The ‘Cultural Burden’: Regional Film Policy and Practice in England

Abstract

The English regions have carried a distinct ‘cultural burden’ within British film culture: the site of a *more* indigenous, socially responsive and culturally relevant cinematic tradition. The continuity of these ideas in the discursive construction of regional filmmaking in England is striking and can be mapped onto the political economy of the development of regional film policy and practice. But how can the notion of cinema as a cultural practice be understood under the changing contexts of the territorialisation and commercialisation of film production in Britain?

This paper looks at the development of film policy and practice in the English regions to assess this debate. It asks: how has the ‘territorialisation’ of film policy and funding affected regional modes of film production? And further, how is film as a cultural practice manifest in contemporary regional film production?

The paper is divided into two sections. The first outlines the development of regional film policy and practice from the 1970s paying particular attention to the model for regional filmmaking that emerged from the film workshop movement and the changes in regional film policy instituted by the New Labour government since 1997. After this broad historical framework has been established the second section analyses regional film policy and practice through a case study of the East Midlands region.

It is argued that while ideas concerning cinema as a cultural practice are still present at a rhetorical level, commercial interests have become ascendant in regional film funding policy, restricting the space for creative autonomy that once defined regional production sectors.

Biography

Jack Newsinger is completing a PhD Thesis at the University of Nottingham. His research interests lie in post-War British independent film: specifically film policy; filmmaking practice; documentary and the representation of the English regions.

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Film Policy in Britain shares a dilemma in common with that for most other national cinemas – the commerce-culture relationship. There is always a struggle between the desire to build a viable sector of the economy that provides employment, foreign exchange and multiplier effects; and the desire for a representative and local cinema that reflects seriously upon society through drama. (Miller 2001: 44)

The English regions have carried a distinct 'cultural burden' within British film culture: the site of a *more* indigenous, socially responsive and culturally relevant cinematic tradition than the 'mainstream', which has always been located in the 'centre'. This 'burden' has a long cultural history - figured, for example, in the 'into unknown England' writing of the nineteenth century, some of the films of the British Documentary Movement formed in the 1930s, and the regional focus of the 'British New Wave' – and has been redefined as ideas of 'film as culture' and the place of the regions in the cultural geography of the country have changed. Nevertheless it can be mapped onto the political economy of the development of regionally-based film production sectors from the 1960s. It was not until the late 1960s that regionally-based film production sectors began to develop in England, and within them distinctly regional modes of filmmaking practice that articulated cultural rather than commercial aspirations for British cinema. Within the tension between commerce and culture that has been the recurrent feature of British film policy debate the English regions have been firmly aligned with film as culture.

Nicholas Redfern has argued that British film policy has undergone a process of 'territorialisation' since 1997 and that 'the regional is increasingly seen as the best scale at which to formalise film policy, the institutional infrastructure, and the discourses surrounding the cinema', making the

traditional centre-periphery model of the film industry redundant (Redfern 2005: 61). This suggests a new relationship between the 'centre' and the regions in British film culture, and a new significance for regional film production sectors. At the same time this process has been widely criticised for the perceived commercialisation of regional film policy and practice: the transformation of regional film production sectors from sites of small-scale but culturally orientated filmmaking practices to regional media economies that have adopted the values and practices of the 'mainstream' film and television industries (for example Harvey and Dickinson 2003). This paper looks at the development of film policy and practice in the English regions to assess this debate. It asks: how has the 'territorialisation' of film policy and funding affected regional modes of film production? And further, how is film as a cultural practice manifest in contemporary regional film production?

The paper is divided into two sections. The first outlines the development of regional film policy and practice from the 1970s, paying particular attention to the model for regional filmmaking that emerged from the film workshop sector, and its eventual incorporation into a devolved national framework for film production under the New Labour government since 1997. After this broad historical trajectory has been established the second section goes into more detail through an analysis of contemporary film policy and practice in the East Midlands region.

The relationship of film policy to film practice – that between institutional determinants and creative agency – should be characterised as a tension that is to a certain degree dialectical. While the economics of regional film production (the availability of equipment and facilities, the availability of

production funding and the ideological position of the organisations that administer it, etc.) place firm limits on the size, scope and character of production activity, at certain times grass roots groups have been able to influence, as well as being influenced by, institutions, subject to external factors. This paper is concerned with how this tension has changed in regional film sectors.

The Development of Regional Film Policy and Practice

The particular structure of regional film sectors in England has its origins in the Regional Film Society movement of the 1950s and the establishment of the Regional Film Theatres (RFTs) by the British Film Institute (BFI) in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 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 RFTs was put into practice. By 1970 there were thirty six RFTs across the country operating on either a full or part-time basis and showing programmes of films partly drawn from the European and art-house programmes of the National Film Theatre and partly in response to local demand (BFI 1970). However, the significance of the RFTs goes beyond regional film exhibition. They provided a regional stake and voice within the structure of the BFI. The annual Conference for Regional Film Theatres, started in 1979 as a way for the BFI to communicate with the RFTs and the Regional Arts Associations (RAAs), provided a forum where issues specific to the regions could be advanced (BFI 1981). The RFTs were established in partnership with existing film societies and by enthusiasts and supporters, and their activities reflected the strength and character of their local film culture.

Increasingly money made available was put to use beyond exhibition to fund other areas of film activity such as libraries, resource centres, and later, production workshops (Christie 1981: 7). At a local level the RFTs could become a centre for the filmmaking community and a space where independent film could be seen and debated, ideas shared and collaborations formed. While this 'pre-history' contained the tensions that existed in the BFI more generally between an effectively conservative ideology of the appreciation of film aesthetics and a growing concern with the social function of cinema, the crucial point is that the basis for regional film production in England was formed under the publicly funded film cultural remit of the BFI.

The development of regional film production activity began in the late 1960s as part of the film workshop movement. While the history of the regional film workshop movement has not received specific detailed academic attention it has been covered in relation to the 'British independent cinema movement' or 'independent sector'. In Margaret Dickinson's account the origins of the movement lie in London as a part of the general ambiance of leftist politics of the 1960s and particularly the politics of the New Left. Small film collectives sought to use film as a tool for cultural struggle as part of wider political struggles; part of a climate that increasingly placed emphasis on issues of culture and ideology within strategies for social change (Dickinson 1999: 35-41).

The first regionally-based film workshop to be established was Amber Films, formed in 1968 in Newcastle. Other notable groups include the Sheffield Film Co-op, formed in 1973 by filmmakers involved in the Women's Movement, Leeds Animation Workshop, 1978, Trade Films Workshop, formed in

Gateshead in 1979, and Birmingham Film and Video Workshop, 1981. It is difficult to fully gauge the number and levels of activity of regionally based groups and individuals in this period: many of the smaller and less active groups and individuals have left little trace. However, numbers certainly increased as the 1970s wore on and accelerated into the 1980s as funding structures expanded and technology became more affordable. With the exception of Bristol, activity was concentrated in urban centres north of London, particularly Birmingham, Nottingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and Newcastle. In 1986 a report prepared for the BFI lists 105 active regional film workshops, more than twice the number based in London with the majority located in these cities (Marris 1986: 51-76). In 1981 a directory of independent film from the North East listed 125 films made by over thirty different groups and individuals in that area alone (York Film 1981: 66-68. See also Dickinson 1999: 68-69). While the North East was particularly developed, if this level of activity were of comparable scale in other regions it would suggest a vibrant regional 'under-belly' of filmmaking developing massively in a relatively short space of time.

Julian Petley describes the features of the film workshop movement:

Although in many respects remarkably heterogeneous, these groups did nevertheless exhibit certain common characteristics: for example, the desire to work outside the political, aesthetic and economic constraints of the mainstream film and television industries; the attempt to establish an ongoing working base, rather than simply being a loose grouping of free-lance individuals; the avoidance of conventional organizational forms (eg the profit-seeking limited liability company) in favour of collective or co-operative modes; the search for finance through non-market mechanisms such as arts grants or other forms of subsidy; a commitment to the local community, and to pressure groups such as trade unions, feminist organizations and anti-racist bodies; the realization of the importance of providing wide access to equipment and facilities; and finally the stress on integrating production with distribution, non-theatrical exhibition, and education. (Petley 1989: 6)

He continues: 'Almost all these groups, in their different ways, were interested in cinema as a social practice' (Petley 1989: 6). To this end groups developed film production and exhibition practices that had a non-sectarian, leftist cultural politics, intended to make a political intervention in one form or another. It is worth emphasising the heterogeneity that Petley notes: in terms of style, form and content. Amber, for example, made films firmly within the British documentary tradition and, in the 1980s, moved into feature-length films that experimented with documentary and fictional practices, focussing exclusively on working class communities in the North East. On the other hand the Leeds Animation Workshop produced short animated films on social issues from a feminist perspective. This demonstrates the degree of creative autonomy that characterised the regional workshop sector in the period. Regional film as a cultural – as distinct from a profit-motivated – activity was defined through these values and practices, and this ideological and operational model informed the development of regional film production sectors until the mid 1980s.

While funding for the regional film workshops remained relatively small it increased steadily during the period. Perhaps more significantly, regional film as a cultural practice in the terms that Petley describes became embedded at an institutional level: the institutions that funded regional film production adopted, to a certain degree, the definition of regional film as a cultural practice that was developed within the sector as a legitimate function of public funding. This point is shown in the extent to which the regional film workshops won recognition for their particular mode of production in the structures of the BFI and, most clearly, in the extent to which they were supported by the newly formed Channel Four from the beginning of the 1980s. For example, in 1981

the BFI described workshop practice as the ‘true “New British Cinema”’ (BFI 1981: v). Channel Four’s Independent Film and Video Department allocated one third of its initial budget of £3m to workshop production, increasing funds and providing the opportunity for new audiences. As Four’s publicity material announced in 1982:

Channel Four’s funding of film workshops represents a unique cultural partnership between independent filmmakers, the Channel and the Association of Cinematographic and Television Technicians. It makes a significant contribution towards strengthening regional film culture from which the Channel can confidently anticipate the emergence of a wide range of imaginative and unusual work. (Fountain 1982: 6)

And in 1986 the BFI assessed the sector in the following terms:

Nowhere else in Europe has this combination of elements been developed – the creation of on-going independent film-cultural production institutions, working in relation to specific communities, with non project-tied film-cultural funding, and union agreement on the terms of access for material produced to national broadcast television. As a unique pilot, it should be backed for many years yet to see what kind of long-term results ensue. (Marris 1986: 40)

The degree of insulation from market forces that the sector established meant that film form, style and content could be determined by concerns other than perceived marketability, and working practices organised other than a hierarchical division of labour. It is not hard to see the appeal of these structures to those committed to cinema as a cultural practice.

However, the encounter with Channel Four represents the beginning of a contradiction for the regional film workshops that became more pronounced as the balance of power in this dialectic shifted during the 1980s and into the 1990s. For example, even by 1984 Sue Aspinall could complain that

the tendency has been for independent work to adapt to television norms, to be presented in recognisable forms (i.e. the longer narrative feature, the work of an ‘auteur’), rather than for television to adjust to the practices of the independent sector: non-standard running times, collective production, formal experiment, an emphasis on ideas rather than production values. While many more people are seeing ‘independent’ work, there is little sense that such

work arises from political and aesthetic debates carried on among filmmakers, through film magazines and journals, and in film education. (Aspinall 1984: 74)

As the regional film workshops helped Channel Four to fulfil its cultural remit, the model of regional film as culture that had developed within the sector became destabilised, and the space for creative autonomy restricted.

Concurrent to this regional local authorities began to identify economic and social benefits to media development, particularly in the relatively deprived areas of the North and the Midlands. The first such organisation, in 1984, was the The North East Media Development Council. Its 1985 feasibility study justified public subsidy for film thus:

there is a real possibility of creating jobs which can be counted in the hundreds, of enhancing the region's self-image and its power to communicate both inside and outside its boundaries, of attracting new investment into the region, and of building new technological skills among the region's workforce. (Cornford and Robbins 1991: 25)

Other regions followed: for example a Comedia feasibility study recommended that Birmingham City Council set up a Media Development Agency in 1987 (Comedia 1987), and a Manchester-based organisation produced a similar report in 1989 (The Centre for Employment Research 1989). The development of a 'cultural industries' approach to regional film was uneven but steady. More radical workshop practice competed with film as economic development and social empowerment. In 2000 New Labour completed this transition in regional film policy by restructuring the various agencies responsible for the economic protection of the commercial film industry on the one hand and the subsidisation of film cultural production on the other into the single agency of the UK Film Council (UKFC).

Demonstrating the ascendancy of the ideology of the 'cultural industries', the UKFC's conception is summed up in the following terms:

Film is a complex combination of industry and culture. Common to both are creativity and commerce. For the purpose of this review we assume that industry and culture are inextricably linked and, that, in public policy terms, to privilege one over the other would be to the detriment of both. (UKFC 2000: 12)

The funding opportunities for regional film production that continued throughout the 1990s became incorporated into a national bureaucratic but devolved structure of regional film funding administered locally through nine Regional Screen Agencies (RSAs). These initiatives form a complex network of public and private agencies, partnerships and co-funding deals, tendering organisations and production companies, feature film development funds and short film training schemes, intended to form an 'integrated planning framework between the "centre" and the regions, and between industrial and cultural priorities' (UKFC 2000: 37). Within this structure the regions have retained the 'cultural burden' through a residual link to the model for regional film production developed in the workshop sector and a rhetorical association with film as culture, albeit expressed in language that reflects changes in the terms of cultural policy at the beginning of the twenty first century. For example, while the Premier Fund, the UKFC's flag ship national funding scheme, concentrates simply on the 'production of popular mainstream British films', the regional production funds, as well as being targeted towards 'cultural diversity' and 'social inclusion' 'objectives', 'aim to produce innovative work, provide new opportunities for creative risk-taking, bring new voices and new visions to the screen and help build regional audio-visual economies'. The regionally-based New Cinema Fund is intended to support 'innovative filmmaker's, most especially new talent' and 'explore new digital production technologies' in order

to 'overcome the artificial separation of industry and culture'. (UKFC 2000: 10, 28, 27). As a DEMOS report puts it: 'The Government and the UK Film Council look to the RSAs to help capture the many facets of British communities.' (Holden 2006: 20)

The formalisation of the relationship between the 'centre' and the regions in contemporary film policy is the result of the success of the development of regional film production sectors through the model that I have outlined combined with New Labour's ideological tendencies towards privatised public policy more generally. It reveals two things: firstly the implicit recognition that a commercially orientated and metropolitan film industry is incapable of producing a film culture sufficiently in line with contemporary ideas of national identity; in terms of ethnicity, gender, and region. Second, the extent to which cultural and commercial interests are taken to be equivalent functions of one another: the rejection of the idea of a tension between commerce and culture. Clearly this is something of a contradiction.

With increased European funding for regional media development, the continued involvement of broadcasters and, in many areas, an increase in investment from outside productions there has been a steady development of regional infrastructures that are now better able to sustain commercial feature film production than ever before. There has been a massive growth in regional short film production schemes which are now accepted as a way that regionally-based filmmakers can begin a career in the commercial industry, side-stepping the traditional London film school or long, industry apprenticeship route.

However, the apparent commercialisation of regional film policy has raised serious concerns among critics and filmmakers committed to cinema as a cultural practice. For example, Holly Aylett has argued that 'in the English regions, as in film policy, we find a series of more or less unaccountable private companies receiving significant amounts of public money and claiming the authority to direct every aspect of film culture.' (Aylett 2004: 106) For Michael Channan:

Part of the problem is the way that trade interests are organised at the level of civil society, according to a regime that establishes the normal channels of communication with the state apparatus, and, not by accident, limits independent voices to a token presence. (Channan 2004: 110)

How have these changes in the ideology, structure and organisation of regional film production funding affected regional modes of film production?

Regional Film Policy and Practice in the East Midlands

The East Midlands makes a useful case study because of its relatively successful record of film production. The development of film production activity in the region closely follows the pattern that I have outlined.

The Nottingham Film Theatre opened in 1966, the very first in the first wave of the Regional Film Theatre movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As was the policy of the BFI it was developed in partnership with local bodies, in particular the Nottingham Co-operative Film Society (Selfe 2007). During the heyday of workshop practice in the late 1970s and 1980s there were active film workshops in Leicester, Nottingham and Peterborough. Between 1981 and 1987 Leicester was home to the British International Super 8 Festival (part of a wave of 8mm short film festivals across Europe) organised by Lorraine Porter. They showed low-budget experimental and avant garde work

from students and amateurs, as well as more established filmmakers (O'Pray 1996: 19). The Leicester Independent Producer's Association later became Lineout which, as well as providing training in video production and acting as a support network for local filmmakers, has organised an annual international short film festival since 1997.

The majority of media activity in the region has been based in Nottingham. Film workshops active during the 1980s include the Other Side Video Collective, Astrodam, Isthmus Productions, and notably the New Cinema Workshop and Nottingham Video Project, which later became Intermedia Film and Video. Reflecting the national trend towards the incorporation of the 'cultural industries' approach to regional economic planning the local authority began a strategy to develop the city as a media centre as early as 1987 (McIntyre 1996: 224). It is from this nucleus that the structure of film funding and production under the UKFC formed.

There is a direct continuity between the film organisations that can be grouped under the workshop umbrella during the 1970s and 1980s and the structure of film funding and production as it developed up to 2000 with the formation of the UKFC and the RSAs, and this is shown in the transition from independent film workshops to open-access workshops to small media production companies exploiting the influx of production finance for short and, to a lesser extent, feature films. Intermedia, for example, has produced a slate of short films and documentaries for various broadcasters and was the 'delivery company' for the East Midlands' region New Cinema Fund financed Digital Shorts film scheme 2002-2004. In 1996 it produced Shane Meadows' career starting featurette *Small Time*, in 2002 Metin Huseyin's *Anita and Me*, in 2003

Chris Cooke's debut feature film *One for the Road*, and in 2004 it co-produced Annie Watson's BAFTA nominated short *Knitting a Love Song*. Similarly, Wellington Films has produced a score of shorts for broadcasters and the UKFC and moved into feature production with *London to Brighton* (Paul Andrew Williams, 2006). Other organisations include Spool Films, the production arm of Confetti Studios which produced the UKFC's Digital Shorts scheme in 2005 and 2006, The Pool in Lincoln and Threshold Studios in Northampton, both of which support community-based filmmaking projects with Threshold having worked in association with Warp Films on a First Light scheme for young filmmakers for the UKFC.

Reflecting substantial growth in the audio-visual sector, according to a Skillset census, in 2005 there were 2900 audio-visual organisations in the East Midlands employing around 8200 people, excluding freelancers. 91 per cent of these organisations had less than five employees. However, most of this growth has been in television, radio, video games and internet companies. The figures for film show more modest growth: there were 280 people employed in film production with a further 100 in post-production. Despite success at attracting inward investment both nationally and internationally in the form of television and feature film productions (for example *Pride and Prejudice* [Joe Wright, 2005], *Tristram Shandy* [Michael Winterbottom, 2005] and *The Da Vinci Code* [Ron Howard, 2006]) the region's infrastructure did not have any fully commercial film production companies (Skillset 2005). This demonstrates the dependency of film production in the region on government subsidy. Despite the apparent commercialisation of regional film production in ideological terms, in practice it operates on a semi-commercial framework, allocating public

money to subsidise the development of small media production companies and the professionalization of regionally-based creative workers.

EM Media, the Regional Screen Agency for the East Midlands, was formed in 2001 through the merger of the different local agencies responsible for film and media funding and production in the region that variously represented the cultural and commercial development agencies that had characterised the production sector previously: the East Midlands Screen Commission, the Midlands Media Training Consortium, the film staff from Arts Council England East Midlands and the East Midlands Media Investment Fund. It was one of the first RSAs and is therefore more developed than many of the others, having seven staff in 2002 rising to 24 in 2005. Between 2004 and 2005 the organisation generated the largest income of any RSA, mostly through its success at attracting money from outside the main support sources of the Lottery and the UKFC's Regional Investment Fund for England (Holden 2006: 9). Its production related investments have grown steadily; 36 in 2002 /2003 with a total value of £674000 to 153 in 2005/2006 with a value of £2.9m. EM Media secured a further £6m in funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in 2006 and launched the first regionally-based venture capital and loan fund. The same year EM Media partnered with Screen Yorkshire, the RSA for the Yorkshire region, the two organisations seeking to develop an international presence (for example sponsoring an industry event at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival) and jointly investing £1.5m over three years in Warp X, a regionally-based low-budget feature film production initiative (EM Media 2006). In many ways EM Media is an example of a successful RSA under the terms of New Labour regional film policy.

As EM Media has matured and established a significant presence its rationale and operation has confirmed the trajectory of regional film policy towards commercialisation. For example, its research and development emphasises the elaboration of a business model and organisational structure in the region through the gathering of market and sector intelligence, skills training, target identification and opportunity. EM Media's Action Plan for 2006-2007 identifies their role as to 'Undertake advocacy, stakeholder development and offer leadership in the sector, by actively raising the profile of film and media's potential contribution to and the benefits of the region's creative economy' (EM Media 2006: 9). At the same time EM Media's publications confirm the presence of the 'cultural burden', at least at a rhetorical level. Its business plan for 2005/2006 reaffirms its commitment to 'develop and sustain an innovative and distinctive media sector' and 'ensure that its strategy, services, activities and investments are fully informed by its commitment to raising levels of inclusion, diversity, opportunity and access and in developing citizenship through film, moving image and digital media' (EM Media 2005: 3, 6).

Perhaps the most significant change in regional film funding has been the reorganisation of resource allocation into a scheme-based system that aims to identify and nurture 'new talent'. EM Media's film funding activities can be divided into four main areas: business and project development, training, short film schemes and feature film finance. These areas are organised so to encourage a linear career progression towards commercial production; what is often termed the 'stepping stone' system. As their Business Plan noted in 2006: In EM Media's experience of four operating years, by far the most effective and efficient way of addressing the needs of emerging talent is through specific

project and scheme interventions where economy of scale can be readily achieved alongside the delivery of a quality experience. (Business plan 2006-2009)

These projects and schemes funded or part-funded 52 short films between 2002 and 2005 representing a significant increase in filmmaking activity in the region. At the same time this structure militates towards the production of films as a 'calling card' to secure funding for more ambitious projects, as opposed to a discreet area of cultural practice. This raises the question of the efficacy of directing substantial amounts of public money towards supplying the 'mainstream' film and television industries with 'new talent' and, occasionally, with profitable media products. That said, while the structure of regional film production funding might be organised within a rigidly commercial model this does not necessarily determine the aspirations of the filmmakers or the character of the films. Here an analysis of the films produced under the East Midlands Digital Shorts production scheme is instructive.

Digital Shorts is a national short film production scheme administered locally on an annual basis by each RSA. While there are variations from region to region typically it works through an application and project development process that leads to the production of around ten films per region, per year, made on a budget of £10000 each. Applications are not usually open to people that have been funded through the scheme before: if funding is organised on a 'stepping stone' basis then Digital Shorts is the first 'stone'.

What sort of films were produced through the Digital Shorts scheme in the East Midlands?¹ Reflecting the current industry standard all the films are around ten minutes long. Most are live action, fiction narratives shot on digital video (DV) with the occasional animation. The majority of the films work on the

interplay of realism with thematic and stylistic devices drawn from outside narrative cinema; particularly the television sketch show tradition of British comedy. Recurrent themes of drug-taking, drinking, male relationships and male angst are often realised through a stylised comedy. For example *Why I Hate Parties (But Pretend to Like Them)* (Mark Davenport, 2003) takes a simple premise of a man's insecurities at a party, drinking, smoking marijuana and chasing women, ending with him drunkenly punching another man. Similarly *A Stoner's Guide to Egg Fried Rice* (Ray Wong, 2002) shows two stoned men take a lesson in making the dish of the title, with attendant comedy forgetfulness and banter. *Look at Me* (Nicholas Roach, 2002) is about a young man's frustrations in being ignored by his family. In a cry for attention he commits suicide live on the internet using helium to asphyxiate himself, his squeaky last words becoming a popular comedy download and giving him the attention in death that he craved in life.

Many of the films use camera work, editing and sound to flex stylistic and generic muscles. *Cry* (Steven Shiel, 2002) is the last ten minutes of a slasher film, a series of iconic images of threat to its female subject without a plot or dialogue. Or the accomplished grotesque black comedy *What About the Bodies* (Simon Ellis, 2002) which shows the misadventures of a man trying to bury a woman he thought he had murdered, that moves from farcical humour to extreme violence.

Generally speaking, the films display a reliance on traditional narrative and generic modes within the short fiction form: comedy, horror, crime. These are often very successful, achieved with the production values of low-budget British feature films or mainstream television. Certainly they are outside the

tradition of aesthetic or political radicalism in regional film and it is interesting to note the lack of engagement with ideas of national, regional, gendered or ethnic identity; ideas that are prominent in regional policy discourse. On the other hand, Ben Pollard's *Jerusalem* (2003) is a simple narrative film about a Japanese man's attempt to record the 'sound of London' to take home with him to Tokyo. His efforts are frustrated until, in finding a place to sleep while he waits for his flight, he is woken by the sound of a black airport cleaner playing the song of the title on a piano in an act of defiance against her oppressive boss. The film manages to subtly convey a sense of the poetic through the everyday while also suggesting the fractured nature of national identity; a cleaner appropriating an emblem of patriotic Englishness (itself appropriated from William Blake's original revolutionary message) into an act of rebellion against the monotony of her job, which in turn becomes an emblem for the multi-ethnic metropolis.

When taken together the films made under the Digital Shorts scheme in the East Midlands show a tendency toward standardisation in terms of form and content. It is impossible to say precisely how far this has been institutionally determined. However, the description of the process by Andrew Brand, who made *To His Knees He Fell* through the Digital Shorts scheme in 2004, is revealing and worth quoting at length:

Through script development I had my idea and it changed off and on as it should do. A lot of the changes I did were changes for the better. But it also changed from what it was originally going to be. It was originally going to be this big landscape film, more about the landscape itself, with these odd bits of plot that fit together in and amongst this landscape. For them to buy in to that I had to turn it round so that it became a plot and there is this landscape instead of the landscape being the main plotline. In a way they signed me up on that premise but it slowly worked its way round with script development and them not feeling I could deliver something like that, which I feel I could. (Interview with the author)

He continues:

I think they like someone who has got a vision, a style that they are trying to create and a genre that they are trying to push as well. EM Media want to see your creative development. They want you to have a five year plan. They want to see that you're an investment to them and that if they fund you you're going to push your area or your genre that you are going to focus on, and you're going to make a series of films for a future goal. (Interview with the author)

This draws attention to the pressures imposed by funding agencies in the development process that work to proscribe form and content towards traditional narrative modes. It also illustrates the way that this process can operate externally; the way that the agendas of funding agencies work to determine what sort of projects they receive and what sort of projects are developed in the first place. Taken alongside the constraints in the scheme more generally, the length and medium (no more than ten minutes, shot on DV), and the 'stepping stone' system, we can say that there has been a considerable restriction of the space for creative autonomy in regional film production sectors in comparison with the workshop model.

At the same time, the availability of relatively cheap DV film production equipment and facilities, the network of organisations willing to lend support and equipment to filmmakers and a collaborative production mentality mean that since the late 1990s there has been a thriving low-budget film culture in the region that is semi-autonomous of the funding agendas of regional institutions.

Nottingham in particular has had a strong community of collaborative filmmakers heavily influenced by the 'DIY' culture that emerged in the 1990s. A disparate movement, 'DIY' culture incorporates social protest, dance culture, grass-roots initiatives in arts and non-hierarchical community-based social action, united by a desire to be independent from the 'mainstream'. George

McKay puts 'DIY' culture in a tradition of non-mainstream independent cultural production going back to pirate radio in the 1960s, through punk rock in the late 1970s and to rave culture in the late 1980s and 1990s (McKay 1998: 24-26). For the filmmakers in the East Midlands the 'DIY' ethic can be traced back to the regional workshop movement and the spirit of collective action and self-help fostered in the 1980s and 1990s around organisations like Intermedia.

Bang! short film festival, housed at the Broadway Media Centre in Nottingham, has grown from this milieu. Started in 2000 by a group of local filmmakers, the festival is entirely digital and runs three times per year showing locally and nationally produced short films. Bang! has grown steadily over the years; in 2007 having around four screenings every four months (a young filmmakers', community films, animation and a main screening). It has no restrictions on form or subject matter and has shown retrospectives of work produced in the area as well as genre specific events. The festival is non-competitive and aims to support local filmmakers; to act as a platform to exhibit work produced in the region; as a centre for the filmmaking community and a catalyst for future collaborations and projects. This ethos can run counter to the target and profile-driven agendas of regional funding agencies and the festival has had to resist pressure to become more traditional in its selection policies. They receive around 100 films every four months, the majority produced without official institutional support with about 80 per cent made locally. This demonstrates the breadth of 'DIY' filmmaking in the region.

'DIY' film culture may be seen as the heir to the cultural and political environment from which the workshop sector emerged, with the values and practices of cultural politics shifted from collectivist principles and a larger

critique of capitalism towards a form of liberal, pluralist direct action which McKay has called a 'kind of 1990s counterculture' (McKay 1998: 2). As Bang! Film Festival demonstrates, a surprisingly large and heterogeneous low-budget film production sector can exist independently of the apparatus of regional film funding. While the Nottingham-based 'DIY' film culture cannot be said to be part of a 'movement' in the same way that the regional workshop movement can, it can reasonably be described as an independent sphere of cultural practice.

It would be a mistake, however, to characterise the relationship between Nottingham's 'DIY' film culture and regional institutions as simply antagonistic. This can be explored by looking at the 'stepping stone' system in action. Chris Cooke is a Nottingham-based filmmaker that worked within the 'DIY' film sector extensively before receiving funding for a series of short films leading to development and production funding of a locally-produced feature film. He describes the 'DIY' approach to filmmaking:

There is a film community here in Nottingham . . . people are emerging their styles because of the means that they've actually got. The actors are really fresh and really interesting round here, people are much less precious and pretentious. It's a DIY culture as it started out. Traditionally it's been a really badly funded region so you've had that thing where people have said 'I know someone who's got a camcorder, let's borrow it' and have made stuff . . . we've all got together with camcorders and we've done films that have been much more improvisatory, we've done films where the crew are improvising and where the cast are improvising or following a script, or whatever. But it is the way the working methods derived out of having no money and it's become a successful method of making films. (Interview with the author)

Collaborative DV filmmaking has been crucial in the development of these practices, allowing a more fluid form of handheld photography to capture improvisation; a process that continues into the edit. For example, on *Shifting Units* (1999), Cooke's short film funded through the East Midlands Media Initiative and produced by Intermedia, ten hours of footage was cut into an eight

and a half minute film with the narrative constructed partially in the edit. These practices were carried into Cooke's debut feature film, *One for the Road*. It was funded by EM Media and Film Four, shot on DV and largely improvised.

Thematically Cooke's films deal with male angst and pathos, and his characters' inability to form relationships with those around them. His films centre on a domestic sensibility and ironic humour with the distance between self-presentation and reality realised at a stylistic, as well as narrative, level through unconventional structures, the use of montage sequences, camera monologues and voice-overs. Combined with rapid camera movement and editing, he has developed an unconventional stylistic and thematic coherence that is directly drawn from his working practices.

Cooke's career is an example of the successful deployment of the 'stepping stone' system under the terms of UKFC policy: unconventional, low-budget filmmaking practices drawn into 'mainstream' production and distribution arrangements. However, Cooke notes: 'If they were stepping stones there weren't very many of them, and you'd have to have incredibly long legs, they were so few and far between.' (Interview with the author)

Conclusion

Graham Roberts has argued that in UKFC film policy it is possible to see 'regional [equals] out of the mainstream through its links to the "low-budget and edgy" New Cinema Fund.' (Roberts 2002: 7) As this paper has argued, the terms of the 'territorialisation' of contemporary film policy has a history that goes back to the model for regional filmmaking that developed in the regional workshop movement. This is significant for two reasons: firstly, it demonstrates

the root of the inconsistencies in a film policy that equates culture with commerce at the same time as displacing cultural concerns from the 'centre' to the regions. Secondly, film policy tends to have a short memory so it is worth reiterating that other kinds of filmmaking are possible.

Roberts' point, however, also suggests how the 'cultural burden' of regional filmmaking that this paper has outlined has become manifest in contemporary regional film policy and practice under the UKFC. RSAs like EM Media use public money to identify and cultivate regionally-based creative workers, and to provide low-investment, and occasionally innovative and technically experimental products for the increasingly diffuse national film and television industries. Ideas of regional filmmaking as a cultural practice that were developed through a rejection of commercially-motivated production and distribution arrangements, a broadly progressive cultural politics, and realised through a relatively high degree of creative autonomy, have become absorbed into a commercially determined emphasis on stylistic and technical features, training and career progression. As the case of the East Midlands demonstrates, in a film policy discourse that views culture as a function of commercial interests this works to restrict the space available for the production of films which do not fit into a narrowly perceived commercial formula. Ideas of cinema as a cultural practice, while still present at a rhetorical level, have been made effectively redundant in regional film production funding.

That said, in the example of the East Midlands at least, access to digital technology, the residual structure of film production infrastructure that developed from the 1970s and a strong 'DIY' culture has allowed the development of filmmaking practices that maintain a degree of creative

autonomy from the agendas of official institutions. However, it is interesting to note the extent to which the film culture of the region is male-dominated and that the films nearly exclusively privilege male point of view structures. This is in contrast to the many women filmmakers and women's groups that were active in regional film production sectors during the workshop period in the 1970s and 1980s. Groups like the Sheffield Film Co-op or, in the East Midlands, women like Dinah Caine adopted distinctly feminist filmmaking practices and regional film production sectors sustained this activity where the commercial film industry would not. The absence of this sort of filmmaking in the contemporary scene cannot be explained solely by the ascendancy of the market in film policy, but must include the recognition of the virtual disappearance of feminism from public culture. Arguably the same can be said of the expression of ethnicity, class and regional identity in regionally-produced film. Despite the undoubted importance of the politics of film funding in limiting which representations can make it to the screen, shifts in the expression of cinema as a cultural practice also reflect wider changes in political culture and the values and practices of cultural politics. The opportunities afforded by 'DIY' digital filmmaking are to be welcomed. However, it remains to be seen whether 'new voices' and 'creative risk taking' can emerge from the gruelling rounds of application procedures, project development and training.

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Notes

¹The following analysis is based on my viewing of seventeen of the films made under the Digital Shorts scheme in the East Midlands. Indeed, obtaining viewing copies of the films made under the scheme is difficult. While Digital Shorts has a distribution deal attached to it films that are not picked up by a broadcaster or successful at festivals are often not seen after their initial public screening. To the best of my knowledge, at the time of writing, neither EM Media nor the UKFC have made all the films available.

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