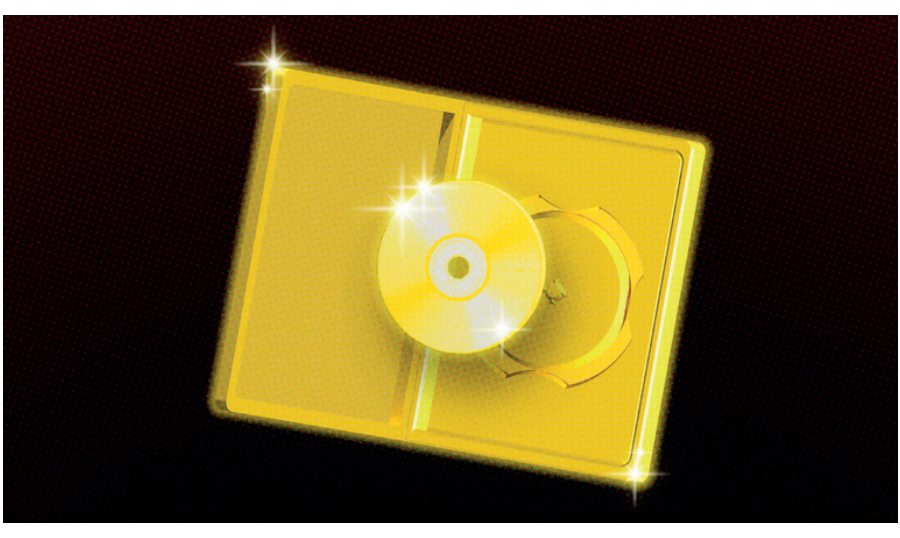


Illustration by David McAllister / Prospect

CULTURE

From the January/February 2026 issue

The little company that changed cinephilia

Over the past 20 years, Second Run and other boutique home-video labels have radicalised people's viewing habits

By James Oliver

December 17, 2025

You probably got rid of your DVD player, didn't you? This is the streaming age, after all: infinite video content at the press of a button, all of it rendering those shiny silver discs of yesteryear entirely obsolete.

So you'd expect that any company still in the physical media trade ought to be panicking at best, or shutting up shop at worst, as all but the most hardline luddites transfer their favours. Except: "The boutique physical media business hasn't changed as much as people might think over the last few years." That's Kevin Lambert, and he should know: he's head of content at Eureka, one of the most important home video labels in the UK. Things are "generally sustainable and reasonably healthy", he adds. Industry veteran Sam Dunn, now of (the equally vital) Powerhouse films, concurs: "I think it's proving to be quite enduring," he says, adding that people have been predicting impending doom since his earliest days in the industry a couple of decades ago.

Even if casual viewers have moved on, there still exists a dedicated community which has kept the faith. While the fabled "vinyl renaissance" has been much discussed (kids buying actual records rather than simply streaming music), far less attention has been paid to the persistence of home video, in particular the successes of the boutique labels. These are less focused on general audiences; their customers are instead those people who don't mind subtitles, ambiguity or unhappy endings—a type known as the cinephile.

It's a community well served in the UK. Indeed, boutique home video labels should be a source of national pride: British labels—beyond the aforementioned Eureka and Powerhouse, there's Arrow, 88 Films and Radiance, to name only the best known—are among the very best in the world, with some of the highest standards and most interesting catalogues. It's thanks to their work that we are able to watch everything from obscure, 13-hour-long metafictions (Jacques Rivette's legendary *Out 1*, unseen in this country until Arrow put it out) to astoundingly weird British exploitation films from the 1960s (the British Film Institute's release of *That Kind of Girl*), all presented in the highest quality and with lots of supporting material.

Then there's Second Run. Not the biggest label—"a niche within a niche" as founder Mehelli Modi puts it—but mightily important, nonetheless. It's Second Run's 20th birthday this year, but that's far from the main reason to pay them closer attention: they're the outfit that might best epitomise what makes the boutique labels so essential.

To understand exactly why, we need to look back. It might be hard to remember just what a radical transformation DVD represented for film fans when it was first launched but, to those used to VHS, it was a revelation. "Suddenly, you could see a film in its right ratio," says Modi, an ardent film fan from his earliest years. "The image was much better, the subtitles were clearer." Most of all, thanks to the shedding of VHS's technical limitations and the rise of ecommerce, there was the opportunity to watch releases from around the world. Although the major studios insisted that DVD be "region locked" (so a disc from the United States could only be viewed in the United States), many players could be cured with almost childish simplicity, opening up a literal world of possibilities.

All canons are constructed from what is available—and lots of films didn't used to be in circulation

However, we need to remember something else about those days: film culture—in the Anglophone world, at least—was a very different thing, (largely) based around a narrow canon that (mostly) centred films from western Europe, Japan and the US. Let's not be too hard on 20th-century tastemakers. All canons are constructed from what is available and, simply put, there were lots of films that weren't in circulation back then, things even the most dedicated viewers hadn't seen.

Modi, though, grew up in what is now Mumbai. During the 1960s, India was officially non-aligned, but the soft power of American pop culture exerted a strong influence on the young. This created consternation among the Soviets, who launched a counterstrike by sending films from the communist bloc—from Poland, from what was then Czechoslovakia, from Hungary—to Indian cinemas. It didn't quite work as planned ("Nobody would go to see them, except a very few people like me"), but these films made a huge impression on the young Modi.

"I still remember seeing *Diamonds of the Night* [1964]. That was my first film from anywhere in the Soviet bloc and it completely blew me away," he says, in reference to the seminal—and still astonishing—Czech drama of two desperate men escaping transport to Auschwitz. From there, "I got really interested in cinema outside the mainstream and saw lots and lots of these films. [Hungarian auteur Miklós] Jancsó films used to come, [Czech genius Věra] Chytilová films would come."

These would later become the backbone of Second Run's catalogue, but when Modi first got a DVD player, they simply weren't available, even in their countries of origin. He was then working in the music industry, but reckoned on a change of course. "I was older, my kids had grown up. I thought I would love to get back to doing something with cinema. That meant trying to have a label which would present films that essentially I had seen and loved, and nobody was releasing."

This was daring: these were films that few in this country had even heard of, let alone seen. But other technological developments helped. "[It would have been] impossible to do this without the internet. Completely impossible," avers Modi.

With internet movie forums forging fresh cinephiles—it's not just political sites that can be radicalising—the landscape was right for a label that went deeper than VHS ever did. Curious purchasers were rewarded with exceptional films which they in turn recommended to others, building a modest-but-loyal following and considerable amounts of goodwill.

From the vantage point of 2025, what's interesting is how those early days of Second Run point very clearly to where we are now. As it's become easier to see a wider variety of films, so cinephilia has changed. Witness the churn in the most recent *Sight & Sound* magazine poll of the greatest films ever, that 10-yearly snapshot of critical fancies; old warhorses such as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) plummeted, supplanted by previously unfeatured films such as, say, *Daisies* (1966, and a Second Run title, as it happens). Or consider Letterboxd, a movie review-cum-social network frequented by the burgeoning breed of younger film obsessives: their aggregated top 100 is genuinely global and looks far beyond Hollywood.

These changes remain underacknowledged; the wider culture still appears to believe that *Parasite* winning the Best Picture Oscar was a one-off, a fluke, not the first sign of a generational shift that will only become more widely felt. The internet has encouraged people to look beyond borders and, to younger viewers at least, subtitles are no longer the barrier they were once taken to be. Within this context, Second Run looks not so much pioneering as prophetic, revealing how much more there is to cinema than those of us reared under the old order ever supposed.

But, of course, from the vantage point of 2025, we can see other things, not all of them to the advantage of small physical media labels. Where once DVD was the mainstream format of choice, now it is streaming; given the carnage the likes of Spotify have inflicted on the music business, you might expect a similarly apocalyptic impact on the world of home video. Here, though, is the surprise: Modi has "no problem with streaming at all", and his fellow label bosses say the same.

Sam Dunn of Powerhouse is equally sanguine: "I'm not against [streaming] at all. It's just that I don't quite see it as being what we're doing. Obviously, it's a huge portion of the whole entertainment market, but I think it's been ever thus: there have always been people who want to be entertained, and there have been [cinephiles] who want that deeper level of engagement."

This "deeper level of engagement" is something with which Netflix, Amazon et al struggle. During their ascent, each made loud noises about their commitment to movies, hiring huge names to produce films for their platforms—Martin Scorsese making 2019's *The Irishman* for Netflix is perhaps the quintessential example—or buying exclusive rights to films that made a splash at festivals, sometimes even treating them to a cinema run first.

But that was then. It's harder to get a green light from a streamer now, not least because they have—and cling inextricably to—data that tells them what subscribers actually watch. Hence their offerings increasingly tilt towards action movies and romcoms, with far fewer idiosyncratic projects. Nor are those who like older films well served: Netflix UK famously offers only a hundred or so films made in the 20th century.

Away from the major players, there are UK streaming services run by and for people with a genuine love of film; the admirable eastern Europe specialists Klassiki, for example, or the British Film Institute's BFI Player, which is also available via Amazon. (Second Run occasionally licenses films to the latter. Says Modi: "I've noticed that if the BFI player shows something then, a little while later, people would buy it.")

But even these share the problems blighting all streaming platforms. For a start, licences are finite and titles often disappear, some never to return. Then there's the technical side. It's not just that the typical Blu-ray—the superior successor format to DVD—offers far better picture-and-sound quality than streaming, it's the unarguable point that Kevin Lambert makes: "If your internet goes down, you can't stream."

Rather than intimidate the boutique labels, streaming seems to have emboldened them. With the streamers in thrall to The Algorithm, the labels have responded by making "discovery" an even larger part of their offer. Where buying physical media was once a way of owning films you already knew—or at least knew by reputation—the emphasis is more and more on the unfamiliar.

Streaming seems to have emboldened the boutique labels

For example, having begun their prestigious (and self-explanatory) Masters of Cinema line with foundational German films such as *Metropolis* (1927) and *Nosferatu* (1922), Eureka has moved on to deeper cuts, including box-sets devoted to West German pulp crime and East German sci-fi, as well as a standalone release of the Teutonic fairy tale *Heart of Stone* (1950), all of which producer and historian Craig Ian Mann says "are criminally underseen by English-speaking audiences". These releases have done good business, too.

Despite this bullishness, a brief note of caution. The boutique labels are only a small corner of the market and, no matter how nimble or creative they are, they're ultimately playing in a medium shaped by the bigger boys. "Physical" remains profitable for the major studios and their major releases, too, but revenue has dropped—so it's not impossible that they'll eventually leave the field. That would be an extinction-level event for the boutiques; without the volume of studio orders, disc-pressing plants would have to close or insist on painful price rises.

There's no sign of that happening yet, though. In fact, there are even hints of a modest revival. "I think we now live in a world where so much is digital and immaterial that people are seeking out ways to own the things they love in a physical format," says Mann.

There's never been a better time to be a film buff. Indeed, as a purchaser, the problem is keeping abreast of everything that looks interesting: every month brings forth a cornucopia of eclectic, unusual and often little-known movies, few of which will ever go to streaming.

As for Second Run, its philosophy remains unchanged after 20 years: "Only to release films we knew and loved." This has enabled Modi to build one of the most exciting catalogues there is, where documentary rubs shoulders with comedy; where vintage films stand side by side with the brand new; where vertiginously high art nuzzles up against genre cinema.

Modi remains passionate. So much so that he's not celebrating his label's anniversary. "I don't want to look back," he says cheerfully. "I want to look ahead and see what's ahead."

The best of Second Run

In addition to those mentioned elsewhere...

The Cremator (1969)

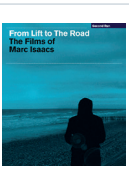
Set just after the German annexation of Czechoslovakia, this surreal coal-black comedy concerns the troubled and troubling Karel Kopfrkingl: crematorium worker, willing collaborator and serial killer. Here is Nazism as the ultimate death cult.

The Circus Tent (1978)

There's a darn sight more to Indian film than just singing and dancing. Straddling a line between fact and fiction, this lyrical (even magical) film observes the arrival of a travelling circus troupe in a rural Keralan village. A vital rediscovery.

Celia (1988)

From Australia, a wonderfully odd film set during a summer in the 1950s, which mixes pet rabbits, communists and scary monsters that may or may not lurk in the dark. This is one of the great films about kids and, especially, the weirdness of childhood.



From Lift to The Road: The Films of Marc Isaacs (2001–2017)

Documentary is an important part of the Second Run catalogue, and this collection of films is one of the standouts. Diverse in subject, they're unified by Isaacs's remarkable feeling for people.

James Oliver is a critic based in Suffolk