

# **MOVING STUDIES**

on a Film Society



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*“To cater for those who are dissatisfied with the average productions of the commercial cinema, with their shallowness and divorce from reality, and to offer in their stead films more closely in sympathy with the life and thought of this age.”*

– **Founding principle of the Salford Workers’ Film Society, 1930**

*“While generally speaking, production has always generated more research than distribution and exhibition, circulation has largely been left on the margins.”*

– **Malte Hagener, film historian**

## HISTORIES OF A FILM SOCIETY

A film society may be a vehicle through which people come together to watch films. It may also be an extremely specific set of actions and modes of organisation in which people mobilise towards a common goal. The term ‘film society’ operates fairly loosely, the ‘Film Society’ however, is something a little more specific.

The histories of the first European Film Societies play out in tandem, through accident and cross-pollination on local, regional, national and international levels. They are central to the history of avant-garde cinema, and apparently, if we take Malte Hagener at his word, almost entirely from the literature around film study. As a result, tracing these concentric histories involves a lot of zooming in, zooming out, taking unexpected sideways steps. So, with that in mind, how do we begin to get a sense of what any one of these units was doing?

When Hagener attempted to define them in essence, he reached to the image of the “social organism”, one that “provide[s] a framework for viewing and discussing films, for developing theories and for distributing and making films”.<sup>1</sup> The living, amorphous thing is a good place to begin. In the 1920s and 1930s, when the first networks were moving through Europe, the screening of films was an action inextricably linked to progressive leftists politics. Members were, through participating in these societies, expected to “understand their subjective position in modern society, and the coming emancipation”<sup>2</sup> according to press reviews at the time. To attend screenings of the sort of films the Film Societies were screening was to stand for a type of socialist politics, and often to pose a threat to the political establishment.

In 1930, the foundation of any one British film society was completely bound up in wider national and international contexts of proletarian cinema and anti-capitalist resistance. There was a felt desire “for a mechanism to produce, distribute, and exhibit leftist films and to counter the Hollywood-dominated cinema of capitalism”.<sup>3</sup> FILMLIGAS (Netherlands) CINÉ-CLUBS (France), VOLKSFILMVERBAND FÜR FILMKUNST (Germany) and their equivalents in Belgium and Switzerland answered the call, devising their own modes of operation, setting up their own constitutions and devising their own approaches to programming. Revolutionary films produced in 1920s in Soviet Russia were, though considerable effort by their individual European counterparts, reaching a global, politically engaged audience.

When director Ivor Montagu founded the first in Britain, the London Film Society, in 1925 after a fact-finding trip to Paris and later Berlin, he charged a higher rate of subscription for wealthy founder members, and a “modest charge” for “ordinary members”.<sup>4</sup> His template

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<sup>1</sup> Hagener, M. (2007) ‘Strategic Convergence and Functional Difference - The Film Societies and Cine-Clubs of the 1920s and 30s’, in (ed.) *Moving Forward, Looking Back*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Press clipping from *The Daily Herald*, 8th October 1930, MSFS Archive.

<sup>3</sup> Kopley, V. Jr. (1983) ‘The Workers’ International Relief and the Cinema of the Left 1921-1935’, *Cinema Journal*, 23(1), pp. 7 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1225069> (Accessed: 12th March 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Cordwell, R (1990) ‘Early Days’ *Manchester and Salford Film Society Diamond Jubilee* pamphlet produced by the committee on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the Society.

would come to spawn chapters all over the country, in London, Bradford, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Cardiff, Liverpool and Manchester & Salford. Of these, it is Manchester & Salford which remains the longest established.

Once the societies managed to get their hands on foreign film, the restless circulation did not stop. Manchester & Salford committee members recall driving up to the moors and Peaks to cross county lines and swap film reels with the Yorkshire societies. It's hard to resist romanticising this image, when the mechanics of operation are so exposed, so human, so clunky. But it's also interesting to think of this in terms of labour, circulation, activism.

Another romantic image: The Salford Workers Film Society, which was to become the Manchester and Salford Film Society was founded off the back of a street corner talk outside The Salford Palace Cinema following a Trades Council meeting on 23rd February, 1930 and their inaugural screening at the The Prince's Cinema featured Soviet documentary TURKSIB (1930) and THE FIRST TIME IN HISTORY (1929). A copy of their founding constitution features the following under the heading 'Object':

- (a) *The presentation to members of Educational, Technical and Artistic Films on Socially Progressive, Evolutionary and Scientific subjects.*
- (b) *(b) To encourage the exhibition and production of films of value to the Working Class.*
- (c) *To co-operate with similar Societies in Britain, or abroad to further the above objects.*

It's not hard to get a sense of what was meant by "of value to the Working Class". In those early days, the Salford Workers Film Society's main aim was to obtain and screen "early Soviet masterpieces"<sup>5</sup> alongside hard-nosed educational documentaries about, say, the shipping industry of the Thames. It was a year later, in 1931 that ties with neighbouring Manchester were catalysed by a censorship furore. The Salford Watch Committee — the local authority responsible for deciding which films were and were not acceptable for broadcast and viewing — deemed Pudovkin's STORM OVER ASIA (1928) to be unsuitable for viewing. Another foundational incident of exchange occurred; The Manchester Watch Committee had no such qualms about the Soviet revolutionary epic, and a marriage of convenience was formed, with the screening taking place at THE MANCHESTER FUTURIST CINEMA, now demolished but once located by Strangeways Prison. The papers at the time picked up on the drama, reporting on the controversy as "Storm over Salford". A moment which is repeatedly flagged up in the archive, and about which the committee remains immensely proud.

Censors were not so lenient when it came to THE NEW BABYLON (1929) and THE BLUE EXPRESS (1929), exposing a widely-felt double-standard in screening regulation; "When

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

workers' clubs wanted to screen Soviet revolutionary cinema, they were prohibited from doing so, however, the Film Society got permission as the censorship board considered the audience less dangerous and less inclined to be overwhelmed by revolutionary messages".<sup>6</sup> The MSFS precariously straddled both the worlds, providing an innovative solution to the pervasively classist assumption of the time that only certain audiences were to be trusted with certain messages.

It's no surprise then that the Society struggled to find a permanent home in those early years. Many formal decisions were forged as a response to restrictions and penalties. They were temporarily prohibited from hiring 35mm theatres, and so moved sideways focusing on 16mm screenings and lectures. Between 1930 and 1933 they were located in eight different locations over Greater Manchester and Salford. Some of them, the long-demolished Manchester Futurist Cinema for instance, serve as reminders of just how localised and specialised the cinema landscape was at the time. Others, like the Grade II listed Midland Hotel, how unapologetic their ambitions. Today the venue count is closer to thirty.

The constitution was re-written in 1938, under financial pressure to reorganise and attract a wider membership:

- (a) *The presentation to members of artistic, cultural and scientific films of a progressive character.*
- (b) *To encourage exhibition and production of such films.*
- (c) *To co-operate with other societies in the objects and arrange lectures and discussions on the art and value of films.*
- (d) *To conduct the Society on a non-profit making basis.*

The changes are notable. In revising much of the top-down pedagogy of the first set of statements, the Society opened itself up, and making a handful of concessions to the "indifference or intolerance"<sup>7</sup> of the censors, but allowing their carefully chosen screening to continue pretty much untroubled. Clause *c* came to be pivotal too, with regards to their involvement with and support of the Co-operative Movement, out of which a body of film works were produced and screened in unofficial collaboration.

A combination of avant-garde and more commercially minded films, screened back-to-back or over consecutive weeks was a radical approach to programming at the time, something which Hagener describes as having the ultimate goal of "a transformation of cinema as institution, art form, industry and *dispositif*". For the first time, a cinematic audience was

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<sup>6</sup> Hagener, M. (2007) 'Strategic Convergence and Functional Difference - The Film Societies and Cine-Clubs of the 1920s and 30s', in (ed.) *Moving Forward, Looking Back*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> Cordwell, R (1990) 'Early Days' Manchester and Salford Film Society Diamond Jubilee.

being acknowledged, whose collective tastes, interests and curiosities were being sensitively mapped and manipulated by these politically-minded clubs and societies. A “utopian”<sup>8</sup> set of ideals, described as “centrifugal”<sup>9</sup>, rather than introspective, or focussed on individual characters and plots.

Despite this outward momentum, much of the literature the MSFS produced about itself, by its nature, looks inward. Recollections about Fellini and Buñuel screening weekends in seaside hotels in Lytham St Annes and visits from notable film critics, testimonials to long-demolished cinemas and much-missed friends, notices about general housekeeping. A collection of writings and essays produced by the committee to celebrate their 60 years in 1990 is made up of such nostalgic reflections. Any suggestion of a historical mission or influence is oddly down-played. At the end of his 1990 essay, then-president Reg Cordwell, somewhat reluctantly, cites some of the Society’s achievements as laying “the foundations of support for continental cinema” in the city, as well as the establishment of various regional and national film boards.

For all their tea-urn-filling and seaside excursions, it’s societies like the MSFS which began to build an archive of the avant-garde. As Hagerer says, “a fairly small group of mobile and ambitious activists, practitioners and theoreticians first made history and later wrote it down”. Apart from, with the MSFS, they often didn’t do the latter. It’s no coincidence then, that a cross-section of the MSFS’s most remembered screenings from those early years — whether for censorship controversy or otherwise — now read like a potted history of the influential and the avant-garde; *THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI* (1920), *NOSFERATU* (1922) *BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN* (1925), *THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS* (1942), *HENRY V* (1944), *LES ENFANTS DU PARADIS* (1945), *L’IDIOT* (1946). The list goes on.

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<sup>8</sup> Hagerer, M. (2006) ‘Programming Attractions: Avant-Garde Exhibition Practice in the 1920s and 1930s’, in Strauven, W. (ed.) *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 269

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 272.

## EWAN MACCOLL: AS SEEN FROM THE STREET

The street; it is the location, byword and litmus test of the everyday. Of ‘authenticity’. But it’s also a place where all things could happen, if only in our imagination. *The man on the street*, I was literally just walking down the street. It’s where transgression occurs, things we’d perhaps rather not think about, where class divisions become most visible. It exposes our prejudices; *what would the neighbours think?* If you’re privileged enough, you barely have to participate in street-life if you’d rather not. For the most vulnerable in society, the street is home.

For Ewan MacColl, folk musician, playwright and writer, his story is one of insides and outsides, pushes and pulls, distance and intimacy. Overwhelmingly though, it is a story of the street.

Born into extreme poverty in Salford in 1915, he’d go on to play a role in mobile theatre, workers strikes, marches, mass trespasses in the fight to win Rambler’s Rights. When he wrote about the influence of cinema on his life, he used that now well-trod cliché of pedestrian travel; “the great epics of Pudovkin, Eisenstein and Dovzhenko” were to “start me on the road I was to travel for the next twenty years.”<sup>10</sup> He recorded his reflections in his autobiography. He called his biography ‘Journeyman’.

He spells it out quite literally. On his early childhood, he writes: “the real centre of the world now was the street”. The street and the community were one and the same; “other streets in the neighbourhood were referred to by their names and, indeed, street names were often used to identify a particular person, as in ‘the woman who lives in Mulgrave street’... If there was more than one family with the same name, then the street name would be used in conjunction with it, as in ‘the Miller Street Joneses’ or ‘the Raglan Street Andersons’.”<sup>11</sup>

In 1930, MacColl was already deeply embedded in local activism, though he probably wouldn’t have thought of it as such. It was completely natural to him that at the age of fifteen he would be a founding member of what was then called the Salford Workers’ Film Society. “It was, I believe, on the Labour Party’s prescribed list of (communist) organisations and every Sunday, in a small flea-pit on Oldfield Road, it presented the cream of the world’s best films.” A combination of boredom, curiosity and a lack of much else to do that sent him in that direction.<sup>12</sup>

In those early days, in that small flea-pit and many other flea-pits of different sizes, MacColl saw *STORM OVER ASIA* (1928), *THE NEW BABYLON* (1929), *METROPOLIS* (1927), *EARTH* (1930), *KAMERADSCHAFT* (1931), *MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA* (1929), *THE GHOST THAT NEVER RETURNS* (1930), *BED AND SOFA* (1927), and made a point of writing them down in his autobiography. For MacColl, an “ill-educated adolescent”,

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<sup>10</sup> MacColl, E. (2009) ‘Journeyman’ Manchester: Manchester University press p. 314.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

these experiences were somewhat therapeutic in the face of “the bleak prospect of trying to earn a living in the arid desert of 1930”.<sup>13</sup>

As the “main conduit in the area for ‘alternative’ films”,<sup>14</sup> the MSFS had close ties with the Co-operative Wholesale Society, who at the time operated “an ‘alternative’ co-operative cinema, alongside the other workers’ cinemas of the inter-war period, was directly perceived as a challenge to the cultural and commercial hegemony”. *MEN OF ROCHDALE* (1944) was one such project. Created with a then-indulgent budget of £15,000, the film commemorated the foundation of the co-operative movement. It’s a strange film, part-socialist propaganda, part-romantic drama, part advert to join your local Co-op. Not as strange as some of their other cinematic output though. *CO-OPERETTE* (1938) all-singing, all-dancing musical number, which in one sequence features a woman dressed as an onion, and one as a tin of carrots, performing a dance whilst singing catchy co-op sanctioned jingles. Other short films produced were about soap, margarine, detergent, tea and corsets.

It wasn’t just the Co-op that was responsible for socialist-minded films coming out of the region. Director Paul Rotha created *A CITY SPEAKS* (1947) on behalf of the Manchester Corporation. Essentially a propaganda film. He cited Freidrich Engels in order to promote migration away from the city centre, a “cess-pit of human misery” into the newly built suburbs to allow for the “bringing in [of] light and space” with such luxurious innovations as “plenty of space for children to play”, with “each house designed by an architect” and the factories “set apart from the houses”. The aim for city renovation was the separation of spaces for work and labour, the creation of suburbs, the re-formatting of the street from a community in itself as a location of loosely connected individual spaces for individual family units.

The film makes a convincing case, but the power cinema had to influence otherwise detached or disenfranchised audiences was rewarded with some caution. Back out on the streets of Ewan MacColl’s impoverished adolescence and young adulthood, mobile film units were deployed to reach remote and impoverished communities in the north west. These mobile cinema units were “free of charge to co-operative and progressive organisations”.<sup>15</sup> Such were the communist implications of these facilities by which cinema might be taken directly into the heart of working class communities, they became known as the ‘free show menace’, and later the ‘16mm menace’.<sup>16</sup>

For MacColl, the potential to gather and mobilise outdoors was both the cause and effect of art production. A two-way street, so to speak. If that art was happening behind closed doors, he was frustrated. Reflecting on his time running Theatre of Action, a group associated with the Workers’ Theatre Movement, he expressed this frustration in no uncertain terms.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Information provided by Robert Taylor, Historian + Committee Member, MSFS.

<sup>15</sup> Burton, A. (1994) *The People’s Cinema: Film and the Co-operative Movement*, 1st edn., London: British Film Institute, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

“Another thing I found very disturbing was the feeling that momentous events were taking place outside in the streets and that we were missing them”.<sup>17</sup>

When the Theatre of Action — essentially an amateur production company creating and performing sketches about life working in factories — finally moved into fixed premises, they were said to have “gone inside”, like a child lamenting the fact that playtime is over. And if the fact that they saw it as the death of something needed stating any more clearly, they called it “curtain theatre”.<sup>18</sup>

Despite their lack of theatrical training, or even any theatrical exposure with which to orient themselves, the Theatre of Action saw themselves situated within a network of other Workers’ Theatre Movements. They took to the road, hitchhiking to London to see how their counterparts were doing things. Despite being underwhelmed by their visit (“it seemed to us they were no better than we were, and in some ways actually worse”)<sup>19</sup>, it was successful in defining for them some early artistic principles. It wasn’t just about realism, but about a sense of communion between audience and performance. That they were on the same side.

For MacColl, figuring out how to ‘do’ theatre was a process of learning upon learning. Feeling their way through a type of theoretical darkness, they “weren’t merely exploring the theories, we were having to learn the words that described the theories.”<sup>20</sup> The “false diction, those false gestures and those false attitudes” identified as ‘rubber-stamp acting’ by Stanislavsky<sup>21</sup> didn’t just seem wrong, they seemed almost offensive. And the same went for the writing; “If they feel for one moment it is written from outside they will suspect its validity” MacColl said of his audiences. Being outside on the street often meant being within.<sup>22</sup>

It’s hard not to think about what this came to mean for MacColl in terms of folk music tradition. With his wife Peggy Seeger, MacColl would go on to found the Ballads and Blues Club in Soho, London — a place which pulled people in and cultivated its own ecosystem of exchange. Another place in which the audience were the performers, and medium was as important as message, or rather, “according to their musical value, and according to their class consciousness.”<sup>23</sup> The ideology of folk was one of mutualism that it’s stars “weren’t being imposed from above, but had sprung up from our own ranks”.<sup>24</sup>

Again, it’s that sense of being no different from a ‘man on the street’ (or in this case, a man in the audience), to being one of the crowd, observing, reflecting, circulating. MacColl’s own folk-singing career would come to be defined most notably with songs about place, rights,

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<sup>17</sup> MacColl, E. (2009) ‘Journeyman’ Manchester: Manchester University press p. 207.

<sup>18</sup> MacColl, E. (1985) ‘Theatre of action, Manchester’, in Samuel, R. (ed.) *Theatre of The Left, 19880-1935*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 242.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 246

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 244.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 254.

<sup>23</sup> Frith, S. (1981) ‘The Magic That Can Set You Free’: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community’, *Popular Music*, 1, p. 163.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 159.

and the types of exchange which happen on street corners and on country paths. In one of his most recognisable songs, 'Manchester Rambler', that unspecific pursuit of 'just getting out there' creating a sense of freedom akin to economic freedom:

*"I'm a Rambler, I'm a Rambler from Manchester way*

*I get all me pleasure the hard moorland way*

*I may be a wageslave on Monday*

*But I am a free man on Sunday"*

Much of the language of the history of activism is the language of spatial transgression; trespass, exile, movement, march. To get out into the great outdoors, or to disappear in a crowd on the street is to deliberately lose oneself. It is to be embedded within something and to simultaneously vanish within it. Just as MacColl wrote about his artistic aspirations; "My ideal was the anonymous author, the anonymous song-writer, and you only achieve anonymity by becoming part of the whole".<sup>25</sup> A desire to me no more notable than the man on the street. Given that, perhaps we leave his work to do the walking.

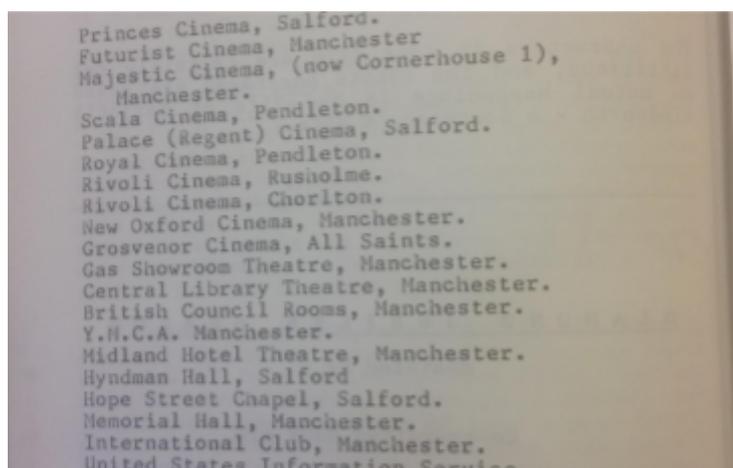
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<sup>25</sup> MacColl, E. (1985) 'Theatre of action, Manchester', in Samuel, R. (ed.) Theatre of The Left, 19880-1935. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 254.

## IMPOSSIBLE COASTLINES AND NOMADIC THINKING

Nomadism is often a response to the inhospitable. Nomadism is seeing the pathways not obstacles, windows not doors. It is rarely self-conscious or sentimental. For the Manchester and Salford Film Society, their nomadism manifested itself through a series of actions and counteractions, agile shifts and sideways steps in order to dodge the censors of local organisations set up to monitor, silence and make invisible, in the name of public good.

*Exhibit A: An attempt to document all the venues occupied by the Manchester and Salford Film Society, as of 1990.*



This information might be better imagined as a would-be map of hyper-local resistance. Rosi Braidotti identifies nomadism as types of interconnectedness where capitalism would profit from us seeing us see discrete categories. “We can delink citizenship from ethnicity and connect it to participation, belonging”. It is a set of actions: “Nomadic is a verb”.<sup>26</sup>

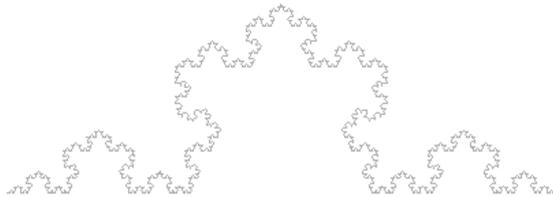
To embody a wandering impulse is to exist firmly in the present, which is why it is not easily mapped onto study of the archive, where dislocation only makes itself seen in the mundanities of self-organisation. Not a highly politicised thing, rather a slightly boring condition of existence.

For Braidotti, it is the low-fi nature of writing that makes it the ultimate nomadic practice. She cites Virginia Woolf when she says “writing is a mode of inscription into life, it’s a way of formatting the intensity of life, furthermore it’s the most democratic way of formatting the

<sup>26</sup> Saleri, S. and Braidotti, R. (2010) On nomadism: A conversation with Rosi Braidotti, Available at: <http://politicalcritique.org/world/2018/nomadism-braidotti/> (Accessed: 19th March 2019).

intensity of life, you do not need a symphony orchestra”.<sup>27</sup> In the early 20th century, film screening was not democratic in the same way. Their formatting of the intensity of life came only in 16mm or 35mm film reels and required an auditorium to share it. It required heavy lifting.

*Exhibit B: An image of a fractal — the closer you get, the more infinite it seems:*



On the topic of inscription into life, we may wish to trace the contour lines that make up a network of networks. Like the phenomena of the fractal, the closer you get to the thing itself, the greater precision with which you try to measure it, the more frayed the edges seem. Each more precise measuring tool finds itself rendered blunt and useless when measuring the grainy textures of an infinite thing. This is often referred to as the coastline paradox, named for the fact that any given coastline of any given island is ultimately infinite if you measured the ins and outs of each outer edge with enough precision.

We can't talk about edges without asking who is drawing the margins and allocating permissions to live there. For so many, nomadism isn't a creative thought experiment, it is a way of life steeped in historical practices, and for that reason shouldn't be trivialised. However, as Rebecca Solnit illustrates in 'A Field Guide To Getting Lost', wandering is a very different thing to being lost. It is a deliberate misplacement of the self. In following a desire line between belonging and resistance, the landscape becomes disrupted, notched, ever more textured.

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<sup>27</sup> Braidotti, R. 'Thinking as a nomadic subject'. This lecture was given at ICI Berlin on 7 October 2014 as part of the lecture series *ERRANS*.

## I AM SAT IN A HOUSE THAT IS AN ARCHIVE

The Working Class Movement Library is the only library I've ever been to that comes with complimentary marmalade.

Not just marmalade, but a whole station of toast ephemera; jam, bread, butter, a selection of herbal teas clustered together on a table in what is signposted as a staff room, but — if the behaviour of the regular library-goers is anything to go by — is treated as a common room. You can go and eat your sandwiches in there. Someone, staff or otherwise, will make you a brew most likely served in one of a number of accumulated trade union mugs.

Built as Jubilee House to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, the imposing red-brick building in Salford, which is crucially not in but adjacent to Manchester, reads like a house. You have to ring a doorbell to get in, there's a small porch, downstairs loo, a single staircase in the hallway.

At times it feels a little more like a library, but not much, more like a dentist's or Victorian school building; all textured beige wallpaper, cast iron radiators and filing cabinets. The carpet tiles are Staff Room Green. To access the archive there's a complicated access catalogue online — ring (a different) doorbell to summon archivist from the attic — fill in box request on slip of paper system I didn't have the opportunity to fully master. It's defiantly low-fi. There's a video recording I want to watch, but they can't get the TV working.

It's a space which feels intuitive, but also a little out of time. It's materiality, tangents and interjections of the everyday are steeped in non-specific nostalgia. Delving into the archive is rifling around the rooms of an old creaky house.

Writing on the archive, Derrida said: "It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently marks this institutional passage from the private to the public".<sup>28</sup> It is a type of threshold, imperfect in the way homemade things often are.



It feels good to be sat amongst the cabinets and fireplaces of the Working Class Movement Library, routing through the archive boxes, because it's one of the few research leads I've followed which hasn't proven to be a completely ludicrous, tragi-comic dead end. For one — the kernel of potential that led me down this research path in the first place ended up being a complete dead end. A Workers' Film Association Bookshop, long bulldozed and turned into luxury flats, on a street with which I share my name in Old Trafford, turned out to be a total red herring. My other potential beacon of enlightenment, an Illinois-based film theorist

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<sup>28</sup> Derrida, J (1995) 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics*, 25(2), p. 10.

called Tony Williams, who attended many of the MSFS's screenings in the 80s also proved to be an informational dead-end, though an entertaining one nonetheless.

In the name of research, I also end up at one of the Society's screenings, which is imposed with a warm but firm sense of ritual. It's a very different thing to what I've read about in the archive and records, operating as a social club for retirees in a predominantly middle class area, with the unspoken codes of conduct you might expect. They invite in, but there are boundaries. In the bar of the Altrincham Little Theatre, which has the same beige-and-mahogany glow as the library. It's the sort of place where everyone has their own seats, and newcomers are regarded with curiosity.

As the end of the Society's 88th season approaches, and the membership are about to ballot for the next season. Robert — the Society's self-appointed historian — shows me the ballot sheet. It features a couple of local low-budget films like *APOSTASY* (2018), *BEING FRANK: THE CHRIS SIEVEY STORY* (2019) as well as recent Oscar-winner *THE FAVOURITE* (2019). I wonder if this document will read as prescient programming in 50 years' time, or whether this is just a self-fulfilling prophecy; the nostalgia of archives and the nostalgia of film, in an infinite feedback loop.

Tonight's screening is *FILM STARS DON'T DIE IN LIVERPOOL* (2018), the biopic of Gloria Graeme's later-life affair with a young working class Liverpoolian actor. It's also the day after International Women's Day, so Carole Moores the Society's President gives a preamble nodding to Graeme's feminist credentials and idiosyncrasies, her passing up of roles because she refused to sit alone in the back of a limo with studio boss Howard Hughes, and her subsequent alienation from Hollywood. I am embarrassed by how surprised I am that this group of predominantly middle-class pensioners are so engaged in feminist discussion, though when I ask around later, no one committee member feels particularly connected to "those early left wing days".



In a lecture, philosopher Rosi Braidotti noted: "Universities do not allow PhDs to be written about living authors — being dead is a prerequisite of being written about".<sup>29</sup> For a continuous, living thing like the MSFS to have engaged with and shaped so many touch points in film history is extraordinary to think about. It's like when you see black and white a photo of a living relative encountering someone or something you'd always thought of as capital-h Historical, mentally designated as something from The Past.

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<sup>29</sup> Braidotti, R. *Thinking as a nomadic subject*. This lecture was given at ICI Berlin on 7 October 2014 as part of the lecture series *ERRANS*.

I speak to Marjorie Ainsworth, the Society's 97 year old part-Vice President, part-talisman. She and her late husband "pretty much ran the Society single handedly for decades" one committee member tells me. She's been a member for eighty years but "the early days" — when Ewan MacColl was a teenage founding member — were "a little before her time". She does, however, remember a teenage Alastair Cook (the writer, not the cricketer), Paul Robeson (actor and activist), Philip Jenkinson (BBC journalist and presenter), Dyllis Powell (film critic).

It's a surreal conversation. She talks about the British Film Institute, founded in 1933, as if they were plucky young upstarts. If I have any more questions, she says, I can come and visit her at home.



## **APPENDIX**

### **Bibliography**

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