

F m m t o r i



# Birmingham Filmmakers Co-operative

Arts Lab Holt Street Birmingham

Tel: 021 359 4192

29/11/78

To:  
Dave Curtis,  
Assistant Film Officer,  
ACGB.

Dear Dave,

With reference to your recent letter on the subject of a show by Chris Welsby here on October 24th, I hope the following background notes will be of some use. Any advice or comments you may have will be most welcome. I am in the process of producing a report on the screenings, with observations for possible future proposals. I shall let you have a copy.

Background:

The screenings began in January of this year, and so have been running for nearly twelve months now. The motivation for the screenings was two-fold: 1). As a response to the lack of any regular and coherent exhibition of independent work in the West Midlands region (and a particular failing of the Arts Lab programme). We viewed the screenings as attempting to construct an audience through the presentation of the diversity of 'independent cinema' and films of historical significance to the growth of the avant-garde (including visiting filmmakers, video shows, introductions by lecturers or ourselves, and so on). In this context we saw ourselves as playing an educative role to a large extent. 2). In consolidating the nucleus of filmmakers involved in the Co-op, but in particular the periphery of persons who had expressed general interest in the Co-op/filmmaking, in the belief that shows by visiting filmmakers would stimulate aesthetic ideas and encourage use of the facilities.


The format of the screenings are once a fortnight - though there was a 'high-profile' period in the spring of weekly shows.

Programming:

The programmes have been under the label of 'Independent Cinema' and as mentioned above have attempted to introduce a general body of work. Thus they have ranged from expanded cinema, video shows, films of historical significance, films by local groups, visiting filmmakers, and so on; with the intention of introducing more specialist programmes later on. The wide-ranging nature of the screenings has tended to attract an eclectic audience, with continuity difficult to sustain over long periods.

Venue:

This has unfortunately been a continuous source of harassment for the screenings. Initially, shows in the Lab cinema alternated with shows in the coffee bar, half of which was screened off for the shows. The venue was chosen appropriate to the nature of the show; the coffee bar being chosen for the more



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informal shows (expanded &/or visiting filmmakers, video); the cinema for work which was intended for it. Needless to say, this distinction is not a rigid one (for example a show by Stuart Pound will be in the cinema). This arrangement was considered as a temporary one, awaiting the completion of the Garage as a separate performance area. We have also been able to use the Holt St Gallery (which belongs to Aston University's Centre for the Arts) on occasions, which has been particularly useful for expanded shows.

The problems that have arose from not having a separate autonomous space for the screenings have been many:

- 1.) There is no long-term arrangement with the Arts Lab over the use of the Cinema. Because of arrangements with distributors, sometimes the cinema is unavailable when we want it.
- 2.) The use of the coffee-bar has grown greatly over the last twelve months and is increasingly difficult to use: as a source of revenue for the Lab on the one hand; noise and interference on the other hand, if it is used.
- 3.) There is no long-term agreement with the CFTA over the use of the Gallery: one has to compete with bureaucracy and an attitude that can only be termed aesthetic philistinism.
- 4.) There has been a much longer waiting period than anticipated for the completion of the Garage.

## Observations:

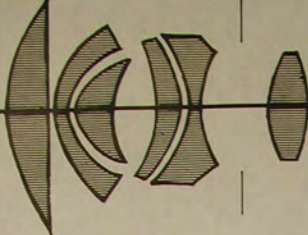
In terms of consolidating an audience for the screenings, we have had only limited success. There is a small hard-core audience and a periphery that turn up for specialist interests. For example, a politically oriented audience that will turn up for 'Juvenile Liaison' and 'Cinetracts from May '68' but not for anything else. As mentioned above, with shows once only every two weeks and an eclectic audience, continuity is difficult to maintain. The average audience is around 20-25. This fluctuates dramatically.

Chris Welby's show was an exception to the extent that we could not use any of the venues mentioned above at all, owing to the ubiquitous presence of Pip Simmons theatre group.

To a large extent, the inconsistency of the audiences can be explained by a consideration of the problems with venue. But at the same time one can escape too easily from a lot of the problems raised with our screenings by finding what could be called a scapegoat. I have mentioned the eclectic nature of the programme. We have also had only partial success with tying together exhibition/production. This aspect is related to the context of working at the Lab, and the present state of the workshop. On the one hand, the film workshop is not properly established at the Lab (itself another spatial problem); on the other hand, it is difficult to escape being construed as merely 'alternative exhibitors' in the Lab context. I shall go into this more fully in the mentioned report.

## Future proposals:

- 1.) It is obvious from the above that a change of venue is not only desirable but well-nigh necessary. This is not just a question of spatial problems, but of context.
- 2.) Changing the programming strategy. A deeper contextualisation on the one hand, and a more concrete tying together of production/exhibition. One proposal is for a filmmaking course to run concurrent with structured programmes (that draw on independent work) on related issues, eg. Sound/Image, and possibly related day schools.



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As the Co-op has no full/part-time staff at all and all work is on a purely voluntary basis, all the above obviously depends to a great extent on person power.

### Note on Chris Welsby's show:

yes  
1/1/68

- On this point, I feel something extra needs to be said.
- 1.) The Co-op has ~~no~~ equipment of its own whatsoever. The filmmaking equipment is actually on loan from the regional arts association. Projectors are borrowed from the Arts Lab, Aston university or individual contacts.
  - 2.) We have rarely had cause for complaint as far as equipment is concerned, from filmmakers, the audience, or ourselves. All equipment is usually checked beforehand, but equally, as all the equipment is borrowed before the shows and depends on availability of Lab projectors, this cannot be guaranteed.
  - 3.) On the occasion of Chris Welsby's show, equipment had to be moved from the Lab to the CFTA. As the room was in constant use before the show, it was not possible to set up before the show started. When the equipment was set up, the projector was found to be dusty. It was duly cleaned before the films were shown.
  - 4.) As you did not go into any further comment on what appears to be an instinctive reaction against autoload projectors, I equally find it difficult to make any comment!  
(The projector in use was the Arts Lab's Bell & Howell autoload.)

\* \* \*

I hope the above notes sufficiently contextualise the screenings and the problems we have been having. I shall be sending a copy of this letter to Chris Welsby. I shall send you a copy of the report on the screenings; I would also like to send copies of this report to all filmmakers who have ever exhibited here.

Best wishes,  
*T. Bloor*  
Tony Bloor.

