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Everything Imperfect

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The real history of cinema is invisible history: history of friends getting together, doing the thing they love.

– Jonas Mekas: Anti-100 years of cinema manifesto (1996)

Everything Imperfect is a forty-five-minute film that aimed to articulate my practice as research and was submitted alongside my PhD thesis as practice as research in 2016. While making the film, I ran a d.i.y film project called Imperfect Cinema: an open-access micro-cinema collective, which navigated the intersection between film and do-it-yourself punk. This film attempts to find a form in which to share some of the aesthetic, political and collaborative concerns of the research as well as documenting some of the participatory situations and experiences.

The principal aim of Imperfect Cinema was to create participatory venues for filmmakers, artists and the public, to come together to share and watch films and performances in non-traditional spaces. For producers, the idea was relatively simple: come to an Imperfect Cinema event with a film 3 minutes or less and we will screen it. This allowed anyone with a smart phone or digital camera the opportunity to make and screen a film in a social context with a live audience.

I aimed to tap into the subversive and emancipatory spirit of punk and d.i.y culture and use the research opportunity to build a film culture and community in Plymouth, UK. This interplay between the contested idea of punk and its inherent activism, with the democratic/accessible implications of digital audio- visual media, allowed for the 'dismantling the boundaries between disciplines' (Gall 2016: vi). However, it was the contextualizing of the project with Cuban theorist and filmmaker Julio García Espinosa and his 1969 classic text 'For an Imperfect Cinema' which gave the project its aesthetic and political framework. Espinosa critiqued cinematic quality and taste within developed cultures and industries. He imagined a committed future in which everyone could be a filmmaker – beyond Hollywood and European art-house cinema.

By 2009, when my research began, the acceleration of digital technology had made Espinosa's vision a possibility. Many people in the UK had access to a smart phone, which could capture video. Nevertheless, the aim of my research was not merely to shoot footage and upload and disseminate online. Whilst online social media platforms can be useful, the aim of Imperfect Cinema was encouraging new producers, participation and face-to-face interactions in social spaces alongside online networks. This was a key method to how I understand the value of imperfection as praxis. To develop community it needs to be more than just cultural production. The project aimed to share research, ideas and counterculture filmic histories alongside opening up spaces for makers. Above all else, it should announce possibilities.

Another key strand of the project was the intersection between research and d.i.y culture. The project sat between the institution and the subcultural- underground. In many ways, this is a contradictory relationship. Nonetheless, it provided the project a generative energy from which to begin thinking about how the academy and subcultural activity can overlap/interact. This created a largely non-hierarchical space: one, which was playful, silly and 'indisciplined' (Rancière 2007), as well as theorised and critical.

I call the definition of my model for participatory practice 'imperfect praxis' (Gall 2016). This model communicates the importance of socialising a participatory film practice, investigating methodologies and forms of participation – both in and beyond the screen – alongside research. This film supported this process and is, in many ways, an exploration of how to communicate the emancipatory qualities of imperfection as praxis.

Rancière states that for politicized art, the fundamental question is to explore the possibility of play. To discover how to produce forms for the presentation of objects, forms for the organization of spaces, that thwart expectations. The main enemy of artistic creativity as well as of political creativity is consensus – that is, inscription within given roles, possibilities, competences (Rancière 2007, 267).

This film documents and communicates the creative, playful and participatory experiences in the project. Moreover, I consider it to articulate a politics emerging out of the creation of non-hierarchical spaces, in which anyone can participate in film production or any other form of cultural activity.

The following text describes in more detail the films methods and aesthetics. It is taken from my PhD thesis: 'Towards a Cinema of Imperfect: Participatory Film as Research (2016).

Imperfect Diaries, B-Movies & Minor Cinema

At the beginning of the project, I had attempted to thoroughly document the process, filming in a Jonas Mekas style. I often asked friends and Imperfect Cinema contributors to record footage of the events, but as the project gathered momentum, this proved to be too difficult to consistently maintain, as my energy was better placed in instigating and facilitating in the moment, rather than siphoning energy into data collection. Additionally, a straightforward documentary didn't appeal to either my sensibilities or the frameworks and methodologies of the project. This is not to say that I stopped documenting entirely, but allowed it to happen more spontaneously.

The film comprised several different elements, edited together to form a fragmentary articulation of the ideas, experiences, practices and social connections that make visible some of the process and projects that made up my research. In doing so, it attempts to create an aesthetic that articulates what I now understand as Imperfect Praxis. I will now describe the varying elements that are featured within this film.

Woven through the film is footage from Imperfect Cinema micro-cinema events and diaristic extracts. This material provides a snapshot of the process, the projects and

politics of the research, as well scenes from my life, which acknowledge the autoethnographic nature of this research. I originally wanted to archive every film made for the Imperfect Cinema events, but this didn't seem to resonate with the direction that the practice was moving in. The social unique moments resisted digitalized reproduction in order to not attempt to quantify as a bureaucratic sense of participation.

The interviews that are included in the film were an attempt at ethnographic data collection, which I hoped would lead to knowledge on the participatory outcomes and implications of the project. I asked questions such as: What does the word punk mean to you? What does Imperfect Cinema mean to you? Can you reflect on your experiences and involvement in Imperfect Cinema? However, as formal interviews, they felt somewhat inauthentic. Most of these people were friends or acquaintances. It should be noted that these friendships developed through participation in Imperfect Cinema – where once they may have been familiar faces or names, now they were people who felt a connection to each other through their common experiential contributions to the Imperfect Cinema community. Nevertheless, when reviewing the footage, I felt uncomfortable and somewhat disinterested in attempting to evidence 'proof' of Imperfect Cinema's effect on production and connectivity. I also didn't want to inscribe participants with a fixed identity and position through their comments and my questions. The formal construct seemed at odds with the fluid and fluctuating nature of the project and begged to take on a less certain form. I therefore used the footage to create a visual and aural abstraction, which felt more authentic than simply including articulate voices – what was said was less important than the fact that there was something to say.

While filming the interviews, I proposed that we brainstorm towards developing a collective and participatory 'imperfect film'. I hung large pieces of paper on the wall where we scribbled down the ideas that were developed. This process led to the creation of the 'imperfect B-movie'. It was shot over a weekend, and all Imperfect Cinema participants, attendees, or anyone else who might be interested was invited to take part.

The film itself had a loose structure that was developed through informal discussion and the process of improvisation. The main plot-points were: androids and possibly aliens were coming to Plymouth; an American android/alien expert was in Plymouth to witness and document the event with a small film crew; an android bounty hunter was also trying to intercept and ultimately kill the androids; a shaman was present to help facilitate the android's ceremony; and general chaos ensues. This plot and the characters involved were essentially made up on the spot. Locations were scouted moments before the scenes were shot. Props and costumes were brought by participants and selected by the actors.

One of the main locations for the shoot was a tiny local and free music festival, Freedom Fields Festival that happened to be taking place in a local park on the weekend of the shoot, where my band was also performing. We naturally felt that this would be an excellent environment to shoot the climactic finale scenes for the film. This location was also born out of necessity, as I had to be there to perform. The chaotic and carnival atmosphere of the event mirrored that of the whole film production – actors intermingled with the public and so the public invariably became

woven into the narrative. While some of the scenes in the film were slightly planned out in advance, the scenes shot at the festival were nearly entirely improvised.

I wanted to use some of the ideas developed by Jean Rouch and his concept of a participatory cinema, in which he would invite the participants in his ethno- fiction films, such as Moi, un noir (1958) and Les Maitres Fous (1955), to contribute in all aspects of the production, blurring the division between drama and fiction, crew and subject. I invited all the participants in the B- movie to my flat to review footage and give feedback. This phase of production was more social than practically useful in terms of the construction of the piece. However, I received feedback from many participants, saying that the social element of the process and opportunity to be involved was the most important aspect of the project for them. Naturally, editing the footage into a cohesive film was challenging, grabbling with the collective, improvisational dimension of the production.

Calling this film a 'B-movie' finds a synergy with punk, No Wave cinema and the notion of the 'minority' 'becoming-minor' (Deleuze-Guattari 1986). This implies an approach against the majority, in this case dominate cinema, as an ethical action.

Working against the major, the dominate cultural-creative industries or what is expected to be 'legitimate' as academic film practice, allows the maker, researcher or activist, to celebrate the small. These are the everyday, the experiences of knowing through people and 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi 1966, 4) without attempting to make something that fits into a larger culture dominated by capitalist modes of production.

Within contemporary film, technical production values are both becoming more accessible and expected. Celebrating the minor, the silly, the 'low' form is not just an excuse to justify a film with 'poor' production values. In this context it is framed within Espinosa's ideas on an 'imperfect cinema' being a popular cinema made for and by the people.

It was important for me to include text in Everything Imperfect because I wanted to share some of the knowledge that had informed the project. My writing on and quotes from theorists like Rancière, Espinosa and filmmaker Jonas Mekas are overlaid, at times, without lingering long enough to fully read the content. The film was working as a site for experimentation, dissensus, and clashes of the different facets of my research. Imprints of the production methods are apparent and important to the work, in attempting to unite the idea of imperfection with form.

The text is difficult to read, using the language as a sensory tactic: words flashing up, dense sentences, provocative thoughts on cinema and art. It was in some ways inspired through conversations with friends, and the collective 'Art & Language', emerging out of the UK in the late 1960s. They considered both the making and talking about art to be interwoven in the process.

The process of editing and putting a piece of work together that attempted to articulate Imperfect Praxis, led me to look to music, rather than film, as an editing guide. Music, to me, holds limitless possibilities to convey texture, mood and meaning. At the onset of the project, an aim was to create a space where radical popular film can merge with experimental approaches to cinema. So, to reflect that, rather than being contained by

traditional film language, I turned to the open and improvisational processes of making music. Editing this film felt more like working through a new song at band practice, than an organised attempt to tell a story with a start, middle and end. I relied largely on intuition and tacit knowledge – 'we can know more than we can tell' (Polanyi 1966, 4) – and an 'imperfect aesthetic' to shape the work.

The main challenge of this project was to illustrate the scope of my practice as research with one artefact. The construction of Everything Imperfect, demonstrated to me that it would be impossible to translate the live events into a singular piece of work, as so much of the research occurred in a particular time and place. However, through the linkage of 'action' and practice in the social context, theoretical framing with reflection and experimentation – I found a form; articulating imperfect aesthetics at work as being: collective, experiential, playful, amateur and personal.

Above all else, the connection of these ideas, through creative and social participatory interactions, created emancipatory possibilities and situations. It is both a personal expression and an interrogation of technique. The reflection and writing on this piece of work and the process of making it, has led me to consider how my approach to music, especially at the start, bears close resemblance to the making of this film.

The multiplicity of content in this work poses the question of how to document and verify knowledge and value through participatory practice. The methodological probing of 'value' and its relationship to participatory practice embraces uncertainty and 'unfixed' processes, situated within social spaces, and supports the blurring/disrupting of disciplinary division. This praxis supports a non-hierarchical process, considering the lines separating the idea of the 'expert', or 'professional', by affirming the 'amateur'. This understanding is informed by its punk context, in which often the space between performer and spectator is contested.

Additionally, the arguments, reflections and ideas of how to capture 'reality', 'truth' and 'experience' in moving image culture has been a feature of documentary filmmakers and theorist since film was invented. The Lumière brothers, Dziga Vertov and Robert Flaherty as well as many others, in the early twentieth century, all explored and considered how reality could be captured and evoked through film. However, in film language, the framing and editing would always subvert the live experience, life unfolding in time and space – the unique moments of the everyday. Even something like a 24-hour reality show such as Big Brother has a producer/editors constructing its narrative. I came to understand that I should look towards another principle – using something of the Soviet theorists of the 1920s and the Kino- Eye, to consider how clashes, collusions, and aesthetics could provoke other 'imperfect' meanings.

Ultimately, Everything Imperfect reflects a moment in time, but does not fully capture it; celebrating the playful interactions, creativity, performance and collective artistic production.

Peer Review 1 (Dean Keep)

Everything is imperfect, but within this visual melange of post-cinematic chaos there are hints of rebellious pleasure seeking as Gall challenges the cinematocracy with all the fury of a punk guitarist spitting chards of image and sound into an unsuspecting crowd. Rather than pay homage to the perfection of cinema, this film revels in all its imperfect glory. What you get is a gluttonous feast of shakey camera, soft focus, and jump cuts that transform the screen space into a narrative bricolage; the visuals tearing away from each other, as if held together only by rusty safety pins. Kick the 'rule of thirds' to the kerb and turn composition into a game of chance.

Like the offspring of Jarman's punk classic Jubilee (1978) and Warhol's subversive 1960's experimental cinema, Gall's film lurches like a monster truck, crushing preconceived notions of elitist cinema. At time self-consciously anarchic, other times playful with a good measure of acerbic wit, Gall tips the narrative on its head, cross-cutting between meta and fiction, art and academia. Shades of Tsukerman's avant-garde sci-fi Liquid Sky (1982), a dystopic ode to class and culture, appear to be lurking in the corners of a sub-plot that slices through this 46-minute film. The alien character in this film seems an apt metaphor for such experimental fare that exists outside of the professional practices associated with the mainstream film industry.

Tripping from moment to moment, Gall's film gives us insight into the machinations of the anti-film, as he toys with traditional and experimental narratives, highlighting the opaque juxtapositions that shape and destroy cinematic languages in a digital era where greater access to filmmaking equipment provides opportunities to forge new visual forms that challenge the status quo. There is nothing 'proper' here, it's like Gall put Bazin's Surrealist Manifesto, Kuleshov's montage experiment and the Sex Pistols in a mix-master and served the lot raw.

Quotes from film theorists Mekos and Ranciere serve to remind the audience that the anti-film is not just an aesthetic, it is a stand against the established vocabulary of cinema, as well as its cultural gatekeepers. And although Gall may be rejecting notions of a 'pure cinema', it's perhaps difficult to argue that a rejection of cinematic aesthetics and conventions is a prerequisite or catalyst for the creation of a cinema of equality. Perhaps in a similar way that Vertov searched for a Kino Pravda (Film Truth), I believe that Gall is also looking for answers; using the film medium to situate and interrogate both the tropes, and mythology of cinema.

This film is not for the faint hearted, but punk never was. In an age where video has become a pervasive mode of communication, the rule book is in the bin and traditional cinema's crown is now looking a little tarnished. A convergence culture has ushered in a new breed of filmmaker, Gall is an opportunist exploiting it all and sticking a finger up at the establishment. Punks not dead, it now lives in academia.

Peer Review 2 (Kim Munro)

As I'm watching Allister Gall's Everything Imperfect, I am reminded that while I am the audience, I am also not really the audience. I am watching it at home in Melbourne on my laptop, distant from the world and material captured and rendered on screen. This film enacts and represents the spirit of d.i.y. aesthetics, punk sensibilities and participatory practices in a community in Plymouth. The intended

audience are the makers and viceversa. But I watch with the twin considerations of bearing its practiceresearch intentions in mind, while also unavoidably aware of my own desire as an audience: to be engaged aesthetically, conceptually and philosophically. While he film successfully exposes the ideas and spirit of the research as practice, as a text that communicates and performs research to an audience, there are moments that could be further interrogated and critiqued.

I come to the film after reading the accompanying text which frames the work and explicates the aims of the research. This guides how I view the film and its purpose. Gall sets out a binary of gatekeepers of film production those who make and those who are the audience, stating the only way to disrupt this binary is to make your own films. In this sense Everything Imperfect certainly captures some of the spirit of Ranciere, whom Gall references often in the written text and the film. Watching the film I am reminded of Ranciere's idea of the "emancipated spectator" who is transformed from the static and ignorant passive position to one who engages in action. There are also references to participatory and relational art practices, diaristic filmmaking and BGrade collaborative filmmaking.

Everything Imperfect uses a variety of filmic devices such as split screens to depict multiple perspectives as well as examples from some of the productions made during the research. These along with the theoretical references as text on screen and interviews that illuminate the ideas and objectives are successful components of the film. The anti aestheticness of this film draws on Espinosa's concept of Imperfect Cinema written in 1979. This also presents contentions and tensions in the work about how this translates to the idea of the amateur and aesthetics in light of contemporary means of production. The collapsing of distinctions between professional makers, amateur and vernacular practices and audiences and users present a filmmaking landscape where low and no budget filmmaking can still contain slick production values. With this in mind, I question whether the d.i.y. aesthetic of poor sound and loose camera work in Imperfect Cinema are reflective of a nostalgic notion of amateurism. Is the lofi shaky camera actually indicative of the presentday amateur given the dominance of quite sophisticated filming technologies and skills available to amateurs. Although frequent shaky camera work is supported by a quote form Jonas Mekas who claims it is beautiful as it hasn't been coopted for commercial interests, this argument also falls back on easy binaries between assumptions of professional and d.i.y. aesthetics. I think more could be done within the film to explore this relationship and the notion of audience.

Everything Imperfect raises some interesting questions about the role of film as research. Is the film in itself actually research or does it function as documentation of the research? There is a slippage in the work between these two positions. This question speaks to some of the messy terrain of creative practice as research. Everything Imperfect works most successfully as a parallel work to the written text which I feel is important in understanding the research aims. The film then functions as a collection of fragments, moments, experiments and forays into participatory film practices and the specific location and culture that produced this.