

EXPLODING CINEMA

AN INTERVIEW WITH DUNCAN REEKIE

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The biggest obstacle for the independent filmmaker was once raising the money to make a film but times have most certainly changed, there is more access to filmmaking tools than ever before and the costs are minimal; anyone with the will can get their hands on a camera and editing software and make a film. This is proven and the evidence is there in that more independent films are being made now than ever before. But in this time of the democratising of the medium a new challenge has emerged and that is getting your film seen by an audience. The internet is the obvious platform and goes hand in hand with the developments that have allowed us to make films without money but I believe that there is still a need for live film screenings. Whilst the feedback and comment functions on the internet are invaluable tools for filmmakers, they could hardly eliminate the need for public screenings in the same way that digital developments in production have created accessibility to filmmaking.



So what are the options for public screenings for the independent filmmaker? Most cinemas, even the so-called independent ones, will not even look at your film unless it is being represented by a distributor. Festivals are, of course, a great place to start but most charge large submission fees and from talking to people in the know I have found that some often don't watch films fully unless they have some motivation to. So that leaves us with two other options. One is to organise your own screenings, but this of course can cost a lot of money if you are to do more than one or two. The other is to submit to an independent screening event but then you are faced with the fact that even though your film is more likely to be watched it still may not be selected because of the tastes of the curator of the event. So imagine a screening event where if you submit your film it is guaranteed to be shown, such an event exist, it is called Exploding Cinema.

The following interview is with Duncan Reekie who is one of the founding members of Exploding Cinema collective which is now in its 20th year.

Q: What is Exploding Cinema?

Exploding cinema is the name of a collective of filmmakers and film impresarios, but it's also the name of a regular open access screening of short films, experimental films, underground films, no budget, DIY, documentaries, drama, anything we are given. Essentially what we do is show every film that is given to us in the order that it is given to us. We try and be as open access, non-profit and democratic as possible. So anyone can join the collective, anyone can get involved in running the events, anyone can show a film. All the equipment is common ownership. We rotate all jobs and tasks within the collective so everybody gets a chance to do whatever they want. It's just ridiculously democratic.

Q: How did the collective come about?

The impetus originally for the founding of the group was at that time in 1991 at the end of the 80's [...] it was very very difficult to get a screening for your film, there were very few places that were showing short films and the places



that were showing short film were very heavily curated, and the curation depended on a lot of institutional factors, the scene was essentially controlled by various funding agencies and institutions like the Arts Council and the BFI.

Q: So they would only show films they funded?

Yes, once they funded your film it was in their interest then that your film should be distributed, it should have screenings, it should go to festivals, and then you would be selected for various things, so you kind of got into the system. If you didn't get in at the funding stage then you were fucked. There was nowhere to show, you would have to organise your own screenings.

Q: What about the London Film-makers Co-op?

The Film-makers Co-op at that point which was the major nexus of experimental film in London, or in Britain [...] was kind of locked in to this faction of various groups that were trying to control it. Partially because it was the only career route, I mean experimental filmmaking as a career is a non-starter really, there is no career.

Because what had happened was, in my opinion anyway, at that point, the monopoly of the state institutions had removed all kind of objective critical discussion because there were too

many vested interests, you know, if somebody was lorded as some kind of an eminent and successful filmmaker and they had been funded ten times or something like this and then you went to the screening and you were like, this is fucking rubbish, there was no way that you could say that, [...] and the reply was, [...] these films are difficult films, they are meant to be difficult films and if you don't like them then it's simply because you are not a part of the culture, or you don't have the academic training, or you are misunderstanding the radical objective of these films because they are actually meant to be tedious. I was personally like, fuck them, let them come and show their films at a pub with a room full of real people and let's see how they go down – so it was to create a critical forum.

Q: Can you describe what an exploding cinema event would have been like at the beginning?

Well the first shows at that point were in the work's canteen and were mostly films by the collective and by friends of the collective, and one of the things that started to happen was that we were showing our films and we didn't have enough, so we were forced to make films within a fortnight and this kind of changed the nature of what we were showing. [...] We started off by showing these films that we'd worked on for years which were like our precious little gems, very polished and then we started having to go in to this manic production every fortnight, having to produce new stuff and this changed the nature of what we were doing and then the whole became a lot more alive at that point, so we would have either live music playing, people playing instruments, and then from that we had people doing live voice-overs.

So the original screenings were very kind of incestuous I guess because it was mostly films from people in the collective or friends of the collective. Then very quickly more people started to come because they heard about it and that it was such a great night. Another thing we discovered quite early on was that if you had a kind of convivial atmosphere where people are talking and eating and drinking and even leaving and coming back then you could show twenty films and they didn't have to watch the films that they weren't interested in, you got a much better convivial atmosphere, it was a better night out, people really enjoyed it, and that became a part of our philosophy as well. So you could show twenty films and if somebody only liked three films that was fine, they may be the best three films that they have seen in their life but there is still another fifteen that they didn't watch properly because they weren't interested but that's alright.

Q: One of the things that seems important to Exploding Cinema is that the filmmakers are able to present

their films to an audience without being censored and the audience can judge them for themselves. But last night there weren't any of the filmmakers there and I also felt that the films shown wouldn't have benefited by having the filmmaker there as there wasn't really much to say about them – they weren't really what I would call “underground” or “experimental” films. They were mostly like the kind of films that you would see on YouTube – peoples first attempts at filming something. I wonder how you feel about this when the films are of poor quality, do you see it as just one of the risk you take?

Well, yeah, I think it is. It's just a risk you take that if you have an open screening like that then you may get no experimental work whatsoever, you may get no underground work whatsoever or you may get a whole program of technically sound student work. There's nothing you can do about that really, last night I think there wasn't really any outstanding underground or experimental work there, I don't think, but that's not always true at another show you may have predominately experimental work.

Q: Do you think maybe the ultimate open access screening would be if somehow you could make your screenings free? How do you feel about the idea that someone might come along and pay £5 and not like any of the films?

Well, we have done free shows in the past but I am for paying because it is to do with the model as well. It's to do with the fact that you're saying well you can make money, you don't need funding, you can make money but as long as you're ploughing it back in to the organisation. I mean if it's free then how are you going to hire the hall.

Q: I am just thinking that maybe that would be taking the whole thing to the full extreme, maybe there was a time when at the start of Exploding Cinema when people would have been objectionable to the idea that you could make this thing for limited money, now I think it is possible to do things for no money and people may think it extreme to operate without any relationship to money, to me it seems like the natural next step for it to go...

I'm wary of that, I am wary of the free thing because... I'll tell you why, the radical film culture of the 70's and 80's, the experimental filmmakers then and the independent filmmakers then, part of their radicalism or so called radicalism was that they had this kind of simplistic conflation of capitalism and trade, they were like capitalism is wrong therefore trade is wrong, therefore making money is wrong because its capitalism. It's a very naive and silly conflation and people would say to us that you're a radical utopian organisation, why are you charging people money? But its bullshit, because what it did was, that attitude, that conflation, put them in the hands of the funders because you need money to run this, so how are you going to run it if you're not going to make people pay? All right, so how are you going to do it? Well maybe we'll get some money from the Arts Council and you sold your soul to the Arts Council. And we were like; we were not making that mistake so I would be against that.

Q: You've mentioned that you are anti-funding, could you explain more what you mean by that and why?

The reasons come initially in the foundations of Exploding Cinema. The reasons were very practical and came out of the experience of the collective which was that myself and my friends realised by talking to other filmmakers that a lot of filmmakers were spending their time applying for funding, that had become their major aesthetic activity. Applying for funding, filling out funding forms, doing treatments for funding forms it had become almost like a replacement for the filmmaking process and so with that insight you start thinking and looking at the whole funding thing. [...] At a fundamental level my problem with funding is about the very nature of culture [...], who makes culture? Is culture going to be made by training experts? Is that what it's about? Is that what you believe, do you be-





lieve that culture is in some way like the health system that you need to train experts and these experts will then go in to some kind of elite professional industry, and that industry will then provide culture for the people? Or do you believe that culture should be made by people? By themselves for themselves and that culture should come from their experience and come out of their access to technology and their own sort of environments? So it depends on what model you believe in.

When you have funding what happens is that the funders want you to behave like a proper organisation. They want staff and then within staff they want hierarchy, they want a manager and they want an accountant and they bring in all that shit and you've got to have a board of directors. And it costs money as well, to do all that, so they give you money but then you find you need more money to conform to their idea of what an organisation is. Same with the filmmaking, they may give you money to make a film but then you have to pay everybody union rates and you have to abide by all the laws and structures and that costs more money so they've given you money to do the things

that they want you to do. And the other thing about funding of course is that its compromise. There's corporate funding sure, you look at the Tate's funding; BP, Hanjin Shipping you know, various other criminal organisations as far as I'm concerned. And then just state funding in itself, this state as you know is still involved in illegal occupations of various nations.

Q: I think that when it comes down to it there is very little funding that is available that would come without compromise. If someone was to say "here's some funding, do what you want", end of story, would that be OK?

The thing is even if a funder comes to you and they say there are no strings attached to this whatsoever, we are going to give you some money and you can do whatever you like, well that is impossible, because there is always one string and that string is that they get to say they funded you. They get to say they funded you. They say we are a successful funding organisation and we are necessary because we funded these people. They have a reason to exist, you are giving them a reason to exist which is the worst compromise of all because who are they these people? They are the experts? In what?

Q: So that would be reinforcing the very thing that you are opposed to?

Yes. Exactly.

Q: What's next for exploding cinema?

We have our birthday coming up in October. It will be the 20th birthday of Exploding Cinema so we plan to do some huge extravaganza! A big Halloween show and I am trying to get together a book just on the Exploding Cinema and related groups from the 90's so hopefully that will be published around then as well.

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