Radical Popular?
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Subversion: the definitive history of underground cinema
Duncan Rooke
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This book is badly titled – in the sense that the title does not give much clue as to its much wider significance. Perhaps this is how it sneaked through some of the publishing industry’s gatekeepers. It is not just about underground film and is far more of a history of popular culture more broadly. What this book does more powerfully than any I’ve read is to hack through the weedy and tangled field that is the study of popular culture and come up with a radical reworking of the term. However, in the course of making a new case for the vitality and innovation of the popular as a category it also sets about the category of Art, which the establishment sets above popular culture as a means to devalue it. But, again, it’s not so much about artwork as about the discourses and theories which prop up the systematic ideology.

“Cultural theory has become for the British state a crucial bureaucracy for the negotiation and maintenance of the border between the art and the popular. The function of theory is to convert the incoherent, chaotic, vulgar collective and popular into an authorised, academic and legitimate culture. This is not simply a textual strategy, it is an educational process since state education is the institution developed by the bourgeoisie to convert the illegitimate popular culture of studious working class people into something I grew up immersed in.” (p69)

As a working class artist / thinker I have been waylaid, confused and thwarted throughout my life by trying to read about popular culture – something I now fully grow immersed in. Subversion does an excellent job of going through all the books that I either turned away from perplexed, went to sleep reading or couldn’t see the point of. It outlines the key landmarks of this material and summarily gives a voice to, and explains, the multiple intuitive turn-offs I experienced.

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Reekie comments that the most convincing evidence of the autonomy of the amateur movement is in its very obscurity within film history. This is true of many other art forms: the very fact of not being observed by state cadres contains the frustration and pain of not having the recognition one’s effort deserves, but it is also a liberation from having one’s life funneled into a meaningless careerist path or being extracted from one’s own organic community. As Reekie argues, “the ruling culture of the bourgeoisie [...] represses, appropriates and enervates all radical projects designed to democratic and liberate cultural production.” (p123)

Reekie roots the history of underground cinema here in the class blurring history of 19th century bohemian cabaret. As the technology of movies burst onto the urbanised market places in the early 20th century, film was, for a while, a ‘cinema of attractions’, a visual spectacle.

The story of the underground is then woven through Dada cabaret to the British underground in the late ’60s, itself the progeny of the US beat / hippie film scene. Here, attention is put onto the London Filmmakers Co-op (LFMC) which was modeled on Jonas Mekas’s earlier Film Maker’s Group, with its “no selection” policy. Reekie traces how the early counter cultural approach gives way to a split between underground film and a banal, abstract but heavily theorised structuralist film. The latter becomes dominant as the LFMC became mired in state subsidy and institutionalised within British academia:

“The demand for cinematic purity is not the trajectory of modernist abstraction or the drive for medium specificity, it is the demand of an autonomous art cinema which will correct an historical aberration: the separation of popular cinema. The position is that a dynamic creative culture could emerge from outside the legitimate sphere of bourgeois art.” (p78)

There are gaps one could point to. The popular culture that Reekie refers to is a particular construction defined at the end of the book by 16 characteristics. These characteristics are not used to analyse the radical components of popular culture, although predictably they bring Bakhtin’s concept of ‘carnival’ into a contemporary context of underground and counter culture. But a complex 16-part definition of the radical popular does seem to be put in as an afterthought and it would have been better in the introduction. Of course that may have imposed a more unwieldy frame on the book.

No doubt for strategic reasons he backs off from being critical of pop culture. His focus is on attacking the miserable, fake, dishonest and nepotistic aspects of state ‘experimental’ culture and positioning underground cinema as part of a ‘radical popular’ tradition. It might be unreasonable to also expect a critique of popular culture as a whole. He is after all coming from a background of growing up imbued with popular moving image culture and he doesn’t take on the Adornian critique of mass culture and popular film culture. Even cult genres are clearly impregnated and driven by capitalist interests. Big bourgeois capitalism took control of the early film industry by using its long established literary arm. A control that was sealed as talkies technology wrenched film from its basis in purely visual communication and inserted the script as central to the rituals of cinematic conception.

The commercial popular is inevitably guided by the interests of the system and big money with inevitable alienation effects. Reekie does not bother to make a distinction between the commercial context of such capital intensive productions and the micro economies that he invests a good deal of hope in. The music hall provides ample illustration of what happens as big business moves into carnivalesque popular culture, but this invasion of economic interests does not surface in Subversion. I can see why he did not want to get mired in economic arguments, but, for me, it does leave a certain weakness in the book’s critique.

There is another relevant discourse that he does not engage. The establishment was embarrassingly late in accommodating popular culture into its batteries of aesthetic defenses. When Richard Shusterman first appears of the pages of the redoubtable British Journal of Aesthetics with his ‘Form and Funk: the aesthetic challenge of popular art’ in July 1991, his contribution made the rest of the articles look like they are out of the ark. Shusterman did an intelligent job of ignoring and throwing off the rusty old attitudes to the popular. In spite of this, he never really takes his critique onto grounds that threaten anything
but the most declipt defenders of ‘good taste’. Thenceforth, I found that people already left behind by the contemporary art scene’s embracing of, first pop art, then ‘bad taste’, and then (turning full circle for many) kitsch itself. Reekie does not wrangle with this discourse in terms of popular culture which meanders from Herbert Gans in 1974 to Shusterman in the ‘90s.2 But to give him credit, Reekie doesn’t shy from the main point, which is that on no account must the idea that culture is renewed and created outside of the bourgeois realm be allowed to gain currency.2

My own story

I have to admit that one reason I was so fascinated by this book was that it later narrative touches my own life directly. Reekie’s research belies and with this book was that its later narrative touches my reading and hopefully add something to his critique. I had been part of the regional Arts Workshop movement of the late ‘60s after being inspired as a visitor to Jim Hayne’s seminal Arts Lab in Drury Lane, London. After a period dropping out in Wales in the mid ‘70s I had returned to London in time for the punk explosion. I was an avid, if occasional, audience member at the Musicians Co-op and the Filmakters Co-op which were adjacent to each other in old warehouses in Gloucester Avenue, Camden, North London. Ten years before, I had been impressed by Andy Warhol’s long almost motionless movies which were shown late-night at the Arts Lab, and I think it may have been at the LFCM that I saw Michael Snow’s Wavelength, an hour long zoom across a room. I had been doing a sort of Zen Buddhist meditation with the Thai master Chou Kuhn Damsobutsi and I treated Wavelength as a kind of challenge to give attention to the minutiae of change. But even with this sympathy but naively mind-set, I found the later ‘Structuralist’ films, especially of Peter Gidal, very hard to take. It was these films and the accompanying theory that came to dominate British experimental film and, as Reekie so eloquently argues, stifle the lower class, pop orientated underground. I struggled to engage with these works and came to think that I was perhaps not intellectually adequate for this refined level of aesthetic experience! But it takes Reekie’s analysis to expose just how, what I felt was my ‘problem’, was in fact a mechanism of class oppression, with which the Co-op structuralists were engaged in undermining my value system. Of course, my internalised classism, coming from an aspirational family, would also have played a part. I found other structuralist films like Malcolm Le Grice’s looping horses, and another US film where a horse casually came down a stream, beautiful and even enjoyable as they had rhythm and lurid colours which I could find hypnotic, especially if stoned. So appreciation here again for the wrong reasons.2 They are still running forever in a corner of my mind... It is interesting to reflect that I found the other artworld scene which Reekie dubbed ‘Counter Cinema’, which was associated with Peter Wollen and the BFI axis, even less accessible. Just the fact the LFMC was called a Co-op and had evolved out of the old Art Lab through the agency of David Curtis encouraged me to seek knowledge there. Nonetheless, the overall experience of the later Co-op was always rather cold. I was friends with a few people like Amabel Nicholas, more due to me frequenting X6 dance space, another collective artists’ initiative of the time in Butlers Wharf near Tower Bridge. I found myself more at home there. Fifteen or so years later I was looking for an MA to give myself academic credentials to back up my part-time work at London Guildhall Communications department. I was teaching in University without a proper degree having dropped out of Architecture. I also wanted to learn the digital media skills I needed to take my book publishing activity into the digital era. When I joined the ‘Time Base Media: with electronic imaging’ course it was run by A.L. Rees with Malcolm Le Grice as the external examiner. Le Grice is the author of ‘Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age’ (2001) and AL Rees is the author of ‘A History of Experimental Film & Video’ (1999), a history Reekie effectively shreds, calling it “the subjective account of a participant in a closed system of reciprocal justification.” (p8)

The MA tutors looked down their noses at my interest in editing a video of my self-build co-op erecting our houses in Kennington. The footage was shot by my then 13 year old son Lech and was not a form of video art that they recognised. Nor did I want to mash up the material in that direction. They didn’t try to stop me but just politely ignore my attempts to get this footage substantially presented. The same level of enthusiasm greeted my dissertation on ‘The epistemological status of working class culture’ which was a minor effort in the same area as Reekie’s more erudite and coherent argument. However Subversion helps me understand and even ‘read’ the quality of attention I received and the historical forces that were mediating it.

Later, I attended the Royal College of Art and was supervised by A.L. Rees for my doctoral study of cultural collectives with a focus on Exploding Cinema. I felt alienated from the RCA which was proudly elitist and made no distinction between excellence and elitism. Although it housed me for a bursary from Tomato, paying my fees for two years, that eminent design group took no interest in my work. A.L. was affable and very nice to be around as a supervisor, but I felt he was afraid of the power the RCA. He had come to the RCA on the possibility that he might become head of a revived film department. The post did not materialise and he was left in limbo as ‘Reader’. He never went to an Exploding Cinema show and I got to feel I was acting as his agent. I was never invited along to in-crowd socials and generally I felt was being kept at arms length. I’m not suggesting any of this was conspiratorial – just the way class exclusion works.

I’m not sure why fate looped me up in these concerns. Possibly because I was pushed hard for Knowledge-with-a-big-K, as well as access to cultural power, and so I was bound to come in contact with the border guards. Reading Reekie’s critique I can see more clearly what forces were in play and just how easy it is to drown out the carnival spirit of a common fella when in fact that fella is not only alone but is psychically overshadowed in the portals of the great and good. I once wrote an appeal in the RCA in-house newsletter for any working class artists to meet. The article was received with allmghty silence. It is easy to come to the conclusion that you are wrong-headed, foolishly or out of time. On the other hand, now I can appreciate my own braveness and perhaps a radical insensitivity.

Through the work I took up on completing my PhD I met Patrick Russel at the BFI. He was one of a new generation to take key post and culture in expertise on amateur and counter culture films missing among the old guard. Only now is it ok for the BFI national archive to collect amateur film from the lower classes and radical films about the lower classes, like those of Cinema Action, which had been almost absent. The interesting dissertation that Russell had written for his MA on a local amateur film scene seemed to embarrass him and was not published. In fact, little has been published within film literature on Amateur film1 and so Reekie’s outline history of the period is especially significant.

So for me Subversion has allowed me to re-evaluate some of the dead-end streets in my life. The book’s critique is pertinent to any person who has been formed by popular culture and for whatever reason finds himself or herself wandering in these alien spaces.

A concluding thought

In the end, the history of the recent resurgence of the British underground, which Exploding Cinema led, is sketchily written. Too few references are made to the scattering of contemporary texts that exist mainly in magazines and programmes. The films of this period, especially the left-out of the official canon, need special attention from archives. Many are on the edge of being lost. My own doctoral thesis listed the films and film-makers shown at Exploding Cinema but I did not have the resources to trace the location of originals or copies that could be archived. Without archiving, the underground of this period will probably exist more as myth and hearsay to future generations. The existing Arts Council/BFI archive will be hard to dislodge.

This book is not really so much about underground cinema as it is about rethinking popular culture, yet it is not about any and all popular culture. It is really searching for a concept of a radical popular culture. But even then it is not so much about radical popular culture as it is about way art devalues instead of supplements. In dealing with Art it focuses more on the theories by which art legitimates itself and frames its own importance; the way the state channels cultural democracy, and which is fundamentally resistant to cultural democracy.

Notes