

Imperfect Cinema: Participation, Micro Cinema & DiY Punk

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This paper will outline various ways that the adoption of a trans-disciplinary approach to research and fieldwork has both informed and enabled the Imperfect Cinema research project. In recognition of the obvious limitations of a 15-minute paper, we will focus our discussion around selected areas which have been central to the development of the project, rather than attempting an all-encompassing thesis! To begin we will outline the Imperfect Cinema project, and how it represents an important disciplinary convergence between DiY punk and a film practice. We will then go on to discuss how this convergence has enabled our practice led research to address the ‘real world’ problems of exclusivity and sustainability existent in mainstream film culture.

As Dr Brad Mehlenbacher has suggested (in ‘Multi-disciplinarity & 21st Century Communication Design 2009) one of the ultimate goals of trans-disciplinarity is the solving of significant real world problems. Jacques Ranciere has noted the 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 experimental-intellectual 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.

DiY Punk as Methodology

Imperfect Cinema represents a trans-disciplinary convergence as it employs a DiY punk methodology to produce, disseminate and socialise a popular radical film practice. I 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.

By adopting a trans-disciplinary framework, which recontextualises 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 and contextualizing 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*). 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 industrialized production value systems.

No Wave

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. Imperfect Cinema is dedicated to exploring a new and more relevant political aesthetic and to the harnessing of trans-disciplinary dialogues to address real world problems of exclusivity and sustainability existent in the contemporary mainstreams of film culture.

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

Imperfect Cinema has thus far produced three 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. All three Imperfect Cinema events have valorized egalitarian technology and participation. 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 and abstract ideas 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 is 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 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?

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'* (Thompson 2005: 24).

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, after all how many variations of the home television set have represented the cutting edge in technological-televisual experience in only the last

decade? 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 re-arrange 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 Imperfect Cinema chapter 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.

As stated earlier in this paper, 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 myself which will be centered 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.

Conclusion

We hope that this paper has served to briefly outline various ways that trans-disciplinarity has both informed and enabled the Imperfect Cinema research project. We chose to focus our discussion 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 our practice led research to address the ‘real world’ problems of exclusivity and sustainability existent in mainstream film culture.

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