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Towards a Cinema of Imperfection: Participatory Film as Research

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Plymouth University

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TOWARDS A CINEMA OF IMPERFECTION

Participatory Film as Research

Allister Thomas Gall

A thesis submitted to Plymouth University in partial fulfilment of the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Plymouth University

April 2016

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)

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Sub-Committee.

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Date:

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SCREENINGS

2015 Home at the Native Makers Festival, Devonport Guildhall

2015 Tamar at the Plymouth Fringe Festival, Jill Craegie Cinema 2015 Tamar at the Plymouth Art Centre Cinema

2014 Tamar commissioned & screened at the Devonport Playhouse. ‘All About the River Film Festival’ & ‘River Tamar Project’

2013 Everything Imperfect commissioned by Peninsular Arts

2013 Everything Imperfect & Home. Jill Craegie Cinema, Plymouth University Visions of a Big Dream at Goldsmith & Exploding Cinema: Besides the Screen 2012 Imperfect Cinema One Minute at the Plymouth Art Centre

2011 Imperfect Cinema micro-cinema at the Interstate Gallery in Brooklyn, NYC 2011 Need at the Lift-Off International Film Festival

2009 Deadly is the Doll at the View From Here Film Festival

PAPERS & PUBLICATIONS

2015 KISMIF Conference, Porto: ‘Imperfect Practices: Film, Punk and Collectivity’

2015 Plymouth University, Inclusive Practice: ‘The Problems of Assessment in Media Arts’

2014 The Guardian: ‘D.I.Y Culture, how to do it yourself’

2013 Plymouth University, ‘Is it TV? Or Something Else?: ‘Online and Local Television Networks: A new pedagogy for a changing media’

2013 Exeter University, QERN: ‘Interplay(ing): Building Democratic Approaches to Film’

2013 Roehampton University Theorising Practice, Practicing Theory: ‘For An Imperfect Practice’

2012 Avanca Cinema: Arts and Communication, ‘(Re)Framing Punk Cinema’ 2012 NECS Cinema and Media Practice International Conference, Prague: ‘Imperfect Makes Practice’

2012 Avanca Cinema Conference, Portugal: 'Reviewing Punk Cinema'

2012 Making Futures International Conference: 'Imperfect Cinema: Making Futures?'

2012 Dirty Hands Symposium: 'Imperfect Cinema; Participation, Micro-Cinema & DIY Punk'

2011 One Plus One Filmmakers Journal, in collaboration with Dan Paolantonio

2011 Requiem///102 Project with Nicolas Rombes, author of New Punk Cinema

2010 British Radical Screens Symposium: 'Towards an Imperfect Cinema'

IMPERFECT CINEMA PROJECT

2015 Native Makers & Plymouth Fringe Festival: Collaboration with Imperfect Orchestra

2014 Workshop Facilitator for All About the River Film Festival: The Imperfect Cine Train

Directed and Produced: Into the Future, Widening Participation Plymouth University

Directed and produced film project for Devon Youth: 1 Minute, 4 Stories, 1 Life
Produced collaborative film project with the Autism Group/ Plymouth University

2011/2012: Co-workshop facilitator and co-producer of collaborative films: SOUNDkitchen & Drunk in Hell at the Supersonic Festival, Birmingham Imperfect Cinema film workshop, Hands-on, Brixham

Imperfect Cinema, Micro-Cinema events: 2010 – 2015

ABSTRACT

This PhD is a practice as research interrogation of the emancipatory potential of the idea of imperfection. It is framed around the key leading question: ‘How can the generation of imperfect praxis – cultural production in and through social dialogues challenging notions of technical expertise – affirm emancipatory value in a film practice? The thesis documents the development of a participatory film practice, operating in-between d.i.y subcultural activity and practice as research. The film component of the submission engages with the problems involved in representing and authenticating the collective dimension of participatory filmmaking.

The emancipatory potential of imperfection has been explored via a broad range of interdisciplinary participatory practices. The core project is *Imperfect Cinema*, an open-access micro-cinema collective, which navigated the intersection between film and do-it-yourself punk. This interplay between the contested idea of punk and its inherent activism, with the democratic/accessible implications of audio-visual media, is seen as an exemplary site for examining, and dismantling the boundaries between disciplines. In this sense, the nature of the work can be seen as being ‘in-disciplinary’ (Rancière 2008), requiring a mobility and responsiveness to the emergence of contemporary participatory and collaborative processes.

The concept of imperfection draws from punk as a set of d.i.y methodological practices and is key to understanding and developing participatory cinema. Imperfection, as a generative conceptual tool, can be described as incorporating and examining methods ‘against methods’ (Feyerabend 1988) in order to acknowledge the uncertainty and fluidity of participatory work. This forms my understanding of what I term imperfect praxis. This praxis requires the emancipatory potential of imperfection to be easily communicable and accessible to different kinds of participants. The emergence of imperfect praxis developed out of collective social spaces where a kind of knowledge can be explored through collaborative and participatory interactions and dialogues, situated and understood through historical, contextual, personal and shared experiences. This thesis consequently represents a ‘moment in time’ in my methodological development, providing me with the structure to identify and disseminate the practice as research.

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INTRODUCTION

This PhD thesis is an interrogation of the potential of imperfection as an emancipatory idea, working with film/digital video as a participatory practice. The practice explored the possibilities of generating open-access ‘cinema situations’ (Schober 2013, 4), navigating the interface between different forms and formats of filmmaking and cultural production in and through collective-social dialogues. This aimed to provide a venue for ‘cinema-makers’ - *a cinema of imperfection*. This understanding of imperfection has emerged from a variety of ‘indisciplinary’ (Rancière 2008) practices, dependent on the situations and people involved. The concept of imperfection draws from punk as a set of d.i.y methodological practices and is seen as being key for understanding and developing a participatory cinema.

The principle investigation was a micro-cinema practice called *Imperfect Cinema*, incorporating and expanding on the work already developed by Julio García Espinosa, outlined in his essay *For an Imperfect Cinema* (1969). This project announced the possibility of imperfection as a conceptual frame, in which filmmaking, dialogues and ideas could be shared in open, social forums, rather than being solely mediated on online platforms. This thesis and the three films included in my submission - *Everything Imperfect* (2013), *Home* (2013), and *Tamar* (2014) - communicate these d.i.y processes as a form of ‘indisciplinary’ (Rancière 2008), where knowledge develops out of a collective space. This interplay or intersection between film as research, theory, practice, d.i.y punk subculture and academic research, is named as imperfect praxis, and can be seen as my contribution to knowledge.

Imperfect praxis is built around autobiographical and participatory methodologies, supported by the interplay between subcultural activity and the academy. This in-between-interdisciplinary-approach provided a fertile ground for testing and developing research frameworks and practice. Challenging the notion of quality and its relationship to participatory activity - through the lens of imperfection - does important knowledge

work in artistic participatory research. It provides venues for collective activity and experiences as well as considering its relationship to aesthetics and technologies.

Structure of Thesis

This introduction aims to provide the reader with a general overview of the sections contained within the written theses as well as introduce the fundamental autobiographical and theoretical contextual foundations of the practice as research. Digital technology's effect on cinema will be briefly discussed in order to frame the research in time and place, focusing on the particular effect that technology has had on participation. The research's contribution to knowledge, imperfect praxis, will be described further, allowing the reader to visualise the full trajectory of the project as contextual and methodological pathways are described in the body of the thesis.

Chapter one, the *Contextual Review*, provides a broad background from which to better understand the aims of the practice. The chapter begins with an analysis of Third Cinema, linking aesthetic and political positions relating to film and cultural resistance, whilst at the same time, acknowledging that my research occupies a different context. This leads to a selective mapping of the contemporary media landscape. I analyse the digital 'poor image' (Steyerl 2012, 31), 'torrent culture' (Priestman 2015) and its relationship to the idea of imperfection. Additionally, I reflect on Friedrich Kittler's (1999) ideas relating to media materialism and its control over our cultural production and 'participation' in a number of different contexts (Jenkins-Rickman, 1993), (Bishop, 2012), (Bourriaud, 2002). These critical media and art dialogues are examined through a contemporary and historical lens, including The Situationist International (1959 – 1972), the avant-garde idea of deskilling and the actionable methodological use of d.i.y punk in my practice and the development of *imperfect praxis*. Finally, the chapter considers how we perceive cinema, through a historical and contextual synthesis with other filmmaking activity relevant to my practice, noting some tensions between value and legitimacy.

The second chapter, *Methodologies and Methods*, will introduce the development of imperfect praxis via a discussion of my methodologies and methods. The aim of this

chapter is to communicate how imperfect praxis required a theoretical framework in order to develop strategies for action and implementation. The discussion of my methodologies elaborates on these theoretical frameworks and the methods that subsequently emerged. Imperfection is a conceptual notion that expanded in meaning and potential as the research and practice progressed, opening up spaces that did not identify with a singular activity. I use autobiographical and anecdotal description and perspective to chart the implementation of methodologies, providing a clear presentation of the shape that the practice as research took and its evolution over the years.

The third chapter, *Film as Research*, is an analysis of my own film practice as research. It explores some of the issues with representing imperfection, participation and distinct experiences. *Everything Imperfect* (2013), *Home* (2013) and *Tamar* (2014) – are examples of my personal cinematic outputs of my methodologies. *Everything Imperfect* is an attempt to unite the objectives of the practice with film aesthetics and form, using the idea of imperfection to challenge notions of traditional documentation. *Home* merges musical collaborations with moving images, and subcultures with academia. It is a screen/sound hybrid, intended to be seen and experienced live, scored and performed by a group of local alternative musicians in d.i.y bands and music scenes. *Tamar* expanded this idea, incorporating workshops with school-children and other members of *Imperfect Cinema*, and resulted in the musicians developing into their own autonomous project: Imperfect Orchestra.

The thesis conclusion reflects on the practice as research process, the formation of imperfect praxis, and how it can be expanded upon in the future by others as a model for participatory film or any other cultural production. This includes some ideas on my future work and further reflections on imperfect praxis - its limitations, contradictions and how the interplay between subcultural/underground activities can feed back into the academy and vice versa.

Setting the Scene

Before delving into the academic, it is important to provide some autobiographical and explanatory context that led directly to and strongly influenced this research. Prior to undertaking my Masters in Research (MRes) degree in 2008 - exploring punk through a film and video practice - I was the vocalist in a punk rock band, *Damerels*. *Damerels* started in 2005 and was my first foray into a 'music scene'. Though untrained in music, I was undeterred and my participation in bands and music continue today, as an important part of my artistic, social and intellectual life.

The 'no expert' ethos of punk rock music gave me permission to participate despite my lack of technical virtuosity. This experience formed the foundation of my research, and led to the consideration of punk as an emancipatory idea. I then identified the particular qualities of punk, which made it such a liberating platform, distilling them further into the concept of imperfection, which can be applied to many forms of cultural production.

It should be noted that punk has multiple, at times, contested and paradoxical meanings. Lead singer of *The Fall*, Mark E. Smith, saw punk as a 'quick statement' (Smith 2009, 42). However, I was and am more interested in its emancipatory, d.i.y principles - anyone can do it, seeing it as a renewable, interdisciplinary 'movable target' (Nguyen & Nikpour, 2013).

Like punk, the term d.i.y has multiple connotations. 'Do it yourself' can be applied to limitless pursuits. d.i.y's relationship with punk rock underpinned its meaning with political and aesthetic implications. The perception of the d.i.y (do- it-yourself) ethos today - its aesthetics, processes and cultural political resistance - has been drastically shifted by the rise of digital technology. The accessibility of audio-visual media, peer-to-peer skill sharing sites and 'social media' make 'doing' and 'sharing' online easy. This thesis refers to the punk spirit of d.i.y: putting the intentions of some of these ideas into actions; embracing the amateur and championing the significance of human interaction and the development of artistic/cultural communities.

In my first paper *Towards a Radical Film Practice*, presented at the British radical screens symposium in 2010 before the first *Imperfect Cinema* event, I proposed that the research would aim to shift the contextual lens through which punk is to be understood, in relation to filmmaking and the *Imperfect Cinema* project, by activating key methodological techniques of d.i.y punk. I wrote how the project would ‘investigate the egalitarian aspects of digital filmmaking as a tool for participatory production, exploring films not only as aesthetic objects, but as investigatory tools for socialising do-it-yourself practice, encouraging participation and advocating non-virtuosity’ (Gall 2010).

The definition of punk has been further investigated through the collaborative actions documented in this PhD. The practice-led enquiry provided opportunities for critical reflection in order to unpick d.i.y punk’s value. The experiential aspect of the research reinforced how I understand punk’s usefulness as an elastic term, with political and aesthetic foundations. When one speaks, shouts, or even sings, however shrill or dissonant, like an elastic band, punk can be used as a slingshot to project people forward into action, or into new situations and spaces - physically, artistically or personally. Punk was instrumental in how I implemented this practice as research and have come to understand *Imperfect Cinema*. Punks’ valorisation of imperfection, against the need for technical virtuosity to take part in culture-making, continues to stretch and expand; whilst also, as Margaret Tait writes in her poem *Elasticity*, retaining the potential to ‘spring back to the original shape’ (2004, 118). Punk can therefore be reused, recontextualised and renewed as a political and aesthetic vehicle.

The central political act of *imperfect cinema* is aesthetic, in that it produces a rearrangement of a social order, where new voices and bodies previously unseen can be heard in a participatory context outside of the academicised-experimental and capitalist-consumerist mainstreams of film culture (Gall-Paolantonio 2011).

In *Imperfect Cinema*, participants screen work free of aesthetic consensus or quality control. Everyone could have a space for self-representation and aesthetic experimentation.

Theoretical Frameworks – Politics & Aesthetics

Alongside my involvement in punk music, another important foundation of the research is an understanding of Jacques Rancière's connection between politics and aesthetics. Rancière suggests that politics is inherently an aesthetic activity - what we perceive is determined by who, what and how we encounter the world. Emancipatory activity is inherently political because it brings new people into the frame, making them visible. This understanding of the connection between politics and aesthetics provided me with starting point to consider how punk could be explored as a renewable idea, and not remain overtly political in a traditional sense.

This theoretical framing provided me with the basis to begin considering how new forms of participatory film and cultural production could be political in a way that avoids aesthetic consensus; to structure an understanding of politics and filmmaking through actions investigating what can constitute a community of cinema-makers. The breaking of traditions, in terms of how we understand and find meaning from a concept such as cinema, is of course not a new way of thinking about film as an art form. But punk forcefully articulated a kind of rupturing that took place in a popular space in a particularly persuasive, easily understood way that the avant-garde previously didn't.

Therefore, punks' critical spirit, along with Rancière's notion of politics- aesthetics, challenged me to review an understanding of cinema, alongside its inherent democratic anyone-can-do-it principles. Rather than viewing 'cinema' as a building, a space where you pay money to see high production narrative feature films, could we devise and create our own micro-cinema settings and, in doing so, attempt to move away from the standardised industrial, commercial and dominant model, and instead towards building a cinema of imperfection from which discourse, action and alternatives to mainstream film culture could enable cinema-makers to emerge?

Finding political importance in the idea of amateurism draws from Rancière's notion of 'the distribution of the sensible' (2004). 'The distribution of the sensible' reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the

time and space in which this activity is performed (Rancière 2004, 13). As stated, Rancière understands aesthetics and politics as being connected through commonality with how we perceive the world – we can think and therefore we are all equal. This theoretical framing resulted in a series of methods and ‘ways of doing and making’ (Rancière 2004, 13), making visible ‘what is common to the community’ (Rancière 2004, 23), as a form of inviting shared actions and experiences to produce this knowledge.

The ‘sensible’, as defined by Rancière, is something common and perceptible to us all. If we shift the focus away from amateurism being seen as less than professional, and instead disaffirm hierarchies, an artistic practice can intervene in the spaces that reinforce the idea of inequality, through a recontextualisation of our understanding of amateurism. Critical to Rancière’s framework is the negation of the need to address inequality. This type of work would highlight existing hierarchical structures, and in doing so, create further divisions between who can participate in cultural activity.

A Cinema of Imperfection

The common understanding of cinema is a prime example of hierarchical structures within cultural activity. Cinema can be understood as the art of moving images, but is popularly associated with the *film* industry, and in the UK especially, the buildings in which we pay to see the ‘movies’. The majority of films are now made, paradoxically, with digital technologies. 35mm film is no longer the preserve of cinematic aesthetic quality (Steyerl 2012, 33). Audio-visual practices, constantly circulating our vision and engaging us, even peripherally, uploaded and shared on ‘social media’ platforms, are visible, abundant and accessible. Home-movies, music videos, GIFs and cinematic cut-ups are downloaded, ripped and distributed. The rapid development, ubiquity and accessibility of digital technology have changed how films are made, who can make them, and how they are seen. Our social and participatory cinematic possibilities and opportunities are constantly evolving.

The terms ‘social’ and ‘participatory media’ are often associated with commercial online platforms. Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, etc., mediate and disseminate media

content online. These are forms of accessible ‘participatory culture’ according to Henry Jenkins, with ‘relatively low barriers’, something in and through ‘fandom’, ‘artistic expression’, ‘mass media’, ‘civic engagement’, ‘strong support for creating and sharing creations’, ‘mentorship’ and ‘affiliations’ amongst others (Jenkins, 2009). On the other hand, ‘participatory art projects’ (Bishop 2004, 2012), in the social field, suggest multiple meanings. For Claire Bishop, participatory processes in a contemporary art context ‘has the capacity to communicate on two levels – to participants and to spectators – the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew’ (Bishop 2012, 284).

Rather than focusing and relying on the new virtual possibilities of digital and web-based technology and outlets, social and participatory processes have been understood in this research as being sourced via direct face-to-face interaction within the living everyday context. This allowed me to consider how people arrive at, experience and take part in participatory film practice. The cinema was used as a common, cultural instigator, rooted in everyday popular spaces, acting as an instigator for making, seeing and discussion, through dialectic aesthetic discourse. The research was allowed to work through its contemporary meaning in a public space. The idea of an *Imperfect Cinema* is posited as a common medium, supporting social interactions, dialogues and practice.

Imperfect Praxis

It is the position of this thesis that practice (action) and reflection (theory) must operate within our direct social experiences in order to generate praxis. Imperfection in action (seen through the projects and films undertaken) and the critical and contextual analysis of ‘imperfection’ (seen through this thesis), complement each other through affirmation of value in the social interactions and incited experiences. The ideas in action developed through sharing the research and practice as a common idea, to be renewed, developed and expanded. Therefore, imperfect praxis can be seen as incorporating the following two positions:

a. Imperfect praxis requires that the idea of ‘imperfection’ should be easily communicable. This is not straightforward: it means more than simply inviting people to produce and exhibit film work in whatever form they want, but cannot be an extended lecture on the history and theory of avant-gardism either. It has to be a contested negotiated space that has a focus and is engaging. This has been the challenge involved in developing an imperfect praxis.

b. ‘Imperfection’ is explored for its emancipatory potential. Imperfection in Cinema is not reproduced as a style, but as a series of methods. It is affirmed as something that is essentially repeatable and held as common property. It is not something that has ‘been done’; it is something that always remains to be done. Imperfect praxis affirms that value, in film or any other kind of cultural production. It is something that is produced in and through social dialogue.

I have situated myself between two limitations: a limitation of subcultural discourse, occurring in the moment, that can be without history, and an academic discourse that becomes strangely removed from the emancipatory dimension of popular discourse. The interaction between these two positions has provided the project with an interesting juxtaposition to address: how to popularise an academic practice, derived from avant-garde practices and d.i.y ideas, in a social context, which easily communicates these ideas in order to support its emancipatory aims? One of the understandings derived from the research is an affirmation of value in and through face-to-face social interactions as a means towards building and sharing collective and collaborative experiences.

CHAPTER ONE – CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

Chapter one set the stage for the practice as research. I explained how the project emerged out of my experiences in a d.i.y punk rock scene, which led to my preliminary work in my practice-led MRes. These experiences laid the foundation for this PhD thesis, developing an experiential and theoretical lens through which to understand and view imperfection as an emancipatory concept. This approach can be synthesised and contextualised with a number of interdisciplinary film, arts and media practices from the 20th century. This chapter is therefore split into three thematic sections, of varying philosophical, theoretical, and practical approaches to resistant, underground, avant-garde and participatory culture. I will discuss how these diverse cultural ideas are relevant to my practice as research in order to situate the political-aesthetic aims of the film practice within a broader historical framework. This reinforces the consideration of ‘imperfection’ as a renewable notion, one that finds value in reintroduced approaches to participatory processes and collective experiences.

The first section, PART ONE – *Developing a Third Cinema* context, is an overview of Third Cinema, discussing some of the political and aesthetic theories. More specifically, it will provide a close analysis of Julio García Espinosa’s 1969 text, *For an Imperfect Cinema*. This gives a sense of the original context of Espinosa’s ideas relating to what ‘imperfect cinema’ could mean, but also allows for a broader discussion of ideas relevant to imperfection and cultural artistic activity. This reading will underline how this research understands the original context of Third Cinema by acknowledging their ideas to be quite different from the one my practice occupies. Nonetheless, the interesting issue here is how the constellation of ideas around ‘imperfection’ returns in different ways and in subsequent debates. The frame is no longer a struggle against imperialism as it was for Third Cinema. It embraces a broader context.

PART TWO – *Poor Images, Participation and Punk* - maps some contemporary and historical discussions relevant to imperfection, aesthetics and cultural resistance, to examine the changed technological context. I draw from Hito Steyerl's (2012) work *Wretched of the Screen* and reflect on her discussion relating to 'imperfection' and the digital 'poor image', describing how the technological context has altered our perspectives. Steyerl's re-interpretation of imperfection, often elucidated with a provocative punk spirit, raises two important issues. First, how the transformed technological context and new forms of technology have created and redefined our perspectives of value within the image (2012, 12- 45). Secondly, the ways in which the idea of an 'imperfect cinema', or 'poor images', has been developed from a different cultural and technological context; inviting a discussion around how we perceive participation in media (Jenkins 2006) and art (Bishop 2012) in the 21st century alongside some reflections on the interdisciplinary d.i.y punk collective No Wave. In addition, I will expand on my discussion of punk, by clearly stating how it has been useful, in a contemporary sense, to my practice.

This reading leads to a wide-ranging third section – PART THREE - *Underground & Collective Cinema* – an outline of relevant alternative, underground and collective film histories. This includes some discussion drawing on Tom Gunning's 1986 work on early cinema pre 1906, underground and collective cinema, such as SLON, New York and London Film Co-Ops, and Exploding Cinema and some analysis of the Situationist International.

PART ONE - Developing a Third Cinema Context

Before I begin discussing some of Espinosa's ideas, it is important to underline that the political aims of Third Cinema were, to some degree, specific to a point in time, and to the project of contesting imperialism in the developing world. This research takes something from the discussion of imperfection in Third Cinema, in order to work through its implications in a very different cultural and technological context. Although I examine some other Third Cinema theoreticians, my research draws specifically from Espinosa's text - *For an Imperfect Cinema* (1969).

An Imperfect Future

Espinosa provided this practice as research both its initial title for the micro-cinema produced and an initial framework for considering imperfection and its relationship to participatory practice. Espinosa was a film director, screenwriter, theoretician and founder of the ICAIC (Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry). Perhaps his most important work was as a notable figure and theorist within Third Cinema, developing out of the so-called Third World countries: Africa, Asia and Latin America in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Espinosa wrote his 1969 *For an Imperfect Cinema* essay as both an intellectual and film practitioner and his work coalesced with other filmmakers, activists and theoreticians in Latin America at this time, thinking around the idea of what a Third Cinema could be in the present and the future, foreseeing the emergent accessibility of the media and film technologies.

Espinosa's ideas belong in the tradition of Marxist cultural politics - an attempt to create an active art for the people, rather than an art that contributes to their passivity. The popular was a site with the potential to be a place of expression, where the people can see and represent themselves. His ideas are interesting, as in a Marxist analysis, popular culture is seen as a kind of opiate, or cause of false consciousness. This research comes back to this point of dissensus often - the concept of imperfection as a key idea for building collective experiences in between alternative and popular spaces – from which everyone can participate in a culture that allows for self-representation, expression and dialogues to emerge.

Third Cinema explored the political by building a 'third' space beyond first cinema (capitalist and dominant), and second cinema (auteur, art-house). *For an Imperfect Cinema* was interesting because it provided a political framework to begin contesting the notion of quality. In this sense, Espinosa called out for a rethinking of how we understand and find value in cinema. This conceptualisation suggested we expand the discourse beyond an analysis of the dominant, commercial film culture and break out of the art-house, dominated by European intellectuals and artists. By carving out a third, imperfect space, Espinosa argued, we could begin blurring the divisions between makers and spectators.

Imperfect cinema is no longer interested in quality or 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. Imperfect cinema is no longer interested in predetermined taste, and much less in 'good taste.' It is not quality which it seeks in an artist's work. The only thing it is interested in is how an artist responds to the following question: What are you doing in order to overcome the barrier of the 'cultured' elite audience which up to now has conditioned the form of your work? (Espinosa 1969)

Espinosa's own film work was often influenced through his experience within social life and Cuban popular culture (Rodríguez-Falcón 2008). This is articulated in his 1978 essay film *Son o no son (To Be or Not to Be)* which critiques notions of class in Cuba. The film is based around a cabaret show in the Tropicana nightclub in Havana and reflects Cuba's cultural traditions by depicting a series of local entertainers: poets, theatre-makers, cabaret, comics, and performers, all in rehearsals during the day. In cabaret style – each act follows the other. Rodríguez- Falcón (2008) describes how the film shifts the lens towards the articulation of authentic Havana nightlife, beyond the tourist traps, in order to depict a 'site of counterculture and artistic renewal' (Rodríguez-Falcón, 18). This approach could be read as a provocation against the intellectualism of taste: Espinosa celebrates the Afro-Cuban traditions rather than the European and American tastes popular at the time. In this sense, his focus on the entertainers and people working in the local bars and clubs represents his valorisation of Cuban popular culture.

Filmmaker and theoretician Michael Chanan describes *Son o no son* as an 'experimental' work. He notes that Espinosa 'set out to interrogate some of the more intractable issues about popular culture that exercised him while serving as vice minister of culture in charge of music and spectacles' (Chanan 2004, 396). *Son o no son's* style has a fragmented, lo-fi and underground aesthetic, with simple shots and cuts. It attempts to connect popular music with film, featuring random musical performances, 'shot with simple techniques that give *Son o no son* a kind of 'd.i.y punk aesthetic, '...the main goal of which was to inform, and not to serve as an esthetic fetish' (Espinosa in Garcia 2015, 107). Espinosa in fact said he wanted to strip down the production elements of a film to its bare bones in order to challenge the languages of film skill in its production: 'I wanted to make the ugliest film in the world', he told Michael Chanan (Espinosa in Chanan 2004, 397).

At the time, many considered it a 'poor work'. Chanan suggests this was because 'there were no current theoretical instruments or aesthetic criteria to understand it, and the solution was deafening silence' (Chanan 2004, 396). He calls the film: 'cine pobre' - 'low filmmaking' - and even wonders if Espinosa's rejection of cinematic mastery was perhaps too close to 'second cinema' – i.e. art-house – to form his own breakaway imperfect 'third' cinema – i.e. an idea not yet fully formed. Interestingly, very few people saw the film. In order to view the work, friends would request a viewing and Espinosa would organise a screening. Many filmmakers with an interest in radical, non-commercial cinema travelled to the ICAIC solely to watch the film. By not releasing the film, *Son o no son* became somewhat mythologised: the social context with which you watched the work became more important than the final piece: 'a kind of laboratory experiment in imperfect cinema' (Chanan 396).

Aesthetics of Liberation

Alongside Espinosa, several other filmmakers and intellectuals explored the idea of a Third Cinema during the late 1960s, each with the desire to discuss and disseminate new ideas and cinematic practices. Alongside *For an Imperfect Cinema*, there were several manifestos emerging, from several different countries. Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's text: *Toward a Third Cinema* (1970), published in the cinema journal: 'Tricontinental by the OSPAAAL', is considered a landmark work. The essay argued for a revolutionary cinema, one in opposition to dominant Hollywood consumerism and 'spectacle', calling this cinema 'surplus value' (1970, 120).

Third Cinema is, in our opinion, that cinema that recognizes in that the struggle the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic manifesto of our time, the great possibility of constructing a liberated personality with each people as the starting point – in a word, the decolonization of culture. (Solanas and Getino 1970, 116)

Some of the Third Cinema filmmakers had developed skills or experiences being trained in Italy, and influenced by film movements before them: Italian neo-realism, the

French new wave, British post-war cinema, and the Soviet filmmakers Eisenstein and Vertov. Alongside the film influences, much of the political ideologies were influenced by the writings of the political radical theorist Frantz Fanon. For Solanas and Getino, a cinema made by the masses could be one that ‘provokes with each showing, as in a revolutionary military incursion, a liberated space, a decolonized territory’ (Solanas and Getino 1970, 129). This type of interplay, between cinema made by the people could become a political event, as a ‘liturgical act, a privileged occasion for human beings to hear and be heard’ (Solanas and Getino 1970, 129).

Because of its wide-ranging influences, Third Cinema comprised of several different strands and not one single concrete definition - other than a dedicated desire to engineer new ideas and practices – bound with a political commitment for cinematic alternatives. Third Cinema didn’t suggest popular culture, or stories, didn’t have a purpose. They considered narrative, genre and cinematic tropes to be an entertaining tool in which to communicate political and popular ideologies. This is something Espinosa was fully aware of in much of his writings and articulated in his own films. Third Cinema attempted to experiment with form but without alienating popular audiences, who might not have the theoretical knowledge to understand the references and reflexivity. At the same time, many wanted to explore new methods of production. Sholat argues that this presented the Third Cinema project, ‘a struggle on two fronts, at once aesthetic and political, synthesizing revisionist historiography with formal innovation’ (Sholat in Guneratne, A., & Dissanayake, W., 2003, 55).

Third Cinema could therefore become a theoretical and practical site in which to explore methods of production in a popular sphere, with a desire to share knowledge and ideas with the people. Teshome H. Gabriel dedicates his 1982 book *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*, ‘To all those filmmakers of the third world who have suffered exile, incarceration, or death for their determination to use film as a tool for social change’ (unnumbered page). Unlike the political work made by Jean Luc Godard at this time, or ‘Structural films’, as described by P. Adams Sitney in his 1970 book *Visionary Film* (2002, 347-370) - artist filmmakers exploring the materialism of film and developing out of the USA in the 1960s and expanded in the UK during the 1970s - Gabriel suggests that, ‘Third cinema can truly come into its own

by establishing a cinema both instructive and leavened with folk humour’ (1982, preface). Gabriel describes ‘the praxis of Third Cinema’, and its methods of production to be seen ‘...as a form of ideology; that is the films point is toward a confrontational cinema and an aesthetic of liberation’ (1982, 6).

Because Third Cinema possessed no singular definitive style or aesthetic consensus, it could be adopted by anybody anywhere, the one defining principle being a commitment to the ‘opposition to oppression’ (1982, 3). In this light, we can read much of the Third Cinema discourse as a political and aesthetic concept to return to, connected ‘with the social life, ideologies and conflicts of the times’ (1982, 2). Whilst oppression is always determined by the context of the time and place, there remains a dominant cinema culture, which builds itself around exclusivity and values determined by cultural gatekeepers. If we shift the lens through which we interpret the political, we can continue to develop the Third Cinema project, albeit in different contexts.

Imperfection As Resistance

In the context of Espinosa’s writing, the idea of imperfection as a space for resistance has aesthetic and political significances. Imperfection conveys both stylistic approaches to film, its social function, fused together with political purpose, challenging our understanding of value, quality and judgement. This aspiration, contests commercial structures to reclaim a popular culture for the people. In doing so, sidestepping notions of quality, as Taylor suggests: ‘Espinosa’s trope engages an irony where the value-meaning of an imperfect work is always located outside the zones where the judgments of quality are made’ (Taylor 1998, 259).

For Espinosa, the popular was a site in which authentic voices could be expressed and made visible and ‘had nothing to do with what is called mass art. Popular art needs and consequently tends to develop the personal, individual taste of a people. On the other hand, mass art (or art for the masses) requires the people to have no taste’ (Espinosa 1969, 24-26). For film to be a ‘genuine’ popular art, film production should be made available to everyone. More potently, with developing film and video technologies

emerging, Espinosa was calling out for a film culture formed through the expressions of the people making their own work - rather than cinema made by the few.

We can make a theoretical connection here with some of the arguments made by Walter Benjamin. In the *Author as Producer* (Benjamin in Duncombe 2002, 68- 81 & in Bolstock 1983), he proposed the content of culture to have less value than the conditions and productions of said culture. For Benjamin, writing at a time of threatening fascist oppression, how a work of art came to be made held the political and emancipatory power. This is summarised well by Duncombe in his book featuring the Benjamin essay, the *Cultural Resistance Reader* (2002).

The content of culture means little, for today's cultural resistance is tomorrow's art object or commercial product. Instead it is the conditions of cultural production, how culture is produced, that holds the political key. (Duncombe 2002, 10)

For Benjamin, the author should be aware of the environments and circumstances of production in the time in which he or she lives (Benjamin 1983, 98). This will allow the writer/artists, to understand the medium, in order to transform 'the apparatus' (Benjamin 1983, 98). Benjamin considered it was critical that this was then communicated effectively, '...to liberate knowledge from the bounds of compartmentalized discipline and make it practical' (Benjamin in Wark).

Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) articulated some of these political ideas, by exploring the potential of cinema as a reflexive art, in which the combination of the apparatus at his disposal – camera-eye, editing and montage - could create social and aesthetic connections with the viewer. Vertov contended film to have vast potential as an instrument to record and share the everyday, the camera being what he termed a 'Kino-Eye' (Vertov in Michelson-O'Brien 1984, 40). Cinema could move beyond other popular art forms, such as the theatre or the novel, and provide new perspectives through the methods in which cinema is constructed. Consequently, making visible a commonality between people - of different backgrounds, status and places - using the tools of cinema production to create new meanings and associations.

Vertov investigated the intersection of cinematic art and politics through documentary footage and playful surreal montage, constructing its meaning, as if in a laboratory. The film is a free-flowing masterpiece, experimental in form, poetic in sensibility, bringing together interesting connections and commentary on Soviet modes of production, through daring experimental techniques, such as: overlays, slow and fast motion, reflexive approaches to the role of the camera and the audience; all fused with an examination of what role the cinema could play in society. The camera and tripod objects eventually become autonomous objects, walking as if there were you and I. In a sense, it was a work filled with energy and curiosity; daring in form, and suggesting film could be an epic medium to be investigated beyond entertainment and narrative, whilst at the same time, still communicating with a popular audience.

Vertov's film still resonates today, as it's embedded with optimism and visual excitement: a future cinema as an emancipatory form not excluded from popular discourse. This exploration of audio-visual practices, as both a popular and experimental medium, can still offer possibilities; if we view film in much the same way as Solanas considered Third Cinema.

A Third Cinema Continuum

It is an open category, unfinished, incomplete. It is a research category. It is a democratic, national, popular cinema. Third Cinema is also an experimental cinema....there are 36 kinds of Third Cinema (quoted in Willemen 1994, 182).

If Third Cinema is to be considered an unfinished project, then it is open to be continued, albeit in a different time and context. Of course, Third Cinema operated in quite a different context to the one my work occupies, as previously discussed, and new audio-visual media and digital technology have provided impetus for participatory ways of thinking and working with moving images. Nonetheless, if we think about Third Cinema as 'incomplete', unfixed and 'imperfect', we can continue to share tactics, ideas and dialogues, in order to renew and rethink the frameworks from which a popular and contemporary participatory cinema could emerge.

At the centre of this analysis is the idea that 'Film is inherently a collective mode of production and it is also open to an inherently interdisciplinary approach (Gabriel 1982, 5). This demands us to continually analyse the medium: economically, aesthetically and philosophically, alongside how films are made and distributed. Consequently, the core synergy between my work and Third Cinema, and specifically Espinosa's ideas, is the action of bringing theory and practice together in a popular space, with the aim that spectators could become producers, so as to circumvent the closed text of Hollywood, or the intellectualisation of the art film, whilst at the same time not restricting either.

Gabriel argues that Third Cinema is a practical project, not restricted by rules, rigid ideas on form, content, genre, or style – or indeed limited by theoretical discourse. We can see some link with punk tendencies here - a desire to free oneself up in order not to feel restricted by the past, or institutional and industrial value systems. Third Cinema was considering, searching for and practising alternative modes as a 'democratic, national, popular cinema' and an active, committed project, 'not practiced in the solitude of one's home or in a laboratory because it conducts research into communication....What is required is to make Third Cinema gain space, everywhere, in all its forms. (Solanas, 1979)

Third Cinema is therefore somewhat defined by non-definition. It can be read and incorporated into new contemporary projects, if at its core, there is a political purpose. However, as I will discuss later in this thesis, how we understand the term 'political' also demands renewed consideration. A cinema activist group of today, at least in the UK, should look to find synergies with the cultural resistant practices of the past, but also attempt to discover new methods for self- representation. Third Cinema is contextualised with my practice as a concept to connect and synergise with, as well as explore and expand in different contexts - its future transformative possibilities up for regeneration - what might it become, rather than what it was.

An Imperfect Retreat

Espinosa pulled back somewhat from the idea of imperfection outlined in 1969, in a later work: *Meditations on Imperfect Cinema...Fifteen Years Later* (1985), translated by Michael Chanan. He notes how his original essay was a form of ‘thinking aloud’ (Chanan 1985, 93), working through the relationship between cinema and the concept of imperfection. The idea of imperfection as a manifesto aimed to create/begin a dialogue on aesthetics as a political filmic approach to aesthetics, and he admits that it was in part a provocation. He moves away somewhat from his call for cinema to be made by the people as an ‘imperfect art’ in his later essay, by reframing his argument - calling art ‘essentially a disinterested activity’ (Chanan 1985, 94). In this sense, his understanding of imperfection is based around art being both ‘ethical and aesthetic’ (Chanan 1985, 94), and how at the time in the late 1960s, the original essay was based, in part, by a feeling of ‘impotence in the face of large-scale technology’ (Chanan 1985, 93).

Alongside this clarification, Espinosa considers how everyday encounters relate to our perceptions of the ‘quality of a city’ (Espinosa 1985, 94). He discusses his love of travelling to local places, filled with people unaffected by overdevelopment. Experiencing how these small communities function, provides us with ‘new attitudes and realities’ without all the ‘make-up’ (Espinosa 1985, 94). In this sense, the overdeveloped cities, such as London, Paris or New York, are seen as an ‘economy of waste’ (Espinosa 1985, 95), which is how he viewed the late capitalist commercial film industry. Chanan argues that Espinosa’s 1969 essay was not an excuse for ‘badly made films’. Instead, he states Espinosa’s imperfect cinema was: ‘was an argument for low-budget film-making which didn’t waste resources on trying to imitate the commercial values of Hollywood’ (Chanan 1998, 5).

At a time of ubiquitous digital accessibility and peer-to-peer open access information, we are becoming increasingly cine-literate. Not only through viewing content, but also through theory and information on the Internet. It can be argued, however, that a surplus of information and media has created a new kind of online waste. Thousands of videos are being uploaded, shared and watched on social media sites daily, leaving traces of digital production like litter on the virtual motorway. The value of Espinosa’s imperfect cinema was in finding ways to think through the political possibilities from forming a

resistance to dominate cinema and to empower others to engage, or consider the arguments aesthetically and politically. That moving images have become accessible, oversaturated and diluted on our screens, presents opportunities, but also a cluster of ever - increasing content, to scroll through and download. The online union of multidisciplinary media presents many creative, technological and democratic possibilities, but we must continue to consider alternatives processes to connect people without the need to mediate the connectivity with technology.

Additionally, how do we consider some of the self-reflexive, radical aesthetic tactics, employed by the Third Cinema, punk and others, in light of this digital technology shift? Information and technology has democratised the audio-visual aesthetic in such a way that we can now see works previously difficult to discover. This mobilisation of free knowledge means that many of the once radical ideas are no longer exclusive, the preserve of the artists and intellectuals. However, it is the position of the thesis that imperfection can still provide a conceptual space for thinking and acting on issues of participation, if we view it is adaptable and renewable, in our lived environments as well as digital contribution. This combination allows for a social space of collective knowledge, insofar as we can discuss these ideas in direct communication, rather than only view and read information on our personal home computers or laptops.

Could we not see Espinosa's retreat from his original provocative statement – the idea of imperfection as aesthetic liberation - as a missed opportunity to continue and renew the political dialogues, positioned on who participates in cultural production? Even if we are all participating, the core aims of questioning cinema value – aesthetic, cultural or political, surely remains a personal, passive or exclusive discussion, unless these arguments and practices are connected with action in social spheres – looking back to the small communities Espinosa celebrates. Perhaps it is best to view Third Cinema and Espinosa's original manifesto from multiple perspectives – its meaning and provocations open to all who choose to engage with the ideas.

The Third Cinema as a project, as discussed here, can be seen as unfinished if we contextualise its meaning through a reading of its emancipatory potential as an unfixed, research category. The 'lucid cinema' (1969) Espinosa desired, can be reviewed as a

cinema practice in which the people actively participate in the film culture - shaping its meanings, value and aesthetics, exploiting technological developments, engaging in film and cultural ‘making’ – via a practice operating within the social sphere. In doing so, building opportunities for self-representation and collective experiences.

PART TWO – Poor Images, Participation and Punk

If man is today more alone, it's because communication has become more difficult. In my opinion, this happens because we can't find our bearings in this environment. (Antonioni 1962)

This section will now address some of the philosophical, technological and contemporary concerns relevant to my practice, specifically the idea of downloadable digital images and participation in a media and contemporary art context. This will lead to some reflections on the value of imperfection after the ‘digital turn’ (Berzina 2012). This is a broad enquiry. Therefore, it focuses on sketching and mapping together several key ideas and theorists, relevant to the practical work in this thesis to support my discussion.

It will begin by pointing out that Hito Steyerl's recent work makes a connection between Espinosa's ‘imperfect cinema’ and what she terms the ‘poor-digital image’ (Steyerl 2012, 31). Her re-interpretation raises two important issues: the changed technological context (new forms of technology), and the different cultural context. This reframing of Espinosa's Third Cinema manifesto no longer struggles against imperialism or social and cultural divisions. It embraces a broader context. In an age of digital access, at least in the Western world, downloading and sharing information has radicalised how we engage with film and ‘torrent culture’ (Priestman 2015). ‘Torrent culture’ (Priestman 2015) points to emancipation, but also reinforces hierarchy and who has access.

In doing so, this chapter interrogates and questions how we position ‘participation’ in light of new media convergence and the ubiquity of digital images. I will discuss these

contemporary issues relating to issues of participation, from a contemporary ‘converged’ media position (Jenkins 2006) and a contemporary art reading of ‘relational art’ and ‘participation’ (Bishop 2006, 2012, Bourriaud 2002). This will be framed through a theoretical discussion on The Situationist International, some ideas relating to ‘deskilling’ and the consideration and impact of how one engages in ‘no-expert’ making in the public sphere and its impact, through a critical and historical analysis of the late No Wave punk scene in New York.

The Poor Image

Hito Steyerl is an interdisciplinary artist and author, developing practical and theoretical work through the consideration of art, cinema, ethics, politics, technological progress and the digital environment we find ourselves in today. Often, her practice incorporates reflections on audio-visual practices and its relationship to contemporary concerns, through playful and political video works, such as: *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), exploring ways to rethink exhibition spaces and disappearing from being offline. Also there is *Liquidity Inc.* (2014), a digital collage-remixed documentary work, foregrounding its methods of production, and exploring the idea of liquidity through the story of martial arts enthusiast Jacob Wood, who lost his job following the financial collapse in 2008.

In her book of essays, *The Wretched of the Screen* (2012), Steyerl considers the history of cinema as being dominated by a kind of ‘resolution fetish’ (2012, 35). She argues that we became transfixed by the idea of the hierarchy of the image - the beauty of the 35mm print as the indicator of the highest cinematic value. This examination of what constitutes value is questioned through an argument highlighting the democratisation of technologies and our new modes of audio-visual engagement (Steyerl 2012, 34-35). Steyerl proposes that our understanding of resolution and the hierarchy of images has become fragmented with ‘new technologies offering more and more possibilities to creatively degrade it’ (Steyerl 2012, 35).

New technologies have certainly transformed the way we view moving image content, although 35mm is still used by those filmmakers who are able to, and it remains a medium capable of capturing the world in ways digital technology cannot. However, it is quickly becoming a rarefied and expensive medium to use and project. Instead, we now watch digital films on laptops, mobile phones and on big screen HD-TVs in the privacy of our homes. We are swamped with audio-visual content. Prior to the digital era – video was the home competitor to the cinema industry. But now the accessibility of digital technologies and their platforms of dissemination, such as YouTube, Vimeo, UbuWeb and Torrent download sites, provide new methods of distribution of moving image work. Most people now no longer use the video shop to rent a movie; walking the aisles in deep concentration, waiting for a film to speak to us; or be assured by a friendly cine- literature store worker, keen to suggest his monthly recommendations. Instead, the ‘trawling’ is now done online.

Free illegal downloading and streaming are now viable and widely used options as opposed to being dependent on the video rental industry. This could be seen to heighten the pleasure of piracy in ‘torrent culture’ (Priestman 2015), but negates the direct interactions between people. It also renders the large portions of the population casually engaging in criminal activity. The copyright fight, seen in the shutdown of Napster and more recently torrent sites being closed in the UK, seems somewhat pointless – a cat and mouse caper.

New online companies such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and Mubi have been quick to grasp ways to monetise how we consume moving image content: offering monthly fees for access of their ‘data’, and more and more people seem to be subscribing to these services.

While Steyerl is more interested in torrent-downloaded-shared media, rather than the consumer online streaming products such as Netflix, she does analyse how online culture compromises the aesthetic quality of the work, at least in how it was originally intended by the maker. The work is often blurred or resized through the multiple digital downloads and connections. Whilst global companies are continually working towards building even more online HD platforms to monetise our entertainment, Steyerl

embraces the political potential of the redistribution of the ripped ‘poor images’ (2012, 31). Through this online sharing, they become a,

...ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution. (Steyerl 2012, 32)

The digital mistakes evidence the wear and tear of the journey, giving them a more humanised value - imperfections - like fingerprints; images passed from hand to hand .

This brings to mind some of Nicolas Rombe’s thoughts on the digitalisation of cinema in *Cinema in the Digital Age* (2009). His book merges critical theory, philosophy, popular culture, punk and no-expert approaches, with an interesting mixture of commercial, avant-garde and independent film analysis. A thread running throughout his work involves *New Punk Cinema* (2005) a book examining and investigating filmmaking’s relationship with punk (Rombes 2005, 3). This concerns contemporary filmmakers developing strategies to avoid aesthetic digital perfection, as in the primitive and obstruction based film work associated with the Dogme 95 movement in the late 1990s. It also concerns the increasing methods of implementing aesthetic analogue bruises of the past in new digital video work, to elicit some traces of the past we can understand. Digital screen flares, or even the sound of digital equipment with noises resembling machines from the past - an analogue camera or super 8mm projector – aural traces of a past we could still comprehend. As he states,

...there is a tendency in digital media – and cinema especially – to reassert imperfection, flaws, an aura of human mistakes to counterbalance the logic of perfection that pervades the digital. (Rombes 2009, 2)

Rombes contextualises a politically charged aesthetic-digital argument by borrowing a phrase filmmaker Harmony Korine used to describe his work, to suggest that the ‘messy, mistakist aesthetic of digital cinema stands against the pure, uncorrupted rigidity of fascism’ (Rombes 2009, 27). By embracing the medium, the Dogme 95 filmmakers, stripping the digital technology back to a primitive form and approach

(often through obstruction), found new ways to humanise the digital, often with strict rules, such as no props, music and lighting.



Figure 1: Julien Donkey-Boy (Source: madmuseum.org).

Steyerl develops a broader interdisciplinary position than Rombes, considering that digital culture and the ‘poor image’ provides us with some aspects of ‘visual bonds’ that share some historical similarities with Dziga Vertov and his theory of the ‘Kino-Eye’. The mechanical apparatus of the camera and its editing process, Vertov suggested, can unite us towards a cinema of connectivity. Not only through the chance encounters between moving images, files and uploads, but how we now have access to moving image work previously difficult to see. Steyerl suggests that video art and experimental film, such as Chris Marker’s essay work, are now being redistributed and made visible, available to download via torrent peer-to-peer methods, whereas before they were the preserve of the academies and the few who had access to these kinds of alternative film (Steyerl 2012, 36). Digital technology allows us to view work we might never have seen, even if we view them on tiny screens and the ‘original’ has been ruptured.

The Pirate Cinema project (2012-2014) has been exploring live installation performances – an immersive, real time audio-visual collage of hidden peer-to-peer downloaded content using ‘BitTorrent’ as its source. Many of the torrent files we see in

their live ‘mashup’ are commercial popular culture products, music videos, pornographic content, and/or, other forms of mainstream culture, reinforcing a kind of audio-visual collage of distorted moving image capitalism. The randomising performance of various moving image files, being downloaded at that very moment, creates a dizzying-chaotic-uncertain montage of sound and image, a bricolage of ‘torrent culture’ (Priestman 2015). This project exemplifies the political ideals of ‘openness and free appropriation that arose in the early days of the Internet’ (Pirate Cinema), whilst at the same reaffirming the dominant hierarchies of mostly American popular culture entertainment.

The Pirate Cinema articulates this through live performance, a participatory torrent aesthetic for ‘understanding our world and the choices being made’ (Pirate Cinema). The exploration of this illegal act, through the public exhibition, is interesting as a theoretical and political piece. The work conveys and reinforces the paradoxical control that digital media has over how we consume, in which digital technology is steering the boat. By opening up the methods of ‘downloaded’ production, we can better understand our invisible tastes.

Don Norman explores the problematic transition between technologies and our everyday lives. In his book *The Design of Everyday Things* (2013), he discusses how we created digital technologies to support progress, but that we remain analogue beings, evolving over the millions of years to become adaptable as problem solvers. New design and digital technologies are creating problems we don’t quite know how to understand. ‘People are flexible, versatile, and creative. Machines are rigid, precise, and relatively fixed in their operations’ (Norman 2013, 215).

In contrast to this is Nicholas Negroponte’s book *Being Digital* (1995), in which he outlines the digitalised world of the future (in many ways predicting much of our technologies today, such as touch-screen and virtual newspapers). In *Being Analog* (1997/98), Norman questions whether we should consider this as progress. He makes a similar point often, that we are ‘social creatures, understanding creatures’ (Norman), and that: ‘(w)e have even been told that ‘being digital’ is a virtue. But it isn’t: People are analog, not digital; biological, not mechanical’ (Norman 1998, Preface, viii). At the

centre of much of his position, articulated in *Living with Complexity* (2012), is a call for digital tools to be complex, because ‘life is complex’; but that we should aim for technologies to be understood and easily used, not overly complicated.

With the rise of global interconnection, global communication, powerful design, and manufacturing methods that can be used by all, the world is rapidly changing. Design is a powerful equalizing tool: all that is needed is observation, creativity, and hard work – anyone can do it. (Norman 2013, 297)

Once again, at the core of Norman’s humanistic position is the idea that, ‘human beings have always been social beings’ (Norman 2013, 298). Despite global ‘social media’, Norman argues that even ‘fully autonomous, automatic machines’ will follow the principles of human interaction – ‘discoverability’, ‘feedback’, ‘affordances and signifiers’, ‘mapping’ and ‘conceptual models’ (Norman 2013, 298).

Steyerl seems more resigned to the idea that the shifted politics of digital representation and uncertain, complex digital technological developments have altered our perceptions for good. The internet, for Steyerl, ‘is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: ‘it is about reality’ (Steyerl 2012, 44). Rather than seeing this technological change as a backward step, we should see the Internet’s dual possibilities, both as systems of control and platforms for subversion. Perhaps we would be best advised to not fully take one position or the other. Instead, continue to work towards technologies being a democratic tool, at least for some, whilst at the same time, be wary of their potential unconstructive impact, and increasing complexity.

There is a temptation to frame this online participation through the lens of Lefebvre’s ‘Festival’ (2014, 221-227), or Bakhtin’s ‘Carnavalesque’ (1984, 15) - as a free humorous space where one can take on new identities, exercise fantasy and engage in the reappropriation of dominate cultures. However, as Steyerl argues, the ‘present time’ is defined by ‘a prevailing condition of groundlessness’ (Steyerl 2012, 13). There is nothing for us to hold on to. Technology provides opportunities to be ‘productive’ in the capitalist sense, but is in danger of becoming a cyberspace ‘reality deprived of substance’ (Žižek 2006).

Nonetheless, the Internet still facilitates and shares political social movements, such as *Occupy* and *Anonymous* although they must eventually manifest themselves physically to be meaningful. *Imperfect Cinema* used social media sites to share information, posters and advertise. In this sense, online social media has supported the participatory practice in this research, but used as a tool to publicise the projects towards people coming together, for interaction in a social space. The lack of face-to-face direct interaction negates the intangible qualities of distributing knowledge, the creation of unique experiences in a shared literal (as opposed to virtual) time and place.

The spontaneous and collective possibilities of the digital era also allow for the fictionalisation of identities to be easily constructed. The Internet has opened up global social networking and peer-to-peer sharing resources, blurring the boundaries between facts (real life experiences) and fiction (information and stories), and how we interact in the world being reflected and navigated by our technologies. ‘After all, it is we who adapt to the machine. The machine does not adapt to us’ (Kittler 2006, 36) as Kittler states.

But if we are to draw from Norman’s notion, that essentially we are ‘analog beings’, faulty and biological, then digital technologies and machines can further alienate and complicate how we make sense of the times, politically, aesthetically and socially – replacing social, human interaction with technological-complex mediation. As these technologies become more complicated, more driven by notions of progress and capital, we also become in danger of leaving those not committing enough ‘brain-time’ (Stiegler 2014, 1) to mastering these media interactions behind. This creates the possibility in the future of class new divisions, based on those who can and cannot master the technological media structures we have created.

If we now return to aesthetics, the ‘poor images’, ‘present a snapshot of the affective condition of the crowd, it's neurosis, paranoia, and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction’ (Steyerl 2012, 41). The question for the artist filmmaker, interested in participatory practice, is perhaps not how to resist or oppose these technological developments, but how to continue to interrogate methods for using these tools to create new collaborations, dialogues and associations. These questions,

challenges, or at least alternatives to the dominant global ‘social media’ platforms, can ensure we don’t become enticed into a digital maze of overly complicated systems.

Becoming overly dependent on the virtual, both in terms of our communications and how we navigate and understand the world, could thus create another form of exclusivity and hierarchy. Whilst digital machines have created jobs, how can we sustain these developments, when digital technology is developing at such a speed that perhaps in the future there will be very little work left? Alongside more opportunities for capitalism to dominate our time – we risk the potential for further alienating ourselves, leaving those confused, or untrained behind.

Participatory Media

Despite many of these issues, media scholar Henry Jenkins remains an advocate for what he terms ‘participatory culture’ (1993, 2003). He has continued to develop the idea of participatory media since his early work in the 1990s, exploring fan-culture, and has increasingly used other words - such as ‘convergence culture’ (Jenkins 2001) and ‘spreadable’ media to describe the combination of old and new media within digital technological developments (Jenkins 2013). He uses these terms to describe and reflect on how members of virtual cultures/subcultures such as fan-communities, bloggers, and gamers, for example, can participate in ‘D.I.Y’ grassroots media and networked relations. These new media ‘convergence networks’ allow participants to ‘believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another’ (Jenkins 2010, 238).

Jenkins’ writing primarily focuses on the uses of connected new media in a ‘period of transition’, to mediate participatory ways of learning as global ‘clusters of practice’ (Jenkins 2013, 9). This form of connectivity within grassroots d.i.y media production - sharing knowledge and developing social connection, via online venues and new media tools – attempts to resist the dominant global markets, by sharing their work beyond the traditional media channels.

In this sense, we have become dependent on media, as Kittler outlined. The convergence of media technologies – its products, content, and social platforms, foster are social interactions, lifestyles, and entertainment, in which Jenkins is an enthusiast:

I can't claim to be a neutral observed in any of this. For one thing, I am not simply a consumer of many of these media products; I am also an active fan. The world of media fandom has been a central theme of my work for almost two decades – an interest that emerges from my own participation within various fan communities as much as it does from my intellectual interests as a media scholar. (2006, 12)

There is a strong sense of optimism and idealism in his work, and a desire to 'document conflicting perspectives on media' (Jenkins 2006, 12); particularly on popular culture, which finds commonality in some aspects of imperfect praxis. Although he addresses issues of equal opportunities for online participation, and on the positive potentials for learning and education, using democratic media engagement, he does not seem to consider how the transformative and radical potential of praxis, exploring non-alienating change in local communities beyond the media, can and is a vital partner to media related involvement. The use of these d.i.y media-based skills might be applied back into non-virtual communities, where the media users actually live. His work also implies that new media online communications are productive for building skills, sharing ideas and building connections – but what if one doesn't want to engage with these technologies?

This was discussed in the journal article published in *Cultural Studies*, titled *Rethinking 'Convergence/Culture'* (Hay and Couldry 2011). Hay and Couldry highlighted how Jenkins' ideas on convergence media remain indebted, in some way, to economical logic. Jenkins responded in 2013, publishing an article in the same journal called *Rethinking 'rethinking Convergence/Culture'*. He argued that while his initial ideals and enthusiasm might need to be reassessed, the online participatory media possibilities needs to continue to be developed, to seek out new possibilities for building communities and participation.

Perhaps without the political and agitated cultural resistance that punk provided, these new participatory d.i.y media cultures, even if ‘grassroots’ and d.i.y in ethics, somewhat lose their critical-oppositional stance, if participatory associations only operate within digital environment controlled by global companies. In this sense, Jenkins’ ‘participatory culture’ can be somewhat transformative for the individual and some of the various groups taking part, especially when digital culture was a new phenomena in the early 21st century, as long as you have the media technologies to take part. But it doesn’t seek to transform the social environment around you in an ‘offline’ context. Instead, this form of participation is content to be part of the media landscape, so that even if it is has political and, or activist intent, the action is mitigated by the rules, boundaries and structures of the operating systems and digital platforms, such as Google, Facebook, Blogger, Twitter, YouTube, etc. Whilst he does retreat from some of his more ‘utopian’ ideas on participatory media in this 2013 article, by noting we need to be aware of ‘the terms of our participation’, his work remains primarily focused on working within these media structures, as the allow for meaningful social change under the conditions of Neoliberal capitalism. We want to make the changes we can now, even if this means sometimes working within rather, than outside capitalist institutions. (Jenkins 2013, 290)

Steyerl somewhat provocatively proposes that we should celebrate this online- digital development, re-examining the media and the media images (objects) disseminated and shared on our screens, as a thing for agency. She asks if the process of actuating the thing with ourselves, such as an image or even a film, could represent participation, emancipation and political agency; a new form of collective opposition to capitalism, which represents our moment in time, confused, blurred, ripped and remixed; re-examining the objects as collectivised and collaborative artefacts of ourselves (Steyerl 2012, 46-58). Steyerl pronounces, in punk spirit that: ‘The hero is dead. Long live the thing’ (Steyerl 2012, 57). We must now pin our hopes on the new.

This statement finds some commonality with punk - negating the heroes of yesteryear - to rip it up and start again. Steyerl even cites lyrics from The Stranglers song *No more Heroes* (a British rock band formed during the first punk era) at the beginning of her essay, framing her argument further with a punk posture, a nihilistic stance. However,

this thesis positions, or counters participation only online. Instead, it points towards working with some digital ‘social’ trends, but towards action/production within the living social context.

Participation, as understood through this practice as research, is dependent on the collective dimension in which the making and viewing experience take place socially, and cannot exist in a ‘groundless’ environment - it needs to be located in the tangible/tactile everyday. To post a film to YouTube and receive 100 views is an entirely different experience from screening a film in a space with 100 people in the audience. It is this dimension of representation and experience that is missing from on-line dissemination. The technologies are full of possibility, both practically and theoretically, but this thesis suggests they must be operated alongside venues of the non-virtual-social interactions. This way, we can examine our environments within the context developed through direct interactions, rather than exclusively digital communications.

Additionally, in an era of increased digital ubiquity and confusion, not to mention the question of our digital activity being recorded, archived and the ever pressing questions of surveillance - of being overseen by governments or others who, likely, have nothing to do with the online groups ‘participating’ – an alternative media art that practices with some critical distance from the ideals of new ‘participatory media’ is strongly required.

Participation and the Questioning of Value

Participatory art is a broad term, and could relate to all kinds of activities that bring people together in and through social sites, such as amateur dramatics, singing around a campfire or other forms of folk art. In this section, to bring some focus towards other thoughts on the ideas of participation, I will discuss participatory artistic production through a contemporary art context, especially drawing from the theoretical work by Claire Bishop and Nicolas Bourriaud.

Bourriaud's 2002 book *Relational Aesthetics* considered a 'point of departure' to have taken place in the 1990s, in which artists were increasingly becoming facilitators, rather than artefact-makers. Finding some synergies with the art collective Fluxus, counter-culture happenings in the 1960s, other early avant-garde practices and artists such as Duchamp (Bourriaud 2002, 14). Duchamp moved away from painting in the early part of the 20th century. Instead, he continued to be an artists beyond professionalization, and instead considered his practice through: 'The idea of play, of art as a witty, personal, open process rather than art as a serious, commercial, definitive product' (Keller 2014, 67).

Bourriaud considered new socially engaged art practices to represent an art-form finding value in social interactions, rather than through 'the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space' (Bourriaud 2002, 14). These new positions and practices brought with it a wave of social and participatory 'turns'.

Claire Bishop was one such influential figure to document these developments, coining the term participatory art in her edited book *Participation* in 2006. Her 2012 book, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* is an examination of participatory art practice, in which she uses historical analysis, example of art practice, Walter Benjamin, The Situationist International and various other theoretical 'reference points', to suggest 'participatory projects in the social field seem to operate with a twofold gesture of opposition and amelioration' (Bishop 2012, 12). Whilst sympathetic to the artist attempting to bring people together and the drives for social connection and cultural resistance, this kind of work - operating outside of the cluster of the contemporary art world - poses Bishop a problem: How to perceive, understand and valorise participation critically 'as art' (Bishop 2012, 13).

This is one of the main interrogations of Bishop's participatory work - the investigative questioning of whether participation for participation's sake should be considered to have political, cultural, and/or aesthetic value. She queries the claim that participating in an arts practice is always radical as a form of social and cultural resistance. How does one valorise participatory work if there is no single authorship, and the work exists within the social processes of the everyday?

This line of questioning, from her point of view, is problematic for the art-world, as a critical institution, because participatory artistic practice often challenges some of our perceptions of authorship, mastery and quality. In doing so, it creates ambiguity and uncertainty within a framework built on a hierarchy of 'experts' and tastemakers. Bishop explores some interesting positions in her questioning of the presumption that participatory work is also an inherently radical, political or even positive process for the public (Bishop 2012, 284). Perhaps it is the intention of the participatory action that deems its value as a resistant work, although Bishop questions its importance as 'artistic gestures' (Bishop 2012, 284). This value, however, may never be visible to all - perhaps especially not to those concerned with identifying and quantifying it - and only apparent to those who actually participated in a particular time and place.

We can see traces of these kinds of collective and participatory art-processes throughout the 20th century. The avant-gardists of the 1920s challenged the value of tastes, exploring anti-art and methods of de-authorship through, amongst other practices, avant-garde alternative cinemas (Reekie 2007, 78-81). Bishop finds a lineage with this approach, suggesting that today's socially engaged artist 'carry on the avant-garde call to make art a more vital part of life' (Bishop 2012, 13), but that we must 'remain critically distant, to not see participation art to be inherently of artistic value, so that we can delineate what is or isn't art' (Bishop 2012, 13).

There is a contradiction in Bishop's work. On the one hand, with some certainty, she argues that socially engaged art, emerging out of the 1970s community art sectors in the UK, shaped by New Labour in the 1990s, is a working definition of participatory art in which the,

...emphasis is placed on social processes rather than outcomes, and on attitude rather than achievement. Yet the thorny question of how to evaluate this category remained unclear. (Bishop 2012, 179)

Part of her critique examines the need to quantify and measure impact 'formally', something she considers was brought in under bureaucratic neoliberal governments, and has taken criticality away from socially engaged, community arts practices. 'It is not

enough to keep producing activist art’ she states (Bishop 2012, 283). Bishop suggests that by,

...avoiding questions of criteria, the community arts movement unwittingly perpetuated the impression that it was full of good intentions and compassion, but ultimately not talented to be of broader interest (Bishop 2012, 190).

The frustration lies with how to evaluate art that sidesteps issues, or needs, of critical legitimatisation. In a sense, this negates the input from institutions, critiques, curators and the ‘art’ world. It could be argued that the need to clarify what is or isn’t art reinforces the separation between artists and non-artists. In our age of digital accessibility, open information, and social art practices, how does one define an ‘artist’? Perhaps whether they receive payment for their work, or if they have been legitimised by a curator or gallery, which seems like a value judgement from the past. In a film-media-art context, whilst accessible media technologies have democratised information and screen-based culture-making, there still remains hierarchies of taste, knowledge and intelligence within the art world; reinforcing value by critically naming what is or isn’t a legitimate piece of art.

Whilst there is benefit in critical work, the need to assess ‘participation’ can lead to further legitimacy division between makers. It also negates the fact that many avoid, or are unable to positioning themselves in this contemporary art context – not through lack of ‘talent’, but through choice, circumstance or where they live. Suggesting those who don’t live in major cities and are not visible to people like Bishop and therefore don’t have the talent to be of ‘broader interest’ is a particularly severe affirmation of art hierarchy. These inconsistencies and superciliousness, relate on a broader scale to the contemporary confusions and breaking down of professionals, amateurs, artist, non-artist, disciplines and boundaries.

Bishop is correct in using Rancière to expand on her analysis, developing his idea that politics can be found in aesthetics if we rethink aesthetics as a ‘mode of experience’ (Bishop 2012, 29). Yet, she seems overly concerned with addressing the accounts of artistic value. Participation surely finds its core value in the individual and group

processes. This is especially true, when the work attempts to not be overly led or curated by the 'artist', as was the case in this practice.

To summarise, her wide-ranging research, theoretical treatment and analysis of relevant artistic participatory practices, has been a useful and stimulating addition to the discourse on participatory, socially engaged art. Additionally, it must be stated that her frame of analysis has been on participation in a contemporary art context, which might not have expanded to other forms of participation in which the participant-maker has more opportunity to impact the processes. Nevertheless, perhaps there are no certain answers, and the need to critically evaluate art in this context, are perhaps only issues for a few in a specific contemporary art context. In a time of 'media participation' and 'information' free communication, to explore and develop theoretical positions without the need to be institutionalised, Bishop's work reinforces a need for somebody to legitimise what is or isn't of artistic value, which expands her value as a critic, but perhaps misses the point of many participatory project.

The Situationist International

Art as experiences via participation, probing new experiences, finds a historical context with The Situationist International. The group consisting of artists and intellectuals, active between 1957 and 1972. Intensely politically committed, they adopted strategies with aims to transform everyday spaces, and rupturing and recontextualising existing artworks to develop political meaning. They called out for new ways to create unexpected experiences and unique encounters, and in doing so, rupturing 'the spectacle'. To oppose the capitalist modes of production and how we perceive the world, they created these 'situations', often collaboratively, to develop new ways to resist capitalism.

The group developed and expanded playful tactics and strategies to attempt to rethink visual culture, such as *détournement*, which would recontextualise existing work to unpick its political meaning. They also developed the idea of the *dérive* - explorations,

or drifts, through lived environments, with the aim of encountering new experiences. These tactics were underpinned with the political aspiration to generate change.

In his 1967 work, *The Society of the Spectacle* (2013), Guy Debord critiques capitalism, by suggesting that alienation and passivity have become intrinsic to the everyday experience, so that authentic experiences have been replaced by spectacle – a representation of what was once real. ‘In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away from representation’ (Debord 2013, 3). He argues that we are now all passive bystanders, alienated, dominated by a world inundated with images, separated through spectacles of representation.

Bishop argues that, for artists on the left, ‘Debord’s critique strikes to the heart of why participation is important as a project: it rehumanises a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production (Bishop 2012, 11). Therefore, as digital spectacles increasingly play more of a role in defining everyday experiences, artists are attempting to develop new ways to encounter the world, using social interactions as a source for meaning. At the core of much of The Situationist International’s ideas was the need to strip away the need for spectators to be engaged through a ‘pre-existing set of options devised by artists’ (Bishop 2012, 91). No doubt Debord would be critical of *Imperfect Cinema*, although perhaps the SI would find some connection with the uncertain, live element, which was not predetermined or curated.

Whilst this type of merging art and life poses problems for art critics seeking to quantify value, Debord saw artistic revolution not as a method for ‘showing life to people, but bringing them to life’ (Debord-Knabb 2003, 216). The participants had to speak for themselves – with some level of participation. It’s difficult to say how much involvement was activated at this time, with Bishop suggesting their only ‘notable public intervention was in Amsterdam in 1960 and a three-day ‘micro-dérive’ (Bishop 2012, 87). However, Debord’s ideas were vital in their dynamic sense of critical resistance alongside artistic possibility, and perhaps now so than ever, it remains a key text.



Figure 2: Situationist International posters (Source: notbored.org)

Cinema also was used as a medium for Debord to interrogate communication, ‘developed, in lieu of other possibilities, by the present class technology’ (Bishop 2012, 87). It reinforced spectacle through its technologies, narratives and escapism, and he made a film in 1971 building on his written work, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) using the method of détournement. Nevertheless, as he became increasingly more disillusioned with the commodification of life, Debord became less enthusiastic, of the revolutionary potential of filmmaking and moved away from public life as he grew older, before his suicide in 1994.

Perhaps his ideas - whilst politically vivid and culturally prophetic - missed a key element of artistic making practice. For someone interested in the act of artistic processes – and certainly that is how I have come to understand imperfect praxis – the Situationist International considered the content and artefact - using existing forms of art and culture to understand their meaning - as being more important than the actual ‘making’. The emancipatory potential of collaborative and participatory methods of artistic production, as in making music together, can shift the focus away from the valorising of skill or intellectual ability, by using a popular medium - such as film or

music – to allow people to develop their own ideas of its meaning through its production. This can create unique ‘moments’, experiences, play and afterwards, if desired, social presentation. The theoretical, aesthetic, political and intellectual urgency of the group is to be appreciated, but perhaps the joy of creation, even if deskilled or ‘no-skilled’, can foster enjoyable, transformative experiences and meaning, which is difficult to quantify without participating in the actual process.

Deskilling/Noskilling

As a method to take part in artistic production, ‘deskilling’ can be both emancipatory and critical. Stripping away the technical calls into question the value of expertise and the artefact itself, whilst still engaged in the act of cultural production. However, playing with form and critiquing its purpose was still a preserve of the few for most of the twentieth century. Whilst amateur deskilling artistic practices in cinema were certainly active in the 20th century, a historical context of skill and art was needed, to some degree, in order to deskill the skill.

Punk forcefully communicated this questioning of technique, using popular music as a megaphone to spread the ethos in a popular space. Technical virtuosity was not essential in order to form a band or take part in cultural productions. The early punk bands, such as the Sex Pistols, not yet examining and deconstructing music in such a way as the No Wave musicians or the later British anarcho-punk bands would go on to explore, would simply turn off Sid Vicious’ bass amp when he was unable to play in time, rather than bring in another player more competent: his value in the band was seen through ‘him’ rather than his technical skill.

These punk ideas quickly spread to other musicians, artists and anybody else interested in culture production. People picked up guitars, cameras, cut up clothes, and communicated these ideas through music, style and attitude. The aesthetic resembled some of the avant-garde practices of the 20th century, such as cut-up techniques, bricolage, used by DADA and other artists, and in William Burroughs’ writing, as a way of rethinking what is perceived to be correct.

In *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (2015), John Roberts discusses ‘rethinking the function and role of the avant-garde’ (Roberts 2015, 12). In light of our idea of how our times are perceived with ‘economic crisis’ and ‘shifts in the new digital economy’ (Roberts 2015, 12), the avant-garde is ‘misunderstood’ (Roberts 2015, 19). Rather than being seen as a moment in time, as many ‘conservatives’ would like to suggest, for Roberts, it is still open and active, and can be readapted for aesthetic, social and political means if moved away from the idea of ‘free creativity’ (Roberts 2015, 462).

Roberts argues that Rancière has proved to be problematic for the ‘political ‘transparency’ or immediacy in art practice – for all its alliance with the politics of autonomy – his work, according to Roberts, has diminished the critical relationship between art praxis and political praxis’ (Roberts 2015, 478). Whilst Roberts considers Rancière’s grassroots ‘emancipatory thrust’ of the idea of the sensible to be ‘applauded’, his idea on the merging between politics and art ‘appear to function only in flight from collective action’ (Roberts 2015, 478).

Robert’s work shares some similarities with Bishop’s position on community art and the grip of neo-liberalism on community art practice, although he does state that the avant-garde reaffirms its relationship with capitalism: ‘Hence the importance of needing to lift the avant-garde out from its conventional art historical categories’ (Roberts 2015, 47). What is interesting is how Roberts attempts to shift the focus away from the enclavist boundaries that defined the avant-garde in the past, and instead calls the avant-garde ‘an open-ended research programme’ (Roberts 2015, 481).

The avant-garde continues to determine the emancipatory horizons of art, not because it offers a reputable historical home for art’s fundamental encounter with the unresolved antagonism of art’s production and reception, but because the encounter with these antagonism is established and re-established as a living engagement with the vicissitudes of free artistic labour. In other words, the avant-garde is the recurring name we give to the conflict between free artistic labour and capital, and, therefore, the recurring name we give to art’s long and embattled intimacy with the revolutionary tradition itself. (Roberts 2015, 481-482)

Emblematically, the idea of some of the emancipatory and participatory potential of the avant-garde – radically challenging form and technical expertise - was popularised to a greater number of people in 1970s punk. It emphasised some of the problematic/exclusivity avant-gardist theoretical positions – a kind of refusal of communication, and popularised the ideas through rock music, zines, and attitude. In other words, punk acted as a vehicle for avant-gardism and popular culture to merge in popular dialogue on a bigger ‘stage’, even if many of the key punk protagonists denied this intention. Whilst this reading is somewhat problematic, there was a sense of sharing ideas with punk and most certainly in its development when it shifted to the underground in the 1980s: to open up dialogues for people who might previously not have been able to access these ideas, even if they inherently understood them without the textbooks.

Many artists, musicians and filmmakers, inspired by this punk idea of popularising ‘anyone can do it’ avant-garde approaches to culture production, began swapping disciplines and making use of developing, accessible technologies, to engage in artistic production, without the need for legitimacy or skill. Punk signalled a playful and popular resistance to the traditional ideas of aesthetic quality, form being open for rupture: a critical de/no-skilling exploration.

Punk Practice

Punks’ do-it-yourself ethics, assorted histories, mythologies, fragmented meanings and paradoxical principles present a series of problems with inherent contradictions. Punk can mean one thing to one group and something completely different to another. Its value can be shaped from personal emancipatory experiences via subcultural activities and processes, as was the case for me, in a historical, political and contemporary context. Punk has also spread into a multitude of academic disciplines. This transition – from the underground into the academy - has in some ways corresponded with my own research trajectory. The d.i.y punk methodology was the engine for the *Imperfect Cinema* project, but now presents issues for me to consider.

I previously introduced the idea of punk as an elastic term. As stated, punk should be politically and aesthetically adaptable for action - in order to remain useful in a contemporary context, and that is how I position my reading. This avoids punk becoming saturated only in nostalgia, or theory and in danger of becoming static in action. Punk provided a series of d.i.y strategies, methods and subversions, as well as playful cultural references. My understanding of d.i.y punk is that as a methodology it should be committed to developing alternative cultural spaces and announcing possibilities. Without these d.i.y principles, punk could potentially be understood as defining a style – easily co-opted into mainstream aesthetics. But punk need not be defined by activist aesthetics. Otherwise, it can become an enclave in and of itself. Therefore, this thesis argues that punk should be understood as being an actionable and contestable idea, and not solely a style.

Of course, the definition of punk has changed since it first began to have any kind of meaning within a subcultural or media context. Writing in 1979, Dick Hebdige's book *Subculture The Meaning of Style* described punk as a kind of subcultural avant-garde embodied by a small group of people in 1977 that was then gradually co-opted by its relationship to commodity culture. This influential work has been accused of being elitist: an academic study of style highlighting a distance between the 'reader and the text' (Muggleton 2000, 2). It could also be seen as being a work removed from the subculture from which the research is based. There are no interviews with punks in the work, for example.

Hebdige was an academic at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, working on issues relating to media and popular culture through a critical, literary theoretical lens. His study of punk subculture was written just a few years after punk had entered the popular culture discourse. However, he remained on the 'outside' of the scene, using the punks 'to test some of the methods for 'reading signs' evolved in the centuries-old debate of the sanctity of culture (Hebdige 1979, 19), specifically using Roland Barthes and the study of signs to unpick cultural meaning.

Despite these problems, this was a substantial study of subculture, of a time and place. Whilst it perhaps suffers from being removed from the culture from which the work is based, it was Hebdige's analysis as punk emerged. He places more significance on

media representation than the emancipatory ideas being developed – namely, its do-it-yourself ethos. However, the work was developing as punk was emerging as a thing. Therefore, the critical distance needed to see the impact of punk was impossible.

Writing some time after Hebdige, David Muggleton argues in *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (2000) that punk is an idea that people have continued to rediscover from a place of no prior knowledge: which is an important implication of its emancipatory discourse, and relationship to d.i.y culture. Muggleton spoke with many people who were active within subcultural scenes to form his understandings. One punk ‘informer’ states that ‘Punk is what you make it. Paradoxically, this is the essence of punk only ‘true’ punks realize this’ (Muggleton 2000, 2). Muggleton has the benefit of examining these ideas from a historical position. In this sense, his work allows for other punks to be heard. Whether this is any more of an authentic representation is debatable. Both he and Hebdige published work in a time and place and therefore inhabit different methods of understanding and articulating punk.

Punk has become legitimate in an academic context. There is, for example, a book called *Punkademics* (Furness 2012), examining the intersection between punk and the academy and *Punk London* is planned for 2016, a celebration of ‘punk heritage and influence in London’ (Punk-London 2016). *Punk: Chaos to Couture* (2013) was recently exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York: a contained mixture of edge, subversion and institutionalisation, using 1970s London and New York punk as its main contextual sources. The commodification of punk in this context is nostalgic and firmly rooted within the mainstream – a museum piece for pseudo-radicalisation.

Other readings have more interestingly emphasised the important, and sometimes troubled relationship between punk, race and gender (Nguyen and Nikpour 2014). The danger, as Nguyen suggests, is that the punk experts will determine and define punks’ ‘purpose’ or ‘worth’, documenting within the expanding ‘punk canon’. That punk can be an uncertain, fragmentary and contested term provides it with contemporary tension and usefulness. The renewal of the ideas coming through the synergising of its historical context and contestation of its contemporary significance linked with ‘cultures of

resistance’ (McKay 1996). This is where I position my understanding of punk: not celebrating its history as a tribute band might – but probing what use it might still have in the present as an action oriented vehicle for change.

During its early stages, punk in both London and New York valorised a kind of deskilling that negated technical virtuosity and called into question the idea of mastery. Deskilling, no-skilling even, was seen as a way to develop new aesthetics, ideas and processes. Punk affirmed value through the process; the making and experimentation with established tools and aesthetics. These process/method was how I began making music. I had no prior experience in music, no musical skills or talent to speak of, and wasn’t fully aware of the punk discourse. I was, however, interested in finding a form for expression. In this sense, it allows those interested in cultural ‘making’ to do so without prior skill or knowledge: to have a voice regardless of how it sounds.

There can be limitations to subcultural engagement that has no relationship to its history. As McKay suggest in *Senseless acts of Beauty* (1996), a dismissal of the past overlooks the possibility to develop dialogues and ideas between generations, ‘sharing tactics, attitudes and tastes’ (McKay 1996, 183), ‘between present cultures of resistance and those of the recent past’ (McKay 1996, 2). He describes sub and counterculture activity as being part of a historical dialogue: ‘hippy through punk through rave’, and develops links between cultures and lifestyles of resistance in order to glean new perspectives (McKay 1999, 6). McKay praises the convivial idea of opposition, seeing the cultural resistance project as one being: ‘ongoing, continual, changing’ (McKay 1996, 184).

The tracing of the past to understand contemporary scenes, shares a similar approach to Greil Marcus’s book, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (1989). Marcus develops a series of fragmentary connections, weaving through time, tracing links between DADA, Surrealism, medieval political activists and 1970s ‘punk who, according to Marcus, were the culmination of the avant-garde:

What remains irreducible about this music is its desire to change the world. The desire is patent and simple, but it inscribes a story that is infinitely complex –

as complex as the interplay of the everyday gestures that describe the way the world already works. The desire begins with the demand to live not as an object but as a subject of history – to live as if something actually depended on one's actions and that demand opens onto a free street. (Marcus 2001, 5-6)

Marcus develops some interesting and complex relationships, exploring the 'hidden connections' of radical practices and their histories, developing out of his fascination with punk, and specifically the 'Sex Pistols'. Nonetheless, the other side of this discussion is that punk, within an academic discourse connected to various avant-gardist ideas, can become inaccessible to a popular audience unaware of its histories. This has been an attack on Marcus' work, most notably by John Lydon - the lead singer of the 'Sex Pistols', who considered the work as coming 'with an agenda', underpinned with a,

'proposition and the result is no relation at all whatsoever to the truth. It's just fantasy or just historical inaccuracy'. 'What I am saying is he (Greil Marcus) had his agenda and he merely fitted us into that agenda...And the language indeed that he uses, just makes the whole thing utterly impossible' (Lydon 1994).

Though I acknowledge that many of the ideas are inherited from, or at least shared with avant-garde experimental practices of the 20th century, my practice understands punk as a set of d.i.y practices to question, interrogate and contest critically, the broad and often conflicting ideals of d.i.y punk, encourages people '...to be participants and performers rather than consumers and spectators, regardless of their ability, experience, or commercial viability' (Moore 2007, 448). A key notion is therefore how the energies, spirit and subversions of punk can act as a vehicle for a practice to be both critical of the mainstream and at the same time 'radical popular', a term developed by underground cinema activist Duncan Reekie (Reekie 2007, 8).

Stacey Thompson's Marxist analysis of punk cinema states that it needs to have a clear connection between its aesthetics and its economy to embody a punk ethos. To articulate its methods of production to encourage other to take part in culture maker. For Thompson, *Punk Cinema* must be open, 'democratic' and aesthetically and economically connected through 'foregrounding its simplicity, punk produces

producers'. (Thompson 2008, 21). It must resist the dominant models. 'In sum, punk cinema producers encourage viewers through a particular set of economic and aesthetic means, to make films' (Thompson 2008, 31).

Punk and especially its d.i.y principles will continue to be vital for me, in the sense that their political and aesthetic principles continue to be practical and actionable. The contemporary benefit of understanding these terms in this way is that it allows a practitioner to learn from strategies from the past and then adapt them to the present. If the aim is to change your environments or to create things without the need of support from industry, or permission, then the d.i.y methodologies in punk imply a sense of freedom: to create, share and engage in culture-making in any form. But it must also be a contested word, negotiable and critical to a dominant culture.

Developing a No Wave Context

As punk incited a wave of do-it-yourself possibilities, in New York City, these ideas spread into a loose group of filmmakers, musicians and artists, emerging as No Wave. No Wave didn't define itself within a specific set of principles, but valorised a sense of experimental deskilling with d.i.y approaches, in order to facilitate and explore new methods and processes of cultural and collaborative production. Alongside these explorations, they began using urban popular spaces, such as bars and clubs, rather than galleries, to show their work, expanding the punk ethos in the city with other forms of cultural production.

I discussed the No Wave Cinema synthesis in more detail in my first paper, *Towards a Radical Film Practice* (Gall 2010). I considered how filmmakers, musicians and artists such as Beth and Scott B, Amos Poe, Steve Buscemi and Jim Jarmusch, amongst others, were all involved in the group in some capacity, blazing across the city with artistic energy, activity and 'anyone-can-do-it' attitudes'. These bold and experimental approaches, deskilled to the point of no-skill, were an important early context for my work.

In Richard Goldstien's Village Voice review, 'The First Radical Art Show of the '80s', he described No Wave as, 'Visual Punk – anybody can do it - three chord art anyone can play' (Goldstien 1980, 32). This crossover between music scenes and other art forms, such as film, visual art and music, created an air of experimentation, and with that, new energies and possibilities. It also gave No Wave a subversive 'in-disciplined' spirit and a ready-made audience, as many involved were in bands and established scenes. The breaking down of boundaries between disciplines and who could do what and where ruptured the idea of the 'expert'. Technical virtuosity was mistrusted; experimentation and process, often within a playful and political context, was to be encouraged.

In *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City* (2011), Alan W. Moore discussed this broad interplay between activist-oriented collectives and counterculture. His chapter on 'Punk Art' focuses on his experiences and observations of various artistic groups, informed by the developing ideas and artistic experimentations coalescing with punk at this time. Moving beyond the art left, groups such as 'Colab' operating between 1978 and 1989, and multi-disciplined No Wave movement explored the margins of cultures and the popular, with 'practices of music, performance and media arts' (Moore 2011, 80).

Moore describes the Colab group as 'opportunistic', 'vernacular' and unburden by 'theory' – revealing the potentials of 'the collective as a matter of opportunism and styling' (Moore 2011, 108). They exhibited contemporary art, films, created workshops and collaboratively edited magazines. It was loose, in the sense that whilst Colab was dedicated to collectivism, some used the project as a platform to further their own artistic careers. Nevertheless, Colab aimed to form alternative spaces in which to engage with practice beyond the 'increasingly institutionalisation of the downtown spaces called alternative – particularly the resurgent power of curators and art managers – by reclaiming for artists the initiative in organising exhibitions' (Moore 2011, 81).

This created a ripple effect for the arts communities in these areas at this time. Walter Robinson, president of Colab for two years, saw commercial galleries, inspired by Colab's 'do it yourself' example, begin to emerge in the area (Robinson in Moore 2011,

107). This spirit of d.i.y punk, as filmmaker Amos Poe tells Jack Sargeant in ‘No Focus: Punk on Film’ (2006), is ‘why it worked, it was the same idea. The words ‘it can’t be done’ or ‘no’ were not viable, they were not part of the lexicon of the time (Sargeant 2006, 86).



Figure 3: Vivienne Dick (Source: Super 8 shots)

Robin Winters, a performance artist credited by Moore for initiating the Colab group in 1975, contends that the politics of Colab came from the ‘magic’ of innovation and collective production, rather than ‘bourgeois Marxists who don’t believe in magic and who have forgotten the fact that magic is a valuable part of politics’ (Winters quoted in Moore, 82). Winters celebrated the link between private and public work, calling himself oppositional, interested in ‘group struggle’ and ‘an emotional politician’ (Winters in Moore, 84). Winters was uninterested in the party aspect of the No Wave scene, explicitly articulated with *TV Party*, a collective TV show broadcast on public access television in the late 1970s, which made visible a connection between politics, experimental methods of production, and hedonistic activities.

For the No Wave filmmakers, politics and aesthetic experimentation could be done within a popular-cultural context. There we're interested in popular narrative filmmaking, as opposed to the heavily theoretical structuralism being explored by film artists and academics in the 1970s. Instead, film noir, B Movies and the French New Wave, as well as American popular culture influenced their work, along with their reading of punk. There certainly was a joy in the creative and collaborative possibilities of working without permissions and filmmaking was an artistic activity 'engaged with the world as well as a model situation requiring collective work' (Moore 2011, 86). This engagement with popular culture, albeit one celebrating the connection between the lower forms and some of the tendencies in art-cinema, such as Godard's pop culture deconstruction in and through cinema in the sixties. This led to the interplay between art, cinema, music and subculture, due, in part, with its social and popular sensibility.

Technology also played a significant role in these interdisciplinary developments. Some of the No Wave filmmakers, in part, began making films because they sourced their super 8mm cameras from Freddy Five Fingers, who stole them from a truck. As the 1980s developed, video and media technologies became more accessible, and artists began to experiment and explore their potentials. Whilst this had been a hallmark of the New York counterculture happenings and scenes, this development opened up spaces for artists to engage in interdisciplinary work on a broader scale, outside of the art-world.

The No Wave scene, in many ways a historical term, dispersed into the severe 'The Cinema of Transgression' during the mid-eighties. This new group aimed to 'express articulate an aesthetic transgression/confrontation' (Sargeant 1995, 7). Filmmaker Nick Zedd 'founder of the Cinema of Transgression' (Sargeant 1995, 43), wrote and publishing the manifesto to describe its aims in the *Underground Film Bulletin* (under the name Orion Jeriko in 1985). He stated that 'We who have violated the laws, commands, and duties of the avant-garde; i.e. to bore, tranquilize and obfuscate through a fluke process dictated by practical convenience stand guilty as charged' (Zedd). Zedd continued to suggest that 'film schools be blown up and all boring films never be made again' (Zedd).

The Cinema of Transgression often connected aesthetic synergies with the American underground of the 50s, 60s and 70s such as Jack Smith, John Waters, the Kuchar brothers and Andy Warhol (Sargeant 1995, 8-9). Like the No Wave, explored low-budget filmmaking, often using super 8mm, but with a more ‘transgressive’ stylistic and narrative exploration.



Figure 4: Polaroid's of Nick Zedd, circa 1985 (Source: Nick Zedd and Fales Library, NYU/ The Underground Film Bulletin)

With these film contexts, they also expanded, or translated some of the ideas of punk, especially the New York aesthetic. Zedd positions Don Letts ‘The Punk Rock Movie’ (1978) as the only film at that time that shared ‘similar value’ to the bands. Letts, inspired by the punk attitude in the 1970s, began using a super 8mm camera and filming gigs in London, later releasing ‘The Punk Movie’ (1978), a scratchy, lo-fi, intriguing document from somebody involved with the people at that time.

For Zedd, his work *They Eat Scum* (1979) aimed to be a work that ‘related in a satirical way to the punk lifestyle’ (Zedd-Sargeant 1995, 60). The short film piece features ‘zombies, monsters and comedy’ (Davis 2014) and was banned in Canada for obscenity. Critics like Amy Taubin found the work offensive and ‘revolting’ (Taubin in Sargeant

1995, 25-27), a victory for Zedd. Time hasn't blunted Zedd. He recently released 'The Extremist Manifesto (Zedd) in 2013, declaring:

Now that contemporary art, a system that stands for privilege, nepotism and political connections is finally dying, get out the fucking way...The fact that breakthroughs in history are the exclusive domain of the AMATEUR (a lone individual who invents and innovates) is beyond the double-think reality tunnel of the insulated curator. (Zedd).

The excitement of making and playful energies of No Wave Cinema became more hard-boiled and aggressive in *The Cinema of Transgression*, perhaps because as Zedd suggest, the focus become less collective (even if it was a loose connection) and more insular. Downtown New York had rapidly becoming more expensive in the 1980s, and the work perhaps signifies the economic desperation for artists and, more generally, the political atmosphere of the time. Rather interestingly, the violence, death and horror aesthetics they often explored in their lower-budget work has been assimilated into mainstream cinema and mass-culture in general.

D.i.y Experts – Everywhere

The lo-fi aesthetic of No Wave and *The Cinema of Transgression* has lost some of its potential to be oppositional, in part because of the changed media cultural landscape. Their tools defined their work, so often they used the cheapest medium available - super8mm, an aesthetic opening up its methods of production, flickering, uncertain, and vibrant. Now, a filter or app can be used to 'scuzz up' your clean digital images, to evoke the 'shaky camera' aesthetic, developed by necessity and through aesthetic choice by Jonas Mekas. The lo-fi d.i.y's aesthetic has become an imitative/nostalgic style, used by consumers, businesses and commercial cinema: an aesthetic of a previous time, before digital 1s and 0s dominated our moving image culture.

Stacey Kuznetsov and Eric Paulos discuss d.i.y culture as revealing a set of values, contextualised with other amateur practice in the 20th century, such as radio hobbyists and pirate radio stations in the 1960s, to reflect:

anticonsumerism, rebelliousness, and creativity of earlier d.i.y initiatives, supporting the idea that people can create rather than consume. Their understanding of d.i.y culture and amateurism sits alongside an engagement of practice produced as because you want to, or ‘to love’. This is opposed to ‘commercial purposes. (Kuznetsov-Paulos 2010, 1)

This understanding of d.i.y culture and its emancipatory implications aren’t quite as straightforward as these debates. Authenticity and a sense of spirit, or passion, can become somewhat blunted in the virtual web, so that artefacts are constructed and shared, but people are not connecting in social situations to consider who they can impact their local areas. Likewise, with the ease of adapting aesthetic styles for image making, the experimental making-processes are often not fully explored and experimented with.

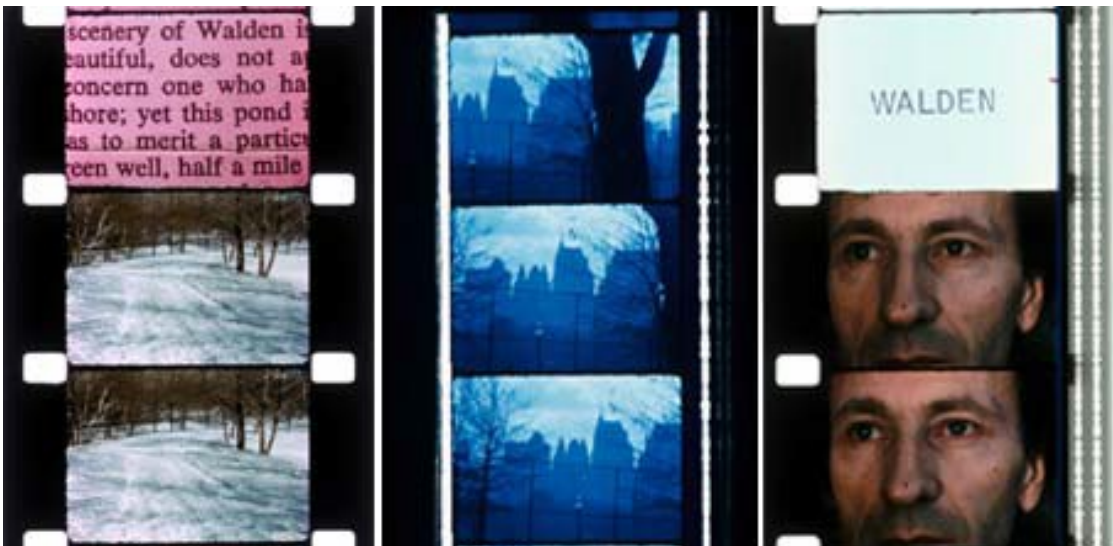


Figure 5: Walden by Jonas Mekas (1969) (Source: artistic references)

Mekas developed his style because film was expensive. So he shot small moments of his life: shaking the camera, shooting in seconds, and then collated the images together as an edit with very little post- production. The chance collisions and ‘brief moments of beauty’ (Mekas-Serpentine Gallery, 2012) were scored by a similar approach to sound, recorded separately. His work poetically captures his experiences through his methods.

Digital technologies can permit many to ‘make’, ‘share’ and build ‘dialogues’, but if the output is an extension of dominant, commercial aesthetics, and is only shared online, the work fails to encompass some of the d.i.y punk aesthetic, resisting or finding ways to resist dominate aesthetics and economic structures. There is a danger that we will become a ‘society of extras’(Bourriaud 2002, 113), extras of what Debord termed the

‘spectacle’... ‘as a part time stand-in for freedom’ (Bourriaud 2002, 113). Additionally, aesthetically, the Internet encourages makers to become ‘professionals’, even if their practise is a part-time endeavour. This can lead to work often high in production value, but confined by dominant aesthetic codes, shackled by commerce and in danger of not being as free-spirited in its approach.

This can be a generative tension. Finding a space in between the digital participatory cultures, alongside artistic-media art works that aim to operate within the public sphere, can provide some new ideas as the digital wave continues to grow – perhaps developing new forms of McLuhan’s COUNTERBLAST.

The following section will therefore unpick and examine some relevant cinema practices in the 20th century, that have explored filmmaking as an underground, cooperative ideas, for aesthetic, political and social innovation; with aims of creating space for themselves to make and share work, and towards alternative collective experiences. This will lead to a broad exploration of some of the discussions on avant-gardism and experimental film processes in the 20th century, before developing some context for my work with the New York and London Film Co-Ops, SORN, and more generally, underground-counterculture film and art practices. Finally, it will discuss film and its relationship to the institutions through the uncomfortable lens of legitimacy.

PART THREE - Underground & Collective Cinema

Tom Gunning’s ideas on early cinema of ‘attractions’, (1986, 63-70), outlined how pre-1906, cinema was still an emerging art form based within the traditions of theatre and the fairground. The filmmakers at this time, according to Gunning, explored film as site of scientific, narrative and visual experimentation - an array of cinematic languages and tricks. They were exploring the possibility of the form and the machines and developing an audience, understanding the medium beyond other art forms through public situations similar to the carnival fair ground. These film experiments/performances were underpinned with a sense of discovery: what cinema could become. The screening

events were not yet structured, certainly not as we came to know in the multiplexes in the 20th century. Instead, they were more of a social ‘spectacle’: a site for, interchange, wonder and curiosity.

Gunning borrows the term ‘attraction’ (1986, 231-233) from Soviet filmmaker Sergey Mikhaylovich Eisenstein, who first developed and articulated the term ‘montage of attractions’ in his essay of the same title in 1923. Eisenstein outlined how: ‘An attraction (in our diagnosis of theatre) is any aggressive moment in theatre, i.e. any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence, verified by experience’ (Gunning 1923, 34). Eisenstein attempted to use the tools of cinema production, specifically in his editing, towards the generation of a third meaning for the audience – exploring how two images could clash, collide, or come together to create new meanings beyond continuity.

For Gunning, the development of exciting technologies and its convergence with popular culture, was a laboratory of possibility. It had an ‘exhibitionist quality’ and ‘a freedom from the creation of a diegesis, its accent on direct stimulation’ (Gunning 1986, 232). The enthusiasm of the early avant-garde for film was at least partly an enthusiasm for a mass culture that was emerging at the beginning of the century, offering a new sort of stimulus for an audience not acculturated to the traditional arts. (1986, 232)

Reekie discusses Gunning’s work in his book, *Subversion: The Definitive History of the Underground* (2007). Whilst sympathetic to his research output, Reekie makes the case that the avant-garde was an ‘underground cinema’ (Reekie 2007, 67). Rather than pointing to 1907 as the moment when narrative film went mainstream, and the avant-garde turned to face new horizons, he considers Gunning’s terminology to be divisive in the sense of creating divisions between narrative film (as popular), and experimental/underground work (artists, amateurs, intellectuals and scientists). Instead, Reekie suggests they both are ‘...Far from being incompatible or mutually exclusive, the montage of popular cinema is actually a synthesis of narrative and attraction – that is the core of Eisenstein’s interpretation...Popular cinema is a narrative of attractions’ (Reekie 2007, 71).

As technologies developed and sync-sound found its way into narrative film, cinema quickly became a popular and lucrative spectacle. Hollywood began developing the epic films, with directors such as Howard Hughes and Alfred Hitchcock crafting narrative with technical expertise, developing a popular mastery of the medium. The less ‘primitive... single-shot diversions made by entertainers and showmen for fairgrounds and music-halls’ (Rees 1999, 25) were apparently no longer of great interest to the general public, now favouring: ‘More elaborate’ cinema, ‘...in purpose-built cinemas – the origins of the picture palaces which were to dominate most of the century (Rees 1999, 25). However, the avant-garde and others interested in further exploration of film as a medium - beyond mainstream dramas and entertainment, continued to interrogate the medium in a variety of forms.

A.L. Rees examines how films made by artists in the early 20th century developed dialogues with other art practices, such as the ‘Futurist, constructivist and Dadaist groups between 1909 and the mid-1920s’ (Rees 1999, 19). The Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s, experimented with form and montage, and filmmakers such as Luis Buñuel surveyed the surreal potential of the moving image, as seen in his film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). Hand painted abstract films, such as *Colour Box* (1935) by Len Lye, continued the idea of the primitive, tactile film. DADA adopted cut up techniques, technical tricks, and formal experimentations in a similar way to the very early filmmakers, probing the possibilities of the mediums, with, and in many ways beyond, the emerging narrative populist cinema.

In the UK, there was some discussion of how to define varying emerging film practices emerging. David Hilton reflects on other forms of experimental film and the avant-garde, framed in the 1920s and 30s, in his PhD ‘Film and the Dartington Experience’ (2005). He cites Kenneth Macpherson, editor of *Close-Up*, a British magazine, as suggesting the avant-garde attitude of the time for the cinema ‘lies with the amateur’ (Macpherson in Hilton 1927, 14). This connection with the avant-garde and an amateur spirit, Hilton suggests, demands an interrogation of its possibilities as a medium on the forefront of its development.

The term 'experimental' is more problematic to define. Hilton states that 'experimental' could imply testing methods, 'representing things and re- presenting things', but that by its very nature is a 'loose' term (Hilton 2005, 94)). Ultimately, he explains experimental film within his context of research, as being a method of working that '...sets out to find new forms or new ways of doing things in a frame that tests ideas and throws up results (positive or negative) that can be applied' (Hilton 2005, 95). It is therefore 'functional', has 'purpose' and 'builds from within the culture to find new forms' (Hilton 2005, 95).

Alongside artistic film practices in the early part of the twentieth century amateur filmmaking began to be an activity for those who could afford the equipment. In the UK, the amateur cinema magazines began to be published: sharing ideas, techniques and approaches in the 1930's. In Plymouth, Claude Endicott, a local butcher, began using a super 8mm camera, to capture his experiences and environments in his afternoons, footage of which is included in the film *Tamar* in this thesis.

There is a rich history of experimental, political and experimental film in many different contexts. Post 1945, there is a vast number of filmmakers and artists, whose varied approach to cinema-making has influenced this research, including: Maya Deren, John Cassavetes, Jeff Keen, Margaret Tait, Stan Brakhage, Marie Meken, Robert Frank, Andy Warhol, George Kuchar, Kenneth Anger, Robert Bresson, Patrick Keiller, Chris Marker, Sam Fuller, Cristian Mungiu, Agnes Varda, Nicholas Ray, Jean Rouch, Jean Luc Godard, Alex Cox, John Smith, Jem Cohen, Lynne Ramsey, Jim Jarmusch, Harmony Korine, Robert Bresson, Lars Von Trier, Penelope Spheeris, Derek Jarman, John Waters, Vivienne Dick and Gasper Noe. However, because of the interdisciplinary practice-based nature of this research, and my word limit, I would like now to move forward with further analysis of *Underground*, collective film activities, rather than focus on individual filmmakers and works.

The Possibility of an Underground

The 1960s brought an underground/counter-culture element to film culture and experimentation, by probing the medium, democratising production and playfully

inciting participation and collective artistic making. Many of these productions in the underground were separated from commercial cinema in the sense that they were made not for profit: ‘...the leisure of amateur cinema was at every level derived from participation in the process of cinematic production’ (Reekie 2007, 107).

It is perhaps too neat a position, but the counterculture in the 1960s, specifically in New York, London and Paris, did seem to provide an energetic constellation of ideas – aesthetic, political, and radical - connected with subcultural cultural resistance. Duncan Reekie summarises this time as evoking, ‘subcultures against the square world: radical student activist, working-class youth, feminists Black and Latin American radicals, peace protesters, anarchists, communists. Anti- artists, gay liberationists, ecologists, hippies, heads, freaks, motorcycle gangs and so on’ (Reekie 2007, 139). All together, the vast variety of happenings, film and art practices began considering the cross-over with popular culture and other forms beyond mainstream culture.

The New York Film co-op emerged in the very early 1960s. Jonas Mekas, a poet, writer and filmmaker, was one of its key instigators. He has remained an advocate and facilitator for underground and avant-garde cinema since, but at this time, he was a leading figure in pushing for new ways to consider film as an art form. The Co-Op consisted of artists and filmmakers interested in ‘investigating new methods of distribution’ (Mekas 1962). Foreshadowing the development of d.i.y culture, they rejected traditional channels of distribution and exhibition.

Instead, they formed new co-operative and collective distribution outlets, creating their own screening venues. Much of this energy was informed with a kind of anger against the inequality of a culture industry, dominated by commerce rather than expanding the medium as an art form. ‘The official cinema all over the world is running out of breath’, Mekas wrote; calling it ‘morally corrupt, esthetically obsolete, thematically superficial, temperamentally boring’ (Mekas 1962). Mekas also suggested that the ‘slickness of their execution has become a perversion covering the falsity of their themes, their lack of sensibility, their lack of style’ (Mekas 1962).

To counter the dominant model, Mekas attempted to create a new collective film culture. ‘...the New American Cinema has until now been an unconscious and sporadic manifestation, we feel the time has come to join together’ (Mekas 1962). They rejected the idea of only making films for money, infused with optimism and artistic action. The group, and especially Mekas, disregards technical virtuosity, particularly from a traditional cinematic approach. Instead, Mekas was, and still is, not restricted by mainstream aesthetic or technological standards, and the first manifesto of the New American Cinema in 1961, makes it clear that they saw a new International cinema emerging: We don’t want false, polished, slick films—we prefer them rough, unpolished, but alive; we don’t want rosy films—we want them the color of blood (Mekas 1961).

The New York Film co-op group tested boundaries and opening up new possibilities, expanding, at least in terms of collective and independent film support, some of the ideas developed by Maya Deren in the 1950s, who sought to ‘bring together, for mutual action and protection, the hitherto isolated film artists, {and} to act as a liaison center between the film artist and his public’ (quoted in Rabinovitz 2003, 80). Deren aimed to develop networks for making and distributing cinema, and in the 1960s, these alternative film co-ops began to develop. The counterculture and underground, initially USA led, created an identity and connectivity based around publications, films, fanzines, happenings and social dialogues. Jonas Mekas was a key driving figure, writing and defending controversial films, such as Pull My Daisies (1959) by Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie and John Cassevetes' early work Shadows (1959), premiered at Cinema 16. He also supported experimental work (after a meeting with Deren in 1955, after Mekas had accused experimental cinema as being ‘a conspiracy of homosexuality’ (Rabinovitz 2002, 84).

The Spirit of the Counterculture

For many around this time, cinema was seen as being at the forefront of the revolutionary spirit, due to its popularity and the slow but certain emergence of more accessible technology (specifically super 8mm in the early 1960s). The spirit of the

counterculture was a key moment for underground and experimental cinema. The movement, loose and fragmentary, provided impetus for developing alternative-oppositional possibilities. Incorporating music, art and film, the Underground for Mekas and later for Reekie, was and is an exciting, ethical, convivial and oppositional site.

As in the other arts in America today—painting, poetry, sculpture, theatre, where fresh winds have been blowing for the last few years—our rebellion against the old, official, corrupt and pretensions is primarily an ethical one. (Mekas 1962, 44)

The London Film co-op (1967-1999) emerged with the aim of screening experimental and underground films facilitated with open-access screening events. The group, inspired by Mekas and the New American Cinema, aimed to redefine the possibilities of cinema. 'Cinim', published by the London Film Co-Op, reflects on the aims of the project, working in a space in-between art and cinema. The first issue featured a telegram from Mekas inciting the group to 'Shoot Shoot Shoot', stating: 'WE HAVE TO START EVERYTHING FROM SCRATCH, FORM THE BEGINNING. NO COMPROMISES, HOWEVER SMALL...' (Mekas quoted in Decherney 2012, 184). Alongside these co-ops, the US New Left film group Newsreel, the Cinegiomali Italina student movement, and the work of Chris Marker and Joris Ivens all began to develop revolutionary film theory and practices as the decade developed.

This form of testing and experimenting with the aesthetic, political and social potential of film developed further collective approaches to making cinema. SLON (Service de lancement des œuvres nouvelles), developed in France (1967-1974). Chris Marker was important in its development, although SLON was formed on the strict basis of being a participatory, political and non-hierarchical group. Loosely comprising other established filmmakers beside Marker, such as Godard, Joris Ivens and Agnes Varda, the group also included amateur filmmakers and workers. They made a series of political and informational films from 1967 to 1977. Their aim was, 'to give the power of speech to people who don't have it, and, when it's possible, to help them find their own means of expression' (Marker 2003 interviewed by Douhaire, S. Rivoire. A).

In 1968, SLON resurrected the Cine-Train experiment from the 1930s, in which Aleksandr Medvedkin travelled across Soviet Russia, setting up film projection studios in train carriages. Medvedkin aimed to film the people of Russia and immediately show the footage back to them, working quickly and on the move. SLON drew from these political and immediate ideas and collaborated directly with the workers they often based the films around, giving them the means of production and taking advantage of new technological developments. The workers documented their experiences in factories and strikes, voicing their struggles. The group used their 'legitimised' position as noted filmmakers, to seek out transformative and participatory approaches to cinema, from which the working classes could make visible their concerns and directly impact on the methods of production.

The Basement Project Film Group emerged in East London in 1972. Maggie Pinhorn and Dan Jones started the project, driven with a sense of community and educational approaches to film. Pinhorn, a filmmaker, began the group when she heard that some young people wanted to make a film in her community. She decided that instead of making the film, she considered that the project would be better if they made it themselves. Pinhorn was working in the film and media industry at the time, but she became disillusioned. 'The media seemed to me totally irrelevant to the vast majority of people in this country. It wasn't about them and it wasn't for them; it was, in fact, completely middle class oriented and dominated. There is a mass of people who still don't get heard and are not appreciated' (Pinhorn in Nigg and Wade 1980, 180). For Pinhorn, the 'building of imaginations and creativity' was the central political act in her film practice. In a way, it was d.i.y punk. She states that she wanted to make the process participatory to show the young people how 'To help themselves rather than have others do it for them. To stop depending on the establishment system and to get on with it. To articulate, to say what they want, what they think and feel' (1980: 182).

Whilst left wing collectives continued to develop in London into the 1970s, such as Cinema Action (1968), for Reekie the popular/radical potential lost its momentum. Reekie argues that Mekas and some of the London Film Co-Op failed to address the industrial and economic factors at play, which would lead to the appropriation of Underground cultural activity by state Art, and find its new place in the institutions. The

subversive energies of the 1960s became institutionalised and state funded (Reekie 2008, 166). The non-hierarchical and conviviality became an exclusive art form, part of the ‘bourgeois culture’ (Reekie 2008, 167). For Reekie, the state suppressed the radical potential of the popular.

Cinema-Makers Go Lo-Fi

Alongside the film movements developing in the larger cities at this time, such as New York and London and the Third Cinema as outlined previously in this chapter, other cinema activist groups began to emerge in other areas in Europe. Anna Schober, in the detailed and revealing book *Cinema Makers*, covers a great amount of ground by illuminating lo-fi and political-expanded cinema work in European cities from the Second World War up until the 2000s. She circuitously connects a number of interesting syntheses between different ‘cinemas’, sidestepping the need to pedantically separate styles, aesthetics or forms. European art house filmmakers, such as Fassbinder (an outsider who directed several vital dramas exploring race, class and gender in the 1970s) seep into our understanding of how other cinema movements overlapped with ideas and came into existence during this time.

The central theme underpinning her analysis is the consideration of how ‘spectators became makers’. The countercultural spirit of the 1960s brought with it new political and artistic ideas of who could take part. Schober states that: ‘The German and Austrian communal cinemas as well as some of the politically engaged cinema clubs or the Expanded Cinema that emerged around 1968 transformed the cinema setting into a site from which they tried to deconstruct dominant ideologies and to inhabit space in order to build a decidedly ‘different’ society’ (Schober 2013, 33). Often, these groups would provoke the public into engaging with political discourse. The act of creating opportunities for people to engage in cinema beyond the traditional forms, began a process of thinking through how we can perceive a modern cinema, and in doing so, create spaces in which people could began dialogues and participate.

For example, she notes how film festivals developed after 1968 that ‘provided very emotionally intense encounters and forged an initial bonding between film-makers, critics, cinema activists and the public which was then developed further, for instance, through mutual invitation, further festival visits, local screenings of films or film-theory readings’ (Schober 2013, 91).

The Low-Fi Video activists in Yugoslavia, from 1997-2003, explored lo-fi aesthetics, humour and collective-social exhibitions in urban spaces at a time of war. They created ‘cinema situations’ to create and share work (Schober 2013, 187) and made use of video and digital technology, spreading the ‘trash’ aesthetic ‘to the screenings themselves’ (Schober 2013, 189). They purposefully articulated themselves as a ‘lower form’ – lo-fi – partly to challenge cultural tastes and values at the time. Additionally, they made films quickly, ‘for fun’ and with no budget (192).

Interestingly, Schober makes a theoretical frame for their work with a reading of Rancière, stating that whilst they didn’t consider themselves ‘explicitly political, ‘the aesthetics they coined and the way activist publicly exhibited these films can be judged as taking part in a ‘political’ struggle in the sense that a loose group constituted itself by the desire for ‘truth’, ‘authenticity’ or ‘directness’ (as opposed to ‘fake’); and by using a specific aesthetics in order to call ways of being. These qualities relate to how Rancière considers politics is therefore:

The primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it. It must first be established that the stage exists for the use of the interlocutor who can’t see it and who can’t see it for good research because it doesn’t exist. (Rancière 1999, 27)

Schober and Reekie’s analysis, discussion and articulations of cinema alternatives support a narrative that offers some insight and resistance to dominate media histories and narratives. James Curran’s work in *Media and Power* (2002), argues that the power of the media has defined a particular narrative media history. Whilst his analysis is through a media lens rather than an activist-social one, he calls for this history to be revisited and refocused, towards alternative ways of looking at how the media has shaped our understandings. The narratives constructed are put at odds with one another, in opposition, because those who have shaped the media define not only its narrative but

also its importance. Alongside Reekie, he makes the case that mass popular culture has been in a struggle with the cultured elite, who saw popular culture as being a threat to their status. As the masses rejected their tastes and turned towards popular forms of art, as seen in the cinema, the elites moved towards the avant-garde as a means to preserve their cultural status. By keeping what they saw as the new, legitimate and significant, the elites, according to Curran, could cultivate and fertilise a hierarchy of taste.

Whilst the underground lost its momentum, community art organisations, funded by the state, began to emerge. In *Art, Culture and Enterprise: The Politics of Art and the Cultural Industries* (1990), Justin Lewis suggests that the community arts movements ‘failed to achieve, or even look like achieving, its broad objective’: to bring art back into the communities. For Lewis, they couldn’t make their own contributions to the cultural sphere. He wonders if this is down to its ‘appropriation’ by the cultural elite, funded as a ‘community arts’ project, yet lacking a ‘target audience’ or an ability to remove the shackles of the dominant art and culture of the time.

Lewis considers that value systems have to be put in place to judge work, aesthetically and culturally, as ‘how else do we decide what to fund?’ (Lewis 1990, 1). This gatekeeper approach to the arts, creates a situation in which free, liberatory and subversive work has little chance to gain funding, as it would likely present a threat to the ones funding the projects. Reekie makes an interesting point in regards to state funded community groups. Whilst they can create a situation of shared knowledge and skills, due to the fact they are funded and have access to equipment, they also lack the subversive, oppositional and convivial attitudes of the Underground. This form of censorship limits how an artist or a group might approach their work. Because of this valorisation through financial exchange, is implied by Reekie that the projects were often unexciting and safe; outcome driven, and overly controlled, limiting the freedom from which many underground works found liberation and political, collective energy (Reekie 2007, 2).

This is not to suggest there wasn’t amateur filmmaking outside of the commercial, underground, experimental-avant-garde or political film at this time. There were also filmmakers who defied being easily grouped, such as Derek Jarman, a British artist

filmmaker who, inspired by the 1970s punk scene in London, made a series of experimental work, visually poetic narratives and documentaries, and even created music videos before his untimely death in the 1980s.

However, Reekie challenges us to rethink how we perceive alternative and underground film outside of the dominant histories. He interrogates and redefines the Underground and its relationship to film practice, through a ‘complicated unlocking and historical recontextualisation of terms’ (Reekie 2007, 1). He uses the term ‘experimental’ to broadly refer to film and video makers exploring film beyond ‘established film culture’ (Reekie 2007, 1). Reekie identifies the British Underground as being at its most popular in the 1960s, before being renewed in the 1980s.

The subversion and liberatory film practices at this time were appropriated by ‘Art’ in the 1970s, leading towards an institutionalisation of experimental film. This development shifted experimental film towards an intellectual practice, a way of working with materials highlighting the need for theory and skill as essential to its understanding. Reekie suggests that the state, fearing the loss of control over legitimate Art, institutionalised cinema’s participatory potential by moving away from the social, convivial and open venues, and back into the lecture halls, via grants and funding to those considered legitimate. For Reekie, the emancipatory possibility of the Underground became an institutionalised, elitist practice at this time (Reekie 2007, 146-158). Furthermore, it became invisible to the people, reframed as an elite practice for artists and intellectuals, separated from the radical potential of popular culture. Experimental film history could therefore be in danger of being written by a certain kind of academic-artist, reinforcing their legitimised fields.

For Reekie, Underground Cinema is ‘alternative, participatory, ambivalent, material, utopian, anarchic, transgressive and unfinished’ (Reekie 2007, 204). In the early 1990s, Reekie co-founded the film coalition Exploding Cinema aiming to reignite Underground ideas, and continues to be an active space for open-access d.i.y cinema today. Additionally, the group visibly articulated a kind of d.i.y punk provocation to action, shifting passive criticality towards inciting the audience, perhaps unimpressed with what they saw, to become active makers instead and respond through their own

creation. After all, central to their ethos is the notion - ‘if you don’t like the film, then make a film’ and its first event was formed with the slogan: ‘NO STARS NO FUNDING NO TASTE’ (Reekie 2007, 193). Exploding Cinema, much like *Imperfect Cinema*, aimed to create a venue for participatory practice that didn’t seek to group or alienate a particular style, group or set of tastes. Instead, as Feyerabend suggest in *Against Methods* (1975) – ‘anything goes’.

The Tensions of the Amator

This tension between amateur, professional and the personal is articulated in the narrative film *Amator* (Kieślowski 1979), a Polish drama, written and directed by Krzysztof Kieślowski. The film tells the story of Filip Mosh (played by Jerzy Stuhr), a factory worker in Poland who buys an 8mm camera to begin recording his life and newborn daughter. His newfound filmmaking hobby leads to his boss asking him to make propaganda films for his place of work: the factory. This begins a passionate discovery of filmmaking. He sets up a cine-club alongside submitting his films to amateur competitions. In turn, he is approached to work for a television company. His hobby opens up new possibilities for him to pursue, in the field of film, a professional career.

These new opportunities set up a number of conflicts for the protagonist. His family life becomes strained – his wife dislikes the time he is now spending making films, and the creative, ethical and political dilemmas he begins to face in relation to his work. The film ends by Mosh turning the camera away from documenting what he sees around him, and towards it on himself, self-reflexively using the camera to articulate the personal tensions and dilemmas he now faced through his new found passion.

Kieślowski’s film attempted to express his own personal experience. He considers that he failed to fully express his aspirations for cinema: ‘The goal is to reach that which exists in the human being, but there are no ways to describe it. You can get closer to it, but you will never reach it’ (Stok 1993, 224-225). Cinema doesn’t have the ‘means to do so’ he states (Stok 1993, 224-225). However, Kieślowski is a ‘filmmaker preoccupied with similarities and paradoxes...[a] career inverted over the years from

one centred on political realities to one of effervescent abstraction' (Cummings 2003, 46). Perhaps Kieślowski's frustration with the medium was with the constraints of the narrative. *Amator* is more concerned with social life than with cinematic aesthetics. In *Amator*, Mosz is credited for filming the real: what 'exists'. We are left unresolved at the narrative conclusion, unsure how Mosz will move forward with both his newfound passion – film, and his disintegrating family life, the very reason he became involved in filmmaking.

Perhaps it is in these unresolved uncertainties in which we can glean meaning from the film. More specifically in this research, we can find a parallel with the existential, ethical and political questions the film ask us: You have a camera - what are you going to film? And will you adapt your approach to improve your chances of professional and artistic progression at the expense of your aesthetical choices?

The film has no coherent answers. In this way, I would suggest Kieślowski did find a form to express the inner life, for it is one of contradictions, dilemmas and imperfections. The context and control of our art, the aesthetics and mediums in which we choose to express our daily lives are constantly in question, our contexts politically defined through the strains of a system valorising quality and economic outcomes. We can find ourselves asking: what are our roles and responsibilities as filmmakers mapping the mediums potential.

Conclusion

This contextual review examined and explored a number of interdisciplinary practices and histories. The 'poor images' (Steyerl 2012) mirror our uncertain times, perhaps challenging the clear idealism of the notion of 'participatory media' (Jenkins 2006) and the need to quantify value within participatory art (Bishop 2012). We can now use online platforms to participate – digital skills having spread so that anyone can engage in making of culture – deskilling critiques with what we consider traditional value of the old art forms – what does this mean for cinema?

The free-flowing experimental-underground, dating back to the early parts of the 20th century and developing a countercultural energy in the 1960s, shifted towards the academy in the 1970s, according to Reekie. In doing so, it just narrowly preceded the emergence of punk rock. As discussed, punk provides a historical platform from which issues of participation and collective activity can be raised, as well as occupying some strange meaning that demands its continual contestation if it is still is to have some kind of contemporary political meaning. The interesting positions I have mapped, from which my practice as research has contextually synergised, sits in between underground subcultural activity and the academy. My work attempts to incorporate an uncertain, fluid methodology, in order to play, critique and develop collective stimulated research. This interplay provides fertile ground for testing and developing these seemingly opposing and contradictory ideas as emerging research frameworks, which demand to be renewed.

In regard to how we understand d.i.y film, the ubiquity of moving images - uploaded, downloaded and shared on computer screens – blend the professional with the amateur. The home movie video collides with commercial or television work. Lo-fi aesthetics circulate in both the mainstream and on our computers. The popular arts of the twentieth century - cinema, television, photography and music, have ‘converged’ (Jenkins 2006). On the one hand, these media tools have created exciting accessibility for making and sharing content, skills and knowledge. On the other, digital media suggests we can all be ‘experts’. Once an emancipatory tool, the digital images, camera and software, now question how we perceive the ‘expert’.

Additionally, this interplay or interface of the contested idea of punk and its inherent activism with the democratic implications of digital technologies is seen as an exemplary site for exploration of what Rancière calls the dismantling of ‘boundaries that separate specialists’ (Rancière 2007, 257). I argue that the challenging of specialism from within an emerging film or media practice, does important work in furthering knowledge in arts and media academic research, interested in participatory methodologies, by operating in-between these sites.

Punk can still be a valuable political and aesthetic gateway for participatory or oppositional practice, renewed and reimagined in contemporary landscapes, if its philosophies are modified, contested and put into a practice - in which the aims are to engage with cultural production as well as encourage new producers. This addresses key questions relating to cultural elitism within dominant societies: not only through making and aesthetics, but sharing, opening up and socialising practice as research - announcing the possibility that anyone can participate in filmmaking or any other form of cultural production, regardless of skill or knowledge. In this light, I have adopted punk as a methodology for practice and research – seeking to bring some of the subversive energies of the underground into the academy in order to question and interrogate methods, research and practice as research. This consideration of punk has been further explored through the practice of writing this PhD, and is now communicated through my distillation of its meaning emerging from practice and theory as imperfect praxis.

The next chapter will therefore discuss my methodology and methods in more detail, developing some of the theoretical concepts used, so that imperfection could emerge as a conceptual idea to better instigate emerging participatory media arts and film practice.

CHAPTER TWO – METHODOLOGIES & METHODS

Notes on the Collective Dimension

The collective dimension of this project has provided this thesis with a series of interesting problems to consider. How can one measure impact, participation and ‘contribution to knowledge’ when one of the core aims of this research has been to explore emancipatory collaborative production, and call into question expertise through a shared methodology, emerging through sociable interaction, situated within a live participatory context. These dialogues can be seen as forming a collective film as research experience. The methods adopted sought to provide unique venues in which people could discover their own value through independent film projects, participatory practices or through dialogue and social interaction.

The key methodological framework underpinning the project's trajectory has been the creation of spaces in which ideas can be disseminated through open forums rather than hierarchical platforms. The process of writing this thesis and making sense of these experiences in order to formulate and share meaning, names this process as ‘imperfect praxis’. This term frames value within artistic research as something rooted within the experiential, shaped in and through social contexts.

Having said this, the practice did result in discrete outcomes. It led to a long- lasting *Imperfect Cinema* micro-cinema night that began in 2010 and is still active, having received hundreds of film submissions, and spawning a number of offshoot projects, some of which are now developing beyond the scope of the original project. Additionally, I have been developing a way of working via a screen and live sound

collaboration, in hybrid works *Home* (2013) and the *Tamar* project (2014). These projects have subsequently led to the development of the Imperfect Orchestra, that has established an autonomous existence outside of the context of the initial project.

Alongside providing a venue for new producers, autonomous projects and divergent ideas to collide in dissensus, the probing of imperfection's relation to a participatory film practice has led to a number of collaborative and well-attended all-ages workshops; collaborations with sound artists and other musicians and artists, live sound-super 8mm projects (at the Supersonic Festival, in Birmingham in 2011 and 2012), several additional film screenings and collaborations (the Exploding Cinema in London, All About the River Festival, Walk On), and a micro-cinema event at the Interstate Galleries in Brooklyn, New York.

There have been a wide array of film and audio-visual projects over the course of this six-year study, and many filmmakers and artists who contributed to the research, submitted and screened work at the micro-cinema events, workshops and various other screenings. Alongside the practical contributions, there have been aesthetic and political discussions in and through social contexts that have supported the research's trajectory. Perhaps without one casual conversation after a screening, the research might have taken a different course. Other ideas developed through collective musical experiences, which expanded into discussions, pushing ideas and future projects in a whole new direction and context. Because of this, the research has been lived and experienced in the everyday. This finds one historical context with the Situationist International, consisting of artists and intellectuals active between 1957 and 1972, adopting strategies aiming to transform everyday spaces and existing artworks through politically committed practices. However, spaces were developed from which new social experiences were fostered through the creative activity of filmmaking, regardless of the work being an appropriation of existing art materials, or any other type of form.

Many of the dialogues developed spontaneously and in the 'moment'. The theoretical model for the theory of 'moment' can be better understood through the writing of Henri Lefèvbre's 1946 book, the *Critique of Everyday Life* (2014), an inspirational theoretician for the Situationist International who, as discussed in the contextual review, proposed

that we grasp moments and create new situations in order to ‘attempt to achieve the total realization of a possibility’ (Lefèvbre 2014, 642). The moment ‘sets up against the uncertain and transitory background of the everyday’ (Lefèvbre 2014, 643) and resists the ‘systematization’ of ordinary life (Lefèvbre 2014, 643). The moment ‘creates situations’ (Lefèvbre 2014, 646), inventing possibilities ‘for those activities which are undertaken in the lived and which do not produce an external object’ (Lefèvbre 2014, 650). As such, many of the dialogues in the ‘moment’ were not recorded as ‘data’. The project would have taken on a very different form if quantifying its participation had been its key priority.

Subsequently, one of the outcomes from the research has been an understanding of participation being uncertain, ephemeral and dependent on multiple contributions. This raises questions about authorship, and the relationship between the individual and the collective. It could be argued that a practice of this kind seems to fall outside of legitimised fields of knowledge. It is still the case, even with the emergence of collaborative PhDs, that academia encourages individual authorship, which is often required to measure, or quantify its impact or value. This research conceives of the value of participation as residing in its resistance to such models of quantification. Nonetheless, a connection to academia has provided this project with structure, though one that exhibits tensions.

This is both the research’s limitation and its strength. In this sense, ‘imperfection’ names the interdisciplinary collaborative and ephemeral nature of participation ‘open-access’ work, but also investigates its emancipatory potential as a collective- active-space where a kind of knowledge can be explored. This knowledge requires an interdisciplinary, or even an ‘indisciplinary’ (Rancière 2008) kind of examination.

‘My Kids Could Draw Better Than That’

my kids could draw better than that
says some fox sly father
eyes yellowy
yes they could I agree with him
but could you



Figure 6: Alfred Wallis. Houses at St Ives, Cornwall ?c.1928–42 (Source: The Tate)

The above quotation is from a Billy Childish (2009) poem, writing about the artist Alfred Wallis. Wallis was a fisherman all his life until his 70s, when he started painting. He and I were both born in the same city, Plymouth. He lived most of his life in Cornwall or at sea. Wallis taught himself how to paint, as a hobby, later in his life, translating his memories and knowledge into paintings. Painting was also a way of keeping himself company after his wife passed away (Berlin, 105).

In 2009, as my doctoral research began, I visited the Tate in St Ives, Cornwall, which was showing an exhibition of Wallis' work. This was the first time I had seen his paintings, and I was captivated by the unusual perspectives, simple and imaginative, interesting textures and shapes of the canvases (often scraps of cardboard).

The book accompanying the exhibition included an essay and poem from the artist, poet, writer, amateur enthusiast, and punk-rock musician Billy Childish. Both Wallis and Childish are in some ways linked through time with their approach and sensibility to creative practice. They both suggest a form of amateur idealism in their work: makers who make because they love doing it, not motivated by hierarchies, taste or value systems of a cultural elite. Of course, today they are now both assimilated into that world and highly regarded.

Coming across Wallis' work affected my thinking on art, and after reading Childish's writing on the exhibition, I began forging links in my mind between art and punk in a different way. I suppose, as I was moving into the PhD, I was becoming concerned with legitimacy. On the train back to Plymouth, as I read the Childish essay in the Tate booklet, the aesthetics of imperfection were on my mind, making their way into words, as song, on a scrap of paper.

Wallis somehow found a gateway into a practice that he pursued for the love of it, not because he was trained to do it, for financial gain or acclaim. Childish's poem, challenges the cynical adult to question their notions of quality and value. 'What is more important, the marks on a canvas or the act of making marks?' I asked myself, regarding how my research might become a gateway for others to access their inner amateur spirit, allowing them to unselfconsciously, for the love of it, participate and create.

In this research the application of imperfect methods in participatory film and other cultural production, has been disseminated and put into action, towards building a renewable and adaptable imperfect praxis as methodology, in and through social contexts. In these projects, I have taken on a number of different roles: filmmaker,

facilitator, promoter, performer, educator and researcher. The imperfect methods have been put into practice producing participatory film as research.

It is important to state that the project *Imperfect Cinema* required responsiveness to the participatory and social context from within which it operated. Many of the methods and methodologies emerged spontaneously through the practice as research: the act of imagining, developing and facilitating *Imperfect Cinema*.

The three films accompany this written text represent distinctive elements of the methods used. *Everything Imperfect* (2013) is a 45 minute piece that attempts to unite the idea of imperfection, personal diary footage, documentary content from the practice, an improvisational movie, interviews during the research, and examples of other films submitted and screened at some of the *Imperfect Cinema* micro-cinema events. *Home* (2013) incorporates a live performance, bring together local musicians after we organised and participated in an open ‘gang-jam’ session. *Tamar* (2014) continues developing this screen/sound hybrid idea, uniting of moving image with live musical performance once again, but incorporates some footage from the *d.i.y imperfect workshop*, organised during the It’s all about the River Festival (2014), and led directing to the ‘Imperfect Cinema Orchestra’ emerging as an autonomous project: Imperfect Orchestra.

In this chapter I will discuss these methodologies and methods in reference to the film work, emphasising the structures and the disorder that comes from the participatory processes, as well as the theoretical frameworks that informed the project.

Practice as research

Robin Nelson describes Practice as Research (PaR) as a ‘research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practices) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry’ (Nelson 2013, 9). Nelson describes learning through practice as ‘knowing-by-doing’,

and this ‘is at the heart of PaR’ (Nelson 2013, 9). I have considered different terms to describe my research approach – including practice-led and practice-based. Though there is some crossover, the fluidity and simplicity of the term ‘practice as research (PaR)’, in relation to Nelson, provides a framework from which the methods can be ‘submitted as substantial evidence’ (Nelson 2013, 9).

In 2004, at the symposium *Supervising and examining practice-based PhDs in the Moving Image*, the filmmaker and theorist Malcolm Le Grice outlined how practice research (PR) could be modelled by using five key points: ‘1. The hypothesis, 2. The approach, 3. Theory, 4. Context, 5. Outcomes.’ In point five, outcomes, he suggests that it was not possible for a PR PhD to ‘have no written component’ (Le Grice 2005, 121-122). As an ‘academic activity’ it has to ‘leave something behind that includes the visuals but goes on a shelf and is available to the next generation of researchers’. Therefore, ‘the exhibition of practice work is more like the viva than the thesis’ (Le Grice 2005, 121-122). This provided me with something to consider: should my viva be an *Imperfect Cinema* micro-cinema event? The problem with this idea is that my practice has expanded into multiple territories, and to try and compress the scope of the project into one event would be inauthentic as an articulation of the whole.

It should be noted that my research methodology could be aligned with participatory action research, described by Vaillancourt (2009) as a:

recognized form of experimental research that focuses on the effects of the researcher's direct actions of practice within a participatory community with the goal of improving the performance quality of the community or an area of concern.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that the research intentionally followed these principles. Additionally, the aims of the practice were not centred on the ‘improvement’ of a community or concern - the intentions were more ambiguous and open. Part of this PhD thesis suggests that a new methodology, imperfect praxis, emerged from the practice, developed by applying various sub- methodologies, which this thesis will now go on to describe.

Methods Against Methods

In order to acknowledge the uncertainty of participatory work, and to support the emergence of a new methodology, the project's overall trajectory was wary of being fixed into a regimented methodological approach. As the practice continued developing, as noted, an element of philosopher of science, Paul Feyerabend's methods 'against methods' (Feyerabend 1975) emerged. He suggests that if the aim of a practice is to encourage progress, that the only methodological principle to follow is - 'anything goes' (Feyerabend 1975, 5).

While this offered my research a great amount of freedom, whilst immersed in the projects, it was at times, difficult to comprehend the meaning or direction of the research with any kind of certainty. I was aware of the importance the theoretical discourses permitted for opening up a space of action. Now, in the process of writing up the research, I am in many ways going backwards in time to piece together the varied formations that make up my methodologies. This is something that Feyerabend advocated for; '...backward movement isn't just an accident; it has a definite function...it gives us the time and the freedom that are needed for developing the main view in detail' (Feyerabend 1988, 118). In light of this anarchic approach to practice as research, the methodologies I will now discuss combine a mixture of theoretical discourse and some of the philosophical influences and understandings of the projects emerging through the practice.

Technologies of Spirit

Friedrich Kittler considered the emergence of media technologies to have transformed 'the structure, placement, and function of cultural production' (1990: 284). In *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (Kittler 1990), he outlines how 'discourse networks' - defined as the relations between media and the people - shaped European culture by defining the tastes, power structures and hierarchies of culture. These networks defined our understanding of cultural value. For Kittler, the arrival of media technology signified a radical shift in our historical archive, outlining who has the power in which to 'give

culture to select, store, and process relevant data' (369). For Kittler, 'technology 'determines our situation' (Kittler 1999, xxxix), directing cultural production and demands investigation. 'What remains of people is what media can store and communicate' (Kittler 1999, xl).

This research problematizes and, in some ways attempts to create a dialogue with, Kittler's ideas of examining the media itself as a means for historical understanding, agency and 'technical specificity' (Parikka 2012, 71). It communicates the 'process' of using digital technology as an emancipatory tool for participatory and collective artistic practices, contextualized within relevant political and artistic activities of the 20th century, by affirming meaning and value as existing in and through the social dialogues. Kittler moved beyond Marshall McLuhan's 'medium is the message' (1964), suggesting now it is media that defines us. Whilst media's materiality and their histories ask important questions for contemporary media scholars and artists, this thesis has attempted to shift the direction away from the technical.

Bernard Stiegler calls for 'technologies of spirit' in our time, devising collective and individual environments in light of our current technical and political situations. He critiques contemporary capitalism, controlling our 'brain time', through industrialisation and informational knowledge, rather than experiences in the social world.

Only a fight against the stupidity imposed by the control of available brain-time, which is to say by industrial populism, represents a real possibility of 're-enchanting the world': of rending it desirable, and thereby of restoring to reason its primary sense as a motive of life. (Stieger translated by Athur, 2014: 5)

Stiegler defines 'spirit' as a human aspect for 'imagining and concretizing alternatives' and 'collective intelligence', through the use of technologies (Stiegler 2014, 69-75). I began this research from a subcultural position, without technical, theoretical knowledge or mastery. Therefore, Stiegler's idea of 'spirit' resonates with my understanding of imperfection, comprehended through the experiences, and is difficult to concretely define in words. Using/playing with technology, instigated creative, collaborative opportunities, open up spaces and counter- environments, in which a kind

of 'spirit' could exist. I use the word 'counter' in reference to McLuhan's ideas on the 'COUNTERBLAST':

The term COUNTERBLAST does not imply any attempt to erode or explode BLAST. Rather it indicates the need for a counter-environment as a means of perceiving the dominant one. Today we live immersed with an electric information environment that is quite imperceptible to us as water is to a fish. At the beginning of his work, Pavlov found that the conditioning of his dogs depended on a previous conditioning. He placed one environment within another one. Such is COUNTERBLAST. (McLuhan 1969, 5).

We can perceive and probe dominant media landscapes, such as cinema, through the construction of counter-cinema-situations. These environments, however small, or micro, can facilitate alternative sites of free expression. In doing so, we can rethink how we understand cinema as a medium. Not only through the content or the study of the media apparatuses themselves, but through the collective experiences facilitated by the making, seeing and discussion. In these environments, cinema as a culture, is inclusive and 'ordinary' (Williams 1958).

Raymond Williams told us 'culture has two aspects: known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested' (Williams 1958, 3). Whereas the gatekeepers of our cultural past determined tastes - what is visible, stored and who could participate - the democratisation of digital technology blurs these distinctions. This is not only through how we participate in culture, but also the vast amount of accessible information available. The digital can store artefacts, as opposed to the medium of film, which will eventually disintegrate.

Kittler's post-human media materialism suggests that media dictates our communication and understanding of situations: what we create, represent and archive. In doing so, it is the technologies that have the power to form meaning and collective memories. Whilst this thesis acknowledges the democratising potential that new online media now offers, this research attempts to problematise this shifting of power, a technological resistance if you will. This, in turn, is because the fundamental understanding and knowledge

developed from the practice positions value as emerging through everyday dialogues, chance and unique moments.

These moments of unique experiences can be framed around Henri Lefèvbre's 'theory of moments' (Lefèvbre 2014, 652). The everyday actions, struggles, and play – the 'transitoriness' of the everyday, is situated within what is lived and how it is experienced. These moments are documented in this practice as uncertain and ephemeral. The audio-visual technologies were used as a vehicle towards constituting social relationships, and 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977). In doing so, imperfect praxis finds its meaning through creative, and social activity that is open, constantly in flux and dependent on people contributing to the work.

Marx defined praxis quite simply as being activity interacting in society, rather than one separating theory and action:

The problem of knowledge in the abstract is a false problem. Abstract logical consistency, theory divorced from social activity and practical verification, have no value whatsoever. The essence of man is social, and the essence of society is praxis – acts, courses of action, interaction. Separated from praxis, theory vainly comes to grips with falsely formulated or insoluble problems, bog down in mysticism and mystification. (Marx Theses on Feuerbach VIII, in Lefèvbre 1969)

Of course, Marx was writing before digital media technologies developed and changed how we interact with the world in the 20th century. Nevertheless, the project finds context for praxis and some solace in this statement, not only as a research project, but also with how we can understand the 'essence' of cultural and participatory practice as research activity. The processes and practices constituting these social relationships were founded upon, on the one hand a form of rationality and theory, in which the idea of imperfection negated a value system indebted to the capitalist commodification of labour, and on the other, a sense of its own emergence, developing as and when people came to be involved, participated and formed its understandings and potential.

Imperfect Methodologies

A ball has to be round. A circle has to be a perfect circle. Perfection of a ball is in its roundness. But in many of the cases, in what we call art, we are on an adventure with no rational end. You just keep working and working and, at some point, you say, that's it, it's done. (Mekas 2015, 51)

Early on in the research, as previously discussed, I outlined the ways in which the project was using a d.i.y punk methodology in my paper *Towards a Radical Film Practice* (Gall 2010). This idea further developed through dialogues, collaboration and practice, and was discussed in two further subsequent papers and published articles, co-authored with Dan Paolantonio . These notions were inspired by our experiences within d.i.y punk and its possible translation into a participatory film practice.

Another key influence as outlined in the contextual review, was filmmaker Duncan Reekie, facilitator of 'Exploding Cinema' (1991-now). One of his main arguments in his work, borrowing the term from Bakhtin (1984, 3), was the notion that the underground needed to reclaim a 'the subversive strategies of the radical popular' (Reekie 2007, 208). This space drew from Bakhtin's carnivalesque concept, ideas around film, conviviality and the general subversion of state art control. In a paper published by 'One Plus One Filmmakers Journal', we outlined the ways in which, 'Imperfect Cinema employs a d.i.y punk methodology to produce, disseminate and socialise a popular radical film practice' (issue 06, 2011).

Let's consider the shifting meaning of do-it-yourself (d.i.y) culture and its contemporary relevance. We are of course familiar with d.i.y in a home improvement context. But the history of d.i.y cultural music production from, skiffle music, to garage rock, to punk and beyond has been radically altered by digital technology. As discussed previously, in the West, most of us can now 'do' much of culture ourselves - uploading our films, music, blogs etc. on websites and social media platforms. Does this still have a political, emancipatory resonance with the punk context of d.i.y culture?

One of the ways that this research understands and utilises punk is that it popularised the ‘anyone can do it’, ‘no expert’ ethos as a subcultural practice, something that the avant-garde had been previously exploring in the 20th century. This liberation from limitations, of who is allowed to take part in culture, has been radically democratised through the Internet, but we wanted to celebrate and utilise the human element of face-to-face interaction. We also used punk simply as an easily communicated cultural reference and aesthetic influence that was pre-loaded with political and subcultural weight.

It was crucial that *Imperfect Cinema* be as immediate, inclusive and non-hierarchical as possible. We took some influence from the idea of a ‘floor-show’ - when a band leaves the stage and plays their set directly on the floor, with little or no barrier between them and the audience. The move to the floor suggests a negation of platforms and embraces horizontal approaches, as the whole room becomes the stage, shared by both the performer and those in attendance.

Often, my band Damerels adopted this approach. Our drummer would ask members of the crowd to play the drums during some songs, whilst I ‘sang’ most of the songs while shoulder-to-shoulder with the crowd. Often floor-shows take place in small venues or spaces that don’t have stages, but even when a venue did have a stage, we would opt for the floor, as it added intimacy and vitality to the experience. Floor-shows can lead to unexpected results, as you’re never sure exactly what will happen. The interaction between the band and the crowd is unpractised, uncertain and usually quite exiting. I wanted *Imperfect Cinema* to have these qualities.

This aim to blur the division between spectator and performer finds some association with Umberto Eco’s ideas of *The Open Work* (1984). The ‘comprehension of the original artefact is always modified by his particular and individual perspective. In fact, the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood’ (Eco 1984, 49). *Imperfect Cinema* was there for people to openly access and subjectively interpret. *Imperfect Cinema* gained ‘validity’ in proportion to the number of different people and perspective that were contributing to the project.



Figure 7. Damerels at the Great Escape Festival, Brighton, 9th March 2013. (Source: Skye Portman Photography)

Though, in some ways, the project was never as ‘open’ as we envisioned. Dan and I were the drivers and facilitators of the project, but we did have the goal that we would eventually ‘pass the baton’ to other members of the community who wished to initiate and facilitate their own *Imperfect Cinema* micro-cinema. However, this never came to fruition as we imagined it. That said, the project is still in progress and the possibility for new facilitators is something to look towards again in the future.

The aim of ‘openness’ in the practice can also find links in other theorists. For Walter Benjamin, the demystification of culture and its methods of production can lead to the stimulation of new producers (Benjamin 1978, 233). For Benjamin, a ‘dialogical approach’ must be introduced ‘into the living social context’ (Benjamin 2008, 80). It was not the content that mattered so much as what tools could be used to elicit participation. Alongside the consideration of Lo-Fi technologies - what they can tell us about culture production and aesthetics - the new digital media tools present radical possibilities when shared in social spaces. These spaces are a place in which others could engage in dialogue with the producers.

The openness of the project shifted the perception of a radical digital media practice by highlighting the conditions of production through collective interaction. In this sense, *Imperfect Cinema* made itself 'exposed' by embracing imperfect methods of production: the production of the events, the dissemination of the research through zines and online social media, as well as through the encouragement of new producers.

This approach to accessible-practice coalesces with some of Roland Barthes' concepts, attempting to operate as a 'writerly text' as opposed to a 'readerly text' (Barthes 1990, 4). A readerly text being one closed to its audience and unconcerned with history. The value in a writerly text, for Barthes: 'Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text' (Barthes 1990, 4). By highlighting our own imperfections, through some of the film work, but also through the micro-cinema itself (technical mistakes, improvisations and uncertain live conditions of culture), the practice as research operated as an open-mobile text. This drew from Stacey Thompson's argument that 'punk cinema' must show its methods of production, and how it came to be, in order to encourage others to think and know that it is possible to take part. Thompson states:

Punk cinema employs an open, writerly aesthetic, engages with history, and critiques its own commodification. It can be negatively defined as non-Hollywoodized, where a Hollywood aesthetic demands a closed, readerly text unconcerned with history and obfuscating its position within the relations of production. Punk films...foreground their conditions of production, which stand as material signifiers of the possibility of making music or film, participating in critique, or doing both at once. (Thompson 2004, 47)

In my attempts at my own punk film, during my preliminary investigations into links between punk and cinema in 2008/9 as mapped in my introduction, I came to realise that an abstract, reading of punk, in and through only the aesthetic, limited the d.i.y principles that I had been inspired by. Punk had to be associated with action. How I came to understand this was framed with using this as opportunity to create participatory filmmaking practice in public spaces.

In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord's critique of capitalism, he suggests that alienation and passivity have become intrinsic to the everyday. From 1957 to 1972,

The Situationist International (SI) called out for new ways to create unexpected experiences and encounters to elicit a rupturing of ‘the spectacle’. Art could be playful and spirited, but must always be linked with political intent and action. *Imperfect Cinema* aimed to shift the course of everyday life and production, rupturing the routines of the community and the individual, as well as instigating a new questioning of contemporary cinema. For some of the workshops and projects that were run through *Imperfect Cinema*, I borrowed some of the practical tactics of the SI, such as ‘the *dérive*’, opening oneself up to the possibility of encountering new experiences, but more so, I encouraged their concept of merging art and life - integrating cinema into the social and everyday, specifically, my *Walk on Film* project.



Figure 8: Walk on Film. (Source: Walk on Film/Imperfect Cinema workshop 2014)

A further link between *Imperfect Cinema* and the SI is evident, as 1970s punk has often been associated with the SI, and many of the key figures and taste-makers of the time. Malcolm McLaren and Bernie Rhodes, managers of The Sex Pistols and the Clash, amongst others (Marcus 1989, 19) were interested and inspired by some of SI’s ideas. However, the SI did not believe in the ‘prank’ without the politics. A prank, as dissent, could be holding up two fingers, spitting on the floor, or telling a interviewing journalist to ‘fuck off’ , but if these actions are taken without a real intention to change the landscape, then it risks becoming no more than an aesthetic, as provocative as it might be. A howl of dissent, fortifying capitalist modes of production, can reveal the conditioned world as we are conducted to see it, but becomes problematic and somewhat contradictory if the ‘revealing’, inspired by the SI’s political stance, reinforces the conditions of the spectacle - namely, that the ‘nightmare’ of advanced capitalism is to continue holding its grip on our actions.

Mistakes, Possibilities & Dialogues

In *Cinema in the Digital Age*, Nicholas Rombes (2009) suggests that both punk and the 'early digital avant-gardists' confirm and articulate 'mistakes' as being 'preconditions for advancements' (Rombes 2009, 14). He states that the d.i.y 'return to basics' approach to cultural production and cinema, employed by filmmakers such as Lars Von Trier and Harmony Korine, developed generational analog and digital synergies. Originally an actor led manifesto, DOGME 95 challenged the idea and value of cinema aesthetics, by using obstructions to fuel creative response using contemporary technologies. By using the new tools of digital technology, but negating conventional filmic methods and standards, they created new working methods, aesthetics and processes within the industry .

Aesthetic consideration of imperfection as a concept allowed participants in this research to explore and reignite the idea of cinema in a social-open-space - permitting aesthetic technical and performativity to be experimented with through its collective materialisation. This supports the development of the research methodology as being fluid, situational and experiential, but can be adapted by artists, filmmakers, educators, researchers and anybody else interested in the generation of cultural production within social, collective-participatory activity. The radicalisation of aesthetics, through mistakes and experimentation, is useful - but shifting the practice into a social arena allows for the value of imperfection to have emancipatory value rather than simply aesthetic value.

The radical development of technology has made past medium and aesthetic experiments somewhat devalued, as they are now so accessible. In this sense, imperfect methods, rather than developing an aesthetic manifesto for feature film production like DOGME 95, reframe technologies and their social interaction as connected through experience and dialogue. The tools produce the work, but must be experienced socially. These methods view face-to-face interaction and shared experience, rather than individual online-connectivity mediated through technology and commercial enterprise, as a vital component towards continuing the dialogues and practice of imperfect methods.

Indisciplinarity

Although featuring a mixture of artists, filmmakers and intellectuals, the Situationist International operated as an exclusive group. Bishop implies Debord and other members did not open up their group to participatory activity. ‘Despite their frequent attacks on ‘bourgeois’ art and its institutions, Debord and Lebel came from well-to-do families and did not countenance the possibility of targeting activities toward an audience outside their community of artists and bohemian intelligentsia; these events consolidated (rather than created) group identity’ (Bishop 2012, 103).

One of the ways in which the research attempted to move past exclusivity was to take something from Rancière’s theoretical position on the examination and disruption of specialism. Rancière calls his approach not interdisciplinary but ‘indisciplinarity’ (Rancière 2008). He breaks down the division between disciplines and argues that everyone is qualified.

Q) Would it be right to suggest that your work is not so much inter-disciplinary as a-disciplinary?

Neither. It is ‘indisciplinarity’. It is not only a matter of going besides the disciplines but of breaking them. My problem has always been to escape the division between disciplines, because what interests me is the question of the distribution of territories, which is always a way of deciding who is qualified to speak about what (Rancière interview with Marie-Aude Baronian and Mireille Rosello 2008).

We can find some immediate historical links with the interdisciplinary aesthetics of rupturing, cutting up, and other approaches to subversive culture-making that the avant-garde, punk and other artists employed and helped to popularise. The No Wave scene, as contextualised in the previous chapter, is a good example of deskilling – choosing to approach/play an instrument/camera with no background or trained skill. Similarly, *Imperfect Cinema* encouraged participants to do before knowing how to do. The playful nature of the films we made for the micro-cinema events as well as films that others contributed, were a reflection of thinking through Rancière’s notion of ‘indisciplinarity’; by attempting to rupture and disregard the spaces that can forge

division between specialism in research. The ‘artist’, ‘academic’ or ‘practitioner’ (me) and the ‘object’ of study (participants) were equal, in the sense that there was no hierarchy of taste or prior knowledge required to participate. Imperfection allowed for the opening of spaces that doesn’t identify with one activity. In doing so, imperfection acted as a conceptual idea for developing new approaches to participatory filmmaking – as a social venue, an aesthetic, or as a principle.

This notion of indisciplinaryity was also discussed by W.J.T Mitchell with Asbjørn

Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes:

From the standpoint of disciplinarity, this means something more than the familiar invocation of ‘interdisciplinarity’, which in my view is a bit too safe and predictable (I’ve argued this elsewhere in an essay entitled ‘Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture’). I prefer a notion of image science and visual culture as sites of what I want to call ‘indisciplinarity’, moments of breakage, failure, or deconstruction of existing disciplinary structures accompanied by the emergence of new formations. (Mitchell- Grønstad- Vågnes 2006)

This relation between disciplines acts a platform for possibilities in-between institutional and subcultural practice, and in doing so, probes the notion of ‘legitimacy’. This provided some philosophical tensions to consider. Should I attempt to engage with the practise by identifying people who might not have the equipment or technical knowledge, in order to share these ideas on emancipation and filmmaking to support self-representation? This would contradict Rancière’s thinking, by reinforcing the gap between specialisms and in doing so, reinforce the idea of inequality. Instead, by creating the spaces in which people could ‘speak’, via film or other cultural activity, the project announced itself as being visible. It was up to the community to decide whether or not to participate.

Sensible Methods

In *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004), Rancière argued that aesthetics should be understood as the distribution of the sensible: what is possible

and commonly perceived. This interplay between art and politics can lead to ‘dissensus’, disrupting the social order as delineated by the ‘policing’ of society, by those in control (Rancière 2004, 46). ‘A dissensus is not a conflict of interests, opinions or values; it is a division inserted in ‘common sense’: a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given’ (Rancière, 2004, 77). The sensible redistribution of art can find a political meaning through access to aesthetics - what is sensed. Rancière argues that inequality is controlled by those who create divisions and hierarchies of taste, and suggests to us that everyone has the ability to discern art, although not everyone has access. In considering the notion of an equal practice, the practitioner cannot be an outsider attempting to address inequality. They must not attempt to create ‘emancipation’ as an outcome. Instead, the interrogation of the idea of emancipation must be practiced equally under the assumption that everyone has an equal ability to speak, think and act. Rancière tells us that a practice should ‘act on the basis of the presupposition - or ‘axiom’ - of equality’ (Bingham-Biesta 2010, 51). This reminds one of the Sniffing Glue axiom in 1977, which *Imperfect Cinema* translated to filmmaking.

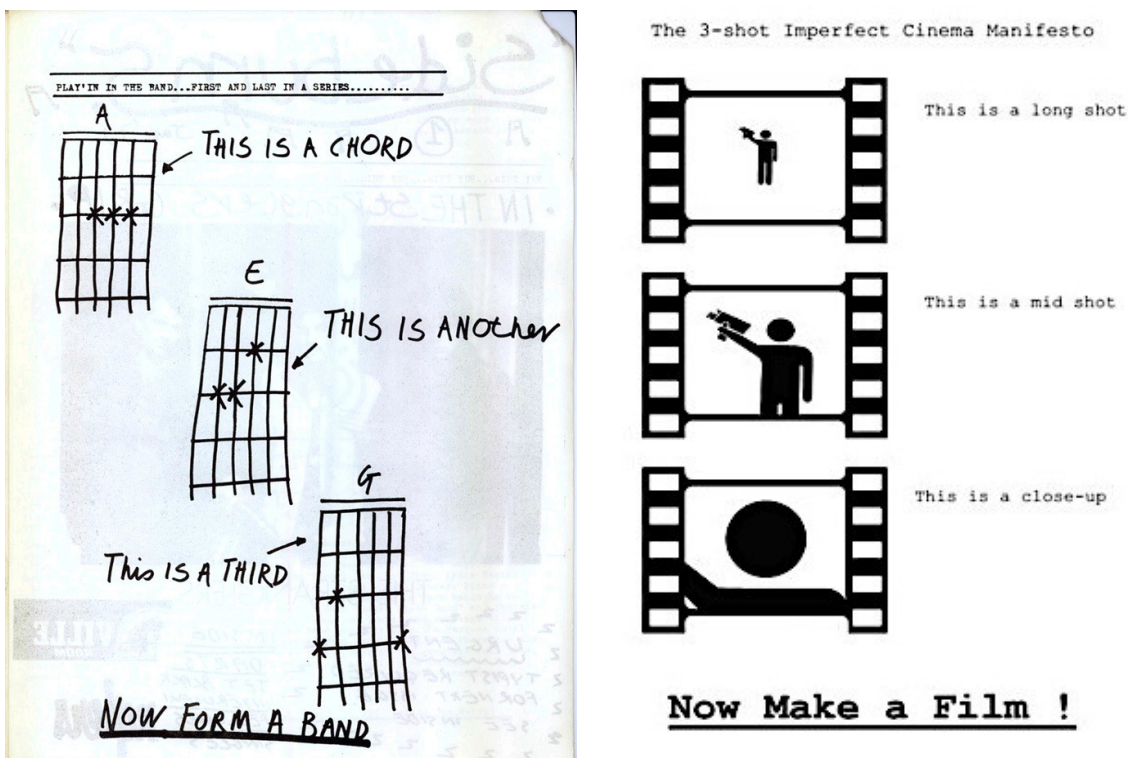


Figure 9-10: Page two in Sideburns Zine, 1977/ Imperfect Cinema (Source: The Guardian/Imperfect Cinema)

I was an inexperienced but enthusiastic filmmaker at the beginning of the project. In this respect the project benefited me directly - I wanted to make films. In a way, as a method, the project facilitated emancipation for myself. I made films for each event: exploring ideas, aesthetics, politics - and sometimes just making 'something', without a great deal of thought, planning or preparation. Instead, I wanted to enjoy the process of making a film, as I was encouraging other to do, in order to build an alternative community of filmmakers, which negated the need for professionalisation.

In action, my participation articulated Rancière statement in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 'only a man can emancipate a man' (Rancière in Bingham-Biesta 2010, 43). This demonstrates the fact that although *Imperfect Cinema* aimed to instigate collective artistic experiences, it was driven also by individuals having the space for autonomy. I was learning by doing it myself – d.i.y as well as the relatively recent concepts of - DIO (do-it-ourselves), or DIT (do-it-together). These terms can use useful to think about, and have been discussed interesting by John Richards in 'Beyond DIY in Electronic Music' (2013), in which he discusses his approaches to 'Dirty Electronics' workshop/performances; but the project did not want to become preoccupied with terminology, so when I refer to d.i.y , this encompasses these offshoots as well.

I made this personal and participatory d.i.y context clear at the onset of the project. I would be making films and exploring the ideas alongside everyone else. The aim was not to become a professional 'filmmaker', technically skilled and sufficiently experienced, in order to become 'emancipated'. Operating as an underground practice, outside of the institution, allowed the project to avoid some of the issues Rancière speaks of. There would be no prizes, marks, or 'critical feedback', in an academic sense. There would be no cost to enter, and an attempt to avoid hierarchy. For example, we didn't curate the films in the open reel section of the nights – we played them as and when people arrived with DVDs or USB sticks. The practice had to be what Mimi Thi Nguyen and Golnar Nikpour describe as 'movable' (2013, 32), as a methodology, a target that never stays still.

Imperfect Methods

So let me even praise unwisdom a little,
For we are never so wise
As to be all-wise;
And in discarding all wisdom and prudence
Now and again,
- Rarely, say, but still sometimes -
We can reach,
We can see,
We can feel, touch, sense in some indefinable way
A deeper knowledge than wisdom,
 Bone-knowledge
 Blood-knowledge
 Felt or known by our deepest sensibilities
For which as yet we have no words

Margaret Tait (2004, 120)

Sean Cubitt, professor of Film and Television at Goldsmiths University of London, explains the importance of moving beyond viewing the anecdotal as illegitimate within the humanities (Cubitt 2013). He sees evidence of practice via experiences to often be more illustrative and important than statistical evidence. The unique experiences emerging from this research can lead to understanding and knowledge in how we engage and communicate participatory research. Douglas Kahn writing in *Relive: Media Art Histories* (2013) uses an example from John Cage to expand this idea, defining how Cage sat in a silent anechoic chamber and heard two sounds. Describing this to the engineer, he was told that ‘one was your nervous system in operation. The low one was your blood in circulation’ (Cubitt-Kahn 2013, 235). This framework allows artistic research to be distinctive, moving beyond notions of professionalism and their relationship to the creative industries. For Cubitt, artistic research is a broad arena, often encouraging social and political activity. He argues for anecdotal evidence as ‘viable’ and ‘vital’ because it is based on the ‘unique instances’ that often produce new knowledge (Cubitt 2013).

The New Knowledge on the Creative Disciplines – proceedings of the first experiential knowledge conference in 2007, brought together academics, researchers and practitioners to examine some of the problems involved in creating new knowledges and understandings emerging from creative practice. These discussions were important for considering and discussing how creative practice might continue to operate in the

field of academic research. At the core of these dialogues, was the question of how experience, in and through practice, can be communicated as a valued source of knowledge. This led to the consideration of how this knowledge/understanding can be situated, leading to the question of who receives this new knowledge? Is it the creative practitioners, the viewers, or the academics?

The conference argued for the importance of experiential knowledge in the field of artistic practice, whilst also acknowledging that the experiences must be grounded in rigor, from which their methods can be shared and disseminated to the research community. Mark Johnson's paper, *The stone that was cast out shall become the cornerstone: the bodily aesthetics of human meaning* (2007), argues that we should consider aesthetics not only as 'the philosophy of art and beauty', but also as:

concerning everything that goes into our ability to grasp the meaning and significance of any aspect of our experience, and so it involves form and structure, the qualities that define a situation, our felt sense of the meaning of things, our rhythmic engagement with our surroundings, our emotional interactions and on and on. (2007, 89)

Using the example of a poet reading their work, Johnson states, 'The words are not the meaning, but they carry forward the meaning within a situation' (2007, 100). In this sense, the emergence of meaningful experiences in my practice can be understood as a process of experiential knowing; and not, as Johnson argues, 'knowledge as a body of information' (2007, 102). This research presents film as research as developing out of practice, theory, reflection and critical evaluation. It operates in between structures, technologies and the underground in order to 'gather the embodied meaning of our situation' (2007, 102).

Between 2010 and 2015, *Imperfect Cinema* facilitated twenty-one micro-cinema events, predominantly in Plymouth, but also in Calstock, Brixham, Birmingham and Brooklyn, New York. We used diverse spaces for the events: bars, social clubs, art cinemas, galleries, schools, colleges, universities and churches. Alongside these events, regular workshops and cine-clubs took place as well as one off film projects and commissions. Though the atmosphere and spirit of these happenings is somewhat intangible without actually being present at the time, the following attempts to provide

a mapping of the project and its methods.

Developing the Idea

By the time I began my PhD in 2009, it had become clear to me through my readings of No Wave Cinema, Espinosa, Rancière, Thompson, Debord, and others, that my practice based research had to connect with the public sphere. To underpin the theoretical frameworks with action to generate an understanding of imperfection. An aim was to encourage producers and share knowledge, research, and ideas in a way that negated consensus; an open, fluid venue for participation that translated the ethos and energy of d.i.y punk into a film practice.

I was also wary of and wanted to avoid defining punk as an aesthetic that would limit the participatory possibilities of the project. Punk would be a spring-board for agency and eliminate the perceived prerequisites of filmmaking. I also knew that a fundamental requirement of my realising this project was that people would need to engage and I hoped that the intangible energy of punk would stimulate this engagement. In my first paper, which I presented at the British Radical Screens Conference in 2010: *Towards a Radical Film Practice* (Gall 2010), I outlined how a radical film practice, using the accessibility of digital technology and new media must look towards creating new possibilities of participation and ways of working.

I knew that if the practice was going to exist within a living, social context – it could not be limited to the disciplines of filmmaking or academia. The initiation of the practice centred on galvanising people's belief in the emergence of a new creative venue and opportunity for collective experience. I became a kind of imperfect advocate and enthusiast, constantly talking about my ideas and the project to anyone who would listen. The realisation of *Imperfect Cinema* emerged through dialogue, the sharing of ideas, discussion, and crucially, energy.

Alongside dialogue with friends, family, supervisors and others within the d.i.y and punk music scenes locally, Dan Paoloantonio and I began meeting regularly to

develop and share ideas, resources and research. Dan's background with anarcho-punk music, filmmaking and his interest in lo-fi technologies gave the project new contexts and frameworks to explore and consider. We decided to develop together.

Background

The first *Imperfect Cinema* event took place on Friday the 29th October 2010, and was held at Jack Chams, a bar situated in central Plymouth. Throughout the course of the project, we used a variety of spaces in and around the city and beyond, but the beginnings of *Imperfect Cinema* were based at Jack Chams.

Jack Chams was a burgeoning late night punk-rock bar. The walls were papered with gig posters, alternative music played on the speakers, and the regular clientele aligned themselves with, what was at the time, a punk/skater style: skinny jeans, tattoos, Van shoes, band T-shirts, flannel shirts, etc. The bar was a community hub of sorts for the local punk rock 'scene'. Jack Chams was also run by Ben Turner, the drummer in my band, who often supported local d.i.y projects. Conveniently, the bar had two large T.V. screens located at opposite ends of the bar and a projector on the ceiling.

Although this was a venue and atmosphere that would appear to coalesce with the project, there was the concern that it would alienate people who did not normally frequent the bar and define or shape the project to align with the punk aesthetic of the space, due to Ben's choices in décor, music and the regular clientele. However, whilst these tensions were noted, it was decided that it was the best available venue to initiate the project due to its connection with the alternative music scene in Plymouth, central location, available equipment and lack of hiring fee.

Getting a Crowd!

In the weeks leading to the first event, Dan and I met several times at Jack Chams to prepare and discuss the project. We checked equipment, and discussed technical

aspects with Ben. There were some potential issues: the room had big windows and no curtains, so keeping the room dark enough to screen films would have been a problem during daylight hours. There were also regular customers who could potentially cause disruption. We resolved these issues by reasoning that as it was autumn, it would be dark enough to see the screen and we welcomed disruption and potential new people inadvertently becoming interested in the project. To make the event private or have an entry fee would conflict with our principles of non-exclusivity.

We promoted the event in a number of ways. I made the poster, researching No Wave era posters and other punk inspired art, before deciding to use a still from the film I made for the event, *Dirty Laundry* (2010). I made a cut and paste collage, photocopied the image, and then scanned the image back into digital format for online promotion. Dan and I flyered posters around the town and we also used Facebook and created webpage and a Vimeo account to host our films.

Collaboration & Community

Working in collaboration with Dan had been productive inasmuch as we both provided critical feedback to each other; allowing for ideas to generate, outlining how the events would run and discussing ways in which it could develop.

We decided to distribute a fanzine at the first event. It was a simple, folded, A4, double sided piece of paper, detailing some of the underlying historical and theoretical punk frameworks of the practice. Dan and I sat together in another pub a few days before, folding the paper and talking about the possibilities of the project. We were enjoying the process, perhaps especially by tapping into this punk ritual, doing it ourselves, working with tactile material, rather than the digital. However, on the day of the first event, with only a few hours to go, Dan told me he wouldn't be able to attend. Initially I was concerned, but perhaps because our preparation and my general enthusiasm for the project, I quickly felt confident about hosting the night on my own – and I had no choice.

IMPERFECT CINEMA aims to discover new possibilities in underground cinema by valorising do-it-yourself ethics.

IMPERFECT CINEMA encourages film production, creation and screenings through participation.

IMPERFECT CINEMA wants to socialise and distribute a free democratic cinema.

IMPERFECT CINEMA explores alternatives to mainstream cinema and dominant filmmaking's glorification of technology alienating production values and industrialised exhibitionism.

WWW.IMPERFECTCINEMA.COM turn on, tune in and geddon!

Your Film Collective



Figure 11: Imperfect Cinema zine (Source: Imperfect Cinema)

Some key elements of the micro-cinema structure of *Imperfect Cinema* were developed at that first event. My opening talk gave the audience background information about the project, my research and conveyed the idea that *Imperfect Cinema* would be shaped by their participation. I discussed punk d.i.y culture, and contextualised *Imperfect Cinema* with No Wave and underground cinema like 'Exploding Cinema'

Approximately 50 people attended the first *Imperfect Cinema* (more than expected). 'Blitzkrieg Bop' (1976) by the Ramones played as an intro – 'Hey Ho, Let's Go!' This became the theme-tune of the event, so to speak, and was played at the beginning of subsequent events. To document the event, we placed disposable cameras around the room and asked people to take images.



Figure 12: Imperfect Cinema first event, 29th October 2010 (Source: Imperfect Cinema)

The Open Reel section of *Imperfect Cinema* was essentially the core of the micro-cinema project. Anyone could submit and screen a film as long as it was 3 minutes or less. We contextualised this time limit with the average length of a punk song. At the first event, five or six people brought and screened films; some were familiar faces and some were not.

A vital part of the night was when the filmmakers would be invited to the front to introduce themselves and their film. This not only gave the participants a chance to speak about their work, but it identified them as *filmmakers*. It also, unlike online platforms like YouTube or Vimeo, put a face to the film being shown. It initiated and encouraged those in attendance to speak to one another, give feedback, praise, spark discussion, collaboration and friendships. These brief introductions enabled a community to begin to develop. This community was made up of a group of people with a range of styles, backgrounds and interests. A solicitor became known for his innovative cutting and surreal political satires. A mature film student's, at times, controversial films were met with mixed reception, but always elicited a response – one of his films went on to be screened at the 'Tribeca Film Festival' in New York City. A musician tested styles of filmmaking with a strong photographic eye and then went on to make several professional music videos. Exchange students from Spain and the USA made films for the event while they were in Plymouth and continued to send in films when they returned home.

Even those who did not make films for the nights were an integral part of The community. People contributed through their feedback and discussion, encouragement and other contributions such as, making food for the events, posters, T-shirts, props and costumes, hair and makeup for the films.



Figure 13: Imperfect Cinema first event, 29th October 2010 (Source: Imperfect Cinema)

Small filmmaking clusters/teams emerged and developed, people taking turns to write, direct, act in, shoot, and edit each other's projects. I challenged myself to make a film for each event, often shooting and editing over a weekend or even a day. *Imperfect Cinema* was giving people a chance to try their hand at things they had perhaps not tried before. Many began to engage with practices that are now integral to their lives.



Figure 14: Imperfect Cinema, November 28th 2010. (Source: Imperfect Cinema)

Duncan came to the second *Imperfect Cinema* event on the 28th November. He screened/performed some of his film work, a hybrid of live spoken-word and film. He also talked about his background in ‘Exploding Cinema’, interest in d.i.y culture and the subversive potential of the Underground. More people began to hear about the project and there was a significantly bigger audience and sixteen films submitted. Duncan’s film: ‘FUCK OFF AVANT-GARDIST’, generated a lively response from the audience. Experimental, convivial and courageous, his films connect with his writing on underground culture and art. For Duncan, the liberatory spirit of the underground allows film artists the freedom to play. ‘The subversive carnival of popular culture winds through cultural history regenerating, transforming, mutating, diverging and combining’ (Reekie 2007: 52).

Duncan brought this sense of subversion and expertise of no-budget film to our group. He shared his experiences, knowledge and work with a sense of collective unity with our aims, and subsequently returned to the *Imperfect Cinema* Jubilee event two years later. Additionally, Duncan has screened some of the *Imperfect Cinema* films at Exploding Cinema in London and Edinburgh, expanding the reach and scope of the community.



Figure 15: Duncan Reekie (Source: Vertigo)

Our second guest, Nicholas Bullen, came to the Lo-Fi Issue *Imperfect Cinema* in April 2011. Nicholas was the founding member of ‘Napalm Death’ in the early 1980s and appeared on the Crass Records Bullshit Detector Compilation 3. He is now a sonic artist and film enthusiast and spoke about his experience using music and punk to push the boundaries of the aesthetic. He highlighted this by performing one of his musical pieces from his ‘Napalm Death’ days, ‘You Suffer’. It is just over one second long.

In a live discussion (talk-show style) with Dan, Nicholas discussed his interest in amateurism as a form of authentic engagement in the arts. He contextualised his own film works with filmmakers such as Margaret Tate, Jeff Keen and Mary Menken. A thread running through the work of these filmmakers was using ones immediate environment as a source of inspiration. Whilst Keen is more of a pop culture, cut and paste DADA inspired agitator, Tate and Menken both have a poetic sensibility, capturing landscapes and experiences, often, with lo-fi technology.



Figure 16,17: Nicholas Bullen & Dan Paolantonio (Source: Nicholas Bullen & *Allister Gall*)

Though the links between a one second ‘grindcore’ punk song and a poetic film shot in one’s garden may not be immediately apparent, what Nicholas brought to *Imperfect Cinema* was a vital demonstration of the versatility of subcultural expression. The links between film and punk are underscored by a resistance to professionalism as being of higher value than amateur pursuits. He was interested in the possibilities and accessibility of new media and technology, to build opportunities for new voices to emerge.

Imperfect Cinema: Micro Cinema Events Listed

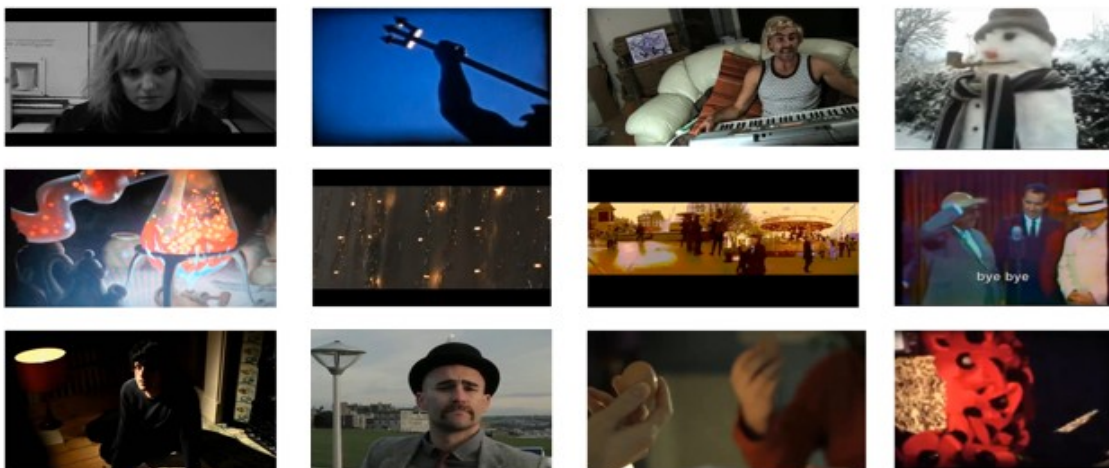


Figure 18: *Imperfect Cinema* short film stills (Source *Imperfect Cinema*)

As mentioned, there were 21 micro-cinema events that took place during the timeframe of this practice as research, with a variety of focuses, some of which included:

The *Lo-Fi Issue* - April 1st 2011: Explored redundant, lo-fi technologies, featuring fanzines and cine-clubs.



Figure 19, 20, 21: Imperfect Cinema posters (Source: Imperfect Cinema)

Imperfect Cinema in New York partnered with Interstate Art Gallery in Brooklyn, New York City where I screened films and showed work by Plymouth filmmakers.

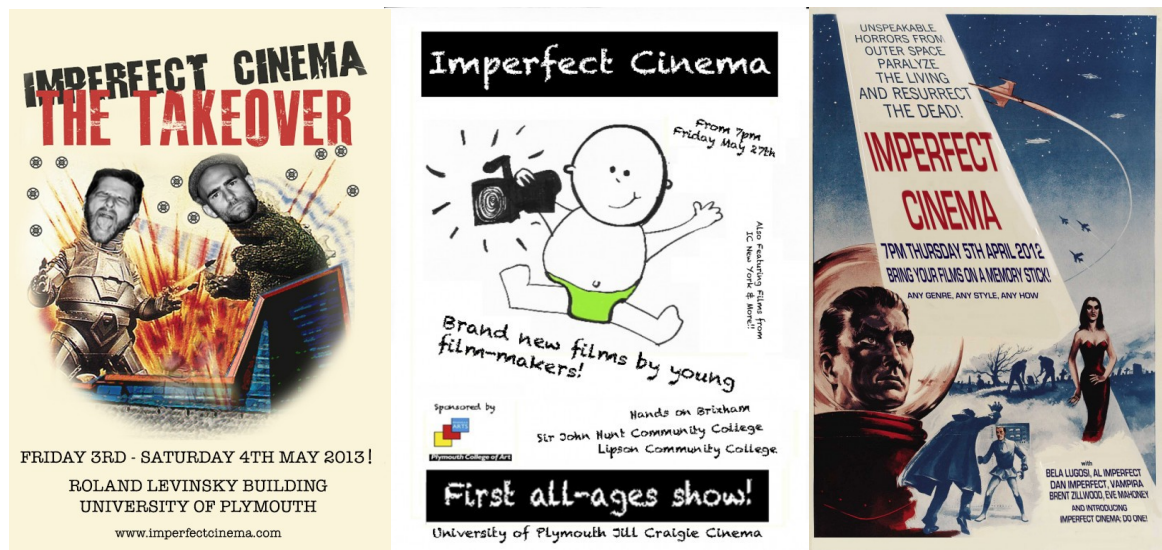


Figure 22, 23, 24: Imperfect Cinema posters (Source: Imperfect Cinema)

Imperfect Cinema All-Ages - 27th May 2011: Screened films from workshops with local children.

The *Jubilee Edition* - 19th November 2011: This was an event celebrating over one year of the project. It had a cabaret feel, featuring underground films, live music, poetry & spoken word, stand-up comedy, guest speakers and a group discussion on d.i.y culture chaired by academic, Dr. Kim Charnley.

Imperfect Cinema One Minute - 20 February 2012: Took place at Plymouth Arts Centre and in collaboration with the Young Plymouth Arts Centre, screening one minute films on the topic of chance, chaos and randomness.



Figure 25, 26, 27, 28: Imperfect Cinema posters (Source: Imperfect Cinema)

This event also featured a film made by Dan and I called *Cortical Songs, Meduallan Visions* with a live score by violinist John Matthias.⁵⁹ This sound/screen hybrid experience, found a synergy with the uncertainty, liveliness and fluidity of my imperfect methodology, and merged my interested in the union of live music and film, eventually leading to my work *Home* and *Tamar*.

Expanded Imperfection

Alongside the micro-cinema events, numerous workshops and cine-clubs took place between 2010-2015. Some of the workshops specifically related to IC and some were designed within an educational context via my work in academia.

However, all of the workshops are linked by an interest in exploring the medium of film as a tool for building confidence, freedom of expression, collaboration and culminating in live screenings in a social/personal context. As a whole, the workshops inform my understanding of imperfection as a method of inciting

transformative practice. I will now outline and discuss the workshops and their impact on the research.

Hands on Brixham: Brixham, South Devon, March 2011

This workshop was part of the Transition Town movement and the Brixham Youth Enquiry Service. Dan and I ran the workshop within a renovated church, which had been transformed into a community and creative hub. There were roughly ten participants who ranged in age from four years old to pension-age. We provided basic point-and-shoot HD digital cameras. After giving them some background on *Imperfect Cinema* and our interest in subculture and D.i.y punk, we let them loose with the cameras, their mission was to capture the environment around them and enjoy the process. I edited the footage into a film which was screened at the *Imperfect Cinema* All-Ages event in May 2011. The resulting footage was a beautiful mixture of generally well-composed and thoughtful footage from the adults and whirling unawares imagery, as children darted under tables, literally playing with the camera.

Film Club: Plymouth, 2010 – 2014

In collaboration with Plymouth University and Widening Participation (WP) - targeting and identifying ‘groups’, who have been ‘historically, underrepresented in HE, their life chances reduced by social and economic disadvantage and other barriers’ (WP strategic statement for 2012-13 and 2013-14, www.plymouth.ac.uk), I ran weekly workshops with local school children, ages 11 -18. This included visits to the schools as well as having the students coming to the university. These projects included working with ‘Young Devon’, students in care homes and with Autism. The workshops culminated in screenings at the Jill Craigie Cinema at Plymouth University. Each year, I adapted the workshop programme, using it as a testing ground for the exploration of collaboration and collective film. Additionally, I adapted the projects in light of the students I worked with. For example, the autism group created an interdisciplinary project (with dance and performance). For film,

we used Jean Rouch's ideas on 'ethno-fiction' (1973) to playfully explore how they could better understand autism, and communicate their experience with others.

Some of these students who participated in the various film club projects had been studying Media in school and were surprised when I encouraged them to work without restrictions of genre or production values. This resulted in some very strong and interesting work. Rather than predictable student films, which whilst useful, often are mimicking Hollywood, the students, at times, created surprising work reflecting on their experiences and the medium of art and cinema itself.

One Minute, Four Stories, One Life: Plymouth, 2014

This participatory film was a creative reflection on being a child in care, told by Josh, Connor, Shelby and Paris. It was supported by Young Devon and Plymouth University, and took place over two months in early 2014. We met on Saturday mornings, aiming to make a piece of work which reflected their lives and experiences as well as providing a tool to care workers and the University to better understand some of the experiences the students had faced in their early lives.

There were restrictions: students couldn't have their face on screen, for example. So, in and through dialogue with the four students, we decided they would take the cameras home individually, and shoot footage to try and capture their experiences over the course of two or three weeks. I gave them prompts to help them, such as: colours prompts, or record a journey.

The students shot the footage and we edited as a group, each student editing a minute of their work. I recorded interviews, framed so as not to reveal their faces. The experience of shooting and editing the film gave them the confidence to express their thoughts and experiences. Additionally, sound artist Christian Gale ran a participatory sound workshop, scoring their work. These workshops resulted in a ten-minute short diary film and was screened at the Jill Craigie Cinema in September, 2014.

Supersonic: Birmingham, 2011 & 2012

Imperfect Cinema was invited to run workshops at the Supersonic Festival in Birmingham. In 2011 we collaborated with sound artist group SOUNDkitchen. We invited participants to use super 8mm film to record their experiences at the festival as an alternative document of the event. We then tele-cined the film overnight and edited the next day producing the film ‘Hallide-Oxide’. As we edited we liaised with SOUNDkitchen who had recorded an alternative audio document of the festival. At no point were we certain about the final results of the collaboration until the two pieces were merged and screened together that evening.



Figure 29, 39: Imperfect Cinema workshop / Screening at the Supersonic Festival (Source: Imperfect Cinema / Capsule)

The following year, 2012, we were asked to return, this time collaborating with noise-rock/punk band ‘Drunk in Hell’. Again, participants documented the festival using super 8mm cameras and again we telecined and edited over the next night/day, constructing a film which was then projected as visual backdrop to ‘Drunk in Hell’s’ set⁶¹. This was one of my favourite moments of the whole project. The uncertainty and immediacy of the live context and serendipity of sound and visuals clashing and coalescing were hugely exciting and satisfying. During ‘Drunk in Hell’s’ set, I spotted some workshop participants in the heaving crowd, pointing to the screen

at moments they had shot themselves.



Figure 30: Drunk in Hell/ Imperfect Cinema at the Supersonic festival (Source: Imperfect Cinema)

Imperfect Takeover: Plymouth, 2013

On May 4th 2013, Peninsula Arts gave *Imperfect Cinema* the keys to the Roland Levinsky building at Plymouth University, allowing us to ‘take-over’ and use the space for screenings and installations created through various *Imperfect Cinema* events, workshops and projects. Dan also ran a direct-animation film workshop, using camera less 16mm film.



Figure 32: Imperfect Cinema Takeover (Source: Peninsula Arts)

For this event I facilitated, ‘Hanging by a Thread’, a collective film featuring thirteen three minute films, which were made by contributors to *Imperfect Cinema*. Each filmmaker was given a title to work from. Each title was taken from the ‘Bullshit Detector’ records, released by Crass on their ‘Crass Records Label’ and featuring demos which had been sent to them by amateur punk musicians in the early 1980s, one of which was Nicholas Bullen’s band ‘Napalm Death’. The resulting films were assembled randomly to make one imperfect piece, hanging by a thread.

Another feature of this event was the Open Reel, the uncensored 3-minute film screenings. This particular event was different from previous open reels due to the fact that it was within the Plymouth University cinema space, and therefore was therefore inherently a different experience than watching these films in a punk bar. One of the filmmakers faced significant backlash from one of the films he showed, as a member of the audience took offence and took their complaint to the institution where he was studying Film.

Walk On Film: Plymouth, 2014

‘Walk On: From Richard Long to Janet Cardiff - 40 Years of Art Walking’ was an exhibition curated by Cynthia Morrison-Bell and Alistair Robinson with the collaboration of Mike Collier and Janet Ross. Examining the ways that artists use the act of walking to create new art, IC was asked to run a workshop as part of the programme.

Participants were invited to walk through Plymouth, reacting with the cameras as they walked, registering the environment and developing a diaristic film style, improvising with camera movement, editing in camera and celebrating the small forms of cinema. The footage was then edited into a five-minute film and an original score was written and performed by Tom Richardson, a local musician and member of Damerels and WYFOFBATH.

Amusingly, there was some confusion, and most of the participants thought that they had signed up for a walking tour of Plymouth and not a filmmaking workshop. However, the majority fully engaged were very pleased with the unexpected process and experience.

All About the River Festival: Plymouth, 2014

The ‘All About the River Festival’ organisers approached *Imperfect Cinema* to take part in the activities and film events, which were happening up and down the Tamar River. Our brief was to incorporate archived film footage shot between the

1920s-60s by an amateur filmmaker and professional Plymouth butcher, Claude Endicott. They also wanted us to run workshops, which resulted in our development and delivery of ‘The Imperfect Cine-train’ and ‘From Plymouth Dock to Present Day’. I also worked with the South West Film Archive, accessing the Endicott footage and incorporating it into an original film ‘Tamar’, which was first screened at the Devonport Welcome Hall on 14th October 2014 to a live score created by the Imperfect Cinema Orchestra.



Not only was this multifaceted project another chance to explore participatory filmmaking with a diverse group of people who were mostly local to Plymouth and the South West, it also, through Endicott’s footage, allowed amateur filmmaking in the region to remerge and be reconceptualised. The development of the film *Tamar* and the collaboration with the Imperfect Cinema Orchestra was an important developmental moment in the exploration of my own work as a film practitioner, which I will expand on in

Figure 33: *Tamar* poster (Source: Allister Gall)

the following chapter; as the work I had done on *Home* in 2012 was progressed and evolved to further explore the possibilities of lived-scored film.

Conclusion

Alongside the planning, preparation and energy that went into the development and facilitation of this project were the happy accidents, the casual discussions that stimulated a new direction, another possibility. These methodologies and methods

are approaches towards participatory film, in which theory and practice can interchange, connect and relate - in a social context and in-between the institution and the community. The trajectory of the practice has been, not so much vertical or even horizontal, but anarchic and uncertain – participants, influences, ideas and contexts, zigzagging through time. Its course has been neither linear, from a traditional sense of perspective, nor has it been ‘free-falling’ (Steyerl 2012, 12-28). It has developed through ideas and connections forming without a sense of its own stability. The ideas have not been fixed, nor have the outcomes been predictable. Perhaps the only constant has been the project’s core aims: to engage with participatory film practice as a means towards building collective experiences and as a framework in which to consider the discourse of imperfection, as practice/concept/idea.

The methodology and methods emerged through analysis, action and collaboration, the spaces in-between aesthetic and politics within a d.i.y punk context uncertain, critical and practical. There are elements of immediacy, structure, chance and play. Perhaps this kind of interdisciplinary approach to methodology, at once against methods, as well as engaging with theory and structure, can help us understand the interplay between politics and aesthetics and can sit within a wider participatory artistic/film/media art practice. Through a creative tension between the author and the participatory aims of the project, in which the intention was to stimulate a d.i.y film collective to take part and form the practice, alongside ‘motivating’, or as suggested in this chapter, ‘emancipating’ myself – to free oneself to create an (imperfect) space to learn, play, make mistakes and, in doing so, develop practical, collaborative and wider knowledge from these actions and reflections, dialogues and unique ‘moments’/‘situations’. These tensions and in-between explorations of spaces lead to the following chapter, in which I will discuss the challenges I faced of evidencing and documenting this movable and collective practice.

CHAPTER THREE – FILM AS RESEARCH

Art will not disappear into nothingness, it will disappear into everything.

Julio Garcia Espinosa: *For an Imperfect Cinema* (1969)

This *Film as Research* chapter provides an overview of the practical film work included in this thesis, and discusses how the practice was the core foundation for the emergence of *imperfect praxis* as methodology: one that invites the researcher to ‘act’ in order to ‘see’ and ‘think’. The films submitted as part of this PhD thesis, are examples of films completed during this research that have informed the research methodology.

As stated in the previous chapter, my practice as research has been an exploration of the idea of imperfection as a conceptual-participatory space. Not attempting to define imperfection allowed for the work to remain in a *state of flux*. Nonetheless, I felt it was required for this PhD, as Le Griice states, to submit ‘data’ to support the articulation of the methods. This has been a problematic process. How to submit data that supports or evidences participation, especially participatory film practise? In many ways, this PhD thesis articulates this quandary as its key problem. To support this argument, I will once again lean on anecdotal evidence as a methodological tool, to guide the reader through the films and experiences.

There is no order or instruction as to how you watch the film artefacts, although it should be stressed that the examples of practice are multi-layered and, aside from *Everything Imperfect*, were meant to be experienced live in a social context. The critical consideration of previous ‘alternative’ modes of culture making, as discussed in the contextual review, eventually led me to the consideration of cinema’s political and participatory potential *beyond the screen*. Why make a film, why encourage others to make films, why engage with local communities, why run cine-clubs and workshops? For this practice, reigniting cinema as being a shared experience, building our own

cinema community, coalesced with the joy of filmmaking as a creative/imperfect praxis.

Films included in this thesis

Everything Imperfect is an attempt to demonstrate imperfect methods as an artefact, to sit side by side with this thesis. More specifically, it is a piece of work that allowed me to think through the action and theory aesthetically. The ephemeral nature of a participatory practice eventually found a form through experimentation: one that is free, interested, and engaged with how both theory and practice can unite. The film includes footage from films submitted and screened at *Imperfect Cinema* micro-cinema events, an improvisational B-Movie made over a weekend, which tried to explore a non-hierarchical approach to cinema, and, perhaps more importantly, is as a documentation, or film diary, inspired by filmmaker's such as Chris Marker, Dziga Vertov, Jonas Mekas, Agnès Varda as well as the people involved in the making of the work, of the practice up until that point.

Home was created for the *Imperfect Cinema* takeover. It is my own personal visual diary of place, my home town Plymouth, and was made with site specific intention to bring my two passions together: film and music. The film was screened live with an orchestra, who emerged from an early 'gang-jam' amongst members of local punk and alternative bands in the city⁶⁵. This film attempts to bring together my two formative reasons to begin this research: cinema and music, in a live setting. Moreover, it continued my exploration into the ideas of d.i.y culture, as a grassroots/activist/free space to build new ideas and possibilities. It also re-ignites the idea of early cinema; an uninhibited, unnamed media of discovery and spectacle, in light of digital ubiquity. The live event as collective experience - can still connect and foster a sense of the uncertain, of unique and distinct experiences.

Tamar expanded on the ideas developed in *Home*, and supports the development of *imperfect praxis*. The final film is a result from cine-train workshops⁶⁶, collective filmmaking via *dérive* footage shot by the *imperfect cinema* group and myself, and the live experience of merging moving images with musical performance. The film

includes archive material from amateur filmmaker Claude Endicott, also Plymouth based, who filmed the South West from 1920s-1960s. This project was important for a number of reasons: it brought together the notion of amateurism in a local and historical context, included workshops with young people, and led to the emergence of an autonomous project: The Imperfect Orchestra.

In all of these projects, the development of how I have come to understand *imperfect praxis* has been dependent on the participants, who, have given up their time, energy, skills, and ideas to support the project. This embodies the research's principle investigation and aims: to develop a d.i.y participatory film community. All have films evidencing the collectivity and participatory work and, in doing so, bring some tensions between the author and collective. This is why I have included some examples of films made for the *Imperfect Cinema* micro-cinema events (on USB). I have shown these films at conferences and meetings and the link between the community and the practice hadn't been fully developed in order to fully theoretically and contextually justify their importance. However, the sense of play, joy, and humour developed in part, I suggest, because the project created a free imperfect space to enjoy cinema and the potential to be a cinema maker. That is, to be able to 'make', 'create', find 'joy' in collaboration, to have a venue in which to share these works and to give creative work a purpose beyond professionalization. This has been essential in my understanding of the value of imperfection – as a musician and a filmmaker - and how I perceive the importance of the practice.

Despite the sense of fluidity, which I have described in the previous chapters, from my position, these projects were devised and managed with a variety of different purposes: play, conviviality, creating a collective space to learn, share ideas, dialogues, and unity. One has to experience these qualities first hand, perhaps, to fully comprehend their value. Nevertheless, the solidarity showed by the many people who contributed and shaped this practice, and therefore this research, are examples of how spirit can instigate meaningfulness.

Everything Imperfect

We must avoid a possible misunderstanding: life in its immediacy is not “openness” but chance. In order to turn this chance into a cluster of possibilities, it is first necessary to provide it with some organization ... choose the elements of a constellation among which we will then - and only then – draw a network of connections. (Eco 1989, 116)

Everything Imperfect was made in 2013, a forty-five minute film, which aimed to articulate the practice as research as a document to be submitted alongside this thesis. Underpinning the making of this film, which utilised diary/documentary footage of the *Imperfect Cinema* events, films submitted for the project, filmed interviews with participants, a collaborative/participatory B-movie, as well as text. Underpinning this was the dialectic relationship between d.i.y punk and film practice. As previously mentioned, my preliminary work, prior to the PhD, had understood this translation had to be more than just an aesthetic or style that would lead to nostalgia. Instead, a participatory cinema practice had to create new collective possibilities as to what might develop through social, creative interactions.

The question of ‘how to evidence’ imperfect methods, as a film artefact, had been a problematic, but productive process for me in thinking about the work that I had done. 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.

As mentioned earlier, 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.

Diary/documentary footage

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 auto-ethnographic 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 digitalised reproduction in order to not attempt to quantify as a bureaucratic sense of participation.

Interviews

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.

A Participatory B-Movie – In Space



Figure 34: Imperfect Cinema B-Movie poster (Source: Imperfect Cinema)

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.



Figure 35: Still from B-Movie (Source: Imperfect Cinema)

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, grappling with the collective, improvisational dimension of the production.



Figure 36: Still from B-Movie (Source: Imperfect Cinema)

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 dominant cinema, as an ethical action. Working against the major, the dominant 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.

Imperfect Text

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.

Moving Images Edited as Music

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 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.

Live Screen/Sound Cinema Performance

Home and *Tamar* are both thirty minute films, which were accompanied by a score performed live by group of musicians call the ‘Imperfect Cinema Orchestra’, later to

be known as the Imperfect Orchestra. *Home* was first screened the Imperfect Takeover in 2013, and the film was shot, edited and directed by me. *Tamar* was shot by cinematographers, as well as other workshop participants, and myself and was screened in 2014 at the ‘All About the River Festival’. Though there are similarities between the two works, I will begin this section by discussing them individually before disseminating their importance to *imperfect praxis*.

Home

Home was an exploration into locality, my personal film practice and the reconsideration of cinema as a distinct/live performance, featuring local amateur musicians playing a live score developed from the moving images, which takes inspiration from the score. I captured the footage, dropping myself off at Dartmoor armed with several batteries and a camera, and then travelled back into Plymouth, capturing what I saw, before arriving at the sea. *Home* aims to be at once immediate and a memory of the experience, both a personal and collaborative experience.



Figure 36: Screenshot of *Home* (2013) (Source: Allister Gall)

The theoretical and aesthetic genealogy of the piece was inspired by filmmaker Dziga Vertov as discussed in the contextual review, a free-thinker who invented a new language for cinema - one that is not commercialised or restricted by what narrative should be. He experimented with a reflexive form whilst also being political, connected to Marxism, believing that the camera could capture imagery which could then be disseminated to the public. Vertov’s film, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) is still a radical film today. It seems to find its form as it unfolds and this is something that I kept in mind as I shot and edited *Home*. To make this film, I was dropped off with my

camera and four SD cards at 7am on the moors on the outskirts of Plymouth, and proceeded to film as I essentially walked *home*. Inspired by the shaking aesthetic of Jonas Mekas' diary films and embracing the spirit of Benjamin's flaneur as well as Jem Cohen's film *Lost Book Found* (1996), I sought to find a hidden dimension to my local environment.

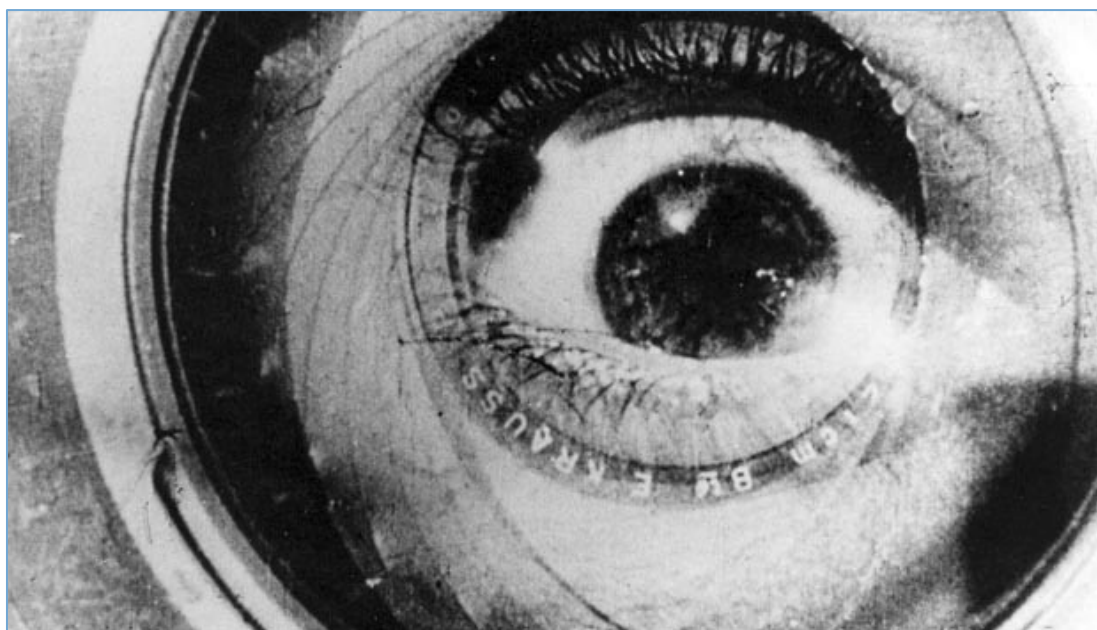


Figure 38 : Man With a Movie Camera (Source: Filmmaker magazine)

Chris Marker's film *San Soleil*, translated in English as *Sunless* (1983), is a home-movie of sorts, a gathering of personal fragmented experiences and observations on his world travels and the fragility of memory. It operates simultaneously in the present, the past, and as an imagined future. Like Marker, I mined the world around me for imagery, and also the chance to meditate on what *home* was for me and what it might be for others. Alongside the natural beauty of the environment I live in, I allowed my camera to linger on discarded objects, dilapidated storefronts, and signs of a city in transition; as Plymouth moves forward, what is it leaving behind? How might I capture and present this through the medium of film?

The structure of this film emerged through dialogues with the musicians in Imperfect Cinema Orchestra (ICO). ICO developed out of a 'jam' session with local musicians that I attended in 2012.

It should be noted that the members of the ICO were mostly musicians who played in punk or rock bands locally, as well as a few musicians who were very/band new to their instrument or picking it back up after a long hiatus. We came up with a three act thematic structure for the score and the film; the moors, the city, and the sea.



Figure 39, 40, 41: Imperfect Orchestra (Source: Laura Harris)

As mentioned, the piece was screened/performed at the Imperfect Takeover event in 2013, held at the Jill Cragie Cinema at Plymouth University, supported by Peninsula Arts. It was a free event that literally brought many of the local people from the Plymouth punk scene into the academy, both as audience and artists. Editing up until the last moment, the first time the musicians saw the finished cut of the film was on the night of the performance. While most of my practice as research up to this point had been operated outside of the institution, this shift articulated that my work was framed in both the institution as well as the underground.

Tamar

Tamar was a continuation of this approach to film: collaborating again with ICO and adopting similar form, thirty minutes, three acts, investigating place. This project had a less personal perspective, and instead was more participatory and complex in its production. As mentioned in the *Methodologies and Methods* chapter, this project was commissioned for the 'All About the River Festival' which took place in the summer of 2014. The footage was shot by me, Russell Cleave - a local musician and film student, and Richard Gorman - heavily involved in *Imperfect Cinema* and now a

professional editor. Film was also shot by participants from two workshops that I ran for the festival. Alongside this original footage, we incorporated archive material from the South West Film and Television Archive, shot by Claude Endicott. The film and score used the Tamar River as source, in many ways more meditative aesthetically than *Home*; the pace of the film draws from the flow of the river itself.

During the development of this project, the ‘Imperfect Cinema Orchestra’ began to identify itself as more of an autonomous group, renaming themselves as the *Imperfect Orchestra*. I met with some of the group members to discuss this as I felt it was important, that if they were going to frame themselves as ‘imperfect’, that they uphold some of the political and participatory principles developing out of *Imperfect Cinema* and the broad spectrum of this participatory film as research. This is not to suggest that I wasn’t supportive of their ambitions, but it did create some minor tensions, which I think are interesting to note.



Figure 42: Tamar screening (Source Imperfect Orchestra)

These tensions developed out of issues of authorship in participatory and collaborative work and are a good example of *imperfect praxis*, which relies on social dialogues. The group’s forming of their own project and interpretation of ‘imperfection’, just as I formed my own interpretation of

Espinosa’s imperfect cinema, is a good demonstration of how the emancipatory idea of imperfection can instigate action, agency and new forms of collectivity. They now work autonomously, sourcing and developing their own projects and funding. This is interesting because, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, Dan and I anticipated that the *Imperfect Cinema* project would eventually be passed along to other film practitioners.



Figure 43: Screening of *Tamar Devonport Welcome Hall* (2014) (Source: Dom Moore)

Instead, the autonomous project that has been born out of *Imperfect Cinema* is focused on music production rather than film production. This unexpected outcome is exciting as an example of the possibilities within the praxis.

Home and *Tamar* represent a shift in my own practice as a filmmaker. The short films that I made at the beginning of this research were framed as operating within the IC context. They were often humorous, made quickly and simply, towards generating conviviality and participatory activity within *Imperfect Cinema*. With these two film projects, I began to think more about my own work and cinema as a whole. The live music element of the works, intended to be experienced in a social space, signals a return to early cinema as a place of discovery and one-off experience. As home television screens get bigger, the allure of a trip to ‘the movies’ becomes less enticing. Now people can have a similar technological experience at home, on huge HD screens with surround sound.

Nevertheless, there is tension between my initial readings of Espinosa's 'imperfect cinema' and these two later works. In some sense, the moving images, especially in the contemporary footage of *Tamar*, are well crafted.



Figure 44. *Home* video still (Source Allister Gall)

Some of the editing, whilst attempting to be sensory rather than narratively logical or conceptual, displays a sense of craft and lyricism developing out of the practice. This is in opposition to *Everything Imperfect*, which attempted to investigate the boundaries of the idea of a well-crafted film, pushing at what is perceived to be of quality - blurring genres, styles and structure.

With the two live screen and sound works *Home* and *Tamar*, I have explored ways in which to move beyond the idea of perfection being reactionary, according to the theories laid out by Espinosa, and instead open up a space from which to experience cinema live. This return to unique 'moments', in which forms of experience can be shared through live performance, expands imperfection beyond form and content. The moving images, cut together and interplaying with sound, aim to evoke sensation, place and 'structures of feeling'. The reading and practising of imperfection is therefore subtler, and not a radical assault of form, but instead an expansion on the idea. After all, imperfection implies something unfinished or not completed,

something in development - as well as something faulty or deficient. It can also imply beauty, as the Japanese word wabi-sabi implies⁶⁸. In this sense, imperfection can open up the possibility to tinker with its meaning and application in a live context, with direct interactions akin to a theatrical performance.

Today's streamed and downloadable moving image content democratises films – blockbusters, artists film or the 'avant-garde', making what was previously inaccessible now visible. I have come to understand cinema as a social form and not just a medium from which to tell stories or explore aesthetics, one in which to come together and share experiences. The live musical scores of *Home* and *Tamar* signal a linkage with the live element of theatre: uncertain, fluid and evolving. Live performance brings with it uncertainty. This link between performance, music, and moving image is a constellation that I want to continue developing as I move ahead as a film practitioner. It brings together these three elements, which I am passionate about, and rethinks the possibilities of cinema as experience.

Conclusion

The discussions of the practical work in this chapter describe how the micro-cinema led to the subsequent projects in attempting to form other possibilities and articulations of knowledge. Together, all the projects have led to its imperfect praxis methodology. It is applied in different ways, but use the idea of imperfection as a venue for emancipatory, collective artistic activity - finding a generative link in the space in between research (academy) and underground subcultural 'amateur' activity.

Everything Imperfect is my working through the project's articulation in form and content, an imperfect praxis originated from the personal and collective experiences. It advocates knowledge through 'minor literature/cinema' (Deleuze- Guattari 1986), in the sense that the work has an ethical dimension in its aim for collectivity - for people to participate and create the work. It depended on the personal and collective dimension of the project, seen through the making and then the editing. It also articulates the in-between space, between institutional and underground - or legitimate and non-legitimate. It shaped artistic practice for social outcomes.

Home and *Tamar* continue a path from the beginning of this research of shaping and interrogating my interest in d.i.y punk and cinema beyond the screen. These two films have moved beyond attempting to find a film-form for an imperfect aesthetic. Instead, they have used the idea of imperfection to expand on its possibilities for participation and shared experiences using sound, music and moving images. Yet, *Everything Imperfect* remains a piece of work that perhaps best captures the spirit of the micro-cinema.

The examination required to construct this PhD thesis provided me with a critical structure to develop *imperfect praxis* as a model for action, production and reflection. The praxis developed out of the methods and methodologies explored in the participatory film practice as research. The outputs resulting from the praxis have been variable, often dependent on the collective nature of the methods in the ‘moment’, as well as variables such as where, when, and who is using, or adopting the model. The production outputs were not captured and meticulously archived as ‘data’. The project operates within an everyday, living context that represents disorder, chance and uncertainty - imperfect reality. Therefore, the film work accompanying this submission - *Everything Imperfect*, *Home* and *Tamar* - are my personal outputs, which reflect the scope and range of social, cultural and artistic production, manifested through the implementation of *imperfect praxis*.

There is a formal aesthetic gap between *Everything Imperfect*, *Home* and *Tamar*. The imperfect aspects of *Home* and *Tamar* are not explicit in the artifacts. These pieces of work represent and embody the idea of expanded imperfection in my portfolio of work for this PhD submission. *Everything Imperfect* interrogates the idea of imperfection by utilising diary and documentary footage, films submitted and screened during the project, personal home movies as the PhD developed, text, interviews and a collaborative and participatory B-Movie. The film articulates experience and enquiry - experimenting with how imperfection as praxis might find a form as a film aesthetic.

Both *Home* and *Tamar* were important films for me to make, as I was interested in expanding the idea of imperfection and exploring new ideas, using live music and cinema within collaborative d.i.y processes. I enjoyed constructing and framing an aesthetic, free from representing imperfection only through the artifact. Instead, the imperfect qualities at work can be found in the collaborative processes, the emergence

of the imperfect orchestra, and the overall orchestration. This was a generative part of my understanding of the definition of d.i.y punk – as being free and independent: bringing people together through a kind of feeling, or spirit, whilst at the same time, its meaning remaining unfixed. This brings tensions and issues for documentation, of course, as this type of impact is difficult to measure. Nonetheless, I wanted to include both of these films, because they were exciting for me to make, helping to bring new people into the imperfect frame; through musical collaboration and fostering critical reflection as to how imperfection as praxis can continue to evolve. Personally, I was also interested in developing my own work in a longer form, attempting to make a poetic, visual piece celebrating my home.

Home, whilst somewhat free-forming in technique, was a departure from my earlier work. It is a longer piece - a portrait of place - exploring a kind of diaristic film-poetics, constructed to be experienced and performed live. *Tamar*, one might argue, is more of a ‘professional’ piece, in the sense that aspects of the content and musical score suggest a certain kind of mastery of techniques. The piece includes footage from workshops with children on trains, local filmmakers and amateur musicians all contributing to the finished work. Nevertheless, in its d.i.y methods of production, orchestrated through a series of projects, workshops and people contributing to its formation, both projects evidence expanded imperfection processes. Imperfection should not only be restricted to lo-fi films for example, or underground aesthetics and venues. This would restrict the scope of *imperfect praxis*. Both *Home* and *Tamar* represent imperfection in the sense that they brought people together in a social context, and instigated new producers, collaborations, experiences and collectivity in different forms. They brought emerging musicians into the picture, some never having played in a musical group before, now performing in local bands. ‘Imperfect Orchestra’ has now become an autonomous and independent project, which I will discuss in more detail later.

Imperfection and the project’s reactivation of punk has continued to expand the understanding of participatory cinema as an umbrella term, to explore new territories and ways of working within time-based moving image, film and music. The elasticity of punk informs my understanding of imperfection: free to manipulate its liberatory qualities accordingly. In this sense, whilst I directed these two films, through the

collaborations made with local filmmakers and musicians, the two pieces emerged out of the ideas, energies and emancipatory impact developed through *Imperfect Cinema*.

Finally, it must be said that part of this way of working requires both courage and, not failure, but a negation of the *need* for success, because processes are valorised as much as the artefact. In this sense, the spirit of the project can be imagined through its collective-democratic dimension - the possibility for beginnings – for people, aesthetics, ideas and groups. The courage participants showed at *Imperfect Cinema*, to stand up and screen their first film in front of nearly a hundred people could be a terrifying proposition. I hope that the ethos and spirit of the overall project made this a possibility.

THESIS CONCLUSIONS

‘Unique’ Guiding Principles

The PhD provided me with the context from which to consider how the emancipatory potential of imperfection could be disseminated: as a written text and as a film and cinema practice. This raised a number of issues to resolve and/or examine. Because of the ephemeral nature of the project, one that critiques the notion of the expert, there are clear contradictory positions to negotiate. Specifically, the tension between a no-expert ‘anything goes’ methodology and the writing of a PhD, which is inherently striving towards a kind of mastery.

Both the film work and this thesis served to generate an understanding of how imperfect practice as research can be communicated and, in doing so, contribute to knowledge. The interplay between the practice as research (social-participatory-collective) and the theoretical research and writing (individually authored) is fused together by an exchange that initially might appear contradictory, but has become a fundamental principle of the *imperfect praxis* model.

Imperfect praxis requires dissensus and ‘indisciplinarity’ (Rancière 2008). The participatory practice also needed to be supported by contextual and historical analysis and theoretical frameworks. The theoretical interrogation of ‘imperfection’ made it possible to conceive of the space of the project. The written text and film represent the context-specific moments in which collective experiences emerge, although retrospectively and imperfectly. As discussed in the contextual review and methodologies and methods chapters, the theoretical, contextual research provided me with an awareness of relevant interdisciplinary film, media and art practices. I believe that through the reworking of these actions and ideas, I have been able to offer some new perspectives, in a changed technological context, where alternative approaches to dominate cultural forms, can be renewed, enjoyed, and rediscovered. In this respect, the project has been about reanimating a spirit of imperfection that was part of the

history of experimental-underground and political film but is suppressed as these works become part of an academic 'canon'. If imperfection is seen as an elite academic aesthetic it is no longer liberating. punks' contradictory histories, uncertain meanings and discordant - at times fractious - connotations, provided this research with a place to begin exploring what an imperfect film practice might be.

George McKay proposes that political-aesthetic work, in the tradition of the avant-garde, should be 'ongoing, continual, changing' (McKay 1996, 184). This has been a crucial idea for this project. *Imperfect praxis* has meant using the social context of film to rediscover what seemed emancipatory about deskilled film-making in the first place. John Roberts considers that to 'resist the pressures of abstract labour, art must find ways and means of being *in* the world and not *of* the world (opening up a space of reflection on, and distance from the transfer of knowledge into abstract labour), and therefore must find ways and means of being both 'social fact' and 'asocial' (Roberts 2015, 79). This is a difficult position to occupy, and perhaps is easier to write than actually put into action. However, I would suggest that this project has offered aspects of this grassroots idea in practice: a convergence between media-art, technology and social transformations in and through d.i.y culture in which imperfection is the thread that stitches these unions together, by creating a space that encourages experimentation, participation and play.

The development and emergence of the *Imperfect Orchestra* is a good example of how sharing practice and knowledge in social settings can create new autonomous projects, emerging from the original context. The *Imperfect Orchestra* are now operating as an independent organisation – a 'Live Soundtrack Ensemble of Amateur Musicians', describing themselves on 'social media' as:

Imperfect Orchestra formed in 2013 and has consistently maintained principles of collaboration, artistic expression, performance, diversity, inclusivity and, perhaps most importantly, celebration of the amateur. These principles were born out of the Plymouth based film collective Imperfect Cinema, from which Imperfect Orchestra originated.

TOWARDS A CINEMA OF IMPERFECTION



Figure 45, 46: Imperfect Orchestra (Source: Evening Herald / PS: Zine)

Working in-between subcultural activity and academia has produced a space to analyse and question some of the boundaries between activism and academia, re/working the relationship between ‘research and practice’. In this sense, the project is framed through the two limitations of the research – an academic study that can easily reify subculture and a subcultural practice that often values immediacy over context and history. The tension and interaction between these two positions provided a generative interaction, a space for critiquing methods, or using methods ‘against methods’ (Feyerabend 1975).



Figure 47: Tamar screening Devonport Welcome Hall (Source: Dom Moore)

Towards a Cinema of Imperfection

In comparison with other arts, such as theatre, music, writing, painting or sculpting, cinema is a relatively new form of expression. The wonder of seeing ourselves on screens and the unknown quality of moving images has lost some of its element of surprise. This practice attempted to cultivate a cinema space from which the spectacle and excitement of seeing ourselves could be developed in such a way that the idea of the cinema itself becomes owned by the ones participating in the *making* and the *viewing*. A key element of this approach was in the development of situating *Imperfect Cinema* within non-traditional cinema spaces. The exhibition was the research, in a live context, so that practice could be experienced, shared and discussed collectively - in the immediate moment. It was a form of a 'Festivals', that '...contrasted violently with everyday life, but were not separate from it. They were like everyday life, but more intense; and moments of that life...were reunited, amplified, magnified in the festival' (Lefebvre 2014, 227). In other words, a participatory cinema practice can shift the central focus away from the artifact - narrative, aesthetics, or technical experimentation – whilst still creating this type of work in order to see ourselves.

Espinosa's writing on popular culture and cinema are driven by 'the possibility of a living act'. The 'festivals', 'nocturnal centres' and 'cabarets' '...must be the spaces where the people express themselves and are expressed' (Espinosa 1969). Therefore, both punk in its broadest, idealistic d.i.y sense, and Espinosa, called for artistic activity to be both a convivial popular site, as well as critically engaged with both its histories and the potential for transformative self-expression.

In some respects, this thesis points to a possible imperfect future for cinema. However, I have not attempted to include a possible utopian future. Instead, I put forward an argument that explores the opportunities that new audio-visual technologies present for artistic expression and self-representation, as well as their ability to foster collective intersubjective experiences. I have taken the position that the presence of the audience is crucial to the emancipatory potential of imperfection. Although it is true that social media helped to disseminate the idea of *imperfect cinema* and drew the audience to the event, the mediated or networked collectivity offered by social media is not enough on

its own. This moves on the discussion from using technology in a neoliberal capitalist sense and the idea of ‘participatory media’, although it does not negate these forms of practices. Instead, it positions a practice that doesn’t fetishize these technologies to such an extent that the collective experience in the social context can become lost.

The progress of digital technology can be emancipatory for cinema, if we continue to interrogate its participatory practical uses in social life. In this sense, the coming together of bodies in spaces can still offer radical approaches to artistic productions, interested in participatory methods of production - although I must stress that these moments are often ephemeral, uncertain, and dependent on the people who come. There can be no exact science to replicate these experiences. Instead, this thesis, through practice, interrogates these ideas, offering a model of what happened and how my experiences fed into its outcomes. This can find one form in language, as in this thesis. However, they must also be discovered, or uncovered, if the aim is participatory artistic practice, in and through actions. Nevertheless, it could be argued that some people who attended events might have felt isolated or outside of the collective. Despite my efforts to keep the practice ‘open’, it is likely that this happened, although it was never communicated to me personally. Ultimately, perhaps there is no ‘perfect’ imperfect methodology.

In conversation with cultural theorist Irit Rogoff at Goldsmith University in 2010, Bernard Stiegler discussed the question of musical experience. As director of the ‘Institute for Acoustic and Musical Research and Coordination’ (IRCAM), Stiegler found issues with how the events at the Pompidou attracted: ‘...a very limited public, a very small public. And the problem of this public was not its size, not an Institutional consideration with the size of the public - the problem was that it was only a public of professionals’ (Stiegler-Rogoff 2010).

Stiegler doesn’t want to rip it up and start again. Instead, he looks beyond the 20th century for context and found an interesting example from the Paris Opera in the 1880s. At this time, their policies included distributing the score and a transcription of the performance to the public prior to the event - ‘an arrangement for piano and violin and voice as well a commentary on the complexity of the score. And you had to prepare yourself before going to the concert hall’ (Stiegler-Rogoff 2010). In an age before the radio and technological media innovation, families learnt the music before attending

the performance. The media-technological revolution in the twentieth century, according to Stiegler, 'created a short-circuit in the skills - the musical skills of the public' (Stiegler-Rogoff 2010).

The orchestration of *Imperfect Cinema* alongside developing my own practice, framed by the critical examination and practicing of d.i.y punk leading towards imperfection as praxis, communicates the importance of socialising a participatory practice. As Rancière notes in *Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics*, practices engaged in relational aesthetics are 'an art creating no more works or objects, but ephemeral situations prompting new forms of relationships' (2009: 47). In this sense, the three films supplied in this thesis and the project as a whole, are presented as a practice investigating methodologies for 'forms of participation in a common world' (Rancière 2006, 85).

This doctoral project is culminating, not without contradictions and the potential to analyse the authenticity of my position. I began this project as an amateur in every way – musician, filmmaker, and student. Today, I'm an academic working within Universities teaching filmmaking, dramatic writing and media arts. Moving forward, it is fundamental for me to continue developing as a filmmaker, artist and educator, observing the world around me to frame new forms of expression and develop new ideas in my field. I am starting to be invited into residencies and some established professional sectors, in the sense that I'm being paid or funded to develop projects. *Home* and *Tamar* were commissioned pieces, and I have recently been selected for the Cornwall Workshop, organised for artist-filmmakers by LUX, the international arts agency that, as discussed earlier, Duncan Reekie heavily critiques. In this sense, one could see the problematic binaries in this thesis - in between amateurism and the professional.

I was initially drawn into punk because it suggested freedom and independence. One can be free to navigate their own expressions without needing permission or valorisation. Whilst I am in a different position now than I was when I began this research, my future practice aims to continue exploring and thinking through the idea of cinema and curation in an expanded amateur sense. I want to continue working within different forms and formats, navigating the relationship between the union of music, live experiences and immediate d.i.y processes. In doing so, the interface between punk, imperfection and cinema are understood as umbrella terms for a variety of participatory

and personal possibilities to work with moving images and time based forms that circulate - in cinemas, schools, bars, galleries and screens. They provide grounding from which to attempt to avoid mainstream populism, phoney-participation and de-radicalized spectacle. The value of an amateur spirit is therefore underscored by d.i.y punk attitudes, free to expand, resistant to political domination; whilst at the same time attempting to change your lived environment.

For me, 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).

Future Practice & Research

The underground micro-cinema project, *Imperfect Cinema*, will return on May the 2nd, 2016, in a new venue – The Underground. This will reignite the *Imperfect Cinema* collective in Plymouth, as a free social space for cinematic participation. The boundaries between cinema and artist-video are collapsing, supporting new platforms and venues for production, distribution and consumption of moving image work. The ephemeral open access situations within film and media art contexts will continue to be interrogated, following the lines of this thesis, the interrogation of imperfection – as a political and liberatory tool. The potential of imperfection as praxis, opening up its means of production to better instigate participation and action, remains a work in progress.

Alongside the continuation of *Imperfect Cinema*, as mentioned, I aim to continue developing my own film practice as research in a number of areas. I am interested in further exploration of the aesthetic of *Everything Imperfect*, integrating ethnography with fiction and documentary. Additionally, I have been developing the idea of a live screen/sound performance film piece on tour, with audio-visual workshops during the day, leading towards a series of public and distinct live performances in the evening. This project would expand upon my work in *Home* and *Tamar*, opening up collaborative opportunities for researching and practicing imperfection within cinema – drawing from Stiegler's ideas on pre-20th century amateurism, by sharing knowledge

and skills collectively; using media technologies in popular spaces so that a union of d.i.y and experimental aesthetics can forge new experiences. This would provide a series of singular musical and film responses to pieces of work, and lead to further critical reflection and research around the notion of sharing skills, collective experiences and participatory filmmaking. This kind of social, spontaneous, and immediate approach to cinema-making, would aim to examine the duality of possibilities within digital technologies – one that carves out a space for my own aesthetic development as a filmmaker, whilst additionally, allowing for collective experiences and continued political exploration around the concept of *a cinema of imperfection*.

We now have technologies that appear to be offering accessibility, information and democratic opportunities to take part in culture making and to learn, changing how we engage in the arts altogether. The question remains as to how to continue evolving cinema to create ‘a new type of circuit, from which other people can come and continue the circuits’ (Stiegler-Rogoff 2010). Media technologies can support our understandings of the complexities of the world; ways of seeing and sharing experiences using audio-visual tools, creatively or as social means of communication, to formulate further knowledge.

Alongside the question of access, imperfect aesthetics, often formed in the past through oppositional or economic necessity, are now easily copied with a press of a button. digital apps can degrade images to appear like Super 8mm analogue film; ‘vines’ harness videos to synthesise the economic urgency of expensive analogue film with a time limit; digital programmes imitate master artists, turning your photograph image into a Picasso, Monet or Bacon in seconds. In doing so, personality, energy, decision-making, observation and communications – human experiences – are now, more than ever, facilitated, controlled and mediated through computers/media. This is why it is important to insist on the human context of participation for this project.

The accessibility of technology has democratised film and cinema-making, potentially at least. Students interested in film and media arts often attended University in order to have access to equipment. Feature films can be shot and sound recorded on mobile phone, editing software is comparably cheap (or ripped/ downloadable). Of course, this

doesn't answer the question of jobs or ways to make a living: as a filmmaker or an artist. It doesn't claim to provide a solution to social and economic inequality. This project does provide a series of examples of how *imperfection as praxis* can develop collective experiences, reinforcing Rancière's point that 'everybody can speak'. *Imperfect praxis* does not affirm inequality by claiming to solve inequality. It provokes critical dialogues for the purpose of developing spaces for participation.

By developing a theoretical framework, or model, and by activating key methodological techniques of d.i.y punk, this practice was able to move towards understanding imperfection as a practice-led idea for research, which can be repeatable and renewable, but always distinct, if operating in-between boundaries. In doing so, it brought different people together as a community of makers. This approach developed a fluid methodology for practice as research by attempting to avoid traditional quantification of participation to measure 'impact'. In this sense, 'imperfection' names the interdisciplinary collaborative and ephemeral nature of participation 'open-access' work, but also investigates its emancipatory potential as a collective-active-space where a kind of knowledge can be explored. This knowledge requires an interdisciplinary, or even an 'indisciplinary' (Rancière 2008), kind of examination, as I have outlined in this thesis.

Espinosa used the term 'imperfect cinema' to incite a new cinema, in opposition to one 'dedicated to celebrating results, the opposite of a self-sufficient and contemplative cinema, the opposite of a cinema which beautifully illustrates ideas or concepts which we already possess' (Espinosa 1969). In light of political and cultural economies of waste, Espinosa tells us that, 'just as in our social aspirations', in which, 'we're looking for better means of human self-fulfillment'; imperfect cinema must also 'search for a culture of true liberation' (Espinosa-Chanan 1983).

Therefore culture has to provide new ways of feeling and enjoying life different from irrational consumption. This is the basis of 'imperfect cinema'. Since we're creating a society which, although full of imperfections, will achieve a new kind of human productiveness. I suggested a cinema which although it has imperfections, is essentially much more consistent with real human needs' (Espinosa-Chanan 1983).

This research communicates a continuation of Espinosa's political-aesthetic line of enquiry through practice. The possibilities of creative productiveness, emerging from the accessibility of digital technology, can support new platforms and venues for participation in and through *social* dialogues. As a methodology in relation to d.i.y punk, the concept of imperfection planted a spirit of community and has led to synergic areas of practice as research within the field of participatory cinema. *Imperfect praxis* is how I name this knowledge, understood in this PhD thesis as emerging out of a negotiated, emancipatory and participatory space of practice - *a cinema of imperfection*.

I fully understand that not everyone would want to be involved in a project such as *Imperfect Cinema*. This is an important part of its imperfection, perhaps. But still, it seems appropriate to conclude this thesis with gratitude and a view towards future social/cinematic experience; the same words that end my submitted film 'Everything Imperfect':

Thanks to everyone who contributed and participated.

The next Imperfect Cinema coming soon...

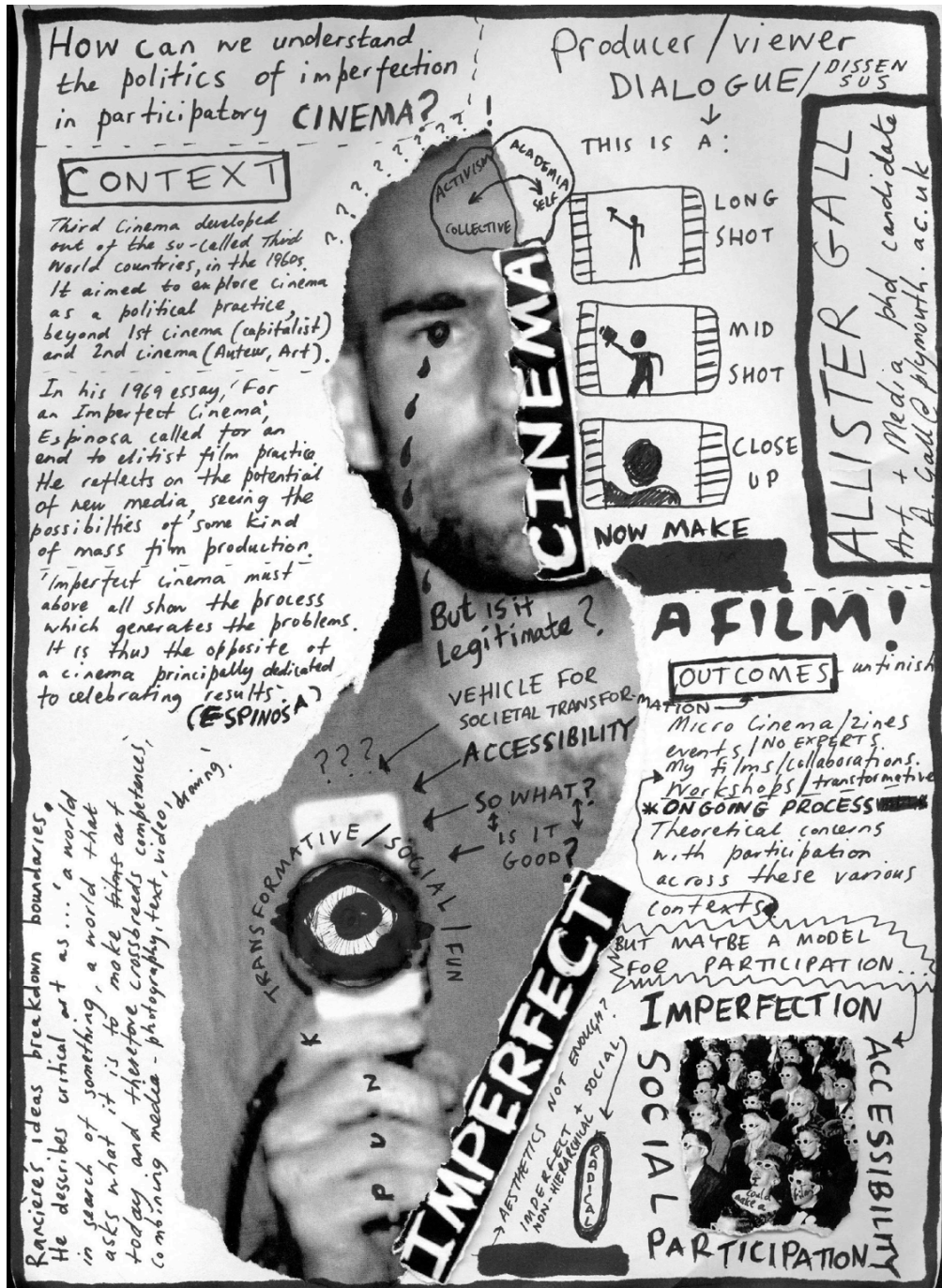


Figure 48: Imperfect Praxis Poster (Source: Allister Gall)

APPENDIX A

Film submissions on USB include:

1. Everything Imperfect (2013)
2. Home (2013)
3. Tamar (2015)

Additionally a selection of films made and screened by myself and participants at various *Imperfect Cinema* events, is available to view on the USB in the folder titled *Imperfect Cinema*.

APPENDIX B

A TREATMENT FOR A DOCUMENTARY/B-MOVIE/PhD PARTICIPATORY
FEATURE FILM

ALLISTER GALL/IMPERFECT CINEMA

April 2012

Act 1.

The present. Plymouth.
Social club. Dusk.

A camera team is filming a documentary of the micro-punk-cinema IMPERFECT CINEMA putting on one of their micro cinema events. The team is hard at work putting up posters, printing fanzines, sending out the word on Facebook and in the streets, structuring a d.i.y cinema screen in a social club, generally panicking and drinking. It is a Saturday and they are hosting a night, which will feature underground films, live music, spoken word, DJ's and general good times. People are rushing around, but generally there is a pleasant and relaxed mood.

Somebody goes to get batteries.
Somebody escapes to have a fag.
Somebody escapes to calm down.
Somebody forgets the projector. Etc.

The camera crew interviews the people organising the night on the fly. We get some background into what IMPERFECT CINEMA is, has done, etc. There are high hopes for the night. There are some problems, but everything gets handled: just about.

Finally the room is set-up.

People slowly start arriving. There is an excitement in the air. People start to bring their films to the desk ready to screen and find their seats. Some bands arrive with equipment.

The camera crew starts to interview some of the people who come. They talk about their experiences with IMPERFECT CINEMA to the camera, but away from direct interviews they talk about the mundane. What they did last night. What they watched last week. Why they are drinking too much. How work is shit.

Finally the room is pretty packed and the night begins. Allister and Dan introduce the night. Allister explains that the camera crew is making a documentary of the night, which will be for his submission for his doctorate research. They thank everyone for coming and talk about how this is the 14th

IC, etc. Then discuss some of the IC news and some of the things that are happening for the future.

While all this is going on a man enters. He seems out of place, but the camera men find him interesting and film him anyway. He passes a film to Allister and then sits down on his own. (This character might be a B movie villain?)

Allister then introduces the first film. A young lady comes to the stage with her film. She begins introducing it.

While this is happening the strange man calls Allister over. Allister walks over. The camera crew watch him talk to Allister. The film begins.

Dan is frantically trying to fix the sound.

Allister and Dan then hurriedly walk outside. The camera follows. There is a problem. The film the strange guy handed Allister is on a weird format – can it be played? There is some frantic thinking. The film inside ends.

They run back on stage. The next film is introduced. The man comes to the stage and talks about his film. He is a regular.

The film is played. Some other shit happens here....

Next the strange man is called up on stage. He looks out at everyone. The camera crew comes up the stage to film him. The man stares at them all. They stare back. Then he simply walks out.

Allister and Dan look at each other. They don't know what to do, but the film is in the player so they press play.

ACT 2

The camera man is filming the crowd. Everyone is staring at the screen and not moving. Like a freeze frame.

The screen shows space. A space ship floats around (use shots from 2001, Ikarie XB-1, Forbidden planet, etc).

The camera pans around the room. *(here is where there is a weird shift...the film becomes proper fiction, but we don't mention that the camera man should be transfixed as well).*

The camera shoots close ups, etc. Everything is now shot on a tri-pod. We

hear a voice over.

Hello Imperfect Cinema humans. I am an alien from outer space. You are all on a space ship. Don't be alarmed. Earth was destroyed many moons ago. We just

left and today there is nothing there. Upon our recovery mission we found nothing at all to speak of, except one hard drive which had somehow got buried in a bunker in Plymouth. The bunker also contained something called Scrumpy Jack, and we believe this enabled the drive to survive. That hard drive belonged to Allister Gall.

CU of Allister looking confused.

We have tried to pierce together existence on Earth from that hard drive. On it we found many incoherent words, moving images and sounds. We also found footage of all of you that are here today. We believe it formed part of some kind of research he was doing, in which he wanted to facilitate an approach to filmmaking that enables him to work independently and collaboratively by adopting d.i.y punk principles and adopting them to a micro-cinema project. Anyway, you have all been created using footage we have from that hard drive. It is believed he intended to make a documentary about his experiences. That never happened.

You are all now on this space ship. We have created you because we have found another Earth. We have called it Earth 2. We have never been there before; but we have created a space ship for you to travel to this new Earth, and attempt to reignite human existence. Good luck.

A noise, then silence. Slowly people look around.

Here is where everyone is free to write, direct, light, film, act in scenes. People are free to write any kind of scenes they want. But the framework is B-Movie. So nothing too ironic or knowing. Hopefully lots of bad writing, hammy acting, dodgy props and crazy scenes. I thought the main driving narrative could be our mission to Earth 2, where we have to fight other space ships, deal with boredom, in house fighting, horror-deaths, too much booze, etc. But really everyone is free to do whatever they want.

ACT 3

They arrive on Earth 2. Upon landing they walk outside. It is the same as Earth 1. They walk around the cities, the moors, the beaches, etc. Eventually one of them sees a sign for an Imperfect Cinema. They all go.

It was all a dream? (a massive cliché right at the end could be fun). Everyone dies.

Everyone arrives on earth 2 and just says see you soon and walks home

APPENDIX C

2011 One Plus One Filmmakers Journal

Dear Allister,

Thank you for your article. We all really enjoyed it and it really fits well with the coming issue. I have pasted some comments along with the article below. Is there any chance you could get this back to us by Friday? Please contact me if there are any problems or concerns. I have put in red things we would like you to re-look at and green anything we have changed. A bibliography would be great. Thank you for allowing us access to the pictures on the website.

Many thanks, Bradley

Imperfect Cinema: DiY Punk, Micro-Cinema and Participation Allister Gall & Dan Paolantonio (2011)
www.imperfectcinema.com

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 García-Espinosa

Jacques Ranciere has noted a primary political concern is the lack of recognition by those dominated in society. He considers the responsibility of one who has an 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 the sharing of knowledge. The central political act of Imperfect Cinema is aesthetic, in that it produces a rearrangement of a social order, where new voices and bodies previously unseen can be heard in a participatory context outside of the academicised-experimental and capitalist-consumerist mainstreams of film culture.

Imperfect Cinema's aim is to create a democratic and sustainable underground Cinema with the central aim of providing a venue for participatory activity outside of the aforementioned enclaves of contemporary film culture.

We take inspiration from Espinosa's essay, quoted above and first published in English in the now defunct British film magazine *Afterimage* in 1971, and Ranciere's fundamental theoretical framework: *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Far more than just academic research, our aim is to create a dialectic venue for participatory activity in which the problems of both exclusivity and sustainability in mainstream film culture can be explored and discussed. As Dr Duncan Reekie of *The Exploding Cinema* has observed, the experimental & short-form film has for too long been the preserve of an academicised elite, or alternatively viewed as the juvenile 'stepping stone' to the mature feature film, a more easily commercially exploitable commodity. This is an incredibly revealing observation as it draws attention not only to the abundant inequalities & enclaves existent within these mainstreams of film culture, but also to a value system which hierarchically positions short-form as 'less than.' 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 experimental & 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 for its chances of discovering new territories of thought and practice. Added to these concerns is an imaging industry which has become 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, we are in danger of losing our brushes and paints as the detritus of this economic model. This 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.

DiY Punk as Methodology

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 a paper which was delivered at the British radical Screens symposium, which argued for a shifting of the contextual lens through which punk is to be understood in relation to our Imperfect Cinema project, away from the numerous coffee table tomes & hip ephemera of the first wave and towards the comparatively underground DiY and anarchopunk movements. In contextualising DiY punk's 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 filmmaking to become not an elitist art, but to be made by the masses and not for the masses. '...our future filmmakers, will themselves be scientists, sociologists, physicians, economists, agricultural engineers, etc., without of course ceasing to be filmmakers.' Building on Espinosa's call to end exclusivity, this research aims to mobilise a film community by valourising and celebrating non- virtuosity, contextualising amateurism as the enthusiastic pursuit of an objective, (rather than as the inferior / juvenile version of 'professional' which for this project is contextualized as engaging in a given activity as a source of livelihood or as a career), not to reject out of hand the notion of 'professionalism' but to problematise the hierarchical framing and valuing of results. Espinosa states, 'a future imperfect cinema is 'the opposite of a cinema principally dedicated to celebrating results.' He goes on to say 'Imperfect Cinema 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', making a distinct comment on the narrow confines of industrialised production value systems.

No Wave Cinema

There is a distinct historical precedent for the convergence between punk and cinema. Termed No Wave, New Cinema, (or 'Punk Cinema' by Macdonald and Kerekes) these 1970s filmmakers in New York paralleled Punks energy, iconography, and aggressive DIY aesthetic. They converged popular culture with experimental/art house cinema, with the intention to critique and screen work outside of traditional models and exhibition spaces. Rather than a cohesive group, they embodied a diverse and fragmented collection of individuals, empowered by the collaborative DiY punk ethos. Musicians made and acted in films, music venues became cinemas, documentary and fiction was blurred, and amateur technologies were re-appropriated, harnessing their radical potential to both upset and provide aesthetic separation from the alienating production values of commercial cinema. No Wave film-makers rejected the heavily-theorised enclaves of the structuralist movement, paralleling punk music's answer to bloated self-indulgence of 1970s mainstream rock. They found new spaces to show and distribute their work, screening films in drive-ins, rock clubs, and even prisons. They embodied a radical collective sensibility: they acted in each other's films, wrote scores, and encouraged others to do the same.

However the development of our Imperfect Cinema's own 'scene' should not be viewed as a revisionist imitation of the No Wave Cinema movement. Indeed, like any reactionary phenomenon, No Wave should be framed within its historical context, especially as many of its then subversive techniques have been appropriated by mainstream film culture. For example, a great deal of their output was pastiche: a binary of lowbrow and highbrow tastes united by an aggressive punk rock attitude. To simply mimic this aesthetic would today be an impotent exercise as it is found in abundance in the political vacuum of the multiplex. Imperfect Cinema is dedicated to exploring a new and more relevant political aesthetic and to the harnessing of trans-disciplinary dialogues to address the real world problems of exclusivity and sustainability existent in mainstreams film culture.

Micro Cinema and the (Re) Distribution of the Sensible:

Imperfect Cinema has thus far produced four events. The Imperfect Cinema Launch event, which was an introduction to the aims and objectives of the project, the Imperfect Cinema 1 event which was the first of our manifestoed provocations and the subsequent Imperfect Cinema 1 Screening event in which the responses to the

manifestoed provocations were screened and discussed. The latest was called the Imperfect 'free' cinema event, which was free of restrictions, manifestoes and screened all films under three minutes. Every event features a manifesto which serves to situate the context of the event and act as a provocation to action, a fanzine style periodical which provides further context to each project and which also provides an open tactile vehicle for the collective to further share ideas and opinions, and a special event, (which has thus far taken the form of contributions by guest speakers and preview screenings of film's of particular relevance to the project).

Each event also contains an 'Open Reel' section, which continuing DIY Punks egalitarian dialectic is a space in which the collective are able to screen work which has been not been specifically produced in response to one of the manifestoed provocations. Central to our framing of the project up to now has been creation of a venue for what Ranciere describes as 'forms of participation in a common world' (Ranciere 2006: 85). Ranciere says we need to upset the social order for equality so that new voices can be heard: 'Equality is fundamental and absent, timely and untimely, always up to the initiative of individuals and groups who...take the risk of verifying their equality, or inventing individual and collective forms for its verification' (Ranciere in Biesta: 2010).

Imperfect Cinema has adopted easily understood cultural frameworks of reference to abstract ideas in order to facilitate aesthetic ownership. For example the manifesto of Imperfect Cinema 1 framed the three-minute film thus 'The Ramones only needed three minutes, so do you.' This statement works in a number of ways, firstly it references the punk egalitarian axiom: here are three chords: now start a band, but also serves to re-frame the short film by its comparison with the duration of a punk song. Just as these were not viewed as being juvenile versions of more lengthy progressive rock songs, but as distinctly different forms, so short-form films can also be viewed as being distinctly different rather than inferior to the more commercially exploitable 'professionalised' format, the feature film. The tactile distribution of work produced in response to the Imperfect Cinema 1 manifesto will be on an ecodisc dvd which will include all the films screened. Taking inspiration from the Crass Collective and their Bullshit Detector compilation series (1981-1984).

Bullshit detector was a portmanteau of underground activity which although comprised

of crudely recorded demos by previously anonymous bands, nevertheless provided an important vinyl snapshot of participatory activity, which is also the aim of our DVD compilation. In this sense, the Imperfect Cinema films themselves can be seen as not only aesthetic objects – but moreover can be used as a record of tactile participation. Highlighting this connectivity, Duncan Reekie, the co-founder of Exploding Cinema, was our first guest speaker, sharing his knowledge, films and research, and creating the potential for new networks and future activity within underground circuits.

Future Imperfect: The (Re) appropriation of the sensible

When considering issues of sustainability in contemporary film culture, how might the adoption of a trans-disciplinary approach to the theorization of practice help address this real world problem? More specifically can a dialectic convergence between DIY Punk and a popular radical film practice provide a venue for this discussion of this issue? Both DIY punk and Film practice rely upon the vehicular aspect of media technologies to facilitate the description and dissemination of ‘information.’ Just as punk was empowered by the re-appropriation of amateur and juvenile technologies (to describe and disseminate its dissatisfaction with the alienating production values and self-absorption of mainstream rock music), might a popular radical film practice find similar means to express dissatisfaction with similarly alienating aspects of mainstream film culture outlined earlier in this article? When considering the trajectory of the imperfect cinema project we aimed to address key ‘real world problems’ existent in mainstream film culture, by visiting distinct areas in sequentially themed micro cinema events and to empower our collective with new and democratic means of understanding, interacting with and commenting on these issues. As Stacy Thompson suggests in his essay ‘Punk Cinema’ (2005: 21) ‘punk textuality cuts across many different cultural forms, including music, style, the printed word and cinema’ (Thompson 2004: 3), although he actually only considers a film to be punk when encompassing an ‘ethical aesthetic.’

This, it could be argued, is an acknowledgement not only of the bricolage, reflexivity and risk which characterise punks mediated audio-visual aesthetic, but also of its resourcefulness in forging new context. In their 2009 paper ‘Obsolescence: Uncovering Values in Technology Use’ Jina Huh, Mark S. Ackerman describe the unsustainability of a technology industry which is 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 is by nature then unsustainable. In fact one might go as far as suggesting that it relies on unsustainability.

When considering the ‘global problem’ that this ecologically unsustainable pattern of usage 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 nostalgia? Just as the reactionary (de-) evolution of a set of ‘professionalised’ production values resulted in the extreme low-fidelity aural aesthetic of the Norwegian Black Metal underground, could a similarly positioned audio-visual production value system rearrange the industrialized / professionalized 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 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?

The second themed Imperfect Cinema event on (‘Imperfect Cinema 2’ April 1st 2011) will explore the possibilities offered by both ‘redundant’ and lo-fidelity technologies in developing a re-contextualised audio visual aesthetic which is not only necessarily vehicular, but which also can be understood as a political comment on issues of sustainability and hierarchical inequality within contemporary film culture. In this respect the imperfection deemed ‘inferior’ by contemporary image-making industries can be harnessed to new and exciting political potential.

Imperfect Cinema seeks to utilize the methodological devices and techniques of DiY Punk and employ where possible easily understood cultural references as a tool to describe, position, interrogate and socialize key issues of concern existent within contemporary film culture and to popularize amongst our collective the notion of dialogue and synthesis between these. In considering how this fundamental aspect of our project, might be underlined, we have decided to lay the theoretical foundation of Imperfect Cinema 2 by exploring and discussing various qualities of a similarly positioned and equally politicized low fidelity aural aesthetic so that new synergetic insights might be drawn from the confluence of the two. To this end Imperfect Cinema 2 will be launched with a live discussion between renowned sonic artist and multi-instrumentalist Nicholas Bullen and ourselves, which will be centred around his development of an extreme genre of hardcore punk music known as grindcore. This format will not only enable the underlining of the trans-disciplinary nature of this project, but will also again serve to democratise this primary research by activating it with all attendees able to contribute and form open dialogues between the stage and the floor.

We hope that this article has served to briefly outline various ways that micro cinema, participation DiY punk has both informed and enabled the Imperfect Cinema project. We chose to focus around selected areas which have been central to the development of the project, and to illustrate how the convergence and dialogues between DiY Punk and a Radical Film Practice has enabled & empowered our research to dialectically address the problems of exclusivity and sustainability existent in mainstream film culture. If you would like to submit a film for Imperfect Cinema, come to one of our events or get involved please visit our webpage at: www.imperfectcinema.com

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