

CHAPTER EIGHT

IDENTITY POLICIES:  
REGIONAL FILM POLICY  
AND REGIONAL IDENTITY IN ENGLAND

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**Introduction**

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?” 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...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 basements. But they were great films, with their heart, their soul, their inspiration in the North (Cox 2004, 115).

For Cox the “mainstream” is based in London and complicit with Hollywood in producing a profit driven and vacuous film culture. On the other hand, the English regions—those areas outside London and

particularly the North of England—are associated with a “rebellious, free, and British” tradition of filmmaking (*ibid.*, 116).

Cox’s speech is an enthusiastic example of what might be called the “centre-periphery” tension in British cinema. That is, the status of the English regions as the site of a more indigenous, authentic and socially responsive cinema. This tension has a history in English culture going back to the nineteenth century, if not beyond, that has been mapped by David Russell. For Russell the South and the North of England are fixed in what he calls, drawing on Edward Said, a relationship of “flexible positional superiority.” That is, an unequal relationship in which the North enjoys a degree of agency but always in terms dictated by the South, the centre of English culture. The identity of the North has long been based on its industrial heritage and is associated with a working class or proletarian culture, and an attendant radical political culture. The regions have occupied an ambivalent position as England’s Other but also as a rich cultural repository where alternative or critical cultural strategies might find expression (Russell 2004, 181). Within British cinema the regions have a progressive status: that of a more authentic, democratic and socially responsive cinema, less tarnished than the “centre” by the derogatory connotations of commercialism and mystification associated with the mass culture debate. Cox was tapping a rich but understudied and often implicit tension in the cultural politics of British cinema.

I also begin with this example for the way it draws a link between the cultural politics of the representation of British national identity and film policy—in this case a vitriolic call for the state’s protection of a culturally valuable tradition of indigenous filmmaking that Cox argues is under threat from New Labour commercialism and “Americanisation.” Within Film Studies aesthetics and the cultural politics of cinematic representations are often treated as somehow separate from the altogether “drier” world of Government legislation, funding agendas, administrative structures and economics. Yet film policy—broadly defined here as the institutional network of film financing agencies (both “public” and “private”) and their associated discourses and practices—largely determines the creative space that filmmakers have to work in, setting the agenda of film culture. At the same time policy analysis often suffers through inattention to aesthetic and cultural issues. This chapter is concerned with regional film policy and regional identity. First it charts the development of regional film policy in England from its embryonic form in the 1960s through to the heyday of the regional Film Workshop Movement in the 1980s. Second, it looks at the construction of regional identity that came from within this movement through a case study of the

first and most active regional Film Workshop, Amber Films. Part of the purpose, then, is to use this case study as a lens in which to explore the negotiations between policy and practice that have worked to construct regional identity in British cinema.

## **The Development of Regional Film Policy**

Traditionally the British film industry has followed a trajectory towards centralised market domination, and has been treated by successive governments purely as a business. For example, Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street have argued that historically film policy has been conceived solely within the framework of commercial policy, with production protected and later subsidised as an industry. Significantly, film remained untouched by the post-war precedents for state cultural intervention reflected in the Arts Council and the BBC (Dickinson and Street 1985, 1-4). Within this context regional filmmaking has emerged from institutional structures sited outside the dominant commercial/industrial arrangements of the cinema.

The first development in the expansion of regional institutional apparatus for film production funding was the intervention of the British Film Institute (BFI). Since its inception in the 1930s the BFI has carved out a place for itself that has gone beyond its original educational remit in the face of industry hostility to anything that might resemble the beginnings of creeping nationalisation.<sup>1</sup> From the earliest days of the Experimental Film Fund in the 1950s, up until 1980 when Channel Four began to make a significant impact, the BFI can be considered the centre for film as culture in Britain.

The BFI's regional policies developed slowly from the 1960s. Before that time the Institute was based solely in the capital concentrating on the National Film Archive and exhibition programmes of films considered to be "culturally valuable" at the National Film Theatre (NFT). As early as 1948 The Radcliffe Report recommended that the BFI should devolve its activities to areas outside London but it was not until 1966 that the idea of Regional Film Theatres (RFTs) was put into practice. The first to open was in Nottingham with Bristol and Norwich following shortly afterwards. By 1970 there were thirty-six RFTs across the country operating on either a full- or part-time basis (BFI 1970).

In parallel to this regional film production funding initiatives began to develop, the majority coming in the form of grants from the BFI administered through the Regional Arts Associations (RAAs). 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 (Blanchard and Harvey 1983, 237-39). By 1974 six specialist film officers had been appointed by RAAs, this number rising to nine by 1977 (Harvey 1981, 9).

By the late 1970s an institutional network of regional film funding organisations had been established under the film-culture remit of the BFI, operating outside the production and exhibition structures of the commercial industry. In the 1980s these funds were massively augmented by the film production policies of Channel 4. Under its official remit to “innovate in form and content” Channel 4 embarked on a major policy of investment in British film under a loose cultural remit, spending £90 million in its first twelve years with the BBC and other ITV companies following suit (Hill 1996, 105-6). At the same time the Independent Filmmakers’ Association (IFA, the trade association formed in 1974 to represent the independent film sector’s interests) successfully negotiated the groundbreaking “Workshop Declaration.” An agreement with the Association of Cinematograph, Television and allied Technicians union (ACTT), the Regional Arts Associations England, the BFI and Channel 4, the Declaration gave union membership and recognition for those film groups working outside existing industrial employment arrangements. In particular the Declaration allowed franchised Film Workshops to operate on below union rates of pay and with cross-grade working practices, reflecting the conditions that characterised the regional production sector. This allowed for revenue funding (as opposed to project-led commission funding) of regionally-based groups and for regionally-produced film to be broadcast on television, giving franchised and non-franchised Workshops access to cash and audiences whilst retaining the copyright of work produced and the autonomy that characterised arts-based funding structures. The combined impact of the Declaration and Channel 4’s initial commitment to independently produced film on the regional film production sector cannot be overstated. Funding levels increased: £473,000 in 1982-83, rising to £1 million in 1983-84, or one-third of its independent film production budget and about equal to the BFI’s Production Board budget for the same period (figures taken from Fountain 1982; Aspinall 1984, 73). While the number of officially franchised Workshops remained small (for example, there were twenty-two in 1988) activity across the sector grew substantially. In 1979 there were at least thirty active workshops throughout the country whereas by 1986 there were 105 operating outside London alone.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the Declaration

gave a degree of mainstream recognition to the regional production sector as making a distinct “cultural, social and political contribution...to society” (ACTT 1999, 164). In 1986 Channel 4 assessed the sector’s contribution in the following terms:

With financial backing within a very flexible relation to the channel, workshops, often working intimately within particular communities, have reflected through documentary and fiction, many of the problems, strengths and pleasures and some of the history of working people in contemporary Britain. The workshops and independent producers between them represent a unique, exciting and innovative alternative to conventional ideas of television production (Channel 4 1986).

For many this represented a model for a decentralised, state-funded and representative national cinema organised around cultural, as opposed to commercial, concerns (Harvey 1981, 9-10).

As is clear a division emerges between “commercial” filmmaking and “cultural” filmmaking with regional film policy and practice firmly entrenched within the latter. Although this distinction may be difficult to maintain in any systematic way, it was felt, debated and institutionalised. Regional film policy, therefore, developed within an institutional framework for cultural film and an intellectual framework around ideas of widening representation, and innovation in aesthetics and practices. The Declaration was effectively abandoned at the beginning of the 1990s, but what did this system—unique in Europe—contribute to the construction of regional identities within British cinema?

## **The Identity of Regional Filmmaking**

The regional production 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. Within the Film Workshop Movement 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” (Fitzgerald 1988, 164). There is a literature that has addressed the “artistic” side of Workshop practice, often in relation to European and US avant garde traditions of cultural production (and, it might be added, with a heavy London bias) (O’Pray

1996). Very little has been written, however, about specifically regional documentary practices.

Regional documentary can be put in a tradition that goes back to the Documentary Movement of the 1930s. With its intellectual figurehead, John Grierson, documentary filmmaking during the 1930s was funded by the state through the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit (1927-39) and the General Post Office Film Unit (1933-39), with an ideological mission more in common with Reithian principles concerning the function of mass communication than the commercial cinema. As Andrew Higson has argued, bound to the documentary idea was a particular “social-democratic perspective”:

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. (Higson 1995, 16-17)

Representations of the regions clearly fall into this category: the extension of the iconography of the social. At the same time the documentary tradition 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 nineteenth century (Grierson himself wrote of his desire to “travel dangerously into the jungles of Middlesborough and the Clyde”). As Colls and Dodd argue, the documentary movement constructs working class identity based on a set of bourgeois ideas that lionises the working class male as hero to the point where “‘real’ masculinity is inseparable from representation of the working class” while also working to identify and fix the relationship between the classes within the national community (Colls and Dodd 1985, 24; Grierson quoted the same page).

Higson has analysed the documentary tradition “in terms of a series of breaks and renewals within the discourse of social and moral ‘responsibility,’ and, correspondingly, within the documentary realist aesthetic” (Higson 1986, 82-83). For the regional filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s this discourse was renewed through the encounter with the politics of the New Left, opposition to the Vietnam War, CND, second

wave feminism, the Labour Movement and a broadly socialist critique of capitalism (Harvey 1986, 238). Combined with the concern to develop film practices that engaged with ideas of grass roots access and representation this in turn implied the development of aesthetics that attempted to overcome the limitations of the documentary idea.

The first 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 are being obliged to conform” (Fitzgerald 1988, 169)) was Amber Films. Amber formed in London in 1968 and relocated to Newcastle soon after with the explicit purpose of documenting regional working class communities in the Northeast; 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.” Amber, and particularly Murray Martin (one of their key founders), were active in the ACTT and the IFA, and were crucial in negotiating the Workshop Declaration. They are exemplars of Workshop practice, fully incorporating the egalitarian structure and cross-grade working that were to be enshrined in the Declaration into their formation and eschewing higher budgets or commissioned work, retaining creative control and copyright. As such all their films are ascribed collective authorship and made through a process of collaboration. For Martin this marks a key difference between Amber’s approach and 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 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. (Martin 2001, 162-63)

During the 1970s Amber made a series of short documentary films recording traditional industrial processes: *Launch* (1973, about shipbuilding), *Bowes Line* (1975, the operation of a coal wagon railway), *Last Shift* (1976, a brick works) and *Glass Works* (1977, traditional glass blowing). The films are stylistically unobtrusive and distanced; social documents recording part of the industrial heritage of the Northeast. For example *Launch* shows the construction of an oil tanker in a builder’s yard at the end of a street. The film is a series of twenty-second long (the film was shot using a wind-up Bolex 16-mm camera) wide-angle composition shots animated by the movement of heavy machinery and men at work, and finishing with the local community coming together to watch Princess

Margaret christen the launch and a stunning, extended sequence of the view of the completed ship moving out towards the sea from between the terraced houses. Similarly, *Glassworks* silently documents glass blowers employing traditional, pre-mechanisation methods. The film captures the carefully choreographed movement of the workers while close-up shots of the men's hands show the attention to detail and skill of the job.

Taken together the 1970s documentaries present a specific construction of regional working class identity based on iconic markers of industrialism: physicality, craftsmanship, collectivity and masculinity. The films are free from commentary, mediation or characterisation with the subjects functioning as roles integrated with the processes as spectacle, rendered abstract. This deliberate refusal to editorialise leaves their meanings relatively open, emphasising the aesthetic qualities of the images. In this way they can be viewed as celebrations or romanticisations of regional identity based on maleness and industry that is fetishised through an art aesthetic. However, if they fall squarely within the documentary tradition of the male worker as hero, for Martin documenting working class identity in this way also has a political imperative *for* the working class:

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. (Neil Young 2001, 68)

For Amber documentary practice is part of an ideological commitment to communicating from and with the communities which form their subjects. This commitment led to the development of filmmaking practices that sought to reflect the identity of regional working class communities in more responsive ways.

The increased funds made available from the beginning of the 1980s for regional filmmaking allowed the group to expand their activities into more ambitious projects. At the same time their operational and ideological model moved beyond straightforward documentation towards film practices that actively involved their subjects in the filmmaking process, and to drama and feature films that probe the boundaries between

documentary and fiction. The decision to move into fictionalised reconstruction was an attempt to overcome some of the problems of observational documentary when representing a community; to produce a more accurate documentation of the region. As Amber member Pat McCarthy comments:

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. (Fitzgerald 1988, 164)

*Seacoal* (1985), Amber's first feature film, made for Channel 4 under the Declaration, is a good example. The film was the result of two years of living and working with the seacoaling community of Lynemouth that make their living collecting waste coal that has been washed ashore. The fictional drama was constructed through a combination of documentary footage, improvised sketches and dramatic reconstructions by both actors and local people. Betty (Amber Styles) and her daughter escape a violent relationship to live in a caravan with Ray (Ray Stubbs), a seacoaler. The film portrays a harsh and precarious existence, threatened by the infringements of local authorities and business interests but with a community spirit that enables Betty to rise above her position as victim and seize some control over her future. The film continues Amber's interest in charting a traditional and disappearing culture in the face of industrial change in the region while giving a voice to the emotional lives of a marginalised and usually invisible regional community. Again, industry is central to the identity of the region, shown in the bleak and dramatic industrial landscape. In this film, however, the industrial backdrop is portrayed as alienating and hostile in comparison to the camaraderie of the community that eke out an existence on its margins.

This tension between change and tradition, and its effect on specific local communities, is something that is explored in most of Amber's subsequent work. If regional planners in the 1980s and 1990s sought to erase and disavow the Northeast's industrial heritage then for Amber it is still a key symbol of its identity. However, Amber's work of the 1980s displays a whole series of ambivalent relationships between regional communities, industrial history, social change and internal difference. Furthermore, *Seacoal* marks the start of a repeated focus on gender relationships and constructions of working class gendered identities that are marked as often by conflict as solidarity. They have argued that their practice "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” (Amber Collective 2005, 19). Amber’s working practices, then, directly contribute to a more complex construction of regional identity: a genuine attempt to overcome some of the limitations of the documentary idea. How successful this attempt is remains open to debate, and ultimately it may be impossible to fully reconcile the contradictions between documentary practices, aestheticism and charges of romanticism. That said, films like *Seacoal* accept and even explore this problem through experiments with the documentary form which dramatise the encounter of the artist with the documentary subject. Amber’s body of work is a sophisticated and varied but also coherent exploration of regional identity and the nature of cinematic representation.

## Conclusion

Nicholas Redfern has argued that since 1997 British film policy has been “territorialised” and that “it is important that film scholars, who have focussed their attention on the British cinema at the transnational and national levels, recognise the increasing significance of the regional in the British film industry since 2000.” For Redfern, “The regional has emerged as a significant issue in England for the first time in the history of British cinema” (Redfern 2005, 63). Clearly this point requires some qualification. The regional devolution of responsibility for film funding and production under the New Labour government was largely informed by the development of regional film policy and practice that this chapter has outlined. However, the territorialisation of film policy has been accompanied by the breaking of the institutional and ideological links with the model for regional filmmaking that was developed in the regional Workshop Movement and under the film culture remit of the BFI and Channel 4. Arguably this has resulted in is the virtual disappearance of an explicit intellectual or theoretical engagement with ideas of regional identity in regional production sectors, issues that were at the forefront of debates in policy and practice in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time distinctly regional production practices and aesthetics were given a space to develop that in turn allowed the exploration of regional identities and strategies of representation which, in the case of Amber Films at least, resulted in an impressive body of work that at once represents a continuation of the documentary tradition and an encounter with some of its more monolithic tendencies. While Amber are exemplars of Workshop practice, they are also, in a sense, unique: the only regional Workshop to survive beyond the 1990s and the re-imposition of traditional, project-led funding and production arrangements in the English regions. However, the

history of the attempt to construct a small-scale, state funded regional cinema is particularly relevant today with decentralisation and globalisation prompting a shake-up in the established place of the centre and the periphery in Britain and beyond.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Christophe Dupin's discussion of the development of the BFI's activities (2003).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of some of the problems in assessing the size of the sector, see Dickinson 1999, 68-69. Figures are taken from here and Marris 1986, 51-76.