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Progressive spaces and lines of battle: Bristol Radical Film Festival 2014

James Newton

Introduction

The ethos of the Bristol Radical Film Festival (BRFF), now in its fourth year, appears to be the provision of a space for the screening of films with a strong emphasis on discussion and debate. The festival represents a shift away from merely exhibiting a range of works and onto an examination of the place of film and filmmaking in politics and society. One can see this in the selection of the festival exhibition venues, including 'digital outreach projects, anarchist social centres, drop-in centres for sex workers, political squats, radical bookshops, community bicycle hubs, trade union halls'.¹



Only on one occasion did the festival cross into a traditionally 'elitist' space. On 7 March 2014 there was a special double bill of *From London to Tehran* (Mania Akbari, 2012) and *Dancing Maria* (Roya Akbari, 2013), followed by a question and answer session with the directors, at Bristol's art gallery the Arnolfini. The focus of the rest of the festival was to move away from such spaces and into venues of social and community relevance. These 'progressive' spaces are essential for the festival to be able to maintain its significance as a radical political force. The shift away from more traditional screening venues such as cinemas or galleries puts the BRFF in line not only with other radical or left-wing festivals around the world but also with political filmmaking and exhibition traditions since the radical politicisation of film and its study after 1968.²

The idea of radical cinema in fact extends prior to 1968 and is present in the anarchist interventions in cinema in Spain during the Civil War. In this period the idea of the cinema as part of the community was as important as what was happening onscreen. Emeterio Diez's essay on the subject highlights how the anarchists introduced the concept of 'socialisation' of the cinema, where education around film and its consumption was integral to how it was understood. In the towns and villages under Republican control the cinema would be 'yet another community amenity'³ where admission for residents would often be free. The BRFF continues this tradition of low barriers of access. Ticket pricing is very modest, ranging from several free events to a maximum of six pounds (at the gallery screening above). On the headline weekend at Bristol's Arc bar the programme states that 'no one will be turned away for lack of funds and asylum seekers can come for free'.⁴ The organisers are clearly making a conscious effort to transcend the often prohibitive costs of traditional film festivals and create an inclusive atmosphere.

What's 'radical'?

How then can the festival be understood as radical? It positions itself within the traditions of a range of leftist political inflections through its selection of films. *The Happy Lands* (Robert Rae, 2012) and *Matewan* (John Sayles, 1987) reflect the historical struggles of workplace unionisation; Franny Armstrong's *McLibel* (2005) is an account of a famous libel case brought by McDonald's against two protestors, documenting the fight against powerful corporations and capitalist exploitation; *Paths of Glory* (Stanley Kubrick, 1957) takes a pacifist stance on militarised conflict; and a showcase of short films from the Tracing Movements project focuses on the problems faced by migrant workers.

More problematic is the festival's claim to 'exhibit works that interrogate poli-

tical and *aesthetic radicalism* [my italics] in new and challenging ways'.⁵ While left wing politics are frequently described as radical by both advocates and opponents of specific policies or positions (with 'radical' being used as a positive or pejorative term depending on the position of the user), there is nothing particularly radical in the style and form of many of the films shown at the festival. In other words, even if the content of the films is inspired by far left theory and traditions many of their aesthetic qualities are conservative or mainstream. This is particularly evident in the larger budgeted films screened at the festival. The film with the most radical aesthetic at the festival was Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), a film which still retains power with its visual innovation but one which is now 85 years old and thus cannot be argued to offer a 'new and challenging' example. In this case the festival's unique intervention in the exhibition setting constituted the most radical aspect. It was presented at a non-profit community café with live, improvised musical accompaniment. Furthermore, in the spirit of green sustainability, the event was powered by people on bikes attached to generators to provide the electricity. Also, audiences were given free access.

In the non-professional work shown (such as the video activist films screened in the shorts session) the rough aesthetic comes as much from the lack of funds, training, and resources of the filmmakers as it does from any desire to break from conventional film style. This is not a criticism of these films. Many of these non-professional works are radical precisely because they are produced outside of traditional channels. These works are typically produced with digital video technology, which can be argued has democratised the potential for filmmaking by being relatively cheap, easy to use, and readily available. These are some of the necessary attributes for producing effective and successful activist video, where speed and the ability to shoot in the moment is essential to capture protests, demonstrations, and civil unrest.⁶

The festival's use of the term 'radical' is broad and open for debate. Precisely because the festival is committed to providing time and space for discussion immediately after each event, such deliberation of the radical can indeed take place. In several of the debates, often between attending filmmakers and the audience, the conversation was lively and politically-engaged. For example, following the screening of *On the Art of War* (Luca Bellino, Silvia Luzi, 2012), the interactions between the filmmakers and festival crowd combined relevant discussions on the topic of the film (union organisation and resistance among factory workers in Spain) with a critique of the film's representations of class struggle and organisation. The involvement of the audience contributes to the radical aspect of the BRFF because it negates the top-down approach familiar at traditional festivals, where audience involvement with the filmmakers is minimal. The BRFF gives its audience an active voice in discussions around the themes of each film.

This particular debate also had an educational aspect, in that much of the discussion centred on forms of workplace protest, unionisation, and other forms of worker organisation. However, the pedagogy in this instance was non-hierarchical. Importantly, rather than instructions telling people how to organise politically, the emphasis was on debating ways of being effective, with members of the audience leading the conversation.

Radical themes: War

If there is continuity in the themes of the selected films it would be in their focus on war. In particular, the films reflect a tendency to draw parallels between militarised conflicts and class-based struggles within domestic settings. Screenings of *Paths of Glory* and John Sayles' *Matewan* in parallel sessions demonstrate the conflation of these two themes, both linked by their representation of the working classes in violent and organised struggle – in service of the state in the case of the former and in support of their social class in the latter. Screenings of a double bill of films on the Spanish Civil War, *The Spanish Earth* (Joris Ivens, 1937) and *To Die in Madrid* (Frederic Rossif, 1963), presented a middle ground between these two positions. Both films, the former a propaganda film produced during the conflict and the latter a French documentary, are in support of the Republican side of the war and reflect the international class-based solidarity of many of those who fought for the Republic. Indeed, we are reminded of the relevance of the Spanish Civil War with the inclusion of these films, both as a period in radical left-wing history and as a line of investigation of how cinema contains a community focus. This double bill was screened alongside another parallel session with *Arna's Children* (Julianon Mer Khamis, 2004), a documentary on the experience of a group of children brought up in a refugee camp in Palestine. Appropriately, this particular screening took place in Bristol's unofficial Palestinian Embassy and Nakba Museum. Again, the importance of the screening space is vital to the sense of community spirit being invoked by the festival.

The theme of war prevalent in the roster of selected films even extends to the marketing of the BRFF. The image on their promotional materials is that of an AK-47 assault rifle in place of a film projector, with two spinning film reels sitting on top and a projector lens extending out where the gun barrel would normally be. This striking image underscores the festival's theme of war and neatly encapsulates the role of films and filmmaking within current struggles and in those of the past.⁷ The icon of the camera as a weapon in class struggle is one which is familiar to grassroots political filmmakers and video activists, and the neat twist here from

camera to projector underlines the idea that the festival itself can be a radical political force.

The festival, activism, and pedagogy

That the festival understands this radical political power is not limited to the screening of films is apparent in both its ancillary activities and its organisational roots in academia. BRFF included a workshop titled *The Languages of Video-Activism*. Here, two producers of activist video in Spain, Concha Mateos and Luis Lanchares, explored the potential of aesthetic tendencies in activist video. This part screening/part training event reveals an emphasis on the need for film education to extend beyond its study within universities and into work and social spaces, mirroring once more the concerns of film culture in the post '68 period.⁸ Crucially, those running this session were not only producers of activist films but also academics, so a bridge is forged between academic research and the struggles of political activism, indicating one of the most important and powerful aspects of the festival.

BRFF is organised by staff and students from the Department of Film Studies at the University of the West of England (UWE), and so the whole festival becomes a junction between academia, film practice and consumption, and political activism. It demonstrates ways in which academia can move beyond the study of film and into an active engagement with the politics of cinema exhibition. Each aspect of film culture is brought together in the structure of the festival. The separation that can exist between production, exhibition, and the public consumption of film and that of the discipline of film studies in academia is broken down. Indeed, the study of film and its social and political position is a process which is opened up to the public in the structure of BRFF. Rather than being hidden away in academic film studies, on university campuses, and at conferences, the live questions on film such as its potential as a democratising force and the possibility of cinema as a social and active community space are the focus of the event.

In providing a space for the exhibition of political cinema and a social space for communities to discuss the issues raised, BRFF extends the line of continuity that runs through political epochs in film history. By doing so it reinvigorates and reinvestigates the questions surrounding film regarding its uses, its relevance, and its ability to affect social change.

Notes

1. *Bristol Radical Film Festival 2014*, p. 2.
2. For a definitive outline of the political developments in film and film studies in the post-1968 period see Harvey 1978.
3. Diez 2009
4. *Bristol Radical Film Festival 2014*, p. 2.
5. Ibid.
6. For more comprehensive instruction on shooting effective activist video see Harding 2001.
7. See Stevenson 2002 for a notable essay on radical cinema which uses the metaphor of war.
8. Harvey 1978.

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