Towards An Imperfect Film Practice

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1 Introduction

This paper examines connections between punk and the creation of underground film events. It focuses in particular on a film practice informed by a DiY punk ethos, contextualised within No Wave Cinema, wherein ‘punk’ is to be viewed not as a style but as a methodology. In shifting the lens through which 'punk' is to be viewed, this project will focus on the inherent participatory nature of 'punk' techniques, and its potential for socialising radical popular film practice. More specifically, by exploring easily accessible digital technology and focusing on egalitarian, non-virtuoso methods of production, this paper explores how I have been developing my own filmic aesthetic. Because punk as practice represents an important convergence, not just in participation and DiY ethics but also in its creation of new spaces for social participation, this paper will explore the limits of the established order and dominant industry approaches. This will be done by building upon Ranciere’s notion of politicising aesthetics and Espinosa’s call for filmmaking to become a populist art.
To open, I will outline the four main elements of punk as a methodology and a practice. Firstly, I will explore ‘punk’ film and discern the No Wave filmmakers as authentic punk cinema, contextualising their punk rock inspired DiY ethos with my own practice, and illustrate strategies for adopting ‘punk’ not as a style but as a methodology. Secondly, I will explain how my films aim to investigate the egalitarian aspects of digital filmmaking as a tool for socialising production, exploring film to not only be aesthetic objects but also investigatory tools for instigating social change. Finally, I will discuss the development and construction of underground film events and the collaboration of a filmmaking collective; exploring notions of a socialised practice centred upon participation, non-hierarchal structures and the development of radical filmmaking strategies outside of traditional models.

2 No Wave Cinema: The True Punk Celluloid

‘Just pick up a camera, shoot, and learn as you go’

- Beth B

An early aim of this study was to define punk cinema. Recent studies have investigated Punk’s relationship to film in a variety of different contexts. Filmmakers often considered ‘punk’ include: Alex Cox, Julian Temple, Don Letts, Jim Jarmusch and Derek Jarman; as well as what Rombes terms the ‘New Punk Cinema’ associated with Dogma 95 and contemporary independent film. Certainly some of these filmmakers embrace ‘punk’ tendencies and styles, in both form and content, but it is questionable whether they
embody a definitive punk ethos associated with DiY subculture and the opposition of dominate mainstream values. Perhaps underground filmmakers, such as Jem Cohen and Mick Duffield are to be considered represent ‘punk’ ethics within filmmaking today; and one could even argue Godard’s non-conformity and the primitive style of Sam Fuller as possessing a ‘punk’ in attitude. One certainty remains: ‘Punk’ is a contested term.

In spite of this, David Kereke’s attempts to define punk cinema in *Punk Rock: So What?*. He considers the New York film Underground, between 1976 and 1985: ‘the only true punk celluloid’ (Sabin (Eds) 1999: 69). Linked to the ‘no-wave’ punk music scene, the filmmakers, as described by Jim Hoberman, began to ‘parallel the music’s energy, iconography, and aggressive anyone-can-do-it-aesthetic’. They embodied a DiY punk ethos, converging populist culture with highbrow influences, with the intention to critique and work outside of traditional models, and show films in popular spaces. This group of filmmakers includes: Amos Poe, Vivienne Dick, Beth and Scott B, and Nick Zedd. Hoberman contended: ‘The existence of a punk bohemia…have stimulated a number of young artists and musicians over the last year to produce a new wave of content-rich, performance-oriented narrative films. These are hardly seamless fictions; some are willfully, at times brilliantly, primitive. Many of the filmmakers were initially attracted to super-8 talkies as a documentary tool, and even the most extravagant of their fictions are grounded in a gritty, on-the-street verite’. 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 utilising the accessibility of super 8 cameras, filmmaking became affordable.

The films share an interest in narrative, as well as a trashy-no budget aesthetic; brought together by the connection with punk rock. They rejected the 1970s heavily-theorised-structuralist movement, paralleling punk music’s answer to the overblown and bloated 1970s mainstream rock, while at the same-time denouncing the Hollywood mainstream. The films themselves display influences of Italian neo-realism, cinema verite and B-Movie/ film noir narratives, juxtaposing populist influences. They found new spaces to show and distribute their work, screening films in drive-ins, rock clubs, prisons and on television. As No Wave filmmaker James Nares states: ‘We wanted a place to show our films that wasn’t associated with any of the established art houses’ (James Nares in Masters 2008:141). They created their own cinema space entitled New Cinema, and it ran for a year before closing down at its ‘popular peak’ (Nares in Masters 2008:142).

Beth B, a prominent No Wave figure, described how: ‘The bands were making their own posters, playing wherever they could. It was something that they organized themselves. So when the filmmaking thing started, we began to do the same thing’ (Beth B in Masters 2008: 139).

Their work was centred upon producing and distributing radical films outside traditional models. They were collaborative, encouraged participation, and was an ongoing process of learning. Hoberman’s described how a ‘radically divergent group sensibility has blossomed on New York’s independent film scene’. Their goal wasn’t to learn
techniques but to make a film. (Masters 2008: 142). They acted in each other’s films, added scores, and encouraged others to do the same. In doing so, they became genuine punk filmmakers; producing technically simple films, embodying an authentic DiY ethos and announcing a new age of independent film and video.

Researching ‘punk’ cinema has proved useful in delineating how I am not using punk as a style and rather adopting punk as a methodology for a socialising, do-it-yourself practice. If I were only to imitate the No Wave style, this would lead to a weak articulation of the term ‘punk’. I use the term ‘punk’ as a venue for encouraging participation and advocating non-virtuosity. In my own experience, 'punk' became a philosophy when I forged a band without any previous experience or skill. I only had a desire to create, do and exhibit our work. Alongside contextualising No Wave within my research, my own personal experiences have transformed my project. How could I make film without mastery of technique, and in doing so, promote others? Punk became, and is, a springboard for action.

3 Point and Shoot: Egalitarian Digital Filmmaking Possibilities

To contextualise the No Wave movement’s use of punk ethics combined with narrative and populist influences, my own aesthetic practice has been exploring accessible cheap point and shoot digital filmmaking.

DiY filmmaking has never been so accessible, so easy to make, so cheap to produce. The No Wave filmmakers could be seen as the analogue precursor to the digital revolution,
freeing artists from parasitical relationships with publishing houses, labels, etc. In some ways, the punk aesthetic, especially in terms of DiY and self-distribution have now migrated to new digital technologies. By experimenting with digital forms, my research progressed from utilising the latest HD camcorder to make a humorous and mildly subversive short film, exploring B-Movie conventions, to experimenting with increasingly cheap digital technologies as a tool to create films. This is a developing project, but I am currently working on three short narrative based films and documentary footage of an Underground collective in the USA. I am incorporating narrative and populist influences while using cheap digital technologies. The focus is not the production of digital film invoking celluloid, but instead foregrounding the cheap equipment.

Stacy Thompson expands upon authenticity in film production in his essay ‘Punk Cinema’ (2005: 21). He notes that ‘punk textuality cuts across many different cultural forms, including music, style, the printed word and cinema’ (Thompson 2004: 3), but considers a film to be ‘punk’ when encompassing an ‘ethical aesthetic’ (Thompson 2005: 24). Adapting Thompson’s notions of punk cinema has developed my own filmic aesthetic with the experimentation with digital simplicity. I want to illustrate the new opportunities digitalisation offers filmmaking by highlighting simplicity in form. Thompson contends: ‘(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, rather than reifying its means of production and thereby
folding in itself as a “closed” text’ (Thompson 2004: 49). By considering punk in Marxist terms we can argue that punks want to see the ‘labour’ and ‘social relations on which it is situated’, not it’s value. Punk’s labour is ‘…either non-corporate, ethical and does not smell like horse dung, or it is corporate, unethical, and does smell, in which case it must be avoided’ (Thompson 2004: 48). Structuring my own aesthetic on the rejection of slick production and instead focusing on a stripped-down digital aesthetic - emphasising subject matter, narrative and the egalitarian aspects of digital technology - it aims to embody Thompson’s notion of punk cinema.

This leads me to Espinosa’s 1969 manifesto: ‘For an Imperfect Cinema’. Espinosa argued for filmmaking to become not an elitist art form, but to be made by the masses and not for the masses; seeing the potential of film as a popular art: ‘…our future students, and therefore our future filmmakers, will themselves be scientists, sociologists, physicians, economists, agricultural engineers, etc., without of course ceasing to be filmmakers’, he considered Imperfect cinema to be ‘…the opposite of a cinema principally dedicated to celebrating results, the opposite of a self-sufficient and contemplative cinema…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 a jungle’.

Espinosa’s essay is still relevant; digital technology today offers filmmaking production opportunities previously seen as difficult and expensive. Today we can make a film on our mobile phones, on web cams, on photocopies, on cheap digital cameras.
We can edit films on downloadable software from the Internet, or on software already available with most computers. We have never before been in such a rich position for what Espinosa proclaims: universal participatory potential: ‘Art will not disappear into nothingness; it will disappear into everything’

Espinosa contended that we must aim for the masses to make films themselves, express their own worlds, narratives, and documentaries in their own communities.

4 The Imperfect Cinema Project: A (Re)Distribution Of The Sensible

In ‘The Politics of Aesthetics’ (2006), Ranciere explores the link between aesthetics and politics. His key concept is what he terms the ‘distribution of the sensible’, which refers to the established social order governing ‘what presents itself to sense experiences,’ and ‘forms of participation in a common world’ (Ranciere 2006: 85). Ranciere suggests that aesthetic practices can play a political role in the distribution of what is seen, heard and felt. These practices are organized and facilitated by people who have the capacity to speak and establish ‘ways of doing and making’ towards a collective sense of what we have in common. For Ranciere, politics is defined as the result of a redistribution of the sensible to those who have ‘no part,’ who by making themselves visible through aesthetic practices, have a chance to disrupt the social order.

My project adopts Ranciere’s notion of subjectification; disrupting existing conditions through the exploration of radical popular possibilities of socialising film. Radicalising digital film, in which experimental techniques have been brought into the
mainstream, presents subversive potential for underground film. Therefore, by focusing on the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and by building on Ranciere’s notions of disrupting existing and dominant orders, a (re) distribution of the sensible for unrecognised societies is possible. In this sense, Ranciere supports equality: ‘Politics exists when the figure of a specific subject is constituted, a supernumerary subject in relation to the calculated number of groups, places, and functions in society’ (2004: 51). Ranciere is expressing how unrecognised societies fail to be acknowledged in the established order.

A key concept of my practice is to create spaces for people to exhibit and distribute their own work; that film not only be an aesthetic object - but moreover can be used as a tool for socialising and participatory filmmaking within in a community. I argue this can be explored by creating a space for the emergence with the Imperfect Cinema project. By utilising alternative spaces outside of cinemas and institutions, the project aims to appeal to a wide-ranging audience. While I have close links to the alternative scene in Plymouth, I don’t want to limit the practice to only ‘punk’ underground scenes. In working towards punk as a methodology for a film practice, the call is for equality and recognition, using my voice as a PhD researcher as a springboard for connectivity. Aims include: exploring various outreach methods to specific groups/communities, offering equipment to diverse groups, ranging from OAP pensioners, to under-privileged areas. The nights also hope to attract experienced and non-experienced filmmakers as well as the general public. In a local context, Imperfect
Cinema aims to investigate the opportunities and limits of location. Plymouth doesn’t possess an abundance of Underground film movements, such as Exploding Cinema in London. But does this not open doors for exploration and new possibilities? Thus far the project has produced the Flipside collective. As a group we acknowledge our debt to punk and its influence on our own work. We aim to explore true alternatives to filmic mainstreams. To keep the practice non-hierarchical, I envision the Imperfect Cinema exhibitions to bring in new producers as we progress. By removing any sense of dictatorship the project will embody the political act of democracy. The nights will be open-ended and Imperfect Cinema will appear in various venues. By experimenting and exploring filmmaking in all its popular and experimental forms, the research will offer new knowledge in utilising film as a socialised tool. In this sense, Imperfect Cinema will become a testing ground. For example, I intend to place digital cameras around the venue and ask the audience to be documentary filmmakers. Much like a wedding photographer captures a certain aesthetic, cheap throwaway cameras for guests to use bring a mixed but in many ways more authentic depiction of the evening. This method will capture an amateur aesthetic while allowing the audience participation. Unlike my own film practice, in which simplicity to form is the focus, the collective will experiment with diverse methods of production.

The first exhibition, entitled Imperfect Cinema 1, will explore aspects of digital filmmaking associated with my practice. However, to discover new possibilities, Imperfect Cinema 2 will explore other themes and challenges. We will be exploring how
endangered media from the technological reliant industries can be employed to comment upon its short sightedness. Imperfect Cinema 2 will also explore ‘amateurism’ as a valorous ideal, and as an alternative to technical virtuosity; making links between lo-fi production in music and argue that the appreciation of a new aesthetic is vital to building a viable alternative to the mainstream.

Finally, a DVD will be made available for each Imperfect Cinema event. This will include the films made for the exhibition; documentary footage of the events, and a package containing manifestos, ideas, tips and artwork; inspired by the Crass produced *Bullshit Detector* (demo tapes featuring unsigned bands sent into Crass, which they subsequently distributed independently). It is our belief that the production of something tactile, that you can take home and keep, will further encourage participation and connectivity.

6 Conclusion

Politically my own aesthetic is to enhance the visibility of filmmaking practice and, by doing so, create a space of emergence for recognition. Whether or not my films are ‘good’ is secondary. The aim for my own filmmaking is to encouraging production by experimenting with non-virtuoso aesthetics. This is exemplified by utilising inexpensive digital equipment, focusing on simplicity. Contextualising my work with the No Wave filmmakers offers strategies for highlighting filmic approaches to populist themes and styles with a punk DiY sensibility. Building on Espinosa’s call to end elitist filmmaking,
this research aims to mobilise a film community to create, exhibit and distribute its own work. Whether the work is of professional standard is not important. Rather, the act of making, exhibiting and distributing the work is the aim.

Non-virtuosity and equal opportunity, inspired by punk rock, is central to my own filmic aesthetic and the project as a whole. Rancière says we need to upset the social order for equality and so new voices can be heard. Rancière says: ‘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’ (Rancière in Biesta: 2010). By bringing together a community with the underground Imperfect Cinema project, I aim to explore socially engaged cinema, and by offering opportunities for films to be exhibited, towards a radical popular film practice.

Bibliography

Sheldon Renan considered underground cinema as a distinct genre from cinema proper by virtue of the fact that it ‘dissents radically in form, or in technique, or in content, or perhaps in all three’ (Ranen 1967: 17). Duncan Reekie considers the underground must as a recuperation of (or perhaps more appropriately, from) popular culture: ‘The crucial barriers and limits to the development of an autark Underground are now not technological and logistical, they are ideological and institutional. The movement for a New Underground must have a dual agency, it must seek to develop a national network of Underground screening clubs and it must simultaneously subvert state control of experimental film. The hope of the Underground lies in the subversive strategies of the radical popular; the hope of radical experimental cinema lies in the anarchy of the Underground’ (Reekie 2007: 208)


considers them a convergence of independent films, subversive cinema and pop musical. Jack Sergeant and Chris Barber in No Focus: Punk Film archive and review what they consider every punk performance on celluloid, from proto punk surrealist films, to 24-hour party people. Sergeant also discussed New York post-punk filmmaking in Deathtripping: discussing No Wave and Cinema of Transgression. Rombes, McRoy, Dugdale, Isaacs and Rubio discuss punk in relation to film in New Punk is a personal philosophy. Could I transport this to film?

The first exhibition: Imperfect Cinema 1 will illustrate the possibilities of digital technology, adopting and building on the punk axiom: ‘Here’s three chords. Now form a band’

See Disposable Film Festival for more: www.disposablefilmfest.com
Ranciere defines subjectification as ‘the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience’ (Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

See: http://www.explodingcinema.org/
See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flipside_film_festival
Imperfect Cinema 1 is scheduled for the 29th October @ Jack Chams Bar, Plymouth