

FILM
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

Ephemeral Cinema Spaces

STORIES OF REINVENTION,
RESISTANCE AND
COMMUNITY

MARIA ANTONIA VÉLEZ-SERNA

Amsterdam
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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| List of figures | 9 |
| Introduction | 11 |
| The structure of the book | 16 |
| 1. Unstable constellations: Recognizing cinema out of place | 21 |
| 1.1. Configurations | 27 |
| 1.2. Protocols | 31 |
| 1.3. Conclusion | 36 |
| 2. Relocations: Mapping the non-theatrical field in Scotland | 39 |
| 2.1. The fieldwork sample | 40 |
| 2.2. Non-theatrical | 46 |
| 2.3. Ephemeral | 48 |
| 2.4. Pop-up | 49 |
| 2.5. Improvised and interstitial | 50 |
| 2.6. Early ephemeral cinemas | 51 |
| 2.7. Conclusion | 54 |
| 3. A desire for the civic: Community cinemas and volunteer work | 59 |
| 3.1. Social value | 61 |
| 3.2. Public hall cinema | 64 |
| 3.3. Community cinema | 68 |
| 3.4. Case studies | 74 |
| 3.5. Conclusion | 85 |
| 4. Film clubs and subcultural cinephile spaces | 91 |
| 4.1. Film cultures | 93 |
| 4.2. Alternative exhibition in Glasgow | 96 |
| 4.3. Glasgow film clubs | 98 |
| 4.4. Producing spaces of cinephilia | 106 |
| 4.5. Negotiating abundance and obsolescence | 110 |
| 4.6. Conclusion | 114 |
| 5. On the ground: Participatory screenings in everyday spaces | 119 |
| 5.1. Archive film and local audiences | 125 |
| 5.2. Spaces for action | 133 |



| | |
|---|-----|
| 5.3. Pop-up cinema as a site for public discussion | 135 |
| 5.4. Conclusion | 140 |
| 6. Crafting the extraordinary: site-specificity and liveness | 145 |
| 6.1. An unrepeatable experience | 148 |
| 6.2. Enhanced cinema: the pleasures of space | 150 |
| 6.3. Site-specific programming | 154 |
| 6.4. Expanded and expansionist cinema | 158 |
| 6.5. Liveness | 163 |
| 6.6. Conclusion | 168 |
| 7. Against enclosure: DIY exhibition as prefigurative action | 173 |
| 7.1. Tactical urbanism | 175 |
| 7.2. Publicness and commoning | 177 |
| 7.3. DIY and disalienated work | 180 |
| 7.4. Home cinema | 185 |
| 7.5. Networks | 189 |
| 7.6. Conclusion | 198 |
| Coda | 201 |
| Acknowledgements | 205 |
| About the author | 207 |
| Bibliography | 209 |
| Index | 225 |



In Memoriam
Kat Lindner (1979-2019)



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List of figures

| | | |
|----------|--|-----|
| Figure 1 | Locations of screenings attended in Scotland | 42 |
| Figure 2 | Age of films screened at Scottish community cinemas, 2016-2017 season | 72 |
| Figure 3 | Dalry Town Hall Cinema. Linocut print by Marta Adamowicz, 2019 | 77 |
| Figure 4 | The Old Hairdressers, Glasgow. Linocut print by Marta Adamowicz, 2019 | 108 |
| Figure 5 | Radical Film Archive at the Laurieston Arches, Glasgow. Linocut print by Marta Adamowicz, 2019 | 132 |
| Figure 6 | Pollywood at Pollokshields Playhouse, Glasgow. Linocut print by Marta Adamowicz, 2019 | 167 |
| Figure 7 | Cinemor77 yurt cinema. Linocut print by Marta Adamowicz, 2019 | 183 |
| Figure 8 | The Peccadillo houseboat, a Radical Home Cinema venue. Linocut print by Marta Adamowicz, 2019 | 188 |



Introduction

Abstract

Why write about film experiences in the context of pervasive crisis? Is the discussion about the death of cinema simply an attachment to a bad object? This chapter invites the reader to see non-theatrical and extramural forms of film exhibition as an experiment in embracing contingency, and a hopeful way to disinvest from hegemonic formations. Contextualizing the research project in relation to precarity and the neoliberal usurpation of the commons, the introduction opens up some of the key debates that will be expanded upon through the case studies in the book.

Key words: cruel optimism, precarity, contingency, pop-up cinema, non-theatrical exhibition

‘In the present from which I am writing about the present, conventions of reciprocity that ground how to live and imagine life are becoming undone in ways that force the gestures of ordinary improvisation within daily life into a greater explicitness affectively and aesthetically’
– Berlant 2011, 7

This is an odd time to write about cinema. There are many other topics that are more urgent and vital, while cinema seems to retreat into a glamorous backdrop for the launch of video streaming services. In November 2019, Netflix took a long-term lease on New York’s last single-screen cinema, which had closed earlier that year (BBC News 2019). As a fantasy of communal experience supplied by capitalism, this attachment to the theatrical venue was, at worst, a mercenary use of ersatz historicity for prestige marketing, or, more charitably, a form of what Lauren Berlant calls ‘cruel optimism’. It is an investment in a conventional desire for a ‘good life’ to which that object called cinema would bring aesthetic pleasures and comforts, connection and togetherness. But the object itself is a cluster of things, some of which

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may actually get in the way of the 'good life' imagined in its proximity (Berlant 2011, 24–25). In the context of 'crisis ordinariness', of the attrition of that fantasy, writing about cinema demands a suspicion of the object.

This book tells stories where cinema is a provisional term, used for pragmatic reasons to refer to different kinds of emergent events. At its most basic, this book is concerned with film exhibition in places that are not dedicated cinemas. Throughout, I use terms like 'non-theatrical', 'ephemeral', 'alternative' and 'non-conventional'. The nuances between these words foreground degrees and aspects of separation from a set of normative conditions. At a moment of transformation in the history of collective film experience, my research set out to explore the boundaries of cinema as a social practice. It sought to trace the persistence of cinema as an organizing idea and a meaningful category. But to do that would be to attempt to salvage and reconstitute an object that instead needs to be taken apart, wrenched open and pillaged. As Katherine Groo argues, 'we do not (or not always) need to recuperate objects and identities to do justice to them' (2019, 9).

I kept thinking of a film from my childhood, *The Snail's Strategy* (Cabrera, 1993), a morality tale of a ragtag group of slum tenants who are due to be evicted from an old house. Spurred on by an anarchist veteran and a trans woman, they work together through the night to sneak out all their meagre possessions, plus all the internal walls and fittings of the house. When the landlord comes, he finds only the empty shell behind the facade, while on the outskirts of the city the tenants are busy fashioning new homes out of the reclaimed materials. In the process of flitting, the tenants find each other and build unexpected solidarities. Meanwhile, the camera follows particular objects as they are winched out of the house. A piece of the wall with the miraculous image of the Virgin Mary is hoisted above the rooftops, a luminous frame surrounded by darkness, like a heavenly cinema screen. A bathtub is raised with great difficulty; finally, the anarchist's coffin, wrapped in the red-and-black. The symbolism of flight embraces the sacred, the sensual and the political, as they vacate the landlord's property. I wondered if something different can also be built out of the debris of an idea of cinema.

The trace of hope that holds this book together, then, is the hypothesis that, in the *practices* of making cinema happen, in the 'embodied processes of making solidarity itself' (Berlant 2011, 260), there might be some way out of the impasse. In the stories I tell, cinema is not an object but an act of assemblage, a tactical making and unmaking of old and new formations. I approached case studies of different kinds of exhibition practice in their particularity, without pre-determined categories other than a pragmatic



geographical restriction to Scotland. These observations and conversations offer a snapshot of what it is like to work with cinema in the minor key at this juncture. These stories are contributions to the ‘archive of the impasse’, as Berlant calls for, to ‘inquire into what thriving might entail amid a mounting sense of contingency’ (Berlant 2011, 10). The flavour of that contingency, in the Scottish context of cultural labour, is that of project-based, precarious work, arts funding depleted by austerity, and speculative patterns in the use of urban space. These are local stories and they are messy, unfinished and often contradictory. Writing them up inevitably betrays their transience, as it brings them into dialectical relationship with theoretical debates on the located, embodied, and relational nature of cinemagoing.

This project started as an extension of my research on pre-1920 film exhibition and distribution. As Groo notes, ‘early and silent film historians are drawn toward the tattered margins of the archives and the irregular objects of history’ (Groo 2019, 17). The sites of exhibition that pre-dated purpose-built cinemas are as much of a challenge to the classical paradigm as ‘postmodern forms of media consumption’ (Hansen 1993, 210). The fairgrounds with their bioscope booths, the magic lantern lecturers, and the travelling music hall operators of the 1900s all put into perspective the novelty of ‘pop-up’ exhibition. But to historicize is not to deny difference, particularly difference from a hierarchical system. As Sudhir Mahadevan argues in relation to India’s itinerant showpeople, perhaps ‘as an assemblage, we can think of ancillary exhibition practices as akin to Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of minor literature’ (2010). If there is a *major formation* of cinema, these margins of history can harbour also the minor, ‘an intimate perch form which to begin amputating the sites and signs of power’ (Groo 2019, 101). The stories in this book speak of minor practices within the major, operating by subtraction: Removing anything that is stable, ‘placing everything in continuous variation’ and then ‘transposing everything in *minor*’ (Deleuze 1997, 246). While treading carefully amongst these theories from literature and performance, I found in this *minoration* a hopeful way to think about what is at stake in non-theatrical and transient screening practices.

The book aims, firstly, to capture a trace of a moment and a place in cinema history, and the voices of some of the people who make it happen. Through fieldwork carried out in Scotland between 2015 and 2018, I gathered first-hand impressions of screenings, and used interviews and archival research to contextualize these experiences. While the specificity of the location is methodologically crucial, the analysis seeks to offer insights that are relevant beyond this time and place. Foregrounding the particularity of



actually existing exhibition practice, I then sought to build and test frames of analysis that can do justice to its malleability and inventiveness. The book experiments with ways of talking about cinema as a dispersed but material phenomenon, a matter of temporary intensities and pacts amongst people. Studying film screenings offered a way to focus attention on ephemerality, and to understand the role of transient events in longer histories.

This project returns to early cinema for dialectical and genealogical reasons. Contemporary non-theatrical exhibition practices extend across a tangle of timelines stretching all the way back to the first two decades of film exhibition. Like many writers before, I am attracted to the volatility of that period, before the consolidation of a hierarchical industry with its own proprietary retail outlets. The parallels with a post-classical situation intrigued me, as I attended screenings in the same kinds of spaces that would have hosted the bioscope at the turn of the twentieth century. Like those early attractions, these instantiations of cinema were self-consciously ephemeral. New festivals, series, and experiments were proliferating, and the only traces left were often just a handful of social media posts. Writing their brief histories is therefore an attempt to capture this crucial moment of transformation and to see it as part of longer histories of communal gathering around the moving image.

Historicizing these encounters with emergent forms of film exhibition is not an attempt to deny what is new about them. Contemporary practices are emerging in response to specific circumstances, and through technical and institutional affordances that were not available before. Moving images are abundant and ubiquitous, present as 'ambient media' in everyday urban spaces, clamouring for attention from billboards, shop windows, and self-service checkouts, or waiting to be called up on the portable screen of a phone or laptop. Powerful barriers to access are still raised along lines of class, disability, and geography, but these are easy to ignore for the privileged consumer who enjoys an expansion of choice and availability. On-demand access unbinds the consumer from the collective rhythms and spaces of media circulation. In doing so, it is part of a longer history of the decline of traditional publicness (cf. Putnam 2001). Within capitalist markets, audiovisual abundance is primarily addressed to the individual consumer. However, it contains the possibility of alternative uses, and it enables more democratic, decentred interventions in film culture. The stories in this book are full of unresolved contradictions.

A key tension I set out to explore was that between the ordinary and the extraordinary, or, in other words, of uniqueness in the realm of mechanical reproduction. In the framework of experiential marketing, the unusual



and the one-off are ways of championing exclusivity of access and producing scarcity. Meanwhile, creative interventions in everyday spaces, while similarly transient, perform a mutually critical operation, denaturalizing the ordinary and demystifying the imaginative. Through this dialectical action, ephemeral exhibition spaces can be activated as sites of resistance, while also recognizing their connection to the current economic model. In that sense, this research connects these questions of ordinariness and spectacle with arguments about cinema as public sphere from a pragmatic point of view.

Film festivals, community screenings and independent cultural venues often argue that their activities can help abate increasing social atomization. Associational culture has long played a role in facilitating sociability, but the dissolution of both traditional and modern support networks has placed an unprecedented burden on voluntary organizations. It is unrealistic to expect from them a solution to the profound insecurities that cut through people's lives and shatter their life-worlds (Philo, Parr, and Söderström 2019, 151). This fantasy was most cynically deployed in British prime minister, David Cameron's idea of the 'big society'. After decades of hollowing out public services and dismantling workers' rights, intensified after the bank bailout of 2008, the idea of devolving responsibility for services like libraries and street-cleaning to volunteers was promoted to appeal to a supposed British love of amateurism. This apparently benign proposal serves to protect the establishment by obscuring some of the most nefarious effects of revanchist policies. On the other hand, collaborative, altruistic labour can be emancipatory, and thrive outside the purview of the state. There is much unpaid, underpaid and precarious work in the stories I have gathered, and thus even more contradictions.

The prevalence of these forms of labour is perhaps unsurprising given the transience of the workplaces. If the screening space is a temporary one, and the organizing structure is the one-off event, the work will most likely be tied to the event rather than to the venue. This detachment between people and place is distinctive of precarity, whether experienced as a loss or a liberation. In this context, it is worth asking whether a temporary configuration, a transient event, can have a reparative role in relation to the loss of public and semi-public spaces. This has been a startling observation in the housing context, where pop-up accommodation offers a meaningful improvement in people's quality of life, while potentially undermining the building of social homes in the longer term. In this context, a temporary intervention may become a way 'of moving forward that seemingly sustains, rather than overhauls, neoliberal modes of producing urban life' (Harris,

Nowicki, and Brickell 2019, 156). The underlying contradiction of temporary actions in this context is that they may offer glimpses of new solutions to the crisis, solutions that lie outside of neoliberalism, but they may also normalize the loss and the harm.

The structure of the book

The contributions that this work makes to thinking about space, ephemerality, and sociability around film screenings are grounded on a period of fieldwork during which I attended events around Scotland, and enriched by interviews with twenty exhibitors. The project, thus, has a strongly localized approach, where my own presence at events becomes the starting point for each investigation. Over the past four years, I attended events, befriended organizers, and sometimes participated as a volunteer. This is not a disinterested, neutral report, though it aims to be alive to the contradictions discussed above, and to situate individual action in the context of collective patterns. In order to do so, it first needs to build a critical vocabulary and a wider panorama of practice. This is what the first two chapters set out to do, first by tackling normative definitions of cinema and asking whether it makes sense to recognize cinema as a meaningful category of experience while moving beyond medium specificity. As a foundation for further discussions in the book, this chapter contrasts approaches to an ontology of cinema, and offers a framework for describing cinema as a contingent alignment of space and practice, both a physical configuration and a social protocol.

On the ground, the assemblages I provisionally call cinema can take many different forms, from theatrical exhibition to certain types of home viewing. The boundaries of my research are outlined in the second chapter, which unpacks the concepts of 'non-theatrical', 'ephemeral', and 'pop-up', in relation to scholarly and policy use. The chapter then lays out the composition of the fieldwork sample and the methodological approach, which is purposive and informed by a genealogical sense of multiple histories. Together with the statistical analysis of film programming, reading of existing sector reports, and interviews with some of the organizers and other agents involved in producing these screenings, the fieldwork completes a picture of non-theatrical exhibition as a pattern at a particular moment in Scotland. Distinct strands emerge in the dialogue between contemporary and historical practices. These continuities shape the thematic divisions of the rest of the book.



Each of the following chapters then concentrates in one of four constellations, each of them foregrounding one of the multiple functions of non-theatrical cinema. First, Chapter 3 explains how film exhibition works as a civic amenity, by examining the community cinema sector. This chapter goes back to the itinerant beginnings of film exhibition, considering specific examples of non-theatrical screening in the 16mm era in Scotland, as a vanguard of 'useful' cinema and a point of reference for contemporary phenomena. Focusing on exhibition activity in Scotland's rural areas, this chapter challenges metropolitan perspectives on pop-up exhibition which have tended to frame it in the context of a saturated cultural market.

Chapter 4 retraces the histories of specialized and underground exhibition, centring on the role that non-theatrical cinema has played in the subcultural dynamics of Scotland's largest city. This chapter focuses on the spaces, practices, and programming of cine-clubs and film societies. Alternative, self-governed exhibition has a significant history in Scotland, with the Edinburgh Film Guild and Glasgow Film Society amongst the first such organizations in the world. As elsewhere, video availability and broader cultural changes have transformed cinephilia, foregrounding its experiential aspects over access to specific films. This chapter shows how enterprising cine-club exhibitors have taken a much more creative role, alongside specialized programming, by producing multi-medial and collaborative events in alternative spaces.

While cinephile exhibition still privileges film culture, an exclusive focus on this sector would overlook the even larger domain of 'useful' cinema. In Chapter 5, I discuss more instrumental forms of exhibition, which imply a closer relationship between the world of the film and the viewer's world. The screening space helps underline this proximity, and may offer opportunities to shift the experience of reception into action. In the chapter, I explain how 'useful' cinema expects active engagement from the audience, encouraging discussion by activating the incompleteness of film. Examples include 'interrupted' screenings, campaigning and educational initiatives.

As a contrast with this predominantly sober streak, Chapter 6 focuses on what I call eventful cinema. This includes forms of exhibition variously described as 'immersive' and 'experiential'. The chapter places these practices in relation to the showmanship tradition of early and classical eras, which already combined familiarity with novelty to create a sense of excitement. This chapter looks at how non-theatrical exhibitors exploit the temporary nature of their spaces in order to amplify a sense of uniqueness and opportunity. It explored site-specificity as the staging of resonances between film content and space, as well as live performance.

The last chapter does not follow a particular strand of practice, but rather observes the utopian elements threaded through all of them. It seeks to identify aspects of non-theatrical cinema as a social practice that express and build towards a transformative ideal. This is based on the destabilization of assumptions made possible by some forms of relocation. The material and social expectations associated with a cinema screening demand a reconfiguration of the temporary spaces in which cinema happens. This may be simply bringing chairs and shutting out sunlight, but it can also be the opening up of a private space, the transformation of a transit space into one for lingering, the presence of people who are not usually there, and a different code of behaviour, for instance. Through these transformations of lived spaces, a screening event can claim a (modest) political potential. This chapter is critical of the exaggerated promises of DIY and 'pop-up' projects, but it also shows that metropolitan critiques of this model are insufficient to account for many of the projects observed in Scotland. Fundamentally, it centres the action of organizing screenings as such, as a direct engagement with publicness and sometimes a subtle way of reclaiming or imagining the commons.

As theatrical film viewing loses ground in its claim as the natural home of the movies, it becomes clear that the full-time, commercial, dedicated cinema is a historically contingent form that was always just one of many sites for the moving image. This is a liberating realization. Meanwhile, the acceleration of climate change demands a reconsideration of priorities. There may be a more urgent value in re-learning ways of working together and making space for one another. At its best, a film screening is a small trial run for decentralized, small-scale, collaborative, nurturing and imaginative forms of living. This book, I hope, offers to the reader some glimpses of that possible future.

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