

From the Grassroots: Regional Film Policy and Practice in England

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the development of regional film policy and practice in England. From the late 1960s regional film production sectors have gradually emerged from small-scale, under-resourced cottage industries to become significant areas of British film practice. By the mid-2000s the English regions were incorporated into a national film policy strategy based on a network of nine Regional Screen Agencies and centrally coordinated by the UK Film Council. Along with similar developments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, for many commentators the devolution of film production has questioned the traditional way that British cinema can be understood as a national cinema. This thesis aims to understand how regional film production sectors have developed, what filmmaking practices have characterised them and what these mean for British cinema.

It is argued that the development of regional film policy and practice can be understood in terms of two distinct models: the regional workshop model and the regional “creative industries” model. Each was based on different systemic processes and ideological frameworks, and is best represented in institutions. The development of an institutional framework for regional film production is placed within the wider context of the trajectory of public policy in Britain in the post-War period; specifically the shifting boundaries between cultural policy and economic policy. The thesis employs a critical political economy approach to analyse the development of these policy frameworks and the filmmaking practices that have emerged from them, including detailed case studies of regional film practices, specifically regional documentary, regional short film and regionally-produced feature films.

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Contents

Abstract	
i	
Acknowledgements	
ii	
Introduction	
1	
Chapter One	
The Nation and the Regions	
16	
Chapter Two	
The Regional Workshop Model	
56	
Chapter Three	
The Regional Creative Industries Model	
91	
Chapter Four	
Amber Films and Regional Documentary Practice	
128	
Chapter Five	
Regional Short Film Practice	
169	
Chapter Six	
Regionally-produced Feature Films	
203	
Conclusion	
Beyond Commerce and Culture	
246	
Filmography	
260	
Bibliography	
265	

Introduction

What do they know of England, who only know the West End?¹

Michael Powell,

1950

In 2003 in an enquiry titled “Is There a British Film Industry?” the Culture, Media and Sport Committee of the House of Commons invited responses to the question “Is it important to seek to preserve a capacity to make British films about Britain in the UK?”² For filmmaker Alex Cox, the loss of this capacity would be a “cultural crime”. Cox railed against the Americanisation of British film culture – “*Notting Hill* and *a Funeral* or *Harry Potter Dies Another Day*” – in these terms:

The great British film successes – whether *Billy Elliot*, *The Full Monty*, *Trainspotting*, *Women in Love*, *The Devils*, *If . . .*, *Kes*, *Brighton Rock*, or *Brief Encounter* – talk about our own unique experiences. They cannot be replicated in the USA or in Prague. Nor are these films even set in London! These films are our cultural patrimony and the – often regionally based – creative people who made them its custodians . . .

It seems to me – based on the films I’ve just mentioned, but you could also add to the list many others including *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, *Get Carter* and *A Taste of Honey* – that the greatest indigenous British features have always been made up North. Maybe they were edited in London: maybe they had to be, when editing machines were massive metal monsters sitting in Soho

¹ Quoted in, Ian Christie, *Arrows of Desire: The Films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) p.79.

² For a brief discussion of this paper see Sylvia Harvey and Margaret Dickinson, “Developing a Sustainable Film Industry: The Role of Film Culture: A Response to the Call for Evidence on the Topic ‘Is There a British Film Industry?’”, Centre for British Film and Television Studies, www.bftv.ac.uk/policy (accessed December 2004).

basements. But they were great films, with their heart, their soul, their inspiration in the North.³

For Cox the “mainstream”, London-based British film industry is complicit with Hollywood in producing a profit driven and vacuous film culture. On the other hand, the English regions – specifically the North of England – are associated with a “rebellious, free, and British” tradition of filmmaking. Cox argued that London-based filmmakers “have been fattened-up for far too long” and called for a “radical restructuring of film funding that favours the regions and original British films.”⁴

Cox’s typically controversial speech is a useful place to begin this thesis for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is an example of the particular, and longstanding, cultural status of the English regions in British cinema. The regions have been associated with non-“mainstream” film production and in a sense a *more* indigenous, “authentic” and socially responsive cinema. Cox was tapping an understudied and often implicit tension in the history of British film. Secondly, it highlights the centralisation of British film production, the marginalisation regionally-based filmmakers like Cox have often felt and the way that this can translate into an opposition to the perceived values and practices of the “mainstream” – in this case a rejection of profit-motivation and collusion with big-budget American filmmaking. Finally, it is useful because Cox raises the question of the politics of film funding and the state.

The “regional dimension” to British cinema history is a rich topic offering many rewarding lines of enquiry that have only recently begun to

³ Alex Cox, “A Call to Arms: Alex Cox Addresses the Film Parliament”, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 1:1 (2004) pp.114-115.

⁴ Ibid. pp.118, 116.

be explored (a discussion of the existing literature takes place in Chapter One). This thesis is about the development of film production sectors in the English regions and the arguments around film funding that have accompanied them. Cox's misgivings notwithstanding, from the late 1960s regional film production sectors in England have gradually emerged from small-scale, under-resourced cottage industries to become significant sectors of British film practice. By the mid-2000s the English regions were incorporated into an ambitious national film policy strategy centrally coordinated by the UK Film Council, the "superbody" charged with the public subsidisation of the film industry and the promotion of British film culture. For some commentators, the "era of London-centred UK media is coming to an end."⁵ How and why did regional film production sectors develop? What practices have characterised regional film production? What has been the relationship between regional film production and "British cinema" as a whole? Has there been and is there now a distinct regional "cinema" in England? These are the questions that the following chapters seek to answer.

This thesis is titled "From the Grassroots: Regional Film Policy and Practice in England". This refers to the relationship between regional film practices and the institutional infrastructure upon which they have depended. But how to analyse this relationship? The methodological approach employed here responds to a call made by Julian Petley in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* for media and cultural studies to "take political economy seriously once again".

⁵ Brian McNair, *News and Journalism in the UK, Fourth Edition* (London: Routledge, 1994, 2003) p.201.

Petley argues that media and cultural studies have been too concerned with “developing theories about theories, writing books about books and discussing how models relate to other models.” In particular, “media and cultural studies have neglected the dynamics of institutional power” and paid too much attention to “cultural consumption at the expense of cultural production”. The key point, for Petley, is to investigate the politics of cultural practice: “we need to ask ourselves whether certain specific cultural practices have liberating, emancipatory potential, whether they help people to exercise both symbolic and material power”.⁶

As David Hesmondhalgh argues, “A necessary concept here is *determination* in its non-reductionist sense of setting limits and exerting pressures, rather than in the sense of an external force or forces which leads inevitably to something happening.” If the political economy approach has often been accused of rigid economic reductionism, then for Hesmondhalgh this need not be the case:

A good analysis will set processes of economic determination alongside other processes and pressures in culture and think about how they interact. Other factors which it will be important to stress in examining a cultural moment, phenomenon or process are: the role of institutions in the legal and political realm; the forms of discourse, language and representation available at a particular time;

⁶ Julian Petley “Time to Get Real”, *Journal of British Cinema and Television Studies*, 1:1 (2004) pp.28-31. This line of argument receives a fuller discussion in Nicholas Garnham’s “Political Economy and the Practice of Cultural Studies”. Garnham argues: “The success of cultural studies’ challenge has undoubtedly brought with it many gains in our understanding of the complexity of the process by which the determinations of social structure and the effects of social power are mediated through systems of symbolic representation . . . [But] this success has been bought at a price; the way in which cultural studies has developed has brought it to positions from which it is difficult, if not impossible, either to analyse effectively current developments within our systems of symbolic representation and associated shifts in cultural power or to engage politically with them. To move on and fulfil the promises of its original project, cultural studies now needs to rebuild the bridges with political economy that it burnt in its headlong rush towards the pleasures and differences of postmodernism.” Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding (Eds.), *Cultural Studies in Question* (London: Sage Publications, 1997) p.56.

and the beliefs, fantasies, values and desires characteristic of different groups of people.⁷

Hesmondhalgh's discussion of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the political economy and cultural studies approaches emphasises a limited economic determinism, the importance of recognising agency and the reciprocal relationships between texts, organisations and institutions. This model implies a dynamic: a dialectically evolving set of relationships that work to set the agenda and limit the parameters of regional film culture. At the same time, it is necessary to grant a "relative autonomy" to the different forces at work in such processes. The twin concepts of determinism and the relative autonomy of political, creative and economic forces also mean accepting, in the words of Andrew Higson, that "all film texts are the site of ideological tensions".⁸

The following analysis attempts to explain the development of regional film production sectors in this way. It is concerned with regional film production: that is, regional filmmaking as a cultural practice. Creative workers operate under conditions that define, to a greater or lesser degree, the space they work in and set limits on the possibilities of cultural practice. These limits need to be established. Therefore, this thesis is centrally concerned with institutions, their policy frameworks, the activities through which their policies are put into action and the discourses through which they can be understood.

⁷ David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries* (London: Sage Publications, 2002) p.46. Hesmondhalgh discusses the relative strengths of the political economy and cultural studies traditions pp.30-47. His conception of critical political economy is the one employed here.

⁸ Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, 1997) p.7.

The development of regional institutions is part of the larger story of the relationship between the state and the cinema in post-War Britain. With the centralisation of the commercial film industry, regional production has been completely dependent on state subsidy in various forms. It has had, therefore, a more direct relationship with the politics of cultural policy than the commercial cinema. At the risk of oversimplification, the trajectory of cultural policy in the period can be explained in terms of a shift in the ideology underpinning justifications for public subsidy: from one of “market failure” to one of “market value”. That is, a shift from subsidising forms of cultural production that the market was unable or unwilling to provide but are nevertheless perceived to be in the public interest, to cultural subsidy being justified through the value it adds to the economy with the market itself taken to offer the best mechanism for the identification and delivery of cultural needs. This transition can be mapped onto the wider trajectory of British politics in the period: the transition from social democratic reformism to “free market” neo-liberalism at the end of the 1970s. Thus a powerful ideological distinction between ideas of “culture” and “commerce” is of central importance to the development of regional film production sectors, and the way that these ideas have been expressed is inseparable from wider political and economic forces.

However, while the institutional and ideological infrastructure sets limits and exerts pressures upon regional film production sectors it does not fully determine the motivations, ambitions or production strategies available to regionally-based creative workers at any given time. Rather,

a dynamic model is required in which regional film policy and practice can be seen as the result of a series of historically specific tensions and negotiations between different social actors and institutions. At some points grassroots groups and organisations were able to exert influence over regionally-based institutions; at other times regional institutions were subject more to agendas set by wider trends in public policy. Likewise, at certain points the relationship between regionally-based filmmakers and institutions can be characterised in terms of struggle and conflict; at other times understanding it in terms of pragmatism and cooperation is more appropriate. Regionally-based practitioners appropriated and modified existing arguments and strategies in their attempts to propagate the idea of regional production. Therefore, this thesis is also based upon an analysis of the cultural politics of filmmakers, the styles, themes and practices they employed, the traditions and schemes of representation mobilised within their films and the ways in which the films have been understood.

The methodological and conceptual concerns outlined above have informed the structure of the argument that follows. Chapter One maps the field, picking up many of the points raised in this introduction. It draws on a variety of secondary sources to discuss some of the key concepts and paradigms that have become prominent in British cinema studies in recent years: particularly the concept of “nation” and how this has been reconceived in light of globalisation and devolution. These ideas are then related to the broad themes of this thesis. The chapter discusses the development of the centralised system of film production in Britain, the

“dominant identity” that this system has tended to produce and the place of the regions within this representational scheme. With this critical background established, the rest of the thesis is concerned with the development of regional film policy and practice in England. It is split into two sections: the first is concerned with what can broadly be described as policy and the second with practice.

The first section contains two chapters, organised chronologically and covering the period 1968-1990 and 1985-2007, respectively. These overlapping phases represent the development of the two distinct models for regional film production that have emerged in the post-War period: the regional workshop model and the regional “creative industries” model. They are models because each was based upon a distinct set of relatively coherent systemic processes and ideological frameworks, represented best in institutions. Chapter Two discusses the workshop model of regional film production and its institutionalisation in the film funding activities of the British Film Institute (BFI), the Regional Arts Associations (RAAs) and Channel Four. This is placed in the context of the expansion of regional cultural provision after 1964 and the politicisation of film as a cultural practice in the 1960s, particularly in relation to the politics of the New Left.

Chapter Three discusses the development of the “creative industries” model for regional film production. This model is most clearly embodied in the creation in 2000 of the UK Film Council (UKFC) and in 2001 of a network of nine Regional Screen Agencies (RSAs). The adoption of “creative industries” policies is contextualised within a wider

transformation in the terms of cultural policy in Britain from the 1980s, a process often described as the “commodification of culture”. Both chapters seek to explain the development of these distinct models of regional film production, define their characteristics, outline the debates that have accompanied them and make a critical assessment.

The three chapters that make up the second section analyse various film practices that have emerged from the regional workshop model and the regional “creative industries” model through a series of case studies. Each case study relates an analysis of filmmaking practice to the economic, cultural and social contexts from which it emerged. At the same time, each case study takes up specific concerns and critical paradigms. Chapter Four is concerned with regional workshop practice and in particular regional documentary filmmaking. This is explored through a case study of the first, most successful and longest surviving regional film workshop, Newcastle-based Amber Films. Amber are exemplars of workshop practice and were centrally involved in the development of the regional workshop mode of production. It is argued that their work represents both a continuation and transformation in the tradition of British documentary filmmaking first established by John Grierson in the 1930s.

The “creative industries” period was characterised by overall growth in regional film production sectors, the adoption of “commercial” values and practices and the increasing visibility of regionally-produced film at a national level. Chapters Five and Six look at the two main areas of film practice that have characterised regional “creative industries”: short film

and low-budget feature film. Chapter Five is concerned with the industrial function of short film policy and practice in regional production sectors, and focuses specifically on the East Midlands region which adopted the “creative industries” model relatively early and successfully. Chapter Six looks at the emergence in the late 1990s of regionally-produced feature films. This is explored in detail through an analysis of the films of Shane Meadows, one of the most critically successful regionally-based filmmakers to emerge in the period.

While each case study is intended to be in certain senses exemplary, they are also inevitably selective. Regional production sectors have sustained a range of filmmaking practices, united by their structural position outside the “mainstream” London-based film industry and their dependence on state subsidy. The approach employed in this thesis is thus not intended to be exhaustive as a survey of regional film in the period, instead focussing on an in-depth account of the major issues, practices and strategies that have been prominent in the development of regional film production sectors in England. There is, however, one significant and enduring set of ideas and practices that have been prominent in the way the regions have been represented in British cinema, a key strategy within regional filmmaking and also the main critical discourse in which it has been understood: what we can call the realist tradition of British cinema. The importance of the realist tradition to British film, and particularly to the intellectual construction of national cinema in Britain is difficult to overstate. Higson, for example, notes that it has been consistently put forward as the “most impressive, valuable, and significant

tradition in the history of British feature films”, the “orthodox version of British cinema’s achievements as a national cinema”.⁹ This tradition was taken up in certain specific ways by regional filmmakers and is a useful critical paradigm with which to explore the connections and distinctions between regional film practices and “mainstream” British national cinema.

This is done in Chapters Four and Six.

If I have so far outlined what is meant by the terms “policy” and “practice”, it is also necessary at this point to define the way “regional” and “film” are used in this thesis. “Film” would seem relatively straightforward. However, in the British context in general and within the history of regional film in particular, a distinction between film and television is difficult to maintain, especially since the 1980s. “Television” companies were heavily involved in regional “film” production funding and many regionally-produced “films” were shown on television. The role of Channel Four and various regional broadcasters in the development of regional production sectors is particularly noteworthy. Furthermore, many of the regional film practices discussed in the following chapters do not conform to the feature-length cinema standard and were not theatrically released. These caveats notwithstanding, the terms “film” and “filmmaker” are used throughout both to recognise the form of practice regionally-based filmmakers defined themselves within and for reasons of clarity. While the distinction between film and television in Britain is difficult to maintain in institutional terms, discursively it remains relatively stable. The distribution and exhibition of regionally-produced film, while an important issue in the

⁹ Higson, *Waving the Flag*, p.178.

development of regional production sectors, has for the most part been deemed outside the scope of this study for brevity's sake.

"Regional" is a more complicated term. Indeed, the idea of discrete regional boundaries in England is problematic. England has been divided and sub-divided for economic and civic planning purposes in numerous ways. For example, the separation of town and County in local Government administration developed from the different relations of the boroughs and manors to feudal lords. Counties have two manifestations: firstly the ancient Counties, some of which date to pre-Norman days; and secondly the administrative Counties and associated County Boroughs created by the Local Government Act of 1888. There have been local government areas and sub-divisions, judicial areas, registration areas, Parliamentary Constituencies and rail regions. In most cases the divisions have been independent of each other.¹⁰ More recently there have been the twelve Civil Defence Regions created during the Second World War – ten for England and one each for Scotland and Wales – upon which the Arts Council based its Regional Arts Associations (RAAs).¹¹ We can add to this regional television franchises, and most recently Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and Regional Screen Agencies.

The "standard regions" currently used by the government divide England into eight regions: North, Yorkshire and Humberside, North West, West Midlands, East Midlands, East Anglia, South East and South West. Although these are broadly correspondent to C. B. Fawcett's classic work

¹⁰ C. B. Fawcett, *Provinces of England: A Study of some Geographical Aspects of Devolution* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1919, 1960) pp. 30, 42, 33-36.

¹¹ Richard Witts, *Artist Unknown: An Alternative History of the Arts Council* (London: Warner Books, 1998) p.58.

of regional social geography, where he insisted that effective regional planning should be based on a “strong local patriotism”, they are largely administrative regions.¹² Nevertheless the movement for political devolution in England, prominent during the 1940s, 1960s and 1970s, and again from the late 1990s, has always contained a desire to introduce a cultural or ethnic regional democracy alongside the rationale to address regional inequalities through the regionalisation of economic planning.¹³

Regional boundaries, then, are not fixed. Nor are they reflective of a pre-existing set of ethnic or cultural distinctions within the nation state. Political devolution in Scotland and Wales since the mid-1990s has thrown the idea of English regionalism into sharp relief.¹⁴ However, the idea of English regionalism competes within political and cultural discourses with other socio-geographic markers: the distinction between urban and rural, between different urban areas, between the “centre” and the “periphery”, and with nationalism more generally.

For the purposes of this study, “regional” is taken to mean those areas outside Greater London and the apparatus of production and distribution of the centralised film industry. This means that London-based film production activities that developed within the policy framework outlined in this thesis – London-based film workshops, London-based

¹² Fawcett, *Provinces of England*, p.28.

¹³ Patricia Garside and Michael Hebbert (Eds.), *British Regionalism 1900-2000* (London: Mansell, 1989) pp.2-3.

¹⁴ New Labour made elected regional assemblies in England an election pledge in 1997 and again in 2001. Alan Trench, “Devolution’s Second Year: But Mountains Left to Climb?”, Alan Trench (Ed.), *The State of the Nations 2001: The Second Year of Devolution in the United Kingdom* (Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 2001) p.3. In 2004 a referendum was held in the North East which rejected the idea by 78% with a 48% turnout. Despite Labour’s professed commitment, as Robert Hazell notes, English regionalism under new Labour has been largely “technocratic” and administrative. “What is the English Question?”, Robert Hazell (Ed.), *The English Question* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006) pp.9-11.

short film production schemes, for example – have been generally ignored. This focus is justified in terms of the marginalisation regional production sectors have felt from the “centre” and to contribute to an understanding of filmmaking practices that have frequently been neglected by a critical establishment that has tended to implicitly internalise supposed metropolitan cultural superiority. Regional film production sectors developed in cities, and in particular the larger urban centres north of London, with the exception of Bristol in the South West. Therefore, the version of English regionalism that emerges from this thesis is primarily urban, often specifically “Northern”, and is constructed most clearly through a marginalisation from the “centre” (these ideas are discussed in more detail in the following chapter).

As well as an understanding of English regionalism in film, this thesis is intended as a contribution to several areas of the study of British cinema. Firstly, to a tradition of analysis that takes the relationship between the British state and British film as its object of study, represented best by the work of Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street.¹⁵ Secondly, as a contribution to contemporary debates about British film policy, represented in the work of Margaret Dickinson, Sylvia Harvey, James Caterer, Nick Redfern and Philip Schlesinger.¹⁶ Film policy tends

¹⁵ Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State: The Film Industry and the British Government, 1927-1984* (London: BFI, 1985). Other examples include James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-45* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000).

¹⁶ Margaret Dickinson and Sylvia Harvey, “Film Policy in the United Kingdom: New Labour at the Movies”, first published in *Political Quarterly* (August 2005), available at www.filmpolicy-uk.org/other (accessed November 2005); James Caterer, “National Lottery, National Cinema: The Arts Councils and the UK Film Industry, 1995-2000” (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of East Anglia, 2007); Nick Redfern, “Film in the English Regions”, *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 1:2 (2005); Philip Schlesinger, “Creativity: From Discourse to Doctrine”, *Screen*, 48:3 (August, 2007).

to have a short memory and a limited field of vision. While regional film policy has received a small but growing degree of attention, one way that academic analysis can contribute is by placing contemporary trends within a meaningful historical and political framework. Part of the purpose here is to historicise current developments.¹⁷

Finally this thesis is intended as a contribution to recent work in the study of British cinema that has responded to the devolutionary political agenda since the mid-1990s. As the concept of national cinema is redefined in response to globalisation, it is hoped that the analysis in the following chapters can help to explain in concrete terms at least part of the current revaluation of “British” cinema. It is these ideas that are turned to in the following chapter.

¹⁷ I am in agreement with James Caterer’s recent work into film funding by the National Lottery in which he notes a “fundamental ahistoricity within film policy debates”. “National Lottery, National Cinema”, p.288.

Chapter One

The Nation and the Regions

Fifty years from now, Britain will still be a country of long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and – as George Orwell said – “old maids cycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist”[.]¹

John Major, 1993

The Breakup of Britishness

In his introduction to *British Stars and Stardom* Bruce Babington muses: “Glancing at my bookcase, I can see eight books on [the subject of British Cinema] . . . all of which use ‘British’ rather than ‘English’”. He notes, however, that “only one actually includes brief material on any non-English made films”. Despite this he opts to retain the term, arguing that its “deployment recognises historical usages, the terms in which the cinema and surrounding culture(s) have dominantly addressed themselves, though that consensus looks to be declining.”² It is now increasingly recognised that British cinema studies has tended to internalise an English form of Britishness (a point that will be returned to later). While in some ways this is simply a matter of terminology it also refers to the declining consensus in British cinema studies of the way that “British cinema” can be understood as a national cinema. The problem of Britishness and,

¹ Quoted in, Krishnan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p.227.

² Bruce Babington, “Introduction: British Stars and Stardom”, Bruce Babington (Ed.), *British Stars and Stardom: From Alma Taylor to Sean Connery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001) p.5.

indeed, the nation as a critical category in general has been a feature of a growing literature across a range of disciplines.

“The twentieth century ends, and the twenty-first begins, with the idea of Britain in deep trouble”, argues Tony Wright.³ In a similar vein Robert Colls has argued that “by the 1990s the British knew that they weren’t what they were anymore. National identity was unravelling with astonishing speed.”⁴ Tom Nairn argued as early as 1977 that the British state was descending into territorial disintegration.⁵ The loss of Empire, global power and industrial supremacy, the move towards European unity, Welsh, Scottish and English regional devolution, immigration, globalisation and transnational capitalism have all been cited as contributing to the break-up of Britain as it has been traditionally conceived and projected as a national culture. Krishan Kumar, for instance, argues that:

Britain . . . cannot continue in the old way. The national aspirations of the Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish have to be respected and accepted. Hence devolution. So too must the claims of the “new British”, the people of Afro-Caribbean and Asian descent. Hence “multiculturalism”, in some form. The English too are not forgotten – they too must be allowed to express their own identity. Hence the restoration of the institution of the mayoralty to the English capital, London, the possibility of English regional councils or assemblies, and talk even of a separate English Parliament, on the model of the Scottish one.⁶

Colls emphasises a particular shake up in the established place of the regions in English social and cultural life, describing a “catastrophic loss of confidence in a homeland that once upon a time had had a certain centre (London), a definite edge (the regions), and not an entirely disrespectful

³ Tony Wright, “Introduction: England, Whose England?”, Selma Chen and Tony Wright (Eds.), *The English Question* (London: Fabian Society, 2000) p.8.

⁴ Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p.4.

⁵ Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: NLB, 1977).

⁶ Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, p.253.

relationship between them.”⁷ If this is correct then it suggests, in Kumar’s words, “a new set of identities within the British Isles, and new kinds of relations between the different peoples making up the once United Kingdom.”⁸

Film studies has, of course, shared in this process of redefinition. As James Leggott has noted, “Most critical responses to contemporary British cinema now take place within a conceptual framework that assumes the national to be fundamentally problematic and something to be dismantled, although still a force to be reckoned with.”⁹ Sarah Street, for example, has argued that the language with which “British cinema” has been conceptualised has been challenged by “globalisation, the proliferation of new communications media, and the impact of cross-cultural activity.” Street points to films such as *Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chadha, 1993) and *East is East* (Damien O’Donnell, 1999) which explore the experience of diasporic identities. These films, it is argued, represent a desire to move beyond the nation and to a multifaceted and hybridized contemporary experience. On the other hand *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996), *Twin Town* (Kevin Allen, 1997), *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) and *TwentyFourSeven* (Shane Meadows, 1997) represent a breed of British films that have been situated in specific localities (Scotland, Wales, the North and the Midlands respectively) as a response to “globalisation and a concern to interrogate

⁷ Colls, *Identity of England*, p.312.

⁸ Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, pp.240-241.

⁹ James Leggott, *Contemporary British Cinema: From Heritage to Horror* (London: Wallflower, 2008) p.37.

the relationship between the local and the global".¹⁰ In similar terms John Hill has argued that the "joint pressures of globalisation and devolution" mean that "there is no longer just one British Cinema (if there ever was) but rather different kinds of 'British' *cinemas* often aimed at different audiences and addressing different aspects of contemporary social and cultural life."¹¹ For Martin McLoone the "multicultural nature of English society has begun to erase singular definitions of national identity and British cinema has begun to explore the bewildering concatenation of local, regional, national, ethnic and racial identities." In particular, "peripherality has moved towards the cutting edge of contemporary debate."¹²

The redefinition of "British cinema" is a reaction to two broad and interlinked processes: the repositioning of the British state in relation to globalisation and transnational processes on the one hand; and on the other political devolution, the erosion of centralisation in cultural production, and multiculturalism. It is both an empirical and conceptual problem: empirical in that it responds to transformations in the film production and consumption practices that have accompanied these processes; and conceptual in that it provides a new way of understanding and interpreting cinematic representations that would have once been thought of as "British". New terms and concepts compete with the idea of national cinema. As Meaghan Morris argues:

¹⁰ Sarah Street, "The Idea of British Film Culture", *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, 4:1 (2001) pp.6-8.

¹¹ John Hill, "Contemporary British Cinema: Industry, Policy, Identity", *Cineaste*, 26:4 (Fall, 2001) p.33.

¹² Martin McLoone, "Internal Decolonisation? British Cinema in the Celtic Fringe", Robert Murphy (Ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 2001) p.190.

In the critical rhetoric of culture today we are always tripping over problems of spatial framing and distinction. Not only do we have the “local”, the “regional”, the “national” and the “international” to contend with but their “trans-”, “intra-”, and “infra-” dimensions as well . . . “Borders” and “boundaries” are everywhere, although in the specialized geography of cultural theory they tend to serve not as barriers but as bridges for “crossing” a rising tide of “flows”.¹³

One response to this has been the growth of a literature that pays attention to the transnational dimensions of British film production and consumption.¹⁴ Another response (and one to which this study belongs) has been a focus on cinematic activity in the nations and regions of the once United Kingdom.¹⁵ So does globalisation render the nation redundant as a critical category? In what ways might it be usefully retained? How do the English regions fit into British national identity? And how does a focus on the development of regional film production in England complicate the concept and content of British national cinema?

The Nation, the Global and the Local

One of the key ideas of the globalisation thesis is that national sovereignty is being eroded as the movement of capital, commodities, communication

¹³ Meaghan Morris, “On the Future of Parochialism: Globalisation, Young and Dangerous IV, and Cinema Studies in Tuen Mun”, John Hill and Kevin Rockett (Eds.), *Film History and National Cinema: Studies in Irish Film 2* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005) p.17.

¹⁴ For example in Sarah Street’s work on British films in the US market she discusses the over-concentration on the indigenous address of national cinemas. *Transatlantic Crossings: British Feature Films in the USA* (London: Continuum, 2002) p.3. Mike Wayne explores similar territory in a European context in *The Politics of Contemporary European Cinema: Histories, Borders, Diasporas* (Bristol: Intellect, 2002).

¹⁵ Examples here, as well as those quoted, include Duncan Petrie, *Screening Scotland* (London: BFI, 2000); Julia Hallam, “Film, Class and National Identity: Re-Imagining communities in the Age of Devolution”, Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (Eds.), *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2000); Dave Russell’s chapter on film in *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) pp.177-208; and Peter Miskell, *A Social History of the Cinema in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006). For a discussion of the British heritage film within these contexts see Sarah Neely, “The Conquering Heritage of British Cinema Studies and the ‘Celtic Fringe’”, Hill and Rockett (Eds.), *Film History and National Cinema*, pp.47-56.

and people increasingly circulate across national borders. For some this points to the irrelevance of the nation in a global capitalist system. For example, Kenichi Ohmae has argued that “in terms of real flows of economic activity, nation states have *already* lost their role as meaningful units of participation in the global economy of today’s borderless world.”¹⁶

Particularly visible has been the restructuring of media and communication industries from the 1980s: the emergence of global media systems as increasingly important components of the world economy and the degree of penetration of media texts across national borders.¹⁷ Global media systems emerge as paradigmatic of the wider phenomenon of the “borderless world”, either as agents of US cultural imperialism or sites of progressive “hybridized” post-national cultures.¹⁸

While the theory of globalisation has developed in relation to trends in international political economy, within film studies the concept of the transnational has come to compete with the national as a key analytical category. As Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden explain,

the global circulation of money, commodities, information, and human beings is giving rise to films whose aesthetic and narrative dynamics . . . reflect the impact of advanced capitalism and new media technologies as components of an increasingly interconnected world-system.

¹⁶ Kenichi Ohmae, “The End of the Nation State”, Frank J. Lechner and John Boli (Eds.), *The Globalization Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) p.207.

¹⁷ See for example, Edward S. Herman and Robert W. McChesney, *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism* (London: Cassell, 1997) Introduction pp.1-10.

¹⁸ For a critical discussion of some of the debates surrounding the global media see, Kai Hafez, *The Myth of Media Globalization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) and Mike Wayne, *The Politics of Contemporary European Cinema*, pp.2-29.

This results in the “impossibility of assigning a fixed national identity to much cinema”.¹⁹ Paul Swann goes further, arguing for the “irrelevance of national labels for cultural software.” He continues: “Ascribing national origin to either product or consumer, and perhaps the very label ‘British film’, ought perhaps to be abandoned as national and other boundaries collapse and disappear.”²⁰ Andrew Higson’s work has been particularly significant in the understanding of British cinema as a national cinema (and it is returned to at several points in this thesis). His later work, however, has also questioned the validity of the concept. For example, in “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema” the nation is described as unstable and contingent, “bound up in a constant struggle to transform the facts of dispersal, variegation and homelessness into the experience of a rooted community.” At the same time, “the contingent communities that cinema imagines are much more likely to be either local or transnational than national.” The problem is that the concept of national cinema has a tendency to supplant these other frames of identification and “obscure the degree of cultural diversity, exchange and interpretation that marks so much cinematic activity.” He argues that modern nations actually consist of highly fragmented and widely dispersed groups of people with as many differences as similarities and with little in the sense of real physical contact with each other. If this is the case, it follows that all nations are in some sense diasporic.²¹

¹⁹ Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, “General Introduction: What is Transnational Cinema”, Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (Eds.), *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006) p.1.

²⁰ Paul Swann, “The British Cultural Industries and the Mythology of the American Market: Cultural Policy and Cultural Exports in the 1940s and 1990s”, *Cinema Journal*, 39:4 (Summer 2000) p.39.

²¹ Andrew Higson, “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema”, Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (Eds.), *Cinema and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000) pp.64-65, 73.

Higson's recent work thus asks an important question: what is the value of the concept of national cinema in light of the contemporary realities of film production and consumption?

At its best the concept of the transnational offers a more nuanced and complex understanding of the interplay between the national and inter-national identifications that have been present in the cinema for much of its history, and that appear to be increasing. In particular it challenges an uncomplicated idea of national cinema as addressing and depicting a clearly demarcated imagined community and pushes the idea of national cinema as fractured and specific to the forefront of critical enquiry.²² This conceptual turn can also throw the idea of the local into focus. However, the move to abandon the nation as a critical category in the face of a loosely defined idea of cultural globalisation must be treated with caution. Firstly, the internationalisation of the cinema is not a recent phenomenon and the perennial problem of ascribing national characteristics to films is a reflection of this. As Brian Winston argues:

This difficulty arises, surely, because it is possible to situate the cinema as a supranational expression of international modernism whose effectiveness has depended, from the outset, on its shared practices of signification rather than on any (logically subordinate) markers of national elements and traits, whatever they might or might not be.²³

Secondly, claims to economic and political globalisation are often overstated. Ngaire Woods points out that "there is little that is new here.

²² The concept of modern nationalism as an imagined community belongs to Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983, 1991). For a critique of the way Anderson's work has been taken up in film studies see Philip Schlesinger, "The Sociological Scope of 'National Cinema'", Hjort and Mackenzie (Eds.), *Cinema and Nation*, pp.19-32.

²³ Brian Winston, "Is 'British Cinema' a Zebra?", *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 1:1 (2004) p.15.

Transnationalism and interdependence were buzzwords not only twenty years ago, but even eighty years ago, not to mention in the nineteenth century.” Further, the transfer of goods, capital and people across national borders has not increased dramatically and certainly not to the extent of epochal change. Woods argues for a dynamic model of global economic integration in which national sovereignties are repositioned in relation to the relative strengths of individual states. Put crudely, weak states are more at the mercy of transnational processes than strong ones. National sovereignty “may well be qualitatively changing, but it is surely not being eroded.”²⁴

This points to the danger within cultural studies of accepting an idea of cultural globalisation without question or qualification. Timothy Brennan has argued that claims toward cultural globalisation “in the humanities have been met with a suspicious eagerness and even a little gullibility.” In Brennan’s words, “globalism” has become

less an analytical category than a normative projection, complementing at once celebratory claims and despairing recognitions: the death of the nation-state, transculturation (rather than a merely one-sided assimilation), cultural hybridity (rather than a simplistic contrast between the foreign and the indigenous), and postmodernity[.]²⁵

Within this scheme an abstract idea of the nation, as state and as imagined community, is therefore *a priori* of less or no relevance. The danger is that certain trends in international political economy and transnational media processes are advanced as epochal change and applied as a theoretical model to certain film texts which are then used to

²⁴ Ngaire Woods, “The Political Economy of Globalisation”, Ngaire Woods (Ed.), *The Political Economy of Globalisation* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000) pp.2, 3.

²⁵ Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997) pp.1-2, 6.

“prove” the thesis. Films which emphasise hybridity and transnationalism emerge in a privileged position signalling the death of the nation state.

This risks replacing one totalising model of national cinema with another equally totalising model of the transnational.

So how might the category of the nation be usefully retained?

Sylvia Harvey and Margaret Dickinson note that the “concept of ‘national culture’ has become increasingly contested both as the global film industry has developed and as definitions of ‘culture’ have changed.” They argue that these changes have “lent some credibility to the view that Hollywood no longer has a single national identity, but it does not follow from this that the concept of a national film industry is redundant.”²⁶ As Higson recognises,

Given that the nation-state remains a vital and powerful legal mechanism, and given the ongoing development of national media policies, it remains important to conduct debate at that level and in those terms. It would be foolish in this context to attempt to do away altogether with the concept of national cinema.²⁷

Debates about the state’s role in film production are, then, one important arena in which the idea of national cinema still has a palpable relevance. Indeed, the perennial debate about the cultural and economic value of British film production has intensified in the last decade.²⁸ It may, therefore, be worth returning to some “old” questions about national cinema, cultural specificity and indigenous production.

²⁶ Margaret Dickinson and Sylvia Harvey, “Film Policy in the United Kingdom: New Labour at the Movies”, first published in *Political Quarterly* (August 2005), available at www.filmpolicy-uk.org/other (accessed November 2005).

²⁷ Higson, “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema”, p.70.

²⁸ See, for example, Andrew Spicer, “The Cultural Value of UK Film: Report on a Seminar Held at Senate House, University of London, 3 May 2003”, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 2:2 (2008) pp.338-343.

One of the most consistent defences of a British national cinema has been made by John Hill. He argues:

The case for national cinema . . . is largely dependent upon cultural arguments. In particular, it is dependent upon a fundamental argument regarding the value of a home-grown cinema to the cultural life of a nation and, hence, the importance of supporting indigenous filmmaking in an international market dominated by Hollywood.²⁹

A national cinema, then, has an inherent cultural value, contributing to the “cultural life” of the nation against the overwhelming outside forces of Hollywood. However, critics have frequently noted the extent to which British-made films have been restrictive in the versions of Britishness they present.³⁰ This has frequently been associated with the location of the means of production and the specific class location of those in positions of institutional power. John Ellis, for example, argues that the “clearly demonstrable core of ‘British cinema’” was the result of a “dual hegemony of production facilities on the periphery of London and a central London creative and performance elite.”³¹ Similarly, Brian Winston’s discussion of the “chasm between Britain and its cinema” refers to the studio system based in the South East, the “privately educated members of the upper middle-class” who worked there, and films which “inclined to obscure Britain behind a smokescreen of ‘one nation’ stereotyping and ersatz realism.”³²

²⁹ John Hill, “The Issue of National Cinema and British Film Production”, Duncan Petrie (Ed.), *New Questions of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1992) p.11.

³⁰ For Hill “the problem is that the marketing of national specificity for international consumption is likely to encourage the use of the most conventional or readily recognisable markers of nationality and national identity.” Ibid. p.17.

³¹ John Ellis, “British? Cinema? Television? What on Earth are we Talking About?”, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 1:1 (2004) p.21.

³² Winston, “Is ‘British Cinema’ a Zebra?”, p.19.

In this context it is easy to see the trends toward decentralisation and transnationalism as providing an automatic decentring of a conservative construction of nationality, as being themselves inherently politically and culturally progressive forces. As Albert Moran has noted:

championing national cinemas in the face of the power of Hollywood may seem politically progressive. However, considered from a sub-national or multicultural perspective such a defence is more problematic . . . Where champions of national cinemas see cultural struggle in the arena of film occurring between a heroic, David-like, national cinema and an overwhelming, Goliath-like Hollywood, an emphasis on the mini-national or the regional . . . leads to a perception of national cinema not only as Goliath-like in its denial of material resources and opportunities to marginal communities but, even more importantly, as blocking the very legitimacy of communities to control their own images and sounds.³³

The regional can thus emerge as a progressive site within British film culture, a *more* culturally valuable and “indigenous” cinema in opposition to a market dominated by a centrally-located and conservative “national” cinema.

This suggests the need to conceive of the national cinema debate in pragmatic terms. As Higson has noted, “it may be that lobbying or legislating for a national cinema will usefully advance the struggle of a community for cultural, political and economic self-determination . . . [but] in some circumstances it may be necessary to challenge the homogenising myths of national cinema discourse”.³⁴ Rather than a fetishization of cinema conceived of in national or regional terms, an analysis of specific production contexts is crucial to a meaningful contribution to this debate. The development of regional film production in

³³ Albert Moran, “Terms for a Reader”, Albert Moran (Ed.), *Film Policy: International, National and Regional Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1996) p.10.

³⁴ Higson, “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema”, p.73.

England from the late 1960s needs to be contextualised within the industrial and cultural conditions from which it emerged. At the same time, if regional film has been constructed as distinct from the “mainstream”, centrally-located British film industry then this account needs to address the discourses by which this tension has been understood. Frequently that has been through and with the rhetoric of nationality: a debate over what British cinema *should* be, conducted at the level of national and regional policy, and, at root, about the politics of film practice. The rest of this chapter will work through these issues, firstly with a discussion of the centralisation of British film production in and around London. From there it discusses what might be called the “dominant identity” that this system of production tended to produce up to 1960. After the terms of the “mainstream” of British cinema have been established, the final part of the chapter deals with the English regions: the representation of the regions within British cinema and finally with the development of regional film policy and practice.

The Centralisation of British Film Production

The early days of cinema in Britain were characterised by experimentation and innovation. Travelling showmen and entrepreneurs tried various ways to exploit the new medium for profit as part of the established music hall and fairground traditions of popular entertainment. As research based on the Mitchell and Kenyon film Collection has revealed, film production and exhibition had a strong regional and local complexion with sophisticated networks of exhibition, commissioning systems, and business practices

operating throughout the country. What have been described as “local films” – films with a considerable overlap between the people appearing in them and those who watch them – appear to have been a substantial genre of early silent film, a significant crowd pleaser and money maker. These include films of factory gates, school exits, processions, calendar customs and events, sporting events, transport films, public entertainment and leisure, and the activities and appearances of personalities of the day.³⁵ At this time film had an “organic” and responsive relationship to the local working-class communities that comprised its audience. It is only later that the industrial organisation and geographic distribution of film production infrastructure that has characterised the British film industry developed.

Why did the film production sector develop with the particular geographic distribution that it did? For Michael Chanan it is the peculiar character of film as a commodity which determined the evolution and structure of the film industry through the distinct set of relationships implied in the terms “producer”, “distributor”, “exhibitor” and “audience”. That is, film does not need to physically pass to the consumer for its exchange value to be realised. Nor does it need to pass into the ownership of the exhibitor. Market domination was achieved through the exploitation of these relationships which in turn created the division of

³⁵ See, for example, Vanessa Toulmin, “‘Local Films for Local People’: Travelling Showmen and the Commissioning of Local Films in Great Britain, 1900-1902”, *Film History*, 13:2 (2001) pp.118-137; Stephen Bottomore, “From the Factory Gate to the ‘Home Talent’ Drama: An International Overview of Local Films in the Silent Era”, Vanessa Toulmin, Simon Popple and Patrick Russell (Eds.), *The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film* (London: BFI, 2004) p.33; Timothy Neal, Vanessa Toulmin and Rebecca Vick, “Mitchell and Kenyon: A Successful, Pioneering and ‘Travelled’ Partnership of Production”, Toulmin, Popple and Russell (Eds.), *The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon*.

production, distribution and exhibition outfits.³⁶ As production became more technically complicated and sophisticated the advantages of a concentrated pool of experienced production technicians implied centralisation. London, as Britain's financial and administrative capital, had early established itself as a centre for the international film trade. The more successful British pioneers such as Cecil Hepworth and R. W. Paul set up production facilities in and around London, evidently to capitalise on this and the city's transport, financial and creative infrastructure.

Ultimately, these production outfits supplanted their provincial rivals. By 1914 virtually all studios and producers were based in or around London, making primarily narrative fiction films for a national and international audience. As Hollywood increasingly dominated British screens in the period following the First World War, British producers seeking to compete sought the maximisation of finance, facilities and talent required to sustain feature film production with the production values audiences had come to expect.³⁷

After 1920 there was a boom in all areas of the cinema. However, the new investments came from metropolitan-based members of the financial classes – bankers, industrialists, theatre owners, members of parliament, print magnates – and not from the entrepreneurial class that had characterised it previously. At the same time the film production sector developed close links with the West End, sharing actors and

³⁶ Michael Chanan, *The Dream that Kicks: The Prehistory and Early Years of Cinema in Britain* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) pp.228-230

³⁷ See Rachael Low and Roger Manvell, *The History of the British Film, 1896-1906* (Surrey: Unwin Brothers Limited, 1948 & 1973) pp.15-27; Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1906-1914* (Surrey: Unwin Brothers Limited, 1948 & 1973) p.93; and Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997) pp.4-7, 12-13

drawing on theatrical traditions.³⁸ In the 1930s, the period in which Tom Ryall argues the British industry was effectively constructed, the established studios at Elstree and Shepherd's Bush were expanded and new studios built in Ealing, Shepperton, Pinewood and Denham. Vertical integration emerged with the formation of the Gaumont-British Picture Corporation and the Associated British Picture Corporation, as well as smaller companies like London Films, British and Dominions and Associated Talking Pictures.³⁹ By the end of the Second World War the industry was dominated by a duopoly of the Associated British Picture Corporation and the Rank Organisation, who between them owned a third of cinema seats and 70 per cent of studio space. Of the 86 film studios that had existed in Britain up to 1997, 68 were located in or around London.⁴⁰

The centralisation of film production in Britain can seem so obvious as to be natural and unquestioned, a pattern that is congruent with the development of other cultural industries and with London's status as the nation's capital and home to most of the state apparatus. For example, the theatre has been strikingly metropolitan in terms of location of provision, personnel and control from the 1860s when touring London-based companies began to dominate regional stages. Similarly, the music industry has been concentrated in London as one of three main

³⁸ Kenton Bamford, *Distorted Images: British National Identity and Film in the 1920s* (London: I. B. Taurus, 1999) pp.3-4, 96-97.

³⁹ Tom Ryall, "A British Studio System: The Associated British Picture Corporation and the Gaumont-British Picture Corporation in the 1930s", Robert Murphy (Ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 1997) pp.27-28.

⁴⁰ Street, *British National Cinema*, p.29.

international centres for music recording and publishing.⁴¹ However, a comparison with the development of broadcasting in Britain provides a useful counterpoint. Key to this has been the idea of “public service”, enshrined in the BBC since its inception in the 1920s. As John Reith, Managing Director General of the British Broadcasting Company 1923-1926 and first Director General of the BBC 1927-1938, explains:

there was an overriding concern for the maintenance of high standards and a unified policy towards the whole of the programme service supplied. The service must not be used for entertainment purposes alone. Broadcasting had a responsibility to bring into the greatest possible number of homes in the fullest degree all that was best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement. The presentation of a high moral tone, the avoidance of the vulgar and the hurtful, was of paramount importance.⁴²

This has been the main way that the idea of public service broadcasting has been understood in Britain: as a cultural, moral and educative force, dictated by the state. The metropolitan, elitist dimension to this has been well documented. After all, a “high moral tone” was surely to be found in the capital; the centre of English culture. As Mark Pegg comments:

Most of the BBC production staff were wholly convinced of metropolitan superiority and preferred to set their own standards for programmes rather than be seen to pander to regional variations in taste which, in any case, they considered to be merely capricious.⁴³

Or, as an American commentator noted in 1948:

English as spoken by radio announcers is not used by any of the ordinary people of England: it is generally associated with class, educational, or regional (London) snobbery, and

⁴¹ Dave Russell, *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) pp.147-149, 209-210.

⁴² Quoted in, Paddy Scannel and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting, Volume One, 1922-1939: Serving the Nation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1991) p.7.

⁴³ Mark Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society, 1918-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1983) p.23.

although clear and not unpleasant, is the language of a minority.⁴⁴

However, crucially the public service remit and the explicit ideological and structural links to state and nation provided a space where arguments about regional representation in broadcasting could find expression. A regional presence in the BBC, while always of secondary importance, has been apparent since the 1920s. Accusations of metropolitan supremacy and authoritarianism, the stifling of regional talent and taste, and criticism of the Corporation as unrepresentative of the country as a whole have been consistent throughout its history. This was accompanied by (in today's language) calls for the regional devolution of control of programming.⁴⁵ "By 1939, few inside the BBC would have argued that a regional service was not an essential adjunct to the main National Programme", notes Pegg.⁴⁶ It was arguments of this type that led to the regional basis of independent commercial television in 1954, with the franchise arrangement demanding that companies produce material that reflected the culture of their region. ITV began transmission in 1955 with the three initial franchises representing London, the Midlands and the North. The North East was connected in 1959 while Yorkshire Television opened in 1968.⁴⁷

The ideology of British broadcasting, then, has contained a tension between the dissemination of a national culture found in the centre and an acknowledgement of the regional dimension to the national community

⁴⁴ Dorotheen Ingham Allan, "The British Way of Radio", *Hollywood Quarterly*, 3:4 (Summer, 1948) p.365.

⁴⁵ Sylvia Harvey and Kevin Roberts, "Introduction", Sylvia Harvey and Kevin Roberts (Eds.), *The Regions, the Nations and the BBC* (London: BFI, 1993) pp.2-3.

⁴⁶ Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society*, p.35.

⁴⁷ Russell, *Looking North*, pp.188-189.

since the 1920s, and this has been reflected in the geographic distribution of radio and television production infrastructure. The film industry, on the other hand, has followed a trajectory towards centralisation and market domination with film treated predominantly as a commodity – as opposed to a cultural, educational or artistic activity. As Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street have shown, while cultural arguments have always been invoked to justify economic intervention in the film industry, frequently with “a great emphasis in the rhetoric on the cultural significance of nationality”, national film policy has been conceived solely within the framework of commercial policy, with production protected and later subsidised as an industry.⁴⁸ Control over screen representations has been exercised through censorship, which, while formulated under a fear of the potential of the cinema to corrupt the “impressionable” minds of the working-classes, differs fundamentally to the ideology of mass broadcasting as developed by Reith’s BBC.⁴⁹ Significantly, film remained untouched by the post-war precedents for state control of the economy, intervention in, and patronage of culture reflected in the Arts Council and BBC television.⁵⁰

The traditional account of cinema history in Britain has presented a teleological narrative of progression from the earliest cinematic

⁴⁸ Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State: The Film Industry and the British Government 1927-84* (London: BFI, 1985) pp.1-4.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of film censorship in Britain see Jeffrey Richards, “British Film Censorship”, Robert Murphy (Ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 1997) pp.167-177.

⁵⁰ Dickinson describes the post-war campaign to nationalise the film industry and the wider post-war debates about film culture on the Left in “A Short History”, Dickinson (Ed.), *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90* (London: BFI, 2000) pp.11-12, 20-23. While this campaign focussed on the economic implications of nationalisation in line with the post-War nationalisation of other industries it contained a cultural imperative to create a film industry that was more responsive and better able to articulate a meaningful culture to the working-class.

experiments to the development of an industry based in and around London and an institutionalised system of narrative film production that sought to emulate the more advanced Hollywood model.⁵¹ Until the late 1960s the centralisation of film production infrastructure in Britain, and with it the centralisation of control over screen representation, was accepted in official, public and academic discourses virtually unchallenged, an inevitable consequence of market forces. So what image of Britishness has this system produced?

The Location of Britishness

A debate exists among historians as to when a specifically English national identity emerged. Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, and following them Krishan Kumar, make a case for the emergence of a specific English identity in the later part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, what Kumar describes as a “moment of Englishness” in the national culture. During this period state education was dramatically reorganised and extended and Dodd emphasises the centrality of educational institutions in the control and dissemination of national identity.⁵² The study of English literature and the construction of a national literary canon

⁵¹ One exception to this was Mancunian Films. John E. Blakely began making films that starred leading Lancashire comics in 1927 in London-based facilities. The films were intended primarily for Northern working-class audiences, including, notably, George Formby's first two films *Boots Boots* and *Off the Dole* in the 1930s. Production activities continued and in 1947 Blakely and several partners set up Film Studios Manchester, the first feature film studio outside the Greater London area. In 1953 the studio was sold to the BBC and production shifted back to London, continuing into the 1960s. Mancunian Films have been overlooked by British cinema history. What remains of their output is held at the North West Film Archive and subject to an enthusiastic restoration and research project by C. P. Lee. Information is available at <http://www.itsahotun.com> (accessed October 2006). See also Russell, *Looking North*, p.178.

⁵² Philip Dodd, “Englishness and the National Culture”, Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (Eds.), *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880-1920* (Kent: Croom Helm, 1987) p.3.

as a repository of national values, according to Kumar, became the “first deity of the English nation” during the period. This was also the period in which the *Oxford English Dictionary* was first published, and the English language “purified and purged of its ‘regional dialects’, and the pronunciation and speech patterns of the metropolitan South were deemed the national form of speech.”⁵³

Southern English dominance of the political and cultural life of Britain has been firmly established from the beginning of the twentieth century. It is important to emphasise, however, that the centralisation of the “national” culture was not a coherent project, but rather a shared “membership and an overlapping vocabulary of evaluation” among certain powerful social groups.⁵⁴ The centralised system of commercial film production has reflected and internalised the “overlapping vocabulary of evaluation” of the dominant form of Englishness, as well as its attendant hierarchies and subject positions. From Cecil Hepworth in the 1920s to Rank and ABPC in the 1950s British cinema has tended to present a particular construction of Britain and Britishness. Not only are these the most conventional or readily recognisable markers of nationality and national identity, but also culturally authorised signifiers of authority and control. As Street argues:

Until relatively recently the diversity of Britishness . . . has not been fully represented on screen. With some notable exceptions, until the 1960s the dominant construction involved films which reflected a limited, often privileged experience of the class system, starring actors and actresses with BBC English accents and set in metropolitan locations.⁵⁵

⁵³ Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, pp.220-221.

⁵⁴ Dodd, “Englishness and the National Culture”, p.2.

⁵⁵ Street, *British National Cinema*, p.1.

It may be useful here to pick out some key examples of the critical judgements levelled at some of the major British film producers up to 1960 which collectively produce what can be called the “dominant identity” of British cinema.

Kenton Bamford discusses production strategies during the 1920s and argues that films were consistently concerned with a particular construction of England and Englishness. The English countryside, a mythical rural England populated by equally mythical characters, was central to British cinema of the day. Attendant to this construction was an image of a static consensual class hierarchy: “on offer were visions of an unchanged and unchanging world where charity begat gratitude and passivity, where class division was mollified by paternalism and where the sun shone with artificial brilliance on characters whose privilege commandeered centre-screen.” Bamford argues that the location of film production infrastructure and the links with the legitimate theatre undoubtedly influenced the screen representations available in British films. At the same time a popular discourse was established around the particular qualities of British films:

To praise a British film was to describe it as “dignified and impressive” or “wholesome, absolutely clean”. When problems were featured it was imperative that they be treated with decorum, in an “essentially British” way which was “free from nastiness”. The heroes in these films were indubitably “all a British Officer should be”, “typically solid Englishmen” or “perfectly mannered English gentlemen”.⁵⁶

The film industry of the period was “always a bastion of conservative Toryism” and what Bamford describes is a distinct collusion between

⁵⁶ Bamford, *Distorted Images*, pp.8-14, 34, 97.

British film producers and an officially sanctioned image of national identity in which “suburbia was heaven [and] the true British way of life only began at the end of the Metropolitan Line.”⁵⁷

In the 1930s the British film industry was dominated by the Gaumont-British Picture Corporation and the Associated British Picture Corporation. Film production of the period is generally divided into two types: the “Quota quickies” on the one hand; on the other “quality” productions aimed at the international market. The notorious “Quota quickies” were the result of the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927. The Act was designed to stimulate indigenous film production by requiring exhibitors to show a quota of British-made films, beginning at 5 per cent but rising to 20 per cent by 1937. As Tom Ryall notes, “these low-budget pictures gave British cinema a poor reputation with both critics and the cinema-going public.”⁵⁸ Subsequently, and despite a recent historical revision of the films and the period, most critical attention has focussed on the output of the big companies.⁵⁹ As Ryall argues, the period has been constructed as “unduly dependant on the West End theatre for its sources . . . dominated by cheaply made pictures and, at best, a pale copy of Hollywood”:

When it came to the character and quality of the films actually produced it was argued that too many films – whatever their budget – were based upon middle-class, middlebrow stage plays and failed to reflect social reality. According to many it was a trivial, escapist cinema in a volatile social and political period[.]⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibid. pp.109-111.

⁵⁸ Ryall, “A British Studio System”, p.28.

⁵⁹ See Jeffrey Richards (Ed.), *The Unknown 1930s: An Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929-1939* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998); and Steve Chibnall, *Quota Quickies: The Birth of the British “B” Film* (London: BFI, 2007).

⁶⁰ Ryall, “A British Studio System”, pp.27-28.

In the 1940s and 1950s the biggest British film producer was J. Arthur Rank who controlled more than half the total studio space, over 600 cinemas, the largest British distribution company and over 80 subsidiaries. The size and power of his organisation allowed him to compete directly with Hollywood, attempting to penetrate the American market and trying to dominate the British.⁶¹ A Conservative and devout Methodist, Rank's production policies were guided by a combination, or tension, between his religious zeal and his business interests. He financed the independent productions of such notable figures as Ronald Neame, David Lean, Laurence Olivier, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, and Sidney Gilliat. At the same time he exercised his authority to ensure that his films shared, as much as commercially possible, his high standards of moral integrity and pursued production policies that would promote family values at home and endorse the "British way of life" overseas.⁶² Vincent Porter comments:

Rank films produced during this period all reinforced family values in one way or another. Most of them were contemporary comedies, adventure pictures or dramas . . . "Adult" subjects, like John Osbourne's play *Look Back in Anger* or Alan Sillitoe's novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, were rejected. Historical subjects, if treated at all, were normally about British heroism or adventures in the Second World War, and those that were set in an earlier period . . . often had a central hero who unquestioningly fought off the enemy in order to defend British values or British interests.⁶³

⁶¹ Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain 1939-49* (London: Routledge, 1989) pp.61, 74, 224.

⁶² Michael Wakelin, *J. Arthur Rank: The Man Behind the Gong* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1996) pp.71, 76-77.

⁶³ Vincent Porter, "Methodism Versus the Market-Place: The Rank Organisation and British Cinema", Murphy (Ed.), *The British Cinema Book*, pp.122-127. Rank's stars were groomed in his famous Charm School at Pinewood studios. Filmmaker Ken Russell notes the particular kind of British "charm" that Rank seemed preoccupied with: "Around this time British films were very high on charm. Officers in the forces had it to a man and

Another important British film production company that must be mentioned here is Ealing Studios. Between 1938 and 1959, under the chairmanship of Michael Balcon, Ealing Studios made films that were self-consciously “British” in character and aimed at the home market.⁶⁴ Ealing films are perhaps best remembered for their focus on community, so much so that Chapman argues that the values of community, tolerance, decency, duty and public service are a “consistent and identifiable studio ethos which crossed generic boundaries, from war films to comedies, and which represents a distinct production ideology.” The “Ealing comedies” of the late 1940s and early 1950s have become “shorthand for a particular style of film . . . one characterised by its whimsical humour and nostalgic picture of an idealised, imaginary nation of stubborn eccentrics and harmless anarchists.”⁶⁵

Balcon himself, who exercised a great deal of control over the character of Ealing’s output, was politically conservative and committed to the state. However he employed filmmakers such as Harry Watt and Alberto Cavalcanti that came from a documentary background, affording them a certain level of creative freedom. Thus while Balcon’s production policies often found expression in films that focussed on working-class communities realised with a degree of “realism” they also reflected his

no one living in the West End was ever without it. Commuters north of the Thames sometimes had it while the unfortunates south of the river seldom had it. People from the East End never had it. J. Arthur Rank . . . dreamed of making a fortune by exporting it on celluloid and opened a charm school for that very purpose. As long as the encyclopaedia of cockney rhyming slang exists, J. Arthur will be fondly remembered[.]” (Presumably, few people in the regions had it either). Quoted in, Wakelin, *J. Arthur Rank*, pp.76-77.

⁶⁴ Tim Pulleine, “A Song and Dance at the Local: Thoughts on Ealing”, Murphy (Ed.), *The British Cinema Book*, p.114.

⁶⁵ James Chapman, *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005) pp.145-146.

sense of patriotic duty to the nation, avoiding social critique. Indeed,

Charles Drazin comments:

This sense of civic duty was responsible for some very indifferent cinema. In the war years the studio turned out morale-raisers . . . Most are something of a chore to sit through today, and their two-dimensional characters who display a stiff upper lip and a chilling cheerfulness under the most appalling circumstances are hard to take seriously.⁶⁶

Ultimately, as James Chapman argues, “Ealing’s Britain was essentially middle class and conservative in its representation of social change and, especially, gender.”⁶⁷

While these few examples are inevitably and necessarily reductive, they do demonstrate what has been thought of as the dominant construction of Britain and Britishness that the centralised system of commercial film production tended to produce until the 1960s. For Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, “The problem was that those in positions of institutional power had a particularly narrow definition of ‘Englishness’ and they actively discouraged films which celebrated, or drew from, working-class culture.”⁶⁸

The English Regions

Within this hierarchy of representation the English regions have held a certain status and currency. Edgar Anstey, stalwart of the British documentary movement, provides a good example of this in an article published in the British Council’s *The Year’s Work in Film* in 1950 titled

⁶⁶ Charles Drazin, *The Finest Years: British Cinema of the 1940s* (London: Andre Deutsh, 1998) p.107.

⁶⁷ Chapman, *Past and Present*, p.164.

⁶⁸ Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s: The Decline of Deference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p.267.

“The Regional Life of Britain as seen Through British Films”. In it, Anstey argues that it was during the 1940s that film producers first “discovered” the regions and began to use “British regional life” as source material: “real factory interiors, hostels and dance halls”, “real places”, “real people”, “the rough edges of true life”. As forebears to this widening of cinematic vision during the period Anstey cites Harry Watt, Humphrey Jennings, John Grierson and Robert Flaherty, the documentarists first responsible for capturing industrial Britain on film, first showed working-class people “in their own environment”, first took the camera to real locations.⁶⁹

Anstey draws an interesting although ill-defined distinction between the regions as a location for films and regional films proper: “films of regional life”. The distinction is based upon, on the one hand, filmmaking with the “eye of the tourist”, as “visiting intelligences having more in common with the scenario office than the local factory”; or, on the other, filmmaking as the true “student of regional life” in which “the story grows out of the background and is not superimposed uncomfortably upon it – the test that all films of regional life must pass.” Regional filmmaking proper developed as part of the wartime propaganda effort and is a mode of filmmaking practice outside the commercial industry. Regional filmmaking has therefore been a “spartan discipline” in which “authenticity has had to compensate for the more glamorous virtues that money can buy.”⁷⁰ That said, Anstey looks toward the development of regional filmmaking in Britain:

⁶⁹ Edgar Anstey, “The Regional Life of Britain as Seen Through British Films”, Roger Manvell (Ed.), *The Year’s Work in Film, 1949* (London: Longmans Green, 1950) pp. 46-49.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

How? One question which arises is whether the development of local production units is a desirable and indeed necessary step if the regional film is to develop fully. In Britain there are comparatively few production groups operating outside Greater London. Those units which have their headquarters in Scotland, Manchester or Devonshire must face serious economic limitations . . . which seem inevitably to follow a removal from the metropolitan centres of film production and promotion . . .

It appears that if all the richness of the British scene is to be translated to the screen – and there can be no question that there is an enormous and world-wide demand for the story of regional Britain – then we must contrive in some way to decentralize our thinking rather than our technical facilities.⁷¹

Anstey's ideas about the "film of regional life" raise a number of issues about the representation of the regions in British film. Firstly, Anstey draws a distinction between the regions and the "mainstream", metropolitan-based British cinema. This distinction is both structural – the regions do not have any production facilities – and representational. If British film production infrastructure has been centralised, then the conception of Britishness that this system has produced has tended to neglect "the richness of the British scene". The regions, on the other hand, are associated with "reality" – "real" people and places – as opposed to the artificial realism of a London studio. Tied to Anstey's conception of reality is the representation of the regional working-class; an "authentic" form of Britishness. Anstey also draws a distinction between modes of filmmaking practice: the distinction between regional filmmaking proper and "the eye of the tourist", which may be explained as the distinction between regionally-based, "embedded" filmmaking practices and the outside exploitation of the regions as a location. Finally, Anstey

⁷¹ Ibid. p.49.

looks forward to the development of regional filmmaking proper. For Anstey, regional filmmaking is a “good thing”. These ideas – located outside the “mainstream”, the association with “authentic” reality and the working-class – are central to the way the regions have featured in British cinema. Their continuity in the discursive construction of the English regions in British film is striking and can be mapped onto the political economy of the development of regional film production sectors from the late 1960s. I will return to the “eye of the tourist” below. For now it is worth looking at this “regional discourse” in a bit more detail.

David Russell has analysed the representation of the North of England in British cinema. As he puts it, “While film in the South is just ‘film’ and can be about any and everything, northern film always arouses certain expectations”. For Russell the English regions are fixed in what, drawing on Edward Said, he calls a relationship of “flexible positional superiority”. That is, an unequal centre-periphery relationship in which the North enjoys some degree of agency but always in ways that do not fundamentally challenge perceived truths about the nature of English identity. The North is positioned as England’s “other”, ultimately inferior, while being “celebrated, even cherished, but always in terms dictated by the centre.”⁷²

While Russell is concerned with representations of the North in art, literature, theatre, language, sport and film and television, his work is revealing as to the discursive construction of regionalism in British culture. Long represented in relation to its industrial past, the North has been

⁷² Russell, *Looking North*, pp.181, 8-9.

associated with working-class or proletarian culture and an associated radical political culture; a pragmatism, empiricism and seriousness; a certain type of masculinity and gender relationships; and authenticity and a moral superiority.⁷³ The North has occupied an ambivalent position, as England's "other" but also as a rich cultural repository where alternative or critical cultural strategies might find expression.

There are mutually constitutive but competing regional discourses within Britishness, of which the North-South dichotomy is the most visible, significant and enduring. From this we could present a series of oppositions: Southern/Northern; middle class/working-class; rural/urban; escapist/realist; traditional/modern; conservative/egalitarian or progressive, effeminate/masculine, and so on. However, the problem with establishing a scheme of oppositions in this way is that it suggests a permanence of reference which is never so clear cut in practice. Rather, representations of the regional dimension of Englishness must be seen as flexible and contingent, a loose and inexact set of signifiers that can be appropriated as part of various cultural strategies. Representations of the regions are thus available to filmmakers in an expressive way. The regional discourse – particularly the idea of the North – can be mobilised to refer to different forces and identities: for example the uneasy economic and social relationship between the "centre" and the "periphery"; perceptions of morality; versions of masculinity or femininity; ideas of reality and fantasy; generation; political affiliation; verisimilitude or even

⁷³ Ibid. pp.22-27.

racial identity. The plasticity of the idea of the regions provides a rich object of study.

Higson has identified four closely related moral attitudes that have dominated thinking about British cinema. Simply put these are, firstly, a fear of mass production, “what is conceived as a standardized, artistically impoverished, trivial, and escapist mass culture.” Secondly, a concern to “promote a national cinema which can be described in terms of art, culture, and quality.” Third is the “desire to produce a realist national cinema which can ‘reflect’ the contemporary social and political realities of Britain as perceived from a social democratic perspective.” The final moral attitude “deals with the question of heritage and indigenous cultural tradition” taking the form of a “concern to represent what is imagined to be the national past, its people, its landscape, and its cultural heritage, in a mode of representation which can itself be understood as national, and as traditional.” Higson emphasises that this cluster of attitudes can be interwoven in different ways, and representations of the English regions may often fit into more than one. However, “regional filmmaking” in the way that Anstey understands it corresponds most clearly with the third attitude, the desire for a realist national cinema:

Embodied here is a desire for Englishness – but not the archaic Englishness of the heritage genre or of London’s bourgeois society theatre . . . This was bound to a social democratic view of the potential of mass communications systems, the idea that they can be emancipatory forces. There were recurrent calls for an enlargement of the public sphere, a democratization of representation, an extension of the iconography of the social – that is, a democratization of the community of the nation as imagined by the cinema.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Higson, *Waving the Flag*, pp.14, 15, 16, 17, 16.

The social democratic desire for the democratization of representation, the enlargement of the public sphere, the extension of the iconography of the social – these ideas have provided the most consistent space for representations of the regions to find expression. In this way the regions have been associated with ideas of a progressive national cinema: a *more* nationally specific cinema, less tainted by the bourgeois metropolitan elite or the philistine commercialism of popular “mainstream” and Hollywood film.

The most influential post-War example of this came at the end of the 1950s. The films of the British New Wave have generally been credited with breathing new life into British cinema. Films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960), *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1959), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962), *A Taste of Honey* (Tony Richardson, 1962), *A Kind of Loving* (John Schlesinger, 1962) and *This Sporting Life* (Lindsay Anderson, 1963), with their regional settings and actors, injected a regional dimension into the cinematic canon. As Russell notes, “in the North lay the ‘authentic’ England, for once privileged over the comfortable South, where cinematic traditions could be refreshed and post-War class relations and the rigidity of moral codes probed and sometimes challenged.”⁷⁵

The final point that needs to be made here is that the realist tradition of British filmmaking and the morality that has accompanied it has frequently been characterised as a top-down approach to the

⁷⁵ Russell, *Looking North*, p.184.

democratization of representation. For some critics it is seen as a form of cinematic social anthropology; revealing marginalised sections of England to the educated elite. Higson calls the tradition “the voyeuristic gaze of one class looking at another, a process of absorbing the working-classes into the established national culture.”⁷⁶ For example, as Russell notes, “Of the five directors involved in the northern realist cycle – Lindsay Anderson, Jack Clayton, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson and John Schlesinger – only West Riding-born Richardson came from the North and even he left to study at Oxford and work mainly in London.”⁷⁷ For the New Wave filmmakers regional representation was part of an aesthetic strategy that sought to challenge the class hierarchy that British cinema was perceived to endorse, or as Lindsay Anderson had it, “Southern English . . . metropolitan in attitude and entirely middle class.”⁷⁸ This was part of a wider cultural turn towards “regional” themes and representations in literature and drama more generally.⁷⁹ While the thematic and stylistic influence of the films has been noteworthy (discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six) the filmmakers did not set out to challenge the location of the industry or to promote a democratisation of film production, but rather show previously underrepresented groups within the national community. The regional exposure in the New Wave was short lived.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Higson, *Waving the Flag*, p.17.

⁷⁷ Russell, *Looking North*, p.184.

⁷⁸ Quoted in, *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p.178.

⁸⁰ Dominic Sandbrook argues that, by 1962, “the demand for provincial realism was exhausted.” *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Little, Brown, 2005) p.195.

Regional Films Proper

A key idea that emerges from the above is that of agency; in particular the limited agency afforded to the English regions by the centralised system of film production – Anstey’s “eye of the tourist”. This sense of the imposition of certain qualities and myths by a centrally located British cinema affording limited agency to the periphery is also a feature of the literature that has addressed the development of film production activities in the devolved nations of the UK. For example, Martin McLoone has described the representation of the “Celtic periphery” that emerged from the centralised system of British film production in terms of “metropolitan needs and desires”:

films which ventured out into the peripheries did so in the main to reinforce rather than to challenge and change these representations. Until relatively recently, there was little indigenous filmmaking or television production in Scotland, Wales or Ireland that might have challenged these dominant tropes . . . During the 1970s and 80s a sometimes vigorous and sometimes bitter campaign had to be fought to persuade government and the centralised industries to support local film and television production and to get facilities and funding devolved to these national regions.⁸¹

McLoone argues that the appropriation and reinterpretation of the dominant myths produced by the centrally located British cinema has been an important concern of these emerging film industries:

The tendency in recent films emanating from the Celtic periphery is to attempt to move cinematic representation beyond the imagery and traditional iconography that have defined it. The re-imagining that is taking place in Scotland,

⁸¹ One way that an indigenous cultural tradition has been asserted is through the use of minority languages in film and television production. In Wales “it necessitated the threat of a hunger strike to the death by the then leader of Plaid Cymru, Gwynfor Evans, to persuade the government to support a Welsh-language channel.” McLoone, “Internal Decolonisation?”, pp.187-188.

Wales and Northern Ireland involves a reworking of national or regional tropes and stereotypes.⁸²

For McLoone this is a process of “internal decolonisation”.⁸³

Regional film production sectors in England began to emerge in the same period as those that McLoone discusses. So, is this notion of “internal decolonisation” a useful paradigm with which to examine their development? Regional film has taken up some of the existing myths about the English regions elaborated by British cinema, particularly through the values and practices of the realist tradition. These have been appropriated and transformed in specific ways, and part of the purpose of the chapters that make up the case studies in this thesis is to understand and contextualise these lines of transformation and reworking. Similarly, the arguments employed by regionally-based filmmakers and the development of regional film policy has frequently been couched in a rhetoric that has emphasised ideas of regional democracy and the marginalisation of regional agency by the centralised system of film production. However, there are also some important differences between the development of regional film production in England and the emerging national film industries in the “Celtic periphery”.

Firstly, ideas of post-colonial self-determination are hampered by the integration of the English regions within England and Englishness. Regional identities are not necessarily in opposition or contradiction to an English identity, but can constitute and complement it. Claims can be made for a distinct Northern identity and a specifically Northern sense of

⁸² Ibid. p.190.

⁸³ McLoone has elsewhere described this as a “critical regionalism”. See “National Cinema and Cultural Identity: Ireland and Europe”, Hill, McLoone and Hainsworth (Eds.), *Border Crossing*, pp.141-146.

marginalisation from the “centre”, but what cultural resources might filmmakers based in other regions mobilise to rework the myths of Southern cultural imperialism? As Russell comments:

Indeed, those in . . . significant regions such as the “South West”, “East Anglia” and perhaps above all, the ill-defined and oft-ignored “Midlands”, have been marginalised within the regional hierarchy by the sheer power of the North’s sense of place and by the dominant discourse of the “North-South divide” . . . That lack of interest captures well the plight of a region sandwiched between the two most culturally laden spaces within the nation’s imaginary geography.⁸⁴

While there have been some attempts to define regional filmmaking in terms of a Northern identity – particularly in the regional workshop period (discussed in Chapter Four) – the Midlands has also been a significant site of film production activity, especially in the later period.

Secondly, the development of regional film policy and practice also demonstrates a distinct lack of concern with ideas of regional identity. This is both in policy terms – generally in the form of arguments that focus solely on regional economic development and integration with the national industry, as opposed to any kind of ethnic or cultural regionalism – and in terms of representation – the adoption of “mainstream” traditions, the privileging of narrative space over a sense of place, for example (this is particularly prominent in the material discussed in Chapter Six). Taken together, in the development of regional production sectors that this thesis outlines there is little sense of a corresponding development of a cultural politics of regionality. Instead, arguments in favour of regional film production in England have been more likely to appropriate and modify the

⁸⁴ Russell, *Looking North*, pp.8-9.

traditional arguments in favour of state subsidy for film production in national terms; that is, regional film production is either culturally or economically valuable and therefore worthy of public support. In this, the development of regional film policy and practice emerges as part of the larger story of the relationship between the cinema and the state in Britain in the post-War period. This relationship is summarised by Toby Miller:

Film Policy in Britain shares a dilemma in common with that for most other national cinemas – the commerce-culture relationship. There is always a struggle between the desire to build a viable sector of the economy that provides employment, foreign exchange and multiplier effects; and the desire for a representative and local cinema that reflects seriously upon society through drama.⁸⁵

The tension identified by Miller here – the commerce-culture relationship – is based upon a preconceived incompatibility between an economically viable film *industry* and a serious, representative film *culture*. It is reflected in two different arguments about the role of state subsidy for film production. The first is the argument for subsidy of film production in terms of its value to the economy, with film production conceived as a commercial activity and as part of a wider British industrial sector in an international capitalist market system. The second is the argument for subsidy of film production for cultural reasons. In this the state has a responsibility to subsidise forms of film production that have a cultural value, however conceived, that the market is unable or unwilling to provide on its own. The commerce-culture tension, understood in this way, has been a driving force within intellectual and public debate about national

⁸⁵ Toby Miller “The Film Industry and the Government: ‘Endless Mr Beans and Mr Bonds’?”, Robert Murphy (Ed.) *British Cinema of the 90s* (London: BFI, 2000, 2001) p.44.

cinema, and central to the development of regional film policy and practice.

However, there are several problems with this formulation. Firstly, as Margaret Dickinson has argued, the distinction between “commercial” and “non-commercial” policy frameworks is flawed “because it posits a somewhat dubious distinction between profitable and subsidised activity, which responds more to the ideology than the actuality of ‘commercial’ production.”⁸⁶ The extent to which “commercial” forms of filmmaking have depended on public subsidy and market regulation is well documented.⁸⁷ Furthermore, “commercial” policy frameworks do not necessarily exclude “cultural” ideas and “commercial” films are no less shaped by “culture”: “even if the former is shaped by the drive for profit it does not mean that, as individuals, the players are always or only maximising wealth, or a combination of wealth, power and prestige. Personal values, inclinations and interests are also important.”⁸⁸

If “commerce” is not a coherent category, then a further problem is that what exactly defines “culture” or “cultural value” is not fixed over time or consistent at any one time. The different manifestations of “cultural” film are too numerous to be discussed here. The key point, however, is that all depend in some way on their perceived difference from

⁸⁶ I am paraphrasing Dickinson slightly here; her discussion focuses more on the politics of film practice than policy. “A Short History”, pp.3-4.

⁸⁷ The “commercial” industry receives massive indirect subsidy from the state that is difficult to quantify. For example, in 2004 industry tax incentives were estimated at anywhere between £90m and £300m per year. See David Steele, “Developing the Evidence Base for UK Film Strategy: The Research Process at the UK Film Council”, *Cultural Trends*, 13:4 (December 2004), p.13. Margaret Dickinson and Sylvia Harvey note that some estimates place the figure as high as £2.2bn in any given year. “Film Policy in the United Kingdom: New Labour at the Movies”, first published in *Political Quarterly* (August 2005), available at www.filmpolicy-uk.org/other (accessed November 2005).

⁸⁸ Dickinson, “A Short History”, p.5.

“commercial” film, however defined. The adoption of a self-consciously “cultural” position is thus the adoption of a tactical position within film culture; that is, a way individuals, organisations and groups can define themselves *against* a dominant system of production that for one reason or another has been found inadequate.

“Culture” and “commerce” are therefore relative categories that refer more to an ideological tension than an empirical difference between different kinds of films or different kinds of policy frameworks. This tension is expressed in different ways in the literature that has addressed the decentralisation of film production in Britain. For example, Street argues that films which “explore the places, spaces, specificities of, and interactions between, these coexisting identities have the potential to address the complexities of contemporary society at local and global levels, revealing the interdependence of both.”⁸⁹ Similarly, for Hill, devolution has resulted in “a growth of films prepared to engage with a more diverse and complex sense of national, regional, ethnic, social, and sexual identities within the UK.”⁹⁰ Steve McIntyre goes further, arguing that regionally-produced film might provide the “cultural and political dynamics necessary to develop a progressive national film culture.”⁹¹

For these critics regional filmmaking is given a potential or actual progressive function in British cinema, associated with the argument for a national cinema that is culturally specific and able to reflect seriously upon British society, usually through the realist tradition. However, it follows

⁸⁹ Street, “The Idea of British Film Culture”, p.7.

⁹⁰ Hill, “Contemporary British Cinema”, p.33.

⁹¹ Steve McIntyre, “National Film Cultures: Politics and Peripheries”, *Screen*, 26:1 (January/February, 1985) p.67.

from the above discussion that there is nothing inherently progressive about regional film production sectors. The following chapters argue that the development of regional film policy and practice can be understood in terms of two distinct models, each reflecting different manifestations of the commerce-culture tension, united by their structural position outside London and the “mainstream” film industry. In this way, the development of regional filmmaking in England is a useful topic through which to explore some of the wider questions that have been prominent since the late 1960s in debates about British film – cultural specificity, realism, the role of the state, commercialisation – as a national cinema or otherwise.

Chapter Two

The Regional Workshop Model

Once upon a time, in a region far, far away, there lived an independent film-maker. S/he had a dream, and in it s/he saw a film. The film was on 16mm, in colour, and had synchronised sound. It was formally sophisticated without being inaccessible, committed without being shrill. It was adequately financed at every stage of production; there were no equipment problems; love and joy permeated the shoot untainted by waging difficulties. It was a wonderful dream.

S/he set out to make it real, applying for grants, ransacking the Region for people and equipment. Very soon s/he discovered that funding was difficult and that the funding bodies were working on small budgets and at cross-purposes. So s/he started an organisation to fight for changes . . .

Then a booming voice was heard from the Great Metropolis: WE (the booming voice always spoke regally) ARE PLEASED TO PROMOTE FILM CULTURE IN THE REGIONS – THIS MEANS YOU! WE SHALL HOLD A CONFERENCE. And there was a conference . . .

Many years passed. Great forests grew and were turned into paper so that reports might be written, minutes taken, and application forms completed in quadruplicate . . . At last s/he received a completion grant, finished the dub, and saw the negative cut. The film was there; the dream realised. But there was something wrong. Nobody actually saw the film, and so tired was the film-maker after all those years of effort, that s/he couldn't face going through it all again just to get the film screened. So s/he and the film stayed at home, where they lived happily ever after, undisturbed by dreams.¹

York Film, 1981

In 1979 Rod Stoneman wrote that “Film Workshops . . . are increasingly being looked to as the main focal points for independent film activity, especially in the regions.” He continued:

¹ Text from the introduction to York Film, “Reel Practices’: A Directory of Independent Film from the Northeast” (York: York Film, 1981), published to accompany the first York Film Festival.

Common to them all . . . is an understanding of the need to develop new educational, exhibition and distribution approaches alongside innovative production strategies in order to realise in the long-term substantial and radical changes within film culture as a whole.²

The aim to substantially and radically change film culture suggests that the regional film workshops and their institutional support network were not seen by those within the sector as a short term experiment or an aberration but as a model: a proposition for a state-funded, regionally-based and representative national cinema organised around “cultural”, as opposed to commercial, concerns. This model developed slowly during the 1970s and by the early-1980s had established institutional structures and recognition as a distinct form of filmmaking practice, largely embodying the idea of regional film in England. What characterised this model? Why did it develop in this particular way? And in what specific ways was the idea of regional film as “cultural” film constructed and advanced? These are the questions that this chapter seeks to answer.

The regional workshop movement has been neglected in the history of British cinema.³ The existing history of “non-mainstream” post-War film has tended to focus on two groups of filmmakers: the theoretically informed, London-based avant-garde filmmakers associated with the influential London Filmmakers’ Co-op (LFC) and a group of intellectually and institutionally privileged *auteurs*, many of whom received support through the British Film Institute (BFI) in the 1970s and 1980s.

For example, in *British National Cinema* Sarah Street discusses “non-

² Rod Stoneman, “Editorial”, Rod Stoneman (Ed.), *Independent Film Workshops in Britain 1979* (Torquay: Grael Communications, 1979) p.3.

³ At the time of writing Paul O'Reilly is conducting doctoral research at the University of Northumbria into the film workshop movement in the North East of England. Apart from this there has been no extended study of the movement as a discreet form of practice.

mainstream” filmmaking by dividing the period between 1966 and 1997 into two phases of modernist experimentation. The first is the “modern independent cinema movement” or “independent sector” which begins with the formation of the LFC in 1966 and ends in 1980. This is characterised by formal experimentation, in particular a rejection of narrative, and a desire to bypass the commercial structures of the mainstream industry. The second phase is defined by the politicisation of “art” cinema during the Thatcher years and signposted through the work of Sally Potter, Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman, Terence Davies and Bill Douglas. Both phases, then, are concerned with what can broadly be termed “art” cinema; for Street, this is defined in terms of the incorporation of modernist aesthetics into British films.⁴ This focus, prominent in the historiography of British cinema, has tended to marginalise the practices, concerns and institutional structures that were specific to the regional film workshops and the development of regional production sectors more generally.

Where the regional workshops have been addressed in British cinema history it has most frequently been as part of the larger story of the development of the “independent sector”. It is from this movement that arguments over access to the means of production for regionally based filmmakers first began to develop with any meaningful force. For example, Simon Blanchard and Sylvia Harvey locate the post-War independent cinema as beginning in 1966 and running until 1981. They focus on the Independent Filmmakers’ Association (IFA), formed in 1974 by groups and

⁴ Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997) Chapter 6 and Chapter 7.

individuals largely based in London (although later having a regional basis), as best representing the practices and interests of the sector.⁵

This focus shifts the emphasis away from avant-garde aesthetics and onto the diversity of practices within the sector as well as its structure and organisation. However, it necessarily ignores the differences that the regional workshops had from the London-based movement and relegates the development of distinctly regional practices and institutional structures to secondary importance.

As Margaret Dickinson notes, there were “geographical tensions” between the original, predominantly London-based, IFA membership and the newer regionally-based groups.⁶ A history of the first stage of the development of regional film production infrastructure thus requires a “re-periodization” or “re-focussing” of the history of post-War British independent cinema. Regional workshop production activity began in the late-1960s, reached its highest point in the early 1980s, and continued at lower levels through to the 1990s. While the regional workshops shared a structural position and an attendant opposition to the “mainstream” London-based commercial industry with the metropolitan “independent sector”, the regional workshop movement has less in common with the attempt to incorporate traditions of art cinema into independent practice than it has to do with establishing an indigenous and regionally-based model for film production (the features of which will be discussed later in this chapter).

⁵ Blanchard and Harvey note the selective nature of this periodization. “The Post-War Independent Cinema – Structure and Organisation”, James Curran and Vincent Porter (Eds.), *British Cinema History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983).

⁶ Margaret Dickinson, “A Short History”, Margaret Dickinson (Ed.), *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90* (London: BFI, 1999) p.70.

The purpose of this chapter is to reconstitute the significance of the regional workshop sector to the history of the development of regional film production in England up to the present. In this history it emerges as central: it is impossible to fully understand contemporary regional film policy and practice without an understanding of the struggles to establish a regional filmmaking infrastructure in the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time this history is intended as a corrective to the marginalisation of the regional workshop movement in the history of the independent sector in Britain. This chapter is, then, less concerned with debates around film form, the development of film theory or key individual theorists, filmmakers or films, and more with structural determinants and the discourses through which specifically regional concerns were articulated. There is already an extant literature addressing the former.⁷

The regional workshop model emerged in the context of the centralised system of commercial film production discussed in the previous chapter. Regionally-based filmmakers employed and modified existing arguments in order to promote the idea of regional filmmaking. In particular it was the cultural politics of the New Left and the politicisation of film as a cultural practice that informed the ideology of the regional workshops. This is discussed in the first part of the chapter, primarily with reference to the work of Alan Sinfield, Margaret Dickinson, Simon

⁷ There are numerous works on film theory and practice that emerged from the “independent sector”, written during the period and retrospectively. Of note are Peter Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes”, *Studio International* (November/December, 1975); a special issue of *Afterimage*, “Perspectives on English Independent Cinema”, 6 (Summer, 1976); Michael O’Pray, *The British Avant-Garde Film* (Luton: John Libbey Media, 1996); and A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice* (London: BFI, 1999).

Blanchard and Sylvia Harvey. From there the distinctions that characterised regional workshop practice are discussed.

While the ideology of the independent sector informed the theory and practice of the regional workshops, their institutional basis emerged within the developing and overlapping agendas of a number of “public” institutions: the BFI, the Regional Arts Associations (RAAs), the Independent Filmmakers’ Association, the Association of Cinematograph and allied Technicians (ACTT) and Channel Four. The second part of the chapter looks at these relationships and the formalisation and recognition of the regional workshop model in the early 1980s. As Julian Petley notes, by the beginning of the 1980s years of debate between these organisations had resulted in “recognition of the need for a regional workshop network and a clear idea of what such a structure might look like and should achieve.”⁸ The chapter concludes by assessing the workshop model of regional film production and addressing some of the criticisms of the workshop sector.

The Politics of the New Left and Film as a Cultural Practice

The ideology and practice of the regional workshops was informed by the development of a set of ideas about the cultural practice of film in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Of particular importance was the rise of New Left politics. This was part of the re-invigoration of the British Left after the collapse of the Stalinist Communism which had dominated it from the 1920s; in Alan Sinfield’s words, this was a “release from the crippling

⁸ Julian Petley “Background and Development of Film and Video Workshops”, British Council, *Landmarks* (London: British Council, 1989) p.6.

ideological manoeuvring which allegiance to Stalinism had imposed, and very gradually from Cold-War stigma.” More significant for the terms of this argument was the ascendancy of New Left cultural politics within the intelligentsia and its influence on strategies of cultural production and policy. As Sinfield explains: “For the New Left, culture almost filled the political vision, producing the virtual expectation that society can be transformed through cultural change.” The New Left project redefined “culture” away from the idea of “high” and “mass” and toward the notion of a “way of life”. From this perspective, a specifically working-class contribution to cultural life could be constituted and valued. Further, class struggle could be a cultural and intellectual activity. For left-leaning cultural producers, or “middle-class dissidents” in Sinfield’s terms, there was a particular appeal to this way of thinking. Firstly it was attractive to those who had become class-mobile through education: “in so far as left-culturism claimed that ‘good’ culture should be for everyone, adherents were not deserting their class but leading the way into a fuller humanity.” Secondly, New Left cultural politics pushed the ideological function of “mainstream” cultural production and consumption practices to the fore of political struggles: “The revolution hadn’t occurred because the fundamental oppression of working people was being obscured, and affluence was destroying their dignity and resistance.”⁹

Sinfield discusses how a “youthful left-liberal intelligentsia cohered around CND, Royal Court drama, some literature, folk music and jazz.”¹⁰ He neglects the emerging independent film sector, which developed from

⁹ Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997) pp.269, 273, 277, 278.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.295.

a constituency just as informed by the politics he describes. The post-War expansion of higher education allowed a minority of young people from working-class backgrounds to attend Universities and art colleges for the first time, and it is from this constituency that many of the new independent filmmakers would emerge. The concern to interrogate the ideological function of “mainstream” cultural forms was a big influence on film theory from the 1970s, and particularly the critique of narrative cinema.¹¹ This could lead to the impetus to produce alternative, non-“mainstream” films and an opposition to “mainstream” practices. Rather than a unified political ideology, however, the cultural politics of the New Left should be seen as the general “structure of feeling” within which the independent film sector developed.

In Dickinson’s account independent film activity began in London with the formation of the LFC: “within two or three years, the concept and context of independent film was transformed by the rapid growth of film practices that were deliberately sited outside the mainstream.”¹² The New Left emphasis on culture in strategies for social change could inform a host of political and social concerns within filmmaking; for example the anti-apartheid struggle, opposition to the Vietnam War, feminism, student protest and industrial conflict. Blanchard and Harvey describe some of the general features of the early film workshops:

Some of these groups were also involved in distribution and exhibition work; some had close ties with a local community or sought work with particular and identifiable audiences, such as the Labour and Women’s Movement. All were involved in production for social and cultural reasons, and

¹¹ Dickinson makes this point in “A Short History”, p.37. A classic example is Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Screen*, 16:3 (1975)

¹² Dickinson, “A Short History”, p.35.

few managed to make a living out of their film work. They worked in other jobs to earn money; they received donations or help “in kind” such as film stock or access to processing from friends and supporters and the occasional grant-aid from various state or state sponsored institutions[.]¹³

Along with the LFC, London-based workshops formed at this time include Cinema Action (1968), the Berwick Street Collective (1972), Liberation Films (1972), the London Women’s Film Group (1972), Four Corners Films (1973) and the Newsreel Collective (1974).

The diversity of the movement and the commitment to a theoretical engagement with aesthetic concerns – questions of form and content – has been repeatedly noted. This heterogeneity can be demonstrated through a look at a special issue of the occasional avant-garde film journal *Afterimage* devoted to “English independent cinema”. In its editorial, Simon Field defines independent film as ranging from the “formalist” avant-garde to the agitational.”¹⁴ The difference between the two can, perhaps, be best illustrated through a look at two of the films under discussion in the volume. The formalist avant-garde, according to Deke Dusinberre, is dominated by two broad concerns “which suggest a certain unity across the diversity of styles which have developed in the last years of increased avant garde activity”: “the subordination of any ‘content’ to ‘form’ (more precisely, the subordination of ‘image-content’ to ‘image-production’) and the decisive rejection of narrativity.”¹⁵ Dusinberre’s description of Peter Gidal’s *Film Print* (1974) is a good example:

¹³ Blanchard and Harvey, “The Post-War Independent Cinema”, p.231

¹⁴ Simon Field, “Editorial”, *Afterimage*, “Perspectives on English Independent Cinema”, 6 (Summer, 1976) p.3.

¹⁵ Deke Dusinberre, “St. George in the Forest: The English Avant-Garde”, *Afterimage*, “Perspectives on English Independent Cinema”, 6 (Summer, 1976) p.5.

Film Print opens with a hand-held camera exploring the objects in a room in black and white, a fairly grainy image. The camera zooms out and the “room” is revealed to be a photograph of the room. Implicit flatness becomes explicit flatness. The film then proceeds to analyse a series of very similar photographs in this way (zoom in/explore/zoom out) for forty minutes . . . *Film Print* explores mundane material. There is no development (after three viewings I am still unable to predict when it will end).¹⁶

“Tedium is used to throw the spectator back on his/her own strategy for involvement with the image”, Dusinberre notes approvingly.¹⁷

At the “agitational” end of the spectrum we have Cinema Action’s *Fighting the Bill*, made in support of resistance to the Heath Government’s “Industrial Relations Act” in 1970 and described by David Glyn and Paul Marris:

The final section recapitulates the history of the British trade-union movement (i.e. what is to be defended), up to the present (the defence campaign) and looks forward towards socialism (the future that must be won by this movement). It opens with a montage of nineteenth-century engravings depicting industrial workers and incidents in the history of the democratic movement, which changes into a montage of still photographs, and then of archive footage of the labour movement from the inter-war years. The section concludes with contemporary footage of mass meetings, pickets, and finally of a large London demonstration against the Industrial Relations Bill. The progress through history of the British working-class movement, culminating in the “present day” with contemporary film, is thus marked by the changes in the media by which it is represented.¹⁸

Debates over political and aesthetic “radicalism”, continued in journals such as *Afterimage* and *Screen*, would dominate discussion within the movement throughout the 1970s.¹⁹ However, as Dickinson notes;

¹⁶ Ibid. p.7.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ David Glyn and Paul Marris, “Seven Years of Cinema Action”, *Afterimage*, “Perspectives on English Independent Cinema”, 6 (Summer, 1976) p.75.

¹⁹ Glyn and Marris provide a good example of this sort of debate: “We approached Cinema Action’s work wielding injunctions derived from the ‘politics of form’ arguments by

The independent film culture of the early 70s had a spontaneous and heterogeneous quality which has been somewhat obscured by a subsequent tendency to describe activities in terms of binary oppositions: alternative or mainstream; collective versus individual; theory versus practice; the political avant-garde or the aesthetic avant-garde; the Co-op kind of avant-garde or the European kind . . . In fact many people were active either simultaneously or serially across these distinctions.²⁰

It is from these diverse strands of activity in the independent sector that the IFA was formed in 1974, intended to give a national voice to the movement and develop mutually beneficial policies and campaigns. While the IFA membership represented the heterogeneous ideological and aesthetic positions within the sector, what they shared was a structural position within film culture: a marginalisation from the production and distribution structures of the “mainstream” commercial film industry. It was to the strengthening of this position that the IFA turned. A discussion paper published for the IFA Conference in 1976 set out their terms, arguing that “independent film-making can only develop if the state accepts its responsibility to support this area”:

Our struggle is both an economic and a cultural one – economic in the sense that it has to demand an increase in state sponsorship for the making and distribution and exhibition of films, cultural in that it has to fight the isolation that independent film-making can all too easily be forced to accept, and must transform all aspects of dominant film practice.²¹

For some coming from a contemporary perspective the IFA’s aims may seem idealistic. However, it is important to remember that thirty years ago

the advocates of ‘counter cinema’, but found it necessary to make a detour through the politics of the ‘politics of form’. Thereby, we found ourselves, whilst justifying and criticising the practice of Cinema Action, polemicising against critical positions which were previously ours.” Ibid. p.65.

²⁰ Dickinson, “A Short History”, p.48.

²¹ IFA, “Independent Film-making in the 70s”, Dickinson (Ed.), *Rogue Reels*, pp.127-135.

the revolutionary change of society's social relations was a more prominent subject of debate than it is in today's political discourse. The IFA sought to cultivate a solidarity amongst the independent sector with real links to wider political struggles around issues of gender, class and representation at the same time as applying tactical pressure to areas of film culture where it was perceived it could make a difference, for example lobbying the BFI and the Arts Council for more money for independent film.²²

The Regional Workshop Movement

The first regionally-based film workshop to be established was Amber Films, formed in 1968 in Newcastle. Other notable groups include the Sheffield Film Co-op, formed in 1973 by filmmakers involved in the Women's Movement; Leeds Animation Workshop, 1978; Trade Films Workshop, formed in Gateshead in 1979; and Birmingham Film and Video Workshop, 1981. It is difficult to fully gauge the number of regional film workshops active in this period, and also their levels of activity, but it certainly increased as the 1970s wore on and accelerated into the 1980s. Many of the smaller and less active groups and individuals have left little trace. With the exception of Bristol, activity was concentrated in urban centres north of London, particularly Birmingham, Nottingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and Newcastle. The Film Workshop Conference at Bristol in 1979 listed 30 film workshops while in 1986 a report prepared for the BFI lists 105 active regional film workshops, more

²² One notable achievement was the successful lobbying to have two elected representatives of the IFA sit on the BFI Production Board from the mid-1970s. Ibid. p.127.

than twice the number based in London with the majority located in these cities.²³ In 1981 a directory of independent film from the North East listed 125 films made by over thirty different groups and individuals in that area.²⁴ While the North East was particularly strong in this regard, if this level of activity were of comparable scale in other regions it would suggest a vibrant regional “under-belly” of filmmaking developing massively in a relatively short space of time.

Ideologically, the regional filmmakers adopted and modified the model of film as a cultural practice that developed within the London-based independent sector. While it would be a mistake to suggest a dichotomy between a London-based movement and a regionally-based one, there were important distinctions. As Dickinson argues:

The situation of independents outside London was naturally different from that of London-based practitioners, simply because the industry was concentrated in the capital. In their criticism of the mainstream the former tended to emphasise the failure to cater to regional or local voices and were generally more concerned with questions of access than issues of language.²⁵

In particular, many of the regionally-based filmmakers “had not been involved in, and were not necessarily interested in” the debates within the sector in the 1970s on film theory. Similarly, Blanchard and Harvey comment that the regional independents, in general, were less informed by the radical politics of the 1960s and brought with them concerns about devolution, democracy and local accountability, advocating a “new way of

²³ Alan Fountain, “Questions of Democracy and Control in Film Culture”, Rod Stoneman and Hilary Thompson (Eds.), *The New Social Function of Cinema* (London: BFI, 1981) p.166 and Paul Marris, “The Regional Production Fund: A Discussion Document” (London: BFI, 1986) pp.51-76.

²⁴ York Film, “Reel Practices”, pp.66-68.

²⁵ Dickinson, “A Short History”, p.70.

conceptualizing the establishment of an infrastructure for non-profit-making film production and distribution.”²⁶ The regional workshops emphasised issues of access and diversity that had developed in the independent sector in order to promote the idea of regional film production. As Harvey has commented elsewhere:

The concept of cultural diversity is often expressed in terms of difference in locality or region; why, it is asked, are there not more major audio-visual productions generated from outside of London, productions that whether they are drama or documentary recognise the particular characteristics, needs, problems and beauties of Sheffield, Newcastle, Birmingham, Liverpool?²⁷

Furthermore, in the regions the New Left emphasis on the development of working-class cultural forms and the celebration of working-class culture could imply a regional and particularly Northern focus for cultural production: the celebration of a traditionally marginalised and “authentically” proletarian culture. This was particularly pronounced in the North East (explored in more detail in Chapter Five). By the late 1970s the growth of regionally-based workshops, often active members of the IFA, produces a distinct confluence of “regionalism” with the idea of independent practice based on the particular distinctions that regionally-based filmmakers had from the London-based mainstream. For example, in 1981 around half the IFA membership was based outside London and the IFA’s Constitution was changed so that the executive committee was made up of representatives elected in the regions.²⁸

²⁶ Blanchard and Harvey, “The Post-War Independent Cinema”, p.238.

²⁷ Sylvia Harvey, “Independent Film and Cultural Democracy”, Rod Stoneman and Hilary Thompson (Eds.), *The New Social Function of Cinema*, p.95.

²⁸ Dickinson, “A Short History”, pp.72-73.

The Sheffield Film Co-op is a good example. It started life as an informal group of four women with no production training, attracted to filmmaking as a way of publicly articulating a feminist position in response to the mainstream media's apparent blanket hostility to the Women's Movement. Their first projects were made using equipment borrowed from a local cable television station. Their third film, called *A Woman Like You* (1975) and about abortion, was shot on 16mm with technical support from a film tutor at Sheffield Art School and grant-aid in the form of free film stock from Yorkshire Arts, the local Regional Arts Association (RAA). It was screened on 16mm at community centres, adult education colleges and at union meetings in an attempt to connect with local audiences and stimulate debate which could inform their future work, and this form of integrated practice – involving themselves in production, distribution and exhibition so as to use film as part of a dialogue with local audiences – became a feature of their working methods.²⁹ Part of their purpose was to help develop a locally specific and responsive film culture, and to articulate this nationally wherever possible. In their words:

people in Sheffield are aware that there is a tendency for the media to be London dominated, and we are committed to highlighting the concerns and achievements of women in our area, and in some ways providing a regional voice in film and video production.³⁰

²⁹ See Margaret Dickinson's interview with Christine Bellamy and Jenny Woodley in Dickinson (Ed.), *Rogue Reels*, pp.289-303.

³⁰ Sheffield Film Co-op, "Sheffield Film Co-op", Channel Four, "The Work of Channel Four's Independent Film and Video Department" (London: Channel Four, 1986) no page numbering.

They were involved in the IFA and helped found Sheffield Independent Film, an open access workshop that rented equipment to local independent filmmakers.³¹

There is very little in the existing history to fully explain the growth of regionally-based film production in the period. Dickinson notes that the growth of the regionally-based workshops pre-dates the IFA.³² It cannot be explained, therefore, as the gradual expansion of the London-based independent sector throughout England. For Dickinson, early regional production can be attributed “partly to the policy of decentralisation introduced by the 1964 Labour government and partly to local pressure.”³³ While this may be true as a summary of the forces that contributed to these developments it does not tell us anything about the particular character of the “local pressure” or the tensions inherent in this process. There were a cluster of interrelated causes that contributed to the growth of the regional workshops, some in common with the London-based movement and some distinct to the regions. In particular it was the “regionalisation” of state cultural provision after 1964, the regional expansion of the BFI through the Regional Film Theatre (RFT) movement and the incorporation of film production within the remit of the Regional Arts Associations that created the distinct structure of the regional workshops. This process culminates with the incorporation of the values of the regional workshops within the funding structures of the BFI and the newly formed Channel Four. What follows will discuss this development.

³¹ See Ibid. and Dickinson’s interview with Bellamy and Woodley, pp.289-303.

³² Dickinson, “A Short History”, p.68.

³³ Ibid.

The Regionalisation of “Good” Film Culture

Regionalism was entrenched in the policies of Wilson’s Labour Government from 1964. While this was primarily economic – part of the modernisation of the British economy after thirteen years of Conservative rule – Labour also significantly increased the State’s role in national cultural production, for example increasing the Arts Council budget from £3.2m in 1964 to £9.3m in 1970.³⁴ This raised regional cultural aspirations and encouraged public bodies to look more firmly at devolving their activities amid charges of metro-centrism.

These policies had a clearly demonstrable affect on regional cultural provision. The British Federation of Film Societies, for instance, had been established before the Second World War and had had a regional structure since the 1950s. In the years between 1965 and 1970 its membership mushroomed from 375 societies to 800 around the country.³⁵ Most significant for the development of regional film sectors, however, was the regional expansion of the BFI from 1965.

The British Film Institute has held something of an uneasy role in British film culture. Since its inception it has carved out a place for itself that has gone far beyond its original educational remit in the face of industry hostility to anything that might resemble the beginnings of creeping nationalisation.³⁶ This has often meant that the BFI has had to attach itself to a role that was perceived as outside the domain of the

³⁴ See Janet Mather, “English Regional Policy”, Peter Dorey (Ed.), *The Labour Governments 1964-1970* (London: Routledge, 2006) especially pp.225-226.

³⁵ Thanks to Vincent Porter for providing information from his research into the History of the British Film Societies.

³⁶ See, for example, Christophe Dupin’s discussion of the evolution of the BFI’s activities in “Early Days of Short Film Production at the British Film Institute: Origins and Evolution of the BFI Experimental Film Fund (1952-66)”, *Journal of Media Practice*, 4:2 (2003).

commercial industry, for example the cultivation of intellectual audiences; the cultural appreciation of film; research and publications; and the servicing of the industry through experimentation and training. A. L. Rees has described the BFI as “the UK’s cultural centre for cinema” and it is unsurprising that it is to the Institute that filmmakers working or seeking to work outside the “mainstream” have turned.³⁷ For Nicholas Pole the BFI’s activities “laboriously gave birth” to the independent film sector in Britain.³⁸ This view – a top-down approach to the history of independent filmmaking – masks the particular tensions that have characterised the relationship between the BFI and regional filmmakers. With limited resources to allocate, the BFI’s activities were always the result of struggle, both internally and from outside, and the organisation’s contribution to regional film sectors must be cast in this way. A more detailed analysis reveals a dialectical relationship between the Institute’s activities and grassroots workshop practice.

As early as 1948 The Radcliffe Report recommended that the BFI should devolve its activities to areas outside London yet, aside from a vague proposal to open a BFI office somewhere in “the North” in 1961, the Institute had remained firmly rooted in the capital and concentrated its activities on the National Film Theatre (NFT) and the screening of films that were considered “culturally valuable” but had not been exhibited by the mainstream circuits. As Melanie Selfe comments, after the NFT opened in 1952 the “discrepancy between the level of services being offered within the metropolis and elsewhere in the country became acutely

³⁷ Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, pp.91-92.

³⁸ Nicholas Pole, “10 Years of the BFI Production Board”, *A/P&Co.* 72 (March 1986) p.21.

visible.” However, “it was only after the Labour Party’s election victory in 1964 and the appointment of a new Minister with special responsibility for the Arts . . . that any form of regional expansion became financially or politically possible”.³⁹ As a BFI publication notes:

the institute was incurring criticism, with some reason, for becoming too tied to its London activities. In 1965, with the encouragement of Miss Jennie Lee, who, as Minister with special responsibility for the Arts, was particularly interested in the dissemination of culture throughout the country and in dispelling the myth of the intellectual superiority of the capital, the Governors of the Institute commissioned the [*Outside London report*], and . . . approached local authorities to seek support for the art of the film such as had already been given (with the aid of the Arts Council) to music, literature and drama.⁴⁰

The first RFT to open was in Nottingham in 1966, with Bristol and Norwich following shortly afterwards. By 1970 there were 36 RFTs across the country operating on either a full or part-time basis showing programmes of films partly drawn from the European and art-house programmes of the NFT and partly in response to local demand.⁴¹

As Ian Christie notes, the ideology of the RFTs reflected a certain conception of “quality” cinema:

The regional film theatre movement was the product of a rising tide of “regionalism” (promoted by the 1964-6 Labour government) allied to an essentially conservative aesthetic of “quality cinema”, as exemplified by *Sight and Sound*, NFT and LFF programming of the time. The unquestioned assumption was that this established film culture could be more or less simply diffused throughout the country without changing or being changed in the process.⁴²

³⁹ Melanie Selfe, “Doing the Work of the NFT in Nottingham’ – or How to Use the BFI to Beat the Communist Threat in Your Local Film Society”, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 4:1 (2007) p.81.

⁴⁰ BFI, “The BFI in the Regions” (London: BFI, 1970) p.7.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ian Christie, “Notes on the BFI and Regional Film Culture”, York Film, “Reel Practices”, p.7.

This was the view that dominated the BFI in this period: an attempt to legitimise state support for film through embedding it within a discourse of “high” culture, with the appreciation of the cinema as an intellectual and educational activity. This is in line with the ideology of state provision in other arenas of cultural production such as theatre, music, the visual arts and literature, and represented in the Arts Council. However, the significance of the RFTs goes beyond regional exhibition. Most importantly, the RFTs provided a regional stake and voice within the structure of the BFI. For example, the annual Conference for Regional Film Theatres, started as a way for the BFI to communicate with the RFTs and the Regional Arts Associations, provided a forum where issues specific to regional film culture could be advanced that would become more significant as the 1970s wore on.⁴³ Perhaps the key point, however, is that the “pre-history” of regional film production in England was formed within the institutional structure and “cultural” remit of the RFTs and the BFI.

From Film Appreciation to Film Production

As Selfe argues, “the RFTs have been generally, if uncritically, regarded as the rolling-out of cinematic enlightenment from the metropolis towards the regions”.⁴⁴ However, as her study of the history of the Nottingham Film Society shows, the process was characterised by negotiation as the BFI’s policies came into contact with a new generation of cine-literate constituents informed by New Left politics.

⁴³ BFI, “The BFI and its Regional Partnerships”, BFI Regional Conference Report, “Independent Cinema and Regional Film Culture” (1981), p.35.

⁴⁴ Selfe, “Doing the Work of the NFT in Nottingham”, p.80.

The RFTs were established from existing film societies and by enthusiasts and supporters, and in this way their activities reflected the strength and character of their local film culture. At a local level the RFTs could become a centre for the filmmaking community and a space where independent film could be seen and debated, ideas shared and collaborations formed.

BFI funding of the RFTs increased steadily: from £50,313 in 1970 to £178,440 in 1980.⁴⁵ For some within the regional film sector the RFTs represented a prototype model of a state-funded, alternative production and exhibition infrastructure, completely bypassing the commercial distribution network.⁴⁶ Regionally based filmmakers put the BFI under pressure to allocate more of its funding to the regions and to extend its remit beyond film exhibition to film production. The idea of regional “film centres” alongside the RFTs was floated within the BFI in 1972 but came to nothing through lack of resources. In the early 1970s the BFI’s Regional Department saw support for RAAs as more of a priority.⁴⁷

The first RAA was established in the South West in 1956 with other regions following in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the first to make grants to filmmakers was Northern Arts in 1968. Others followed suit and the BFI actively encouraged the development of RAA-supported film production and exhibition work.⁴⁸ By 1974 six specialist film officers had been appointed by RAAs, this number rising to nine by 1977.⁴⁹ RAA funding

⁴⁵ Figures provided by Vincent Porter.

⁴⁶ See Harvey, “Does Cinema in Britain Have a Future?”, pp.9-10.

⁴⁷ Ian Christie, “Regional Film Theatres: Towards a New Definition”, Stoneman and Thompson (Eds.), *The New Social Function of Cinema*, p.62.

⁴⁸ Blanchard and Harvey, “The Post-war Independent Cinema”, pp.237-239.

⁴⁹ Harvey, “Does Cinema in Britain Have a Future?”, p.9.

from the BFI grew exponentially during the 1970s: £30,250 in 1974 rising to £140,300 in 1977 and £400,000 in 1980. However, when divided across England funding was still relatively low, especially in comparison to the sums available from the BFI's Production Board centrally. Furthermore, funding varied substantially from region to region. For example, Northern Arts received a total of £267,500 during the 1970s while the South East Arts Association got just £11,000 during the same period.⁵⁰ A Directory of independent film funded by the RAAs further demonstrates the uneven and piece-meal funding opportunities across the sector. For example, Lincolnshire and Humberside Arts had its film funding cut-off by the BFI in 1983 and therefore lost its film officer whereas North West Arts film funding steadily increased from under £300 in 1975 up to £14,000 in 1981-82.⁵¹

RAA film officers were frequently drawn from the regional independent sector and the film funding activities of the RAAs reflected this. The Directory demonstrates an uneven but steady incorporation of the workshop model into regional institutional funding strategies. For example, West Midlands Arts fully incorporated the model of cinema as a cultural practice into its funding priorities. It gave a low priority to one-off production projects, with a policy that "educational work must be put on the agenda and should relate both to production and exhibition activity." It continues: "Preference would be given to work in groups, and some emphasis was put on the notion of 'relevance'." Likewise North West Arts

⁵⁰ Figures courtesy of Vincent Porter.

⁵¹ Frank Challenger (Ed.), *Regional Film Directory: Films and Videos made with the Assistance of the English Regional Arts Associations* (Stafford: West Midlands Arts, 1984).

concentrated its film funding through one workshop: the Manchester Film and Video Workshop. On the other hand, Southern Arts, the youngest RAA with more limited funds, concentrated on the development of training facilities. In parts the Directory reads as a workshop manifesto. The entry for East Midlands Arts, for instance:

East Midlands Arts' Policy is premised on the necessity and desirability of a regeneration and democratisation of the audio-visual means of communication in Britain. The Association wishes to encourage the production of innovative and challenging images and sounds, alive to the social, political and cultural needs of contemporary Britain. It is committed to the forging of an active partnership with the emerging current of independent film, sharing its concern with the conditions of the production, circulation and reception of meaning.⁵²

Generally speaking, the RAAs worked towards the workshop model, the major obstacle being their acute lack of resources. The pattern followed begins with exhibition funding, moving toward small one-off production finance and then toward more ambitious revenue and full time workshop funding integrated between production and exhibition. Eastern Arts, for example, was one of the more developed regions fully incorporating the workshop model from early on. Their film funding began in 1973 with purely exhibition work. In 1975 17% of their budget was spent on buying equipment for an open access centre and by 1984 two-thirds of their budget was spent on production.⁵³ This demonstrates the lack of centralised policy, the arbitrary nature of funding decisions and the relative differences in the development of regional film activity.

⁵² Ibid. p.23.

⁵³ Ibid.

The testimony of filmmaker Richard Woolley to the BFI's Regional Conference in 1981 illustrates the conditions of regional film production in this period, and is worth quoting at length:

I moved to Yorkshire, and . . . I proposed a project to Yorkshire Arts Association (YAA) and the ACGB [Arts Council of Great Britain] Experimental Film Fund. The total cost to both organisations together was about £5,500; they accepted and a mammoth metropolitan/provincial co-production was under way. *Illusive Crime* was the result and the only person who got paid was the actor and that had to be kept from the sponsors . . .

Soon after this, having financially recovered with a spell in the waged paradise of fringe theatre, I joined up with Sheffield Independent Film Group. Here I found a number of people trying to keep going by making films. People who didn't want to retire into full-time teaching or television. People who were willing to help on each other's productions in a place where an equipment pool was being set up . . . The result, *Telling Tales*, was my first genuine cooperative regional film experience, and to me is a model of how things can work and how high quality product can be produced . . .

Ten other films from Yorkshire were coming off the assembly line . . . At the same time a new women's film group in York was set up and the animation group in Leeds was carrying out its work. Perhaps independent film making was becoming a way to live, as well as expose your soul?⁵⁴

This account highlights the level of activity developing in the region at this time. The minuscule production budgets regional independents worked with and the lack of rewards they received demonstrates the commitment to this type of filmmaking practice that characterised those filmmakers determined to work outside London and the mainstream industry. In this way establishing open facilities and the spirit of cooperation can be seen as practical measures born of necessity that could also inform an ideological opposition to "mainstream" hierarchical working arrangements.

⁵⁴ BFI Regional Conference Report, "Independent Cinema and Regional Film Culture", pp.18-19.

Woolley's account clearly places his activities as part of a growing movement in the independent sector in Yorkshire, suggesting a filmmaking community that maintains a degree of contact and participation. Through collective practice, the creation of film workshops, the various roles that regionally based independents would work in, and contact with other agencies, organisations, groups and individuals, the embryo of a distinct regional production sector could emerge.

The Consolidation of the Regional Workshop Model

By the end of the 1970s the regional workshops were increasingly being seen as a model for a publicly-funded, regionally-based film production sector on a national basis. This can be demonstrated through a discussion document circulated at the Film Officers' Group of the conference of the RAAs in consultation with the BFI. The document noted:

It is clear that much distribution and exhibition work is justifiably directed at particular constituencies in particular locations, and that the development of these audiences and ways of educating them needs a consistently funded and subsidised programme of work which can only be done on a regional and local basis.

. . . The general strategy towards which independent filmmakers in conjunction with the RAAs and central funding bodies are clearly all aiming is a national network of regional 16mm production facilities, linked and closely related to a developed distribution system and a network of exhibition outlets. In many respects the vitality of all aspects of independent film culture is dependent on the recognition and provision of this focus and working base from which a range of activity can evolve.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ The document is untitled and undated, but was most likely written in 1978 or 1979. It is included in Rod Stoneman (Ed.), *Independent Film Workshops in Britain 1979* (Torquay: Grael Communications, 1979) p.46-47.

In this way regional workshops are envisaged as taking over the role of RFTs with the model of film as a cultural practice that developed within the sector supplanting that which had existed previously. More than this, the document sees this activity as “central to the future of film on a national basis”, arguing that regional workshops “should be seen in the longer term as reconstituting the nature of British film production, exhibition and distribution.”⁵⁶

As the regional workshop sector grew there was increasing dissatisfaction as to the BFI’s perceived conservatism. For example, Alan Fountain argued:

The British film Institute, like all the main cultural funding institutions in this country, is profoundly undemocratic; a State body with very little accountability. The Institute’s contact with its various “constituencies” is principally conducted through informal channels and is, invariably, self-selected and self-perpetuating.⁵⁷

Regional independents campaigned for more direct production funding, a clear policy for supporting regional workshops and recognition from the BFI as to the importance of such work to national film culture. The Conference for Regional Film Theatres became a focus for debate. In 1979 its name was changed simply to Regional Conference and its constituency widened to include regional independent cinemas, film workshops and other activists. The 1980 Conference appears to have been something of a watershed, with the BFI describing independent practice as the true “New British Cinema”. The expansion of the RFTs to become film centres incorporating exhibition, book libraries and, crucially,

⁵⁶ Ibid. pp.48-49.

⁵⁷ Alan Fountain, “Questions of Democracy and Control”, p.164.

filmmaking equipment was debated, as was the establishment of a Regional Production Fund. The BFI was put under pressure to switch emphasis away from London, the NFT and the Production Board and towards supporting regional activities. At the same time the BFI published its policy paper “The BFI and its Regional Partnerships”. The document was carefully worded. It contained an acknowledgment of the importance of practices that are “integrated between film-making, film-exhibition and education” without explicitly mentioning film workshops, and expressed support in principle for a Regional Production Fund while maintaining that funds could not be diverted from existing activities. One delegate summed up the mood: “The time has now arrived when the regional organisations are no longer prepared to be poor country cousins.”⁵⁸

Despite chronic funding shortages, by the beginning of the 1980s the regional workshop model had been recognised and institutionalised as a distinct form of filmmaking practice, largely embodying the idea of regional film in England. This point can be most clearly shown, however, in the extent to which the regional workshop model was incorporated in the relationship between the BFI, the Association of Cinematograph Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT, the film and television craft union) and Channel Four.

Channel Four can be seen as the combination of two forces: on the one hand a desire amongst some sections of the television industry to break the BBC/ITV duopoly, deregulate the broadcast sector and introduce free market competition through independent production; on the

⁵⁸ The 1981 BFI Regional Conference Report contains a copy of the policy document and also Harvey’s keynote speech which addresses these issues. “Independent Cinema and Regional Film Culture”.

other, a drive for greater diversity in broadcasting than was catered for by the BBC and the ITV companies. It came into being through a series of negotiations between various interests that are too complex to be outlined here.⁵⁹ Suffice to say, Channel Four has generally been cast as the saviour of British film production at a time when the Tories were beginning to systematically dismantle the state's protection of the film industry. As John Hill notes, Channel Four embarked on a major policy of investment in British film, spending £90m in its first 12 years, with the BBC and other ITV companies following suit.⁶⁰ Hill argues that Channel Four's success in film production depended on "its insulation from purely commercial considerations." Effectively, it has been "committed to a 'subsidy' of film on the grounds of its cultural worth and importance in a way in which government film policy has not."⁶¹ Of importance to this argument, however, is the remit, enshrined in the Channel's constitution, to "encourage innovation and experiment in form and content of programmes".

In the years of debate preceding the fourth channel the IFA lobbied extensively for the representation of the independent sector's interests. This resulted in a commitment from Jeremy Isaacs, its Chief Executive, to appoint a commissioning editor with a brief for independent film. This post was filled by Alan Fountain, then a member of the IFA in Nottingham.⁶² Channel Four's Independent Film and Video Department allocated one third

⁵⁹ See, for example, Peter Goodwin, *Television Under the Tories: Broadcasting Policy 1979-1997* (London: BFI, 1998) pp.18-34 and also Dickinson, "A Short History", pp.74-75.

⁶⁰ Hill, "British Film Policy", p.105.

⁶¹ Ibid. p.106.

⁶² Dickinson, "A Short History", p.58.

of its initial budget of £3m to workshop production, massively augmenting the sector's funds.⁶³

The "Workshop Declaration", the agreement under which work was produced for Channel Four, was arranged between the ACTT, the BFI, the RAAs and the channel, and intended to recognise and support the particular conditions of the workshop sector. It, more than any other document, represents the recognition and institutionalisation of the regional workshop model of film production. It followed on from the Codes of Practice agreed in 1978/79 between the ACTT, BFI Production Departments and the RAAs which allowed for flexibility in regard to crewing levels, the use of non-union labour and the paying of overtime rates, specifically on experimental and non-commercial productions but not on films "intended for commercial television or theatrical release." The Declaration specified the pay, conditions and financial structures necessary for a workshop to be franchised. These included: parity salaries of no less than £10,000, job sharing, flexible hours, paid parental and child care leave for mothers and fathers, retention of copyright and regular employment.⁶⁴ This guaranteed revenue funding for the franchised workshops, allowing them to work with creative autonomy and addressing the piece-meal and project-by-project funding arrangements that had existed previously. Further, the Declaration was explicitly linked

⁶³ Alan Fountain, "Channel 4 and Independent Film", York Film, "Reel Practices", p.6. The main platform for workshop-produced film in Channel Four's schedule was the *Eleventh Hour* programme strand which ran from November 1982. The first series showed thirteen films, the majority of which were made by independents in the previous ten years. See, Channel 4, *The Work of Channel Four's Independent Film and Video Department* (London: Channel Four, 1986).

⁶⁴ The Declaration is quoted and discussed in Felicity Oppe, "A Declaration of Independence", *Screen*, 24:1 (Jan-Feb, 1983) pp.53-54.

to the “cultural, social and political contribution made to society by the grant-aided and non-commercial” sector, marking the recognition the sector had achieved on a national scale. As Channel Four’s publicity material announced in 1982:

Channel Four’s funding of film workshops represents a unique cultural partnership between independent filmmakers, the Channel and the Association of Cinematographic and Television Technicians [sic]. It makes a significant contribution towards strengthening regional film culture from which the Channel can confidently anticipate the emergence of a wide range of imaginative and unusual work.⁶⁵

While the number of franchised workshops remained small (ten initially, rising to 22 in 1988), the Declaration represents the real gains that the regional workshop sector had achieved with the model of film as a cultural practice that the workshops represented recognised as a legitimate function of public funding for film. In 1986 the BFI assessed the sector in the following terms:

Nowhere else in Europe has this combination of elements been developed – the creation of on-going independent film-cultural production institutions, working in relation to specific communities, with non project-tied film-cultural funding, and union agreement on the terms of access for material produced to national broadcast television. As a unique pilot, it should be backed for many years yet to see what kind of long-term results ensue.⁶⁶

The workshops had successfully become a viable model for the state funding of film on a regional basis, and successfully bent the idea of regional film production into their own image.

⁶⁵ Fountain, “Channel 4 and Independent Film”, p.6.

⁶⁶ Marris, “The Regional Production Fund”, p.40.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the development of the workshop model of regional film production. The workshop model was based primarily on the idea of regional filmmaking as a “cultural”, as opposed to commercial, practice. This distinction was the felt difference and organising principle that emerged from within the sector. The features of the workshop model can be further summarised through four areas, the first of which is small-scale production activities. While funding for the sector grew steadily through the 1970s and early-1980s, it remained relatively low. Even after the introduction of Channel Four funding there were large variations across the sector with the stability offered through the Declaration only extended to a proportion of regional workshops. The amount of work produced under these conditions is remarkable, but the size of the sector – in terms of finances, personnel and output – remained relatively small. The money allocated to the workshops by the BFI, for example, was always a fraction of that which it allocated to feature film production through the Production Board. The second feature of the workshop model was collective production: workshop practice rejected private ownership and hierarchical working arrangements in favour of cooperative structures. Thirdly, there was non-standardisation in form and content, demonstrated through the heterogeneity of production that characterised the sector: drama, documentary, animation, the avant-garde, etc. If workshop practice can be defined by the avant-garde on the one hand and the “agitational” on the other, then overall the aesthetics that define the workshop mode of production should be seen as a spectrum. This also

demonstrates the large degree of creative autonomy that was afforded in the workshop model. Fourthly, there was a concern to integrate theory and practice: this was informed by a cultural politics associated with the New Left and in particular a dissatisfaction with the metro-centric organisation of film production infrastructure. It took the form of the development of links with local communities and specific causes, a desire to “democratise” film production and a broad rejection of the commercially-orientated values of the “mainstream”. Chapter Five is a detailed discussion of the kind of films that could be made under these conditions.

However, there are a number of criticisms of the workshop model that became more pronounced during the 1980s. Firstly, those active in the sector were often slow or even unable to respond to the changing political and economic situation sufficiently to further their own interests. The literature that the movement produced, for example, often displays a belief in the sector as at the vanguard of cultural activism on the verge of the transformation of the “mainstream”. This concern was voiced by Alan Fountain when he complained of

the complete failure of the [Regional] Conference to discuss in full session its location within a specific economic, political and ideological conjuncture . . . sessions seemed to be spent in a mood of optimistic expansion between which informal conversations with Institute staff indicated a dire short term financial position – the prospect of cut-back rather than expansion and the choice of what to axe rather than what to initiate.⁶⁷

In this way Malcolm Allen, Film Officer for the East Midlands, could confidently argue that:

⁶⁷ Fountain, “Questions of Democracy and Control”, p.164.

Independent film has, at last, emerged from the semi-ghetto where it could be safely ignored to become an articulate and serious challenge to a cinema employing an historically bankrupt aesthetic which has nevertheless stubbornly refused to disappear.⁶⁸

With hindsight it is clear that the objective situation fell far short of these aims. However, the most recurrent and in some ways related criticism of workshop production is summed up by Theresa Fitzgerald: "Even those broadly sympathetic to the sector's aims and politics often accuse it of amateurism and self-indulgence, of retreating within a closeted and cosseted world".⁶⁹ This is echoed by Peter Sainsbury (then BFI Head of Production) in 1979 when he noted that "The films produced . . . in some cases have been unfathomable by even those familiar with traditional minority cinema."⁷⁰ The tendency to more obscure formal experimentation was less prevalent in the regional workshop sector than the London-based avant-garde. However, as Alan Lovell has argued, inattention to aesthetic concerns within the more politicised workshops was also a problem:

the "political" tendency had never shown much interest in aesthetics. It had generally been content to accept a simple form of realism. An uncritical acceptance of community art ideas of the 1960s, with their insistence that authentic representations could only be achieved by oppressed groups themselves, further strengthened these characteristics. The consequences were not happy ones for Workshop productions.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Malcolm Allen, "Introduction", Tony Bloor and Sue Norman, "What We Have!" (Loughborough: East Midlands Arts, 1980) p.4.

⁶⁹ Theresa Fitzgerald, "Shoptalk", *Sight and Sound*, 57 (Summer, 1988) p.163.

⁷⁰ Peter Sainsbury, "Production Policy", Stoneman and Thompson (Eds.), *The New Social Function of Cinema*, p.10.

⁷¹ It should be noted that Lovell's article is in fact a systematic defence of the regional workshop model. "That was the Workshop that Was", *Screen*, 31:1 (Spring, 1990) p.104.

Lovell questions the skills base of the sector, a “naïve” reliance on “authenticity”, and argues that this is a problem at an institutional level:

Part of the problem has been that the Commissioning Editors for Independent Film and Video are themselves products of the cultural politics of the 1970s. They are trapped within its contradictions as much as any of the film and video makers they support. Their sense of innovation is defined by the aesthetics of that time.⁷²

While this should be seen in the context of underfunding, and while there are certainly many exceptions, it demonstrates a weakness in the ideology and practice of the workshop model that cannot be ignored. This criticism can be more fully understood, however, as a problem created through the dichotomy between culture and commerce that is at the heart of the regional workshop model. As Sinfield has argued of the New Left: “what was ignored almost entirely on the left . . . was the possibility of working with – politicising – actual popular cultures, ‘commercial’ though they are. The idea, always, was to replace them with ‘good’ culture.”⁷³ This criticism is largely applicable to the regional workshop sector. The rejection of popular cultural forms, albeit based on a productive rejection of the values and practices of the “mainstream”, created a chronic inability to communicate the sector’s aspirations beyond small and selective audiences.

It is important to recognise that the workshop model was always precariously balanced between the competing and overlapping agendas of institutions, and subject to the wider transiency of the politics of public funding for film. A product of the 1970s but being fully born in the 1980s,

⁷² Ibid. p.105.

⁷³ Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture*, p.283.

the regional workshop model was established in an awkward position: that of the political scales tipping towards the Right and against its values and practices. In this way the 1980s was a transitional time for the regional film workshops as the institutions on which they depended shifted their agendas away from the model of film as a cultural practice that emerged from the sector. The encounter with Channel Four best represents this paradox. For example, by 1984 Sue Aspinall could complain that

the tendency has been for independent work to adapt to television norms, to be presented in recognisable forms (i.e. the longer narrative feature, the work of an “auteur”), rather than for television to adjust to the practices of the independent sector: non-standard running times, collective production, formal experiment, an emphasis on ideas rather than production values. While many more people are seeing “independent” work, there is little sense that such work arises from political and aesthetic debates carried on among filmmakers, through film magazines and journals, and in film education.⁷⁴

While workshop production continued throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s in various forms the specific model for film as a cultural practice embodied in the Workshop Declaration was de-stabilised and eventually supplanted by commercially-orientated commissioning and funding arrangements in the regions. Channel Four withdrew from the Declaration at the beginning of the 1990s. These changes will be fully explored in the following chapter.

⁷⁴ Sue Aspinall, “The Space for Innovation and Experiment”, *Screen*, 25:6 (Nov-Dec, 1984) p.74.

Chapter 3

The Regional Creative Industries Model

We need to abandon forever the “little England” vision of a UK industry comprised of small British film companies delivering parochial British films . . . it’s time for a reality check. That “British” film industry never existed, and in the brutal age of global capitalism, it never will.¹

Alan Parker (2002)

Creativity is at the heart of British culture – a defining feature of our national identity. And today, the force of British creativity is renowned throughout the world. People across the globe are inspired by the sheer diversity of our creative talent and the consistency with which that talent takes the arts in new and exciting directions. They recognise Britain as a hub of creative endeavour, innovation and excellence, and they are drawn to the strength of our creative economy. In the coming years, the creative industries will be important not only for our national prosperity but for Britain’s ability to put culture and creativity at the centre of our national life.²

Gordon Brown (2008)

I never felt in any way threatened by my Tory political masters as I did by New Labour from day one. I mean these people have done Cultural Studies courses so they know that art is a bourgeois con-trick.³

Colin MacCabe (2000)

This chapter is concerned with the “creative industries” model for regional film production. Emerging in the 1980s, “creative industries” policies increasingly, although unevenly, came to inform film policy and practice in the English regions throughout the 1990s. By the mid-2000s it was

¹ Alan Parker, “Building a Sustainable Film Industry: A Presentation to the UK Film Industry”, Film Council (2002) p.8.

² Gordon Brown, “Foreword”, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Creative Britain: New Talents for the New Economy* (London: DCMS, 2008) p.1.

³ John Caughey and Simon Frith, “The Film Institute and the Rising Tide: An Interview with Colin MacCabe”, *Screen*, 41:1 (Spring 2000) p.63.

possible to discuss a national film policy strategy characterised by a centrally coordinated but devolved network of film funding agencies based on the “creative industries” model. For example, Nick Redfern argued in 2005 that:

The regional is increasingly seen as the best scale at which to formalise film policy, the institutional infrastructure, and the discourses surrounding the cinema, as such the industrial and cultural activities of film production, distribution, and exhibition are carried out at the regional level more and more.⁴

For Redfern this means that the “traditional core-periphery relationship between London and the provinces is no longer a viable model of the film industry in the UK.”⁵

If, in the earlier period, it makes sense to discuss the geographic distribution of British film production infrastructure in terms of two distinct and antagonistic sectors – a centrally located “commercial” industry orbited by small-scale, regionally-based “cultural” production sectors – then by 2000 this distinction becomes impossible to maintain in the same way. The key questions are: what caused this transformation? What are the features of the “creative industries” model for regional film production? And what is their structural position and function in British film policy?

The concept of the “creative industries” requires definition. It derives from the “cultural industries”, a term with a complex etymology.⁶

For the purposes of this argument the terms “cultural industries” and

⁴ Nick Redfern, “Film in the English Regions”, *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 1:2 (2005) p.61.

⁵ Ibid. p.62.

⁶ The concept’s origins are in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s classic condemnation of “mass” culture. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”, Simon During (Ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993). For a fuller discussion of the term that has informed my argument see Nicholas Garnham, “From Cultural to Creative Industries”, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 11:1 (2005).

“creative industries” refer to transformations in public policy from the 1980s: in particular the redrawing of the boundaries between cultural policy and economic policy, a process often described as the “commodification of culture”. This process began in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government with the introduction of market-based systems of subsidy for “cultural” sectors. After New Labour’s 1997 election victory the emphasis on market value in cultural provision was reinforced and expanded under the new term, “creative industries”. The terms “cultural industries” and “creative industries” are, therefore, chronological, reflecting the steady development of a particular policy framework. However, the terms also overlap and are in some ways interchangeable.

“Creative industries” policies for regional film production are most fully embodied in the creation in 2000 of the UK Film Council (UKFC) and in 2001 of a network of nine Regional Screen Agencies (RSAs), an institutional structure intended to form “an integrated planning framework between the ‘centre’ and the regions, and between industrial and cultural priorities”.⁷ A flagship New Labour initiative, the inclusion of regional production sectors within a national strategy responsible for both the industrial and cultural aspects of film has been cast as a sea-change in the state’s approach to the cinema. For example, in 2004 John Woodward, the UKFC’s Chief Executive Officer, argued that

For the first time in its history, the UK film industry now has a cohesive public policy and strategy. For the first time in living memory, we have succeeded in bringing together

⁷ UKFC, *Film in England: A Development Strategy for Film and the Moving Image in the English Regions* (London: UKFC, 2000) p.37.

disparate parts of the industry to speak as one on issues such as piracy and training. For the first time in years, we have a Government which is committed to film as an intrinsic and immensely valuable part of the Creative Economy.⁸

This celebratory tone has been reflected in academic critique. For example, Graham Roberts argued in 2002 that “much of the new ring of confidence which really is seizing the UK film industry is a result of a central government which has clearly embraced the cultural industries.” Roberts hailed the UKFC’s “visionary pragmatism” and argued that “the new UK government, unlike the Conservative administrations of both Thatcher and Major, had recognised film as a key part of the £60bn p.a. UK creative industries”. In particular, “for the first time there is one organisation in the UK responsible for encouraging both cultural and commercial film activity.” For Roberts, “the only complaints about the UKFC ‘project’ can be lack of cash or . . . an inability to solve every problem.”⁹ In a similar vein, Paul Marris describes a “sunrise following the long Tory night” in which

the first New Labour administration has been both creator and creature of a new conjuncture. The concept of “heritage” has thankfully mutated into “media and culture”. The “creative industries” (wider than the “cultural industries”) are officially accepted, even promoted, as a significant economic sector which generates jobs and wealth. Europhobia is to be dispelled, and devolution and regional regeneration have become explicit policy objectives. In a metropolitan state like Britain, these changes have a vital bearing on the environment for regional media production development, consolidating certain baselines which have encouraged a confident, social entrepreneurialism.¹⁰

⁸ John Woodward, “Keynote Address to Screen International Conference” (Delivered 21st October 2004, available at www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk, accessed Dec 2008) p.24.

⁹ Graham Roberts “Now We Are Two”, Paper given at ISA, New Orleans, 2002 (available at www.ics.leeds.ac.uk, accessed July 2005).

¹⁰ Paul Marris, “Soyo Square: The Studio in the North”, *Vertigo*, 2:2 (2002) p.4.

In this way the “creative industries” model for regional film production is often promoted as part of a reversal in government film policy, away from the previous Conservative governments’ disastrous *laissez faire* attitude to the industry; away from the marginalisation of the regions in British film culture; and away from the separation of industrial and cultural concerns in public policy terms more generally. The integration of regional film sectors into a national film strategy is cast as part of New Labour’s modernisation of the country, which, alongside regional devolution, and European and global integration, signal an end to a divisive and culturally conservative political agenda.

On the other hand, for some the incorporation of the “creative industries” ideology into film policy represents almost the exact reverse: the commercialisation of regional film production sectors at the expense of film as a cultural practice. For example, Margaret Dickinson and Sylvia Harvey have argued that “the deployment of London-based production, distribution and exhibition funds and the priorities of the new Regional Screen Agencies have moved public policy away from cultural criteria and concerns and towards almost exclusively market-based forms of judgement and evaluation.”¹¹ Similarly, for Holly Aylett, “in the English regions, as in film policy, we find a series of more or less unaccountable private companies receiving significant amounts of public money and

¹¹ Margaret Dickinson and Sylvia Harvey, “Film Policy in the United Kingdom: New Labour at the Movies”, first published in *Political Quarterly* (August 2005), available at www.filmpolicy-uk.org (accessed November 2005) p.4.

claiming the authority to direct every aspect of film culture.”¹² Part of the purpose of this chapter is to assess this debate.

In opposition to the de-historicising tendencies of UKFC policy and its advocates, it is argued here that the “creative industries” model for regional film production is not a sea-change in film policy and practice but the culmination of wider trends in public policy from the 1980s. This is discussed in the first part of the chapter, primarily with reference to the work of Nicholas Garnham, Steve McIntyre and Philip Schlesinger.

As in the previous chapter, the specific character and function of regional “creative industries” is best understood through the development of regional institutions: specifically, transformations in the ideology and practice of the BFI, the Regional Arts Associations, broadcasters and local authorities. At the same time this development can be understood through the creation of new institutions: particularly regional Screen Commissions, regional Media Development Agencies and, later, the UKFC and its regional structure. The second part of the chapter analyses this development, culminating with the establishment of the Regional Screen Agencies. The chapter concludes by assessing the “creative industries” model of regional film production and addressing some of the criticisms of contemporary regional film policy.

The Commodification of Culture

There are two main ways in which to understand the transition to “cultural industries” policies in the 1980s. The first is that local authorities began to

¹² Holly Aylett, “The Independent Film Parliament: An Introduction”, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 1:1 (2004) p.106.

recognise cultural production as a key area of economic development and regeneration in the face of a decline in traditional manufacturing industries and spatial subsidies. According to this view the shift to “cultural industries” policies emerges as a dynamic and modernising force, softening the blow of Thatcherite economics while having the added bonus of ceding cultural authority to groups traditionally marginalised by the centrally located and elitist structures of cultural funding, such as the regional working-class, members of ethnic minorities, or women. While this may accurately represent some of the aspirations of cultural policy in the 1980s, the problem is that it suggests that the development of “cultural industries” policies worked independently of the wider economic structure and in opposition to the prevailing Thatcherite programme. This is not supported by the evidence.

The second way to understand the adoption of “cultural industries” policies is in relation to the wider political economy of Thatcherism: the political shift to the Right, the restructuring of the British economy along “free market” lines accompanied by a massive transference of public assets to the private sector through privatisation initiatives. This is reflected in cultural policy through a shift in the ideology underpinning justifications for public subsidy: from one of “market failure” to one of “market value”. That is, instead of subsidising forms of cultural production that the market was unable or unwilling to provide but are nevertheless perceived to be in the public interest, cultural subsidy becomes justified through the value it adds to the economy with the market itself taken to offer the best mechanism for the identification and delivery of cultural

needs. In this analysis the “cultural industries” concept becomes complicit in the privatisation agenda of the 1980s, facilitating the transfer of public funds to the private sector.

The adoption of “cultural industries” policies contains a tension between these two conflicting trends. However, it was the second set of ideas which would achieve primacy within the discourse, reflected in the transition from “cultural industries” to “creative industries”. This can be explored by looking at the origins of the policy, and how it was taken up and deployed.

The “cultural industries” as a policy concept developed from a radical reappraisal of the traditional basis of arts subsidy in Britain. As Dickinson and Harvey note:

[Pierre] Bourdieu’s work on the concept of “cultural capital” and on the ways in which arts institutions and subsidies help to perpetuate class distinctions encouraged both a new sympathy for market-based forms of cultural expression and a determination to intervene in order to sustain forms of cultural commodity production that were accessible, pluralistic and of high quality.¹³

They continue: “While there was a pragmatic aspect to the strategy (strengthening the local economy) there was also a radical impulse introduced by policy advisors, like Nicholas Garnham, at the Greater London Council (GLC).”¹⁴

The policies of the GLC are widely regarded as the seminal moment in the incorporation of the ideology of the cultural industries into public policy. Steve McIntyre, for instance, argues that it is “difficult to underestimate the crucial influence of Nicholas Garnham in insinuating

¹³ Dickinson and Harvey, “New Labour at the Movies”, p.5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

notions of the cultural industries into the London Industrial Strategy".¹⁵

Garnham's critique questioned the traditional distinction between commercial and cultural policy, as well as the institutional basis which it informed. He criticised a "whole tradition of idealist cultural analysis" arguing that "while this tradition has been rejecting the market, most people's cultural needs and aspirations are being, for better or worse, supplied by the market as goods and services."¹⁶ This analysis was incorporated into a wider project:

The Greater London Council represented an extraordinary (and in retrospect almost inconceivable) exposition of radical left politics in London within a general political landscape characterized by the most intransigent and uncompromising radical right government since the war. The GLC introduced a series of populist, grassroots initiatives ranging from a cheap public transport policy to employment programmes in the capital. It was persuaded that its industrial, economic and employment strategies should take London's cultural industries seriously.¹⁷

"The London Industrial Strategy", therefore, contained a chapter devoted to London's "cultural industries": "the small record labels, fringe theatre groups, small literary presses and magazines, [and] independent film and video makers." In part it sought to promote access to these arenas of cultural production by "communities of interest such as those of the women's movement, black culture, [and] working-class experience". At the same time support is justified through an economic analysis, arguing

¹⁵ Steve McIntyre, "Art and Industry: Regional Film and Video Policy in the UK", Albert Moran (Ed.), *Film Policy: International, National and Regional Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1996) p.223.

¹⁶ See, for example, Nicholas Garnham's speech delivered to the Economic Policy Group of the Greater London Council in 1983: "Public Policy and the Cultural Industries", Fred Inglis (Ed.), *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information* (London: Sage Publications, 1990) pp.154-155.

¹⁷ McIntyre, "Art and Industry", p.223.

that “Intervention at this level . . . creates jobs by enabling more producers to exist at an economically viable level.”¹⁸

The experiment in radical cultural policy was short lived: the Conservatives disbanded the GLC in 1986 along with six other Labour controlled metropolitan councils. The key point, however, is that while the concept’s origins are in a Leftist critique of arts subsidy and the ideal of an autonomous art aesthetic, the discourse of the “cultural industries” effectively rearticulated certain cultural practices (particularly workshop film, music and other visual arts) within an economic policy framework.

McIntyre describes this transformation:

The notion of public investment in cultural industries . . . rose phoenix-like from the ashes of the GLC and two to three years later, no self-respecting city in England . . . was without a team of consultants devising a strategy for that area. What happened, however, was that the terms began to shift and the emphasis increasingly began to be placed on cultural industries as industries like any other – areas in which local authorities could intervene and thereby generate jobs, urban regeneration economic development and so on. Increasingly the sponsoring department would be economic development rather than arts and cultural services.¹⁹

Why did the terms of cultural provision shift in this way? To understand this the development of regional “cultural industries” policies must be viewed within the wider context of the 1980s. As Garnham has argued, “The general context was the shift from state to market across the whole range of public provision, initiated under the Thatcher government.”²⁰

McIntyre’s account highlights the “success of industry-orientated rhetoric within the cultural sector and the mechanisms through which

¹⁸ Greater London Council, “The London Industrial Strategy” (London: Greater London Council, 1985) pp.169-170.

¹⁹ McIntyre, “Art and Industry”, p.224.

²⁰ Garnham, “From Cultural to Creative Industries”, p.16.

cultural agencies have aligned themselves with film, video and television industries on the one hand and broader economic development concerns on the other.”²¹ Here, two broad policy contexts need to be mentioned.

First was the attempt to introduce market values into mechanisms for the allocation of cultural provision. As Nobuko Kawashima has argued:

the Conservative Government which came into power in 1979 pushed forward a whole new set of values and ideologies into public sector management. For the arts, there was much evidence to suggest the government was trying to minimise its role in the support for the arts.²²

Kawashima notes that the “ideology that the public sector was wasteful and inferior to the market model” became increasingly influential. Take this statement from Richard Luce, Minister for the Arts in 1987, for example:

there are still too many in the arts world who have yet to be weaned away from the welfare state mentality – the attitude that the taxpayer owes them a living. Many have not yet accepted the challenge of developing plural sources of funding. They give the impression of thinking that all other sources of funding are either tainted or too difficult to get. They appear not to have grasped that the collectivist mentality of the sixties and seventies is out of date.²³

One response was the introduction of “incentive” or “match” funding requirements into the budgets of cultural funding bodies through initiatives such as the Business Sponsorship Incentive Scheme, launched in 1984. Under the scheme public money would need to be matched or exceeded by money raised from the private sector. This worked to create an internal “market for support” within the cultural sector where “individual ‘units of production’ – be they organisations or individuals – have to compete for

²¹ McIntyre, “Art and Industry”, p.231.

²² Nobuko Kawashima, “Planning for Equality? Decentralisation in Cultural Policy” (Warwick: Centre for Cultural Policy, 1996, revised 2004) p.29.

²³ Quoted in, *ibid.* p.30.

assistance and to present a case.”²⁴ Cultural institutions increasingly embedded their activities within a rhetoric which emphasised direct and indirect economic benefits to wider sections of the economy: through research, education, training and development, through job creation and urban regeneration, through the commercial exploitation of “cultural” products.

The second significant policy context during the period was the deregulation of British broadcasting, a process that began with the creation of Channel Four. Unlike the BBC and ITV companies, Channel Four was created as a publisher/broadcaster, with its programming entirely dependent on outside production companies. The role of the Channel in nurturing the regional film workshops was noted in the previous chapter. Its success, however, led to the further deregulation of the sector:

Throughout the 1980s, the Conservative Government determined to carry through a comprehensive re-structuring of the British broadcasting industry. The broad thrust of its policies was to introduce competition into what was seen as the “cosy duopoly” exercised by the BBC and by the [Independent Broadcasting Authority] IBA and the ITV companies[.]²⁵

In 1987 a Home Office directive forced an independently-produced programming quota of twenty five per cent onto the BBC and ITV companies, which was incorporated into the 1990 Broadcasting Act. This resulted in the growth of a casualised labour force based on small

²⁴ Bernard Casey, Richard Dunlop and Sara Selwood, *Culture as Commodity? The Economics of the Arts and Built Heritage in the UK* (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1996) p.7.

²⁵ James Cornford and Kevin Robins, “Development Strategies in the Audiovisual Industries: The Case of North East England” (Newcastle: The University of Newcastle, 1991) p.8.

independent production units, what are often called Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs):

While the major broadcasting companies always supported a fairly extensive freelance labour market, they were mainly staffed by full-time, permanent labour. By contrast, much of the proclaimed “efficiency” and “flexibility” of the independent production sector is associated with a different relationship to the labour market. Most independent production companies have a full-time complement of only four or five employees and hire in much of the requisite technical and creative labour as and when it is required. One result of the growth of the independent sector has, therefore, been a growing casualisation of the labour market.²⁶

Although the period saw increased concentration of control over distribution, what emerges from these developments is the importance of small independent cultural producers as the *symbolic* driving force of the “cultural industries” discourse, embedding themselves within a rhetoric of economic development in order to compete for funding from cultural institutions and broadcasters.

By the mid-1990s many of the features of the “creative industries” model were in place across a range of national and local policy strands in Britain, and increasingly reflected at an institutional level. However, these tendencies were not unified within a coherent departmental framework or policy program. This was only achieved after the election of the New Labour government in 1997. As Garnham has commented:

The Labour Party (rebranded as “New Labour”) wished to signal that it not only accepted, but wished to accelerate, this shift. This was linked to a new relationship under Chancellor of the Exchequer (i.e., Finance Minister) Gordon Brown between the Treasury and the spending departments under which public expenditure was to be seen as an “investment” against which recipients had to show

²⁶ By 1991 the majority of the British broadcasting workforce was casualised. Ibid. p.9.

measurable outputs against pre-defined targets. This explains the shift to and reinforcement of “economic” and “managerial” language and patterns of thought within cultural and media policy.²⁷

In 1997 New Labour renamed the Department of National Heritage (the government department with responsibility for film) as the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The DCMS consolidated the identity of the “creative industries” (a term it had itself coined) with The Creative Industries Mapping Document (1998), managed by the Creative Industries Task Force, a policy research unit.²⁸ The Task Force’s purpose was to “recommend steps to maximise the economic impact of the UK creative industries at home and abroad.” The creative industries were identified as “those activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the exploitation of intellectual property.”²⁹ These were: advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software, television and radio.

By the mid-2000s the centrality of economic mechanisms of value in cultural policy was evident. The “creative economy” was increasingly seen as central to the British economy as a whole, and a key area of competitive advantage. For example, a report prepared for the Arts Council in 2007 begins by noting that the creative industries would grow by 46 per cent in employment terms and 136 per cent in output by 2015;

²⁷ Garnham, “From Cultural to Creative Industries”, p.16.

²⁸ Jonathan Vickery, “The Emergence of Culture-led Regeneration: A Policy Concept and its Discontents” (Warwick: Centre for Cultural Policy Studies, 2007) p.51.

²⁹ Quoted in Philip Schlesinger, “Creativity: From Discourse to Doctrine”, *Screen*, 48:3 (August, 2007) p.379.

that in 2004 the creative industries accounted for eight per cent of UK Gross Value Added compared to four per cent in 1997; that creative industries grew by five per cent per annum between 1997 and 2004 compared with three per cent for the economy as a whole; that the creative industries employ 1.8 million people in the UK; and that creative industries exports contributed £13bn to the balance of trade, or four per cent of exports.³⁰ In 2005 James Purnell, Minister for Creative Industries, argued that Britain was the world's most "creative nation", and that the creative industries had "contributed to a quiet revolution in the shape of our economy", and expressed the government's desire to make Britain the "world's creative hub".³¹

The concept of the "creative industries" within New Labour cultural policy has been analysed by Philip Schlesinger. As he notes, its deployment demonstrates that the "logic of economic policy has prevailed." In particular, the significance of the concept was twofold:

One was symbolic – a projection of a new mood, but in reality a kind of regressive modernization whose key symbol (until it became manifestly absurd and discredited) was the Millennium Dome at Greenwich. This aspect, associated with marketing and public relations, treated the nation as though it were a brand. The other face was that of "cultural policy proper", which promoted creative industries not only as an assertion of national identity but also as a key form of economic competition.³²

Schlesinger argues that the supposed importance of the "creative economy" to the wider economy pushed intervention into "creative"

³⁰ John Holden, "Publicly Funded Culture and the Creative Industries" (London: DEMOS/Arts Council, 2007) p.1.

³¹ James Purnell, "Making Britain the World's Creative Hub", Speech to IPPR, 2005 (Available at, http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/minister_speeches/2050.aspx accessed may 2009).

³² Schlesinger, "Creativity", p.378.

sectors to the forefront of government policy initiatives. Indeed, the concept achieved such a primacy that it became a hegemonic doctrine, an object of “unceasing advocacy” by its proponents and an “obligatory starting point for those who wish to enter into dialogue with policymakers.”³³

The concept of the “creative industries” is thus the culmination of a redrawing of the boundaries between cultural and economic policy which, by the turn of the century, was formulated into a relatively coherent centralised framework. Within this line of thinking small independent production companies emerge as the unit to which cultural subsidy is most efficiently directed in order to drive a host of policy objectives such as economic development, urban regeneration, cultural diversity, and so on. Given the intense currency of the concept within government it is unsurprising that aspirations for regional film production became increasingly entrenched within the language, mechanisms of value and institutional infrastructure of the “creative industries” model.

Regional “Creative Industries”

It must be emphasised that the “commodification of culture”, despite the rhetoric, remains an incomplete process. In the regions its development was gradual and uneven as regional production sectors adjusted to the wider economic and political framework. The “creative industries” model for regional film production competed with the “workshop model”, and in practice never entirely supplanted it (this is illustrated through more

³³ Ibid.

detailed examples in the following chapters). This point is important if we are to understand the function of the creative industries model under the UKFC and it can be shown most clearly through changes in regional film funding policy during the period.

The main institutions involved in regional film production in the 1980s continued to be the British Film Institute, the Regional Arts Associations (renamed Regional Arts Boards in 1989) and broadcasters, particularly Channel Four, various ITV franchises and to a lesser extent the BBC. As McIntyre comments:

By the early to mid-1980s . . . most of the elements were in place for a fairly radical shift in the terms of the debate about developing regional cultural/media industries. In effect, a meeting ground was effected between on the one hand local authorities which were looking for mechanisms and strategies for reinvigorating local economies, and on the other cultural activists attempting to develop workshop based practice but also, increasingly, to secure new private and public funding for cultural development underpinned by industrial rhetoric.³⁴

A report prepared for the Arts Council in the early-1990s entitled “Production Funding in a Unified System” confirms this trajectory. It demonstrates increasing collaboration between the BFI, the RABs and broadcasters centred on a combination of “cultural” and “commercial” objectives. For example:

The Arts Council, the BFI and the RABs share the following general objectives for production funding: to identify and give support to creativity in film and video; to fund work of cultural value which might not otherwise be made; to develop skills, give experience and redress imbalances in opportunity; to increase the arts economy.³⁵

It continues:

³⁴ McIntyre, “Art and Industry”, p.225.

³⁵ Undated and unpaginated report, probably early 1990s, available at the V&A Arts Council Archives Box No. ACGB/54/138.

Where in the 60s and 70s it was possible to describe an independent (funded) sector which related to the industry exclusively in oppositional terms (e.g. “against dominant cinema/TV with its white/male/probably American values”), during the late 80s the independents traditionally nurtured by the funders – from radical documentary and feature film makers to video artists and disadvantaged groups – have begun to operate successfully in a mixed economy, happy to work inside TV when the opportunity arises. The advent of C4, the 25% quota and the arrangements negotiated between the funders and TV have provided the impetus for this change.³⁶

The Report concludes: “As a consequence, the aspirations and expectations of those seeking funding in the 90s are likely to be very different to those funded in the 70s and 80s, as will be the criteria employed by the funders.”³⁷

The BFI remained a key source of regional production finance in the period, moving away from the aesthetic and political concerns which had previously defined its activities and adopting “creative industries” policies. The Publishing division was reorganised under more commercial lines and it withdrew support for the Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT), with the publication of *Screen* shifting to the University of Glasgow. There were attempts to commercialise the National Film Archive as a source for TV programming and an increasingly market-orientated production policy was introduced. The BFI’s 1991 catalogue, for example, is the first to adopt an explicitly commercial format. Unlike previous catalogues which addressed aesthetic and political debate within film culture it is designed to “provide information about this body of work

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

for buyers and programmers" while emphasising that "Training has become increasingly important to the funding and development division."³⁸

The majority of BFI funding for film production in the regions continued to be channelled through the Regional Arts Boards. As an Arts Council report demonstrates, they too began to embed themselves within the "creative industries" discourse:

a key role for a RAB of the future would be to play its part in progressing the development of the film, video and broadcasting industry in its broadest sense, by seed-funding talent, providing research and development funds, supporting low-budget production (below 20K), providing challenge/investment funding for cultural productions (above 20K) involving private and public funding partners, ideally a broadcaster.³⁹

However, funding for the RABs declined in real terms during the 1980s and remained relatively low through the 1990s. Further, the traditional pattern of large regional variations in funding also continued.⁴⁰ For Richard Taylor this was the driving force behind the tendency for RABs to broker co-funding deals with broadcasters and by the mid-1990s most regions in England had a film co-production scheme of one sort or another.⁴¹ For example, First Take, joint-funded by the Eastern Arts Board and Anglia Television, took the form of a low-budget television production fund designed to identify and nurture "new talent". Similarly, the West Midlands Arts Board part-funded a scheme with Central

³⁸ Lizzie Francke (Ed.), *BFI Catalogue 1991* (London: BFI, 1991) p.3, 24. This transformation is apparent if this programme is compared with the BFI's catalogue ten years previously, Rod Stoneman and Hilary Thompson (Eds.), *The New Social Function of Cinema* (London: BFI, 1981).

³⁹ Arts Council, "Production Funding in a Unified System".

⁴⁰ In 1995, for example, Northern arts received £432,028 while South West Arts got just £71,510. For a full list of BFI regional grants see Richard Taylor, "Opportunities Knocked? Regional Broadcasters and Grant-aided Film Production", *Vertigo*, 1:5 (1995) p.59.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Television and Channel Four called the First Cut Film and Video Production Fund, offering up to £18,000 for short films for broadcast. In the same period the BBC instituted 10X10, a documentary production scheme produced by BBC Bristol with a regional focus, designed to provide training and an entry route to television production for new, regionally-based filmmakers.⁴²

The adoption of co-production schemes in the regions in this period represents a decisive break with the structure and ideology of the regional workshop movement: structurally in the move from revenue funding to project-by-project commissioning, which represented a shift in the balance of power away from regionally-based producers and to regional broadcasters; and ideologically through a transformation in the discursive construction of regional film practices, away from questions of the politics of aesthetics and towards notions of training and stylistic “innovation”. For example, Taylor describes the potential benefits to regional media development of one such scheme:

South West Arts was involved in one of the first regional production schemes with a broadcaster, under the title of *Shoot First*. The partnership provided several positive spin-offs for both the broadcaster, TSW, and the filmmakers. Some of the experimental filmmakers went on to produce title sequences for TSW arts programmes or public service announcements. TSW was pleased with the freshness of the product it was getting from the sector – the methods, techniques and the risks taken were clearly not coming from within established television culture. TSW was positive about the “community” element of its independent filmmakers’ scheme as it had always fostered links with its local communities; this was largely why TSW was a very popular company. And TSW paid well[.]⁴³

⁴² See Christopher Chandler and Linda Carruthers-Watt, *Guide to Funding for Low-Budget Film and Video Production* (London: BFI, 1994).

⁴³ Taylor, “Opportunities Knocked?”, p.58.

(He argues that “The generosity of spirit shown by this broadcaster does not characterise many of the current schemes.”⁴⁴) Whereas ten years previously arguments for regional film production funding were likely to be couched in a rhetoric of the politics of cultural practice, the regional independent production sector was now increasingly constructed as a source of aesthetic and technical innovation and experimentation for the “mainstream” broadcast sector. Unsurprisingly, regional film funding schemes of this kind raised concerns among those coming from an older tradition as to the efficacy of spending “public” money to produce material destined for commercial circulation, often made at below union rates of pay, and to identify and train television workers. McIntyre, for example, calls them “talent spotting operations” that effectively “subsidise a television industry in doing something that it should be doing anyway”.⁴⁵ Similarly, Taylor asks: “Are these schemes about notions of regional identity, of indigenous voices, or are they about cheap television and token nods by the broadcasters in the direction of the regulators?”⁴⁶

These kinds of criticisms were mirrored by John Caughey and Simon Frith in relation to the BFI in 1990: “for many of us who work in cultural or educational institutions, to watch the BFI accommodating to enterprise, to new staffing structures, to profile building, to marketing, is to watch our own professional life flash past with the painful objectivity of distance, and a sneaking sense of something betrayed.” They continue:

For the BFI it is clear that the language of sponsorship and entrepreneurialism is what brings in official support; but how does such an Institute speak that administrative and

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ McIntyre, “Art and Industry”, pp.230-231.

⁴⁶ Taylor, “Opportunities Knocked?”, p.57.

managerial language without being in bad faith with the principles of public service and the critical cultural theories which gave it its identity in the first place, and which established its centrality within its key constituencies?⁴⁷

While opposition to these new funding regimes was voiced within intellectual and radical publications, the response generated in practice was just as likely to be pragmatic.⁴⁸ Marion Doyen's speech at the 1988 BFI Regional Conference provides a good example:

The language of economic development, the language increasingly used by funding bodies . . . is new to many of us and rightly elicits concern . . . about the place of cultural practice within such discourses. But it is clear that if we are going to survive we are going to have to learn the language and its meaning. I think it is important to add that it should be part of our political programme both to use the language literally for all its worth in cultural and financial terms and perhaps attempt to inflect it with new meanings that are recognised by all its users – not just us but funders as well.⁴⁹

If the workshop period was characterised by the influence grassroots groups were able to exert on regional film policy, then the development of regional “creative industries”, by contrast, is defined by an agenda set by wider trends in public policy.

New Institutions

As well as transformations in the funding policies of existing institutions, towards the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s new organisations were formed that more directly reflected “creative industries” policies, the most significant of which were the Screen Commissions and the regional Media Development Agencies.

⁴⁷ John Caughey and Simon Frith, “The British Film Institute: Re-tooling the Culture Industry”, *Screen*, 31:2 (Summer 1990) pp.215-216.

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the response of the “independent sector” in the period see Dickinson, “A Short History”, pp.62-83.

⁴⁹ Quoted in, *Ibid.* p.81.

The idea for a national network of regional Screen Commissions derived from a 1990 Downing Street Seminar co-organised by British Screen and the BFI as a way to attract foreign investment to the UK in view of the increasing internationalisation of film production. For local authorities eager to encourage investment in local facilities – not only production but also hotels, catering, spending on materials and so on – and boost tourism, Screen Commissions could also help wrest film and television productions away from London and the South East. As a BFI publication on the subject in 1991, written by Paul Marris, argued:

Visiting productions put money directly and indirectly into the local economy, giving rise to additional work for local specialist media companies and personnel. In the case of the predominantly UK-financed feature film, figures from British Screen and other sources suggest that on average direct spending of £200,000 goes into the local economy.⁵⁰ For television series the sums can be greater.

Liverpool City Council opened a Film Liaison Office in 1989 with the support of Merseyside Television; other cities followed suit. These organisations gathered information relevant to producers such as directories of facilities, crew and locations, built up contacts and offered production liaison with local services such as fire authorities and landowners. In 1991 a national organisation – the UK Film Commission – was set up to coordinate these initiatives and thereby attract foreign investment. Its initial budget was £3.5m over the first four years.⁵¹

For local authorities the benefits of the development of regional “cultural industries” were based on a desire to boost local economies and reduce unemployment, and there were a number of attempts to measure

⁵⁰ Paul Marris, “UK Film Commission”, Richard Lewis and Paul Marris (Ed.), *Promoting the Industry* (London: BFI, 1991) p.29.

⁵¹ Ibid.

the economic impact of the cultural sector at a local level.⁵² For example, a study conducted in Liverpool in 1988 by Merseyside Arts in conjunction with the Merseyside County Council and the Merseyside Development Consortium and part-funded by the Granada television company concluded that the “economic value of the arts in Merseyside” included an £80m annual turnover, direct or indirect employment for 7000 people and at least £4m in tax revenue. It concluded that “the arts were a cost-effective means of generating jobs through public expenditure” in comparison to other public services such as education and local government. The report identifies training to be a key area of further expansion for the economic activities of cultural organisations and argues that a lack of overall coordination hampers economic development.⁵³

The first regional Media Development Agency was formed in the North East in 1984. Other regions followed: for example a Comedia feasibility study recommended that Birmingham City Council set up an Agency in 1987 and a Manchester-based organisation produced a similar report in 1989.⁵⁴ Over the next few years Liverpool, Bristol, Leeds, Sheffield and Leicester also undertook media/cultural industries mapping exercises.⁵⁵ The relationships between the different actors within these emerging regional “creative industries”, and the interplay of “cultural” and

⁵² For an overview of these see Casey, Dunlop and Selwood, *Culture as Commodity?*, p.8.

⁵³ John Myerscough, “Economic Importance of the Arts in Merseyside” (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1988) pp.92-93.

⁵⁴ Comedia, “Birmingham Audiovisual Industry Report – Mechanisms for Intervention: Feasibility Study” (London: Comedia, 1987); The Centre for Employment Research, “The Culture Industry: The Economic Importance of the Arts and Cultural Industries in Greater Manchester” (Manchester: Manchester Polytechnic, 1989).

⁵⁵ McIntyre, “Art and Industry”, p.224.

economic arguments, can be illustrated by outlining the development of “creative industries” in one region in more detail.

In the mid-1980s the North East had a regional ITV company – Tyne Tees Television – a BBC regional production centre and a number of small independent production companies making non-broadcast commercial films such as corporate promotional videos. The North East also had five film workshops – Amber, Swingbridge, A19, Trade Films and Siren – supported by Channel Four through the Workshop Declaration (see Chapter Two) with 60 full time staff and an annual turnover of £1.6m in 1987. Deregulation in the period, in particular the quota for independently-produced programming, cut back on directly employed television production staff in the region, which encouraged the development of a new tier of small independent production companies. These numbered up to 50 by 1989, with an average of between three and four staff each, competing with each other for commissions, primarily from broadcasters.⁵⁶

The North East Media Development Council (NEMDC) was formed in 1984. Its 1985 feasibility study justified public subsidy for film thus:

there is a real possibility of creating jobs which can be counted in the hundreds, of enhancing the region's self-image and its power to communicate both inside and outside its boundaries, of attracting new investment into the region, and of building new technological skills among the region's workforce.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ For a more detailed analysis of this see Cornford and Robins, “Development Strategies in the Audiovisual Industries”, pp.16-27. See also Channel Four, “Audiovisual in the Regions: A Project Coordinated by Channel Four and MEDIA in Association with Amber” (Newcastle: Amber/Side, 1988); Chandler and Curruthers-Watt, “Guide to Funding for Low Budget Film”.

⁵⁷ Quoted, in Cornford and Robins, “Development Strategies in the Audiovisual Industries”, p.25.

By 1987 NEMDC had set up a development agency, a training centre and a distribution company (although the distribution company folded shortly after). James Cornford and Kevin Robins comment on internal debates within NEMDC:

On the one hand, it was argued that the major objective for the organisation was to secure grant aid for audiovisual work that would reflect the region's culture. On the other, it was argued that the creation of jobs had to take priority, and that only on the basis of industrial development could there be a flowering of cultural expression. Given the changing environment, this dispute was ultimately resolved in favour of the regional development argument.⁵⁸

This demonstrates the pattern of regional production sectors moving from “cultural” conceptions of film practice – here realised in terms of “reflecting” the region’s “culture” – towards “commercial” mechanisms of value, in particular the creation of jobs.⁵⁹

Increasingly, NEMDC’s function was limited to the management of the training centre which adopted a market-driven strategy through a production company and facilities business servicing the local broadcast sector. In 1989 a new agency, the Northern Media Forum, was set up incorporating the ITV companies for the whole Northern region, the larger production companies as well as the groups involved in NEMDC. The Forum’s strategy was based around maintaining the regional broadcast sector and attracting outside production spend: it set up a £3m film investment fund which promised up to ten per cent of production budgets

⁵⁸ Ibid. p.26.

⁵⁹ For an example of this see, John Stevens Associates, “A Media Strategy for the North of England” (Gateshead: Northern Media Forum, 1995).

on agreement that two thirds of the total production budget be spent in the region.⁶⁰

In 1990 a study prepared for Newcastle City Council assessed the region's "cultural industries" in the following terms:

The AV sector . . . has considerable implications for the promotion of the profile and identity of cities . . . a high level of audiovisual production and a reputation for innovation can help to raise the profile of cities and replace simple-minded stereotypes with a more rounded view of the city. The potential of local television and other services, it is argued, can contribute to the sense of identity of a city and generate a sense of local pride as well as opening a potential forum for local debate and discussion.⁶¹

Northern Arts, the local RAB, was particularly well developed and by the 1990s managed a Media Investment Fund channelled to script development, one-off pilot projects and capital loans. It also funded the development of new writers in partnership with Yorkshire and Humberside Arts, North West Arts, Yorkshire TV and Granada TV, and ran a short film production scheme in association with Tyne Tees Television. In the mid-1990s revenue funding for the workshops was withdrawn, leaving them to compete on an equal basis with other local production companies. Reflecting the adoption of broadcast industry standards, in 1995 a document written by Northern Art's Head of Published and Broadcast Arts outlined their production policies as a "product-led application procedure for company support and individual projects" with an "emphasis on film and television drama":

support should be offered for work which would not necessarily be defined as cultural production. The aim will

⁶⁰ Cornford and Robins, "Development Strategies in the Audiovisual Industries", p.26.

⁶¹ James Cornford and Kevin Robins, "Broadcasting for the Audiovisual Industries: A Sector Study for Newcastle City Council" (Newcastle: Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, 1990) pp.9-10.

be to grow the region's infrastructure and ensure that companies of sufficient strength and experience exist to provide regular work to the technicians and creative grade individuals based in the region.⁶²

In this period, then, we have an overall growth and development in the sector – in terms of size, organisation, and levels of subsidy. Existing film workshops were augmented by a massive growth in small commercially-orientated independent production companies and the development of economic justifications for cultural subsidy to the point where cultural policy is indistinguishable from economic policy – witnessed in training initiatives, business development and a focus on attracting outside investment. Ideas of the politics of film as a cultural practice that were represented in the regional film workshops are absorbed into a more nebulous notion of “identity” and “civic pride”. Perhaps most significantly, these are seen to be a by-product of regional economic development, a result of “creative industries” *per se*, as opposed to particular kinds of practices making a particular kind of product. By the mid-1990s public subsidy was maintaining a coordinated “market for support” in the North East driven by the agenda of broadcasters and directed towards small independent production companies.

These kinds of developments also took place in other regions, so that in 1991 Paul Marris could argue that

While London and its geographical surround continue unquestionably to hold the foremost place in the UK industry, there is now a second tier, comprising Bristol, Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle upon Tyne, and a third including Belfast, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Nottingham, Norwich, Sheffield and

⁶² Quoted in, Julian Petley, “Crisis in the Northeast”, *Vertigo*, 5 (Autumn/Winter 1995) p.55.

Southampton. Each region of the UK has a labour and technical facilities infrastructure in the audiovisual production industry concentrated in major urban centres.⁶³

By the mid-1990s all the elements of the regional “creative industries” model were in place and the national significance of regional production sectors was increasingly recognised. However, there was a perception of disorganisation and inefficiency.

In 1998 New Labour appointed a Film Policy Review Group made up of industry company executives. Its report, *A Bigger Picture*, recommended the restructuring of the existing institutions responsible for administering film policy in England into a single organisation under the “creative industries” model.⁶⁴ The Film Council was created in 2000 (renamed UK Film Council in 2003), a body incorporating the Lottery Film Department of the Arts Council of England, BFI Production, the British Film Commission and British Screen Finance into a single agency charged with both the cultural and commercial activities of its predecessor organisations. Reflecting the ascendancy of the “creative industries” concept, the UKFC’s conception of film is summed up film in the following terms:

Film is a complex combination of industry and culture. Common to both are creativity and commerce. For the purpose of this review we assume that industry and culture are inextricably linked and, that, in public policy terms, to privilege one over the other would be to the detriment of both.⁶⁵

⁶³ Marris, “UK Film Commission”, pp.27-28.

⁶⁴ Film Policy Review Group, “A Bigger Picture: The Report of the Film Policy Review Group”, (London: Department for Culture Media and Sport, 1998). Despite the “UK” tag, existing institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were left largely intact. See Dickinson and Harvey, “New Labour at the Movies”, p.3.

⁶⁵ UKFC, “Film in England”, p.12.

In 1999 the Department of Culture Media and Sport launched a consultation process which led to the policy statement, “Film in England: A Development Strategy for Film and the Moving Image in the English Regions”. The report recommended the creation of nine Regional Screen Agencies to coordinate film funding between the UKFC and the regions and the creation of a Regional Investment Fund for England (RIFE) with a budget of £6m per year to be used to “to catalyse integrated regional planning, strengthen the existing regional infrastructure and to expand film activities.”⁶⁶

The RSAs were formed through the amalgamation of the agencies that characterised regional film sectors previously: the film activities of the Regional Arts Boards, regional Media Development Agencies, Screen Commissions and other investment funds, training funds and production schemes. They represent the consolidation of the “creative industries” model in a number of ways. Firstly, they adopted the functions of the organisations that existed in the regions into a single agency: managing training provision, attracting inward investment, facilitating business development and investing in production. Secondly, as Redfern has noted, they represent the bureaucratisation and professionalization of regional film production funding with an increase in full time, specialised administrators.⁶⁷ Thirdly, their production funding activities reflect the formalisation of the existing tendencies in regional film production as a training route into the commercial film and television industries. For example, there has been a growth of short film production schemes aimed

⁶⁶ Ibid. p.5.

⁶⁷ Redfern, “Film in the English Regions”, p.61.

at identifying and nurturing “new talent”, particularly writers and directors. In comparison to the uneven provision that existed previously, under the UKFC each RSA administers a “Digital Shorts” short film production scheme, designed as a training initiative and to provide a calling card for regionally-based directors. These schemes are organised so as to facilitate linear career progression, through the regional schemes, to the nationally administered short film schemes such as Cinema Extreme run by the UKFC, and ultimately to feature film and television work. There has also been an emergence of regionally-produced feature films, made on low budgets and often utilising digital production technology, produced by small independent production companies and funded through co-productions, most often between an RSA and a broadcaster. Finally, UKFC policies have formalised the ideological tendencies within regional “creative industries” towards seeing “cultural” policy objectives as a by-product of economic development.⁶⁸ As a DEMOS report puts it, the regional production funds are intended to “develop a sustainable UK film industry by developing the pool of creative skills and talent; developing entrepreneurial acumen and business clusters; and developing an industrial infrastructure”.⁶⁹ RSAs “help to develop an individual’s interest in screen production into a career of economic value”:

The RSAs do not see themselves as funders of screen culture, but prefer to see themselves as investors in it. They do this by developing the competitiveness of businesses, assisting to build critical mass, addressing skills shortages, developing talent and innovation and offering sector-specific advice and expertise . . . As operators at the regional level

⁶⁸ For a discussion of the instrumental nature of UKFC policy see John Hill, “UK Film Policy, Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion”, *Cultural Trends*, 13:50 (2004).

⁶⁹ John Holden, “The Big Picture: The Regional Screen Agencies Building Community, Identity and Enterprise” (London: DEMOS, 2006) p.37.

embedded in local networks the RSAs are well positioned to make local interventions, and so encourage economic growth in their regions.⁷⁰

The development of these commercial activities will “promote cultural and ethnic diversity in film industry and culture”.⁷¹

Are regional film production sectors now indistinguishable from the “mainstream” commercial film industry? The “commodification” of regional film policy and the increasing integration of regional production sectors within national film strategy does suggest a transformation in the traditional centre/periphery distinction in the British film industry.

However, UKFC film policy also demonstrates a persisting commerce-culture dichotomy manifest in regional terms. For example, in the UKFC’s first major policy statement, “Towards a Sustainable Film Industry”, then UKFC Chairman Alan Parker announced that “Essentially our intention is to use public money to make better, more popular and more profitable films in real partnership with the private sector, which drives our industry and largely creates our film culture.” By contrast, the “cultural role of the UK FILM COUNCIL has been largely delegated to the British Film Institute and its regional partners.”⁷² To quote DEMOS again: “The Government and the UK Film Council look to the RSAs to help capture the many facets of British communities”:

To encourage the growth of a sense of community and identity, to identify and empower under-represented and marginalised voices, give support for different forms of distribution, and ensure diversity of access and participation.⁷³

⁷⁰ Ibid. p.28.

⁷¹ Ibid. p.37.

⁷² Alan Parker, “Forward”, UKFC, “Towards a Sustainable UK Film Industry” (London: UK Film Council, 2000) p.1.

⁷³ Holden, “The Big Picture”, p.20, 17.

In policy terms, much of the “cultural burden” of representing the nation – community, identity, diversity – has been displaced from the “centre” onto regional production sectors. This structure tacitly endorses the idea that a centrally-located, commercially-orientated industry is unable or unwilling to represent national identity in a multifaceted sense. The commerce-culture, centre-region dichotomy that developed through the workshop period is thus maintained, even formalised, within regional “creative industries”.

Conclusion

How can we define the creative industries model for regional film production? Ideologically it is based on the superiority of the market in film production policy. That is, it is based on the belief that commercially-orientated values and practices represent the best possible set of organisational relationships, aspirations and aesthetics for regional film. However, this point needs to be qualified: while a commercial *ideology* is dominant in this model, in practice it operates as a privatised public service, maintained by relatively large levels of public subsidy, administered through a “market for support” and subject to a centrally determined set of policy objectives. These initiatives form a complex network of public and private agencies, partnerships and co-funding deals, tendering organisations and production companies, feature film development funds and short film training schemes. We can further note that “cultural” policy objectives are achieved primarily through the identification and training of regionally-based creative workers, the funding

of low investment products (short films, regionally-produced feature films), and the subsidisation of regionally-based production companies to compete individually within a region and collectively with other regions, with London and also internationally. In this argument Nicholas Garnham's 1983 analysis of the subsidised cultural sector is applicable:

The existence of this dependent satellite sector fulfils a very important function for the cultural industries because it enables them to shift much of the cost and risk of cultural research and development off their own shoulders and on to this exploited sector, some of which is then supported from the public purse. It also enables them to maintain a consistently high turnover of creative cultural labour without running the risk of labour unrest, or bearing the cost of redundancy or pension payments. Their cup brimmeth over when, as is often the case, the workers themselves willingly don this yoke in the name of freedom.⁷⁴

This has been accompanied by a considerable growth in regional film production funding from both "public" and "private" sources: in 2004/2005, for instance, RSAs secured £13.5m in investment from sources outside of RIFE, with the total RSA budget reaching £21.3m.⁷⁵ Alongside this there has been real growth in the film sector in general during the period. For example, in 1994 there were 32,000 people employed in the film and video industries; by 2003 this number had risen to 57,000.⁷⁶ In 2003 production spend in the UK reached £1.2bn, the highest amount since records began in 1992.⁷⁷ These developments meant that, by the mid-2000s, regional film production could be accurately described as a

⁷⁴ Garnham, "Public Policy and the Cultural Industries", p.163.

⁷⁵ Holden, "The Big Picture", p.49.

⁷⁶ David Steele, "Developing the Evidence Base for UK Film Strategy: The Research Process at the UK Film Council", *Cultural Trends*, 13:4 (December 2004) p.14.

⁷⁷ This rise was mostly fuelled by an increase in foreign inward investment. Domestic feature production remained relatively constant between 1997 and 2002. See UKFC, "Statistical Yearbook: Annual Review 2004/05" (London: UK Film Council, 2005) pp.78-80.

significant sector of commercial film practice for the first time in history; it is a trend which is set to continue.

Despite what emerges from UKFC policy statements (which are increasingly propagandistic), the “creative industries” model is best understood not as a sea-change in regional film policy, but the result of the steady development of wider trends in economic and cultural policy going back to the 1980s, in particular the deregulation of British broadcasting, the casualisation of the television workforce and the introduction of market systems of value into cultural policy. The UKFC’s regional policies consolidated existing trends into a devolved but centrally coordinated structure for regional film policy and practice. Simply put, RSAs don’t do anything that wasn’t happening in some form already.

UKFC policy has had the effect, paradoxically, of increasing the centralised control of regional film policy by centrally coordinating the previously existing uneven provision for film in the regions. Within this structure, “cultural” policy objectives have been effectively displaced from the “centre” to the regions, maintaining and formalising a commerce-culture distinction that has its roots in the workshop movement described in the previous chapter. However, as Harvey and Dickinson have argued:

In the English regions . . . the intervention of the Council has had the effect of removing film from its previously strong links to arts policy and administration as well as from the sphere of influence and expertise of the British Film Institute. The sense of an arts and cultural framework for film in England has thus diminished and been replaced, in part, by the very different imperatives and performance indicators of an essentially industrial and economic strategy. The cost of administering public policy for film in the regions has also increased significantly.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Harvey and Dickinson, “New Labour at the Movies”, p.3.

UKFC regional policy has thus aligned “culture” with commercial interests. Given the tacit endorsement that a centrally-located, commercially-driven film industry is unable to adequately provide for cultural representation, this is something of a contradiction. For Michael Chanan:

Part of the problem is the way that trade interests are organised at the level of civil society, according to a regime that establishes the normal channels of communication with the state apparatus, and, not by accident, limits independent voices to a token presence.⁷⁹

Jonathan Vickery has analysed the New Labour government’s approach to urban regeneration. He comments that “there remains a strong case to be argued that the ‘culture-led’ component of regeneration maintains an unwitting ideological function in de-politicising (obviating the rationale for political opposition) the private sector colonisation of public cultural terrain.”⁸⁰ The same could be said of regional film policy. When taken as a whole the development of the “creative industries” model has effectively depoliticised regional film sectors, shifting the idea of film as a cultural practice to an amorphous conception of “identity” and “diversity”, a by-product of regional economic development.

Real questions remain as to how effective UKFC regional strategy is in terms of its both its “cultural” and “commercial” objectives. It is important to recognise, however, that while the structures of regional film funding set the agenda of regional film production, they do not necessarily determine the agendas of filmmakers. From the beginning of the

⁷⁹ Michael Chanan, “The Independent Film Parliament 2003: A Report”, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 1:1 (2004) p.110.

⁸⁰ Vickery, “The Emergence of Culture-led Regeneration”, p.25.

workshop period regional production sectors have contained a range of film practices. These are explored in more detail in the following chapters.

Chapter Four

Amber Films and Regional Documentary Practice

[The] idea of extracting an idea . . . from the past is a thing that the poet does for himself and especially it is a thing that he can do for the community; I mean he can try to tell them who they are. Now he can't tell the community who they are unless he does two things: unless he talks about the things that the community knows about. The things that they're interested in, and unless he also looks on the community's past – at the figures, the monuments, the achievements, the defeats, or whatever it may be, that have made the community what it is.¹

Humphrey Jennings, 1938

really I don't think there's been any contribution by Britain to documentary in the last ten years of any new sort.

I see the next chapter being making films really locally . . . the local film people making films to state their case politically or otherwise, to express themselves[.]²

John Grierson, 1972

In 1981 Alan Fountain argued, in a BFI publication, that the development of the network of film workshops was “the most significant [development] within any area of British Film culture at the current time”.³ However, by 1995 Richard Taylor could complain that

Today, the . . . workshops have been and gone . . . What, now, are the opportunities for new, young filmmakers to make their first films after leaving college? And, in particular,

¹ Quoted in, Kevin Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings: The Definitive Biography of One of Britain's Most Important Filmmakers* (London: Picador, 2004) p.203.

² Elizabeth Sussex, “Grierson on Documentary: The Last Interview”, *Film Quarterly*, 26:2 (1972) pp.26, 30.

³ Alan Fountain, “Questions of Democracy and Control in Film Culture”, Rod Stoneman and Hilary Thompson (Eds.), *The New Social Function of Cinema* (London: BFI, 1981) p.167.

what opportunities are offered to those who choose to live and work outside London?⁴

For a brief period, beginning in the 1970s, flourishing in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, regional film workshops largely defined and embodied the idea of regional film production in England. The regional workshop sector was characterised by a range of film practices and aesthetics: on the smallest scale, community-based training initiatives in film and video production, moving through avant-garde film and video, to documentary and feature film. Groups were often formed around the politics of gender, ethnicity and sexuality as well as the desire to reflect distinct regional identities. Theresa Fitzgerald broadly divides workshop practice into two strands: “artistic” and “documentary”, arguing that both were united by a “shared political element arising from various grass-roots concerns with issues of representation, image and ways of working.”⁵

While this distinction may be difficult to maintain (see Chapter Two), the focus of this chapter is regional “documentary” which can be placed in the tradition of documentary filmmaking that goes back to the 1930s. Indeed, part of the argument here is that regional documentary demands the extension of the history of British documentary cinema beyond the 1960s and Free Cinema.⁶

The documentary movement had a profound and lasting effect on British film culture and has received massive critical attention. Founded in the late

⁴ Richard Taylor, “Opportunities Knocked? Regional Broadcasters and Grant-aided Film Production”, *Vertigo*, 1:5 (1995) p.57.

⁵ Theresa Fitzgerald. “Shoptalk” *Sight and Sound*, 57 (1988): 164.

⁶ This has been advanced by Andrew Higson and Ian Aitken. Andrew Higson, “‘Britain’s Outstanding Contribution to the Film’: The Documentary Realist Tradition”, Charles Barr (Ed.). *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1986) p.96. Ian Aitken, “Introduction”, Ian Aitken (Ed.), *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p.61.

1920s by John Grierson, the movement established a basis for state and corporate sponsorship for documentary film production and a theoretical basis for its practices and values. The movement has been the subject of repeated critical revisions. This has placed it in a curious position: on the one hand it is the most important British contribution to the cinema; a democratic, theoretically informed and politically progressive antithesis to Hollywood mass entertainment that came to inform much of British cinematic practice. On the other, it is cast an elitist form of state propaganda that exploited the working-class, and was responsible for restricting the development of radical documentary practices and critically marginalising alternative, popular British cinematic traditions. This can be seen partly as a result of the extraordinary plasticity of the realist discourse as discussed in Chapter One, partly because of the changes in emphasis that characterised Grierson's own writings up to his death in 1972, and partly due to the influence of his notable apprentices, many of whom diverged or shifted from the original theory and practice of the movement.⁷ Because of this, different strands of the documentary movement, its attitudes and aesthetics, are available to filmmakers in various and sometimes contradictory ways.⁸

For the regional filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s the documentary movement was appropriated in specific ways in their attempt to construct a politically and culturally progressive cinema practice,

⁷ For a full account of the history of the documentary movement, including the critical tradition surrounding it, see Ian Aitken, "Introduction".

⁸ For example, the Free Cinema filmmakers of the 1950s chose to associate their documentary practice with one strand of the documentary movement, and in particular with the work of Humphrey Jennings, in conscious opposition to other competing strands. Lindsay Anderson, director of *O Dreamland* (1953), and *This Sporting Life* (1963), commented: "I don't think the British documentarists ever really approved of Jennings . . . The Griersonian tradition – into which Jennings only fitted uneasily – was always more preachy and sociological than it was either political or poetic." Lindsay Anderson, "Only Connect: Some Aspects of the Work of Humphrey Jennings", first published in *Sight and Sound*, 1953, reprinted in Paul Ryan (Ed.). Lindsey Anderson, *Never Apologise: The Collected Writings* (London: Plexus, 2004) p.366.

representing both a change and a continuation in the values and practices of the documentary movement. What determined these changes, and how the documentary idea was taken up and deployed, will form the basis of the argument of this chapter. This will be explored through a case study of Amber Films, the first, longest running and most significant regional film workshop (up to the point where Fitzgerald argues that they “established a model and a working practice to which all other franchised workshops [were] being obliged to conform”⁹). Amber was formed by a group of students who met while studying film at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London in 1967. The original members were Murray Martin, Graham Denham, Peter Roberts and Lorna Powell, all from working-class backgrounds, and Sirkka Liisa Kontinen, from Finland. The group relocated to Newcastle in 1969 out of a desire to work outside the structures of the London-based industry¹⁰ in a region that had a “strong sense of its own identity”¹¹. Amber’s stated purpose was to document traditional regional working-class communities in the North East, a culture that was perceived to be in decline as traditional manufacturing jobs disappeared and were replaced by low paid, casualised work in the “service sector”. In this way Amber were fully informed by the cultural politics of the New Left and the politicisation of film as a cultural practice described in Chapter Two.

⁹ Fitzgerald. “Shoptalk”, p.169.

¹⁰ As Murray Martin recalls: “we realised that in London you were going to get dragged into the TV world, into the film world which has a different sort of values, and I always recognized that there was a direct relationship between cheapness and freedom.” Neil Young, “Forever Amber: An Interview with Ellin Hare and Murray Martin of the Amber Film Collective”, *Critical Quarterly*, 43:4 (2001) p.117.

¹¹ Amber, “A Short History” (Newcastle: Amber, 2005) p.1.

From the outset Amber incorporated the egalitarian structure and cross-grade working practices that were to be enshrined in the Workshop Declaration into their formation, each member of the group taking an equal wage. As such all their films are ascribed collective authorship and made through a process of collaboration. In 1971 Amber rented premises on the Newcastle Quayside, buying the buildings in the late 1970s when they were threatened with demolition (and later successfully leading a campaign for the Quayside's preservation which would be the subject of their 1979 film, *Quayside*). The buildings were converted into a film workshop, a cinema and the Side photographic gallery.¹² As well as film they were active in photography and the Live Theatre movement, the separate areas informing one another. This integration of activity attracted revenue funding for photography from Northern Arts, the local Regional Arts Association, and film exhibition funding from the BFI; these funds contributed to the film production of the period along with money earned from freelance work that was pooled back into production so as to maintain a degree of financial independence.¹³ Amber, and particularly Murray Martin, were active in the Association of Cinematograph, Television and allied Technicians and the Independent Filmmakers'

¹² In common with other workshops, Amber's premises were used for debate on film practice and theory within the independent film sector. For an example of this sort of debate see Philip Simpson, "Politics and Avant-Garde Film in Newcastle", *Screen*, 18 (1977) pp.120-123.

¹³ As Martin explains: "We sold our skills as crew to television to earn money, but we wouldn't make their films. That may have been an oddball position, but it says something about us. We wanted to make films we believed in. If TV wouldn't fund those, then it could do so through our making *The Money Programme*, or whatever we crewed. We learnt our skills that way, which was useful. We were developing our craft, but we were not compromising our ideals[.]" Murray Martin (interviewed by Huw Benyon), "Documentary Poet", Shelia Rowbotham and Huw Beynon (Eds.), *Looking at Class: Film, Television and the Working-class in Britain* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2001) p.167. Information on Amber's funding and early history can be found in Dickinson's chronology of the group in Dickinson (Ed.), *Rogue Reels*, pp.256-262 and also Amber, "A Short History".

Association, and played a central role in negotiating the Workshop Declaration, securing them revenue funding. Their work can be divided into three overlapping phases or strands. The first is the series of short documentaries made in the 1970s recording traditional industrial processes, a type of film that Darren Newbury has called “salvage documentary”.¹⁴ The increased funds made available for regional film from the beginning of the 1980s through Channel 4 and the BFI allowed a massive expansion of activity and Amber moved into more ambitious projects. The second phase begins in 1983 with *Byker* and sees the group experimenting with documentary and fictional or narrative practices. The third strand is their more explicit campaigning work, particularly that involved with the Miners’ Strike (1984-1985).¹⁵ This chapter is concerned with the first two strands as representing the development of the documentary tradition in their work.¹⁶ To 2007 the group have made some forty films, almost all of which explore working-class identity in the North East. As Ellin Hare notes, “All of the films are experiments, and

¹⁴ Darren Newbury, “Documentary Practices and Working-class Culture: An Interview with Murray Martin”, *Visual Studies*, 17:2 (2002) p.114.

¹⁵ Amber’s most significant campaigning work was centred on the media campaign in support of the Miners’ Strike, part of wider involvement from the independent film sector. *News From Durham & Where Are We Going* (1983) was the first in a series of films made by Amber’s “current affairs unit” that covered the build up and aftermath of the strike in different ways. *Beyond the Vote* (1984), for example, covered the Chesterfield by-election of March 1984 and shows a growing cross-over between the politics of industrial action and the anti-nuclear and peace movements, explored in more detail in *Can’t Beat it Alone* (1985). Both films were made for Channel 4’s Eleventh Hour programme stream. Amber also worked on the widely celebrated *Miners’ Campaign Tapes*, a project coordinated by the London-based workshop Platform Films to bring together material recorded by film workshops from across the country to counteract the mainstream media’s hostility to the strike. The films won the prestigious John Grierson Award at the 1985 British Film Institute Awards. See Amber’s catalogue, available at www.amber-online.co.uk, accessed November 2007.

¹⁶ Amber’s campaign films, while informed by the same political commitment as their other work, can be seen as separate from the development of their documentary practice. This is argued by Murray Martin. See Newbury, “Documentary Practices and Working-class Culture”, p.120.

each one has a slightly different way of making that interface between documentary and fiction".¹⁷

This chapter is, then, focussed on one example of film as a cultural practice that emerged from the regional workshop model. The argument proceeds first by examining how the documentary movement has been considered within film scholarship in order to build up an interpretive framework. From there Amber's development is contextualised within economic and social change in 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the North of England. Finally the chapter looks at the development of documentary practice within their work, first considering the salvage documentaries and then moving on to their experiments with the documentary form.

The British Documentary Movement

Ian Aitken periodizes the British documentary movement into four phases. The first, from 1929 to 1936, was one of location within a single public sector organisation, the Empire Marketing Board (EMB). The second, from 1936 to 1948, was characterised by dispersal as Grierson's apprentices relocated out of the state sector and into commercial corporations. The third phase of the movement, between 1948 and 1950, began when Grierson was appointed as Controller, Film at the Central Office of Information (COI), and ended when he left the organisation. After 1950, the fourth and final phase was characterised by gradual disintegration: "Its final point could be said to be 1972, the year of both Grierson's death and the writing of Paul Rotha's *Documentary Diary*, with its valedictory

¹⁷ Young, "Forever Amber", p.72.

“Afterthought” and epilogue to the movement.”¹⁸ The periodization of the movement around Grierson’s own life demonstrates his importance to its theory and practice, expressed through his extensive writings.¹⁹ In this way the movement itself – its institutional basis and aesthetics – cannot be separated from Grierson’s ideas which are central to the way that documentary filmmaking was constructed, articulated and understood.

Aitken identifies two strands of Grierson’s thought on the documentary, both present throughout, but changing in emphasis as conditions changed within the movement. The first can be described as aesthetic, prominent in Grierson’s original thinking about the documentary film. The second can be described as sociological and became more prominent in Grierson’s later writings. This can be explained through a look at two contradictory statements by Grierson. The first was written between 1927 and 1933 and describes Grierson’s theory of documentary:

when we come to documentary we come to the actual world, to the world of streets, of the tenements and the factories, the living people and observation of living people, but I charge you to remember that the task of reality before you is not one of reproduction but of interpretation. We have to give creative shape to it, we have to be profound about it before our documentary art is as good or better than the art of the studio . . . It is only good if its interpretation is a real interpretation, that is to say one which lights up the fact, which brings it alive, which indicates precisely and deeply our human relation to it.²⁰

Here Grierson articulates the central concern of the documentary film as observation combined with the creative interpretation of these

¹⁸ Aitken, “Introduction”, pp.9-10.

¹⁹ These have been collected in a volume edited by Grierson’s official biographer, Forsyth Hardy, *Grierson on Documentary* (London: Collins, 1946). More recently Ian Aitken’s *The Documentary Film Movement* is a revisionist selection of Grierson’s writings along with the writings of other members of the movement.

²⁰ John Grierson, “Untitled Lecture on Documentary” (1927-33), Aitken (Ed.), *The Documentary Film Movement*, pp.76-77.

observations in terms of an “arts” practice. A desire to represent the “actual world” is combined with an aesthetic that seeks to dramatise, mediate and communicate specific ideas.

The second statement was written by Grierson in 1942, again in an article on the theory of documentary practice:

the documentary idea was not basically a film idea at all, and the film treatment it inspired only an incidental aspect of it. The medium happened to be the most convenient and most exciting available to us. The idea itself, on the other hand, was a new idea for public education . . . from the dramatisation of the working man and his daily work to the dramatisation of modern organisation and the new corporate elements in society to the dramatisation of social problems: each a step in the attempt to understand the stubborn raw material of our modern citizenship[.]²¹

While the emphasis on the “actual world” is retained, here Grierson is ambivalent with regard to the aesthetic, characterising the documentary as a medium, perhaps no better than any other, for the communication of ideas in terms of public education. In this way the documentary movement contained a tension between the aesthetic and the sociological. This tension has been significant not only in the way the history of the movement has been written, but also in how the documentary tradition has been taken up within British film culture. As Andrew Higson has argued,

The tension between aesthetic concerns and social concerns is by no means clear-cut: there is little sense of being able to say that this film is aesthetic, while that one is social. It is a much more complex series of shifting emphases, not simply with the films themselves, in terms of strategies and devices of representation which they employ, but also in the writings, reviews, books, etc., which stress one particular way of making sense of a film rather than another.²²

²¹ John Grierson, “The Documentary Idea” (1942), Aitken (Ed.), *The Documentary Film Movement*, p.106.

²² Higson, “Britain’s Outstanding Contribution to the Film”, p.75.

Clearly both statements identify the subject of the documentary as the working-class. The notable films of the movement, including *Drifters* (John Grierson, 1928), *Industrial Britain* (Arthur Elton, Robert Flaherty and Basil Wright, 1931), *Coalface* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1935), *Nightmail* (Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936), *Spare Time* (Humphrey Jennings, 1939), *Listen to Britain* (Humphrey Jennings and Stuart McAllister, 1942) and *Fires Were Started* (Humphrey Jennings, 1943), all centre on the representation of the working-class. Indeed, for Grierson the documentary movement was guided by “the discovery of the working people”²³ and for Paul Rotha, it “represented the first attempt to portray the working-class in Britain as a human, vital factor in present existence, to throw on the screen the rough labour of the industrial worker, the skill of the trained craftsman and the toil of the agricultural labourer”.²⁴

Grierson’s own writing displays an interesting enthusiasm for the representation of the working-class. For example, here is how he describes *Drifters*, about the North Sea herring fleet:

Men at their labour are the salt of the earth . . . and if you can tell me a story more plainly dramatic than the gathering of the ships for the herring season, the going out, the shooting at evening, the long drift in the night, the hauling of nets by infinite agony of shoulder muscle in the teeth of a storm, the drive home against a head sea, and (for finale) the frenzy of a market in which said agonies are sold at ten shillings a thousand, and iced, salted and barrelled for an unwitting world – if you can tell me a story with a better crescendo in energies, images, atmospherics and all that make up the sum and substance of cinema, I promise you I shall make my next film of it forthwith.²⁵

²³ Sussex, “Grierson on Documentary”, p.30.

²⁴ Paul Rotha, *The Documentary Film: The Use of the Film Medium to Interpret Creatively and in Social Terms the Life of the People as it Exists in Reality* (London: Faber and Faber, Third Edition, 1952) p.97.

²⁵ John Grierson, “*Drifters*” (1929), Aitken (Ed.), *The Documentary Film Movement*, p.78.

The documentary movement was, therefore, progressive: positing a social function of the cinema that worked to extend the representational boundaries of British film to include the working-class.²⁶ As Philip Dodd and Kathryn Dodd argue,

there was clearly a desire to incorporate the class into the national culture and to give them a voice of their own for the first time in film, in much the same way that innovative BBC producers in the regions, especially in Manchester, had begun to incorporate local people into their 1930s documentary programmes.²⁷

This principle of representational extension, it has been widely argued, corresponds very closely with a reformist, social democratic political perspective prominent in the early 20th Century, a functionalist or collectivist view that emphasised interdependence and common interest within society:

In the first place, there was a belief in the essential soundness of established society; in the second place, there was a belief in the need for State regulation and intervention, and, in the third place, there was a rejection of the option of a socialist or fascist transformation of society. These political and cultural parameters framed what some critics have described as a “social democratic consensus”, which developed in opposition to orthodox economic liberalism and Marxism during the inter-war period, and which became the most influential reform movement of the period.²⁸

The documentary movement is thus closely associated with the “social democratic consensus” and a reformist, social democratic political culture. Grierson argued that “documentary is concerned in the last resort with the

²⁶ Andrew Higson argues that the documentary movement should be seen as one aspect of a much larger field of progressive cultural practice in the 1930s and 1940s. “Britain’s Outstanding Contribution to the Film”, pp.73-74 Ian Aitken discusses the place of the documentary movement in politics and culture in *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement* (London: Routledge, 1990) pp.167-183.

²⁷ Kathryn Dodd and Philip Dodd, “Engendering the Nation: British Documentary Film, 1930-1939”, Andrew Higson (Ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996) p.47.

²⁸ Aitken, *Film and Reform*, p.168.

creation of loyalties”²⁹ through the representation of “some cross-section of reality which will reveal the essentially co-operative or mass nature of society”:³⁰

Our theory of approach has, from the first, been related to the needs of government and peoples. On the one hand, we wanted to find the patterns of the social processes; on the other hand, governments wanted these patterns found and described and illuminated and presented.³¹

The role of documentary, in this formulation, is as a form of state sociology; a means to discern and communicate “the complexities of a cooperative world.”³² As Aitken has pointed out, this sociological side of the movement became more prominent in its historiography from the 1970s as new forms of film theory emerged that “took issue with Grierson’s ideas on documentary realism, instrumental filmmaking and consensualism.”³³ This has tended to eclipse the aesthetic, privileging one strand of the movement over another. At the same time the breaking of the social democratic consensus in British politics from the 1960s could demand the reinterpretation of Grierson’s ideas. For example, as Higson has argued, implied within Grierson’s writings is a specific conception of the nature of the state, social relationships, and the role of the mass media:

underlying many of these claims about the role of documentary is the idea of the benevolent state acting as impartial patron of the documentary movement. Terms such as “public education”, “public comprehension”, and “good citizenship” which recur across the documentary discourse indicate the extent to which the documentary idea was

²⁹ Sussex, “Grierson on Documentary”, p.27.

³⁰ John Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary” (1932), Aitken (Ed.), *The Documentary Film Movement*, p.86.

³¹ John Grierson, “Postwar Patterns”, *Hollywood Quarterly*, 1:2 (1946) p.162.

³² Ibid. p.163.

³³ Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p.48.

precisely an effort to produce and regulate an official public sphere, an attempt to discipline public life.³⁴

In order to construct this idea of the public sphere the documentary must take “Labour . . . out of the context of economic class relations: the interests of the capitalist class are transformed into the public interest.”³⁵ The documentary movement, and Grierson in particular, has been thoroughly critiqued along these lines, leading to a critical judgement in which it has been noted for its anthropological tendencies: the exploitation of its subject matter for largely middle class, metropolitan audiences. For example, Robert Colls and Philip Dodd locate the “grammar and concerns” of the documentary movement within the “Into Unknown England” writing of the late 19th Century (Grierson himself wrote of his desire to “travel dangerously into the jungles of Middlesborough and the Clyde”). For them, the documentary constructs working-class identity based on a set of bourgeois ideas that lionise the working-class male as hero to the point where “real” masculinity is inseparable from representation of the working-class”. The male body “becomes the focus of this celebration, seen at its simplest in the countless close-ups” of it at work. These aesthetic practices, according to Colls and Dodd, work to identify and fix the relationship between the classes within the national community.³⁶ The documentary movement is thus responsible for

³⁴ Higson, *Waving the Flag*, p.185.

³⁵ Higson, “Britain’s Outstanding Contribution to the Film”, p.77.

³⁶ Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, “British Documentary Film, 1930-45”, *Screen* 26:1 (1985) 24-25 (Grierson quoted p.24).

disseminating and naturalising a monolithic construction of working-class identity based on industrial labour and masculinity.³⁷

This kind of aesthetic voyeurism is often linked to the class position of the documentarists. Indeed, the social backgrounds of the documentary filmmakers have been an important part of the critical tradition surrounding the movement. The majority of them male, exclusively white and drawn mainly from the English Home Counties (with the obvious exception of Grierson himself, who was Scottish), all the documentarists were from middle class, liberal, university educated backgrounds, and most went to public school, with a significant minority having attended Cambridge University.³⁸ This leads us to another tension in the documentary movement, described by Aitken:

Despite the populist rhetoric he often employed, Grierson's work and ideas were aimed, consciously or unconsciously, at the middle-class audience who read the minority journals and watched educational or "interest" films. This posed a contradiction which he was never able to adequately resolve . . . the documentary movement was primarily dedicated to the communication of ideas to governing elites and intellectuals[.]³⁹

Thus the documentary movement is the site of some powerful tensions – between an aesthetic and sociological function of cinema; between the state and the working-class; between elitism and populism – that make it a rich territory for the elaboration of various cultural interests. Arguably, this has led to the critical marginalisation of regional documentary practice in the history of the regional workshop movement, and a concentration on

³⁷ For Dodd and Dodd "the documentary film movement should be seen as an offensive against the feminization of Englishness in the 1930s, a process which was part of the crisis of dominant manly Englishness." "Engendering the Nation", p.47.

³⁸ Aitken, "Introduction", pp.6-7.

³⁹ Aitken, *Film and Reform*, p.173.

avant-garde practices that represent a profound rejection of documentary-realist aesthetics.

Amber Films

To understand the way Amber and the regional documentarists of the 1970s and 1980s revitalised the documentary idea it is necessary to contextualise their development within changes in the values and practices of cultural politics and the transformation of the place of the North in British social and cultural life. If the documentary movement can be defined in terms of a “social democratic consensus” – a belief in the state as a benevolent force for the regulation of capitalism combined with an overriding collectivist notion of social relationships within the public sphere – then the cultural practices that emerged from the political and cultural ferment of the 1960s were cited in opposition to the state. While this took many forms and was not unified or coherent across the workshop sector, or even necessarily within individual film workshops,⁴⁰ Amber’s expressed desire to be independent from state institutions and the commercial film industry, and the related desire for creative freedom, can be best understood in this way. For Murray Martin the degree of independence from the agendas of funding bodies that characterised the regional workshop model in the 1970s and 1980s marks a key difference between Amber’s approach and that of the 1930s documentarists:

The difference between that constituency and us was that in many ways the 1930s’ filmmakers worked for the state, were employed by it and censored by it. Hence there are no

⁴⁰ For a full discussion of this point see Sylvia Harvey, “The ‘Other Cinema’ in Britain: Unfinished Business in Oppositional and Independent Film, 1929-1984”, Barr (Ed.). *All Our Yesterdays*, pp.230-238.

images of unemployment from the 1930s or at least very few . . . we came from an artistic background but one with a political dimension. It is a different tangent and a much more independent one.⁴¹

This “different tangent” involved the re-articulation of the documentary impulse to record and communicate ideas about the working-class as part of an analysis that stressed class conflict and contradiction.

However, Amber’s early work was guided less by a reasoned response to cinematic traditions, class politics, and so on, and more by a set of feelings incorporating, variously, a non-sectarian leftist critique of established institutions and the “mainstream” media, a nostalgic attachment to and interest in traditional forms of regional working-class identity, and a desire for artistic expression. Martin, for example, recalls the group’s early motivations: “we were conscious that we were creative people who felt that we were making imagery about a particular culture.” He continues: “I felt there was a job to be done of recording working-class culture before it disappeared, and celebrating it”.⁴² The desire to observe and document the working-class in the North East as a “particular culture” clearly echoes the sociological motivations apparent in Grierson’s writings. However, when placed in the context of the 1970s and early 1980s the expression of a traditional regional working-class identity could take on an oppositional cultural politics. Put another way, while Grierson and the documentary movement constructed the representation of the working-class within a discourse of public service to the state, for Amber the

⁴¹ Martin, “Documentary Poet”, pp.162-63.

⁴² Newbury, “Documentary Practices and Working-class Culture”, p.117, 119.

function of documentary is constructed within a discourse of service to the Northern working-class that stands in opposition to the state:

We constantly get into this battle about the representation of the working-class ...

I often say Prince Charles can have a cloth cap, but the working-classes can't – the upper classes understand their traditions, and defend them. The power structure has Black Rod knocking on Parliament's door, to see the MPs through. And all the MPs go and kneel at the Queen's feet and say, "We swear allegiance to you above even our party", and then join the Privy Council – all those traditions are fine, but when the working-class have a history, like mining, it is erased at a frightening rate.⁴³

This rearticulation of the documentary idea can be contextualised within the changing political and economic conditions of the 1970s and 1980s.

While, as Darren Newbury notes, "In the early 1970s, working-class institutions such as the trade unions represented a powerful political force, and working-class identity could be seen in a positive light",⁴⁴ this changed sharply during the late 1970s, culminating with the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979. Historian Richard Weight describes a significant redistribution of wealth under Thatcher that was felt and manifest in regional terms: an "orgy of prosperity in Southern England [which] created a stark 'north-south' divide". Thatcher set about dismantling regional spatial subsidies as part of her more generalised attack on the welfare state and by 1986 unemployment in the North of England was sixty per cent higher than in the South.⁴⁵ For Colls this was part of a change in the character of the North in British social and cultural life, moving the region in national cultural geography from a place in need

⁴³ Young, "Forever Amber", p.68.

⁴⁴ Newbury, "Documentary Practices and Working-class Culture", p.114.

⁴⁵ Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940-2000* (London: MacMillan, 2002) pp.591-592.

of assistance to a zone far out on the margins as privilege, wealth and national identity became concentrated in the South East.⁴⁶

These social and political tensions would receive their fullest expression with the 1984-85 Miners' Strike which signalled "a permanent shift in the balance of power in British politics."⁴⁷ A bitter and violent struggle, it marked the first stage of Thatcher's strategic assault on traditional working-class institutions in Britain, of which the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was one the largest, best organised and most militant.⁴⁸ This was particularly felt in the traditionally Labour supporting industrial heartlands of the North and the Midlands. As Dave Russell notes, the North-South divide became a staple of political discourse:

While it is difficult to sustain any reading of "North-South" relationships over the long term in truly colonial terms, it is not surprising that some politically engaged northerners began to view themselves as living under precisely such an arrangement from the 1980s.⁴⁹

This resulted in the consolidation of one image of the North as backward, defined by failed industry and unemployment, and peopled by brutish union men and petty criminals. As Raphael Samuel describes it:

The very qualities which had recommended it to the "new wave" writers and filmmakers now served as talismans of narrowness. The rich associational life, such as that of the workingmen's club, was seen not as supportive but as excluding, a way in which the natives could keep newcomers and strangers at bay . . . The solidarities of the workplace were reconceptualised as a species of male bonding, a licence for the subjugation of women; while

⁴⁶ Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) pp.332-333

⁴⁷ Newbury, "Documentary Practices and Working-class Culture", p.114.

⁴⁸ It is now widely known that the confrontation with the NUM was the first stage of the "Ridley Plan", conceived some years before, to take on and defeat the large powerful unions one by one so to break their power base and pave the way for the economic restructuring of the British economy along free market lines. See, for example, Ruth Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict: The 1984-85 Miners' Strike in Yorkshire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

⁴⁹ Dave Russell, *Looking North*, p.29.

smokestack industries which had been the pride of the North now appeared, retrospectively, as ecological nightmares. In another set of dialectical inversions, the modernizations of the 1960s were stigmatised as planning disasters, imprisoning the local population in no-go estates and tower blocks.⁵⁰

In Newcastle deindustrialisation had begun towards the beginning of the twentieth century and accelerated from the late 1960s.⁵¹ This coincided with a large programme of city redevelopment under the Labour administration from 1958, embodied in the “Burns Plan”. The Plan included infrastructure development and a comprehensive clearance and redevelopment of inner city housing areas so as to adjust the city’s economy from manufacturing to one based on property, leisure and consumerism. Newcastle had relatively few slum areas. However, for Wilfred Burns, Chief Planning Officer from 1958, housing clearance had other advantages:

One result of slum clearance is that a considerable movement of people takes place over long distances, with devastating effect on the social groupings built up over the years. But, one might argue this is a good thing when we are dealing with people who have no initiative or civic pride. The task, surely, is to break up such groupings even though the people seem to be satisfied with their miserable environment and seem to enjoy an extrovert social life in their own locality.⁵²

City planning in Newcastle through to the 1980s, as David Byrne notes, was both a technical and sociological project, “the assertion of the form of

⁵⁰ Quoted in Ibid. Within the region, in attempts to counteract this image, city planners sought to disavow the stigma of industrial decline through re-branding exercises, and partly through the development of cultural industries (see Chapter Three).

⁵¹ See Natasha Vall, “The Emergence of the Post-Industrial Economy in Newcastle 1914-2000”, Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster (Eds.), *Newcastle Upon Tyne: A Modern History* (Chichester: Phillimore, 2001) pp.47-70.

⁵² Quoted in David Byrne, “The Reconstruction of Newcastle: Planning Since 1945”, Colls and Lancaster (Eds.), *Newcastle Upon Tyne*, pp.346-347.

the future".⁵³ That this contained an overt hostility towards the traditional identity of the urban working-class in the city is clear.

Social, economic and cultural divisions were, therefore, realised nationally in the expression of the North-South divide, but also internally in the North in a dichotomy between the politics of "tradition" and "modernization". For regional filmmakers in the 1970s, then, documenting working-class identity could have a political imperative for the working-class through the representation of traditions that were under threat. These motivations can also be explained in part by the social position of the filmmakers. Most of them benefited from the post war expansion of higher education that for the first time enabled small numbers of people from working-class backgrounds to attend university. For example, Peter Roberts describes the motivations behind the salvage documentaries:

There's . . . a strange way of reconnecting with something that's more personal than education had, in a way, alienated us from . . . it separates you from this background . . . it was a way of legitimising something that, for me, had been almost unknown. I realised that I had only once seen the inside of my father's workplace . . . Coming across these workplaces where there were people working who were living deeply dignified and honourable lives.⁵⁴

Here, education, relative affluence and the desire for artistic expression is aligned with a sense of alienation from an idealised image of a working-class background.

Amber's work explores working-class identity in the North East during a period of intense transformation in the identity of the region with old connotations persisting as well as being contested and supplanted.

⁵³ Ibid. pp.344-349.

⁵⁴ Amber Films, *Making the Tyne Documentaries* (2007).

This is central to the way Amber's work can be understood. Their films chart the response to industrial decline in the region while dramatising a confrontation between traditional forms of working-class identity and "modernization". This begins with the salvage documentaries of the 1970s which take up the thematic concerns and practices of the "aesthetic" documentary of the 1930s. From the early 1980s a change is discernible in their work, moving away from straightforward documentary and into experimentation with the documentary form – the "interface between documentary and fiction". Concurrent to these developments in scale and ambition the group developed a coherent operational and ideological model for a regional film workshop with close links to the communities that formed their subjects and a long term commitment to the expression of the identity of the region. This was accompanied by the development of "socially embedded" filmmaking practices that attempted to overcome some of the perceived limitations inherent in the documentary tradition as described above. As a result Amber's later work moves away from a monolithic construction of regional working-class identity based on industrial labour and masculinity, and towards more complex representations based on difference: in terms of gender, generation and the experience of marginalisation as the traditional markers of regional identity became unstable. What follows will trace this development in regional documentary practice.

Salvage Documentary

With limited funds for film production their early work was intermittent, combining photography and film. Martin describes the production of Amber's first film in the early 1970s:

I remember Sirkka, myself and Pete going out on a sunny morning, we got in the car and we drove. We went down to Wallsend where they were building one of these giant tankers, and we stood there almost in awe of this and said "let's make a film about this", you know, to celebrate working people. We wanted to make a film which reflected their pride and achievement in making this object. To finance it I took payment for lecturing at Newcastle College of Art in film stock; we shot the film with a thousand feet of Kodachrome II . . . it's an organic thing of recording.⁵⁵

The film in question, *Launch* (1973), was followed by *Bowes Line* (1975, about the operation of a coal wagon railway), *Last Shift* (1976, about a brick works) and *Glass Works* (1977, about traditional glass blowing).

These documentaries can be aligned very closely with the ideas of the social function of the cinema, and the aesthetic ambitions and procedures of the 1930s documentary movement. At the most basic level the idea of the function of documentary as a means of recording and communicating ideas about working-class culture corresponds to the principles of cinematic practice at the heart of the documentary tradition. The concern with appropriate visual imagery to communicate these ideas – the "creative interpretation of reality", in Grierson's words – places the films squarely within the boundaries of documentary cinema. Martin's repeatedly expressed enthusiasm for the iconic markers of working-class identity, the achievements of working-class culture in the region, echo

⁵⁵ Newbury, "Documentary Practices and Working-class Culture", p.118.

Grierson's own enthusiasm for the "hero worker", the "ardour and bravery of common labour".⁵⁶

All the films focus on labour, with *Last Shift* and *Glass Works* looking at pre-mechanised industrial processes. Within this there is an emphasis on the detail of the craft skills of the workers and the conditions within which they work. With the exception of *Launch* they do not look outside the immediate industrial context, or attempt to place the workers and the products as part of a wider social system. In this way the subjects function as roles and are fully integrated with the processes that the films depict. Taken together they construct regional working-class identity based on the iconic markers of industrialism: physicality, craftsmanship, collectivity and masculinity.

Stylistically the films are unobtrusive and distanced, free from commentary or characterisation. This deliberate refusal to editorialise leaves their meanings relatively open, highlighting the aesthetic qualities of the images. They are constructed through montage techniques that emphasise composition, rhythm and movement with the processes functioning as spectacle, rendered abstract. In this way they can be viewed as celebrations or romanticisations of regional identity based on maleness and industry that is fetishised and mediated through an art aesthetic. However, if they fall within the documentary tradition of the male worker as hero, at times the films also reveal a political consciousness at odds with the documentary tradition's more collectivist

⁵⁶ Grierson quoted in Colls and Dodd, "British Documentary Film", p.24.

tendencies. This can be explored through a more detailed analysis of *Launch*.

Launch was shot in the early 1970s when Amber were given access to a ship yard at Wallsend in Tyneside directly backing onto a street. The film shows the construction of the World Union oil tanker and its eventual departure from the yard. It is a series of short wide-angle shots animated by the movement of heavy machinery and men at work, and finishing with Princess Anne and local dignitaries christening the launch and a stunning, extended sequence of the view of the completed ship moving out towards the sea from between the terraced houses.

The architecture of the film is defined by industry: heavy machinery, steam and noise. We see the ship constructed, welded and painted, and are given the scale of the endeavour. The focus is on the processes and frequently the workers are not fully in shot or are out of focus, so that the industrial background becomes the subject of the film. There is a concern with the sociality of the workplace, shown in several close-ups of men smoking and laughing, but no individual characterisation.

The shots are carefully composed and mostly static, with an emphasis on scale, light/shadow and movement. This sense of the aesthetic qualities of the industrial is further emphasised by montage editing that undercuts a narrative dynamic. While there is attention to the detail of the work there is little explanation or attempt to communicate information about what is happening and why. In this way the processes are removed from the context of industrial labour relations and rendered as spectacle, finishing with the shot of the ship moving out to sea that

completes the film. Like the other Amber films in the series, *Launch* integrates industrial labour and working-class identity.

The final part of the film shows women and children emerging from the tightly lined terraced houses to witness the christening of the ship. Again the camera remains distant, observing interactions without characterisation. The community line a wall to watch the launch and the camera assumes their point of view, observing the dignitaries approach the ship through a glass barrier. Ultimately the workers and their families are excluded from the ceremony. In this final sequence, then, we have a concern to represent class divisions that undercut the aesthetic practices of the first part of the film.

From this we can say that the film constructs a regional working-class identity based on collectivity and work, and seeks to communicate that identity through cinematic practices that look back to Grierson's aestheticism of the 1930s. While there is a social commentary within this construction, and a representation of class relationships with the film firmly seeking to align itself with the working-class, this takes second place to the aesthetic concern to document and celebrate.

This dual concern with a visual celebration and a social critique can be seen in the other salvage documentaries, all of which look at traditional industrial processes on the verge of disappearance. For example *Glassworks* documents glass blowers employing traditional, pre-mechanisation methods of production. It is more formally sophisticated than *Launch*, structured by the building and eventual firing of a clay furnace cross-cut with montage sequences of various glass blowing

techniques. The contrast between the noise and movement of the glassblowing and the silence and calm of the moulding of the clay furnace gives the film its shape.

Again there is a focus on skilled labour with the subjects integrated with the processes. The film captures the carefully choreographed rhythmic movement of the workers while close-up shots of the men's hands show the attention to detail and skill required for the job. The overall feeling is of a harmonious working environment, symbolised in the movement of the men turning white-hot bulbs of glass as they step to avoid injuring each other in the confined space of the factory. In the final part of the film the white-hot furnace is lifted and moved across the floor of the factory by a team of men. This final sequence provides a visually dramatic climax to the film while highlighting the inherently dangerous conditions of production. At the same time the focus on pre-mechanised craft skills implicitly dramatises a confrontation between change and tradition with the film clearly celebrating tradition. That the dramatisation of this dichotomy is part of a political response to deindustrialisation is made explicit by Graeme Rigby, another Amber member:

people might dismiss that as romanticising the landscape of industrial culture. It's probably more important to realise that this is actually what's been taken away from people's lives. This is a whole dimension within which they found identity, an identity in which they could feel proud. You take that away and people's lives are diminished and that should be acknowledged.⁵⁷

Many of the thematic concerns and aesthetic practices present in Amber's documentaries of the 1970s are continued in their subsequent work: the

⁵⁷ Interview by the Author with Graeme Rigby (20th August 2007).

representation and celebration of working-class culture; a visual interest in the industrial landscape of the North East as central to regional identity; and a conception of decline. In particular the tension between aestheticism and a commitment to the representation of the working-class can be seen as a significant continuity between Amber and the documentary tradition. The tension between “an artists’ collective but with a commitment to the working-class” has been recognised by Martin as a “strain within Amber’s work in making creative documentaries, which takes you back to the tensions in the 1930s documentary movement.”⁵⁸ Indeed, the move away from straightforward documentary practices from the 1980s can be seen in large measure as the working through of this tension.

The Interface of Documentary and Fiction

Several interlinked factors contributed to the transition in Amber’s work to filmmaking practices that experimented with the documentary form. Firstly, Amber’s combination of work in theatre, photography and film, all in relation to specific working-class communities in the North East, led to the development of long-term relationships with those communities. This presented the opportunity for more detailed research and documentation over longer periods. At the same time this combination of activity informed the development of filmmaking practices that actively involved documentary subjects in the process of constructing meaning, moving into fictional drama and dramatic reconstruction. While this could be seen as a

⁵⁸ Murray Martin, “Documentary Poet”, p.162.

break with the documentary tradition, for Amber it is characterised as an extension of their project of regional documentation which “gives greater flexibility, makes a depth of exploration possible and opens up a completely different relationship with the communities in which the work is developed.”⁵⁹ For Rigby the employment of fictional drama is “experimenting in the relationship between documentary, community and fiction.”⁶⁰ It can, then, be seen as part of an attempt to address the tension between aestheticism and commitment realised at a formal level. For example, Murray Martin argues;

The working-class hate being talked down to, however inarticulate they feel sometimes . . . And that's one of the problems of the documentary. People believe in it – believe it represents the truth – they much prefer to get involved with people's emotional lives, which is why the power of soap operas is so great.⁶¹

He continues: “it was really acting, using working-class people acting and saying what they wanted to. And this not only made [the films] more poetic but also more emotionally accessible.”⁶² The way that this in turn informed the thematic concerns present in Amber's work can be seen in Martin's account of the production of *High Row*:

I worked with a writer called Eric Northey. We were there for about a month, working in the mine. That was part of the romance, we actually went and did a job there as part of the research. What we said as we wrote the script was that the work is dangerous and claustrophobic, because you crawl down the hole basically and the roof falls in all the time, and you can't see underground. But when we showed the script to the men, they said, “if you think that, you're not a miner”. Their view of themselves was romantic . . . So we re-wrote the script and made a film which reflected what they thought about themselves . . . So it's an interesting process, and that

⁵⁹ Amber, *A Short History*, p.19.

⁶⁰ Interview by the Author.

⁶¹ Martin, “Documentary Poet”, p.163.

⁶² Ibid.

process has always been part of reflecting what people think, taking it back to them and having that debate, it's part of the recording of that culture.⁶³

Amber's documentary practice, therefore, sought to actively construct subjective agency within the filmmaking process and in turn within the documentary form. As Graeme Rigby argues:

The key thing is to do with going into the community and genuinely creating the film out of that engagement rather than imposing your narrative on that. And if you're trying to develop something genuine out of that engagement it is necessarily experimental.⁶⁴

The move into fictional drama is thus articulated as part of Amber's attempt to develop a "socially embedded" filmmaking practice.

Their films of the 1980s and 1990s emerged from this community involvement. This coincided with, and even precipitated, Channel Four's funding of the regional film workshop movement as described in Chapter Two. Indeed, "socially embedded" filmmaking understood in this way significantly informed the rationale for Channel Four's funding of the independent film sector during the period. These funds, and in particular the flexible framework that the Workshop Declaration allowed, enabled Amber to begin producing feature-length films while maintaining their other activities and their particular approach.

In common with other film workshops Amber sought to set up and maintain alternative distribution systems for their work, bypassing the commercial exhibition circuit:

As filmmakers we always took the question of distribution and audience very seriously . . . In the 1970s we took [our films] to pubs and projected them ourselves . . . We were in

⁶³ Newbury, "Documentary Practices and Working-class Culture", p.119.

⁶⁴ Interview by the Author.

Working Men's clubs showing films because we had our work accepted as a second feature on the club circuit. We had linked in with their distribution man and told him that though we weren't going to make any money out of it, we'd love to have our films shown there . . . Don't forget there were 400 Working Men's clubs in the area[.]⁶⁵

From 1981 the relationship with Channel Four also opened up television audiences for workshop produced material, particularly through its *Eleventh Hour* programme stream.⁶⁶

The notion of "socially embedded" filmmaking integrated with independent distribution corresponds very closely to the conception of cinema as a social practice that Sylvia Harvey argues defined the independent film sector in Britain during the period. That is, cinema as a "cycle of production and consumption which is concerned with the joint production of meaning by both producer and consumer, and motivated by cultural rather than commercial considerations".⁶⁷ This is put another way by Amber member Pat McCarthy:

It's a grassroots involvement in saying "the media should belong to you, you should influence it." Basically, what we're saying to people is that it's an area you should be involved in. It's not something that should be done *at* you.⁶⁸

By the early 1980s Amber had developed a coherent operational and ideological model for a regional film workshop. This was constructed as a progressive cinema: a more socially responsive and representative cinema, in comparison to both "mainstream" film and television practice and the documentary tradition.

⁶⁵ Martin, "Documentary Poet", p.166.

⁶⁶ For a description of *Eleventh Hour* see Dorothy Hobson, *Channel 4: The Early Years and the Jeremy Isaacs Legacy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007) p.75.

⁶⁷ Sylvia Harvey, "Does Cinema in Britain Have a Future?", BFI Regional Conference Report, "Independent Cinema and Regional Film Culture" (London: University of London Institute of Education, 1981) p.14.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Aspinal, "Shoptalk", p.164.

The 1980s was a period of extraordinary productivity for Amber. *Byker* was followed by *Keeping Time* (1983), *The Sadler Story* (1985), *Seacoal* (1985), *Double Vision* (1986), *T. Dan Smith* (1987), *From Marks and Spencers to Marx and Engels* (1988), *Shields Stories* (1988) and *In Fading Light* (1989). From the early 1990s Channel Four and the other institutions that supported regional film production withdrew revenue funding from the workshop sector and shifted priorities toward output made under traditional commissioning arrangements as part of the development of the “creative industries” model. This is reflected in Amber’s reduced output of the period: *Dream On* (1991), *The Writing in The Sand* (1991), *Eden Valley* (1994), *Letters to Katja* (1994), *The Scar* (1997), *Like Father* (2001) and *Shooting Magpies* (2005).

All the films contain elements that can be said to blend documentary and fictional drama or narrative production practices. Within this a variety of thematic, formal and aesthetic mediating techniques are used. For example, *Byker*, *Keeping Time*, *The Writing in the Sand*, *Letters to Katja* and *T. Dan Smith* are the most formally experimental, constructed through montage, documentary and reconstruction. With the exception of *T. Dan Smith* these films all employ still photography and still imagery as well as moving film. *Seacoal*, *In Fading Light*, *Dream On*, *The Scar*, *Like Father* and *Shooting Magpies* are all classically structured feature-length films, featuring central protagonists, dramatic conceits and ultimate narrative resolution. They employ a combination of documentary, reconstruction, improvisation and fictional practices. This blurs the distinction between documentary subject and actor with a core of actors

drawn from live theatre and the local area appearing in many of Amber's films alongside non-professional actors drawn from local communities.⁶⁹

Thematically there is an overriding emphasis on the experience of deindustrialisation and decline in the region. *Byker*, for example, looks at housing redevelopment to create a portrait of a community in transition as the Byker estate was demolished (part of the Burns Plan mentioned above) during the 1970s. The film constructs a poverty stricken but vibrant and tight-knit community life on the estate in contrast to the relative affluence but coldness of modern housing.

There is a continued interest in work as central to working-class identity, with *In Fading Light*, *Dream On*, *The Scar* and *Like Father* all addressing the decline of traditional industries, including fishing and coal mining. If regional planners in the 1980s and 1990s sought to erase and disavow the North East's industrial heritage then for Amber it was still a key symbol of its identity. However, the relationship between work and identity is frequently portrayed as complex and ambivalent, as opposed to integrated and celebratory, with the romanticisation of industrial labour repeatedly undercut through the depiction of harsh conditions, precarious employment and conflict. From the beginning of the 1980s their work foregrounds a whole series of ambivalent relationships between regional communities, industrial history, social change and internal difference. The pre-eminence of this in their later work is made explicit by Martin as a result of the defeat of the Miners:

⁶⁹ As Rigby notes, "If you're working on a fiction, they become an actor. Full stop. If you're working with someone, even if they are portraying themselves, that's acting." Interview by the Author.

you could celebrate the achievements pre-1984 because they'd gone unrecognised. You could celebrate the fact that people had built a huge ship, however they were treated, or the monumental impact of working in the steelworks. On the one hand it destroyed your health, on the other it gave you a monumental identity.⁷⁰

He continues:

The mining culture had that parameter of brutalization at one end, horrific treatment of people and of each other, and a totally humanist base at the other . . . It's not just about money, it's about dignity and the belief in the work you do and the status you have . . . Post Miners' Strike we've been looking even more at the demise of what one would call working-class culture and at the same time being more and more dragged into periphery cultures.⁷¹

These ideas inform the construction of work and working-class identity in their films throughout the period. At the same time there is a repeated concern to document sociality and leisure – whether it be pub singing, harness racing, or the camaraderie of the workplace – as a rich and vibrant part of working-class life. Often this is contrasted with colder, less inclusive social relationships that are aligned with modernization in the region.

As well as a concern to explore the challenge to traditional working-class masculinity posed by deindustrialisation, a significant departure from the thematic concerns of the documentary tradition is the focus on women in many of the post-1980 films. There is a repeated focus on female experience, gender difference and inequality. *In Fading Light*, for example, centres on a woman's attempt to join the highly masculinised world of the fishing industry and the hostility she encounters, both from the men aboard ship and the women ashore. Similarly *Dream On* explores

⁷⁰ Newbury, "Documentary Practices and Working-class Culture", p.122.

⁷¹ Ibid. p.121.

the personal lives of three members of a women's darts team and their struggle to overcome domestic violence, abuse and alcoholism.

Again, many of these themes can be further explored through a more detailed analysis of a specific film. *Seacoal* is a good example. In common with many of Amber's films, it grew from a photography project to document the seacoaling community at Lynemouth that made their living collecting waste coal washed ashore and selling it back to a contractor to recycle. In the early 1980s Amber bought a caravan on the seacoaler's campsite which housed the production team on-and-off for a period of two years while the film was researched and shot. The film is constructed through the events at the camp during this period combined with a fictional narrative written by Tom Hadaway.⁷² *Seacoal* mixes documentary footage recorded during this time with fictionalised scenes using actors, and reconstructions with actors and local people.⁷³ Betty (Amber Styles) and her daughter escape a violent relationship to live in a caravan with Ray (Ray Stubbs), a seacoaler returning to the camp after a period working elsewhere. As an outsider Betty must adjust to the harsh conditions of life on the beach and the prejudices of the local people towards the seacoalers. This is framed by the Miners' Strike, which puts pressure on the seacoalers, and the decision by the company that owns the beach to remove them. Ray stockpiles coal in anticipation of the price rising in response to the strike as part of an attempt to buy his own horse and cart so as to escape the exploitative conditions imposed by the

⁷² Amber, *A Short History*, p.13.

⁷³ Interestingly, Rigby notes: "A film like *Seacoal*: one of the reasons for pushing it to drama is that a lot of the people working on *Seacoal* were working in the black economy. By fictionalising it you give them some protection." Interview by the Author.

company. Ray then loses his coal in a bet and, after an argument with Betty, leaves the camp. The film finishes with Betty choosing to remain on the beach and attempt to earn a living without Ray.

According to Amber's catalogue, the film was conceived of in the following way:

The inspiration for Seacoal undoubtedly came from the staggering visual location in which it is filmed; the industrial landscape of power station and pit framing the blackened beach of Lynemouth where, for generations, local people and travellers have made their living from collecting waste coal washed ashore.⁷⁴

This aesthetics of the beach and its industrial backdrop are repeatedly returned to in the film, portrayed as both severe and beautiful. This dual construction of the landscape is reflected in Ray and Betty's attitude toward their surroundings, with Ray valuing it in terms of freedom and beauty while Betty comments on dirt and deprivation. This landscape is central to the identity of the community, constructing a dualism that is present throughout the film on an aesthetic and thematic level.

Again, work is central to identity and there is considerable attention placed on visually recording the detail of the work of the seacoalers through a combination of montage editing and description: sifting and shovelling coal, using horse drawn carts to transport it, being dependent on the tide. The work is physical and gruelling but not entirely male dominated. It offers a certain freedom and a harmony with nature that is attractive to Ray, and is in this way romanticised. At the same time the work is placed in the context of the economic exploitation of the seacoalers by the company, Betty describing it as "slave labour". This is

⁷⁴ Available at www.amber-online.co.uk, accessed November 2007.

accompanied by a concern to show and describe the poverty the seacoalers live under: the lack of running water, the rubbish on the beach, shortage of money and unsuccessful negotiations with benefits agencies. The film contrasts this with Betty's life in an abusive marriage on a nearby housing estate, and ultimately the film celebrates the self-determination and community spirit on offer on the beach. However, the narrative resolution of the film leaves even this conclusion uncertain, refusing to fully endorse the seacoaler's way of life.

There is also considerable attention paid to communicating the sociality of the camp: camp fires, music, the pub, gambling, and harness racing. In this film sociality and community are just as significant markers of the seacoalers' identity as labour, and the camaraderie and support offered by local women are central to Betty's decision to stay. However, the community is also shown to be internally divided with the seacoalers in competition with each other for resources. This theme is advanced through Ray's rivalry with another seacoaler who eventually wins his coal, leading to his departure. Capitalist production relations are, therefore, integral to the internal life of the community, as opposed to an insidious outside force.

The film uses a number of devices to communicate these ambivalences, some that can be said to be documentary practices and some more in keeping with fiction filmmaking. For example, an extended central sequence shows Betty being accepted by the community, and particularly Rosie (Rosie Laidlow, a non-professional actor) who introduces her to life on the beach. In this sequence documentary footage

is interspersed with dialogue between Betty, Rosie and other seacoalers, building a documentation of the community. In this sense Betty's character functions as a mediating figure that facilitates the expression of experience by the seacoalers themselves. Considerable space is given to Rosie and her family to construct their own identities at the same time as visually recording the landscape and activities. This integration of documentary subject with actor forms the basis of much of Amber's filmmaking practice and was first developed on *Seacoal* through an agreement with the actors union, Equity. While the actor's lines were scripted the agreement stipulated that the non-actors could not be scripted or directed by Amber, so forcing this approach on the group.⁷⁵

These documentary practices are integrated with fictional narrative devices. For example, early in the film a sub-plot is introduced in which a friend of Ray's, Ronnie (Sammy Johnson), has left the beach, taken a manager's job with the company and moved to a nearby village. This puts his interests at odds with his friend and the community. Ronnie is a symbol of social change and modernization, embracing business and self interest at the expense of solidarity and freedom. While this is portrayed with some sympathy, Ronnie's decision to leave a rational choice in the face of the decline of the seacoaler's way of life, ultimately the film laments the loss of a traditional regional culture in which local people have held common land rights for generations, rights which are now under threat from privatisation. As Ronnie tells Ray, "Your trouble is you were born here, your da, your granddad. You think you own it." Similarly, the

⁷⁵ Amber, *A Short History*, p.13.

romance plot between Ray and Betty allows the film to explore gender relationships and identity. The couple are supportive and in conflict in equal measure, arguing about money and work but working together and sharing childcare. Finally, economic conditions prompt Ray to leave with Betty becoming empowered by the informal female support network on the camp. Female experience is thus placed at the centre of the film. While the iconic markers of masculinity in relation to labour are present, the gender division between provider and nurturer is destabilised with Betty deciding to work for herself as a seacoaler.

Seacoal can be considered a sophisticated exploration of a thematic dualism between the “brutalization” and “humanism” that Martin describes as central to the identity of the region from the 1980s. This thematic ambivalence combined with the mixture of documentary and narrative production practices constructs a complex documentation of a regional community. Finally, the use of the device of the outsider entering the community is repeatedly employed in Amber’s films from the early 1980s. While in part this functions as a way of communicating with the audience through exposition it can also be seen as the symbolic dramatisation of the encounter of the artist with the documentary subject, a formal dramatisation of the tension between aestheticism and commitment that lies at the heart of Amber’s encounter with the documentary movement. This point has been put forward by Tobias Hochscherf and James Leggot, who argue that

Amber’s films can be read as a kind of commentary on this tradition, in that their films acknowledge, address and even dramatise some of the perceived problems with realist practice. Recurring debates around issues of authenticity,

romanticism and, in particular, intervention and adaptation, are woven into the very fabric of the films themselves, thus circumventing, perhaps, some of the alleged pitfalls of this kind of filmmaking.⁷⁶

This thematic device coexists with the mediating aesthetic practices of the salvage documentaries as a way of addressing the tension between aestheticism and commitment in documentary practice. Amber's experiments with the documentary form in films like *Seacoal* thus address on a thematic and formal level tensions within the documentary tradition.

Conclusion

It is tempting to see the salvage documentaries of the 1970s simply as precursors to Amber's filmmaking from the 1980s. While in a sense this is the case, it should also be noted that their work developed within strict institutional and structural constraints that determined the level and ambition possible in their work. As Martin comments, "you can't make the sort of films we make within the mainstream tradition. That's fact."⁷⁷ The development of the workshop model for regional film production enabled Amber to build and maintain a sophisticated and varied but also coherent exploration of regional identity and the nature of documentary representation. The vision of this regionally-based, socially responsive cinema is worth reiterating. In the words of Pat McCarthy:

We have always been driven by cultural rather than commercial concerns, and have never sought to be part of the mainstream of the industry. Our agenda has been concerned with establishing film as an "art" form that has particular relevance to working-class people, and breaking

⁷⁶ Tobias Hochscherf and James Leggott, "From *Launch* to *Shooting Magpies*: Locating the Amber Film Collective", Hilary Fawcett (Ed.), *Made in Newcastle: Visual Culture* (Newcastle: Northumbria University Press, 2008).

⁷⁷ Young, "Forever Amber", p.74.

through the cultural snobbery that sees film as somehow inferior to other art forms such as theatre, music, ballet and painting. We have campaigned for public funding of a filmmaking that is dedicated to the representation of regional cultures, and for the establishment of an alternative cultural film production, distribution and exhibition network; a national cinema that reflects and explores our national identity and regional filmmaking that reflects its diversities.⁷⁸

From the mid-1980s regional workshop production fell into steady decline. While, as has been argued, Amber are exemplars of workshop practice, they are also, in a sense, unique: the only regional film workshop to survive beyond the 1990s as “creative industries” policies supplanted that which was developed in the regional workshop movement. As Graeme Rigby notes,

If you asked me to date, I think the Miner’s Strike actually created the change. I think after the Miner’s Strike the funding bodies stepped back from that kind of thing. At the time I personally don’t think the Conservative government gave a toss about what was coming out of the Arts – it was too small . . . But I think the Arts were constantly keen to present themselves in a new way and that new way that was very much about making the case that they were economic, it was about supporting the national economy through culture and things like that. And that trend has continued and what we get now is that film presents what it is doing . . . as generating a vibrant industry . . . It is more that we no longer fit the structure that has become the necessary structure. We work in a different way.⁷⁹

As if to mirror this trajectory, Amber’s films, when taken as a whole, chart a narrative of decline in the North East. If the 1970s was a period of the celebration of regional working-class identity, then in the 1980s this celebration becomes more complex and ambivalent, repeatedly returning to the themes of deindustrialisation and defeat. *Shooting Magpies*, released in 2007, might be said to represent the lowest point of this

⁷⁸ Pat McCarthy, “A Lasting Light”, *Vertigo*, 2:3 (2002) p.26.

⁷⁹ Interview by the Author.

decline. Made on a shoestring budget the film mixes documentary and reconstruction to chart a community dealing with the devastation wreaked by a generation of young people who have known only unemployment. Amber's body of work is unique in British cinema through its coherent engagement with the North East over nearly four decades, and in this sense represents a theoretically informed attempt to continue in the footsteps of the British documentary movement first conceived by Grierson in the 1930s.

Chapter Five

Regional Short Film Practice

To have only large and expensive films means they can only be made by the few with large capital backing . . . This means that minority opinions . . . rarely have the chance to be seen and heard. If more short films were made, then perhaps our films would present a broad spectrum of views and not the superficialities that most films seem to glorify today . . . A healthy short film industry producing quality shorts would mean first, that the industry would not collapse completely even if big features did cease to be made in Britain for a while. There would be a coherent nucleus for the industry's rebirth. A healthy shorts industry also carries within it the seeds of a new feature industry[.]¹

The ACTT, 1967

There's no question . . . that this is a bonanza time for short films, and there's a sense that the fug of a whinging culture has been blown away by the stark fact that there are now virtually no obstacles to making your first moving-image work. That the UKFC has been sharp enough to use the cheapness of DV to help empower hundreds of would-be film-makers can only be a good thing[.]²

James Bell, 2004

As discussed in Chapter Three, by the end of the 1990s regional film production sectors operated within a policy framework for film production that represented a break with the definition of socially and culturally progressive film practices that had been established during the workshop period. As noted there, this was accompanied by a substantial growth in regional film production and an attendant bureaucratisation of the mechanisms of regional film funding and professionalization of regionally-

¹ Derrick Knight and Vincent Porter, *A Long Look at Short Films: An A.C.T.T. Report on the Short Entertainment and Factual Film* (Oxford and London: Pergamon Press, 1967) pp.6-7.

² James Bell, "Eat My Shorts", *Sight and Sound* (May 2004) www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound (accessed January 2005).

based creative workers. By the mid-2000s, regional production sectors could be considered significant areas of commercial filmmaking for the first time. This chapter and the following one analyse the effects of the adoption of the “creative industries” model by looking at the two most significant areas of regional film practice within these sectors: regional short film and regionally-produced feature film, respectively.

“Short” filmmaking of various kinds has been part of British film culture since the cinema’s inception. Until the 1960s and 1970s, the same period that the study of British cinema began to develop as an academic discipline, short films were a staple part of the cinema-going experience. Since that time the exhibition opportunities for short film have been limited to specialist cinemas and festivals, and more recently television and the internet. However, as Eileen Elsey and Andrew Kelly argue, short filmmaking has had a “pivotal role in British filmmaking”, providing a creative space that is “essential for the development of the moving image and of filmmakers.”³ Despite this, the short film has been almost completely ignored in accounts of post-war British cinema in both its industrial and textual dimensions.⁴ As Noel McLaughlin observes,

³ Eileen Elsey and Andrew Kelly, *In Short: A Guide to Short Filmmaking in the Digital Age* (London: BFI, 2002) p.128, 139.

⁴ Elsey and Kelly give a short account of the early production and exhibition contexts for short film. *Ibid.* pp.5-8. This is the only book-length study to deal exclusively with contemporary British short film. It incorporates a discussion of short film with interviews with contemporary short filmmakers. While it is not intended to be a solely academic work it does provide a useful introduction to the subject, particularly in stressing the importance of short film production to contemporary practice. A. L. Rees’ *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice* (London: BFI, 1999) mentions narrative short film in the context of artists’ film and video production. Short film as a specific area of filmmaking practice has been addressed by Noel McLaughlin in “Short Sighted: Short Filmmaking in Britain” (*Cineaste*, 26:4 [Fall 2001]), Kate Ogborn in “Pathways Into the Industry” (Robert Murphy [Ed.] *British Cinema of the 90s* [London: BFI, 2000, 2001]) and Jeremy Howe, “Shorts and the Real World: The

“cinema and the feature film have come to articulate one another: cinema increasingly means ‘feature’ resulting in the marginalisation and almost total disregard of the short film.” Short films “form the hidden history of British filmmaking, encompassing a broad range of styles and techniques.”⁵

As noted by a number of critics, short film production underwent something of a “renaissance” during the 1990s. For example, Kelly has argued that:

The short film, formerly a staple part of cinema, but absent for many years, is making a comeback. National Lottery support, new festivals, the extension of university and college media courses, and the need to fill satellite, cable and digital channels have led to increased production, broadcasting and exhibition. The potential offered by the Internet in distributing, exhibiting and selling films, is already creating new opportunities for future development.⁶

New funding structures and transformations in the technologies of production, distribution and exhibition provided new opportunities for short filmmaking in the period: in the education sector, in community settings, and within the cultural sector. The development of digital technology has been particularly important. James Bell, for example, has argued that:

The availability of cheap equipment, from cameras to desktop editing suites, has democratised film-making so it's quite feasible to shoot a no-budget short with a basic DV camera, edit the film at home on a computer editing package and then present it to one of the short-film schemes as a calling-card to secure funding for more ambitious work or to distribute it via the web.⁷

Relationship Between the Short and the Feature Film” (*Journal of Media Practice*, 4:3 (2003). The debates raised in these are cited where used.

⁵ McLaughlin, “Short Sighted”, p.62.

⁶ Andrew Kelly, “Creative Partnerships: Fundraising for Short Film Projects”, *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 6:1 (2001) p.9.

⁷ Bell, “Eat My Shorts”.

Bell also identifies the growth of short film festivals such as Brief Encounters, based in Bristol, touring cinema programmes such as the UKFC's "Big Stories/Small Flashes" which took nine digitally made short films to 30 venues across the country in 2003, short film DVD compilations such as the Onedotzero series or Cinema 16 and internet streaming as providing new distribution and exhibition opportunities for short film.

With the casualisation of the film and television production workforce and the attendant restriction of traditional entry routes such as apprenticeships, short film funding and production became increasingly important to the film industry. As Kate Ogborn has argued:

The 1990s have seen major changes within the film industry, some of which have had an impact on the way in which filmmakers can kick-start their careers. There has been a massive proliferation of schemes around the country that fund short films . . . Shorts are the firmly established way in which the feature filmmakers of the future are spotted and developed.⁸

By the mid-2000s short film arguably played a more significant and active role in British film culture than at any other time since the Second World War. More important for the terms of this chapter is the particular role short film production played in the development of regional "creative industries". The key questions are: what is this role? And how have "creative industries" policies affected regional short film practice?

Defining short film as a category of film practice is far from straightforward. A broad definition of "short" film would include a multitude of practices, styles and institutional contexts including animation, drama, the avant-garde, propaganda, documentary, political film, music videos,

⁸ Ogborn, "Pathways into the Industry", p.61.

adverts and user-generated web content; and including commercial cinema and television, formal education, art galleries, the supported cultural sector and amateur practices.⁹ However, if “short” filmmaking is a site where the interconnectivity of apparently disparate practices is visible, it is also a category that is particularly unwieldy, defined by its exclusion from the commercial distribution and exhibition practices associated with feature films.

The focus of this chapter is short film produced within regional “creative industries” and therefore relies on the categorisation of short film practice associated with that particular set of institutional arrangements. Short film production was fully incorporated into the structure of film funding under the UKFC from 2000 and forms a central plank in the UKFC’s regional policies. Perhaps most significant is the organisation of short film production funding into a regional scheme-based system so as to provide a line of career progression for regionally-based writers and directors, a process of professionalization. This “stepping stone” system attempts to incorporate regional production sectors into national film strategy in certain specific ways, and as instrumental in furthering several policy objectives. This will be analysed in this chapter through a case study of short film policy and practice in the East Midlands region. The first part of the chapter looks at the development of the “stepping stone”

⁹ In Elsey and Kelly’s work the focus is on narrative drama films of thirty minutes or less, reflecting contemporary festival standards. They omit documentary, work for children and “abstract avant-garde” films. On the other hand, they include music videos and advertising commercials, highlighting their significance to contemporary practice: “These omissions and inclusions have come about in an attempt to draw a line round a subject area on which so little has been written, and represent an attempt to locate a community or network of filmmakers. Because Britain does not have a sustainable film industry, most drama filmmakers – both live action and animation – have worked on music videos and commercials.” *In Short*, p.3.

system in short film production policy and how this was taken up by the UK Film Council as a model of institutionally-funded short film. From there it outlines some of the debates that have accompanied this development. The second part of the chapter focuses on the Regional Screen Agency for the East Midlands, EM Media, its short film production policies and its relationship to the wider short film culture of the region, and analyses a sample of films made in the region under these conditions. The chapter concludes by offering an assessment of regional short film practice under the “creative industries” model. Part of the purpose is to assess how the policy framework outlined in Chapter Three has been put into practice.

The Development of the “Stepping Stone” System

While “short” films have always been part of British film culture in one form or another, the ascendancy of publicly funded short film as a legitimate mechanism for the subsidisation of new entrants to the industry is relatively recent. The involvement of broadcasters and Regional Arts Associations in funding film production in the regions during the 1980s and 1990s was discussed in Chapter Three. However, the development of the “stepping stone” system can be traced further back within the BFI’s film production activities.

Between 1950 and 2000 the BFI funded or part-funded well over 200 short films, excluding animations.¹⁰ The first steps toward direct film production funding were made by the BFI in 1952 with the establishment of the Experimental Film Fund under the Chairmanship of Michael Balcon.

¹⁰ See the *BFI Sales Catalogue* (London: BFI, 2000) for a comprehensive list of all the short films funded by the Institute.

The Fund was set up to administer a grant of £12,500 drawn from the British Film Producers Association to finance experimental short films to be shown in the new Telecinema on London's West Bank as part of the Festival of Britain. During the fourteen-year history of the Fund it financed or part-financed 50 short films including animations, documentaries and fiction dramas. Christophe Dupin argues that the BFI's entry into film production should be understood in the context of a troubled industry and as part of a strategy to increase the Institute's influence on British film culture:

one of the reasons why the mainstream film industry seemed to be in a permanent state of crisis was the lack of encouragement for new ideas and new film-makers. Unlike many developed countries, Britain did not have a national film school, and the industry did nothing to set up its own "research and development" scheme.¹¹

Rather than encroaching on commercial filmmaking the BFI attempted to negotiate its entry into film production by presenting the Fund as a training ground to nurture aesthetic and technical experimentation and innovation. Dupin describes the Fund's production policy:

The idea that the Fund could be a mini-laboratory where film-makers, ideas and techniques could be tested quickly became the Committee's *raison d'être*. In that respect, it did not see experimentation as a practice *against* the industry, but clearly *on its behalf* and *to its benefit*. The sort of experiment that the Committee certainly did not have in mind was, for example, avant-garde cinema.¹²

However, the industry, and in particular the British Film Producers Association, was immediately and continually hostile to the BFI's encroachment onto what it perceived as its own territory, despite the

¹¹ Christophe Dupin, "Early Days of Short Film Production at the British Film Institute: Origins and Evolution of the BFI Experimental Film Fund (1952-66)", *Journal of Media Practice*, 4:2 (2003) pp.80-81.

¹² Dupin, "Early Days of Short Film Production", p.85.

minuscule sums involved.¹³ In turn, the Fund's production policy shifted "from a rather traditional and industry-orientated approach to film experiment to a more elaborate 'art cinema' project".¹⁴ This was epitomised by the Fund's support of the early short films of Karel Reisz, Tony Anderson, Lorenza Mazzetti and cinematographer Walter Lassally, who, together with Lindsay Anderson, made up the Free Cinema group.¹⁵ In the late 1950s and 1960s it funded the early short films of Ken Russell (*Amelia and the Angel*, 1958), Ridley Scott (*Boy and Bicycle*, 1965), Tony Scott (*One of the Missing*, 1969) and Stephen Frears (*The Burning*, 1967). The Fund was reorganised and renamed the Production Board in 1966, after which an explicitly "cultural", as opposed to industrial, film production policy developed. As the political and cultural terrain shifted through the 1970s the BFI's priorities shifted to the avant-garde and political cinema represented by the Independent Filmmakers' Association and, later, low-budget "art-house" feature films.¹⁶

The notion of short film as a publicly-funded mode of filmmaking practice serving industrial objectives was not revived at the BFI until the late 1980s with the New Directors short film scheme. A flagship production scheme funded jointly by the BFI and Channel 4, New Directors reflects the general trajectory towards "creative industries"

¹³ See Ibid. pp.82-83.

¹⁴ Dupin, "Early Days of Short Film Production", p.88.

¹⁵ Dupin argues the Fund became Free Cinema's official sponsor, incorporating to a large degree their "general aesthetic, themes and methods" into its selection policy. Ibid. p.86.

¹⁶ The history of the Production Board is fraught with tensions around production policy that are too complicated to be discussed here. See, for example, John Caughey and Simon Frith "The Film Institute and the Rising Tide: An Interview with Colin MacCabe", *Screen*, 41:1 (Spring 2000); Nicholas Pole "10 Years of the BFI Production Board", *AIP&Co.* No. 72 (March 1986); Dickinson, "A Short History", p.56. At the time of writing a major AHRC-funded research project into the history of the BFI is being undertaken at Queen Mary, University of London, under the direction of Geoffrey Nowell-Smith.

policies outlined in Chapter Three. As Kate Ogborn, executive producer for the scheme during the 1990s notes:

It is significant . . . that the New Directors scheme was initiated at a time when Channel Four was withdrawing most of the funding it had provided to the independent workshop sector, an indication of the switch away from infrastructure funding to production financing for one-off films.¹⁷

Running from 1987 to 2000, 66 films were made under the scheme at £20,000 and later £40,000 per film, representing a fifth of the BFI's production budget. Ogborn describes the production policy of New Directors:

The intention was twofold: first, to nurture and promote the art of the short film, making it accessible to cinema and television audiences; and second, to provide the writers and directors with a calling card to help them develop their film-making careers.¹⁸

And she describes the position of short film schemes such as New Directors within the structure of the film industry in the period as follows:

The majority of filmmakers who have received funding have done degrees in film production and have typically gone on to freelance production work, documentaries and short films. They often begin their own authored work on microscopic budgets and then move up the funding and budget ladders to the national schemes which offer larger budgets.¹⁹

New Directors, therefore, served a function as a bridge between formal education and commercial feature film production. In this it had much success. Of the directors funded under the scheme at least fifteen have since directed feature films and many others have gone on to direct other short films, music videos, or become active in various capacities in television. Filmmakers of note include Gurinda Chadha (who directed the

¹⁷ Ogborn, "Pathways into the Industry", p.61.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.60.

¹⁹ Ibid. p.62.

short *I'm British But . . .* in 1989 and has since become a prolific feature filmmaker), Andrew Kotting (who directed the short *Smart Alec* in 1993 and has since directed *Gallivants* in 1996, and *This Filthy Earth* in 2001, as well as numerous film and video art pieces), Jim Gillespie (who directed the short *Joyride* in 1995 and has since made *I Know What You Did Last Summer* 1997 and *Detox* 1999), Simon Beaufoy and Billy Eltringham (who co-directed the short *Yellow* in 1996; Beaufoy wrote *The Full Monty*, 1997, and the pair collaborated on *This is Not a Love Song*, 2002), Lynne Ramsay (who directed the short film *Kill the Day* in 1997, and has since directed *Ratcatcher*, 1999, and *Morvern Callar*, 2002), and Chris Cooke (who directed the short film *Shifting Units* in 1999 and has since directed *One for the Road* 2003). What is interesting about this list is, firstly, the direct continuity between short film and feature projects, with the narrative styles, thematic concerns and often subject matter running between them strikingly similar, and secondly the “speed at which a filmmaker can progress from graduation film to short to feature”.²⁰

Ogborn notes that once “New Directors had become established as an on-going scheme in the mid-1990s, it was increasingly seen as part of the research and development work of BFI Production, finding those filmmakers whose voices will challenge and enrich the mainstream.”²¹ In this way the short film funding activities of the BFI and Channel Four had a dual function: on the one hand as providing a form of industrial apprenticeship; on the other as a site of aesthetic innovation, enriching the “mainstream”. Significantly, by 1995 one third of New Directors’

²⁰ Ibid. p.62.

²¹ Ibid. p.61.

applicants had previously received support from a Regional Arts Board, demonstrating the increasing integration of regional “creative industries” with the “stepping stone” system.

From 1995 publicly funded short film production was augmented by funding from the National Lottery, distributed by the Arts Councils of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Between 1995 and 2000 they spent £4.8m financing or part financing short films under a similar remit of “research and development”. While this was a fraction of the total (£135m) invested in film by the Councils across the UK, it represents a significant investment in short film production and a number of the directors funded under the scheme went on to make Arts Council-funded feature films.²² By the time the Film Council was set up in 2000 short film funding was firmly established as a legitimate form of public investment in the film industry. So how was this framework incorporated into UKFC short film policy?

Training new entrants to the industry was identified as a key priority by the New Labour government in 1998. The Film Policy Review Group appointed Skillset to develop a training strategy to “encourage more commercially-focussed films, to maintain high production values, and to promote standards and qualifications.”²³ The result – “The UK Film Skills Strategy” – was published in 2003. It set out three “golden threads” or overarching strategic objectives:

The need to encourage and deliver a more diverse workforce, both culturally and socially. This is fundamental

²² James Caterer provides an overview of the films in, “National Lottery, National Cinema: The Arts Councils and the UK Film Industry, 1995-2000” (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of East Anglia, 2007) pp.200-208.

²³ UKFC, *A Bigger Future: The UK Film Skills Strategy* (London: UKFC, 2003) p.6.

to the industry's future relevance. It is essential that all sectors become more accessible to currently under-represented groups;

The nations and regions of the UK are central to the successful delivery of this strategy. The National and Regional Screen Agencies and Skillset's Approved Training Partners have a vital role to play in developing and nurturing talent and supporting the growth of a UK film industry;

The implications of new technologies, as a result of the accelerating pace of change, need to be taken into account so that industry can be in front of, rather than behind, that curve.²⁴

Short film production was central to these objectives. The UKFC reorganised the existing regional and national short film funding activities of the BFI, the Arts Council and the Regional Arts Boards into a new, centrally coordinated structure under the New Cinema Fund. Existing regional provision was replaced by Digital Shorts, a low-budget digital production scheme administered locally on an annual basis by each RSA. The UKFC describes it as a "programme of research and development of talent" targeted at "emerging filmmakers" designed to "develop . . . skills and talents and [offer] an exciting and creative platform for innovative storytelling using digital technology."²⁵ While there are variations from region to region, typically the scheme works through an application and project development process that leads to the production of around eight films per region, per year, made on a budget of around £10,000 each and shot on DV. Applications are not usually open to people that have been funded through the scheme before: if funding is organised on a "stepping stone" basis then Digital Shorts is the first "stone". The Arts Council

²⁴ Ibid. p.9.

²⁵ See www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk (accessed April 2007).

shorts and New Directors schemes were replaced by Cinema Extreme, run in partnership with Channel Four. With higher budgets the scheme is intended as the bridging step for filmmakers before making a first feature film.

Short film production policy under the “creative industries” model thus articulates the perceived needs of the film industry to identify and nurture “new talent”. The alignment of these interests with “cultural” policy objectives – promoting “diversity”, “social inclusion” – is evident. Its regional basis demonstrates the integration of regional film production sectors within national film strategy. In particular, regional short film is instrumental in two specific objectives: to provide an entry route to the film industry for under-represented groups, particularly members of ethnic minorities, women and disabled people; and to develop digital production practices and technology. This has resulted, partly through the relative cheapness of DV production, in a sharp rise in short film production. Digital Shorts, for example, supported the production of nearly 300 short films between 2001 and 2004, representing a substantial growth of institutionally-funded short filmmaking in the regions.²⁶

However, the “renaissance” of the short film and the expansion of short film funding have drawn criticism. In particular, the commercial orientation of the “stepping stone” system has been attacked for restricting the space for experimentation within the short film format and therefore breaking the traditional links between short films and aesthetic innovation. For example, Noel McLoughlin has attacked a “climate of artistic

²⁶ The UKFC describe the scheme as “the largest digital shorts scheme ever devised”. UKFC/Digital Technology Strategy Group, “Digital Technology Strategy: An Interim Position Paper” (London: UKFC, 2003) p.8.

conservatism" in short film production in the period. For him, production schemes that act as training routes focus too heavily on the "orthodox ideologies of professionalism and the 'calling card' approach, as well as the 'official' aesthetics of classical narration and realist mise-en-scene."

He argues that

While the importance of schemes such as these in encouraging new talent and developing a skills base across the country cannot be overestimated, it is also the case that they have tended to be dominated by industrial rather than cultural conceptions of film. This, in turn, has encouraged an emphasis on classical-narrative storytelling and thematic conservatism that has pushed questions of form, style, culture and identity to the fringe of the agenda.²⁷

Similarly, Jeremy Howe rejects the "calling-card" idea of short film arguing that seeing shorts as a personal advert or stepping stone towards making a feature has dealt a blow to the short film as a cinematic form:

Directors usually make shorts to make a feature. They are a great calling card: a good short will open the door to a career, or at least a debut feature . . . Yet, too often, shorts exist in a twilight world of their own, obeying their own peculiar rules of narrative, style and subject; a world often dominated by children, adolescents, post office heists, a good twist in the tail or existential moments hermetically sealed off from the world of feature films and often the world we live in. Stories are dominated by the narrative interests of the film-makers who make shorts - often 20- and 30-something directors who often have a much greater handle on style and film-making than in telling stories that matter.²⁸

Duncan Petrie has discussed similar debates in Scotland during the period focussing on publicly funded short film schemes, the most prestigious of which was Tartan Shorts. He notes that

critics have attacked the kind of structured apprenticeship for filmmakers from entry level schemes through to "Tartan Shorts" as an overly prescriptive and narrow model serving

²⁷ McLaughlin, "Short Sighted", pp.62-63.

²⁸ Howe, "Shorts and the Real World", p.177.

the interests of the mainstream industry to the detriment of alternative and more challenging modes of cultural filmmaking. There is also the very real question of just how effective short films actually are as industry calling cards.²⁹

Likewise, Ogborn worries that “As shorts increasingly get tied to the development route to features, their role as a forum for purely visual and avant-garde work is in danger of disappearing”³⁰

A certain paradox or tension emerges in regional short film production in the period. On the one hand, cheaper filmmaking technology and the expansion of short film funding schemes across the country are seen as instrumental in providing an entry route to previously marginalised groups and a source of technical and stylistic innovation for the future of the “mainstream” industry, challenging the hegemony of a degree-educated, metropolitan elite and in turn widening the discursive boundaries of British cinema; on the other, a closer orientation to the perceived needs of industry is said to work against these aims, encouraging a conservatism in form and style, and a reliance on traditional generic and narrative modes. In this way some of the debates central to this thesis – about “culture” and “commerce” – converge on short film production policy. The rest of this chapter will assess these debates through an analysis of short film policy and practice in the East Midlands region.

²⁹ Duncan Petrie, *Screening Scotland* (London: BFI, 2000) p.182.

³⁰ Ogborn, “Pathways into the Industry”, p.62, 63.

Short Film Policy and Practice in the East Midlands

The East Midlands makes a useful case study because of its relatively successful record of film production. The development of film production activity in the region closely follows the pattern outlined in Chapters Two and Three.

The Nottingham Film Theatre opened in 1966, the very first in the first wave of the Regional Film Theatre movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As was the policy of the BFI it was developed in partnership with local bodies, in particular the Nottingham Co-operative Film Society.³¹ During the heyday of workshop practice in the late 1970s and 1980s there were active film workshops in Leicester, Nottingham and Peterborough. Between 1981 and 1987 Leicester was home to the British International Super 8 Festival (part of a wave of 8mm short film festivals across Europe) organised by Lorraine Porter. They showed low-budget experimental and avant-garde work from students and amateurs, as well as more established filmmakers.³² The Leicester Independent Producer's Association later became Lineout which, as well as providing training in video production and acting as a support network for local filmmakers, has organised an annual international short film festival since 1997.

The majority of media activity in the region has been based in Nottingham. Film workshops active during the 1980s include the Other Side Video Collective, Astrodam, Isthmus Productions, and notably the New Cinema Workshop and Nottingham Video Project, which later became

³¹ Melanie Selfe, “‘Doing the Work of the NFT in Nottingham’ – or How to Use the BFI to Beat the Communist Threat in Your Local Film Society”, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 4:1 (2007).

³² Michael O’Pray, *The British Avant-Garde Film* (Luton: John Libbey Media, 1996) p.19.

Intermedia Film and Video. Reflecting the national trend towards the incorporation of the “creative industries” approach to regional economic planning the local authority began a strategy to develop the city as a media centre in 1987.³³ It is from this nucleus that the structure of film production infrastructure under the UKFC formed.

There is a direct continuity between the film organisations that were organised under the workshop model during the 1980s and the structure of film funding and production as it developed up to 2000 with the formation of the UKFC and the Regional Screen Agencies. This is shown in the transition from film workshops to open-access organisations to small media production companies exploiting the influx of production finance for short and, to a lesser extent, feature films. Intermedia, for example, produced a slate of short films and documentaries for various broadcasters and was the “delivery company” for the East Midlands’ region Digital Shorts film scheme from 2002 to 2004. In 1996 it produced Shane Meadows’ career-starting featurette *Small Time*, in 2002 Metin Huseyin’s *Anita and Me*, in 2003 Chris Cooke’s debut feature film *One for the Road*, and in 2004 it co-produced Annie Watson’s BAFTA nominated short *Knitting a Love Song*. Similarly, Wellington Films has produced a score of shorts for broadcasters and the UKFC, and moved into feature production with *London to Brighton* (Paul Andrew Williams, 2006), *Better Things* (Duane Hopkins, 2008), *Unmade Beds* (Alexis Dos Santos, 2009) and *Crying with Laughter* (Justin Molotnikov, 2009). Other organisations include Spool Films, the production arm of Confetti Studios, which produced the Digital Shorts scheme in 2005

³³ Steve McIntyre, “Art and Industry: Regional Film and Video Policy in the UK”, Albert Moran (Ed.), *Film Policy: International, National and Regional Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1996) p.224.

and 2006, The Pool in Lincoln and Threshold Studios in Northampton, both of which support community-based filmmaking projects, with Threshold having worked in association with Warp Films on a First Light scheme for young filmmakers for the UKFC.

Reflecting substantial growth in the audio-visual sector, according to a Skillset (the Sector Skills Council for Creative Media) census, in 2005 there were 2900 audio-visual organisations in the East Midlands employing around 8200 people, excluding freelancers. 91 per cent of these organisations had less than five employees. However, most of this growth has been in television, radio, video games and internet companies. The figures for film show more modest growth: there were 280 people employed in film production with a further 100 in post-production. Despite success at attracting inward investment both nationally and internationally in the form of television and feature film productions (for example *Pride and Prejudice* [Joe Wright, 2005], *Tristram Shandy* [Michael Winterbottom, 2005] and *The Da Vinci Code* [Ron Howard, 2006] were all partly shot in the region) the region's infrastructure did not have any fully commercial film production companies.³⁴ This demonstrates the dependency of film production in the region on government subsidy. Confirming the argument outlined in Chapter Three, despite the apparent commercialisation of regional film production in ideological terms, in practice it operates on a semi-commercial framework, allocating public money to subsidise the development of small, independent media production companies and the professionalization of regionally-based creative workers. These companies

³⁴ Skillset, "East Midlands Skills Strategy for the Audio Visual Industries" (London: Skillset, 2005).

and individuals compete for funding from broadcasters and the UKFC, channelled through the Regional Screen Agencies (the “market for support”).

EM Media, the Regional Screen Agency for the East Midlands, was formed in 2001 through the merger of the different local agencies responsible for film and media funding and production in the region that variously represented the cultural and commercial development agencies that had characterised the production sector previously. These were the East Midlands Screen Commission, the Midlands Media Training Consortium, the film staff from Arts Council England East Midlands and the East Midlands Media Investment Fund. It was one of the first RSAs and is therefore more developed than many of the others, having seven staff in 2002 rising to 24 in 2005. Between 2004 and 2005 the organisation generated the largest income of any RSA, mostly through its success at attracting money from outside the main support sources of the Lottery and the UKFC’s Regional Investment Fund for England.³⁵ Its production-related investments have grown steadily, with 36 in 2002 /2003 with a total value of £674,000, rising to 153 in 2005/2006 with a value of £2.9m. EM Media secured a further £6m in funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in 2006 and launched a regionally-based venture capital and loan fund. The same year EM Media partnered with Screen Yorkshire, the RSA for the Yorkshire region, the two organisations seeking to develop an international presence (for example sponsoring an industry event at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival) and jointly investing £1.5m over three years in

³⁵ John Holden, “The Big Picture: The Regional Screen Agencies Building Community, Identity and Enterprise” (London: DEMOS, 2006) p.9.

Warp X, a regionally-based low-budget feature film production initiative (discussed in more detail in Chapter Six).³⁶ In many ways EM Media is an example of a successful RSA under the terms of New Labour regional film policy.

As EM Media has matured and established a significant presence its operating rationale and practice has confirmed the trajectory of regional film policy towards the “creative industries” model for regional film production. Its Action Plan for 2006-2007, for example, identifies its role as to “Undertake advocacy, stakeholder development and offer leadership in the sector, by actively raising the profile of film and media’s potential contribution to and the benefits of the region’s creative economy”.³⁷ EM Media’s research and development emphasises the elaboration of a business model and organisational structure in the region through the gathering of market and sector intelligence, skills training, target identification and opportunity. The East Midlands’ Skills Strategy for the Audio Visual Industries, produced by EM Media and Skillset, advocates the development of commercially-focussed practices and values in the region and “represents the voice of employers”.³⁸ Its report characterises the training strategy for the region as follows:

The biggest skills changes anticipated over the period to 2010 are within the higher level occupations associated with business and creative strategy. This covers the range of occupations concerned with planning, funding, coordinating, versioning, aggregating and selling audiovisual products and services.³⁹

³⁶ EM Media, “Action Plan 2006-2007” (Nottingham: EM Media, 2006)

³⁷ Ibid. p.9.

³⁸ Skillset, “East Midlands Skills Strategy”, p.1

³⁹ Ibid. p.25.

At the same time EM Media's publications reflect the way "cultural" concerns are expressed within the "creative industries" model. Its business plan for 2005/2006, for instance, affirms its commitment to "develop and sustain an innovative and distinctive media sector" and "ensure that its strategy, services, activities and investments are fully informed by its commitment to raising levels of inclusion, diversity, opportunity and access and in developing citizenship through film, moving image and digital media".⁴⁰

EM Media's film funding activities can be divided into four main areas: company and project development, individual training, short film schemes and feature film finance. These areas are organised so as to encourage a linear career progression towards commercial production, reflecting the "stepping stone" system. As their Action Plan noted in 2006:

In EM Media's experience of four operating years, by far the most effective and efficient way of addressing the needs of emerging talent is through specific project and scheme interventions where economy of scale can be readily achieved alongside the delivery of a quality experience.⁴¹

The commercial orientation of these schemes is evident:

By investing in talent, the lifeblood of the film and media industry, EM Media will also address market and audience opportunity, connection and relevance. Through investments in for example, Digital Shorts, feature films (with skills attachment), computer games development and interactive business solutions, EM Media's experience to date has proved that there is an incredible wealth and breadth of talent in the region.⁴²

Short film production occupies a central role in EM Media's film production strategy and fully incorporates the UKFC's strategic priorities: to "identify,

⁴⁰ EM Media, "Business Plan 2005-2006", (Nottingham: EM Media, 2005).

⁴¹ EM Media, "Action Plan", p.16.

⁴² Ibid.

grow and support the cultural, creative and economic ambitions of the region's reputation for innovative practice and distinctive voices."⁴³ These projects and schemes funded or part-funded 52 short films between 2002 and 2005, representing a significant increase in filmmaking activity. But what kinds of films were made in the region in this period? The most productive way this can be explored is by looking at generic, stylistic and thematic tendencies within the films. The following analysis is based on seventeen of the twenty five films made under the Digital Shorts scheme in the East Midlands between 2002 and 2005.⁴⁴

Reflecting the industry standard, all the films are ten minutes or less in duration. Of the seventeen, two are documentaries; three are non-narrative, formally experimental films; the remaining twelve are live action fiction films. Of these there are five films that can be classed as comedies, four horror/thrillers and three dramas. In this sample, then, comedy is a particularly prominent generic mode and, along with the horror/thriller genre, exist in greater proportions than they occur in British feature film releases more generally (which has a much higher proportion of drama films, at around 40 per cent).⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid. p.9.

⁴⁴ Obtaining viewing copies of the films made under the scheme can be difficult. While Digital Shorts has a distribution deal attached to it, films that are not picked up by a broadcaster or accepted at festivals are often not seen after their initial public screening. At the time of writing neither EM Media nor the UKFC have made all the films available. A selection of the films can be seen on the Britfilms website (www.britfilms.tv). Thanks are due to Andrew Brand for providing access to the Bang! film festival archive.

⁴⁵ The UKFC Statistical Yearbook 2004/2005 gives the figures for British feature film releases by genre. The relevant figures for that year were: horror 0.9%, documentary 4.7%, thriller 6.5%, comedy 20.6% and drama 42.1%. While this may fluctuate year on year it seems reasonable to expect a relatively stable proportional spread during the period as a whole. UKFC, "Statistical Yearbook/Annual Review" (London: UK Film Council, 2005) p.32.

The non-narrative experimental films all explore abstract themes such as claustrophobia (*Inside*, John Ross, 2004), obsession (*Toccare*, Ruth Parker, 2003) and insomnia (*Staying Up*, Tom Kirk, 2003). *Lovetakes* (Jeanie Finlay, 2003) is a sophisticated documentary, a montage of interviews with people of different ages on the subject of love. Beginning with children, the interviewees get progressively older up to old age, creating an intimate portrait of social attitudes.

Of the comedies, there is a repeated thematic concern with masculinity, male relationships and male angst. Stylistically the films often draw on devices from outside narrative cinema, particularly the television sketch show tradition of British comedy, taking a premise and realising it as a comic vignette. For example, *Why I Hate Parties (But Pretend to Like Them)* (Mark Davenport, 2003) focuses on a man's insecurities at a party, his inner thoughts revealed through a voice over. His actions become increasingly incongruous with his self perception as he gets drunk, smokes marijuana and chases women, ending with him drunkenly punching another man, collapsing on the floor and commenting "I've made loads of friends". Similarly *A Stoner's Guide to Egg Fried Rice* (Ray Wong, 2002) shows two stoned men take a lesson in making the dish of the title, with attendant comedy forgetfulness and banter. *Look at Me* (Nicholas Roach, 2002) is about a young man's frustrations in being ignored by his family, told through a voice-over. In a cry for attention he commits suicide live on the internet, using helium to asphyxiate himself, his squeaky last words becoming a popular comedy download and giving him the attention in death that he craved in life. The two comedies directed by women, on the other hand,

feature more “domestic” themes and characters. Dena Smiles’ *Supa Heroes* (2003) focuses on two children. The older sibling no longer believes in super powers and sets out to prove this to his younger brother through a series of “experiments”. *Wig Sisters* (Katy Milner, 2004) focuses on the competitive relationship between two elderly sisters. They argue over a wig given to them by Dusty Springfield, which becomes a representation of their romantic fantasies.

The three horror/thriller films focus on stylistic and generic features. For example, *Cry* (Steven Shiel, 2002) is intended as the last ten minutes of a slasher film, a series of iconic images of threat to its female protagonist without a plot or dialogue. *What About the Bodies* (Simon Ellis, 2002) mixes horror and grotesque comedy. It features the misadventures of a man trying to bury a woman he thought he had murdered, moving from farcical humour to extreme violence. *Number 54* (Iain Finlay, 2003) is an exercise in suspense and tension. A bus driver steals a mobile phone from a collapsed passenger, leaving his body by the side of the road. He is undone when the passenger’s friends get on the bus and call him.

If the comedy and horror/thriller films, in general, focus on generic motifs then the three drama films conform more to classical narrative modes. Ben Pollard’s *Jerusalem* (2003), for instance, is about a Japanese man’s attempt to find and record the “sound of London” to take home with him to Tokyo. His efforts are frustrated until, in finding a place to sleep while he waits for his flight, he is woken by the sound of a black airport cleaner playing the song of the title on a piano in an act of defiance against

her oppressive boss. The film weaves together two stories whilst suggesting the hybridity of British national identity, as a cleaner appropriates an emblem of patriotic Englishness (itself appropriated from William Blake's original revolutionary message) into an act of rebellion against the monotony of her job, which in turn becomes an emblem for the multi-ethnic metropolis. The other two dramas focus on romantic relationships: *Birth Day* (Laura Smith, 2004) explores the interaction between a man and a woman over the course of one night while *The Space Between* (James Kibbey, 2003) focuses on a man overcoming the death of his wife and child.

Taken together, the films made under the Digital Shorts scheme in the East Midlands represent a range of generic modes, styles and themes within the short film form, suggesting a varied production strategy. Within this the films are largely generically segregated with few of them mixing or crossing generic boundaries, and there is a tendency towards comedy and horror/thriller films realised through stylistic motifs. These are often very successful, achieved with the production values of low-budget British feature films or mainstream television. At the same time, it is revealing to note the lack of engagement with ideas of national, regional, gendered or ethnic identity, ideas that are prominent in regional policy discourse. The exception to this is the focus on masculinity in many of the comedies, the frequency of which could suggest the development of a generic cycle within the short film culture of the region. Therefore, while several of the films are formally experimental, the overall sense is of a tendency towards standardisation. It is impossible to say precisely how far this has been

institutionally determined. However, the description of the process by Andrew Brand, who made the horror short *To His Knees He Fell* through the scheme in 2004, is revealing and worth quoting at length:

Through script development I had my idea and it changed off and on as it should do. A lot of the changes I did were changes for the better. But it also changed from what it was originally going to be. It was originally going to be this big landscape film, more about the landscape itself, with these odd bits of plot that fit together in and amongst this landscape. For them to buy in to that I had to turn it round so that it became a plot and there is this landscape instead of the landscape being the main plotline. In a way they signed me up on that premise but it slowly worked its way round with script development and them not feeling I could deliver something like that, which I feel I could.⁴⁶

He continues:

I think they like someone who has got a vision, a style that they are trying to create and a genre that they are trying to push as well. EM Media want to see your creative development. They want you to have a five year plan. They want to see that you're an investment to them and that if they fund you you're going to push your area or your genre that you are going to focus on, and you're going to make a series of films for a future goal.⁴⁷

This draws attention to the pressures imposed by funding agencies in the development process that work to proscribe form and content towards traditional narrative and generic modes. It also illustrates the way that this process can operate externally: the way that the agendas of funding agencies work to determine what sort of projects they receive and what sort of projects receive development. Taken alongside the constraints in the scheme more generally, the length and medium (no more than ten minutes, shot on DV), we can say that the "stepping stone" system produces a

⁴⁶ Interview by the Author with Andrew Brand (14th July 2005).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

tendency towards commercially determined generic standards within short film production.

At the same time, the availability of relatively cheap DV film production equipment and the network of facilities, organisations and companies in the region has fostered a thriving low-budget film culture that is semi-autonomous of the funding agendas of regional institutions. Nottingham in particular has had a strong community of collaborative filmmakers heavily influenced by the “DIY” culture that emerged in the 1990s. A disparate movement, “DIY” culture incorporates social protest, dance culture, grassroots initiatives in the “arts” and non-hierarchical community-based social action, united by a desire to be independent from the “mainstream”. George McKay puts “DIY” culture in a tradition of non-mainstream independent cultural production going back to pirate radio in the 1960s, through punk rock in the late 1970s and to rave culture in the late 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁸ For the filmmakers in the East Midlands, the “DIY” idea can be traced back to the regional workshop movement and the spirit of collective action and self-help fostered in the 1980s and 1990s around organisations like Intermedia. Filmmakers regularly collaborate on productions, alternating between roles as runner, sound recordist, lighting, camera operator and assistant director, which, as well as acting as an informal training ground develops creative partnerships and working practices that can be continued in more ambitious projects. With access to film production technology and the presence of local organisations prepared

⁴⁸ George McKay, “Notes Towards an Intro”, George McKay (Ed.), *DiY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties’ Britain* (London: Verso Books, 1998) pp.24-26.

to loan equipment, support and expertise, much of this activity can continue without official institutional support.

Bang! short film festival, housed at the Broadway Media Centre in Nottingham, grew from this milieu. Started in 2000 by a group of local filmmakers, the festival is entirely digital and runs three times per year showing locally and nationally produced short films. Bang! has grown steadily over the years; in 2007 it had around four screenings every four months (young filmmakers, community films, animation and a main screening). It has no restrictions on form or subject matter and has shown retrospectives of work produced in the region as well as organising genre specific events. The festival is non-competitive and aims to support local filmmakers, acting as a platform to exhibit work produced in the region as a centre for the filmmaking community and as a catalyst for future collaborations and projects. This ethos can run counter to the target and profile-driven agendas of regional funding agencies and the festival has had to resist pressure to become more traditional in its selection policies. They receive around 100 films every four months, the majority produced without official institutional support, with about 80 per cent made locally. This demonstrates the breadth of “DIY” filmmaking in the region. Access to digital filmmaking equipment, organisations prepared to offer support and nurture filmmakers and the development of a tight-knit network of filmmakers have all contributed to a thriving grassroots short film culture in the East Midlands which is semi-independent of the agendas of regional institutions, but from which local short film schemes such as Digital Shorts draw their applicants.

What is the relationship between the “DIY” production sector and regional institutions? It must be seen as a process of negotiation between the aesthetic ambitions of filmmakers and the pressures imposed by funding structures. While these pressures set an agenda they do not necessarily determine the aesthetic ambitions of filmmakers, or, for that matter, producers. This can be explored further by looking at the “stepping stone” system in action.

Chris Cooke is a Nottingham-based filmmaker who worked within the “DIY” film sector extensively before receiving funding for a series of short films, which in turn led to development and production funding of a locally-produced feature film. He describes the “DIY” approach to filmmaking:

There is a film community here in Nottingham . . . people are emerging their styles because of the means that they've actually got. The actors are really fresh and really interesting round here, people are much less precious and pretentious. It's a “DIY” culture as it started out.

Traditionally it's been a really badly funded region so you've had that thing where people have said “I know someone who's got a camcorder, let's borrow it” and have made stuff . . . we've all got together with camcorders and we've done films that have been much more improvisatory, we've done films where the crew are improvising and where the cast are improvising or following a script, or whatever. But it is the way the working methods derived out of having no money and it's become a successful method of making films.⁴⁹

A graduate of Intermedia’s Headstart scheme – a film production training course for the unemployed in the 1990s – Cooke’s first funded short film was *Map of the Scars*, about a street drinker living on the Island of Jersey who recounts his life of violence, suicide attempts and drunken accidents using the scars on his face. The film combines a thematic realism with

⁴⁹ Interview by the Author with Chris Cooke (8th June 2005).

formal experimentation. Cooke describes his unorthodox method of film production:

We'll write a really complicated outline that's just ten pages shorter than an actual script, then we'll go to a work-shop and get the actors in and get a finished cast for a film that still hasn't secured funding, then we'll completely improvise the outline, from that we'll create a rough script that we'll do the budget from and organise the shoot. Then we'll go and shoot but we'll allow more improvisation in the shoot because we'll have the structure for that to occur in. Then we'll go into the edit suite, we'll see how the story works as a linear kind of thing . . . It is much more collaborative and you are much more involved with executives and with the financiers.⁵⁰

Collaborative DV filmmaking has been crucial in the development of these practices, allowing an improvisatory form of handheld photography, a process that continues into the edit. For example, on *Shifting Units*, Cooke's short film funded through the East Midlands Media Initiative and produced by Intermedia, ten hours of footage was cut into an eight and a half minute film with the narrative constructed partially in the edit. The end result is black-comic exploration of a salesman's gradual psychological unravelling and descent into alcoholism.

Reflecting the tendency toward a focus on masculinity described above, thematically Cooke's films deal with male angst and pathos, and his characters' inability to form relationships with those around them. His films centre on a domestic sensibility and ironic humour with the distance between self-presentation and reality realised at a stylistic as well as narrative level through unconventional structures, the use of montage sequences, camera monologues and voice-overs. Combined with rapid camera movement and editing, he has developed an unconventional

⁵⁰ Ibid.

stylistic and thematic coherence that is directly drawn from his working practices.

These practices were carried into Cooke's debut feature film, *One for the Road*. It was funded by EM Media and Film Four, shot on DV and largely improvised. Although *One for the Road* secured only a limited theatrical release, it received excellent press, with Cooke hailed as "a man to watch" by Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian*.⁵¹ In this way Cooke's career is an example of the deployment of the "stepping stone" system under the terms of UKFC policy: the subsidisation of the professionalization of regionally-based creative workers; and the development of low-budget digital filmmaking practices articulated within "mainstream" commercial production and distribution arrangements.

Conclusion

The subsidisation of "training" new entrants to the film industry has been part of short film policy from the earliest days of short film production at the BFI in the 1950s. However, the consolidation of the "stepping stone" system within short film policy was characterised by a change of emphasis, moving away from the idea of the short film as a creative space for aesthetic experimentation and towards a training ground, part of a linear progression toward commercial feature film production. The adoption of the "creative industries" model in the regions has integrated this system into a national film strategy aimed at identifying and professionalising regionally-based creative workers. Privileged within this

⁵¹ Peter Bradshaw, "Review of *One for the Road*", *The Guardian* (August 21st, 2003).

system are filmmakers working within a clearly identifiable generic niche who can demonstrate a desire and ability to progress to commercial feature film production. However, as the example of Chris Cooke's career demonstrates, this system can work to develop unconventional digital production practices and aesthetics in feature films.

"DIY" film culture may be seen as the heir to the cultural and political environment from which the workshop sector emerged, with the values and practices of cultural politics shifted from a critique of capitalism and a concern with the politics of form and content, towards a form of liberal, self-help direct action which McKay has called a "kind of 1990s counterculture".⁵² As Bang! Film Festival demonstrates, a surprisingly large and heterogeneous low-budget film production sector can exist semi-independently of the agendas of the apparatus of regional film funding. While the Nottingham-based "DIY" film culture cannot be said to be part of a "movement" in the same way that the regional workshop movement can, it can reasonably be described as an independent sphere of cultural practice. As Ogborn comments, "With the rapidly growing new media technologies, perhaps the spaces to experiment are happening outside the reach of the film institutions and broadcasters."⁵³ The long term effects of these developments remains to be seen.

Short film schemes such as Digital Shorts are designed to provide entry routes into the film industry for previously marginalised social groups and so widen the discursive boundaries of British cinematic representation. As the UK Film Strategy notes, "local initiatives that find

⁵² McKay, "Notes Toward an Intro", p.2.

⁵³ Ogborn, "Pathways into the Industry", p.62, 63.

and nurture talent for the benefit of the industry also help to increase diversity in the workforce".⁵⁴ This is part of a national film policy strategy in which the “cultural” concerns of representing the nation have been displaced onto the regions, as discussed in Chapter Three. However, real questions remain as to how effective the “stepping stone” system is in terms of promoting “diversity”. While on paper Digital Shorts is intended to encourage “innovative storytelling” and “culturally diverse” film production, in this example the inherent systemic pressures appear to be directed towards innovation in generic and stylistic features at the expense of diversity. Of the seventeen films made through the DV Shorts film scheme in the East Midlands between 2002 and 2005, only four were directed by women. In 2005 there were no women directors funded through the scheme. Perhaps more surprising is the extent to which the films produced in the region have tended to be dominated by a very specific cluster of “male” themes and have largely concerned themselves with constructions of masculinity. The marginalisation of women in short film production is matched by a marginalisation of female point of view structures. The de-politicisation of regional film production policy and practice effectively marginalises an engagement with wider questions of the politics of representation. This works in direct contradiction to the UKFC’s stated aims of representing a multifaceted national identity through regional film.

Finally, the commercial viability of the “stepping stone” system is also far from self-evident. DV technology has significantly reduced the cost of

⁵⁴ UKFC, *A Bigger Future*, p.42.

short film production. However, the efficacy of single project, low-budget short film funding as a training route towards feature film production is uncertain. Cooke, for example, notes: "If they were stepping stones there weren't very many of them, and you'd have to have incredibly long legs, they were so few and far between."⁵⁵ Four of the filmmakers from the sample analysed in this chapter have since made low-budget feature films: Simon Ellis, Steven Shiel, Mark Davenport and Chris Cooke.⁵⁶ At the time of writing none of these films have received more than a limited theatrical release. The following chapter analyses production strategies in regionally-produced feature films in more detail.

⁵⁵ Interview by the Author with Chris Cooke.

⁵⁶ The films are: *Dogging: A Love Story* (Ellis, 2009), *Mum and Dad* (Shiel, 2008), *Big Things* (Davenport, 2009) and Cooke's *One for the Road*.

Chapter 6

Regionally-produced Feature Films

When British films enjoyed a creative surge in the early 60s, with new directors from stage or television, and fresh actors with northern accents, it was possible to see connecting threads in the body of work. Filmmakers like Tony Richardson and John Schlesinger were determinedly shaking off old habits and donning new ones, some imported from the French New Wave. They had a purpose. But however striking each individual film, the latest British boom has no similar thrust: the pile of miscellaneous product is simply larger, bolder, and occasionally more profitable, than the small heaps produced in the 70s and 80s.¹

Geoff Brown,
2000

Some British films are at last doing exactly what *Sight & Sound* has campaigned for: reflecting aspects of British life[.]²

Nick James,
2007

Films in the UK are easy to make on a low budget as long as they fit within the tight boundary of social realism. There is hostility and lack of understanding of serious entertainment and genres outside the narrow confines of social drugs, teenage pregnancy and race issues. Thrillers, sci-fi, fairy tales, adventure and horror are all possible on a low budget but require a lot more work to get off the ground.³

Anonymous Respondent to UKFC Survey, 2008

By the end of the 1990s regional production sectors were better able to sustain feature film production than ever before. While Chapter Three discussed the institutional and structural determinants from which regionally-produced feature films emerged, this chapter is concerned with

¹ Geoff Brown, "Something for Everyone: British Film Culture in the 1990s", Robert Murphy (Ed.) *British Cinema of the 90s* (London: BFI, 2000) p.31.

² Nick James, "Greenlit Unpleasant Land", *Sight & Sound*, 17:1 (January 2007) p.16.

³ UKFC, "Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK" (London: Northern Alliance/UKFC, 2008) pp.49-50.

the production practices and strategies that have characterised this mode of production. Although levels of production have not yet been significant, it is possible to identify certain tendencies in the production strategies regionally-produced feature films have employed and in the ways that they have been understood.

Samantha Lay, in a discussion of the tradition of social realism in contemporary British cinema, has argued that “there is some evidence that a regional approach to the making of social realist films is evident and that European and United Kingdom funds have, in a variety of ways, encouraged such regionalisation.” She cites films such as *This is England* (Shane Meadows, 2006), *Better Things* (Duane Hopkins, 2008), *Exodus* (Penny Woolcock, 2007), *Sub Zero* (Ian Dowson, 2006) and *London to Brighton* (Paul Andrew Williams, 2006) – all funded by combinations of various regionally-based public and private agencies – as evidence that “social realist films are being generated from and within distinct and highly localised communities.”⁴ We might add to this list *TwentyFourSeven* (Shane Meadows, 1997), *A Room for Romeo Brass* (Shane Meadows, 2002), *One for the Road* (Chris Cook, 2003), *This Is not a Love Song* (Billie Eltringham, 2003), *Yasmin* (Kenneth Gleenan, 2004), *Dead Man’s Shoes* (Meadows, 2004), *Brothers of the Head* (Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe, 2005), *Frozen* (Juliet McKoen, 2005) and *Control* (Anton Corbijn, 2007).

Social realism has become established as a dominant “mode of expression” (to use Lay’s phrase) in regionally-produced feature films and

⁴ Samantha Lay, “Good Intentions, High Hopes and Low Budgets: Contemporary Social Realist Filmmaking in Britain”, *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, 5:3 (2007) pp.235-236.

the discourse of social realism has also been the main critical paradigm within which they have been understood. This is particularly evident in the regionally-produced feature films which have received the highest critical and commercial profiles since 2000: *Dead Man's Shoes*, *London to Brighton*, *This is England* and *Control*.⁵ Each was produced within regionally-based funding and production conditions, and each is easily identified as having characteristics that place it within the social realist tradition's discursive boundaries.

Social realism – or as it has also been called, “working-class realism” or “Northern realism” – is a somewhat problematic critical category. For example, for Lay social realism is defined as a “somewhat marginal, sometimes oppositional mode of expression that has relied – to varying degrees – on its otherness from more mainstream film products as a distinguishing feature.” Likewise, for John Hill social realist films have “typically been counterposed to both Hollywood and to commercial British cinema”.⁶ In this way the discursive construction of social realism in the history of British filmmaking achieves much of its cultural currency through its apparent difference to the values and practices of “mainstream” cinema. This construction carries both explicit and implicit associations with the high/mass culture dichotomy.

⁵ *Dead Man's Shoes* won the BAFTA for Best Film in 2006, *This is England* won the Best Independent Film award at the British Independent Film Awards 2006 and the BAFTA for Best Film in 2008, *London to Brighton* won Best Achievement in Production at the British Independent Film Awards 2006, and *Control* won Best Independent Film at the British Independent Film Awards in 2007. All received relatively wide theatrical releases in Britain.

⁶ John Hill, “From the New Wave to ‘Brit-Grit’: Continuity and Difference in Working-class Realism”, Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (Eds.) *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2007) p.250.

Lay argues that social realism is evidenced in the history of British film and television from the Documentary Movement of the 1930s, to the British New Wave of the 1960s, through to the “socially purposeful art cinema” of the 1980s and the so-called “Brit-Grit” films of the 1990s, but also includes television dramas like *Aufwiedersehen*, *Pet*, *The Boys from the Black Stuff* and *Shameless*, and sitcoms like *Steptoe and Son* and *Only Fools and Horses*.⁷ The problem is that such an all-encompassing definition tends to obscure as much as it reveals about the different practices, strategies and conditions of production that have characterised social realist filmmaking at any specific moment. As Hill notes, “we should not be too eager to run together differing forms of filmmaking practice.”⁸ At the same time it must be acknowledged that a great deal of the power of social realism as a discourse rests on its imprecision, making it a vehicle for the elaboration of a variety of interests within film culture. For the purposes of this chapter it is necessary, then, to define how social realism as a critical category can be meaningfully applied to regionally-produced feature films. How and why specific “social realist” practices and cultural strategies have been employed? How they have been modified? What evidence is there of continuity and change in the social realist tradition? The critical importance of the social realist tradition (to the extent that Andrew Higson argues it works to “structure the possibilities and limitations of British cinema and British film culture”⁹) also make it a particularly useful conceptual vehicle for a discussion of the

⁷ Lay, “Good Intentions, High Hopes and Low Budgets”, pp.231-232.

⁸ Hill, “From the New Wave to ‘Brit-Grit’”, p.249.

⁹ Andrew Higson, “Britain’s Outstanding Contribution to the Film: The Documentary-Realist Tradition”, Charles Barr (Ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1986) p.81.

place of regionally-produced feature films in the wider context of British film practice in the period.

Given the tradition of social realism's established role in the representation of the English regions in British cinema history (as discussed in Chapter One) it may be unsurprising that regionally-produced feature films have been made and understood in this mode. However, in certain key respects the appropriation of social realist practices and strategies within these films represents a break with the tradition. Regionally-produced feature films articulate the tradition of social realism within a model for low-budget, commercial filmmaking, circulate within a commercial framework and adopt commercial production and marketing strategies. This is most evident in their adoption of "popular" generic modes. For example, to return to the regionally-produced films mentioned earlier, *Dead Man's Shoes*, *London to Brighton*, *This is England* and *Control* all work within established generic narrative modes (a horror film, gangster film, youth pop culture and biopic, respectively).

Regionally-produced feature films can thus be said to stand in a somewhat contradictory position: on the one hand a product of the commercialisation of regional film production sectors during the period and therefore part of a retreat from the model for politically and culturally progressive regional production sectors that characterised the workshop period; on the other as a continuation in the project of progressive, socially committed "realistic" filmmaking that stretches back to the Documentary Movement of the 1930s and would include the regional documentarists of the 1970s and 1980s, discussed in Chapter Four. In what ways do

regionally-produced feature films represent a continuation in the tradition of social realism, and in what ways do they represent a break? What has determined these changes? And do they represent the development of a distinct “regional cinema” in England? These questions will be answered in this chapter through a case study of the development of one specific regionally-based filmmaker’s career and work.

Shane Meadows’ rise from grassroots short filmmaking in and around Nottingham to feature film director has made him something of a hero to “no-budget” and regionally-based filmmakers in Britain. He has made some 70 short films, regularly speaks at film festivals and has his own tips corner on Channel Four’s website, *Shane’s World*.¹⁰ Getting his first experience through a local film production scheme for the unemployed in the mid-1990s, he began making films with borrowed equipment in his local area of Sneinton, a predominantly working-class suburb of Nottingham. As such a kind of origin myth surrounds his move into feature films, from his beginnings in home-made short films in which he played all the characters (sporting different trade-mark curly wigs), to *SmallTime* (1996), funded through ingenuity, with non-professional actors improvising their performances, to *This is England*, his fifth internationally acclaimed feature film released in 2006, which has received a degree of commercial success.

Meadows’ films, all of which take as their subject the regional working-class, have repeatedly been placed in the tradition of social realism. His films have been claimed as representing part of a renewed

¹⁰ Available at www.channel4.com/film/makingmovies (accessed December 2008).

“authenticity” in British cinema from the mid-1990s, and much of his status is drawn from his association with the social realist discourse. James Leggott, for example, calls Meadows “arguably the most influential realist British filmmaker of the era.”¹¹ However, his career also demonstrates the way that regionally-produced feature films, and regionally-based filmmakers, were cultivated, funded and marketed within a commercial framework under the “creative industries” model.

Meadows’ development as a filmmaker has depended on the development of a regional infrastructure during the period. His early work was nurtured by local institutions that retained a workshop mentality fostered during the 1980s, lending support and equipment. This enabled him and his collaborators to develop their skills and experiment, with his early short films acting as calling cards allowing him to be noticed by and secure funding from broadcasters eager to fulfil their commitments to the development of new regional talent. From this informal training he was able to progress onto his first feature film on a commercial basis. From there, up to the time of writing, his career has been sustained through a combination of modest economic return and cultural cache picked up through film festivals, critical reputation and so on. Demonstrating the “creative industries” model for regional production sectors, his feature films were all made through co-funding deals by the range of “public” institutions that sustained regional production in this period: Channel Four, the British Film Institute, the UKFC, and Regional Screen Agencies, specifically EM Media and Screen Yorkshire. His films have been

¹¹ James Leggott, *Contemporary British Cinema: From Heritage to Horror* (London: Wallflower, 2008) p.74.

produced by small commercially-orientated production companies, made on relatively low budgets and employed largely regionally-based creative workers. Meadows has developed exclusively outside the structures of the London-based film and television industries. As he commented in 1999:

The way that things have spurted and grown in the industry in the last sort of two or three years, I'm definitely a beneficiary of all of that. Ten years previous the world probably wouldn't have accepted me in the same way, or I probably wouldn't have had as many opportunities, so I have probably landed at just the right time. Ten years ago I think I'd have been making television pieces.¹²

Meadows' development can be said to reflect the rationale and practice of regional feature film funding and production of the period. In particular, it has depended upon the structure of regional film funding as a means of identifying and nurturing regionally-based creative workers, providing low investment, critically successful films for circulation within a commercial framework, which in turn contributed to the cultural cache and commercial sustainability of regional production sectors. However, a detailed analysis reveals this as a differentiated process characterised by the deployment of various strategies for the production and marketing of his films, and by varying degrees of critical and commercial success. His work is, then, a good lens through which to analyse the elaboration of different strategies for regionally-based film production under the "creative industries" model.

This differentiation can be explored by looking at the development of Meadows' production practices, the thematic and narrative content of his films, and how his films have been marketed and understood, from his

¹² Stephen Applebaum, "Interview with Shane Meadows", available at www.britmovie.co.uk (accessed January 2008).

early filmmaking to his feature films. The argument begins by looking at the tradition of social realism in British film culture, primarily through the work of Andrew Higson and John Hill on the British New Wave films of the 1960s, what might be called the foundational moment in British social realist feature filmmaking. This is not in order to suggest direct links between 1960s social realism and regionally-produced feature films. Rather, it is to establish an interpretive framework within which the social realist mode of expression can be understood. With this framework in place the chapter then looks at the development of thematic concerns and filmmaking practices in Meadows' films, beginning with his early "no-budget" filmmaking. The remainder of the chapter analyses the way that these concerns and practices were taken up and articulated within a model for regional feature film production.

Social Realist Feature Films

As has been widely argued, the New Wave filmmakers of the 1960s incorporated some of the aesthetics developed in John Grierson's Documentary Movement within a model for narrative fiction film. The currency of the New Wave films is difficult to overstate. Indeed, the particular way in which "realism" was constructed and located within the films informs the way in which British social realist feature films have been interpreted up to the time of writing.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, in order to offset the financial risks of film production, studios increasingly entered into agreements with smaller independently established production companies, providing a

proportion of production finance, distribution and/or renting studio space.

The use of faster 16mm film stocks and lighter, more easily portable camera and lighting equipment allowed location shooting more readily.

These new industrial and technological arrangements created a space within which a degree of creative autonomy for filmmakers “who came from outside the cultural and industrial establishment”¹³ might be seized, who in turn widened the discursive boundaries of cinematic representations to include the regional working-class. The second-highest grossing British film of 1960 was *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz), made by Woodfall Films and shot on location in Nottingham with its central character a tough, sexually active, working-class youth with a regional accent, advising the audience “don’t let the bastards grind you down”.¹⁴

As John Hill describes it: “What above all seemed to distinguish this new cinema was its commitment to ‘realism’, a determination to tackle ‘real’ social issues and experiences in a manner which matched, a style which was honest and ‘realistic’ as well.”¹⁵ The discursive construction of certain cultural artefacts as “realistic” works by identifying verisimilitude with specific practices, aesthetics, themes, and so on, which are then rarefied in relation to other cultural artefacts, deemed less or non-“realistic”. As Hill’s quote above suggests, there were two main ways in which the “realism” of the New Wave was located: iconography and

¹³ Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s: the Decline of Deference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p.267.

¹⁴ John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-63* (London: BFI, 1986) Introduction and Chapter Two.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.127.

theme, or what Andrew Higson has called “surface realism” and “moral realism”.

The construction of surface realism, as Higson explains, involved the “fetishization of certain iconographic details”, the construction of an “iconography which authentically reproduces the visual and aural surfaces of the ‘British way of life’.” For example, Higson has analysed in detail the way that surface realism in the New Wave films was figured in what he terms “That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill”, wide townscape shots to which the films “insistently and obsessively return.”¹⁶ The construction of an “authentic” iconography relied on the development of filmmaking practices that displayed their difference both from Hollywood and from established British filmmaking. As Hill comments, “By opting for location shooting and the employment of unknown regional actors, occasionally in improvised performances, [the New Wave] stood opposed to the ‘phoney’ conventions of character and place characteristic of British studio procedure.”¹⁷ Clearly the representation of regional places and the use of “unknown, or unglamorous or non-professional”¹⁸ regional actors was a significant part of the way in which surface realism was established.

Intertwined with the claims for surface realism through iconography and filmmaking practice was a set of moral claims. Moral realism “involves a moral commitment to a particular set of social problems and solutions, a particular social formation.”¹⁹ Central to moral realism was the focus on the representation of the working-class, a social commitment

¹⁶ Higson, “Space, Place, Spectacle”, p.138.

¹⁷ Hill, *Sex, Class, Realism*, p.127.

¹⁸ Higson, “Space, Place, Spectacle”, p.136.

¹⁹ Ibid. pp.136-137.

to represent “ordinary people”. Again, the claims toward moral realism in the New Wave films are bound in a relationship of difference and even opposition to the perceived structures of morality and concern present in established “mainstream” practice. For example, Lindsay Anderson, a consistently vitriolic critic of both Hollywood and the “mainstream” commercial British industry, argued in 1957 that the “virtual rejection of three-quarters of the population of this country represents more than a ridiculous impoverishment of the cinema. It is characteristic of a flight from contemporary reality.” For him, films should “make people – ordinary people, not just top people – feel their dignity and their importance”.²⁰ And again, it was often the regional working-class that could function as the appropriate location of concerned morality, demonstrating an opposition to “the British cinema’s traditional marginalisation of such a social group.”²¹

As Higson observes, “the claim for moral realism is in part bound up with the claim for surface realism – there is a moral thrust to the iconographic commitment to the representation of ‘ordinary people’.”²² For example:

a film such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is a classic melodrama of individual desire regulated by censorial social relations and responsibilities. There is no structural necessity for the films to be set in the Midlands of England or to be shot on location. The machinery of criticism, promotion and selling, and the dominant historical memory of these films, endlessly stresses the detail of location, but this detail is a product of moral demands rather than structural (narrative) demands.²³

²⁰ Quoted in Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, pp.127-128.

²¹ Ibid. p.127.

²² Higson, “Space, Place, Spectacle”, p.137.

²³ Ibid. p.140.

Higson has looked at the way that the claims for moral realism worked in a certain degree of tension with the fetishization of iconographic detail (surface realism) in the New Wave films and argues that, ultimately, the social realist discourse is unable to “hold the two ends together, to produce a coherent point of view.”²⁴ That may be so. However, for the purposes of this argument the currency of these conventions – “prosaic renderings of surface realism and moral realism”²⁵ – are more significant than their ideological incoherence. It is worth emphasising the close association of “regionality” with the expression of surface and moral realism within the tradition.

From this we can say that social realist feature films receive much of their critical currency based on a set of self-conscious distinctions from “mainstream” cinema that are realised in terms of iconography and theme. Higson has called this the “‘realism’/‘escapism’ distinction”, which highlights the way that social realist films have been discursively constructed in terms that echo the high/mass culture dichotomy.²⁶

There is a general critical agreement that social realist feature films continued to be a significant part of British film culture from the mid-1990s, often achieving high commercial profiles both at home and internationally. Julia Hallam, for example, argues that “Filmmakers in Britain in the mid-1990s showed a renewed interest in portraying working-class life, projecting images of alienation and crisis amidst landscapes of industrial recession and economic decline” in a way that directly evoked the memory

²⁴ Ibid. p.151.

²⁵ Ibid. pp.137-138.

²⁶ Higson, “Britain’s Outstanding Contribution to the Film”, p.95.

of the New Wave films.²⁷ Brian McFarlane also makes a direct comparison between British cinema of the 1990s and the New Wave films, arguing that the “tradition they established of ‘scenes of provincial life’ was revived through films . . . whose reality is rooted in Northern urban settings”.²⁸ A commonly cited list of these films might include *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1995), *Twin Town* (Kevin Allen, 1996), *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996), *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997), *Nil by Mouth* (Gary Oldman, 1997) and *TwentyFourSeven* (Shane Meadows, 1997). All focus on specific marginalised working-class communities and all achieved a degree of commercial and critical prominence in the period.

However, the way the social realist mode of expression was taken up in the period has also drawn criticism. For example, Claire Monk argues that there is an “anachronism at the heart of [the films’] success”. She continues that a “superficial content analysis might suggest that the ideological role performed by films like *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* is, almost by definition, positive and ‘progressive.’” However, for her the adoption of commercial production strategies in the films “was symptomatic of the abandonment of the project of a socially committed British cinema rather than the reverse.” Specifically, the problem is the “commercialised, market-driven film and political cultures within which the films were produced and circulated” which has resulted in the transformation of the representation of marginalised working-class

²⁷ Julia Hallam, “Film, Class and National Identity: Re-imagining Communities in the Age of Devolution”, Ashby and Higson (Eds.), *British Cinema, Past and Present*, p.261.

²⁸ Brian McFarlane, “The More Things Change . . . British Cinema in the 90s”, Robert Murphy (Ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 2nd Edition, 2001) p.276.

communities “into an appealing, profitable and exportable commodity.”²⁹

Similarly, Hallam argues that:

The working-class films of the mid-1990s occupy an ambiguous cultural terrain. They celebrate locality, yet at the same time they commodify the cultural identities of economically marginalised communities, re-packaging their experiences for sale in the global marketplace. Will those who live in these places reap any benefits from these production initiatives in the longer term? . . . Blarite cultural policy has continued this trend, emphasising the commercial aspects of film production and largely ignoring cultural issues such as access and diversity.³⁰

If these critics are correct then social realist films were subject to increased commercial pressures during the period. The argument is that these commercial pressures dislocate the films from their production contexts and reduce their capacity for indigenous address.

James Leggott has identified what he calls a “mainstreaming” of British cinema in the period, witnessed in the adoption of generic narrative modes, a “depoliticisation of attitude” and the “imposition of unexpectedly upbeat endings onto material associated with a social realist tradition more accustomed to tragic conclusions.” As he notes, this “mainstreaming trend poses a critical challenge to the traditional definitions of British cinema in terms of polarising tendencies.”³¹ For the critics cited above, the problem identified with social realist films from the mid-1990s is that commercial forces have weakened or destabilised the “realism”/“escapism” distinction, blurring the difference between social

²⁹ Claire Monk, “Underbelly UK: The 1990s Underclass Film, Masculinity and the Ideologies of ‘New’ Britain”, Ashby and Higson (Eds.), *British Cinema, Past and Present*, pp.276-283.

³⁰ Hallam, “Film, Class and National Identity”, pp.270-271. Paul Marris makes a similar argument in “Northern Realism: An Exhausted Tradition?”, *Cineaste*, 26:2 (Fall, 2001) pp.47-50.

³¹ Leggott, *Contemporary British Cinema*, pp.21-22.

realist films and “mainstream” commercial filmmaking. While it is arguable whether the tradition of social realism has ever been genuinely or even relatively free from commercial pressures,³² the key point is that debates about the perceived problems with commercialism in British filmmaking are often figured within debates about “realism”. The conventions of the social realist tradition – surface and moral realism – often serve as an implicit critical vocabulary with which to elaborate these concerns. So how have these commercial pressures affected regionally-produced feature films, and how have these critical concerns affected the ways in which they have been understood?

In 2000 Mark Kermode made the following evaluation of the place of Meadows’ work in British cinema in his review of *A Room for Romeo Brass*, which is worth quoting at length:

If there is indeed such a thing as a British film tradition it probably owes less to the Laura Ashley loveliness of the Merchant Ivory period romps which sell so well abroad than to the lower-budget work of filmmakers like Shane Meadows, who is fast becoming to cinema what Morrissey once was to pop. Refining the blend of realism and romance which characterised 24/7, Meadows again proves himself one of our most intriguing visual poets with this engaging picture of English mores. At once insightful and inspirational, it reminds us that it’s possible to make extraordinary movies about apparently ordinary people.

He continues:

In other hands it could be monstrously corny, but somehow the earthiness of the characters, the believable quirkiness of their relationships and the unsentimental eye through which Meadows spies them all . . . prevent the project from sliding into mere pop-video clichés.

Instead, what we have here is a cinematic slice of life filtered through 30 years of British popular culture. From its

³² See John Hill’s discussion of the financial base of the New Wave films in *Sex, Class, Realism*, pp.35-53, for example.

Kes-style opening, to its classic television sitcom closing credits, *Romeo Brass* hits the nostalgic home-grown touchstones with ease, but crucially avoids cosiness at every turn. Like Ken Loach and Les Blair before him, Meadows possesses an unflinching eye which does not need rose-tinted spectacles to find delightful sights. What marks Meadows' work apart from that of many of his contemporaries is his ability to negotiate the change from significance to insignificance, drama to comedy, and humour to horror with ease, allowing each element to flow into the next as if each were an individually observed moment.³³

Kermode's piece is useful for the way it expresses a negotiation between social realism and more "popular" cultural forms in Meadows' work; a "blend of realism and romance". Meadows is characterised as something of a maverick, outside the establishment and therefore non-conventional. His work is placed in the tradition of British social realist filmmaking (Ken Loach, Les Blair) that is constructed through a dichotomy between low-budget, indigenous filmmaking and the "mainstream", between social realism and the artifice and in-authenticity of commercialism, the "Laura Ashley loveliness" of British films that are aimed at the American market. At the same time Meadows' work is said to draw on popular modes: drama, comedy, horror. The success of his work within this formula is related to what we can identify as renderings of surface and moral realism: an "earthiness" or believability, an "unflinching eye", and a focus on "ordinary people".

In this way Meadows' films can be said to successfully negotiate the "realism"/"escapism" dichotomy. In order to understand how this kind of critical response to Meadows work is possible we can look at the production strategies and practices that his feature films employ.

³³ Mark Kermode, "Review: A Room for Romeo Brass", *Sight and Sound* (February, 2000) Available at www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound (accessed January 2008).

However, this alone is not sufficient to understand the way that the specific conditions of regional filmmaking in the period worked to determine this mode of production. Meadows' feature films can be usefully contextualised within the film culture of the period by looking at the development of his stylistic choices, thematic concerns and working practices in his early "no-budget" filmmaking, and how these were then taken up and articulated within a model for regionally-produced feature films.

Early Filmmaking

According to Kate Ogborn, Meadows appeared to be "a filmmaker who came from nowhere, who proved that you didn't need to go to film school, that all you needed was a strong enough desire to make films and the gift of the gab."³⁴ She continues:

The interesting aspect to Meadows' progression and development as a filmmaker is that he paid no attention to the kinds of films he was supposed to make, and didn't waste time trying to second guess the successful formula for getting funding. Instead he concentrated on the resources that were available to him on his doorstep, and on telling the stories he and his friends wanted to hear.³⁵

Meadows is often characterised as an instinctive filmmaker, part of a new breed drawn from outside the established commercial film industry as well as the theoretically informed leftist intelligentsia, more concerned with pop-culture than cultural politics. Between 1994 and 1997 Meadows made some 25 short films, including the short documentary, *King of the Gypsies* (made in 1995 for Channel Four's "Battered Britain" series),

³⁴ Kate Ogborn, "Pathways into the Industry", Robert Murphy (Ed.), *British Cinema of the 90s* (London: BFI, 2000) p.65.

³⁵ Ibid. p.65.

Where's the Money Ronnie? (1996) and the featurette *SmallTime* (1996).³⁶

With the exception of *King of the Gypsies* all the films were made without direct production funding of any kind and using equipment borrowed from Intermedia, the Nottingham-based film workshop. The films feature Meadows and friends, and, with the exception of those mentioned above, were intended for private viewing. The films must be understood within this context: as untrained practice pieces. However, they are notable for two reasons: firstly, they show the development of themes and practices that inform all Meadows subsequent feature filmmaking; and secondly they demonstrate the willingness of funding bodies to cultivate and promote “no-budget” regional filmmakers on the basis of such “homemade” work during the period.

Many of the films are based around a single joke or comic conceit, with the humour emerging from the interplay of small-town provincialism alongside motifs and references drawn from US and British popular culture. For example, *The Datsun Connection* (1995) is an anarchic thirteen minute film which references 1970s US police television shows. The film is about a group of local “crime fighters” chasing a gang of underwear fetishists after a spate of local washing line thefts. Similarly, *Black Wiggow* (1995) is about a mother who leads a double life as a serial killer and the baby-sitter who discovers her secret, complete with slap-stick gore.

³⁶ *SmallTime* and *Where's the Money Ronnie?* were commercially released on video by Polygram in 1998. Thanks are due to Dave Clarke, owner of www.shanemeadows.co.uk, for providing exhaustive information on Meadows' early unavailable films and for help tracking down some of the rare available ones.

Intertwined with this comedic intertextuality is an attachment to a specific social malaise – regional working-class youth – and a thematic concern with petty criminality, casual violence and masculinity. For example, *Where's the Money Ronnie?* is Meadows' most accomplished short and features the misadventures of a local money collector. Meadows made three versions of the film between 1994 and 1996, with the final one intended for presentation at festivals to act as a “calling card” to secure funds for more ambitious projects. The finished film is a series of four direct-to-camera police interviews in which we are given conflicting accounts of a fight between Ronnie and the Marzetti brothers, three faux-Italian mobsters (“Even though they don't speak Italian – they grew-up up North somewhere – they've got Italian roots”), shot in black-and-white. Their respective statements are cut with montage sequences of the characters walking in formation (reminiscent of the iconic sequence in *Reservoir Dogs*, [Quentin Tarantino, 1992]), being chased down alley ways or falling over each other in slap-stick fights.

The ironic humour, visual comedy and pop-culture references that characterise Meadows' early films clearly do not correspond to the rejection of “escapist” cinema that is at the heart of the social realist tradition. However, while the films are not part of a social realist *project* their clear grounding within a specific regional working-class community, combined with their largely improvised production practices and “low-budget” aesthetic can be seen to encounter the social realist tradition's conventions of surface and moral realism. This can be shown through a more detailed analysis of *SmallTime*.

SmallTime centres on two unemployed petty criminals, Malcolm (Matt Hand) and Jumbo (Meadows), their relationships with their respective partners, Kate (Dena Smiles) and Ruby (Gena Kwecka), and how this strains with their gang's criminal activities. The narrative is a series of episodic comic vignettes: the gang engaging in various and mostly unsuccessful robberies, the domestic lives of the two couples and the social activities of the group, ending with the gang's farcical attempt to rob a "hippie shop".

The film continues the thematic concerns of Meadows' other early films: broad satirical comedy within a regional community of young working-class men and women. Again, the humour is based on an ironic detachment from the provincialism and ignorance of the characters within the generic structures of a crime or gangster film. As Jumbos's opening voice over explains; "There's one thing you've got to understand, right? This ain't fucking London, this ain't even Nottingham. This is Sneinton. And all that matters in Sneinton is having a tenner in your pocket, it don't matter how you get it." In this vein the gang's activities are ludicrous parodies of provincial criminality, such as stealing tins of dog food from behind a shop or robbing a car boot sale.

As Claire Monk has pointed out, *SmallTime* is a "social comedy of gender that hinges on . . . questions of masculinity, misogyny and crime".³⁷ Jumbo makes many attempts to exclude the women from the gang and he is violent and oppressive in his relationship with Ruby. At the same time the film satirises his attempts to maintain patriarchal

³⁷ Claire Monk, "From Underworld to Underclass: Crime and British Cinema in the 1990s", Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy (Eds.), *British Crime Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1999) p.186.

dominance, repeatedly returning to Ruby's insistence that he has a small penis, her enthusiastic preference for her vibrator over sex with him, or his feeble attempt to disrupt a middle-class dinner party.

A construction of young working-class masculinity is probed in the film and critiqued as ridiculous, misogynist and oppressive. However, the sociality of the group is also repeatedly affirmed as enjoyable and at times inclusive. This is shown through the extended scenes of banter between the characters and their social activities, them smoking dope or dancing in a pub during an extended musical montage sequence. In this way satire and critique is nuanced by a sensitivity and attention that prevents the film from appearing exploitative.

SmallTime, then, contains various stylistic and thematic elements that could satisfy a desire for "escapist" cinema. *Empire* magazine noted approvingly that "you immediately know that Shane Meadows - writer, director and actor - doesn't take himself too seriously." They continued:

Meadows is clearly having a whale of a time with the process . . . the film forsakes potential misery and grittiness in favour of exaggerated characters and controversial subjects, tackled with skill and uneasy humour. Having completed 25 short films before embarking on this (relatively) lengthy production, Meadows proves beyond reasonable doubt that he is ready to play in the big league.³⁸

However, the subject of the film along with the way it was made could also work to locate it within the tradition of social realism.

SmallTime was shot over nine days, with the actors, mostly made up of Meadows' friends, improvising the dialogue and scenes from a rough script. Thirteen hours of footage were then edited into the final 60 minute

³⁸ Empire, "SmallTime", *Empire* (available at www.empireonline.com/reviews, accessed February 2008).

film, which features extended sequences of dialogue and long camera takes, lacking a central narrative drive.³⁹ This works to emphasise the detail of the dialogue and the focus on the sociality of the milieu that forms the film's subject. It was shot in the streets and houses that Meadows' and his collaborators lived in at the time, which works to authenticate the film. Therefore, while these stylistic choices and working practices were dictated to a large degree by the conditions of production – as opposed to being a function of moral demands – they construct a surface realism that can be placed within the social realist tradition: the construction of an "authentic" iconography.

Furthermore, these renderings of surface realism can work to authenticate the film's content. For example, for Monk,

SmallTime had genuine origins in the (non)-working-class community it depicted rather than observing it with the gaze of the socially concerned outsider. One consequence is that it never idealises, sanitises or aggrandises its protagonists: their swearing, sexual behaviour and limited criminal and intellectual horizons are all presented in hilariously unb Bowdlerised fashion . . . Meadows' engagement with his twenty-something small-time thieves is sympathetic but mercilessly debunking.⁴⁰

Monk argues that the film "was one of very few 1990s British films dealing with crime to be fully rooted in 1990s conditions". For her, "its depiction of criminal activity as undramatic and unimpressive surely had more in common with the everyday realities of much 1990s crime". While this

³⁹ The improvisation can be shown through the difference between the shooting script and the finished film. The twenty five page script features extended sequences of dialogue but has no ending. The only scene to make it into the finished film in a relatively similar fashion to the script is the opening one featuring the aforementioned dog food theft. In characteristic tone, by way of explanation Meadows notes that he "was simply going to use this structure to ensure that the film wasn't a sloppy lump of shite that ran on for fourteen hours." Paul Fraser and Shane Meadows, *TwentyFourSeven* (including Shane Meadows, *Where's the Money Ronnie?* and *Left [Small Time]*), (Suffolk: Screen Press Books, 1998) p.165.

⁴⁰ Monk, "From Underworld to Underclass", p.185.

focus is clearly not part of a paternalistic concern on Meadows' part, for Monk it contributes to a moral realism. She argues that while *SmallTime* was not "overtly 'political', it marked a renewed belief in community and a kind of social morality that seemed to herald a new, anti-nihilistic fighting spirit in British cinema as the 1990s drew to a close."⁴¹

Meadows has repeatedly expressed the link between his own working-class background, the way his early films were made and their thematic concerns:

I'm twenty-five, I got kicked out of school before my O levels, my mum works in a chippie and my dad drives a lorry

...

I made my first films for a tenner with money saved from my dole . . . You could say my film career was launched by the DSS.

. . . Both *SmallTime* and *Where's the Money Ronnie?* are about the people I grew up with in Uttoxeter. It's as working-class as it gets – full of Irish, Scots, Brummies and Stokies who came to work for JCB in the sixties. My memories of the men I grew up around were of small-time crooks, good people who had been shat on during the recession, trying to get by by skimming a bit off the top . . .

When I started doing filming, I used these characters.⁴²

Meadows' origins, his sense of belonging and access to the social group which form his films' subjects is thus inscribed within their aesthetics: in the production practices and stylistic choices employed, as "authentic" authorial representations of a regional working-class community. In this way, despite the use of distinctly "non-realist" narrative modes and devices (including, along with those mentioned above, outlandish wigs and costumes), *SmallTime* can be accepted as an authentic

⁴¹ Ibid. pp.187, 184-185.

⁴² Fraser and Meadows, *TwentyFourSeven*, pp.ix-xiv.

representation of a regional working-class community containing various expressions of surface and moral realism.

The themes, practices and stylistic choices developed in Meadows' early films inform all his subsequent feature films. What follows will discuss the way that this combination of social realism and "escapism" was taken up and articulated within various models for regionally-produced feature films.

"Part Kitchen-Sink Drama, Part . . . Terminator"

SmallTime received completion funding from BFI Production to transfer it from video to 35mm film for a theatrical release. It was screened at the Edinburgh film festival where, according to Ogborn, it "created a huge buzz".⁴³ Concurrent to this *Where's the Money Ronnie?* won the Channel One short film prize and put Meadows in contact with Steve Woolley, a member of the jury who encouraged Meadows to develop a feature film project. The resulting film, *TwentyFourSeven*, won a host of awards in Britain and Europe and was followed in 1999 by *A Room for Romeo Brass* and in 2002 by *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*. Despite generating generally good reviews, none of these films received wide theatrical releases. In 2004 Meadows made *Dead Man's Shoes* and in 2006 *This is England*. Both films received massive critical attention, picking up several awards in Britain and internationally, and seemingly confirming Meadows' critical reputation.⁴⁴ .

⁴³ Ogborn, "Pathways into the Industry", p.65.

⁴⁴ For example, *This is England* won the Best Film Award at the British Independent Film Awards in 2006 and the Best Film Award at the South Bank Awards in 2008. Meadows

There is a thematic and stylistic coherence across these films that have suggested an *auteurist* analysis to many critics: a set of consistent directorial preoccupations produced through the exercise of creative control.⁴⁵ All the films centre on specific regional working-class communities and explore aspects of working-class masculinity in a similar way to Meadows' early filmmaking. Recurring plot devices gravitate around violence, unemployment and petty crime. *This is England*, for instance, looks at the infiltration of Far Right politics into a group of adolescents during the 1980s and features a vicious racist attack, while *A Room for Romeo Brass* is about two children's friendship with a local misfit, Morrell (Paddy Considine). The climax of the film centres on Morrell's transformation from laughable fool to violent thug.

TwentyFourSeven, *Dead Man's Shoes* and *This is England* operate exclusively within a milieu of unemployed male youth. Within this framework there is just as much attention paid to the supportive and enjoyable aspects of working-class youth culture as there is to the negative experiences of marginalisation. There is also a repeated concern to represent family relationships, particularly from the point of view of male adolescence. For example, *A Room for Romeo Brass* and *This is England* centre on coming-of-age narratives, with the central characters pre-pubescent boys. The moral realism developed in Meadows early filmmaking is thus maintained.

was the subject of a special edition of the *South Bank Show* (ITV) broadcast 29th April 2007 and was featured on *The Culture Show* (BBC 2) 8th April 2007.

⁴⁵ For a good example, see Graham Fuller, "Boys to Men: Shane Meadows Caps His 10-Year Exploration of Working-Class Masculinity in Crisis with This is England", *Film Comment*, 4:4 (2007) pp.44-47.

At the same time all the films feature central comic characters, performances and scenarios which undercut the sense of concerned morality inherent in the social realist tradition. In common with Meadows' early filmmaking the humour is often based on the satirisation of the provincialism and ignorance of the characters, with narrative drive destabilised by comic vignettes. For example, the character of Ronnie Marsh (Frank Harper), a stereotypical East-End gangster with an overweight and effeminate son in *TwentyFourSeven*, or Morrell in *A Room for Romeo Brass*, with his feeble attempts to seduce Ladine (Vicky McClure) and his accentuated provincial accent. (Meadows' himself appears in a cameo in each film wearing an ill-fitting wig, a distinctly non-“realist” device.)

Youth and pop-cultural motifs feature strongly in the films, with an emphasis on style and identity, witnessed in the musical montage sequences of the skinhead gang in full regalia in *This is England* or the extended sequences of banter in *TwentyFourSeven*, replete with youth slang. The music used in the films often emphasises the youth orientation of the films with *TwentyFourSeven*, *A Room for Romeo Brass*, *Dead Man's Shoes* and *This is England* having soundtracks featuring the likes of The Stone Roses, Ian Brown, Beth Orton, Calexico, Adem and Aphex Twin, all contemporary, independent, niche rock and dance-music artists.

On the surface, the trajectory of Meadows' filmmaking career can be seen as that of the steady progression of a critical and commercial profile, culminating with *This is England*, which represents the direct development of the thematic concerns and stylistic features prominent in

his early filmmaking: that is, a combination of surface and moral realism alongside a willingness to employ generic or “popular” narrative modes and devices. In this way his career trajectory can be viewed as the articulation of Meadows’ filmmaking within a model for low-budget commercial film production that, in common with other social realist films of the period, blurs the distinction between “realism” and “escapism”. However, while there is much continuity in his films, a more detailed analysis reveals this trajectory as a differentiated process involving a host of different agencies and various production strategies which represent different attempts to articulate Meadows’ filmmaking within a commercial framework with varying degrees of success.

For example, *TwentyFourSeven* featured Bob Hoskins, Bruce Jones and Frank Harper, with the majority of the cast made up of non-professional actors. The film was funded by the BBC and produced by Scala, a British production company specialising in low-to-medium budget British features and British-American co-productions. Along with its budget of £1.5m, the use of actors from British film and television alongside unknowns would suggest it was intended primarily for a domestic audience but with the potential to cross over into international markets in common with other Scala productions.⁴⁶ It was, however, a commercial failure, grossing just £236,000.

⁴⁶ Scala’s notable production credits include *Backbeat* (Iain Softley, 1994), *Fever Pitch* (David Evans, 1997), *Divorcing Jack* (David Caffrey, 1998), *Little Voice* (Mark Herman, 1999) and *Last Orders* (Fred Schepisi, 2002). Wayne describes Scala as “a regular vehicle by which the Disney/Miramax CTNC ‘plug in’ to British culture and talent.” “Performing the Northern Working-class in British Cinema”, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 23:4 (2006) p.291. Information on budgets, production companies, business and prints sourced from The BFI Film and Television Database (available at www.bfi.org.uk, accessed December 2008), The Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com, accessed

For Graham Fuller, *TwentyFourSeven* “established [Meadows] as a fully formed social realist director.”⁴⁷ The film is shot in black and white and focuses on a group of unemployed young men and Darcy’s (Bob Hoskins) attempt to install some self-discipline and belief into them through an amateur boxing club. The prominence of a sense of concerned morality as central to the film is clear from Darcy’s opening voice over:

When our town died, we were just beginning, but we weren’t living. I feel as though I’m a casualty . . . Housing development. Housing development of what? 2000 people in an area that should be 200 maximum . . . Other than that you get four walls , furniture that cries out second hand and poor, and the demoralised inhabitants that have lost touch with their origins. Behind these walls are people.

TwentyFourSeven works through a contrast between the “old” working-class values of community and solidarity, represented by Darcy, and a “new” working-class reality characterised by the social problems of unemployment, crime, drug abuse and despair. This rendering of moral realism is in common with Hill’s reading of social realism in the period in which films have “focussed on the working-class as victims of harsh economic conditions, identified as responsible for yet further erosion of working-class traditions.”⁴⁸ The commitment to a particular set of social problems and a particular social formation firmly place the film within the social realist tradition.

Once Upon a Time in the Midlands, on the other hand, can be seen as an attempt to court widespread commercial success more directly and

December 2008), Charles Grant, “Meadows’ Greener Grass”, *Sight and Sound*, 17:7 (July 2007) and Neil Spencer, “Suburban Guerrilla”, *The Observer* (August 25, 2002).

⁴⁷ Fuller, “Boys to Men”, p.46.

⁴⁸ Hill, “From New Wave to ‘Brit Grit’”, p.251.

represents a distinct change of emphasis within Meadows' established practices and thematic concerns.⁴⁹ It was funded by the UK Film Council and the East Midlands Media Initiative (EMMI), and produced by Film Four and EM Media. Budgeted at £3.5m it features a cast of British stars, several of whom have appeared in Hollywood films: Robert Carlyle, Kathy Burke, Ricky Tomlinson, Rhys Ifans and Shirley Henderson, apparently working for reduced wages on the basis of Meadows' critical reputation.⁵⁰

As the title suggests, Meadows' provincial satire receives its fullest expression in *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*, which adopts aspects of the Western genre in its narrative. Jimmy (Robert Carlyle) returns to the Midlands after a failed "heist" in which his gang attempt to rob a group of costume clowns. (The gang are shown in a succession of ludicrously inappropriate vehicles: a mini fitted out as a wedding car, an ice cream van, a milk float.) Jimmy attempts to re-enter the lives of Shirley (Shirley Henderson) and their child, Marlene (Finn Atkins), at the expense of Dek (Rhys Ifans), Shirley's live-in boy friend. The film focuses on Dek's conversion from hapless and emasculated eccentric to hero after winning a western-style stand-off with Jimmy.

Once Upon a Time in the Midlands received widespread mediocre reviews. Sheldon Hall, for example, called it "a disappointingly thin and flaccid follow-up, an attempt at a contemporary English 'Western' which fails to come off as anything other than a quirky conceit." For Hall the

⁴⁹ Pre-release, Spencer noted: "More upbeat than its predecessors, with a starry cast . . . it is the film Meadows hopes will finally bring box-office returns in proportion to his feted profile in the media." "Suburban Guerrilla".

⁵⁰ Ibid.

casting of the film betrayed the authenticity of Meadows' established practices:

Its cast of stars (Rhys Ifans, Robert Carlyle, Kathy Burke, Ricky Tomlinson), none of whom is readily associated with the Midlands, is the first sign that Meadows might be willing to compromise his regional loyalties in order to reach the mainstream, though he has yet to achieve a major popular success.⁵¹

Similarly, for Charlotte O'Sullivan, writing in *The Independent on Sunday*:

Director Shane Meadows, who made his name with "gritty" dramas . . . has obviously decided to go mainstream – his mistake lies in assuming that the majority of people are dumb. Where the best Westerns explore archetypes, he makes do with stereotypes . . . Kathy Burke . . . has a laugh playing a loudmouth, and Ricky Tomlinson, as her unemployed, singsong-loving husband, fails to notice he's not in *The Royle Family*. Slightly more thought has gone into Rhys Ifans' role, as Shirley's doting boyfriend, but his move from needy loser to bold winner is such an obvious "arc", that it's hard to take seriously.⁵²

Meadows later distanced himself from the film, putting its perceived failures down to outside interference and lack of editorial control.⁵³ In particular, the commercial pressures associated with "mainstream" casting practices forced a departure from his established production techniques during filming:

Having famous people in your films makes a difference to your box office, but it's not something I'd do regularly because it doesn't fit with how I work. It wasn't my choice in the first place to fill the cast with lots of big names . . . the problem with working [with] successful actors is that it's

⁵¹ Sheldon Hall, "Meadows, Shane (1973-)", *Reference Guide to British and Irish Film Directors* (available at www.screenonline.org.uk, accessed December 2008).

⁵² Charlotte O'Sullivan, "Frailty, Dog Days, Once Upon A Time In The Midlands, The Bourne Identity", *The Independent on Sunday*, (6th September, 2002, available at www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/review, accessed December 2008).

⁵³ Meadows comments: "Once upon a Time in the Midlands, when I did it, it wasn't until a few months later that I realised how disappointed I was with what I'd made – through not having a genuine final cut for the first time and also having to get audience figures. It was a horrible experience politically. I had this aim of trying to get a wider audience and the complete opposite happened." Future Movies, "Interview with Shane Meadows" (16 April 2007, available at www.futuremovies.co.uk, accessed January 2008).

totally different to the way I normally like to work . . . Usually we all live together for six months before I start shooting, so I'm getting to know the cast. When you're working with famous people they're so busy that they can only turn up for the odd week here and there.⁵⁴

The budget, casting and comedic focus of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* would suggest an attempt to appeal to a broader domestic and international audience, in common with other Channel Four productions of the period and as part of a direct attempt to emulate the international commercial success of films like *The Full Monty*.⁵⁵ The surface and moral realism associated with Meadows' production practices was sacrificed in an attempt to court "mainstream" audiences. While more than doubling Meadows' previous box office returns, it still made a minor impact in cinemas, grossing £496,000.

Meadows' next two films, *Dead Man's Shoes* and *This is England*, were made under entirely different conditions. They represent a significant reduction in production budgets (*Dead Man's Shoes*, for example, cost just £750,000 to make), and feature largely unknown and non-professional actors, suggesting they were aimed at specialised or "arthouse" audiences. Ironically, it is these films that turned out to be Meadows' biggest commercial and critical successes.⁵⁶ Both were joint-funded by EM Media, Screen Yorkshire and Film Four, and produced by Sheffield-based Warp Films.

⁵⁴ Jared Wilson, "Interview with Shane Meadows", *Leftlion* (10th September 2004, available at www.leftlion.co.uk, accessed December 2007).

⁵⁵ *The Full Monty* cost £2.2m and grossed £134m. For a discussion of the film as part of a group of British films with regional settings intended for the American market in the period, see Mike Wayne, "Performing the Northern Working-class in British Cinema", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 23:4 (2006).

⁵⁶ While *Dead Man's Shoes* made under £200,000 it reportedly went on to sell 100,000 copies on DVD release. *This is England* grossed a healthy £1.5m at the UK box office.

Warp Films is the film production arm of Warp Records and *Dead Man's Shoes* was its first film. Concentrating on “micro”-to low-budget productions within generic niches, Warp Films works as a regional mini-studio, integrated with distribution partners (Optimum Releasing for theatrical and DVD, Channel Four for broadcast) and regional funding agencies (EM Media and Screen Yorkshire). It represents a new kind of small, independent, regionally-based and commercially-orientated film production company formed to take advantage of the beneficial film funding arrangements under the regional “creative industries” model. Warp’s managing director, Mark Herbert (also a producer of *Dead Man’s Shoes* and *This is England*), has expressed his desire to make films “faster, leaner, lighter, and with no excess baggage.”⁵⁷ A UKFC publication describes Warp Films’ production strategy:

The trade off is that low budget film strips the frills out of the production process – winnebagos, special assistants and ritzy catering . . . taking the glamour out of the film industry. Attitude is important – the whole cast and crew have to take a more egalitarian approach than on high budget productions. A can-do attitude is essential, and a willingness to innovate and improvise. The whole cast and crew need to take ownership of the production.⁵⁸

For Meadows’ this model allowed freedom from the commercial pressures associated with larger budgets, reaffirming the improvised production practices developed in his early filmmaking:

We said on this one, we want less money than we need – we want to have our backs against the wall, driving around in a mini-bus . . . What it meant was we had complete autonomy . . . there are some quite brutal scenes in the film – we wanted to make sure there wasn’t going to be some executive producer saying “When we sell this to Japan”, or

⁵⁷ See www.warpx.co.uk (accessed January 2009).

⁵⁸ UKFC, “Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK”, p.39.

“When we sell it to Romania, you’re going to have to change that bit.” This is the first Shane Meadows film that’s been made under the radar, at a budget level where I go off and completely make a film that’s uncompromised.⁵⁹

In this way the production of *Dead Man’s Shoes* can be seen as a creatively motivated reaction against some of the pressures associated with larger budgets and the attempt to court “mainstream” audiences.⁶⁰ However, it would be a mistake to suggest that this represented a move away from “escapist” cinema.

For example, *Dead Man’s Shoes* works within a strong generic narrative framework and contains a number of non-realist stylistic, narrative and intertextual devices. The film takes place over five days and centres on Richard (Paddy Considine), an ex-soldier returning home to take revenge on the gang of petty criminal drug dealers that bullied and humiliated his brother Anthony (Toby Kebbell), resulting in Anthony’s suicide. The narrative is repeatedly interrupted with intertitles and black-and-white flashback sequences that have no diegetic motivation. There is an extended sequence in which Richard spikes the gang with hallucinogenic drugs and which employs special sound and visual effects. In the final segment of the film Richard’s conversations with his brother are revealed to have been fantasies, Anthony having died before the action takes place. Most obviously, the film is a revenge narrative working within the conventions of the horror genre. In this the character of Richard functions as an almost supernatural force, ruthlessly toying with and then

⁵⁹ Neil Young, “Interview with Shane Meadows” (August 2004, available at www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film, accessed December 2008).

⁶⁰ Meadows’ commented: “*Dead Man’s Shoes* was a massive reaction to [*Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*]. You can take £3.5 million and shove it; I’ll take £750,000 and try and make the best film I’ve ever made.” Future Movies, “Interview with Shane Meadows”.

exterminating his seemingly defenceless victims. As Fuller comments, “he is clearly the return of the repressed, the angel of death who visits Anthony’s persecutors and makes some of them reflect before they are slain.”⁶¹

Significantly, it was the recognisable generic elements of the film that were exploited most strongly in its marketing. The advertising poster, for example, featured a silhouette of Richard brandishing an axe on a blood-red background with a promotional quote from *Empire* magazine that reads: “This could do for slasher movies what *28 Days Later* did for Zombie flicks”, clearly establishing its generic credentials. The film’s soundtrack was released by Warp Records along with a graphic novelisation of the film.⁶²

Dead Man’s Shoes also locates surface and moral realism in a number of key ways. The project grew from improvised short films made by Meadows and co-writer Considine, in which the story and characters were developed. Meadows comments: “we used the short films as a starting point . . . you might do four or five different characters and one jumps out at you and that’s the one you take forward and let it blossom into something bigger.”⁶³ Like his other films the plot was reportedly drawn from his own experiences:

I lost a friend when I was 19, a kid I’d grown up with and he’d committed suicide as a result of being schizophrenic. It wasn’t so much just the illness that fucking drove him to his death – it was the crowd of people that we were around at the time preying on him, giving him more acid. You know, they think it’s hilarious to give somebody that’s got a mental

⁶¹ Fuller, “Boys to Men”, p.47.

⁶² Anjan Sarker, *Dead Man’s Shoes: The Graphic Novel* (Sheffield: Warp Films, 2004)

⁶³ Field, “Interview with Shane Meadows” .

illness hallucinogenic drugs . . . And then a few years after that his box was so badly done in that he hung himself.⁶⁴

Alongside the use of non-professional actors and improvised production practices this works to inscribe Meadows' authorial voice within the film.⁶⁵

Shot on location in Matlock in Derbyshire, thematically the film continues Meadows' exploration of working-class male youth. The gang are a group of unemployed drug dealers led by Sonny (Gary Stretch). They are cruel and violent, viciously bullying the younger Anthony both physically and mentally. In a brutal rendition of a coming-of-age narrative, for Anthony the initiation into adulthood is violent and humiliating, with the gang forcing him to take drugs against his will, threatening to force him to perform fellatio, and forcing an unnamed young woman to have sex with him as they look on, taunting.

There is a continued concern to satirise working-class provincialism with the gang's ignorance and crudity repeatedly displayed. For example, in one scene two members of the gang read pornographic magazines aloud, completely mistaking the meaning of "Alfresco". At other times we see them mistakenly sniffing parmesan cheese (thinking it is cocaine) and driving around listening to American Hip-Hop ludicrously squeezed into a Citroen 2CV.

In this film, then, working-class masculinity is constructed as violent, repressive, ignorant and particularly un-glamorous. At the same time the film balances this critique with a certain sympathy. For example,

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ As Meadows comments: "What we delivered as a shooting script was about 40 pages, and the last line was 'we haven't written an ending 'cause we can't think of one, and it'll probably change anyway.'" Jonathan Romney, "Shane's World", *The Independent on Sunday* (3rd October, 2004, available at www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films, accessed December 2008).

Richard's relationship with his brother is protective and tender. The film is repeatedly sentimental towards childhood and family relationships, shown in the opening sequence of grainy, Super-8 home-movie footage of the brothers as youngsters, or the final part of the film where the last remaining gang member seeks to protect his children. There is also a concern to show the camaraderie of the gang as at times humane and supportive – "Moments of real warmth and humour", as one reviewer had it⁶⁶ – complete with the banter, dialect and slang that characterises all Meadows' films. In this way the film articulates working-class culture and experience as both enjoyable and in some ways oppressive.

Meadows has described *Dead Man's Shoes* as "Part kitchen-sink drama, part . . . *Terminator*".⁶⁷ These intentions were mirrored in the critical reaction to the film. Philip French, for instance, argued that "This is a very skilful, superbly edited piece of moviemaking, intriguing, gripping. It's steeped in a particular area, yet weaves together social realism and myth the way *High Plains Drifter* does."⁶⁸ For Fuller the film is "Meadows' stark memoir bearing witness to the damage done by heroin in Uttoxeter" that successfully "drew on genre films – *Straw Dogs*, *High Plains Drifter*, *Death Wish*, and *Rumble Fish*".⁶⁹ Thus the film successfully integrates social realism and horror within a strategy for low-budget, commercially orientated regionally-produced feature films. In particular, the nuanced focus on working-class youth and the improvised production practices

⁶⁶ Mark Blacklock, "Cruel Justice", *The Daily Telegraph* (6th October 2004, available at www.telegraph.co.uk, accessed December 2007).

⁶⁷ Young, "Interview with Shane Meadows".

⁶⁸ Philip French, "Dead Man's Shoes", *The Observer*, (3rd October 2004, available at www.guardian.co.uk/film, accessed Dec 2008).

⁶⁹ Fuller, "Boys to Men", p.46.

construct an iconography that works to morally sanction the film's focus on male violence. The critical and commercial profile *Dead Man's Shoes* achieved demonstrates the successful articulation of Meadows' established thematic concerns and production practices within this model.

Meadows' films show the elaboration of several production strategies for regionally-produced feature films that attempt to combine the social realist and generic practices developed in his early filmmaking in different ways. In this they provide a space for the articulation of regional working-class identity and experience that is sympathetic, enjoyable and inclusive. Despite the commercial orientation of the strategies employed, Meadows' films have been critically constructed within the social realist tradition as authentic representations of contemporary Britain.

Conclusion

Social realism has been established as a dominant mode of expression within regionally-produced feature films. Paul Marris has argued that:

Since the nineteenth century, "realisms" have shared the objective of portraying social life within the compass of "ordinary" people, not the exalted, the rich, the glamorous, the famous or the exotic. This is the sense in which we can talk about a continuing tradition of northern "realism." But classically, "realisms" are perceived as "realistic" at the moment of their introduction. That is to say, in contrast to previously established artistic conventions, they are received as giving a more convincing and contemporary relevant account of the social, offering new insights that speak to their times. Realism should not be taken as a fixed formal recipe. If so, it atrophies: over time, the formerly perceptive becomes routine and conventionalized and is no longer adequate to the changing situation . . . Northern realism needs to remake itself as newly "realistic" and its

best practitioners have been able to do so each decade since the 1960s.⁷⁰

The renderings of surface and moral realism that Meadows developed in his early filmmaking can be seen as such a renewal. The consistency with which these themes and practices are deployed across his body of work suggests that an *auteurist* analysis is appropriate. Combined with his professed commitment to continue working regionally, this goes somewhat to explain his critical profile.

However, an analysis of the production contexts of his films also shows this to be a differentiated process characterised by attempts to elaborate his filmmaking practices and thematic concerns within various commercial strategies with various degrees of success. These strategies were funded by different agencies, aimed at different markets and audiences and therefore are characterised by different degrees of emphasis within an otherwise coherent range of practices and stylistic choices.

In some ways Meadows' films reflect the "mainstreaming" of the social realist mode of expression in the period. The repeated use of generic stylistic and narrative motifs and devices blurs the ideological distinction between realism and escapism that is at the heart of the tradition. Meadows films are *not* self-consciously counterposed to Hollywood or to commercial British filmmaking. The production strategies employed within his films show attempts to court broad international audiences – "mainstream" casting practices, for example – which depend on finance from national organisations increasingly concerned with

⁷⁰ Marris, "Northern Realism", p.50.

international commercial viability. This receives its fullest expression in *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*.

However, the development of improvised production practices, the use of non-professional actors, a focus on specific regional working-class communities and a consistent thematic concern with masculinity and the social problems associated with working-class male youth – drugs, crime, violence – mean that Meadows' films are able to negotiate the realism/escapism distinction. Thus despite the use of generic narrative modes Meadows' films can be taken up as authentic representations of British social life, a renewed concern with social reality in British cinema. The combination of this particular blend of surface and moral realism and genre is best shown through *Dead Man's Shoes* and *This is England*, Meadows' productions with Warp Films.

Mike Wayne makes the argument that, in the mid-1990s, “British Northerners increased their stock as a visible and viable category within the American market”. He looks at films such as *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty*, *Little Voice* (Mark Herman, 1998) and *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000) as a cluster of British films that represent “the recently acquired viability within the North American market of a certain kind of British film (low budget) offering a specific regional focus within Britishness (they are all set ‘up north’).” For him, this demonstrates that

while it is widely recognised that English heritage films are shaped according to the pressures of the international and especially American market, it is now the case that the CTNCs [Cultural Transnational Corporations] are today shaping the kinds of “realist” films that were once thought to be the authentic representations of a national film culture.⁷¹

⁷¹ Wayne, “Performing the Northern Working-class”, p.296.

Meadows' films show the operation of this international political economy on regional production sectors during the period in their increasing integration with national and transnational film industries. This complicates claims to the development of a distinct regional cinema to emerge in the English regions under the "creative industries" model for regional film production. The production strategies employed in several of the examples discussed in this chapter are not specific to regional production sectors.

On the other hand, the production strategy elaborated through Meadows' collaboration with Warp Films might suggest otherwise, since they are "micro"-to-low-budget films, often employing improvised production practices and non-professional actors, and combining a social realist iconography with marketable generic stylistic elements. Warp Films' regional basis, vertical and horizontal integration – across finance, production, distribution and ancillary markets such as music and publishing – and development of a strong brand identity provide a business and production model for low-budget regionally-based film that reflects "creative industries" policies. Furthermore, Warp's financing structure through EM Media and Screen Yorkshire demonstrates an increasing inter-regional integration as well as an increasing regional autonomy from the London-based industry. This model has been mirrored by developments in other regions. For example, Digital Departures was launched by Northwest Vision and Media in 2008 in Liverpool to produce low-budget, commercially-orientated feature films financed, shot and produced in the region. In a similar fashion, Northern Film and Media's

Atomic Pictures supported a slate of film production by Pinball Films in the North East from 2008. Slingshot is a similar company funded by Screen West Midlands.⁷² It is too early to say what the long-term effects of these initiatives might be, but it certainly suggests an apparently workable strategy for the future of regional production sectors and may be the closest thing to a regional “cinema” to emerge since the regional workshop movement. “Creative industries” policies have facilitated this growing regional autonomy.

If the idea of a distinct regional cinema is complicated in institutional terms, the identities mobilised in these films are also complex. Meadows’ films, for example, are clearly based on a particular conception of “regionality” which works within the conventions of social realism. In this way can they be part of an argument that UKFC regional policies have contributed to a renewed focus on aspects of British social life in contemporary film, providing a space for the articulation of regional working-class experience. The production conditions created through the “creative industries” model contributes to the adaptation and reworking of the conventions of social realism and arguably represents a reworking of the dominant myths of regionality produced by the centralised system of film production in a similar manner to Martin McLoone’s conception of “internal decolonisation” discussed in Chapter One.⁷³ However, in Meadows’ case this is not characterised as part of a political or cultural “project”, but rather as an *auteurist* preoccupation with his own working-

⁷² For details of these companies see UKFC, “Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK”, pp.38-47.

⁷³ Martin McLoone, “Internal Decolonisation? British Cinema in the Celtic Fringe”, Robert Murphy (Ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 2nd Edition 2001) pp.184-190.

class origins. Furthermore, it is not defined by a rejection of escapist cinema or commercialism but by its embrace, which, as noted above, is a problem for many critics. This reflects the de-politicisation of regional film production sectors in the period; Meadows is more concerned with popular culture than cultural politics. With this in mind it is interesting to note that while “region” is repeatedly used to categorise his work by critics there is a distinct lack of place signifiers within the actual films. This becomes more pronounced over his body of work: from Sneinton in *SmallTime*, to the Midlands in *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*, to the whole country in *This is England*. As his work is articulated within an increasingly robust commercial strategy for regionally-based film production, Meadows’ regionality increasingly moves from the specific to the general, from the local to the national, and from place to narrative space.

Conclusion

Beyond Commerce and Culture

When it comes to film, we remain a nation of fence-sitters. Is it a business? Is it an artform? . . . film policy in the UK is too market-driven . . . to be bothered with supporting culturally valuable but economically risky projects. Scant attention is paid to the cultural ambitions of film-makers.¹

Nick Roddick, 2005

Some would say that cultural value is inherently unquantifiable, but government has to make specific spending decisions so, pragmatically, a figure must be struck. Is a vibrant UK film culture worth £10 million per year in public funds, or £100 million or £1000 million?²

David Steele 2004

It can already be asserted that any future attempt to build a regional structure of independent producers to challenge the centripetal forces of the metropolis will have to refer again to the workshop experience in Britain[.]³

Rod Stoneman, 1992

This thesis has analysed the development of regional film policy and practice in England. It has argued that this development can be understood in terms of two relatively distinct models for film production, each based on different institutional frameworks, and characterised by different sets of filmmaking practices. These two models – the workshop model and the “creative industries” model – are based on two distinct

¹ Nick Roddick, “What Hope for British Film?”, *Sight and Sound*, 15:8 (August 2005) p.12.

² David Steele, “Developing the Evidence Base for UK Film Strategy: The Research Process at the UK Film Council”, *Cultural Trends*, 13:4 (December 2004) p.16.

³ Rod Stoneman, “Sins of Commission”, Margaret Dickinson (Ed.), *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90* (London: BFI, 2000) p.181.

ideas about the role of the state in the subsidy of film production. The first idea is that the state should subsidise film production for cultural reasons. This is based on an opposition to the “mainstream” commercial film industry and its perceived values, particularly the idea that film is a commodity much like any other. It is also based on a rejection of the practices and forms associated with the “mainstream”; for example popular cultural forms, especially generic standardisation, or even a rejection of narrative altogether. In this formulation the state has a role to play in the cultivation of film practices that commercial mechanisms do not cater for, but which are nevertheless perceived to be culturally valuable or in the public interest, however conceived.

The second is that the state should subsidise film production for commercial reasons. In this model, film production is seen as primarily an economic activity and part of a wider economic system. While “cultural” arguments are not excluded from the “commercial” idea, they are of secondary importance, aligned with the mechanisms of value inherent in commercial relationships. State subsidy is most properly directed towards the development of film practices and production infrastructure that can generate a profit through commercial distribution channels.

These two sets of ideas about the role of the state in the development of regional film production sectors are not separate from the wider ideas and arguments that have characterised the history of British cinema as a national cinema, in both its industrial and cultural senses.⁴ However, in the context of the centralisation of the British film industry, the

⁴ For a discussion of these “wider ideas” see Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, 1997) pp.9-18.

dependence of regional film production sectors on state subsidy has meant that they are most properly understood as arguments about public policy, specifically the boundaries between cultural and economic policy.

The commerce-culture distinction has worked to structure debates over regional filmmaking, both in terms of the institutional mechanisms put in place to sustain regional film production and the practices and aesthetic strategies employed by regionally-based filmmakers. For example, it has been apparent in the discursive construction of the London-based “mainstream” film industry as artistically moribund; in the association of the realist tradition with regional film production; and in the rejection of popular cultural forms. Conversely, the “commercial” idea has been apparent in things like the association of regional film production with the development of regional economies; in the perceived need to professionalise regionally-based creative workers; in ideas of economic opportunity as cultural empowerment; and in the construction of non-standard practices and forms as elitist.

In this way the history of regional film policy and practice that this thesis has outlined can be interpreted from two different perspectives. The first is as the gradual colonisation of regional filmmaking by the outside forces of commercialism. In this view culturally-orientated and socially-embedded filmmaking practices have been supplanted by an insidious and philistine London-based film industry that values cinema only in terms of its exchange value and imposes a rigid and standardised conception of mass appeal against the creative ambitions of regional

filmmakers. The development of regional film policy and practice therefore comes at the expense of its cultural worth.

The opposing interpretation is that regional filmmaking has developed from a culturally and economically marginal position to become integrated with the British film industry. From this perspective, regional filmmaking has emerged from the confines of an amateurish minority cottage industry, claiming public money without demonstrating public appeal, to become part of an economically viable, popular and innovative sector of the British “creative economy”.

However, while the commerce-culture distinction has been the main discursive framework in which arguments over regional film funding have been framed, and regional policies justified, and in which regional filmmaking practices have been understood, a critical political economy analysis poses the question in a different way. The question is, in the words of Nicholas Garnham, “how the resources for cultural practice, both material and symbolic, are made available in structurally determined ways”. The key point is to understand the dynamics of institutional power and how this sets the agenda and limits the parameters of regional film production: how do some policy frameworks provide or restrict access to film production, how do they provide or restrict opportunities for creative autonomy, how do they distribute material and cultural resources, and in what ways have these been utilised? This is because strong cultural producers determine

which meanings circulate and which do not, which stories are told and about what, what arguments are given prominence and what cultural resources are made available and to whom. The analysis of this process is vital to an

understanding of the power relationships involved in culture and their relationship to wider structures of domination.⁵

The problem is, then, not that “commercial” forms of policy and practice are not “cultural” enough, or that “cultural” forms are not “commercial” enough. Rather, the problem is the way that different institutional forms have limited or facilitated the exercise of symbolic and material power. This conclusion will summarise the preceding chapters by moving beyond the commerce-culture distinction to make an assessment of regional film policy and practice in these terms

Beyond Commerce and Culture

The development of the workshop model for regional film production was characterised by a degree of struggle between regionally-based filmmakers and regional institutions. This can be placed in the wider context of political struggles around issues such as the Vietnam War, feminism, student protest and labour disputes in the 1960s and 1970s.

The regional workshop filmmakers were informed by the politics of the New Left and the politicisation of film in this period. In particular, the New Left emphasis on cultural politics in strategies for social change could suggest the cultural and political value of the representation of the regional working-class whilst critiquing their neglect by the “mainstream”. Amber films are a good example of this kind of attitude. They consciously sought to align themselves with and represent specific regional working-class

⁵ Nicholas Garnham, “Political Economy and the Practice of Cultural Studies”, Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding (Eds.), *Cultural Studies in Question* (London: Sage Publications, 1997) p.72, 61.

communities and give expression to working-class culture in the North East.

Struggles around the politics of representation were matched in the struggle to secure funding that could sustain workshop practice outside the production and distribution structures of the London-based industry; for example, in the pressure placed on the BFI to expand its regional remit beyond the exhibition of “quality” cinema to include production funding. This sort of pressure led to the incorporation of the sector’s values into the funding activities and ideology of the Regional Arts Associations, the BFI and Channel Four, to a certain degree. These gains are best shown in the Workshop Declaration, the single most important institutional representation of the development of the regional workshop model.

The workshop model, therefore, was developed and institutionalised through the exercise of material power by regionally-based filmmakers. The measure of this success comes in the extent to which the regional workshops successfully associated the *idea* of regional film production sectors with their own ideas of film as a cultural practice, which revolved around a regionally-based, alternative funding and production infrastructure to the commercial “mainstream”, based on notions of a representative and culturally-orientated cinema. Workshop production was characterised by collective production practices, typically a rejection of structures of private ownership and hierarchical working arrangements. At the same time it must be emphasised that the regional workshops were characterised by a spectrum of practices and aesthetics – including drama, documentary, animation, and the avant-garde. This

demonstrates the relatively high degree of creative autonomy that characterised the workshop model. What was possible under these production conditions is shown through Amber's confrontation with the aesthetics and practices of Grierson's documentary movement. Their films address on a formal and thematic level some of the tensions in the documentary tradition – its anthropological tendencies, the fetishization of the male worker as hero, for instance – and move towards a complex representation of regional working-class identity that is unique in British cinema, responding to and taking up concerns that were specific to the North East of England.

However, it must be emphasised that the incorporation of the workshop model into the funding structures of the BFI, the RAAs and Channel Four was only ever a limited gain and a small part of each institution's activities. Likewise, workshop production was always small-scale and the number of regional workshops, even at their highest point in the mid-1980s, remained small. If the regional workshop movement developed a coherent ideological and structural model for a distinct regional cinema, it was also hampered by an acute lack of funds and an ideological opposition to "mainstream" aesthetics that ultimately prevented it from escaping the confines of minority audiences. With hindsight it can appear as an experiment or an aberration within an otherwise linear development of a commercially-orientated film policy framework.

Chapter Two argued that the history of the development of the workshop model for regional film production requires a re-focussing of the existing history of the "independent sector" in Britain, which has tended to

neglect the distinctly regional aspects of workshop production.⁶ The tendency to focus on avant-garde practices and *auteurs* has relegated regional workshop policy and practice to the margins of British film history. However, in this thesis it emerges as central. This point is significant: it is impossible to fully understand the structure of regional film production sectors and the debates over regional film policy in the later period without understanding the first stage of the development of regional film policy and practice. Workshop production continued into the “creative industries” period, although its ideological and institutional basis was destabilised. This is demonstrated through the increasing marginalisation and reduced output of the Amber workshop, but also through the importance of open access workshops like Intermedia to regional filmmaking in the East Midlands, providing support, equipment and facilities to a new generation of regionally-based filmmakers like Chris Cooke and Shane Meadows during the 1990s. While these filmmakers were not informed by the cultural politics of the workshop movement, they have benefitted from its successes. Finally, the regional workshop tradition has informed the “DIY” film production culture discussed in Chapter Five. Although workshop filmmaking still operated as a loose set of practices, ideas and a “mentality”, it was no longer part of a movement, no longer able to collectively lobby for its own interests; it no longer operated as a model.

The destabilisation of the workshop model for regional film production was the result of wider transformations in the film and television industries – the deregulation of British broadcasting and the

⁶ The critical silence surrounding Amber and the other film workshops is interesting considering the number of workshop participants that went on to work in academia.

casualisation of the film and television sector workforce – which were in turn a response to wider changes in the British economy, specifically the ascendancy of Neo-Liberalism and the defeat of the Unions in the 1980s. These changes were reflected in cultural policy by the introduction of market-based systems of subsidy into the “cultural” sector and the discursive construction of small independent production companies as the symbolic driving force of the “creative industries” discourse. If the development of the regional workshop model demonstrates the influence grassroots groups were able to exert on institutions, then the development of regional “creative industries” was characterised by an agenda set in the wider political economy of public policy.

Regional “creative industries” developed slowly and unevenly throughout the 1980s and 1990s, competing with workshop practice. The adoption of “creative industries” policies is demonstrated through the incorporation of “commercial” criteria into production funding activities by regional institutions – the establishment of co-production schemes between Regional Arts Boards and broadcasters, the adoption of commission-based funding arrangements, the allocation of production funding as a mechanism for the training of regionally-based creative workers, for example. Alongside this was the creation of new institutions which focussed on economic development and therefore better reflected the “creative industries” ideology, in particular regional Media Development Agencies, and Regional Screen Commissions. Regional “creative industries” policies are most fully embodied, however, in the Regional Screen Agencies, formed in 2001 by the UK Film Council.

The development of regional “creative industries” have been characterised by an overall growth in film production. The so called “renaissance” of short film described in Chapter Five was partly fuelled by the relative cheapness of digital production technology, which was incorporated into regional production policy through RSA-managed schemes such as Digital Shorts. By the mid-2000s these schemes were an established entry route to the industry for regionally-based filmmakers, a “stepping stone” toward feature film production. As the relationship between regional funding agencies and grassroots production cultures like that centred on the Bang! Film Festival in Nottingham shows, this can work to professionalize regionally-based creative workers. Furthermore, the development of Shane Meadows’ career is an example of the willingness of regional funding agencies to support the development of “no-budget”, untrained regionally-based filmmakers in this period.

Regional production sectors were also better able to sustain low-budget feature film production than ever before, and Shane Meadows’ films show attempts to exploit a number of different commercial strategies. These developments increased the visibility of regional film production in the period, defined by an increasing integration with the production and distribution structures of the “mainstream” film industry – through co-productions with broadcasters or theatrical exhibition, for example – as well as the increasing autonomy of regionally-based production companies like Warp Films. The model for low-budget, regionally-based commercial feature film production adopted by companies like Warp also suggests the development of a popular, generic cinema strategy in the

regions. This, potentially, overcomes some of the criticisms that can be levelled at the regional workshops and represents a decisive break with cultural elitism and separatism.

This degree of commercial development was matched by the critical success of some of the films. Meadows' *Dead Man's Shoes* and *This is England* in particular, but also films such as *Control* and *London to Brighton*, achieved high critical profiles. Their adoption of the social realist mode of expression and low-budget production practices provide a space for the articulation of regional working-class identity and experience in British film. For many critics this is part of a renewed commitment to social reality, a renewed "surface and moral realism" in British cinema. This adds to the argument that "British" cinema can be increasingly seen as fractured and specific, increasingly devolved in its forms of address.

If it is true that the development of the "creative industries" model has been accompanied by the distribution of greater material resources to regional production sectors, it is also true that this was at the expense of opportunities to make films that do not conform to commercially-defined forms. This is demonstrated through the constraints imposed in regional short film production schemes – the emphasis on generic modes and stylistic features, for example – and the different attempts to articulate Meadows' filmmaking within a commercially successful formula. The range of practices and aesthetic choices available to filmmakers was narrowed. Regional film production under the "creative industries" model could no longer be described as a spectrum.

Chapter Three concluded by noting that in UKFC policy, much of the burden of representing the nation had been displaced from the “centre” to the regions. One important question is, then, how has regional policy and practice responded to this “burden”? The UKFC has incorporated into its policies the now commonly held belief that diversity in the film production workforce is a necessary prerequisite for the production of films that are sufficiently in-line with contemporary ideas of national identity and represent Britishness in a multifaceted sense:

Diversity is both a catalyst for creativity and is key to the success of the UK film sector. However, the profile of the sector’s workforce shows it has a long way to go before it can demonstrate that it is inclusive of the diversity of contemporary British society. Inevitably, this has a significant impact on the stories that are told, the way they are told on screen, the levels of access to film for potential audiences and, in terms of content and portrayal, the images of Britain and the concepts of “Britishness” around the globe.⁷

Despite the rhetorical commitment to “diversity”, film production in regional “creative industries”, in the examples discussed in this thesis at least, has been dominated by a distinctly narrow social group – white, male – and an attendant focus on maleness and male experience. The UKFC has failed to achieve through large-scale subsidy the sort of “diversity” achieved by the workshop sector through subsidy on a small-scale.⁸

This is a reflection of a film policy that aligns “cultural” objectives with commercial interests. One brief example encapsulates this problem:

⁷ UKFC, “Success Through Diversity and Inclusion” (London: UK Film Council, 2003) p.5.

⁸ For an analysis of systemic racism in the contemporary British film industry see Emma Pollard, Elaine Sheppard, Penny Tamkin and Robert Barkworth, “Researching the Independent Production Sector: A Focus on Minority Ethnic Led Companies” (Brighton: Institute for Employment Studies, 2004). For an analysis of gender inequality see Alice Sinclair, Emma Pollard and Helen Wolfe, “Scoping Study into the Lack of Women Screenwriters in the UK: A Report Presented to the UK Film Council” (Brighton: Institute for Employment Studies, 2006).

the UKFC's Diversity Action Group argues that "Filmmaking is about teamwork and diverse teams are more likely to be innovative and creative than those that are not."⁹ The obvious point is that a link between "diversity" and "innovation" is far from self-evident (the film industry has been "innovating" without being "diverse" so far). It is also revealing to point out that this statement was written by Tim Bevan, who as well as being appointed Chair of the UKFC's Leadership on Diversity in Film Group is Co-Chair of Working Title Films; this is undoubtedly a commercially successful film production company, but it is not noted for its contribution or commitment to a multifaceted construction of Britishness. UKFC policy is increasingly unable to make a case for "diversity" that is not based on commercial criteria, such as a moral or political argument.

However, while greater levels of access to the means of film production are a prerequisite for the production of films that represent a wider range of identities, this alone does not guarantee the production of a broad film culture. As all the film practices discussed in this thesis demonstrate, the production process is a negotiation between the constraints and opportunities created through specific production conditions and the aesthetic ambitions of filmmakers. This is as true of filmmaking groups such as Amber as it is of Shane Meadows and the short filmmakers discussed in Chapter Five. It follows, therefore, that the development of a film culture that represents Britishness in a multifaceted sense, that represents the struggles and tensions in British society and culture, that can dramatise a confrontation with structures of inequality –

⁹ Tim Bevan, "Foreword", UKFC, "Success Through Diversity and Inclusion", p.2.

racism, sexism, class difference, for example – requires filmmakers that have the desire to articulate these concerns. Despite the undoubted importance of the politics of film funding in limiting which representations can make it to the screen, shifts in the expression of cinema as a cultural practice also reflect wider changes in political culture. Put another way, the de-politicisation of regional film production cannot be explained solely by the ascendancy of a commercially-orientated ideology in regional film policy, but must include the recognition of wider transformations in cultural politics. A comparison between the ways the realist tradition was taken up in the two examples discussed in this thesis is revealing. Amber's confrontation with the documentary movement was theoretically informed, part of a coherent cultural politics. Realism in Meadows' films, on the other hand, is largely iconographic and stylistic. This is not to make a judgment on which are better types of films; each reflects changing circumstances and ambitions and, along with the short filmmakers discussed in Chapter Five, each can be described as filmmaking from the grassroots.

Filmography

Feature-Length Films

A Kind of Loving (John Schlesinger, 1962)

A Room for Romeo Brass (Shane Meadows, 2002)

A Taste of Honey (Tony Richardson, 1962)

Better Things (Duane Hopkins, 2008)

Bhaji on the Beach (Gurinder Chadha, 1993)

Big Things (Mark Davenport, 2009)

Billy Elliott (Stephen Daldry, 2000)

Brassed Off (Mark Herman, 1996)

Brothers of the Head (Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe, 2005)

Control (Anton Corbijn, 2007)

Crying with Laughter (Justin Molotnikov, 2009)

Dead Man's Shoes (Meadows, 2004)

Detox (Jim Gillespie 1999)

Dogging: A Love Story (Simon Ellis, 2009)

Dream On (Amber, 1991)

East is East (Damien O'Donnell, 1999)

Exodus (Penny Woolcock, 2007)

Frozen (Juliet McKoen, 2005)

Gallivant (Andrew Kotting, 1996)

I Know What You Did Last Summer (Jim Gillespie 1997)

In Fading Light (Amber, 1989)

Joyride (Jim Gillespie, 1995)

Like Father (Amber, 2001)

Little Voice (Mark Herman, 1998)

London to Brighton (Paul Andrew Williams, 2006)

Morvern Callar (Lynne Ramsey, 2002)

Mum and Dad (Steven Shiel, 2008)

Nil by Mouth (Gary Oldman, 1997)

Once Upon a Time in the Midlands (Shane Meadows, 2002)

One for the Road (Chris Cooke, 2003)

Pride and Prejudice (Joe Wright, 2005)

Ratcatcher (Lynne Ramsey, 1999)

Reservoir Dogs (Quentin Tarantino, 1992)

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (Karel Reisz, 1960)

Seacoal (Amber, 1985)

Shooting Magpies (Amber, 2005)

Sub Zero (Ian Dowson, 2006)

T. Dan Smith (Amber, 1987)

The Da Vinci Code (Ron Howard, 2006)

The Full Monty (Peter Cattaneo, 1997)

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (Tony Richardson, 1962)

The Private Life of Henry VIII (Alexander Korda, 1933)

The Scar (Amber, 1997)

There's Room at the Top (Jack Clayton, 1959)

This is England (Shane Meadows, 2006)

This is Not a Love Song (Billie Eltringham, 2002)

This Filthy Earth (Andrew Kotting, 2001)

This Sporting Life (Lindsay Anderson, 1963)

Trainspotting (Danny Boyle, 1996)

Tristram Shandy (Michael Winterbottom, 2005)

TwentyFourSeven (Shane Meadows, 1997)

Twin Town (Kevin Allen, 1997)

Unmade Beds (Alexis Dos Santos, 2009)

Yasmin (Kenneth Gleenan, 2004)

Short Films, Experimental Films and Documentaries

A Stoner's Guide to Egg Fried Rice (Ray Wong, 2002)

A Woman Like You (Sheffield Film Co-op, 1975)

Amelia and the Angel (Ken Russell, 1958)

Anita and Me (Metin Huseyin, 2002)

Birth Day (Laura Smith, 2004)

Black Wiggow (Shane Meadows, 1995)

Bowes Line (Amber, 1975)

Boy and Bicycle (Ridley Scott, 1965)

Byker (Amber, 1983)

Coalface (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1935)

Cry (Steven Shiel, 2002)

Double Vision (Amber, 1986)

Drifters (John Grierson, 1928)

Eden Valley (Amber, 1994)

Fighting the Bill (Cinema Action, 1970)

Film Print (Peter Gidal, 1974)

Fires Were Started (Humphrey Jennings, 1943)

From Marks and Spencers to Marx and Engels (Amber, 1988)

Glass Works (Amber, 1977)

I'm British But . . . (Gurinder Chadha, 1989)

Industrial Britain (Arthur Elton, Robert Flaherty and Basil Wright, 1931)

Inside (John Ross, 2004)

Jerusalem (Ben Pollard, 2003)

Keeping Time (Amber, 1983)

Kill the Day (Lynne Ramsey, 1997)

King of the Gypsies (Shane Meadows, 1995)

Knitting a Love Song (Annie Watson, 2004)

Last Shift (Amber, 1976)

Launch (Amber, 1973)

Letters to Katja (Amber, 1994)

Listen to Britain (Humphrey Jennings and Stuart McAllister, 1942)

Look at Me (Nicholas Roach, 2002)

Lovetakes (Jeanie Finlay, 2003)

Nightmail (Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936)

Number 54 (Iain Finlay, 2003)

One of the Missing (Tony Scott, 1969)

Quayside (Amber, 1979)

Shields Stories (Amber, 1988)

Shifting Units (Chris Cooke, 1999)

Small Time (Shane Meadows, 1996)

Smart Alec (Andrew Kotting, 1993)

Spare Time (Humphrey Jennings, 1939)

Staying Up (Tom Kirk, 2003)

Supa Heroes (Dena Smiles, 2003)

The Burning (Stephen Frears, 1967)

The Datsun Connection (Shane Meadows, 1995)

The Sadler Story (Amber, 1985)

The Space Between (James Kibbey, 2003)

The Writing in The Sand (Amber, 1991)

To His Knees He Fell (Andrew Brand, 2004)

Toccare (Ruth Parker, 2003)

What About the Bodies (Simon Ellis, 2002)

Why I Hate Parties (But Pretend to Like Them) (Mark Davenport, 2003)

Where's the Money Ronnie? (Shane Meadows, 1996)

Wig Sisters (Katy Milner, 2004)

Yellow (Simon Beaufoy and Billy Eltringham, 1996)

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