

What's the alternative?

Independent cinemas used to be a premier hang-out for students. But with multiplexes pushing smaller venues out of the picture, **Matt Goddard** asks whether it's curtains for the art-house cinema

By its very nature, film is constantly changing. When painting was as young a medium as film is now, it was practised on cave walls, so it is no surprise that one century on, film is still evolving — in all directions. While multimillion-pound blockbusters break takings records every summer, the digital revolution has enabled anyone to make a film. Students, of course, have a part to play in both of these sectors, but historically it is the relationship between students and art-house films that has been closest.

Years ago, alternative cinemas not only provided material for thought and rebellion, but they were also great places to go to drink and smoke. Now, however, while commercial cinemas are boasting more screens and venues than ever, some cities in Britain have no dedicated art-house cinema.

This development is a long way from the days of Federico Fellini and François Truffaut, and does not correspond to the growth in independent cinema in other European countries. Somehow, the term "art-house" provokes sniggers — often based on the misconception that the audience for art-house cinema is becoming both smaller and older.

Mark Cosgrove, head of exhibition at the independent Watershed cinema in Bristol, finds this surprising: "These assumptions invariably emanate from and are perpetuated, although not exclusively, by London-based institutions."

The Watershed has found that audiences are not dwindling at all. With a programme of art-house pictures, the cinema saw audience figures for the 2001/2 season rise 13% on the previous year, with young people making up a significant share of the audience. Mark Cosgrove maintains that, over the past five years,

the programme "has consolidated the strength of screening art-house films".

Most universities have dedicated film societies showing both mainstream and alternative features. Andrew Wilkinson, chair of York Student Cinema, has found that interest has grown considerably over the past few years, but, unsurprisingly, mainstream films still attract the larger audiences. "We would expect 50-100 people for an art-house film, while we usually get 250-plus for mainstream films. There's a pretty dedicated band of art-house film lovers, but you could quite easily miss them."

Ed Lea, chair of Manchester University Film Society, puts it more bluntly: "The present, apathetic generation of students, on the whole, are apparently satisfied by the mainstream."

Research at the Watershed has shown that over 50% of the audience is aged 25-35. That, says Mark Cosgrove, is a clear sign that "art-house cinemas and the whole vibe of alternative culture are still a significant part of the student experience". The university film societies, however, paint a bleaker picture.

At Manchester University Film Society, the last decade has seen membership fall from "more than 1,500 to barely 300 at the end of our last season". Ed Lea has found that "when students see our film lists, they recognise our token Hollywood contributions but not the titles of the art-house films and show very little interest in watching them".

Similarly, York Student Cinema has encountered difficulties in encouraging students to see a wider range of films. Two years ago, the society launched



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the York Independent Film Festival at the university, but found only a small number of students among the 500 attendees. For next year, the event has moved to York's successful independent cinema City Screen, but Andrew Wilkinson expects "even fewer students".

While many university cinemas and film societies find they have a small but dedicated art-house audience, there is some indication that independent cinemas are managing to attract people who would not previously have watched an alternative film. Facilities at many independents have become more comfortable and many venues run a programme of art-house films alongside blockbusters. At the same time, some commercial cinemas play an active role in film festivals.

Some high-profile films have done much to change attitudes to alternative cinema. Recent hits such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* have blurred the distinction between mainstream and alternative and reduced some of the prejudice surrounding subtitled films. Of course, whether *Crouching Tiger* is an art-house film or a kung fu picture is open to argument — but isn't that the kind of discussion that students used to thrive on? Hopefully more will take the chance to do so.

