

# Coda

## Abstract

This brief chapter offers a final reflection on the future of film exhibition as a social practice, and returns to the ambiguous value of the ephemeral as a site of precarity but also of possibility and freedom.

**Key words:** ephemeral cinema, pop-up cinema, precarity

This project set out to investigate the proliferating forms of non-theatrical film exhibition that I saw blooming around me. It was an open-ended exploration of present events, seeking ways to match the spontaneity that characterized them. The method was simple: Attending as many events as I could, observing, sometimes taking part, sometimes asking questions. But behind the ephemerality of each film screening there was a tangled thread connecting it to the long histories of film exhibition. Historicizing the present was, at the time, a way of noticing continuity and change. Eventually, of course, the writing is no longer in the present: This is now a historical account of a particular time and place. As darkness gathers around us, this book tells of times of joy and hope, moments of kindness, playfulness and fun. It observes, through the pretext of film screenings, the resilience of utopian imagination, practical cooperation and a desire for the public, as much as a love of film that has endured through technological change.

I set out to find through Scottish examples what cinema meant as something people do. I was aware of a thriving and diverse non-theatrical cinema sector, sustained by people who devote so much time and effort to screen films to their communities, to strangers, to each other. While individual initiatives may appear relatively marginal and inconsequential, altogether they constitute an ecosystem that adapts to, and sometimes resists, the conditions of cultural (re)production in the current phase of British capitalism. This book has tried to capture glimpses of the simplest, most unassuming plants in this garden, as well as the showy ones, the

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deep-rooted ones, and the ones with tangled rhizomes. It does not pretend to say which of these efforts will leave a deeper mark in future histories, and which will disappear without another trace. Gathering these stories is a small (or minor) intervention into a historical record dominated by major narratives.

By looking at non-theatrical practices in relation to one another, this project contributes to the sector's own understanding of its own options and strategies. I draw connections between exhibitors and activities that would not often be considered together, making them visible to one another and to other researchers and policymakers. By historicizing contemporary practice, I do not intend to deny innovation, but to acknowledge that ephemeral and non-theatrical exhibition is out of its novelty phase. The examples of best practice, the conscious or implicit strategies used by exhibitors, and their reflections on the obstacles they face, contribute to a more nuanced view of a maturing sector. Future research might observe this in an international context. An international approach, connecting the growing research on non-theatrical exhibition around the world, could reveal other histories of DIY, other ways of doing independence and of existing alongside or against the mainstream. It would help rethink the relationships between institutions, communities, exhibitors and audiences.

At the start of this project, I intended to interrogate the 'relocation' of cinema as a potentially fractious displacement. My research showed that this relocation is fragmentary, and that it therefore demanded thinking about cinema in a non-essentialist but pragmatic way. These screening practices diverged from dominant exhibition through subtraction, but were still socially recognizable, often through the word 'cinema'. Therefore, studying them offered an opportunity to disaggregate those elements that can be subtracted, and to observe the new assemblages that become possible. Rather than a fixed object or a set of necessary characteristics, in minor non-theatrical exhibition practice there is an intensity that emerges through the temporary convergence of spatial configurations and social protocols. Each screening may have some elements and subtract others, but it resonates with what people have called cinema in the past. These operations of unmaking, assemblage and recognition tend to cluster around historical patterns of practice, and can be studied genealogically.

This allowed me to address a second question, regarding the relationship between past and present. I set out to document a particular moment in exhibition practice, within a limited geographical area. The types of

cinema activities I found in Scotland over that period were the anchor point for my historical research. Starting from the present and tracing the hybrid lineages that have fed into current practice, this selective archive research perhaps foregrounds continuities. However, there are important ruptures. For instance, easier access to films through online distribution, and the use of social media for event promotion, have lowered the barriers for people who want to put on a screening. However, the greater informality this allows clashes with slow-changing institutional models of licensing and funding. There is also greater porosity between 'high' and 'low' film cultures, so that it is not unusual to obtain institutional funding for popular or subcultural programming. Fandom and cult practices have also become much more mainstream, and the boundaries of 'specialized' film cultures have blurred, which has stimulated new forms of mixed creativity.

While recognizing the inventiveness and skill of cinephile screenings and richly intermedial live events, it was important not to lose sight of the many uses of film exhibition as a means to an end. People use social expectations associated with cinema to claim a portion of space and time in which they can be sociable in intentional ways. In that sense, the ephemerality of that space poses a contradiction. The pop-up is a precarious proposition as a business, as a line of work, as a strategy for cultural provision, and as a social space. It cannot replace the permanent, everyday spaces that have been stolen from neighbourhoods and towns; or the organized labour of workers that have been deemed unnecessary by neoliberalism. Indeed, it risks papering over those wounds with some gaudy branding. On the other hand, a temporary formation may materialize latent possibilities and open vistas of alternative futures. The question is then whether, or how, temporary formations can become sustainable and *sustaining*, rather than sources of further anxiety and insecurity, without solidifying into institutions.

Doing cinema as an intervention in the context of 'crisis ordinariness' is, sometimes, a form of cruel optimism, an attachment to a bad object; in others, it is an accommodation that normalizes precarity, and in others, it may yet be 'the noise of a new politics' (Berlant 2011, 262). This is almost never by design, but rather a function of the dynamic tension between the everyday and the eventful that gets played out in film exhibition. The extraordinary qualities of a film event may offer an escape into conciliatory fantasies, a jolt to the senses, a party, an opportunity for distinction, or a little distance from the mundane, amongst other things. Meanwhile, non-theatrical exhibition can also be grounded in the everyday, without

demanding a dedicated space or a separation from the social world, but instead rehearsing gestures of a new ordinary. However modest and short-lived these interventions may be, they shimmer with the possibility of different social relations and a fuller life. With these gestures and these small gifts, people make room for each other within the crumbling shell of this house, where any wall serves as a screen.

## Works cited

Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.