

‘One Screening Away From Disaster’: Precarity and Commitment in the Radical Film Network’s Community Exhibition Sector

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Introduction

The Radical Film Network (RFN, www.radicalfilmnetwork.com) is an international network of individuals and organisations engaged in the production of political film culture. Convened in London in 2013, the RFN now consists of more than one hundred organisations across twenty countries, and ranges from production companies, archives and distribution platforms to film clubs, co-operatives (co-ops) and festivals. This diverse range of organisations is united by two things: a medium-specific focus on the moving image and a political identity marked by an affiliation with the politics of the left and the ideologies traditionally at its core, especially socialism, anarchism and radical environmentalism.¹ The community film culture in question here, then, is an overtly political one, distinguished in part by the overriding concern of those involved to use film to engender social and political engagement, participation and change.

This chapter explores the RFN’s exhibition sector in the UK. Unfortunately for those involved both in exhibition and other sectors of radical film culture, another characteristic shared by the vast majority of organisations involved is a complete lack of funding and a corresponding paucity of time and resources. As a result, although the large number of organisations active in the network suggests that this film culture is alive and well, most radical film organisations also exist in a state of precarity, or ‘existence without security’

(Murray and Gollmitzer 2012, 419). The concept of precarity has been explored at length, both in macro socio-economic terms as a symptom of 21st-century capitalism (Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Standing 2011 and 2014), and as a condition that is particularly prevalent in the creative industries (Gill and Pratt 2008; Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009; Ross 2010). Income instability, free labour, self-exploitation and associated pathologies such as alienation and anxiety are all markers of ‘the precariat’: a new international class of workers that lacks stable income, employment benefits and any meaningful control over labour and leisure time. Precarity is now a standardised feature of employment in advanced capitalist economies (Brault cited in Bain and McLean 2013, 96) and is so embedded in the cultural industries that most cultural workers in the UK actually depend on another job outside of the cultural field (Arts Council England 2010). In this context, we might think of radical film exhibition – and radical film activists more generally – as doubly precarious: a form of cultural work that is rarely (if ever) remunerated, and carried out in their spare time by people that already rely on a second or third job to survive. How do organisations involved in radical film exhibition negotiate such precarious conditions, and how do these conditions shape their approach to exhibition?

In what follows I focus my attention on two radical film exhibitors: Liverpool Radical Film Festival (LRFF) and Birmingham Co-operative Film Society, or Birmingham Film Co-op (BFC). These organisations have been selected because they offer both contrasting examples and instructive similarities to other groups in the sector. Both organisations encounter similar challenges and share comparable aims but differ in terms of the nature of the events they organise, their internal structures and identities, and the kinds of film they show. LRFF is an annual event – although it also hosts ad hoc screenings throughout the year – organised by a loosely decentralised team that operates horizontally and which explores a range of

approaches to radical film. BFC, by contrast, organises a year-round series of monthly screenings, is coordinated by an elected committee with fixed roles, and selects films democratically via a ballot box. One must therefore be wary of generalising analysis of one organisation to another. As Lucy Küng-Shankleman has argued (albeit in relation to two very different organisations – the BBC and CNN), all organisations and cultures are unique, with unique strengths and weaknesses that are ‘context-dependent’ (2000, 202). Yet detailed analysis of these two organisations does yield insights that illuminate the sector more generally, and this chapter seeks to be of equal use to both scholars interested in this community film culture and to those groups that comprise it.

A broader aim of the chapter is more general. In the UK as elsewhere, radical film culture is a large and diverse – albeit precarious – facet of contemporary film culture, but remains a significantly under-researched area. Academic work in the field has grown in recent years but is still relatively sparse, rarely focused on the UK and, with a few notable exceptions – Winton and Turnin (2014); Mazierska and Kristensen (2015); Tzioumakis and Molloy (2016) – predominantly focused on periods long since passed. In the UK, much of the more recent work on political film culture has concentrated on the 1970s and 1980s,² just as scholars involved with the resurgence of radical film culture in the 1970s and 1980s were preoccupied with rediscovering the radical film cultures of the 1920s and 1930s.³ Documenting these histories is essential, but must not be at the expense of our understanding of contemporary movements, the organisations involved and how and why they do what they do. Indeed, for the most part these earlier histories *are* well documented – see Dickinson (1999) for a thorough account of radical film in Britain from 1945 to 1990, for example – while the past twenty years of committed film culture in the UK is practically unaccounted for.⁴

Within the RFN's exhibition sector alone, for instance, many other organisations are deserving of further investigation. In the UK, for example, self-titled radical film festivals exist in cities, towns and villages such as Bristol, Brighton, Norwich and Tolpuddle (Dorset). RFN-affiliated festivals in the capital include the London Feminist Film Festival and London Labour Film Festival, while myriad other groups organise events up and down the country throughout the year. Such groups include Autonomy Films (Bridport), Full Unemployment Cinema (London), Manchester Film Co-op and Take One Action (Edinburgh). Outside the UK, festivals and exhibition groups affiliated to the RFN include the Brazilian International Labour Film Festival (São Paulo), Cinema Política (Montréal), Guerrilla Cinema (Marrakesh), Subversive Festival (Zagreb) and Workers Unite Film Festival (New York City). While some excellent research into activist film festivals has taken place within the wider field of film festival studies, notably by scholars such as Iordanova and Torchin (2012), few of the organisations above have featured in this growing body of work thus far (partly because the field has tended to prioritise festivals to the neglect of other kinds of exhibition organisation, such as film clubs or co-operatives). Focusing on just two organisations here thus both fills a gap and illustrates the wealth of work that remains to be done in this large and heterogeneous field.

Research on activist film festivals has nevertheless generated a number of insights into how such organisations operate. For example, Iordanova has noted that the inclusion of discussion time after the screening event, in which the films and the issues they raise can be interrogated by the audience, is probably 'the single most important feature that makes a festival activist' (2012, 16). Skadi Loist and Ger Zielinski's (2012) overview of queer film festivals notes the role of these festivals in the creation of counter-public spheres, and that such 'community-oriented, identity-based film festivals' differ in their organisational structures and funding

patterns (51). Miriam Ross has explored how the ‘material and embodied’ aspects of community exhibition – introductions, interruptions, the proximity of the projection equipment to the audience and so on – distinguish it from the lack of interaction and strictly delineated spaces of commercial exhibition (2013, 449-50). Winton and Turnin, meanwhile, distinguish ‘community programming’, in which films are selected with the interests of the audience in mind, from ‘capital programming’, in which the profit motive is the guiding principle (2013, 25).

These characteristics apply to the above groups and are evidenced in the case-studies below, but different groups articulate these shared characteristics in different ways and for different reasons. Detailed scrutiny of individual case-studies thus enables us to analyse how and why behaviours common among radical exhibitors also contribute to the rich diversity of organisations active in the sector. With a view to unpicking this intersection of commonalities and distinctions, in what follows, each organisation is framed in the same way – formation, objectives, internal organisation and external relationships – a structure that facilitates comparison and brings into relief their unique organisational identities.

Methodology (and full disclosure)

My relationship to this field is neither objective nor dispassionate. As a founder member of the Bristol Radical Film Festival collective and convener of the RFN, I am a committed participant in this culture as much as an observer of it. While this relationship inevitably colours the analysis that follows, it is also perhaps appropriate given that one of the distinguishing features of contemporary radical film culture (in the West, at least) is the strong links that many such organisations have with Higher Education Institutions. Indeed,

the RFN received development support from my institution, the University of the West of England (UWE) Bristol and has more recently benefitted from an international research networking grant from the government's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the UK: 'Sustaining Alternative Film Cultures' (2015-17).⁵ The interviews that inform this chapter have taken place as part of that AHRC-funded project. Because of the nature of the organisations in question, there are very few, if any, secondary sources on which to draw. The methodology I have adopted is therefore a qualitative one, with analyses drawn from empirical data based on extended interviews with participants and participant-observation at selected events. Interviews are, of course, an unreliable form of data – interviewees inevitably present a particular version of themselves and assign their own set of values to the subjects they discuss – and participant observation is similarly shaped by the researcher's presence and her or his belief in what is relevant or important. These caveats aside, both methods can also produce valuable material for interpretation, as the following pages demonstrate.

1. Liverpool Radical Film Festival

Formation and objectives

LRFF was established in 2012 by Brian Ashton, a retired car worker and trade unionist, and David Jacques, a trade unionist and established artist in the city. In 2011 Ashton and Jacques organised a series of screenings for 'Liverpool: City of Radicals', a city-wide celebration of political activism in the city (Belcham and Biggs 2011). That event was so successful that they decided to organise an annual festival from the following year. Ashton, Jacques and Steve Eye, an activist with a social centre associated with Liverpool's long-standing radical bookshop, News From Nowhere, led the first edition of the festival in 2012, and two audience

members – Hayley Trowbridge, then studying for a PhD in Film Studies, and Grace Harrison, an independent artist and researcher – joined the team to produce the festival the following year. LRFF is currently run by a team of seven: Eye remains, though Ashton left in 2014 and Jacques is now in an advisory role. Current members range from PhD students and independent artists and writers to a community media producer and a cashier in a bookmakers. Crucially, all members of LRFF’s organising team are volunteers, and the organisation is unfunded. This is typical of radical film organisations and has wide-ranging ramifications for the LRFF’s approach to programming, its organisational structure and the networks of organisations with which it works.

One of the most visible consequences of the volunteer-run nature of LRFF is its shifting approach to programming. As the team changes, so too does the kinds of events it organises as volunteers with different ideas and backgrounds get involved. The first edition of LRFF consisted of classic oppositional cinema and addressed key periods in the history of the left. Screenings ranged from classic oppositional films such as *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and *The Spanish Earth* (1937) to sessions on video-activism with films by Cinema Action (1968-1989), Undercurrents (1994-), and Reel News (2006-).⁶ The second edition of LRFF also comprised both historical and contemporary work but, reflecting the influence and interests of the new members of the festival team, displayed a broader, more questioning approach radical film which, as Trowbridge argues in an interview with her, ‘doesn’t have to be politically-motivated documentaries shot in a certain way ... “radical” means much more than that’.⁷

Alongside conventional political documentaries (*Gasland* [2010]; *Year of the Beaver* [1985]), the second edition of the festival thus screened films more radical in style than subject (*The*

Film That Buys the Cinema [2013]), work by politically-engaged artist filmmakers (Luke Fowler, Karen Mirza, Brad Butler), and sessions explicitly designed to explore multiple approaches to the concept of radicalism on film. That Trowbridge and Harrison were – with the support of the rest of the team – able to influence the conceptual approach of the festival illustrates the speed and extent to which new members of volunteer-led festivals can influence the organisations they join. This level of agency makes such festivals satisfying organisations to work within and is an important counter-weight to the precariousness of unfunded, volunteer-led organisations (Bain and McLean 2013).

LRFF may have developed a more open, inquisitive approach to the concept of radicalism, but the core objectives of the festival remain staunchly political. As Anthony Killick, a PhD student that joined LRFF in 2014, unequivocally stated: ‘the festival is about instigating fundamental or systemic social change, and the screenings are intended to connect with protest movements and encourage direct action’.⁸ Nevertheless, the group have also debated the merits of labelling the festival ‘radical’, aware that it might suggest a vanguardist elitism on their part, or that the negative connotations of the word – its association with ultra-left dogma or Islamic fundamentalism – could discourage potential audiences for attending. Yet rather than rename the festival and appeal to a broader audience, the group resolved to try to challenge the negative connotations of radicalism, emphasise the festival’s inquisitive approach to the concept, and promote the values of left-wing libertarianism to which they are committed.

Internal organisation and external relationships

LRFF's political values structure its internal relationships: the team operates collectively, all decisions are taken as a group and it actively avoids adopting a formal hierarchy in which members perform fixed roles and responsibilities. LRFF's internal structure – and its network of relationships with other groups – has emerged partly in response to its precarious existence and is an important means of negotiating that, but it is also the group's preferred way of being, not something that is resented-but-tolerated in light of the organisation's insecurity. However, a number of challenges also derive from this kind of organisation.

Decision-making and communication, for example, can take more time and is often fraught – 'massive chaos' was the phrase used by Trowbridge – which is especially draining for an unfunded community organisation run in volunteers' spare time. This structure can also result in some members of the team taking on more of the organisational labour than others, which can make those individuals dangerously valuable to the organisation and increase the likelihood of them becoming exhausted or 'burning out' – a doubly risky scenario. This kind of informal horizontalism is also susceptible to certain people adopting leading roles unofficially and therefore without formal responsibility or accountability – what Jo Freeman famously referred to as the 'tyranny of structurelessness' (1970).

The festival's collective, non-hierarchical structure, and the challenges involved in managing that structure, is an essential part of the organisation. Because LRFF has so little resources, those involved in the festival must want to be involved. As Trowbridge goes on to say, 'ultimately we all do it because we want to do it, and if it became something we didn't want to do then we'd have no festival anyway'. Organising in this way means that the group practices the kind of politics it promotes at its events, and being part of a democratic, non-

hierarchical organisation and dealing with the difficulties that entails, is a key source of satisfaction for those involved.

Protecting the LRFF's ability to operate and organise in this way means maintaining its financial insecurity. The festival generates the small amount of money it requires by running a bar and selling food at their events, in addition to occasionally charging a small admission fee. These low-key money-making activities, combined with LRFF's mutually-supportive relationships with other organisations in the city (explored below), enable the festival to sustain itself without funding. LRFF has chosen not to apply for the core funding that enables most other festivals to survive because of the potential consequences this could have on the group:

we've talked about being a formal organisation and applying for money but if you get funding from the Arts Council or wherever then it's a job [and] that might change it ... we operate on a degree of mindfulness and ethics, not processes, procedures, and documents. So I think we can do it without money. It's more the will of the group. That's what's important, having a group of people who want to do it and will make it happen. (Trowbridge 2015).

Given the relationship between LRFF's organisational structure and the group's political identity, their decision to remain financially precarious is understandable. Funding would inevitably entail a different organisational structure and set of relationships which would jeopardise its existence in the first place. For LRFF, volunteer labour is more important than funds, so arguably the biggest danger the festival faces is 'volunteer churn' and maintaining the organisation as the team of volunteers running it inevitably changes. As Trowbridge says,

‘the challenge is making sure that the group stays together. I don’t necessarily mean the group of people who it is now, but having new people come in as other people are going, because people move cities, people’s lives move on’.

LRFF’s external relationships with other grassroots, political or community-based organisations are both a major part of its organisational identity and a key means by which it negotiates precarity. The organisations with which LRFF works provide the venues for its screenings, which is essential for an organisation unable to pay hire fees. Yet showing films at a variety of locations across the city is also central to the cultural and political motivations of the festival: it exists to support and strengthen the communities in which it operates, and touring the festival around a range of venues is thus a means of outreach and engagement. As Killick says:

The purpose of using multiple venues is so we screen in various different parts of the city, getting to people who might not feel totally comfortable in more mainstream ‘cultural’ spaces, which are mostly populated by middle class white people. Insofar as the purpose of the festival is to raise political consciousness, that’s quite important. There’s a phrase that says if the working class don’t have access to it then it’s not radical.

LRFF screenings have taken place in community halls, artists’ studios, unemployed workers’ centres, asylum support spaces – and more recently in the Liverpool Small Cinema, a volunteer-run venue that some LRFF members were involved in building – but not in FACT, Liverpool’s main arthouse cinema. Operating in these spaces is an attempt to reach the marginalised groups LRFF wants to attract, and enables LRFF to run its events as it pleases,

providing a bar and refreshments, hosting discussions and providing a partisan space for ‘communities to come together’ to address the issues that affect them (LRFF 2016).

These intentions of LRFF are imbued into the ethos and atmosphere of its screenings and embody much of what Miriam Ross has described as the ‘interstitial’ – somewhere between the multiplex and home viewing experience – nature of community film exhibition (2013, 446). In 2015, LRFF took place at two venues in the city centre: Pagoda Arts, a Chinese community and youth centre, and a large, ‘pop up’ artists’ studio space. Pagoda Arts was the main venue, a large two-storey building with one main room downstairs and a small kitchen to one side. An impressively large screen, comprised of a wooden frame with bed sheets pinned across it, had been assembled at the rear of the building. In contrast to the standards of commercial film exhibition, with its strict separation of auditorium and projection room, at LRFF a projector and laptop were present in front of the audience. A makeshift bar was assembled by the entrance to the kitchen, which sold cups of tea and coffee at morning screenings and beer, wine and single-pot dinners prior to the evening films. Screenings frequently started late as organisers dealt with technical hitches or delayed for late-comers – rather than elicit complaints, these were the subject of jokes between audience and organisers. Each screening was introduced and subject to a discussion afterwards, and every event was free of charge. These elements are at the heart of LRFF’s identity and encapsulate the ethos of the festival: welcoming and friendly but fiercely determined, familiarity and irreverence masking the steely political commitment that drives its organisers.

2. Birmingham Film Co-op

Formation and objectives

The relationship between the co-operative movement and film is as old as cinema itself (Burton 2005). Today, three UK-based exhibition groups in the RFN operate as co-operatives: Birmingham Film Co-op (BFC), Manchester Film Co-op (MFC) and the London Socialist Film Co-op (LSFC). Of these, BFC is the most recent – it began in 2010 while LSFC dates from 1992 and MFC from 2008 – and has the closest relationship with the UK’s co-operative movement and the federated family of retail businesses that are its most visible facet. Indeed, this relationship was crucial to the formation of the group and the unique structure and approach to community exhibition it subsequently developed.

The BFC’s beginnings can be traced back to 2008, when two friends and members of the Cooperative Party (the political arm of the co-operative movement), Richard Bickle and Bernard Parry, organised a screening of *Black Gold* (2006), Nick and Marc Francis’ documentary about exploitation in the coffee industry. The event was a success and in 2010, with another mutual friend, John Cooper, they began to think about forming a more long-term organisation to address the dearth of alternative, socially-engaged film screenings in Birmingham.⁹ A fourth member of the group, Phil Burrows, a film enthusiast and activist with Friends of the Earth, joined the group and they approached the regional consumer co-op, the Central England Co-operative (CEC), for support.¹⁰ The CEC agreed to provide a venue free of charge at the Birmingham and Midlands Institute, a public building in the centre of the city to which it is affiliated. With an initial team and venue in place, the group began to consider how it would operate and what its role in the community could be.

As the youngest of the political film co-operatives operating in the UK, BFC’s organisers looked for inspiration from both the LSFC and MFC and chose to distinguish themselves in

two key ways. Unlike the LSFC, Bickle, Parry, Cooper and Burrows chose not to reference a specific left-wing ideology in the title of the group. According to Bickle, this was ‘not because most of us wouldn’t describe ourselves as socialists, but because we thought that might put off part of an audience that we wanted to engage’.¹¹ Instead, they opted for a more neutral name and a catch-phrase that gently alluded to the co-operative-influenced socialism of the group: ‘Just Film, for a Fairer World’. BFC also distinguished itself from MFC which, at that time, organised its screenings into thematic seasons. BFC felt that this would risk attracting only particular audiences to each season, and thus serve to maintain what they saw as existing divisions across different community activist groups. According to Bickle, in addition to a more general ambition to ‘grow the audience for progressive cinema in Birmingham’, one of the main objectives of the organisation was to encourage people to make connections between different issues and to situate them within the context of a wider, integrated socio-economic totality:

Our vision was that, in the economic and political culture in which we live, there is a lot of energy and participation in a whole range of single-issue organisations ... So if you can start building up a vision which is a bit bigger than one issue on its own, you can start to articulate what a fairer society might look like.

At first, then, like other radical exhibitors, building relationships with external organisations was at the heart of BFC’s identity, and BFC decided to vary the subject of the films screened each month in the hope that a diverse programme of different films would bring people back more regularly and help build links across the various activist groups in the city that tended to focus on distinct issues.

Internal organisation and external relationships

Initially, BFC's approach was to build the co-operative in collaboration with these so-called 'single issue' organisations,¹² and it developed an organisational membership structure that allocated each organisation a proportion of free tickets for their members. However, this proved unsuccessful when only a few groups expressed interest, so the BFC organisers decided to base the organisation on an individual membership structure, let individual members vote on which films to show, and then invite local campaign groups to the screening when the chosen title overlapped with the group's work. BFC's democratic approach to programming is unique among radical exhibition groups in the UK – most of which are run along the more ad hoc lines of LRFF – and has wide-ranging ramifications for the organisation and the way in which it negotiates its precarious position.

Administering BFC's democratic, co-operative approach to exhibition requires a complex internal structure and clearly defined roles and responsibilities. BFC is currently run by a committee of seven volunteers with designated roles: secretary, chair, treasurer and so on. To cement the relationship with the CEC, BFC also allows one of its members to sit on the board. These roles are performed by BFC members that are elected each year at the BFC's AGM. Although this organisational structure is more rigid than most other radical exhibition organisations, it is also more time-efficient once established. After meeting monthly for the first year, BFC committee meetings now take place just four times per year, with occasional meetings when needed. This is in stark contrast to the monthly meetings of MFC or the weekly meetings in the lead-up to LRFF's festival, for example.

BFC's membership structure also ensures a steady income stream. Membership costs £12 per year and, for the past two years, has been stable at around forty-five members. Members receive reduced admission to each monthly event (£3 instead of £5), as well as voting privileges to participate in the selection of films and to elect committee members at BFC's AGM. BFC's income is also bolstered by an annual CEC grant of £400. Audience numbers can fluctuate significantly but typically range between twenty and forty people, so BFC can expect to generate around £1500 per annum from membership fees, box office takings and the grant.

However, the security provided by this guaranteed income is offset by the higher costs of BFC's screening programme. Film selection consists of nominating short-lists of films three times a year, which are then subject to a ballot that opens at each screening and runs for one week afterwards. The winning films are then shaped into a programme for the coming season. Because the films the members select tend to be contemporary titles which already have a public profile, they often require significant screening fees (between £100 and £300) to be paid to distributors such as Film Bank or Dogwoof. Therefore, despite its income being higher and more stable than most other radical film exhibitors, BFC also exists in a state of precarity, the potential risk of a high-cost screening fee combining with a poor audience turnout means that the BFC is, as Bickle puts it, always 'only one screening away from disaster'. Yet for the BFC's organisers, this precarious but independent existence is preferable to one in which the organisation relied on external organisations for grant funding to survive: 'autonomy and independence', says Bickle, is 'one of the seven co-op principles, [and] is really important to us'. In a similar vein to LRFF, then, the BFCs organisers are committed to co-operatives as a mode of organisation, and it is this commitment that keeps the organisation going.

Like LRFF, the atmosphere of BFC's screenings embodies the identity of the organisation. As noted, screenings take place in the same place each month: the CEC's Members' Hall in the Birmingham and Midlands Institute, a mid-19th-century public building in the middle of the city centre. The Members' Hall is a spacious, conventional and sedate space, well-equipped with soft chairs and inoffensive meeting-room furniture. While the space is thus able to cater for the variety of co-operative groups that use it, its purpose – to provide a space for co-operatives in the region – is unmistakable from the large banners on the wall advertising the CEC and the values of co-operation.

As the audience enters the space, two members take their admission fees and people congregate around the refreshments table. Like LRFF, a significant element of the BFC's events is the home-made flapjack, cakes, tea and biscuits (available for donation rather than a price). These refreshments are made by the BFC committee and brought by members of the audience, and thus both exemplify the care that has gone into the organisation of the event and serve as a reminder of the shared responsibility and collective spirit on which the event depends. Screenings begin with an introduction and are followed by a discussion, but the latter are usually very informal, and often held in the local pub than conducted in the Members' Hall. BFC events are thus tidier, more low-key affairs than those of the LRFF. In part this derives from the fact that they are monthly events which do not need and could not sustain, on a regular basis, the effort that goes into shaping the annual LRFF events. Yet these under-stated, practically-run screenings also reflect the gentle, homely, socialist spirit that pervades the BFC and ensures that the organisation can continue with the challenging task of exhibiting political films.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed two very different radical film exhibitors and their respective strategies for negotiating precarity. As noted at the outset, one must be careful to not draw too general conclusions from analyses of unique organisations given that differences are invariably ‘context dependent’: what is a strength in one organisation may well be a weakness in another. Indeed, as we have seen, the decentralised, non-hierarchical, consensus-based approach of LRFF is a strength in the context of an anarchist-oriented festival run by volunteers that want to be part of an organisation with those politics. Similarly, the more concrete roles of BFC’s committee are a strength in the context of a festival with socialist leanings, run by volunteers that prefer an acknowledged hierarchy and formal democratic processes. Yet to transpose their respective strengths across these organisations would be to transform them into weaknesses.

As this suggests, the single most important factor that enables these organisations to survive is the commitment of the volunteers involved and their shared belief in the ability of politically-engaged cinema to make a positive contribution to the communities in which they work. There is thus a dual commitment: to the politics of the organisation and to the films it shows as a cultural means of engaging with those politics, and their engagement with film is therefore always as much political as it is cultural; the films they show always, in part, cultural means to political ends. Of course, the audiences for these films might be described as equally committed – to a mode of film viewing and consumption that emphasises post-screening discussion, shared experience and community solidarity. Exploring audience perspectives on the value and role of activist film festivals is an important avenue for future research.

From the organisers' perspective, the combination of a cultural commitment to film and a political commitment to community activism is at the heart of their organisations' ability to negotiate the precarious conditions in which they exist, and is the reason why their respective strategies for dealing with precarity are so often also simply their preferred way of being.

LRFF hosts its events in venues across the city not just because these are the spaces it can use for free but because the organisers are interested in building networks of solidarity among different groups involved in movements for social change. BFC selects its programme democratically and co-ordinates its activities via an elected committee not just because this generates membership fees but because its organisers are passionate about independent and autonomous, participatory, democratic control. From this perspective, it is unsurprising that both groups have decided to remain independent of funding structures that would risk changing the nature of the organisations and therefore the commitment of those involved.

Yet this also means that organisations such as LRFF and BFC remain precarious: as people move on or jobs and families make volunteer labour untenable, the danger is of course that such groups may dwindle and die out. Perhaps it was ever thus, but maybe it is also possible for community film policies to be instituted that enable such organisations to persist without changing (but that is a topic for another time). In any case, there are reasons to be hopeful.

Beneath the welcoming surface of these organisations is a deep commitment to equality and social justice, and a passionate belief in the power of film to contribute to those ends. That commitment will not dissipate any time soon. Moreover, the LRFF team and their audiences are growing and, while BFC's membership has remained constant over the past few years, a recent screening I attended, on a rainy Thursday evening, attracted nearly one hundred people.

This chapter has shown radical film culture to be both alive and well, and extremely diverse. I have focused on just two organisations, but this culture is comprised of many more hundreds of others, each with their own politics and organisational identities, and interpretations of what ‘radical film culture’ means. Stuart Hall argued that identity is a process that is both constructed through recognition of shared origins, values or ideals and, as a discursive construction, constituted through a never-ending play of difference (1996). In bringing together a multitude of unique organisations which, though grounded in different political and geographic contexts, nevertheless share a certain broad set of ideals, I hope the RFN will equally help radical film culture to maintain its identity, and continue to change.

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¹ Radical environmentalism typically connects approaches to the environment to socio-economic critiques of capitalism, patriarchy and globalization. See, for instance, Mies and Shiva (1993), Wall (1999) and Jensen (2006).

² Events and publications include *Visions, Divisions and Revisions: Political Film and Film Theory in the 1970s and 80s*, a series of screenings and discussions at Raven Row gallery, 2010; *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (Knight and Thomas, 2012; see also Knight, 2013); *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s* (Kidner and Bauer, 2013); and *Reactivating the 1970s: Radical Film and Video Culture in Theory and Practice*, a seminar at Open School East, 2016.

³ See, for example, Donald MacPherson's *Traditions of Independence: British Cinema in the Thirties* (1980); Bert Hogenkamp's *Deadly Parallels: Film and the Left in Britain, 1929-39* (1986); or numerous related articles in journals such as *Screen*, *Afterimage* and *Undercut*.

⁴ See Presence (2013 and 2014) for an attempt to recover some of this more recent radical film history.

⁵ The project is being led by myself, Professor Mike Wayne (Brunel) and Dr Jack Newsinger (Leicester), and consists of a series of events at various industry and counter-culture film festivals in the UK and US. More information about the network and the research project is available at www.radicalfilmnetwork.com.

⁶ For more information on Cinema Action, see Dickinson, 1999, 263-88. For more information on Undercurrents and Reel News see Presence, 2015 and 2016 respectively.

⁷ All quotations from an interview with Trowbridge conducted on 11/06/2015.

⁸ All quotations from an interview with Killick conducted on 05/05/2015.

⁹ Film festival scholar Marijke de Valck has noted that many 'specialised' film festivals emerge in this way, in response to gaps or omissions elsewhere (2012, 35). Although Jeffrey Ruoff claims in the same volume that 'programming festivals is as different from year-round programming as night is from day' (2012, 17), this is one of many areas (in activist circles, at least) where monthly groups and annual festivals overlap, and another reason that film festival studies should to begin to explore other kinds of exhibition organisation alongside annual events.

¹⁰ The Central England Co-operative is the second largest independent retail co-operative in the UK and runs over four hundred businesses in the region, primarily in the food retail and funeral sectors.

¹¹ All quotations from an interview with Bickle conducted on 20/05/2015.

¹² Many activist organisations do ostensibly focus on single-issues, and while it is important to build relationships between them it is also worth noting that struggles for change rarely address a single issue. For example, a recently successful campaign against a new MacDonald's fast food drive-thru opening in my neighbourhood – despite being commonly (and correctly) referred to as an anti-MacDonald's campaign – was in fact about a plethora of issues: food education, child advertising, physical and environmental health, traffic safety, urban planning, and democratic control over the communities in which we live.