

## **The Role of Independent Cinema in the Age of On-demand Culture**

**Supervisors: Mark Cosgrove (Watershed Cinema Curator); Andrew Spicer (UWE); James Lyons (Exeter)**

\*\*\*If you wish to express an interest in undertaking this project and would like to find out more about the candidate selection process, please contact the full supervisory team at: [mark@watershed.co.uk](mailto:mark@watershed.co.uk); [Andrew2.Spicer@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Andrew2.Spicer@uwe.ac.uk); [James.Lyons@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:James.Lyons@exeter.ac.uk) \*\*\*

### **What is the project about? What are the likely research questions?**

The project explores independent cinema's approach to curation, audience development and community-building; its relationships with funders and policymakers at local, regional, national and international levels; and the strategies it has developed to survive in the face of far-reaching changes to the ways in which films are distributed, exhibited and consumed. It is focused around Watershed Cinema and Digital Creativity Centre which, as one of the leading independent cinemas in the UK and as the British Film Institute's (BFI) Film Hub Lead (FHLO) for the South West, has a remit to develop the independent exhibition sector locally, regionally and nationally. The recent emergence of Subscription Video on Demand (SVoD) services and the challenges they pose to the cultural cinema sector – of which exhibitors, and the lifelong audiences they create, are the foundation – makes this research especially urgent. Research questions include: how have independent cinemas developed since the millennium? What are the key challenges faced by Watershed and the wider sector it represents and how are these being addressed? How effective are existing policy mechanisms in supporting the sector and how might they be improved?

### **What is the research context?**

The case-study element of this project builds on a one-year (2017-18), UWE-funded pilot study that focused on Watershed's genesis and development from 1964-1998. The student's engagement with the wider context of the development of independent cinema would expand and enlarge the sporadic studies of this area – in Leicester and Nottingham – and the edited collection *The British Film Institute, the Government and Film Culture, 1933-2000* that includes a history of exhibition policy and the Regional Film Theatre scheme (1964-2003), as well as Stuart Hanson's work on cinema exhibition in the UK. S/he would also engage with international, primarily European, trends in independent exhibition and the literature that addresses the emergence of SVoD companies such as Netflix and the 'digital disruption' to long-standing patterns of distribution and exhibition. S/he would also engage with studies of urban and community regeneration that have been spearheaded by the cultural sector and compare Watershed's role in Bristol with that of, for example, HOME in Manchester and the Phoenix in Exeter. The research would contribute to the wider shift within film and media industry studies that focuses on film exhibition, including the AHRC-funded 'Beyond the Multiplex' project (2017-2020) and seek to influence film and cultural policy in the UK.

### **What are the main works or collections in this area? What approach is proposed?**

Watershed is committed to providing student support, travel monies and full access to its own archive. S/he will be co-supervised by its film curator Mark Cosgrove, whose knowledge of the development of independent cinema is unrivalled. Through Mark, s/he would have access FHLO staff and records, be present at meetings and use the major networks of which Mark is a member to undertake interviews with key actors at local, regional and national levels including senior staff at the BFI and in the Europa Cinemas network in which Watershed participates. Spicer and Lyons are highly experienced doctoral supervisors (16 and 10 completions respectively), with numerous relevant publications and have previously collaborated on a collection about the film producer. Spicer has worked closely with Cosgrove for many years, including a joint MA programme. The student will have access to the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum (Exeter) that has programmes and periodicals from the 1920s around the growth of art and independent cinemas in the UK and material showing the exhibition of such film material outside London, which would help contextualise Watershed's role. The student would be trained in skills of empirical, archival and ethnographic enquiry informed by theoretical concepts derived from film studies, cultural geography and urban studies. S/he would gain a detailed knowledge of the film industry, affording career opportunities. There are well-developed plans to extend this study into a national enquiry about UK independent exhibition creating opportunities for post-doctoral research.

### **Why is this a doctoral project?**

This is a clearly defined project, with a specific organisation (Watershed), timeframe (2000-20) and conceptual focus (cultural cinema exhibition) appropriate for doctoral study. However, the subject is broad enough to allow for supervised self-direction, while Watershed's key role as a nationally significant regional cinema – and its close relationships with policymakers and the UK's cultural cinema infrastructure – ensure there is ample scope for the student to make a significant contribution to knowledge. The Watershed would benefit significantly from this research as it embarks on a major new development phase to inform an enhanced historical and cultural understanding of its regional, nation and international roles. UWE's Cultural Economy Unit and Exeter's partnership with the London Film School, which encompasses research and teaching across the independent film business, offer additional opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange. There are several clear pathways to impact (such as the

development of empirically-informed policy interventions) and opportunities for public engagement (such as a showcase of the research findings to personnel involved in independent cinema sector, nationally and internationally).

**SWW2 themes & approach:** Politics, policies & values; Cultural transmission & translation; research co-production.