

Blogpost 12/12/15 www.filmhibscotland.com (<http://www.filmhubscotland.com/news-and-blog/blog/2015/december/cinema-is-where-ive-learned/>)

Georgina Coburn, [Arts Writer](#) and Chair of [Inverness Film Fans \(InFiFa\)](#), received a Film Hub Scotland bursary to attend [This Way Up 15](#) - the Exhibition Innovation Conference which took place at [HOME](#) in Manchester in December 2015. Here are her thoughts on the event...

Cinema is “where I’ve learned and unlearned everything about being a person”.

Paul Ridd, [Picturehouse Cinemas](#), panellist on *Cinephile Activism*

As HOME's Director and Chief Executive Dave Moutrey suggested in his opening remarks, one of “the best investments we can make as a nation” is in the culture of Cinema. It felt very apt that the second This Way Up conference found its way to HOME in Manchester, a city defined by industrious cultural reinvention. Opened in April 2015 the transformation and merger of Cornerhouse and the Library Theatre Company into a new Arts complex, including the expanded programming possibilities of five cinema screens, is a very public acknowledgement of the city's cultural economy. Funded by £19 million from Manchester City Council, £5 million from Arts Council England and £1 million in fundraising, it's a visible sign of connection between the cultural value of the Arts and the value of investing in Culture as a primary economic driver.

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The world of film exhibition is very much a site of collision, and potential collaboration, between the business and cultures of Cinema. In an unprecedented time of technological change; multiplex dominance, multiple screening devices, video on demand, streaming services, binge viewing, increasing demand to freely share and to shape content and to screen “everything for everyone, everywhere, right now”, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by mass forces of visual and viral consumption. Being part of the 7% of cinema screens in the UK devoted to independent /specialist film is a battle. You need to be sure of why you're doing it, who you're doing it for and why film matters to you not to succumb to combat fatigue. Many of us have built walls around what we value most about cinema, to protect that collective experience from a constant barrage of threats to film as we know it. Cinematic survival in a digital age requires constant re-examination of your own fortress, where its weaknesses and biases are, where expansion of those walls or even knocking some of them down to build a more adaptive structure might be necessary. As keynote speaker Marianne Maxwell, producer at the [National Theatre of Scotland](#) (NTS) expressed; “at its worst it's like standing in rubble” until you “stand up”, look around” and “see who you can build with”.

The importance of events like This Way Up is in having the time and space to raise your head above the parapet; to look at the whole landscape, take stock of where you are, the true nature of your defences and to discover that you have allies, who ideologically, emotionally or practically enable and inspire you to keep fighting. There is always a great sense of excitement and camaraderie in bringing people who are passionate about film together. The convergence of over 250 participants; exhibitors, distributors, film societies, critics, academics and filmmakers, creates its own palpable energy. I felt this on day one amidst the intense, dizzying hum of conversations at break times, in heated panel debates and in raised hands at question time. MC Gaylene Gould, Creative Director of [WriteTalkListen](#), set the tone of the conference beautifully in presenting a personal way back into film and the possibility of finding new ways to connect with audiences and each other. At the heart of the conference was discussion about the kinds of relationships we want to build with audiences and within the industry as a whole; between makers, distributors, exhibitors and viewers. Exploring blurred lines between art forms, media platforms, creativity and consumption, raises infinitely more questions than a two day conference can possibly begin to answer, but beginning those conversations is vitally important and re-energising to the whole sector.

Some of the most provocative sessions for me were those dealing with what fundamentally brings us to film in the first place. The concept of human empathy was definitely on the agenda this year, although interpretation of what it means in relation to film varied enormously. The panel session "*I'm not like you, I don't feel like you*" *Persona Swapping in Film Programming* examined Neurocinematics and how representation feeds into audience perception. Intelligently curated by Jemma Desai ([Independent Cinema Office, I Am Dora](#)) this session really demanded a symposium all of its own. Scientist Maria Panagiotidi (Arctic Shores) and fellow panellists suggested more complex applications for this evolving technology than the current mapping of behavioural responses used by big studios for film editing and trailer cutting. How we communicate Diversity and how an audience identifies with diverse perspectives on screen is a fascinating field of investigation that perhaps finds its greatest advocacy in creative process. The presence on the panel of filmmaker George Amponsah and exploration of key sequences in his documentary *The Hard Stop* conveyed this brilliantly, with the director's creative process being essentially open to the people and story behind the headlines. His intention to address the question of "what kind of people get shot on the streets of London?", grappling with his own pre-conceptions, is innately humane, reflected in the crafting of his documentary. The questions of "How inclusive are we feeling?" and "How far can we push the walls of our cinema spaces?" are all about the powerful role of cinema in creating meaning.

This essential creative perspective and impetus to make sense of the world around us was at times markedly absent on other panels. As one delegate suggested during closing remarks, there is currently a separation of film production and exhibition that represents structural weakness in the promotion and development of film nationally.

The panel session *The Film is Not Enough* looked at the demand to do more than just show films through "event cinema, enhanced screenings and alternative content". It was inspiring to see imaginative ways into

film through the delivery of large scale cinema events staged by the [BFI](#), [Cambridge Film Festival](#), [Abandon Normal Devices](#) and [Live Cinema](#) and very encouraging to see “audiences putting a premium” on collective cinematic experiences. However, the question of whether the film is enough was ironically highlighted for me by Ian Forrester, part of the BBC’s research and development towards adaptive content. Like the delegate who raised her hand at question time, I was also very uncomfortable with this self-proclaimed future of broadcasting and storytelling; a model for creative production which moulds itself in response to the individual viewer’s taste and choices. Whilst I enjoyed the performance of Nathan Penlington’s [Choose Your Own Documentary](#) on the first evening, which like the proposed BBC adaptive content is interactive with audience voting and polling to create the story, I was also conscious of the limited range of possible narratives. All programming ultimately has an author or authors. As the poster for [Choose Your Own Documentary](#) honestly proclaims, there are 1566 possible shows out of the one production - an obvious economic choice for a corporation, but arguably a poor singular model of production on its own, when compared to the infinite imaginative responses possible in response to a single well-crafted film.

Exhibiting film isn’t just about bums on seats or box office. It’s about growing the audience for a more diverse range of content, encouraging exposure to the wealth of human experiences that film has to offer and ensuring that independent creative voices have the opportunity to be seen and heard.

Essentially as a punter, a critic and chair of a film society I come to cinema to feel something and to discover a wider world than my own. Ideally it’s an expansive experience, rather than a reductive one limited by my own biases, tastes and assumptions. Arguably films that stand the test of time and are constantly being rediscovered by successive generations are those which create imaginative spaces for the viewer’s mind to wander into. Regardless of time or place, we are able to project ourselves into a film’s narratives because there are levels of empathy and understanding in crafting the work that transcend the personal, communicating something universal about what it is to be human. Most Film Societies are fiercely defensive of this whole back catalogue of cinematic Art, much of it not available on DCP and increasingly being lost between the cracks of distributor catalogue busts and takeovers. Equally the diverse voices to be found in contemporary independent filmmaking are what we consistently champion and it’s vitally important that we continue to do so. I’m not convinced that cat video festivals equate to “alternative content” or that anything receiving millions of hits on You Tube actually needs space at a film festival, however entertaining the content might be. Exhibiting film isn’t just about bums on seats or box office. It’s about growing the audience for a more diverse range of content, encouraging exposure to the wealth of human experiences that film has to offer and ensuring that independent creative voices have the opportunity to be seen and heard.

Mel Larsen’s session “*Not for the likes of you?*” posed really pertinent questions about the tendency for taking the culture of film watching for granted. Film societies championing Specialised Film are often perceived as elitist and Larsen’s question of “Is it your organisation (rather than the audience) which is hard

to reach?" is one that needs to be routinely examined by film exhibitors. Our homework preparation for this session illuminated some of the pitfalls for anyone coming to an experience for the first time. As Larsen so eloquently put it, often we are selling from the top of Maslow's self-actualising hierarchy of needs pyramid when some of the more basic needs of audiences may need to be met first. "Am I safe here?" is a basic question to be considered empathically from the individual audience member's point of view. Thinking about the journey from first contact to post screening and understanding some of the barriers to audience engagement by putting yourself in a first timer's shoes, was very illuminating and of great benefit in considering audience development strategies.

With 60 panellists taking part and back to back sessions there were many more insights throughout the two day conference that strengthened my belief in why film is important and how it creates meaning. Lofty ideals? Perhaps, but now more than ever - in the face of unprecedented and unrelenting technological, social and cultural change, it's important to know what colours you are nailing to your mast and what they mean as part of a wider context of film exhibition, appreciation and consumption. When *This Way Up* comes to Glasgow in 2016 it will be wonderful to see where these conversations and debates will lead.