plight which now faces those film artists whose practice was focused around the orphan film; those films of unknown parentage. Put simply, the economic drivers of the imaging industry and amateur films' perceived lack of 'cultural capital' has rendered a substantial part of their practice obsolescent.

So what for the futures we are making? Our lives as artists and educators are coming under unprecedented attack from a political culture which valorises competition and economically exploitable results. How might these issues find a venue within this system, and indeed what about those without capital, those non-stakeholders? As previously stated, positioning practice, criticality and form in a hierarchy which is potentially inaccessible to most does not bode well for the either the sustainability of our art form, or for its chances of discovering new territories of thought and practice. Positioning education within an arena which valorises only economically exploitable results does not bode well for the sustainability of practice or knowledge.

Imperfect Cinema would not claim to have the answer, but rather an alternative. We believe that this alternative relies upon a return to amateurism as a valorous activity and the fostering of an underground network of activists dedicated to free and open knowledge exchange and preservation. We believe that if academia is indeed to engage meaningfully with these issues, at least at under-graduate level, it must first undertake a searching reassessment of its own political aesthetic and creation of cultural capital.

'Redefining the Underground involves a complicated unlocking and historical recontextualisation of terms. It requires not only a comprehensive investigation and reformulation of accepted critical typology, but also the exploration of cultural forms which would traditionally be considered inappropriate to the study of experimental film and video.'

(Duncan Reekie, 2007)

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