

A Politics of Working-Class Culture and the Culture of Working-Class Politics: The Aesthetics and Activism of Amber Film and Photography Collective and the Berwick Street Film Collective

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This paper examines how Amber Film and Photography Collective's working-class affiliations and Berwick Street Film Collective's middle-class makeup shaped their divergent approaches to depicting 'working-class issues' by drawing on the films of both collectives, alongside archival materials and oral testimonies. By engaging in a comparative reading, I highlight the breadth of Amber's oeuvre, tracing the development of their filmmaking strategies—which included agitprop, the fusion of factual and fictional formal elements and transnational collaboration with the German Democratic Republic's film production company, Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA)—to demonstrate that, contrary to criticisms levelled by contemporary theorists clustered around *Screen* magazine and the British Film Institute, Amber transcended the constraints of Documentary Realism by incorporating radical avant-garde aesthetics into their oppositional practice. Concomitantly, Amber's radical filmmaking is positioned as relative to its members' working-class solidarities, with their concern for championing working-class cultures contrasted with Berwick Street's broader political agendas. Through foregrounding this politics/culture dialectic, the practical repercussions of Berwick Street's middle-class representation of 'working-class interests' are investigated while the theoretical criteria by which avant-garde depictions of 'working-class issues' are evaluated are themselves assessed.



Introduction

One of cinema's earliest images is of workers leaving a factory. Women mainly, but also men, cascade through industrial gates onto a sun-drenched street in Southern France where, grinning, they greet each another with gestures of delight whilst children and dogs frolic in the foreground. First screened in Paris in 1895, *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* [*La Sortie des Usines Lumière*] constitutes a momentous moment in the annals of moving image. For Sean Cubitt it represents 'an innocence of movement that never after could recur in front of the camera ... at the edge of a leisure that cannot be remade or recorded: these are ... visions of immanent utopia' (2004: 20), while Pedro Costa inversely pinpoints the film's genesis as 'when fiction was born, because the boss gave orders to an employee ... [a] somewhat terrible thing' (2005).

Presaging a genre of non-fiction cinema that endures to this day—the working-class film—*Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* provokes questions that remain prescient to subsequent iterations of the tradition. What power dynamics are at play between worker and filmmaker? How do divergent class affiliations and sociopolitical exigencies between both parties structure this relationship? And what formal strategies might be effectually mobilised to represent the working-classes?

The present paper addresses these questions by examining the filmmaking practice of two more recent case studies: Berwick Street Film Collective and Amber Film and Photography Collective which, both formed in Britain in the late 1960s, are united by their politicised concern for representing working-class issues.¹ While the former, lauded by theorists on the British New Left as fervently avant-garde, enjoy a canonical status in accounts of radical European filmmaking, the latter face hostility from the same cluster of critics. Paul Willemen's perspectives are representative: extolling Berwick's formal accomplishments Willemen, then editorial board member of *Screen* magazine, champions *Nightcleaners* as 'undoubtedly the most important political film to have been made in this country' (Willemen and Johnston, 1995: 104). Contradistinctively, he dismisses Amber's work as 'simplistic' (Dickinson, 1999: 254), an assessment reiterated by commentators since who fault the group's filmmaking on analogous justifications, proclaiming it 'romantic' (Andrew, 2005: 1150), 'nostalgic' and 'paternalistic' (Crouch and Grassick, 2005: 45).

For its detractors the problem with Amber arises, as we shall see, from the group's perceived commitment to the conventions of Realism. This problem transcends the specificities of the collectives' practice insofar as it pertains to, and is imbricated in,

¹ Henceforth, I use the abbreviated titles of Berwick and Amber for ease of reference unless it is contextually appropriate to use full titles.

broader debates on the politics of representation or, more precisely, the perceived limitations of the British Documentary Movement as it subsisted in the hands of John Grierson and his followers. In recent years, however, a new wave of leftist commentators, resonating with the enduring relevance of this era of radical cultural production to the urgencies of today, invigorate discourses on the history of independent cinema with a fresh set of problems. In the field of Feminism, for example, Erika Balsom and Hilga Peleg respond to ‘an urgent need to rehistoricize this period of practice beyond the Realism/Modernism divide’ through perforating the once steadfast binary between the avant-garde and Real to accentuate the breadth of conventions embraced by these umbrella terms, thereby ‘enlarging the scope of inquiry beyond the canon of work ... that tends to dominate English-language accounts’(2022: 30). More thematically pertinent, perhaps, is Jamie Chambers’s reappraisal of Amber’s 1970s ‘salvage-based’ documentaries which, issued from a leftist vantage point from where the immiseration of working-class cultures can be palpably discerned, reappraises Amber’s ‘salvage politics methodologies’ as operating ‘in service of a progressive politics of recognition’ (Clayton and L. Mulvey, 2017: 180).

Reassessing Berwick and Amber from a position of scholarly distance, the present paper draws on and strives to contribute to this nascent body of criticism. Engaging a comparative reading of both workshops, it charts the groups’ deviating approaches to engaged practice, investigating a dialectic between the filmmakers’ sociopolitical obligations of authentic representation, and critically determined imperatives of experimentation. Initiating a conjunctural assessment thus, it does not claim to radically reappraise films made by either the group. Rather, it mobilises Amber as a salient example of artists whose embedded approach to depicting the working classes, transcending the constraints of Documentary Realism, gestures towards the avant-garde in order, ultimately, to probe the theoretical criteria by which representations of ‘working-class issues’ are themselves evaluated.² More specifically, it posits that discerning Amber and Berwick’s filmmaking practice through an optic of class difference reveals the limitations of indexing socially engaged art projects—that is, those which incorporate people and communities in discourse, collaboration or social interaction—into theoretically proscribed categories.

My argument is laid out in two parts. The first part schematises the sociopolitical context of Amber and Berwick, sketching their emergence and development through interrogating convergences and divergences between the pair’s attitude towards

² I use conjunctural here in the Hallian sense, and Hall himself draws heavily upon Gramsci’s use of the term. For a detailed breakdown of the term, see Stuart Hall, et al (1983).

collective praxis and community engagement. Here, I assess how the geographic, pedagogic, and political positionalities of Amber and Berwick structure their social exigencies or, to be exact, the degree to which the priorities of the working-class communities each group represent determine their corresponding styles.

The second section analyses the collectives' filmmaking, reinvigorating 1970s debates through a present-day optic to raise questions about the criteria by which working-class films have historically been assessed. Here, I focus on productions that animate, either directly or by implication, the academic debates I seek to problematise—that is those which, unfurling across the pages of *Screen*, discharge realistic projects in favour of more formally reflexive undertakings that elicit audiences' critical, rather than emotional, responses. Correspondingly, analysis is foregrounded, in the first instance, in Berwick's 1975 documentary *Nightcleaners* on the basis that its standing as a touchstone of the avant-garde, endorsed by *Screen*'s anti-realist project, makes it a suitable candidate for identifying formal criteria against which Amber's aesthetic tendencies can be compared. Likewise, my appraisal of Amber's practice relies on examining productions that, for the most part, have been subjected to considerable criticism; in this case, though, from the collective's detractors as well as their supporters. Further still, I limit the boundaries of inquiry by only considering films produced by the groups under discussion for, as will become clear, one of the key points of comparison underpinning my study pertains to Amber and Berwick's distinct approaches to collective practice. Consequently, I do not, for example, delve into Berwick's members' subsequent inauguration of groups such as Lucia Films; nor, indeed, do I analyse Marc Karlin's solo productions which fortunately have been surveyed excellently elsewhere.³

Context and Comparisons: Cultural Convergences and Social Divergences

Although it is true, as Sue Clayton and Laura Mulvey observe (2017: 1), that the past decade has witnessed a surge of interest in 1970s Independent Film. It is also the case that the significance of this period requires reiterating for the contemporary generation. A convenient point of departure, in this respect, is terminological. Emerging in the late 1960s, 'Independent Film and Video' was embraced as an umbrella term that would cohere the increasingly fragmenting avant-garde—then, nominally split between artistically experimental and politically agitational projects—so that financial lobbying to the Arts Council, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and British Film Institute

³ For discussion of Karlin's solo projects see Holly Aylett's edited volume *Mark Karlin: Look Again* (2015) which, introduced by Sally Potter, brings together essays by thinkers including John Akomfrah and Sukhdev Sandhu, together with letters written by Karlin himself.

(BFI) ensued with a united front.⁴ The nomenclature gained legitimacy upon the 1974 inauguration of the Independent Filmmakers Association (IFA) which, charged with promoting the development of filmmakers outside of industrial monopolies, boasted a diverse membership, including associates of the London Film-makers' Co-op, leftist documentary filmmakers, radical collectives and, with Channel 4's launch in 1982, participants in the Workshop Movement. In short, the IFA embraced a broad range of approaches, including filmmakers who worked primarily within conventional genres, (a category to which Amber are frequently indexed), as well as more radical producers whose oppositional strategies of countering the illusion and narrative structures of commercial cinema have been embraced by critics, including Willemsen, as radically avant-garde and, concurrently, positioned within broader visual cultural narratives (Berwick is associated with this latter group).

Although it might seem tempting now to transmute the somewhat outmoded epithet, 'Independent Film and Video' into the more fashionable appellation 'Artists' Moving Image', to do so is to brush over the contradictions inherent in the latter term which, as the IFA recognised, was imperfect since one of the association's key roles was to campaign for government funding, rendering it, and those who relied on it, financially *dependent* on the state. Likewise, whilst the Independent Cinema movement is frequently indexed to the 1970s—the point when it reached its apex—its duration transcended this decennium since groups such as Cinema Action were inaugurated towards the end of the previous decade whilst the Black Workshops, for example, emerged in the 1980s. Put simply, discussions of 1970s Independent film culture, including the present one, tend towards a broad definition of the term which holds political and critical significance rather than economic connotations.

So too then, it is illuminating to reacquaint the modern reader with the political landscape of this era. The word that reverberates in accounts of 1970s Britain is liberation: the decade saw the inauguration of The Black Liberation Front; the initial meeting of the London Gay Liberation Front and the first national Women's Liberation Movement Conference, movements informed by contemporary currents from across the Atlantic as well as global uprisings of the previous decade, most notoriously those of Paris in 1968. Refrains of 'under the cobblestones, the beach' and 'kill the cop in your head' fused with European-inspired theory and North American-inflected polemics to provide the stimulus for a shift in British cultural production with artists not intent, in Adorno's words, on 'sleeping through the deluge that threatens them' but increasingly active in the struggles they lived through (1978: 3). Consequently, questions pertaining

⁴ This divide is characterised by Wollen (1975) in his landmark essay on the two avant-gardes.

to the politics of representation percolated into broader frames of resistance. At the same time, the 1970s represents a critical conjunction in the history of the British working classes. The optimism of the decade's beginnings—the political potency of working-class institutions, including trade unions and flourishing of proletarian culture—was gradually eclipsed as the decade drew to a close by an intensification in deindustrialisation; a nadir in mass unemployment (matched previously only in the 1930s), and, correspondingly, the degradation of working-class cultures.

This was the conjunctural moment in which both Amber and Berwick emerged; indeed, 1968 represents a formative epoch for both groups. For Amber, this was the year the collective formed around the vision of founding member Murray Martin in London, where original members of the fledgling group were enrolled at the Regent Street Polytechnic. Martin himself, however, traces the emergence of Amber to former origins, specifically to its members' working-class roots, explaining in interview that, 'in a sense it [filmmaking] starts in your own history' and 'there was a movement among the group I was in ... to go back to your own roots, your own childhood and reconnect with your interests there' (Martin 2002: 117). Elaborating, he divulges details of his upbringing, clarifying that his 'grandparents did two jobs, my grandfather was a miner and a gardener, my father always did two jobs, my uncle always did two jobs. They worked, they went out in the morning and worked' (2002: 117). Relating his working-class subjectivities to those of Amber's other members, Martin explains that 'A number of the group were of a similar generation and from working-class backgrounds — Peter Roberts came from Leeds, I came from Stoke, Lorna Powell came from Tyneside, Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen came from Finland' (2002: 118).

To be clear, whilst Amber's members celebrate their working-class roots, they also acknowledge that certain 'experiences', most particularly that of education, 'designed' them 'out of [their] backgrounds' (Martin, 2001: 160). The filmmakers' descriptions of their metamorphoses are tinged with regret: according to Roberts, both he and Martin 'had the same education experiences, which takes you away from your background' and, as a result, both 'felt a certain loss that that process [of education] had brought about' (Roberts, 2008). The loss Roberts bemoans pertains to that of his and Martin's working-class identities. It is loss then, as Chambers asserts, that has theoretical implications in terms of regarding the group's cultural position insofar as the shifting class statuses of Amber's members muddy their 'emic' points of view — that is the group's collective capacity to document working-class experiences as working-class subjects (2018). The present paper is not, however, the place to delve into Chambers' notion of the group's 'emic' versus 'etic' authenticity (83). Instead, what is to be advanced is more straightforward: that Amber's members' mutable identities impelled

the group's compulsion to 'go back', in Martin's words, to their 'own roots' and 'reconnect with [their] interests there' (Martin, 1999: 248).

Berwick's ascendance can likewise be plotted to 1968, for it was late this year that another group, Cinema Action (also known as Working Class Films), emerged through screening a French student protest film throughout UK factories. Two years later, three of its members—Humphry Trevelyan, Marc Karlin and Richard Mourdant—frustrated, according to Trevelyan, by its 'insistence on making campaign-led "working-class films"' broke away to form their own subsidiary group: Berwick Street Film Collective, officially inaugurated as such in 1972 (Bauer and Kidner, 2013: 47).

Berwick members inscribe their origin stories not, as with Amber, in the terms of class consciousnesses but rather according to intellectual pedigree. For example, in a retrospective essay published in Kidner and Sainsbury's anthology *Nightcleaners and '36 to '77*, Trevelyan assiduously excavates the backgrounds of those involved in the making of Berwick Street's two most prominent films (*Nightcleaners* and *'36 and '77*) finding that 'the diversity of background of the filmmakers ... makes it hard to identify a clear origin for the tendencies evident in the films' (2018: 86). The diversity he is referencing is an intellectual one: he writes of James Scott's Sorbonne education and North-American Underground networks, before detailing the collective's 'allegiances' to 'artist filmmakers' including Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, Howark Alk, Maya Deren, Stephen Dwoskin, Peter Gidal and Malcom Le Grice (86–87).

Equally noteworthy are subtle differences between the two groups' approach to collective practice. A scholar of Amber might find it difficult to locate the precise personnel of the group and harder still to ascertain their moment of initiation or responsibilities: Amber, operating non-hierarchically, consistently emphasise the importance of collective authorship to their productions. Consequently, whilst an argument could be made for classifying each of Amber's films according to the distinctive imprint of its principal director—a pursuit that necessitates identifying if a film was directed by Murray Martin, Peter Roberts or Ellin Hare—such an inquiry would be to ignore the group's intentions. This is not so much an ethical quandary (it seems permissible, in this instance, to circumvent artists' preferences in the pursuit of historical precision), but rather a hermeneutic issue since Amber's cooperative principles are integral to their representational strategies on two counts.

First, Amber, much like other independents of the period, mobilised collective efforts as viable alternatives to the dominant practices of mainstream film production. Indeed, as Hillary Thompson outlines in the BFI's 1981 pamphlet, *The New Social Function of Cinema*, the Independent Film Movement itself evolved as part of a larger sociopolitical initiative which, in addressing a demand for an 'alternative, counter,

pedagogical, propagandist cinema practice', bolstered filmmakers to 'challenge the basis of dominant media operation', taking 'impetus from the events of France in May 1968' (1981: 3). As Thompson suggests, the movement took its inspiration from European impulses whereby filmmakers had for some time espoused the political advantages of working collaboratively, with Jean Luc Godard, for example, operating as part the Dziga Vertov Group, denouncing what he termed the pre-eminence of 'the auteur with a capital A', rationalising that:

I [Godard] find it useless to keep offering the public the 'auteur'. In Venice, when I got the prize of the Golden Lion, I said that I probably deserve only the mane of this lion, and maybe the tail. Everything in the middle should go to all the others who work on a picture: the paws to the director of photography, the face to the editor, the body to the actors. I don't believe in the solitude of ... the auteur with a capital A (1984: 16).

Godard's admonishment of auteurism draws directly from Bertolt Brecht's propositions on the subject; when Brecht recalibrated the role of artist into that of producer he engendered the predominant metaphor by which alternative notions of authorship have since been imagined, with the work of art recast as a product of labour relations, with the artist given the worker status. Crucial, with regard to this inquiry, is that Brecht's model of collective practice was held up by contemporary cine-theorists (including Willemsen) as a political ideal and, concomitantly, acquired currency among the British avant-garde, including Berwick, who manifestly saw the benefits of collaboration. Indeed, a certain pragmatism underpins its affiliates' reports on why they came together in the first instance. When asked how she began work on *Nightcleaners*, Mary Kelly recalls: 'because the subject matter was about women, they [Berwick Street] felt like they should have a representative' (2018: 97); Kelly, an artist and involved in the Women's Liberation group, was judged a suitable candidate for the job. Still, as Trevelyan is quick to emphasise, Berwick 'was only ever three people' (2013: 47)—himself, Karlin and Mordaunt—and although others were folded into the group, most notably Kelly, James Scott and John Sanders as co-directors of *Nightcleaners* and '36 to '77, they were never made 'permanent members' (2013: 47). And so, as Dan Kidner remarks, it can be difficult to write about them 'without ascribing to the group a solidarity and definitive structure that it did not possess' (2018: 47).

Teleologically put then, Berwick's gatekeeping of membership and use of discrete credits stands, albeit subtly, in contrast to Amber's more egalitarian approach. Consequently, if we determine that a film's critical value can be assessed, albeit

quite crudely, by its production methods (as theorists increasingly do), then Amber's egalitarian principles surely align the group more convincingly with Brechtian models of production than Berwick's do.

The second hitherto under-discussed reason I posit to comprehend Amber's privileging of collective practice models regards the nuances of representing the working classes specifically. More precisely, it invokes the discipline of political science or, to be exact, structural critiques of social democracy and electoral socialism that discern a tension between the mass nature of working-class movements and the substantive requirements of party politics under Capitalism. Most such accounts agree that the inherent logic of Western electoral systems runs counter to that of socialist movements. Adam Przeworski, for example, highlights how Parliament

... seats [individuals], not masses. A relation of representation is imposed upon the class by the very nature of capitalist democratic institution. Masses do not act directly in defence of their interests; they delegate this defence ... In this manner participation demobilised the masses (2002: 14).

Przeworski asserts that these dynamics are as 'true of unions as much as parties' where collective brokering is 'as distant from the daily experience of the masses as elections. Leaders become representative. Masses represented by leaders' (2002: 14). Crucially, Przeworski's diagnosis of the representational dynamics belying the stability of working-class politics can be productively translated into the realm of cultural production where, after all, democracy is neither a *de jure* nor a *de facto* necessity.⁵ Here, hegemonies might be demolished, leaders rejected, and individualised structures eroded should filmmakers elect to take an egalitarian path by committing, as Amber does, to non-hierarchical principles rather than operating, as with Berwick, through nominating delegates—or leaders for specific projects (as with Kelly in the production of *Nightcleaners*, for example).

Put simply, embedding Amber's collective praxis within broader frameworks of the politics of working-class representation together with theoretical agendas imposes a comprehensive optic through which to appreciate the group's considered responsibilities towards the communities they represent. Crucially, these communities are embraced, as we shall see, not only as cinematic subjects, but also politically,

⁵ For an example of how Przeworski's diagnosis of the representational dynamics belying the stability of working-class politics can be productively translated into the realm of cultural production, see Matti Ron's (2020) article 'An Uneasy Avant-Garde: The Politics of Modernism in 1930s Proletarian Fiction'.

across a more horizontally aligned axis, as working-class affiliates. Indeed, the very name Amber—a reference to a Newcastle ale less well known than the premium brand Newcastle Brown—was selected based on anonymity so that ‘the name will be from what you do, not what it is’ (Martin, 2002: 117). Amber’s achievement was, as commentators almost universally concur, to prioritise the perspectives and inputs of the communities they depict. What emerges upon subsequent analysis of Amber’s filmmaking is the group’s unwavering responsibility towards those they represent; a responsibility, I argue, that Berwick did not prioritise.

Before initiating this analysis, it is worth drawing a few more contextual comparisons between the two collectives; the first of which pertains to the duration of each. Amber, still active today, is comfortably into their fifth decade, making them the longest surviving of the 1970s British collectives by a significant margin. This fact alone has been the subject of considerable scrutiny, with critics deliberating on explanations for the group’s success, often with a view to generate imitable paradigms. Although this is not the place for comprehensive discussion on Amber’s sustainability, not least because this subject is excellently dealt with elsewhere,⁶ direct insight can be found in Martin’s pithy rules on collective practice in which he advises to ‘Integrate life and work and friendship. Don’t tie yourself to institutions. Live cheaply and you’ll remain free. And then do whatever it is that gets you up in the morning’ (2015: 5). Albeit informal, Martin’s edict sheds light on Amber’s remarkable lifespan. Operationally, while the group navigated national and localised funding structures, they also instigated alternative forms of income by establishing, for example, commercial photography ventures and the Side Gallery on Tyneside, to implement a cross-subsidising revenue model and thereby avoid binding themselves, as per Martin’s cautionary, to institutions. Likewise, without delving too far into personal biographies, it is reasonable to attribute Amber’s success to its members’ effectual integration of ‘life and work and friendship’ whilst the aim of living cheaply ultimately impelled the embryonic group’s move to Newcastle.

The ramifications of this relocation were decidedly mixed. On one hand, Amber’s advocates lionise the group’s immersion in ‘regional cultures’ as visionary, Mike Wayne going so far as to classify Amber’s immersive engagement with working-class communities as a ‘Third Cinema mode of production’ (2001: 49). Yet, celebrating Amber’s regional production methods, however well-intentioned, seems also to have had the paradoxical effect of minimising the group’s theoretical achievements and,

⁶ See, for example, Paul O’Reilly (2009) *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network*, Vol 1, No 2 (2009) ‘I Will Survive’: Forty Years of Amber Films and the Evolution of Regional Film Policy.

correspondingly, their critical recognition. An example of Amber's treatment in a study of directing techniques is illustrative: here, it is stated that in the United Kingdom, 'local-issue fiction [emerged] as the equivalent of the regional novel' (Rabiger and Hurbis-Cherrier, 2013: 15), a development evidenced by Amber's filmmaking practice. As Leggott (2020) suggests, if Amber is indeed categorised in such terms, then their relative obscurity in critical accounts of film and television cultures equivalences that of 'regional' novelists, including Catherine Cookson, Sid Chapin and Jack Common, who, as Robert Colls has demonstrated, have been overlooked by the literary establishment owing to their 'regional' and therefore supposedly narrow concerns (1998: 164–210).

Perhaps Amber's so-called 'regional' focus would not have been so problematic for critics were it not for the group's chosen location: the North, where filmmakers have been persistently pigeonholed as operating uniformly (indeed, almost definitionally) within a parochial tradition of Poetic Realism, as Ewa Mazierska observes in her introduction to an essay collection on contemporary cinema's representations of the North. She remarks:

The tradition of 'poetic realism' cast a long shadow on the more contemporary representation of the North. Not only are artists' interest in depicting this region expected to focus on its drabness, economic deprivation, the dignity of its inhabitants and their sense of belonging to their milieu, but criticism and historians privilege works conforming to this stereotype (2017: 11).

Mazierska's observations resonate with Amber's reception, for it is true, as she posits, that the tradition of northern Realism looms large in critiques of the group's filmmaking, which is persistently, often pejoratively, indexed to iterations of the genre. Indeed, as Peter Thomas surmises 'within an independent film movement substantially committed to a politicised Avant-garde aesthetic, Amber received much criticism for working in a realistic mode and have been accused of nostalgia and romanticising their subjects' (2012: 205). Such indictments vary in flavour. Peter Hutchings for example, determines that Amber's pledges to Realism propagated their production of northern stereotypes which 'formed in the context of particular stylistic conventions and devices with these in turn presupposing a set of beliefs about the region' (Hutchings, 1996: 283). Analogously, commentators suspicious of the inherent notion of documentary, including David Crouch and Richard Grassick (2005), critique Amber's realistic filmmaking as simplistic, although along the slightly different lines of faulting their connection to and perpetuation of paternalising aspects of the British documentary movement and, so-called affiliation with the Grierson school of the 1930s.

Despite Amber's members repudiating these associations—Martin, for instance, claims in a video interview with Lindsey and Graeme Rigby that he was 'not particularly aware' of the Griersonian tradition whilst Roberts, in the same interview, declares himself unfamiliar with the Griersonian school outright — negative associations between Amber, the British Documentary movement and Poetic Realism persist. A misleading corollary of this questionable epistemic supposition is that Amber's remarkable work beyond the North remains, at least in critical appraisals of film and television, relatively obscure. For example, political accounts of radical filmmaking make remarkably little of Amber's collaboration with the Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA), the German Democratic Republic (GDR)'s state-controlled film production company. This is a surprising omission considering the collaboration represents a rare cultural exchange between the two states which, in brief, involved filmmakers from both groups immersing themselves in the working cultures of their host country, with the result that Amber who, documenting the fishing and shipping industries of the East German seaport of Rostock, gained remarkable access to life behind the iron curtain. They found this—contrary to common assumptions—to offer an attractive prospect to the working classes as Martin outlines, determining that

In many ways, there was much to admire in the Eastern bloc. I come from a working-class background, and it was my parents' dream country: guaranteed employment, extremely good healthcare, wonderful childcare, state provision. You could say this can be dulling and repressive, and for some people it certainly was, and the intelligentsia found that. ... But all states are police states. This one [Britain] is too. The police don't work for you, they work for the state (Martin, 2006: 130).

In short, not only did Amber lack the financial means to establish a stable practice in London but to do so would have isolated them from the specific working-class communities they sought to 'go back to' (Martin, 1999: 248)—that is, those located in the northern regions of England where the majority of the group's members were born. Theoretical perspectives on the impact of isolation can be found in Raymond Williams's analysis of post-war working-class fiction which, according to Williams, was characterised and ultimately impeded by two modes of writing (Williams, 2020). First, novels written by those whose experiences of being working class were determined by its 'escape' (a tradition with an extensive lineage, traceable from D. H. Lawrence through to David Storey) and second, 'the working-class weekend novel' which fixates almost exclusively on leisure narratives to the detriment of labour activities (a genre epitomised by Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*) (Williams, 2020: 54). Williams's empiricisms illuminate Amber's pragmatism: had the group settled in

London they surely would have detached themselves from the subject matter—northern working people, cultures, and practices—they sought to (re)immerse themselves in in precisely the ways he identifies.

Amber then faced something of a double bind: the authenticity and indeed economic stability of their practice relied on the group positioning themselves in the region they hailed from; yet, whilst absenting themselves from the capital did not limit their geographical reach (quite the opposite: it encouraged them to turn to international cultures), it did curtail, as we have seen, their critical reception. Berwick evaded this bind by basing themselves, as their title implies, in a street located in the district of Westminster in London. However, their lifespan here was short for they disbanded in 1978, citing as reason for doing so that they had become ‘considerably less cohesive as a group’ (Trevelyan, 2018: 94).

The first half of this paper schematised the development of both Amber and Berwick. What became apparent was plain: for Amber, being born into the working classes carried particular social affiliations and, with these, socioeconomic realities that manifestly bore on their approach to cultural representation, and corresponding critical reputation. Berwick, a middle-class collective, eluded these dynamics and were received more favourably.

Critical Analysis: Comparing Amber and Berwick’s Avant-Garde Innovations, Brechtian Formulations and Political Representations

The second section of this article issues an analytic study of both groups’ filmmaking practice considering the first’s findings. My approach, once again, is comparative, though it is worth offering two points of clarification in support of this enduring methodology. First, Amber, partly owing to the collective’s remarkable lifespan, is significantly more prolific than Berwick. However, as the present concern is with the avant-garde and the 1970s Independent Film Movement, imbalance between the pair is largely resolved by the boundaries of inquiry being set by the number of avant-garde films I suggest both groups made and the duration of the 1970s Independent Film Movement which, as indicated in the introduction to this paper, I take to be from the end of the 1960s to the end of the 1980s. Second, as outlined at the opening of this inquiry, I investigate Berwick’s *Nightcleaners* in the first instance on the justification that its reputation as a touchstone of the avant-garde makes it a viable candidate for identifying criteria against which Amber’s avant-garde tendencies can be measured. Whilst this structure risks ossifying the boundaries of the avant-garde as drawn in the 1970s, the assessment of Amber by standards established by critics at the time, rather than adjusting benchmarks according to modern sensibilities, has clear argumentation

advantages: satisfying the demands of one's detractors is surely more robust than fulfilling the expectations of supporters.

It is curious perhaps, considering Berwick's aversion to working-class campaign films, that the group's most notorious project was, at least ostensibly, just that: *Nightcleaners* represents the struggles of working-class women contracted to clean London office blocks by night. According to notes compiled by Scott (1975) charting the film's production, it evolved out of a series of social conjunctures, the first of which was former cleaner May Hobbs' petition to the Internationalist Socialists for assistance in unionising night cleaners. From this initial meeting evolved a second, this time with the Dalston branch of the Women's Liberation Workshop which in turn occasioned Hobbs' visit to a communal house in Hackney, where she enrolled leafleteers from both groups in a recruitment drive aimed at encouraging cleaners to join the Transport and General Workers Union. Living at this house at the time was the feminist organiser-turned-historian Sheila Rowbotham and Karlin, who subsequently met with Hobbs and her husband Chris to discuss producing *Nightcleaners*.

Filming began the following month when Karlin, Scott and Trevelyan borrowed a 16mm camera from Mordaunt to document a strike organised by Hobbs at the Sanctuary House in London's Victoria district, where cleaners were protesting the dismissal of two women colleagues. A year later, under pressure from the Women's workshop, Kelly joined the group, and filming continued until August 1972. By all accounts, *Nightcleaners* was shot relatively conventionally: lightweight cameras were deployed to document cleaners at work, meetings, and protests, and participants were interviewed about their daily lives and struggles. Only at post-production did proceedings become more complicated for, rather than persisting in the style of *cinéma vérité* (maintained only in sequences directly representing the cleaners' monotonous work), Berwick instead radically manipulated footage garnered over the last two years. The result is thoroughly avant-garde: still, superimposed, and suspended camera shots are interspersed with blank frames whilst isolated scenes, most notoriously that of a black leader, reoccur throughout the film's 90-minute duration. This visual portrait of the cleaner's quotidian routines and determined resistance is complemented by a polyvocal soundtrack composed of the jarring voices of cleaners, filmmakers, union leaders and WLM leafleteers, intermixed with occasional bursts of stark silence.

Looking back at her involvement as a feminist activist in the night cleaners' campaign, Rowbotham notes how Berwick's film 'revealed, often painfully, the difficulties of organising and the gap between desire and reality' through laying bare the 'effort' that 'communicat[ing] across the gulf of class and political aspiration' requires (2008:15). Shortly before his death in 1999, Karlin, the figure most involved

in editing *Nightcleaners*, made a similar observation: he pronounced it to be about ‘distance’ (1999: 5). Distance structures the film’s form, shaping breaches between the silence and clamour of its soundtrack and the apertures amidst the blank frames and rich moving images juxtaposed onscreen. These aesthetic distances collide with those palpable in *Nightcleaners*’ narrative foci: ruptures erupt amid the middle-class filmmakers and their working-class subjects; chasms surface amongst the women campaigning for liberation and exhausted cleaners, whilst corporation bosses and contracted labourers scarcely interact with one another at all. Post-production editing intensifies these narrative distances. In one frame, for example, a middle-class woman complains of society’s oppressive gender norms, her vocal lament set against a grainy black-and-white image of an anguished worker, the instability of the image mimicking the precariousness of the cleaner’s position whilst its saturated monochrome scheme—draining the affect from the image—parallels her exhaustion. Form thus mirrors content in an archetypical avant-garde formula. Yet, more than this, the distances punctuating *Nightcleaners* compel the spectator to fill them with their own interpretations of what they bear witness to. Thus, the questions posed at the opening of this article on class dialectics find profound prescience.

Berwick’s insistence on their audience’s engagement with—or resistance to—the medium of film fortified the group’s heralded status in the history of the cinematic avant-garde. First exhibited in 1975 at the Cambridge Women’s Film Group, *Nightcleaners* was screened again that year at Edinburgh Film Festival’s ‘Brecht and Cinema/Film and Politics’ event where Willemen and Johnston presented the paper ‘Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on *Nightcleaners*)’ (1975), subsequently published in *Screen* that Winter. Willemen and Johnston recommended that political filmmakers not only incorporate Brechtian models of collective production—as we have already seen Berwick and Amber do—but that they also recalibrate the role of their audiences according to Brechtian formulations: casting the spectator as a cogent agent capable of constructing intellectual—rather than purely emotional—responses to what unfolds onscreen. To demonstrate how this might be accomplished, the pair invoked *Nightcleaners* which, according to Willemen and Johnston (1975), departed from previous, essentially unsuccessful, Realist endeavours through featuring complex formal devices—the use of narrative dislocations, interspersal of blank frames and juxtapositions between sound and image and so on—to render the instability of the mediated image transparent. Thus, rather than claiming to offer a window into the world as if known, Berwick instead emphasised the artifice of diegetic processes to encourage, as per Brecht’s recommendations, audiences to detach passionately from the medium of film itself so that they might engage not only with the specific labour

struggles of the night cleaners it represents, but also, more broadly, in the struggles of (political) representation itself. Appraised since for its anti-illusionism, *Nightcleaners* was positioned hence as a corrective to the ‘simplistic’ work of prominent collectives preceding Berwick. With regard to the present investigation, however, this approach throws up two problematics.

First, constructing a narrative of succession whereby early iterations of so-called ‘simplistic’ documentaries are superseded by later, allegedly more sophisticated avant-garde projects, implies a bifurcation in the history of independent cinema that is hardly there. The success, after all, of *Nightcleaners*, so often, and rightly, championed as a trailblazer of the avant-garde, derives from Berwick’s incorporation of different aesthetic practices including that of Direct Cinema, a tradition pejoratively associated with the purportedly unsophisticated collectives Willemen and Johnston admonish. Indeed, members of these disparaged collectives frequently lodge complaints along analogous justifications. For example, original member of Cinema Action, Steve Sprung, observes the existence of what he describes as a

... well-rehearsed mantra that there were two types of films: the political agitational, and, in contrast, the films from more concerned with film form, those which provoked thought. The assumption was that agitational films did not experiment with form or provoke new ideas. It’s a theoretical construct that’s too simplistic... Into this, on the clearly self-identifying political side, you can add the equally well-rehearsed realism/ anti-realism debate and you get another theoretical axis that also tends towards oversimplification (Clayton and L. Mulvey, 2017: 63).

Despite being drawn in the 1970s, the ‘simplistic’ constructs that Sprung delineates have remained, at least until the last few years, more or less intact in contemporary film criticism, as the opening presentation at the inaugural conference of the Radical Film Network (RFN) in Birmingham in 2015 demonstrates. Here, in the context of acknowledging the IFA’s contemporary resonances, the conference’s organiser, Steve Presence, either by accident or design, reinstated taxonomies installed by scholars including Willemen and Johnston almost half a century ago. More precisely, Presence—who, I must stress, is a compelling advocate of the oft-overlooked agitational film—notes that the ‘challenge’ faced by the RFN of incorporating forcefully oppositional films alongside more formally experimental productions had already been encountered by IFA which, he states, likewise ‘[brought] together the two Avant-gardes—political and aesthetic—in constructive criticism and (sometimes heated!) debate’ (Presence, 2015: 6).

Yet, as Sprung's objections to the dichotomies that scaffold film theory make clear, filmmakers working in the independent sector have refuted the division between the two ostensibly distinct traditions of avant-garde film that Presence delineates ever since the binary was established. Staying with the example of Cinema Action, Sprung, for instance, objects to Wollen and Johnson's characterisation of Amber's practice as dependent on conventions perceived as axiomatic of so-called illusionary realism including, for example, 'Cinema verité' techniques...[and] agit-prop' tactics (Clayton and L. Mulvey, 2017: 63). In particular, the filmmaker takes issue with Johnson's assessment of the kinds of discussions that Cinema Action's films provoke which, she argues, are rooted in 'the political issues raised by the films rather than the film themselves', outlining in this context, that her own position contradistinctively moves 'towards a situation in which film itself is seen as a political issue' (Johnson, 1979: 6). Probing the robustness of Johnson's 'concrete research', Sprung not only refutes Johnson's grasp of Cinema Action's reception but also connects the group's formal approaches to their political objectives (2017: 63). Explicitly, he explains that Cinema Action's 'concerns' emerge out of a need to 'engage at the point of struggle, in a *thinking* [my emphasis] way, among workers who were themselves not only acting but also reflecting within a context of struggle' (63). In such circumstances, he emphasises, 'at some points a talking head might be the most radical and significant thing to show', inquiring thus, whether 'a film theorist' is 'trained, interested or even able to take account of this?' (63).

Sprung's negation of the academic tendency to categorise, and ultimately judge, oppositional films based solely on the degree to which the formal properties of a particular production adhere to a set of theoretically proscribed conventions is far from anomalous. On the contrary, his views resonate with the parallel perspectives of numerous other filmmakers active during the period under discussion. These include, for example, the founding members of Platform Films (Platform) which, established in 1982, remains active today. Like the original members of both Amber and Cinema Action, Platform's members self-identify, as Geoff Bell explains in an interview with Sylvia Harvey, as 'people who are involved in class politics' and relate their commitment to representing working-class issues to their cinematic priorities (Harvey, 1984). Consequently, Bell elucidates, that Platform mobilises filmmaking primarily 'as a means of getting across ideas which we feel strongly about; to open up a dialogue around issues; to bring these ideas and issues into the public arena' (1982: 37). Correspondingly, instead of 'subscribing' to what Bell perceives as a 'preoccupation with formal experimentation', Platform forged an aesthetic that was 'readily comprehensible to a mass audience' (37). Nevertheless, as Harvey compellingly

asserts, the group's pledge to develop widely accessible films did not prevent them from advancing fresh representational approaches, particularly in relation to 'questions of class and class voice' (1982: 37).

From a critical standpoint, Cinema Action and Platforms Films' innovation of practical techniques for documenting working-class struggles somewhat undermines the efficacy of indexing radical films into two discrete categories. In fact, the groups' explanations regarding the relationship between their political goals and the formal approaches they adopt prompted scholars at the time to question whether the steadfast binary splintering of the two avant-gardes might be surpassed by a more nuanced analytic. So, for example, Harvey's exchange with Platform's members led to her suggestion that:

[I]t may be useful to separate out the issues of difficulty, class experience, class address and experimentation. So that instead of rejecting either 'formal experiment' or 'conventional form' in general, we ask specifically and, in each case, whether the experimental or conventional forms adopted facilitate effective communication of the social analysis intended by the film (1982: 37).

Harvey's notion of analysing films that have a social purpose based on a contextually specific criteria leads us neatly onto the second issue with Willemsen and Johnston's account insofar as the pair's assessment analysis of *Nightcleaners* glosses over the glaring reality that much of what makes Berwick's production formally innovative simultaneously renders it impractical as a political campaign film. Explicitly, five years in the making, *Nightcleaners* was completed two years after the labour campaign itself ended and, when it was released, ran at 90 minutes in length: hardly a pithy piece of propaganda. Furthermore, Berwick's aim of provoking critical contemplation vis-à-vis formal complexity frequently bewildered rather than politically agitated audiences invested in the labour movement. Consequently, *Nightcleaners* was met by manifold hostilities: according to Rowbotham, the film's lengthy duration, 'many-layered' structure and 'far from celebratory' message 'exasperated' Hobbs, whilst campaign leaders grew frustrated with drawn-out editing processes; members of the women's movement, antagonised by its failure to serve their activist agendas, even organised a petition against it (Rowbotham, 2008: 15). In Karlin's words, 'Demands were being made of the film to service the image people had of themselves and to that (labour) struggle' (1980: 22). Rather than navigate these demands, however, Berwick consciously evaded them through 'not asking the cleaners about the kind of film they wished to be made', for doing so would, in Karlin's view, have rendered the project 'an impossible task' (128).

Scott embellishes on the tensions between the film's participants in his diary, detailing discussions that occurred over a series of 1972 meetings between the night cleaners, the women's leafleting collective and Berwick. In the first of these meetings the cleaners reportedly raised concerns 'that the film had gone on too long and was of no use to the cleaners unless it was finished in the immediate future' (1972: 111). A subsequent meeting a few days later addressed the cleaners' misgivings. In attendance were the women leafleteers and Berwick, but not the cleaners themselves who were excluded, partly, it seems, because Karlin felt they 'would not understand' discussions on the 'contradictions between arguments of film aesthetics' (Scott, 1972: 113). This ancillary meeting did not go well. For, although Trevelyan considered producing a film more functional to the cleaners' requirements, Karlin apparently rebuffed this possibility, emphasising 'the contradiction between campaign film and Berwick Street making the film' and protesting the 'unarticulated moralism/censorship of us (Berwick Street)' (112). At one point, Karlin even threatened to resign; he did not, though, instead attributing the conflict to a 'Misunderstanding between the cleaners' collective and Berwick Street film group, i.e., they expect a campaign film' and he proceeded on this basis with his original vision (Scott, 1972: 113). Despite Karlin's objections, a shorter two-minute campaign film was eventually produced to placate the cleaners and women's leafleting group, if only to serve as an after-thought to the main act.

Generous appraisals of Berwick's production methods might gesture towards the crudity of Scott's terse notes which, after all, were not produced with a public in mind or perhaps to the fact that Berwick did ultimately produce a short campaign film. Sceptics, however, are more likely to question the integrity of Berwick's relationship with the cleaners, on the justification that the latter (a group of working-class women) evidently trusted the former (a collective of men, some privately educated) to represent their very real struggles under the impression that doing so would ultimately improve their working conditions. The present paper however is not the place for adjudication. Instead, what is to be advanced is much simpler: the success of *Nightcleaners*, by Karlin's own admission, depended upon the group bypassing the demands of the collective's working-class subjects.

Crucially, as the first section of this paper is at pains to explicate, Amber's working-class allegiances and concomitant sociopolitical exigencies preclude the possibility of the group simply circumventing the interests of the working-class affiliates they represent, a dynamic neatly evidenced by circumstances surrounding the production of one of their earliest films, *High Row*. Documenting a community of workers at a drift mine near Alston in Cumbria, *High Row* depicts the gruelling arduousness of labour — men drill for coal, haul wagons, fix precarious rail tracks but derive gratification from

their work. The film's ostensible celebration of dangerous labour conditions, combined with its pastoral focus, provoked justifiable criticism, with one member of the BFI's production board, Peter Sainsbury, criticising *High Row* for being 'totally romantic' (Dickinson, 1999: 254). Reproaches like Sainsbury's however do not adequately account for—or acknowledge the validity of—Amber's production methodologies or, more precisely, the collective's consultation of the miners who, upon being presented with the original script of *High Row*, objected to their dour representation, appealing for a more positive image of themselves to be presented. Indeed, as Chambers asserts, knowledge of the miner's intervention rather contests scholars' uncompromising indictments of *High Row* since 'it would seem a highly troubling epistemic imposition to foist upon a working-class community an external conception of their own lives' (2017: 179).

The question that follows is does Amber's allegiances to the working people they represent necessarily impede their production of avant-garde work? The collective's first film, *All You Need is Dynamite* (1968), would suggest not. Produced while Amber's original members were still enrolled at Regent Street Polytechnic, *Dynamite* evolved directly out of the fledgling group's exposure to radical discourse generated at the 1967 Dialectic Liberation Conference. Here, speakers including Stokely Carmichael, Allen Ginsberg and R.D. Laing, united in an effort to broaden the discipline of Psychiatry by encompassing ostensibly divergent methodologies imported from parallel fields, principally from Sociology and Philosophy.

Transmuting the 'dialectical' approach of the conference into their filmmaking practice, Amber marshal a diverse range of superficially conflicting source materials. Violent imagery, seized from television programmes, clashes with shots of students' anti-Vietnam War protests in Grosvenor Square. Representations of archetypal working-class leisure spaces, including bingo-halls and football stadiums, juxtapose with televisual advertisements which in turn yield to an arresting newsreel of South Vietnamese general Nguyễn Ngọc Loan's brutal execution of a Viet Cong prisoner in Saigon. All the while an abrasive soundtrack, consisting of popular songs by commercial bands such as The Beatles, accompanies the jarring onscreen visuals. Rather than suturing the spectator into the film *vis-à-vis* 'invisible' editing devices, *Dynamite* is structured discontinuously, with individual motifs such as an opening and closing lift door repeating to compel the spectator to appreciate the construction of the mediated text. Amber's thesis—that the complacency of British society, dehumanised by consumerist popular culture, ultimately propagates global violence—is thus not stated explicitly but rather given striking visual form. Correspondingly, recent commentators hail the group's debut as formally generative, with Leggott, for example, positioning

Amber's aesthetic strategies and 'overt theorising' as 'closer in spirit to the kind of countercultural cinema typified by Jean Luc Godard and Jean Marie Straub/ Daniele Huillet than [to] the British Documentary Movement' (2020:108), whilst Chambers embraces *Dynamite* as a 'bracingly avant-garde piece of agit-prop that ticked all the boxes of Willemen's prescribed "Brechtian" deconstructivity (anti) diegesis' (2017: 171).

Whilst both scholars reappraise Amber's avant-garde credentials, they also perceive the group's first film, produced as it was before the collective was formally inaugurated, as anomalous. Leggott finds that 'the 'dialectical' *Dynamite* 'may very much seem like a path not taken for Amber' (2020: 56), whilst Chambers views it as testament to Amber's capacity to work in the avant-left's favoured "'anti-illusionist" mode', regarding 'Amber's subsequent adoption of documentary classicism ... [as] highly intriguing' (2017 :171). Yet, while it is true that Amber would never again so radically depart from the purportedly conservative practices of Documentary Realism, it is also the case, I contend, that it would be a mistake to dismiss the group's nascent avant-garde impulses as inconsistent with their subsequent filmmaking endeavours. It is this contention that the remainder of this article strives to prove by considering, in the first instance, the implications of Chambers' recent survey of productions belonging to Amber's arguably most conventional series *The Tyne Documentaries* (so-called because they record Tyneside's deteriorating industries) on the present inquiry. My rationale for invoking Chambers's study is twofold. First, out of all Amber's productions, the Tyne series is that which has been subjected to the most extensive, and unjustified criticism. Second, in the context of repudiating the series' longstanding association with salvage ethnography Chambers, albeit briefly, registers that the films it features exhibit formal tendencies which, I suggest, at the very least gesture towards the avant-garde and correspondingly warrant further investigation.

Closer analysis of *Glassworks* (1977) illuminates. Shot in a factory in Lemington, *Glassworks* documents the intricate industrial processes involved in manufacturing handmade glass. As with the series' other films, it was produced with the academic support of industrial archaeologist Stafford Linsley who, based at Newcastle University, lionised cinema's capacity for preserving historically significant labour practices at a point when increased mechanisation threatened their extinction. Consequently, contemporary commentators such as Darren Newbury (2013) reasonably index the Tyne series and Amber's filmmaking more broadly, to 'salvage' paradigms which have been justly condemned by cultural historians such as James Clifford, who is suspicious of 'the mode of scientific and moral authority associated with salvage, or redemptive ethnography' (1986: 113).

As Chambers compellingly observes, however, negative associations between the Tyne documentaries and salvage ethnography prove misleading since here, as elsewhere, Amber, rather than recapitulating fraught practices associated with ethnographic inquiries, innovates fresh approaches that repudiate the tradition's problematic aspects. For example, rather than engaging a 'voice of God' narration to apprise non-specialist audiences of the complex industrial procedures exhibited onscreen (as is the expectation of films belonging to the Griersonian school), the collective 'give[s] people [their subjects] the space to be themselves', determining that doing so affords them 'dignity' (Roberts, 2007). Discontinuous editing devices operate to parallel effect: jump cuts juxtapose frames of the glassmakers at work in a fiery furnace room with images of a cooling pot positioned in a contrastingly crisply lit blue loft, suspending the flow of images onscreen to safeguard the labourers from the casual spectator's quasi-touristic gaze.

Relating the combination of these representational systems to Amber's refusal to 'create a privileged, penetrative access to interior aspects of the working-class-experience', Chambers mounts a persuasive case for retrospectively appreciating the group's 'localised, embedded and multivocal approach' as impelled by two related goals (2017: 176, 180). First, a mission to attain 'some form of record or history for working-class experience that—without institutional support, funding or priority—was quite demonstrably lost' and second, a commitment to ensuring the integrity of the labourers they depict (179). Crucially, however, in the context of examining Amber's concern for advancing the interests of working-class communities he also touches upon the experiences of the group's spectators insofar as acknowledging that Amber's tactics of 'deny[ing] easy audience purchase' resonate with 'Brecht-inspired alienation techniques' (176). This latter assertion merits further investigation since, I suggest, shifting analytic focus onto Amber's audiences' viewing experiences affords a better understanding of the group's anti-illusionary approaches. Indeed, interpreting the remove that Amber installs between the casual spectator and their working-class subjects along such lines not only provides, as we shall see, something of a heuristic framework for regarding the group's subsequent projects, but also has several theoretical implications that bear directly on the present inquiry. First, as Chambers suggests, more than just shielding the labourers from the spectator's voyeurism, Amber's discontinuous editing techniques simultaneously expose the artifice of diegetic mechanisms, thereby disabusing audiences of the fallacy that they might access, by way of mediated processes, a window into working-class life. Likewise, the group's conjuring of anonymous workers who consistently converse in a local register not only upholds the labourers' dignity by obfuscating what Chambers characterises as the

casual interloper's quasi-touristic perspective of industrial practices, but concurrently frustrates the viewer's faculties for relating to the working-class people Amber depict. According to my reading then, the spectator, divested of the capacity to emotionally identify with Amber's cinematic subjects, is impelled into a more critical position from where, much like Berwick's audiences, they might interrogate the authenticity of representational systems that conventional images of the working classes rely on.

Sceptics might posit that the subtleties of Amber's avant-garde impulses in *Glassworks* render them imperceptible, but the same critique can surely not be levelled at the group's later work *T Dan Smith A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to Utopia* (1986) which represents one of several experimental profiles of public figures made by the group. For readers unfamiliar with the titular figure, Smith, a self-proclaimed Trotskyite born into the working classes, served as chairman of the Newcastle Labour Party from 1953 to 1965 and Leader of Newcastle City Council from 1960 to 1965, before being convicted of corruption in 1974, found guilty of accepting bribes from the architect John Poulson in exchange for civic building contracts.

Described by Owen Hatherley as the 'missing link between Marxism and Mandelsonism' and the 'ultimate political curate's egg: fascinating and charismatic ... a corrupt mandarin who intended to create a decentralized socialist Britain' (2010: 117), Smith was a natural candidate for Amber's investigations, not least because the group were well-acquainted with the effects of his 'slum-clearing' development projects, having documented their impact previously in *Byker* (1983). As a result, Amber spent three years interviewing Smith in prison (where he was incarcerated for six), braiding the material they shot, alongside archival footage and dramatically staged sequences, into a self-reflective meditation on political representation that, structured bilaterally, unfolds in two threads which, although sharing common elements, appear in formal terms strikingly different.

The first thread is documentary about documentary-making. It opens with footage of a shipyard, accompanied by the audio of seagulls and blasting foghorns. As the camera pans through a window frame into a private study, these images yield to those of Martin who, playing a dramatised version of himself, listens to a tape recording of the BBC's *Desert Island Discs*, the theme tune of which (Eric Coates's 'By the Sleepy Lagoon') reverberates throughout the small room before being interrupted by a male monologue. Throughout, Murray organises a box file of material relating to the film, including the graphic designs for its opening credits which, when they transition into a full frame onscreen, mark *T. Dan Smith's* official commencement.

Following this, Murray collaborates with playwright Steve Trafford, who likewise plays a dramatised version of himself to portray Smith's predicament. The pair conduct

archival research, interview Smith and his colleagues and discuss strategies for and obstacles to representing their protagonist's fall from grace. For example, at one point Trafford records a 'voice of God' style narration in a media box whilst Murray riffles through archival reel, sourcing material to complement Trafford's commentary and complaining of the BBC's apparently predictable loss of archival reel. Later, Martin critiques this creative approach, dismissing it on reflection with Trafford as 'Ok, if you like that sort of thing' (Amber, 1987). These editing sequences are shot in long takes in which the camera traces a bank of video monitors assembled across the media studio, shifting focus to each monitor as they alight sequentially. The audio accompanying each monitor, however, frequently lags so that the track associated with the previous screen bleeds, as if mistakenly, into the next. Not only do these scenes serve as a 'meta' strategy for rendering the fallibility of mechanical reproduction processes transparent, but they also envisage a dialectical approach for exhibiting interview footage, with Smith's disparate testimonials—recorded across different temporalities and locations— assembled beside each other as if to enable the spectator to draw their own conclusions from what unfurls onscreen.

To incentivise audience into adopting this prescribed critical position, Amber plays out a storyline illustrating its necessity. Specifically, they expose Murray's empathy with Smith whom he declares in the film's opening scenes not to be a 'crook', later suggesting he might have been 'fitted up' by MI5. These assessments, rather than based on empirical evidence, ostensibly derive from Murray's respect for and affinity with Smith as an, albeit flawed, working-class hero. Indeed, as Leggott observes, Amber 'invites the informed viewer to locate parallels between Smith and Martin as "leader figures"' of 'tight-knit bands of comrades' (2020: 120), whilst Smith's refusal of a role in central government, which he rejects in favour of being, as his biographer puts it, '[a] provincial who would stay at home at make regionalism work' (Foote-Wood, 2010: 53), equivalences Amber's own commitments.

The mainstay of *T Dan Smith's* second thread or, in Martin's words, 'a film within a film' (Foote-Wood 2010: 189), is the schematic drama of the days leading up to the arrest of a fictional, quasi-Smith character dubbed Alan Deal (played by Art Davies). Like the real Smith, Deal serves as a Newcastle council leader embroiled in a corruption scandal involving the fraudulent architect, Jack Cross (played by Dave Hill). Amber's focus on the personal consequences of Deal's downfall, charting his deteriorating relationship with his wife and the phenomenological aspects of being closed in upon by, in Martin's terms, the 'tightening net' of authorities (Foote-Wood 2010: 189).

These dramatic sequences are articulated in a television noir style: the protagonist's performances are melodramatic; the hardboiled dialogue verges on parodic, whilst the

sets are illuminated by chiaroscuro lighting effects. Strikingly, this noir aesthetic also permeates the so-called factual Murray/Trafford thread where the pair is cast as quasi-detective figures who operate illusively by night, seemingly to evade the powers that be. This formal slippage between fact and fiction blurs the epistemological divide between the two modes, implying that the world can never be represented, by diegetic means at least, with unmitigated accuracy. A range of formal techniques, varying in their degree of subtlety, emphasise this anti-diegetic cautionary. Sonically, for example, the unnatural sound of a magnetic tape loop repeats in the film's opening scenes, with an audible 'tick' resounding as the cut and spliced end of the loop is played out through the recorder, alerting the spectator to the artifice of its construction. Similarly, Amber, much like Berwick, deploys internal framing shots to emphasise the camera's restricted focus and attendant inability to capture reality fully.

Overall, then, rather than operating as a dramatic biopic, *T. Dan Smith* instead functions as a broader mediation on political representation on two levels. First, in terms of narrative, Amber represents Smith as a working-class figure corrupted by party politics in a thesis that implicitly critiques 'democratic' power structures and explicitly expounds the fallibility of filmmaking and editing processes. Second, on an aesthetic level, Amber self-reflectively deconstructs, by way of framing shots, the fusion of fact and fiction and so the struggle of (political) representation itself. Understood as such, the group satisfies what Willemsen and Johnson identify in their Brecht paper as 'one of the most essential aspects of political film-making' since they deter the spectator, from being swept up 'along a stream of emotionality' and encourage them instead to 'construct a critical reading of the text as it unfolds' (Willemsen and Johnson, 1975: 107).

If the first part of this article focused on the variances between Amber and Berwick's attitudes towards collective practice and socially embedded filmmaking, then this second part, by contrast, has foregrounded similarities between the formal strategies each deploy. In particular, it has explored the parallel approaches each group mobilises to encourage audiences to passionately detach from the cinematic text through attending to the notion of critical distance. This comparison has yielded noteworthy results, for it has become apparent that Amber's class-based allegiances did not inhibit their capacity for formal experimentation. On the contrary, the significance the group attach to the authenticity of their relationships with working-class communities variously impelled their innovation of Brechtian style schematic systems akin to those featured in *Nightcleaners*. For example, the remove that Amber installs between the casual spectator and working-class labourers in *Glassworks* incentivises audiences into adopting a critical rather than emotional spectatorial position, whilst at the same time ensuring their subjects' dignity by inhibiting the viewer's voyeuristic pleasures.

This is not to suggest that Amber and Berwick's manifestly distinct projects ought to be critically yoked but rather to cast doubt on theoretical taxonomies that, in keeping them irrevocably apart, obstruct more balanced assessments of the methodologies each group takes.

Critical Conclusions: Towards a Theory of Inclusion

To conclude, in this article I gesture back, from the privileged vantage point that scholarly remove affords, to Karlin's notion of 'distance' which, as I hope the reader will recall, the filmmaker articulated as the subject of *Nightcleaners*. It is a declaration that helps to make sense not only of the film's formal and thematic concerns but also, ultimately, of its success: *Nightcleaners* expounds the political tensions that pervade and ultimately impede leftist movements, laying bare discords between union leaders and workers and exposing the fragility of precarious alliances between working people and middle-class socialist campaigners; all the while, the frictions—latent and fresh—that develop amidst Berwick's members and their subjects are rendered transparent. *Nightcleaners* operates, in short, as a Marxist critique of the destabilising inequalities inbuilt into social formation and political struggles, as well as a self-reflective exposition on the role film plays in perpetuating these ideological hegemonies. Its power derives from Berwick's emphasis on, rather than evasion of, two overlapping dialectics: first, that which exists between political filmmakers and cultural subjects; and second, that which structures the very nature of representational projects.

Amber's filmmaking practice is characterised, quite antithetically, by the group's proximity and affinity to the people they represent, hence their sustained commitment to immersing themselves in regional cultures. The group's propinquity to their working subjects registers in their filmmaking. *Glassmakers*, for example, denies audiences the privileges that a spectatorial remove enables, refusing to supply them with interpretive frameworks vis-à-vis contextualising cinematography or illuminating commentary, thereby obstructing them from assuming the semi-touristic position of voyeur of the working classes. Likewise, even in *T Dan Smith*, Amber express affinity with the duplicitous working-class leader they portray; indeed, it is the group's proximity to, even respect for Smith, that enables them to initiate, much like Berwick, a structural critique of the notion of (political) representation itself—for they also self-reflectively expose the limitations of the documentary mode and precarities of representational politics.

Teleologically put, the representational tensions that shape both Amber and Berwick's filmmaking are not dissimilar. Where the two collectives depart is in their approaches to navigating this tension: Berwick accept and expose the 'distances'

between and amongst themselves and their subjects, which in turn enables the circumvention of the working-class people they represent. Contradistinctively Amber, prioritising the authentic relationship with their working-class affiliates, repudiate these distances, perhaps in part because they are not as profound. Yet, despite these divergent approaches, both groups ostensibly yield comparable results: they locate their politics at the level of form as well of content, innovating avant-garde strategies for critiquing dominant modes of representation to compel their spectators, as per Brecht's recommendations, to passionately detach from the cinematic text and instead critically engage with the medium of film as cogent agents capable of agitating for radical change.

Ultimately, the parallels between the two collectives' outputs not only contest unfavourable critiques of Amber's purportedly 'simplistic' filmmaking but also counter prevailing assumptions that overstate working-class artists' unwavering commitment to a parochial tradition of Realism and, even more broadly, theoretical constructs that impose a rigid demarcation between formally experimental avant-garde projects and realistic endeavours. Succinctly put, the polemic salvos of highly circumscribed theoretical debates impede a more nuanced historical accounting of approaches deployed by cultural producers, such as Amber, whose sociopolitical allegiances to their subjects necessarily structure their representational strategies. Consequently, it seems that only by perforating this divide or, if you will, narrowing the distance between opposing poles of realist/antirealist and agitational/aesthetic positions, might contemporary critics illuminate, in the light of the present, latent histories overlooked by scholars fixated on reductive canons. All this is to say that while a compelling case might be made for reinstating Amber in studies of the avant-garde—and as such within historiographies from which they are presently omitted—an equally persuasive one might also be mounted in support of dismantling reductive canons themselves; installing in their place frameworks that advance contextually specific interpretations of cultural producers which more inclusively evaluate the sociopolitical circumstances and economic exigencies that frame representational projects.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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