



Subversion: the definitive history of underground cinema
Duncan Reekie

ISBN: 978-1-905674-21-3
www.wallflowerpress.co.uk

This book is badly titled – in the sense that the title does not give much clue as to its much wider significance. But maybe this is how it sneaked through some of the publishing industry's gatekeepers. It is not just about underground film and is a defense 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 reclaiming 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 systemic 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 youth into art..." (p167)

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 grew up 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. *Subversion* is essential reading for anyone like me.

I had found a path through some of this tedious stuff in conversation with Howard Slater, Graham Harwood and others in the '80s, and self-published my own conclusions in the early '90s with Working Press. However, there was much that I just didn't have the energy or time to approach. Reekie has filled many gaps for me in a way that is forthright, concise and incisive. He has certainly done a lot of reading to expose middle class aspirational leadership in the mechanisms and rituals of cultural legitimisation. Often masquerading as Socialist or Marxist, the line that is missing from these tracts is that 'the revolution' will be televised and managed by the middle class and their wannabee allies and turned into a charade.

The book may be easy for reviewers to dismiss just because it is so wide ranging. A large part of it is a critical and selective literature review of a mass of secondary material, much of which is known to cultural studies academics. But the discourse is both re-assembled and given pragmatic orientation by Reekie's experiences of working as an experimental filmmaker. There are also areas that are based on original new research, like the chapter that draws an outline history of the burgeoning amateur film scene in the UK from the '30s to the '60s. This is derived from the magazines that were a regular part of the British amateur film scene. The close relationships between amateur filmmaking and the underground are, according to Reekie, about "alternativity and experimentalism." (p112) It is astounding to realise that this amateur movement, at its height in the '60s, was the "the most successful integrated autonomous film movement in British Cinema history." (p115)

Radical Popular?

Stefan Szczelkun

Reekie comments that the most convincing evidence of the autonomy of the amateur movement is 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 organic community. As Reekie argues, "the ruling culture of the bourgeoisie [...] represses, appropriates and enervates all radical projects designed to democratise 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.

"As cinema superceded popular theatre and music hall, so it became the crucial site of the border conflict between the popular and bourgeois art, the inevitable target of bourgeois licensing, sedation, gentrification and appropriation. This conflict has two discrete fronts: the first was an initiative within the nascent film industry which was stimulated and guided by state intervention; the second was a movement which sought to appropriate cinema for autonomous art." (p72)

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 Co-op, 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: popular cinema. The aberration is that a dynamic creative culture could emerge from outside the legitimate sphere of bourgeois art." (p78)



The critical stuff

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 popular 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.¹

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 on 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 fusty old attitudes to the popular. In spite of this, he never really takes his critique onto grounds that threaten anything



but the most decrepit defenders of 'good taste'. Those were the 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 defense 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. The idea that the bourgeoisie are the font of the highest forms of creativity is essential to justify their superiority. The result of such an ideology is that a whole institutional framework is brought into existence which controls and extends culture, and which is fundamentally resistant to cultural democracy.

My own story

I have to admit that one reason I was so fascinated with this book was that its later narrative touches my own life directly. Reekie's research belies and often explains my own experience as an aspiring member of the audience. It helps me unpack the sense of both excitement and exclusion that I felt. By offering a personal account of a period that Reekie covers I want to point to the bias in 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 Film-makers 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 LFMC 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 Damasobutsi and I treated *Wavelength* as a kind of challenge to give attention to the minutiae of change.

But even with this sympathetic but naïve 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 boat constantly came down a stream, bearable 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! They are still running forever in a corner of my mind...

It is interesting to reflect that I found the other avant-garde scene which Reekie dubs '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 Annabel Nicholson, 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 ignored my efforts 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 whatever motives, no-one asked me to present or teach and I was nervous when I wanted to meet up with other research students. Although grateful 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 networks. Possibly because I was pushing 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 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 fellow 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 almighty silence. It is easy to come to the conclusion that you are wrong-headed, foolhardy or out of time. On the other hand, now I can appreciate my own brazenness 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 posts and bring 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 film³ 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 him 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 those left out of the official canon, need especial 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 canon 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 the way art devalues working class culture. 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 experiment and play into forms that are safe for bourgeois power. In this sense *Subversion* is counter theory coming out of sustained radical praxis.

Notes

1. See: William Uricchio & Roberta E. Pearson's *Reframing Culture Princeton*, UP (1993)
2. Gans, Herbert J., *Popular and High Culture: an analysis and evaluation of taste*, Basic Books, New York (1974)
3. Szczelkun, Stefan. 'The Value of Home Movies', *Oral History Society Journal*, Autumn 2000 (V28 No 2 pp94/98)