

AN INTERVIEW WITH SEVENTYSEVEN FILM CLUB



Still from Toshio Matsumoto's *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969)

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Here's an insight into the minds, the humour and the passion that fuels the Bristol based Seventyseven Film Club. The breadth of their knowledge and love for cinema is impressive to say the least, their programming is one of the most consistently diverse, unusual and exciting we have ever encountered and is almost enough to make us want to move to Bristol! It is clearly a space for a devout engagement with films, and a wondrous gift for any passers-by who might not be too bothered about cinema but will surely not leave unaffected. If you're ever in the mood for thought-provoking, hair-raising and soul-stirring cinematic experiences, this is the place to go!

What is Seventyseven?

KRIS COWELL: Seventyseven – don't ask about the name! – is a Tuesday evening film club currently based at The Arts House in Stokes Croft, Bristol. We cover a broad spectrum of cinema from MGM musicals to Doris Wishman to Third Cinema to the more abstract and avant garde – whatever, really.

OWEN MAYNARD: Officially we started two years ago, but we'd been doing a similar thing with friends for years before.

KRIS: As Owen said, it kind of grew out of film nights we'd been holding with friends. I think it was around sometime in the summer of 2009, Owen, myself and our mutual friend Nick decided to hold a John Carpenter marathon at my house with beers, BBQ and extreme hot sauce and somehow it became a monthly thing with each month one of us picking three or four films to watch. I suppose we always thought it would be great to do public screenings of the films we were introducing each other to. Fast forward a few years and I approached the Southbank Club in Bedminster to do just that. We were unaware of some of the great film nights that were springing up in Bristol – the fucking awesome Hellfire Video Club at The Cube, for instance. In a recent interview Hellfire mistakenly said that we started

before them and although I'm more than happy to go along with this misinformation and pretend like we're the true heroes of the revolution, sadly, in reality it's not true. Our first screening was Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* on 7th October 2013 which we followed a week later with a Peter Watkins double bill. I found myself with nowhere to live in Bristol September last year and had to relocate to Newcastle and due to this I intended to end the film club, at least temporarily, however Mark who was at that time a regular felt it was too important not to continue and came on-board to help run Seventyseven.

MARK PEARCE: I was aware of Seventyseven about the time it started which was in Autumn 2013. I was immediately struck by the selection of films. They started screening at the Southbank Club in Dean Lane where, during a long spell of unemployment, I used to curate films for Link Age. It wasn't until February 2014 that I attended my first screening, Matsumoto's *Funeral Parade of Roses* which left an indelible impression on me. I am always struck by films where the eyes are attacked, offended or gouged out. I remember gasping at the sequence where a character attacks their own eyes with a knife. Immediately I was aware of both Kris and Owen's brimming passion for cinema. By the time they relocated to The Arts House I decided to attend as much as possible and then gratefully become more involved.

I think Seventyseven is a small but dedicated group of individuals who value the importance of cinema in their lives. We also have numerous other interests which often reflects our choices, for instance philosophy (Kris), music (Owen) and the visual arts (myself). Much of the selection of films is based on our intellectual curiosity and a real desire to show a variety of work, ranging from silent films to even more mainstream fare. Nonetheless, I think one motivation is to share films with audiences which often unjustly have fallen into obscurity and to create an environment of discussion and debate. A platform which can provoke thought.

You screen such an amazing selection of films, everything from the classics to the art-house, experimental and underground, I very often discover new films and filmmakers through you. Where do you find all these amazing films and how do you make the selection of what to screen?

OWEN: We all have pretty personal tastes in films so we often learn from each other. It's just a case of searching, whether that being on the internet or books. For instance, I love swinging sixties films, '70s Americana, avant garde animations and old samurai films, so I scour YouTube and DVD labels to find out what's out there.

MARK: I have always been in awe of Kris' extraordinary knowledge of film which is very rich and varied. When I was at Essex University I was involved in the weekly Art Film Society and that certainly encouraged me to try and watch all kinds of work. Renting films from Albert Sloman Library there, revelling in Godard, Pasolini and Fassbinder. Currently I rent films from Bristol's 20th Century Flicks – officially the oldest working rental store in the world. Recently I have been working my way through the films of Claude Chabrol. It's an educational experience as much as a pleasurable one.

KRIS: The internet is the greatest resource out there, obviously. After all, didn't Berners-Lee invent the web because he'd seen Ghostbusters too many times and wanted something more? I reckon so, anyway, even if he states ulterior motives. Also film magazine, fanzines, books, DVD labels, documentaries etc. One thing tends to lead to another and often I find something just falls in my path whilst looking up something else. I'm always searching for new cinematic territories to explore and tend to obsess over new discoveries. Recently I've been watching George Hoellering's 1936 docudrama *Hortobágy* on loop almost – God knows how many times I've watched it now! If you're at a loss, just try picking a country at random and googling its cinema history and I suspect within minutes you'll stumble upon something potentially fascinating. There are so many films out there that if you look you'll inevitably find ten films you enjoy more than your current top ten favourite films and then there'll probably be another ten out there you'll enjoy more than those and so on. This is largely because the more exposed you become to different voices in cinema, as with anything else, the more your taste and expectations shift. This is partly why I find it irritating listening to people bitching about so-called reboots, if you don't like them there is a whole world and history of cinema out there. Cinema isn't reducible to the output of multiplexes.

Although there are probably certain films I like that the others wouldn't want to screen and vice versa – we've yet to encounter this however – by and large we just show what interests us individually. When we first started we drew up a list of fifty or so films we wanted to screen, however we veered off from this list many moons ago and most haven't been shown. I can't even remember what most of them were! But as a rule of thumb we tend to stay clear of well-known films, or rather films that most people have seen, as we don't see much point in screening them. *Blade Runner*



Still from Jane Arden's *The Other Side of the Underneath* (1972)

and *The Terminator* are easily among my favourite films but everyone has seen them a billion times. They already saturate the market enough, we don't need to add to it. There's nothing necessarily wrong with film clubs which screen such films, it's just for me part of the fun is giving lesser-known films I love wider exposure as well as learning myself from the choices of Owen and Mark and our regulars. Having said that, we have shown *Watership Down* (in a double bill with *The Plague Dogs*) so we're not madly dogmatic about it. It's difficult to select what will attract an audience so we don't tend to bother thinking that way. We just can't predict it. Some films we think will be popular but aren't and others we hope at best for a small but enthusiastic audience but they are very busy. For example, we didn't foresee *The Other Side of the Underneath* (Jane Arden, 1972) to be one of our biggest events in terms of audience numbers. Between the three of us, as well as our regulars who sometimes suggest screenings, we've a pretty broad taste so we prefer to keep the programme varied from week to week. It would quickly get boring if we screened the same types of films week in week out. For me, personally, with regards to the films I programme, there is almost a childish impatience to screen them as there are always so many more waiting in the wings that I am desperate to show.

What have been some of your personal highlight events in the past?

MARK: One of the great pleasures of Seventyseven is that I am always surprised and inspired. We screen silent films I've had no idea about and it fills me with awe and satisfaction. For instance, this year we screened *Children of No Importance* (Gerhard Lamprecht, 1926) which deeply moved me. Other personal favourites I've seen have been Shepitko's *The Ascent* (1977) and Kuleshov's *By the Law* (1926).

KRIS: *The Goddess* (Wu Yonggang, 1934) was probably the stand out event. We asked our friend and regular Bristol-based musician Ocean Floor to compose a new piano score and perform it live. The result was extraordinary and beautiful. He is hoping to release it soon. It was an honour to be part of the *Savage Witches* story which we screened for Scalarama 2014. I'm forever grateful to Mark for introducing me to *Marquis* (Henri Xhonneux 1989) and Owen Chappagua (*Conrad Rooks* 1966). Also as I said earlier what I most enjoy is introducing people to films I love. This hasn't necessarily always equated with a successful event in terms of audience numbers – although often it has – but it's enough for me that those who do come along appreciate the films. That I've exposed people to works by the likes of Bartosch, Peixoto, Shimizu, Shepitko, Kuleshov, Medvedkin, Starewicz and Alexeieff is enough to justify the time and effort.

There is a serious lack of art-house and revival cinemas in the UK, but there does seem to be a growing number of small film clubs popping up all the time. Could you talk a bit about what you think the role of film clubs are now and maybe what you anticipate or hope for in the future?

MARK: I think if there is a role it's already as I've mentioned: a platform to inspire and engage people in discussing all

sorts of ideas. I think community is a very important word. Bringing people together, creating friendships.

KRIS: It would be easy to say that the emergence of the culture of film clubs – if such a thing is a new phenomenon – is a reaction to the squeezing of the market by mainstream cinemas and lack of independent cinemas. This may be true in part but I'm not sure it's entirely true. Currently, there is also a proliferation of boutique distribution labels, like Second Run for instance, making lesser-known art house films much more readily available. To me, it seems that the emergence of growing numbers of film clubs is born more from enthusiasm stirred by the now readily-available nature of previously inaccessible works rather than a negative reaction to the mainstream, although without doubt this is true to some extent. Czech New Wave cinema, for instance, seems to be gathering a lot of attention now among underground film-makers and film clubs and this, I argue, is directly related to its wider availability on home video format. I suppose it is not so much that art-house or revival cinema as such is disappearing, it just moved elsewhere or onto different platforms. With this emergence of the more bottom-up approach of the film clubs and volunteer/community led cinemas, such as Bristol's The Cube or Newcastle's The Star & Shadow, I think audiences are taking an increasingly proactive stance with regards to output and hopefully this will see a growth in the diversity of films screened. But things are obviously far from rosy. Although the history of cinema is literally now at the push of a button and it's easier than ever to see the most obscure of films, we're in a climate where things despite being ever-more accessible they seem more alien and distant to the majority of people. I think film clubs are necessarily in, I suppose, a process of re-engagement and promotion of alternative voices. To answer your question, fingers crossed we're turning a corner.

What is the film scene like in Bristol, are there many cinemas and festivals?

KRIS: Putting the multiplexes and chain cinemas of which there are a few aside, Bristol is home to the Watershed media centre which hosts many film festivals throughout the year such as the incredible Slapstick Festival. Some true gems such as The Cube cinema, home to the mighty Hellfire Video Club, and 20th Century Flicks rental store. Bristol Bad Film Club host incredible screenings of so-bad-it's-good fare, matching film with venue. Cannoli & Gun serve up films with the food seen in the films. Bristol Silents are forever dedicated to promoting silent film. Cineme host evenings of short films. Bristol Radical Film are heroes. There's loads, loads more and on top of that Bristol is home to Aardman Studios!

OWEN: The film scene in Bristol seems quite vibrant to me. However, I'm not particularly knowledgeable on current Bristol filmmakers, I'd like to be though so if anyone wants to send us stuff I'd be up for seeing it ... unless it's some superhero rom-com crap or some hippie bollocks that thinks it can change the world. I want to see some real creativity. If it's out there we will happily promote the shit out of you.

MARK: I count myself very lucky here in Bristol. You can usually find me at the Watershed or The Cube. I am sure there are other groups I am unaware of but would like to know about.

What screenings do you have coming up over the next couple of months?

KRIS: Next week is the first of two Halloween screenings: *Lips of Blood* (Jean Rollin, 1975), followed the Tuesday after by *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984). As for the future, who knows? We're certainly excited about screening *Splendor Solis*.

MARK: For November I've suggested a documentary double bill of *The Ensorcery of James Ensor* (Nora Philippe & Arnaud de Mezamat, 2010) with *Claude Vivier* (Cherry Duyns, 1997).

KRIS: I've a number of others up my sleeve. Certainly *Hortobágy* (George Hoellering 1936), *Der Damm* (Vlado Kristl 1964) and *The Annunciation* (András Jéles 1984). For a while I've been meaning to screen *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* (Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1971), *The House on Trubnaya* (Boris Barnet, 1928), some Norman McLaren, Jiri Trnka, Len Lye – I could go on forever. I'd love to screen *Loss of Sensation* (Alexandr Andriyevsky, 1935) – giant robots dancing to saxophones before overthrowing capitalism! It just doesn't get any better than that!

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