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Title	Political Cinema in the 21st Century: The Radical Film Network Inaugural Conference, Birmingham City University, 7–8 February 2015
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Publication date	2015-06-01
Original Citation	Zarins, K. (2015) Political Cinema in the 21st Century: The Radical Film Network Inaugural Conference, Birmingham City University, 7–8 February 2015. Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 9. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.9.11
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.9.11
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Download date	2026-11-15 18:03:23
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/5913

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JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

Political Cinema in the 21st Century: The Radical Film Network Inaugural Conference Birmingham City University, 7–8 February 2015

A Report by Kelly Zarins, Leeds Trinity University

The Radical Film Network (RFN) was formed in September 2013 with the ambition to unite the significant range of organisations and individuals involved in politically and aesthetically radical film in the UK and internationally. The network owes its inception to the activities of Steve Presence, founder of the Bristol Radical Film Festival and convenor of this year's conference on *Political Cinema in the 21st Century*. The network previously convened for its initial meetings at the Bristol Radical Film Festival and other venues across the South of England, while it was agreed that its inaugural conference was to be held more centrally, at Birmingham's City University.

Political Cinema in the 21st Century: The Radical Film Network Inaugural Conference began with a very clear agenda: to consider the future of the network's activities, structure, stances, and, hopefully, growth. Steve Presence established through his introduction that the network expanded significantly during its first few years, now encompassing members and organisations from eighteen countries; however, with most activity centred in the UK, he remarked that the network should strive towards the equal inclusion of all its members via the support of activities in all countries, as well as those which are already taking place in the UK and Canada. Presence ended his introduction by noting that the network does not currently have any connections with political organisations, trade unions or radical filmmakers, and that these were possible areas for the development of the network's future activities and scope.

The proceedings began with talks and discussions on the future structure of the network, rather than with the traditional keynotes. Chris Jury, who currently lectures on creative activism at Bath Spa University, opened with a report from the fourth annual *Global Labor Film Festivals Organizers' Conference* held on 7–9 October 2014 in Washington, DC. In his talk, Jury contextualised the conference and the backdrop of radical film exhibition in the US, where almost each state has its own radical film festival. He shared the anecdote that, at the conference, he presented his paper before twenty percent of Montana's Communist Party, namely one of its five members. He also spoke about the *Global Labor Film Festival*, which unites international film festivals that showcase films about work via the online and public exhibition of emerging radical cinemas.

Freelance editor Reuben Irving (University of Worcester) delivered a presentation entitled "Non-Hierarchical Self-Governing Consensus: How Can it Work for the RFN?". After sharing his provocation that "the RFN doesn't exist on paper, should it remain this way?", Irving elaborated that, as a network, the RFN currently has "no head office, no regulations, no roles, no exclusions via definition, and that its members are able to establish

break-away groups autonomously with the RFN essentially providing a banner to work under", and a support network from within which to make, distribute, exhibit and produce scholarly work on radical cinema. Together with Jury, Irving proposed that the network continue in this vein, remaining "lightweight" and allowing its members to freely put forward ideas for projects, meetings and future conferences via the mailing list in order to solicit interest and collaboration from its growing number of associates. The future of the network's activity came up frequently in the questions, in informal discussions and throughout the final talks of the conference as a key theme, sparking a flourishing of breakaway collaborations and projects for the future enhancement of the network.

During the "Theory-Practice" panel, inspiringly varied papers were delivered by independent filmmakers, screenwriters and four key collaborators from the UK cooperative film exhibition movement. Lynda Myer-Bennett and Clive Myers from Eclectic Films explained the collective ownership method of film production used on the set of their film *The Orchard* (2013), in which the actors improvise in a style that alternates between the performance of their characters and the presentation of themselves out of character, as actors on-screen. Screenwriter Jan Worth offered her thought-provoking views on the need to rethink radical practice and theorisation via the representational methodologies that are inherent in preproduction and characterisation. She argued against the depoliticisation of production and the widely accepted paradigm by which the political elements of films are interpreted via critical analysis, after the production stages and usually not by the filmmaker themselves. Worth spoke of her experiences as a screenwriting consultant and mentor, work in which she has observed and attempted to counteract the "displacement of representations", which she identifies in the attitudes of screenwriters who subscribe to this separation between production and theorisation. This approach for Worth often creates a belief that theorisation should lie solely within the realm of academia, and that those who produce film should take heed of a purely academic-based theorisation upon which to inform their work, rather than creating their own theory, which is tested through their practice. Worth presented a strong argument for the reconciliation of practice and experiential-based theorisation, an undercurrent in many of the conference's papers and discussions. Papers then led on from this with historiographies of, and insights into, the successes and challenges of the cooperative film exhibition movement in the UK, presented by Richard Bickle (UK Society for Co-operative Studies), Sue Letts and John Cooper (Birmingham Film Co-operative), and Sarah Redman (Manchester Film Co-operative). Redman poignantly concluded her paper by remarking on the ability of audiences who watch and exhibit films cooperatively to take action and collectively respond to activist films; as she put it: "Serving the need: getting real, reel by reel."

The "Conceptual and Political Approaches" panel was intended to provoke and share fresh thinking on practice-based techniques and their theoretical underpinnings. James Newton's (University of Kent) paper "The Anarchist Cinema" argued that the corpus of scholarship on anarchist cinema is disparate, with key texts not having informed one another, resulting in a fracture in the trajectory of theorisation in this field. Hoping to bring these texts together in his thesis and to locate an "anarchism from within the audience", Newton spoke of his findings from radical film screenings and festivals such as *Exploding Cinema* and the *Bristol Radical Film Festival*, where the mode of exhibition evokes a sense of anarchy, by facilitating audiences to view films in nontraditional contexts, such as pubs, community centres, radical bookshops and political squats.

Filmmaker and activist Ken Fero (Coventry University) began by clarifying that his presentation was "not a paper, but a call to arms" in which he would go on to suggest that internationally there is a need for "citizen journalists" to form collectives, similar to the productions that came from the Arab Spring and earlier collective movements. Citing revolutionary writer Frantz Fanon and Marxist theoretician and politician Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* as invaluable resources towards the formation of "collective memories of resistance" and "mass educational programmes", Fero put forward an exceptionally provocative and clear argument for the organisation and education of what we now know as the "citizen journalist": members of the public who record the peaks of action and resistance that are punctuating our current times.

Continuing on with further lively provocations, in her paper "Feminist Strategies for Documentary Film" documentary filmmaker Sharon Hooper (Leeds College of Art) highlighted the need to trace the relationship of feminist film theory to documentary practices. Hooper screened a clip from her collaborative documentary *Spare Rib and Subversive Stitching* (2015), in which two women are filmed sharing their personal ideas on politics and their sewing practice. The film, which intricately captures the complex details of the women's conversation as they sew together, chooses a celebratory approach to highlight the feminist strategies for documentary filmmaking, which Hooper also described in her paper. Hooper also seized the opportunity to raise the profile of—and extend an invitation to join—the Feminist Media Network, which will run as a breakaway group from within the RFN.

Day two of the conference saw a "Participation, Collaboration" panel that worked well as a forum to vocalise some of the final thoughts of the conference as well as to assess the possibility of a more objective form of representation through collective practice, which was one of the foremost themes of discussion throughout the two-day event. In her paper "Breaking Mirrors: Towards a Non-Hierarchical Visual Language in Palestine", Berlin-based independent filmmaker Insa Langhorst reflected on how film can act as a transformative tool through which to re-examine the stereotypes formed by the mainstream media, which often only serve to offer a singular representation of a country's political and cultural climate. Langhorst shared her practice-based research experiences as a filmmaker working on the front line in Palestine to establish a collaborative video art project with independent Palestinian filmmakers. Similarly to Hooper, Langhorst is working with film as a radical and transformative device with which to facilitate others to represent their daily lives, empowering them as they collaborate to the production, rather than proliferating the negative portrayal, widespread in the West, of Palestine as little more than a conflict zone. Langhorst also discussed her personal engagement in her own reflective practice, whereby she had begun to examine her own status as an "EU passport holder", with the freedom to travel internationally, and her own preconceptions about the region prior to visiting Palestine, instilled again by a Western media perspective. In order to counteract this and open up a positive dialogue, the filmmaker shared her research on the history of Palestinian cinema from 1935 until the present day, suggesting how the revolutionary cinema of the late 1960s to early 80s gave way to a more personal mode of contemporary filmmaking, which is mainly externally funded and therefore subjected to an "othering" via the hierarchical perceptions of the Western funding bodies. Overall this methodology, argued Langhorst, aims to "dislodge capitalist ways of thinking about film" replacing hegemonic practices by "testing through collaboration rather than firming up through theory."

The final paper of the conference was given by Margaret Dickinson (film editor and author of *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain 1945–1990*). Margret delivered her paper "50 years of Practice, Change and Repetition: Some Remarks on Radical Film History", a richly comprehensive chronology of the peaks and troughs of radical action filmmaking in Britain. This was in my view the essential paper of the conference, giving younger filmmakers like myself a share in the insights of how collaboration, collectivism, political action and radical aestheticism can become combined forces through which to challenge hegemonic representations and work collectively with the marginalised to value and reveal their own personal histories. Dickinson highlighted the effectiveness of the workshop movement and how it remained active, even throughout the miner's strikes of 1984–1985. From this standpoint she suggested that the RFN is in a good position to act as a network that supports and encourages younger filmmakers who are trying to establish similar practices working collectively and opening up filmmaking production to the marginalised.

Proceedings closed with a summation from Sylvia Harvey (University of Leeds) in which she presented the conference convenor Steve Presence with a book: *Nye: The Political Life of Aneurin Bevan*, signed by those who had attended the conference and, by now, were made to feel truly welcomed members of the RFN. This was followed by a final discussion and reflection upon future actions for the RFN in light of the outcomes of the conference. It was on the whole agreed that the self-governance model for operation could facilitate positive progression, with members organising action and events when they have the opportunity to do so, and with the collaboration of others. The effort to actively include nonacademic members was also addressed alongside wider issues such as a need for further representation from black and ethnic minority communities. It was felt that future conferences and events should be held in nonacademic settings and that there should be more time for dialogue outside of the presentation and discussion of academic papers.

To conclude, it is worth stressing that the conference and its more seasoned network members were exceptionally inclusive and encouraging to newer members and those, like myself, who are making their first forays into radical filmmaking practices. The RFN and its inaugural conference were united by a desire to fully extend the capabilities of radical filmmaking to the widest possible communities, from which to share and make visible the essential personal and cultural histories and current narratives of the marginalised, endeavouring to operate outside the perimeters of a hegemonic media tradition.

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Suggested Citation

Zarins, Kelly. "Political Cinema in the 21st Century: The Radical Film Network Inaugural Conference." Conference report. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 9 (Summer 2015). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

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