

# Communities that film, watch, and walk: On the work of Imperfect Cinema

Henry Mulhall

**Summary** Since 2009 Alistair Gall and Dan Paolantonio have been running an open-access DIY film collective called Imperfect Cinema (IC). The interplay between community-led creative practice and critical film-making provides a generative intersection from which to situate their (imperfect cinema) praxis. Their ongoing project Home of Movies brings to light Plymouth's largely forgotten cinema history by engaging a local community through screenings, history walks, and film-making workshops. Rather than producing objects for aesthetic and critical reflection, IC's main aim is to produce welcoming and creative environments that anyone could enter.

In this piece, which relates to my broader PhD research into the area, I will explore how the aesthetic, practical, and activist streaks that run through the work of IC intersect. The piece will combine verbatim conversations with IC and descriptions of their events. My intention is to emphasise the importance of the DIY and imperfect in IC's practice, which allows them to engage hard-to-reach communities.

**Keywords** cinema, communities, DIY, film, walks

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## Introduction

It must have been around 2010 that I was telling an old friend about a film I'd made just after finishing my BA in fine art. Excitedly, he told me to bring it along to his friend's film night next time I was down in Plymouth. He described the events as a bit hectic and unpredictable, but always worthwhile, if not for the films, then for the atmosphere. Sadly, I never made it to one of these nights. Fast forward to 2018, and I was starting my PhD at Birkbeck in London, where I'm researching the connection between community groups and art spaces in the Union Street area of Plymouth and how informal social interaction links to national level arts policy discourse. I try to use film as a mode of research to investigate how ideas of the local fit with wider social, political, and aesthetic agendas. Early on I came across

Imperfect Cinema, run by Allister Gall and Dan Paolantonio, local film-makers, academics, and community organisers. If only I'd taken my friend's invitation (to what turned out to be an Imperfect Cinema event) a little more seriously, maybe I'd have saved myself some time. I say this because Imperfect Cinema (IC) embody ideas of collective action and community building through art that I certainly didn't understand back in 2010 but have spent the last few years delving into.

If you ask IC about their practice,<sup>1</sup> they're as likely to reference bands like Crass or Napalm Death as they are political and cultural theorists such as Jacques Rancière or Julio García Espinosa (author of the 1969 *For an Imperfect Cinema*, from which they got their name). The overriding impression is that DIY culture, be it punk or political aesthetics, is their major influence. They are clear that they have two interlocking aims in their work: their own aesthetic pursuits as film-makers and their desire to convene spaces where people from any age and background can be creative. They want to activate people's imaginations and shared histories. The two strands of their practice, the creation of space and filmic production, sit together and feed off each other.

To my mind, their success is based on a few factors. Dan and AI use no set structure; their working methods depend on whatever community or group they are collaborating with at a given time. The only hierarchy in IC is the fact that they are 'each other's bullshit detectors', meaning they are alive to one another 'slipping into pretentiousness', by which they mean relying on preconceived ideas of what should be happening or should be created if their output is to be considered serious or of high quality. They also prize experience and forming relationships over output. At times, making films seems to be the least important thing. They told me IC is a 'conversational rather than filmic practice. The films have always been secondary, really – it's just using film as an excuse to enable intercultural and intergenerational dialogue, through creativity'.

The concluding premise I would like to offer regarding IC's practice is their lack of value judgement given to individual pieces of work. While speaking to them a while ago, it struck me that a film or event could be a resounding success (whatever that might mean), but they wouldn't repeat it; it could be a resounding failure (again, whatever that might mean), and they also wouldn't repeat it. Their practice moves away from a metrics based on failure and success towards a responsiveness to specific times, places, and people. They work with minimal frameworks, which allows their approach to be fresh every time; it opens a space for them to look at and listen to the context. This might be daunting to many artistic producers, but I'd suggest that the reason for that is a notion of aesthetic quality attached to an artistic identity or brand. A coherence to artistic identity,

or to an artist or art organisation's output, is often placed at the forefront. I'm not implying that IC somehow lack aesthetic quality or refinement, just that they have not developed a brand image. For this reason, they are able and willing to fail creatively, let imperfection speak, and allow misfires to be celebrated. This is a key theme in their practice that creates the openness and accessibility that is characteristic of their work.

In this article, I will frame elements of IC's practice to draw out how they have become involved with Plymouth's Union Street and its surrounding areas, which include Milbay and Stonehouse. These areas suffer from significant socio-economic difficulty and are historically known as late-night drinking spots, home to a red-light district, and recently as the site of derelict buildings. While I was growing up in Plymouth, I knew nothing of the area's history and only saw it as a rundown neighbourhood full of pubs and clubs. IC and other organisations are working to change the perception of the area. My attention will be directed towards their practice of film nights and cinema history walks, and how these activities build community. IC's various activities and how their community-focused events feed into their own filmic practice have been highly productive for me when thinking about the interaction between top-down planning and bottom-up community organising. Although I do not have space here to carry out a full critical treatment of their filmic output, the connection they make between their own creativity and their fostering of others' creativity questions a prevalent conception of artists as removed problem solvers who all too often swoop into an area that needs *help*. Through a long-term commitment to working in a specific area of Plymouth, IC are helping to reinvigorate public spaces that for some time have been considered unnoteworthy at best or a *problem* at worst. However, they are by no means the only people working in this location to effect change. I would like to highlight Nudge, KARST, WonderZoo, Plymouth Octopus Project, and the Oasis Project as just a few organisations that are using various forms of art and culture to change the wider perspective of what the area is.

### Three-minute film nights

IC have been putting on film nights since 2010. At these events, which have been housed all over Plymouth, anyone can come along and show their work, with the only stipulation being the film cannot not exceed three minutes. At once limiting and freeing, these 'open projector' or 'micro-cinema' nights open a space for the exchange of creative works from a wide range of styles, subjects, and

perspectives. Although IC realise that there are intellectual, academic aspects to these gatherings where knowledge and dialogue are exchanged through film-making, their focus has always been more on holding spaces that are welcoming and creative. As AI explained to me:

The films are in a way secondary because the focus was always on how we can create community or create specific events in which we bring people together into this or that venue. And then from that, you know, exciting things can happen.

Over the years they experimented with restrictions and constraints beyond the three-minute limit, such as nights based on films made with obsolete technology, or films made on smartphones. Three minutes could seem very short or very long depending on a film-maker's style and approach to making. The key aspect of this tactic for me is that content and method are not centre stage – the simple fact of making is the only imperative. Linking back to their punk inspiration, the original tagline of their micro-cinema events was 'The Ramones only needed three minutes to make a punk rock masterpiece, you only need three minutes to make a great movie'. This connection to punk allowed them to problematise certain notions of filmic legitimacy and framed the idea of an invitation based on participation rather than any perceived idea of quality. They are asking that you give it a go because what you produce might be great.

This method removes their events from ideas around artists' films, a broad, amorphous, and often daunting category they are very wary of. In their view, artists' films are 'often about attention to the medium of film itself, often quite intellectual, and rarely have a discernible narrative [...] the main marker is that they're shown in galleries or big institutions'. Although they accept that some of their own filmic output could be considered artists' film, their events aim to avoid the alienating effect of institutions. They recall that at 'micro-cinema events people often made fun of artists' films with formats like slapstick comedies, but sometimes people did make artists' film [...] The important thing is the lack of aesthetic hierarchy'. Their openness to people and styles means that they screened first-time film-makers next to those with significant production budgets. The invitation is to make and watch films, not to be an artist.

The three-minute structure also has a mediating effect on the events. If you don't like what you're watching, three minutes isn't so long that you can't sit through it. Rather than structuring an event around an aspect of identity or matter of local concern, the event is planned around the sharing of three-minute videos,

regardless of what they're about. It does not matter what you want to say, just that you're willing to show up and share, watch, and listen. You do not have to be showing a film to enter the space – anyone can attend. The intention has always been to provoke other people to make more films, and to allow IC's and others' film practice to continually evolve – to form a community of makers and viewers. Some films have been odd drunken moments on petrol station forecourts; others have gone on to be shown at Tribeca Film Festival. IC themselves have had films shown around the globe, but this form of recognition and success is not what characterises the practice.

When thinking about these events, the total openness to content raised a few ethical concerns around safeguarding. I asked what would happen if someone wanted to show something offensive, and they explained, 'we have had a few tense moments, but nothing hardcore. I suppose it's live art, so we embraced that risk. This is what makes it lively'. At the start of the night, they explain the ethos of the event, and although they've never had to, they would stop a film if it was offensive or upsetting to attendees. The only confrontation IC could recall came about during the Queen's Jubilee in 2012 when Dan read out an antimonarchist spoken word piece. He explained that, from a political aesthetics perspective, the monarchy couldn't be further from the values that IC believe in. This went down quite badly with a right-wing attendee, who shouted, heckled, and became very animated and confrontational. But the nights are political in that they form a space for exchange – events where the fact of publicly offering a perspective is considered political, regardless of its content. The events draw a broad range of people (particularly in age) together around a shared practical and aesthetic interest – making and watching film. In a sense they are community forming, or even world building, but that does not mean everyone agrees. There is political possibility in not having complete control over our and others' actions and how those actions are interpreted. This lack of control is partly what makes public space political.<sup>2</sup>

## **Union Street – Plymouth's Home of Movies**

Since 2018 IC have adapted the open projector nights in the Union Street area with their project Home of Movies (the motivation behind this name is discussed later). The events they hold under this umbrella have allowed them to open up new possibilities within the three-minute framework, including workshops and screenings at local coffee shops where film is combined with food and drink.

When preparing this article, I spoke to Slain McGough, a Stonehouse resident and one of the directors of WonderZoo, a local art collective focused on spoken word and performance events. We spoke about a film night IC organised at the Old Morgue, a venue just off Union Street. Students and other local film-makers were showing films that reflected on past and present representations of the area, offering a context where residence of Stonehouse exchange their views with people from all over. Slain said he appreciates that the event did not shy away from some of the problematic associations with Union Street. He explained:

Rather than denying the negative aspects of the area, they ask what the area can become. An honest approach to this needs to accept the evident social issues in Union Street. IC and other groups who work in the area embrace the problems so that we can move forward.

He went on to explain that Union Street's undesirable reputation isn't negated by these events but folded into them. Characteristically, IC (and WonderZoo) foster a setting of acceptance based on the equal possibility of success and failure, but where aesthetic judgements are still encouraged. They do not intend to offer a slick model of cultural production for people to watch and receive, but a messy and open process that people can engage with at whatever level they choose.

The specific focus on Union Street, Stonehouse, and Milbay has allowed IC to respond to needs in the area. Along with micro-cinema events, they have organised or collaborated on events where they screen films for residents who are experiencing loneliness or do not have the means to watch films. For example, on Boxing Day 2019 they held a Christmas film event at the Oasis Project, a community café and foodbank, where their aim is not to be avant-garde or punk, but to create an open and welcoming space using film. This openness comes before the wider project of offering the opportunity for people to make and experiment with their own films, where new producers and voices can be brought in. During the Christmas lunch that the Oasis Project provided, they screened *It's a Wonderful Life* and then had a range of films for the group to choose from (*Gremlins* won the vote). Dan recounts that 'one man told me this was the first film he'd watched out of his own house for a long time. Another told me that it was the first time they'd watch a film with anyone else for years'. Popular cinema was used here as a cipher for creating a space where people could just spend time together. Elderly residents of Stonehouse found these events particularly useful, as they offered a sense of community at a time of year that can be particularly isolating for some.

IC's passion for making films is strong; as AI says, they want to 'announce the conditions of possibilities for people to make films and watch films together'. But their interventions into Stonehouse make clear that they are aware of some premising factors if people are going to attend their events. Such 'conditions' include breaking social barriers put up by loneliness and lack of clear community to join. IC turn film events into a form of political activism, not based on exploring or promoting a specific issue, but in building community and spaces of exchange in an area that has had a certain kind of reputation for some time.

### History walks and movie stars

Since 2018 IC have worked with other local groups to organise cinema history tours. They frame Union Street as a cultural epicentre of cinema history, at one time or another housing 10 cinemas in only a quarter of a mile. The notion of Union Street as Plymouth's Home of Movies came about during the Atlantic Project, a one-off international arts festival hosted by Plymouth in 2018. They were commissioned to make a film for the closing event. This resulted in *Cinaesthesia*, a collaborative film made with other film-makers through a series of workshops and shown in the iconic, yet derelict Millennium building (formerly Gaumont Place Theatre and then the Warehouse nightclub).<sup>3</sup>

The Atlantic Project generally, and the events in Millennium specifically, marked a shift in my conception of what Union Street was and is becoming. From the ages of 15 to 18 I went there most weeks to drink cheap alcohol and dance. This period gave way to most of the clubs on Union Street shutting down, leaving only the negative connotations of an area literally left to crumble. The Atlantic Project, full of exciting international artists, made me think that Union Street could be taking on a new character, becoming a contemporary arts location of national significance. Such a project could easily be a sign of planned gentrification, art-washing an area to raise its status and value. However, through organisations like Nudge, a community action group who have taken over several disused spaces on Union Street and used them for a range of community-focused initiatives, there are some assurances that any gain in value will not only be for developers but for residents as well. For example, Nudge now own the Millennium building and offered a community share scheme so that residence could own a percentage of the development. For IC, the Atlantic Project commission sparked a process that continues to this day: they organise walks, workshops, and screenings that intervene in local narratives, as well as raise consciousness

about a history the area can be proud of. This extends ideas of new art and culture in the area, bolstering Union Street's identity as also having historic and cultural significance.

When they first started working in the area, they knew about a couple of old cinema sites on Union Street, but while chatting in a local café, they decided to continue a line of research into buildings that have at some time been cinemas. Through extensive digging around at Bill Douglas Cinema Museum in Exeter and Plymouth City Archives, they found seven sites that had all been cinemas at the beginning of the 20th century. They held a workshop at Union Corner (a community centre run by Nudge) and shared their research. The resulting films came from many angles, from a student questioning their role in the area as an emerging film-maker to experimental video art made by a local resident that explored the potential threat of waterlogging in nearby Stonehouse Creek. *Cinaesthesia* is essentially a collection of films that resulted from these workshops and opened the door to an extended and ongoing engagement with Stonehouse and Union Street, where IC's Home of Movies walks are altering ideas of place, history, and public space.

During their early phase of research into Union Street, many cinematic facts came to light; for example, it was the primary shoot location and setting of the 1982 naval drama *Remembrance*, Gary Oldman's first film. Also, the Palace Theatre (later known as the Dance Academy nightclub) was the site where Laurel and Hardy gave their last ever live performance as a double act. These Hollywood findings have spawned several one-off events; for example, they discovered that before Gaumont Palace, on the site of the Millennium building stood on the site of another cinema, Andrews' Picture Palace, which had been the venue for the premiere of Charlie Chaplin's 1918 film *Shoulder Arms* (extracts of which are featured in *Cinaesthesia*). As the hundred-year anniversary was close, they organised an event where they screened *Shoulder Arms* at the Millennium building, with a new score composed by local musicians Westford Needles. Through combining a silver screen megastar and local musicians, the event shifted a notion of what is possible and has been possible in a disused building.

The notion of Union Street as a nationally significant site of cinema history prompted them to start cinema history walks. Dan explained that with the walks they are asking people to look closer, to try to see beyond a disused, dilapidated shop and 'encouraging people to value things on their own terms, rather than terms dictated by financial or social mobility opportunities'. These walks are free, and they also point out that the Lidl is not only a cheap supermarket but used to be the site of an old cinema – a significant identity shift for a single location. By



underscoring a largely unknown historical narrative, they shift the often negative associations of the area. For me, this transformed from memories of cheap drinks and military men fighting to an area that encompasses some of the most exciting heritage sites in Plymouth.

To get a better sense of the area, Dan and AI started joining Walks with History, a group that organises walks and forms community around sharing local history around Union Street. IC realised that to try to make their emerging historic research practice relevant, they would need to connect with existing community-focused practitioners such as Walks with History. They learned a great deal from them and found a community that were interested in their Home of Movies project. When they were able to start their own cinema-themed walks, they had two groups (film and history enthusiasts) to share their practice with. On Home of Movie walks, a community comes together, united by a shared interest in the area and cinema history. IC are particularly happy with the age range of the participants on their walks, ranging from teenagers to pensioners. The events become a space for cross-generational exchange for Stonehouse residents and others from around the city (and beyond).<sup>4</sup> The walk becomes a bank of knowledge, not only on the local surroundings but also on current subjects of concern. IC told me that through these walks they want to 'ossify this notion that Union Street is Plymouth's Home of Movies, and also to make the street a kind of living gallery that eradicates the need for those dreaded white cube type spaces'. They want to promote the idea that culture is in the fabric of the area. It is not only *about* the place but *in it*.

Recently, IC started working with Nudge on the idea of a Hollywood Walk of Fame. This project aims to spotlight each cinema location or site of specific cinematic interest on Union Street with stars inlaid into the pavement, much like the stars on Hollywood Boulevard. Each star will have a QR code so that anyone with a smartphone can access archival materials such as still and moving images. The code might also take a passer-by to works produced in response to that site by members of the IC community. They hope that this initiative has the potential to tangibly bring the rich history of the area to life. (They will also continue to organise free tours where the material can be shared without the need for a smartphone.) This project furthers their aim of making culture a totally open and accessible feature of life, not something that is housed in 'dreaded white cubes'.

At first glance, the Hollywood movie industry and community-engaged film practice seem entirely antithetical. IC have described this in terms of cinema *for* the people versus cinema *of* the people – top-down rather than bottom-up

cultural production. But they are using the glitz of Hollywood history to change ideas of Union Street. Dan said that 'the silver screen, the glitz and the glamour and all, that's a big part of it because, you know, maybe Union Street could do with a little bit of that'. These actions reclaim the space from its past conception as debaucherous nightlife hub, or more recently as a collection of derelict and disused buildings, to something of international significance. The walks and the stars on the street ask that the area becomes an open public space for cultural exchange, one that can be occupied by anyone, most of all its surrounding residents.

## Conclusion

At the opposite end of Plymouth City Centre to Union Street sits The Box, a new multimillion-pound museum, Plymouth University's Art Institute, and Plymouth College of Art's MIRROR gallery. This section of the city has been dubbed Plymouth's Cultural Quarter. The director of KARST, Donna Howard, told me recently that if that's the Cultural Quarter, then Union Street and Milbay is the Independent Cultural Quarter. I mentioned this to IC, to which Dan added: 'If we can think of that area [The Box, etc.] as a Cultural Quarter, it's one that's for the people, whereas a Stonehouse Culture Quarter is of the people, there's a big difference, it's speaking for itself, it's not instructive'. The ethos replaces a mode of cultural engagement based on giving art to those without to one where groups create culture together – from a 'them' to an 'us'.

Another telling formulation of these ideas came from WonderZoo's Slain. While describing to me the anarchist politics that sit at the root of his and IC's creative practice, he said:

there's no way I would stand onstage and give a lecture about any of this because I would be bored if I was in the audience. But I'll stand onstage and make you laugh and somewhere in there, there might be a political message.

IC are not interested in passing down an aesthetic or even a political message; they would rather just hear what people have to say and show because they think this will allow others to do the same. The embrace of an open-ended, sometimes chaotic structure that is about getting people together to show films manages to weave together the negative aspects of Union Street with 'the rich tapestry of

culture that is the area' (Slain's words). The walks and screenings are organised in a way that means there are no guarantees anyone will see what they want, but if you don't see anything you like, you could always try again next time. The approach is open to viewers as well as makers.

IC engage with a notion of community on many levels. From groups that share a neighbourhood to those that share interests and passions, they structure their events in a way that these groups can mix because there is no divide or hierarchy between those that are seen as the creative artists and those that are passive viewers or subject – for IC, there are no passive subjects. For this reason, simply attending an IC event could be a world-building act – to show oneself in public and offer the possibility of dialogic exchange is community forming, and useful for a Union Street neighbourhood that has long had a sense of shame about its character and history.

## Notes

- 1 Throughout the article I will cite the words of IC that have been gathered through several conversations.
- 2 Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- 3 Allister Gall, *Cinaesthesia*, Vimeo, 7 January 2019, [www.vimeo.com/309870979](http://www.vimeo.com/309870979).
- 4 As David Runciman describes, age has become the most significant political divide in the UK. David Runciman, 'Votes for children! Why we should lower the voting ages to six', *The Guardian*, 16 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/nov/16/reconstruction-after-covid-votes-for-children-age-six-david-runciman>.

## About the contributor

Henry Mulhall is a part-time, practice-based PhD student at Birkbeck College, University of London. His research looks at how constellations of practice form between art organisations and community groups in the Union Street area of Plymouth, UK.

He works as a co-evaluator on The Line and is co-lead for Cards on The Table. Since 2019 he has collaborated with Sophie Hope on the independent evaluation of BE PART a European network of organisations collaborating to better understand how to further participation in arts and culture.