

Cube culture:

Exploding the frames of cinema in Bristol

Ben Slater

After four years, Bristol's Cube, one of precious few full-time cinemas and arts venues in the UK with a claim to the term 'Independence', is flourishing. Former Cube programmer Ben Slater explores its development and talks to some of the core team.

Amidst much argument about the beleaguered independent film exhibition in the UK, 'art-house' cinemas continue to dominate both the funding hand-outs and the policy documents. But as the multiplexes aggressively seek to widen their audiences (securing exclusive runs on foreign-language hits, teaming up with the British Film Institute), there is a real case to be made that the future of alternative film exhibition lies not within the cosy confines of regional film theatre, but in new kinds of cinema spaces. Resisting easy definition, these are places where the traditional frames and expectations of a film venue are subverted, adapted and re-invigorated.

These creative impulses go back as far as avant-garde cabaret in the 1920s, from there into the free-form art movements of the '60s, resurfacing in rave and club culture and further. In the context of Britain in the '90s and beyond, the will to 'explode cinema' has mainly come from groups of like-minded film makers frustrated not only by the feature-film bias of mainstream exhibition, but the often stifling, formal atmosphere of presentation. They wanted to create their own space, not usually fixed to one venue, but nomadic, unpredictable. Crucially, they demanded the freedom to screen work without it having to pass through the networks, channels and barriers that centrally govern our culture.

In London in the mid '90s, alternative cinema collectives definitely seemed to have their moment. *Halloween Film Society*, *My Eyes My Eyes*, *Omsk*, *Exploding Cinema*, *Kinokaze* and more. They operated with little or no funding, they took risks and they memorably heckled TV executives at panels about 'independence' during the London Film Festival. Although the frequency of events seemed to be dwindling by the late '90s, their intentions still reverberated.

Club Rombus, a film screening collective based in Bristol circa 1997 had specialised in intermittently putting live music to film in unusual and audacious contexts. I'd heard they had simultaneously projected both Murnau and Herzog's versions of *Nosferatu* side-by-side in an act of vampiric experimentation. This led me to attend what for them must have been a fairly 'straight' night involving an uncut 16mm print of Borowczyk's juicy *La Bete*, a DJ and a very smoky community centre. Later I experienced a far more momentous *Rombus* event, a band called *The Newts* performing soundtracks to animations by the Russian master Starewicz, after-hours, in a small, but much-loved second-run cinema called *The Arts Centre*. This half-hidden venue, located down the end of a scruffy corridor past a Chinese restaurant, had long ago been Bristol's main centre for the arts, and its inviting auditorium with red velvet seating remained virtually unchanged.

Nobody that night had an inkling that within 18 months, the husband and wife team who had run the cinema for over a decade would disappear suddenly, leaving a trail of debt, and allowing the lease to get snatched up by the least likely 'cultural entrepreneurs' in Bristol. Kevin Dennis and Hogge (erstwhile circus stilt-walkers and the main organisers of *Club Rombus*) joined up with an ambitious film maker, Jack Davies and local film net-worker and screenwriter Julian Holman, to form the key team that would kickstart *The Cube*

into existence.

Collectively they dreamed of the old *Arts Centre* transformed into a venue that could move freely between the current second-run programme, cult classics, new indies and the kind of mixed-media events that had made *Rombus* so exciting. None of the London collectives ran a venue, even the Brighton *Cinematheque* with its excellent film programme hires out a private screening room. For good reasons most people wouldn't want to get bogged down with property law and overheads—but for the Bristol group, the freedom and rewards of having a venue to call your own were potentially massive.

In October 1998, after six draining months of meetings, fund-raising and cleaning-up, the *Arts Centre* re-opened under the name *The Cube* with a screening of Chris Petit's 1979 London-to-Bristol road-movie *Radio On*. The energy had gone West. The doors were open.

As the team soon discovered, organising monthly events in ad-hoc spaces is a very different game from running a venue seven days a week. Audiences went up and down, but mostly down. A pattern began to establish itself, one-off events might sell-out, but any attempt at a normal film-run led only to a trickle.

In the initial business plan, it was envisaged that the regular films would subsidise more ambitious events, but the proliferation of commercial screens in Bristol plus the presence of two well-established art-house venues (*Watershed* and *Arncliffe*) had virtually eroded the second-run market (hence the cinema's original closure). Only a few key films could transcend this (*Buena Vista Social Club*, *Amores Perros*, *Crouching Tiger*, et al). There was no clearly reliable source of income. After continued fruitless attempts to chase the art-house mainstream *The Cube* was finally liberated by that failure. Now it could experiment and take the wildest chances, because there was nothing to lose.

It was an uphill struggle for the best part of a year. It went voluntary (and continues to be) after only a few months. When it became painfully obvious that it couldn't afford wages it returned to what it had always been—a labour of pure love, passion and enthusiasm.

Gradually *The Cube* shaped up. Licenses to sell booze (and drink it in the cinema) and to stage live music eventually came and opened up myriad possibilities. Donated computer equipment revolutionised the office into a hub of Linux-biased online creativity. Part and full-time volunteers began to gather into an experienced and friendly workforce. Diverse audiences were brought into the building, crossing between the farthest reaches of the program. No matter how underground and alternative *The Cube* might have felt, it always made everyone through the doors welcome—to come in, hang out and get involved.

Bands and DJ's played, sometimes to old films, new films, their own films or no films. People gave talks, workshops, readings, discussions. Events turned into parties and vice versa. *The Cube* was still a cinema, but its programme exploded in many different directions. Film was the base-



Billy Childish at The Cube

camp. The rest was up for grabs.

In August 2001 a fire in the corridor outside the venue forced its sudden closure. Just as the momentum was really building, when word of its activities was seriously beginning to filter out of the West Country to the rest of the UK and beyond, a hefty dose of bad luck put everything on hold.

A more difficult period of closure followed. They were back to bureaucracy—lawyers, landlords, insurers and builders. Men in suits and hard hats were their visitors.

The core team had changed considerably since '98. Jack, Julian and Kevin had all departed, none acrimoniously, but *The Cube* is dangerously all-consuming. You had to make a clean break or you would struggle to have any life outside of it. Among others, Hogge had been joined by Chris 'Chiz' Williams, a London music industry drop-out self-exiled to Bristol, and sometime e-zine editor and artist 'The Lady' Lucy, both of whom have an unwavering and somewhat delirious commitment to the venue's success.

After they had given up announcing predicted opening dates because of seemingly endless delays, the new entrance finally swung open to a refurbished *Cube* in August 2002. It's not been long since the re-opening as I write, but the audience-levels are healthy, and the programme itself is, if anything, more wildly diverse, eclectic and genuinely exciting than before. Cult music acts rub shoulders with cult films, anti-war activist nights, art exhibitions, film-makers introducing their work and much assorted *Cube*-flavoured mayhem.

What the future holds for *The Cube* has never been certain. Given the levels of energy required to turn events around and keep things on track it has always been impossible for the organisation to think much further than a month ahead. *The Cube* has never chased the kind of long-term public funding that could finance its infrastructure. To make the leap from a voluntary organisation to a salaried workplace is difficult to contemplate for a number of pragmatic and psychological reasons. But actually there aren't any arts funding schemes for places like *The Cube* to sign up to, and there seems to be no will to create them. While struggling regional film theatres are forced to spend

fortunes on branding consultants and months drawing up applications for emergency grants, just so they can keep bringing you the latest Loach and Kiarostami (and I'm certainly not knocking that), *The Cube* continues to re-invent the possibilities of a cinema venue every week on a shoestring. That's the cost of freedom.

An email conversation with Chiz, Lucy and Hogge of *The Cube*

Ben Slater: Initially, the primary objective and ethos of *The Cube* was to be an alternative cinema. Since then 'Cinema' for *The Cube* has become the basis for a much wider range of activities. Tell me about this development, the factors and thinking behind that?

Chiz: This building has been used for Cinema—alternative, arty, small and independent—for 30 years. It has been run by co-ops, a family business, arts-funded bodies and used by musicians, fine-artists, pornographers, video makers, poets and drama companies... most exploiting the Cinema set-up to their own ends.

The concept behind *Cube* programming has, to me, always been based around an idea of cinema as a cultural centre. The diversity of our programme has developed with gaining legal licenses and the continuous exploration and development of our cinema space. It is strengthened and developed by a strong sense of the history/future of projected visual images but chiefly due to the enormous interests of the revolving *Cube* team. It's a more broadly "Cinematic" programme—we can now entertain multi-format screenings, talks, live music, computer workshops and theatre in the same month all twisted around a backbone of films.

Although we reject a lot of possible programme content, we try a lot of ideas out of curiosity and the need to bring in the money as well as to constantly re-define what *The Cube* is about. The growth of activities within the space over the last 4 years has been fast and furious and there is a daily discussion about this: to keep on experimenting but to remain recognisably and unfathomably *The Cube Cinema*.

Hogge: It was always in my mind that many kinds

of stage- or screen-based activities would be possible because of the nature of the physical set-up. Early on we were working with the established practice of the site, namely cinema, so as to keep as much of the loyal audience as possible and to acclimatise ourselves with the new environment. I don't think we have lost our focus on films, but we have shifted so much into other types of events.

BS: What's your relationship with the funded 'independent' cinemas and art-spaces? Has it changed since you began?

C: I have become less envious of funded Cinemas. They sometimes work in worse conditions and with little creative input from the staff, and are just as unstable. However, I visit some venues that have a more consistent, steady income-stream and still wish we could achieve this, but feel it best to avoid core funding and develop new ways that will allow us to support ourselves.

The way we work off other independent cinemas' more locked programmes is by working on the fly, turning around ideas into actual practice very quickly, leaving us able to respond to current tastes and events with speed. Likewise we collaborate with them by sharing films and ideas, often proving there is a substantial audience for marginal subject matter. Our mutant cinema team is often brought in to programme and assist funded film spaces to provide a live cinematic event, to re-work their ideas of cinema.

BS: Is there a danger that once it becomes a free-for-all, that the programme loses coherence, too many hybrid events splits the audience? I'm interested to hear you talk about your audiences.

C: I think most of us have a strong perception of what *The Cube* programme is. It tries to pick up and programme what people may have missed out on, is ignored by other cinemas/media, or needs quietly celebrating.

People are not as constrained as some people like to think. I remember an argument that went "we should show no normal films" (i.e. those held by a regular distributor) because the more marginal/cult film/video received bigger crowds and it was not politically correct (to show the 'normal' films). However the same activists and artists that came to the marginal stuff would come to see *Crouching Tiger* or *Buena Vista Social Club*. People enjoy our diversity as much as we do.

Lucy: I like the comparison to fanzines... to think of *The Cube* as a live cinema fanzine with some of the volunteers being contributing editors. We have a strong idea of what the programme is. Though I think this is too sub-conscious sometimes, not discussed enough.

H: I'm not sure anyone knows how coherency (in the programme) is actually achieved, if indeed it is. A recent volunteer said she liked the programme because of its apparent absence of coherency; as if in this was a sheer openness and range which could at any point turn into something specific and specialised. Careful examination of early programmes will show terrible programming experiments, but those were necessary to learn. I'd say we had only just reached a plateau in smoothing out content-coherency-contexts and then the fire happened.

Also, something in the nature of *The Cube* has helped form a cult following. Partly due to it being run by people on the dole who can be reached and talked to about ideas and anything, but mainly because the programme speaks a kind of colloquial street language, which says that people are having fun while contributing to the culture. In this respect it's entirely true that the people organising events are engineering their own entertainment. I always hated it when an event wasn't attended by the originator of the idea—which seems fanatical now. I felt very personally about the ownership of ideas.

C: We need to achieve higher audiences though and that will be the next challenge but I don't think it will simply come by showing successfully 'popular' material. We are very much a commercial venture. If we don't achieve the audience figures and income we need to sustain the operation we will have to close. Pre-fire our audience figures were up. An audience had found us and more



importantly we had developed a (varied) audience. We have become more popular and more diverse.

H: Part of this development is probing and seeing what people will and won't come to. It's interesting to imagine that much more experimentation is yet to come. For lots of people *The Cube* is a discovery...

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