

## Birmingham Film & Video Workshop

### Introduction

In this presentation I'd like to talk about the origins and work of the Birmingham Film & Video Workshop, as a kind of case study of one of the original franchised workshops, which was one of the signatories of the Workshop Declaration, and which conducted pioneering work of lasting interest, but which has received less attention than other workshops such as Amber. As well as looking at some of the cultural influences that shaped the personnel, politics and programming of the Birmingham Workshop I'm going to widen it out a bit by providing some examples and making some observations about the influence of the New Left and cultural studies on film and TV policy and programming. I'm interested in the significance that cultural studies has had or might have had outside of the university, and the kind of forms its influence has taken in the 'real world'. After exploring that I will discuss the somewhat ambivalent attitude of the workshop sector to the television industry, and the way in which Birmingham was somewhat exceptional in the workshop sector in embracing television aesthetics and style and in examining media policy through its programming. Having discussed the cultural politics of the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop and its programming I'll conclude by offering some observations about how we might define the cultural politics of the early Channel 4.

### The Origins of the BF&VW

In some senses the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop can be said to have grown out of countercultural activity in the 1970s. It was based at the Birmingham Arts Lab, an experimental arts centre which was modelled on the London Arts Lab. The Arts Labs grew out of the flourishing of community publishing, experimental cinema, bookshops, galleries and darkrooms in the 1960s and 1970s. The Birmingham Arts Lab developed as an off-shoot of the Midland Arts Centre, but was self-supporting, with some artists working and living on the premises. It organized experimental theatre, hosted multimedia, photography and other artistic events, and ran a well-regarded independent cinema club. Some filmmaking was also organized

by the Arts Lab, under the name of the Birmingham Film Co-op. By the 1980s it was probably the only Arts Lab still in existence, and it continued as a hub for community arts with Derek Bishton and others producing the influential photography magazine *Ten:8* in rooms upstairs, and Roger Shannon, Jonnie Turpie and others producing work for Channel 4 as the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop, which was funded by Channel 4, West Midlands Arts and the British Film Institute.

So In a fairly organic way the Workshop evolved from strands of the countercultural and community arts scene, but it was also influenced by another important local development – the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), which I will variously call The Centre or the Birmingham School for the sake of convenience. In 1979 Roger Shannon, a Liverpoolian who had just completed a Masters at the Centre, responded to a job advert for the role of ‘co-ordinator’ of the Birmingham Film Workshop.

Activities and developments at both local and national level had precipitated the need for co-ordination of local film activity – at the national level there was the growing influence of the Independent Filmmakers Association, which (as John will tell you!) was composed not only of filmmakers but also of academics, exhibitors and policy-makers. And as well as the BFI, Channel 4, the Arts Council and the GLC there were the Regional Arts Associations supporting filmmaking – the film officer of West Midlands Arts, Frank Challenger, had recruited Alan Lovell as an advisor, and Alan soon became an active member of the Workshop. Alan Lovell may well be a familiar figure to many of you, but it is worth at this point giving a brief picture of his early intellectual and political background. Lovell, who is now retired, was a conscientious objector, Oxford graduate and film reviewer for *Peace News* as a young man; he then became a central figure in the New Left during the late 50s and early 60s, serving on the original editorial board of *Universities and Left Review* (and becoming active in nonviolent civil disobedience as part of the ‘Committee of 100’). Later he was a member of the BFI Education Department. Without a doubt cultural studies in the UK can be said to have originally developed from the intellectual community of the New Left, with Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall of the Birmingham School having been actively involved in this intellectual and political ferment.

Before we return to the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop, it is worth expanding on the impact of this earlier generation on the arts and broadcasting policy. In a general sense the original New Left's wide cultural support and dynamism can be said to have been partly derived from its connections with transformations in the arts, where non-deferential and non-condescending realism was being combined with new aesthetic approaches in film, TV drama, theatre, the novel and journalism. Free Cinema, regional realism in the British New Wave or 'kitchen sink' films and Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop are some examples of this cultural stream in the late 1950s and early 1960s. More specifically it can also be noted that the New Left Review had a significant influence on the Pilkington Report of 1963, both in terms of the agency of Richard Hoggart (the first director of the CCCS) on the Pilkington committee, and in the form of a submission from New Left Review. This submission analysed in detail the most common genres in television and paid particular attention to the coming of a third channel. To quote from the document:

"The present structure is dominated, either by the "commercial" voice of advertising, or the "official" voice of a public institution. What is needed is other voices, faces, other interests, other interpretations of "entertainment", other approaches to "seriousness", other aspects of our community life...A Third Channel has the opportunity to do what neither the ITA nor BBC has been able to do; create a genuinely "popular" channel and trust the people who produce the programmes." (quoted in Hogenkamp 2000)

This intervention in cultural policy can be regarded as a precursor of the later campaign for a *fourth* channel (it can also be said to have preceded the activism of the Free Communications Group, which was established in 1969 to campaign for a more democratic and accountable broadcasting system). Of course whether or not the influence of the broadcasting philosophy articulated by the New Left reached as far as Channel 4 is another matter. It is worth mentioning as a kind of footnote that Derek Hill, who was Channel 4's film buyer in the area of world and experimental cinema, was associated with the New Left; he was film critic of the *Tribune* and was one of many CND supporters involved in the making of the *March to Aldermaston* film in 1959, which was a collaborative documentary effort involving Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, Derrick Knight and many others.

To return to Birmingham in the late 70s and early 80s - at the Birmingham School Roger Shannon had studied the documentary, newsreel and worker's film movements of the 1930s, and documentary was of course a particular research interest of Alan Lovell, so they began to screen some of these films at the Arts Lab. One of these films was *Hell Unltd.*, a fascinating animated short about the arms race in the 1930s made by Norman McLaren and Helen Biggar. They became curious about Helen Biggar, a Glaswegian sculptor and political activist who shot footage for the film during the Spanish Civil War. She was a completely forgotten figure, and research into her background led them in 1983 to make a documentary along with Rob Burkitt called *Traces Left* about Biggar and this period in history. This was really an example of cultural archaeology as so little was known about her, and then a few years later Bert Hogenkamp celebrated the film in his book *Deadly Parallels*.

Rob Burkitt had also been at the CCCS, and he became the Workshop's media researcher, looking for opportunities for films to explore issues to do with media and cultural policy. This resulted in a documentary on pirate radio called *The Black and White Pirate Show*, and another about media regulation called *Are You Being Served Well?* The Workshop benefitted from a steering group which included people like Charlotte Brundson, also a member of the CCCS, and Trevor Boden, who was setting up a film and TV course at West Midlands College where Dick Hebdige was a teacher. At the same time the Workshop had links with the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, and organized a series of debates about film and media.

So we can see how the personnel of the Birmingham Workshop had a background in cultural studies and were interested in documentary history and media policy. Before we explore the influence of cultural studies at the level of programming in the case of the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop, it is worth briefly discussing other examples of the influence of cultural studies on the workshop sector. It should not be forgotten that the central figure in the cultural studies tradition, Stuart Hall, who was Director of the CCCS between 1968 and 1979, was vocal in his support for black filmmakers and artists working within Channel 4 funded workshops such as *Black Audio Film Collective* and *Sankofa*, and collaborated frequently with Isaac Julien. He regarded this work as drawing attention to the culturally constructed notion of ethnicity, writing in 1989 that films like *Territories*,

*Passion of Remembrance, My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* “make it clear that the question of the black subject cannot be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity”. It’s also well worth noting that the Black Audio Film Collective was founded at Portsmouth Polytechnic – what is now the University of Portsmouth - in 1982 by 7 students studying sociology, fine art and psychology; John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Edward George, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Claire Johnson (who was later replaced by David Lawson) and Trevor Mathison. During the early- to mid-70s the first cultural studies BA had been developed by a group of staff working closely with Stuart Hall, who came down and helped design the course and who was himself the first external examiner of the course. At that time Portsmouth placed a high premium on the relationship between the social and the cultural, and there was a great degree of cross-over in teaching between art history and cultural studies, so the Black Audio Film Collective were exposed to teaching from people who developed the cultural studies syllabus as well as film lectures from Simon Field. It is also worth mentioning that Black Audio shared an interest in history and cultural politics with the Birmingham Workshop, and when they made their celebrated film *Handsworth Songs* in 1986 they borrowed equipment from them.

### BF&VW Programming

So how did the influence of cultural studies filter through to the level of programming, in the case of the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop? It could be argued that the influence of cultural studies in the 1980s, with its increasingly cross-disciplinary approach, helped to determine that the Birmingham Workshop was multifaceted and centred on various aspects of everyday life and cultural policy. There were strands on Black and Asian community arts in Birmingham; about young people and youth lifestyles; about media policy; and about history and geography from a feminist perspective. Other workshops around the country defined themselves and their collective identity more tightly or rigorously according to aesthetics, campaigning stance or identity politics – you had animation workshops, women’s workshops, Amber with their community-focus and Griersonian approach and so on.

Much of the Workshop's output sought, like much of the Birmingham Centre's work on teenagers and subcultures, to link youth culture to the social relations of production. For example, Jonnie Turpie and Stephen Peet made programmes with a group of young people from Telford – who called themselves the Dead Honest Soul Searchers or DHSS for short - on youth unemployment, home taping, and other issues of direct concern to them. These programmes gave them a space in which to counter and question assumptions made about them. Roger Shannon has told me that this strand of the Workshop's output was informed by the way in which television news and current affairs programming was being deconstructed at the time by academics like Ian Connell and the Glasgow Media Group. These programmes also occasionally offered glimpses into how – to paraphrase Eric Carter - the commodities offered by the teenage market could be deconstructed, appropriated, subverted or reassembled. They also consistently placed an emphasis on cultural policy and the production and circulation of popular culture, which in some ways anticipated Jim McGuigan's later critique (in his 1992 book *Cultural Populism*) of what he saw as the tendency towards a one-dimensional focus on consumption that characterised the Birmingham School's engagement with popular culture, at least until the arrival of people like Erica Carter. These films captured the erstwhile active audience in action, quizzing policy-makers without a hint of deference or lip service.

In 1982 Angela McRobbie of the Birmingham School had written an article on the girls' magazine *Jackie* which explored the 'ideology of adolescent femininity'. In terms of the development of cultural studies we can see such work by McRobbie as a necessary corrective to the orthodoxy which saw women as slaves to consumerism; as a means of taking popular culture seriously and encouraging audiences to actively intervene in it; and as a challenge to the male-dominance of the studies on subcultures which had been conducted by the Centre thus far (both in terms of the authors of the studies and the subjects they chose). In the article she called for a feminist magazine for girls, and this project which was brought to realisation by Carola Klein in the form of a one-off programme made by the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop, called *Girl Zone*, and transmitted in 1986.

As you might expect, *Girl Zone* is a mix of interviews, discussion and sketches co-ordinated and performed by a group of young girls. There is, of course a great deal of humour but also engagement with serious subjects and moral dilemmas in

the film, such as the Gillick ruling about the contraception of minors which was then a matter of great debate, and letters about incest received by agony aunts. It is also interesting that the girls seek to understand adulthood and women's issues through interviews with women who are not viewed or addressed as celebrities or role models so much as sources of knowledge and representatives of the creative industries that were addressing their particular age-group. For example, the girls interview the young agony aunt of *Just 17* magazine, the actress Susan Tully who played Wendy from *Eastenders*, and the DJ's Janice Long and Rankin' Miss P of Radio 1.

The homemade aesthetic of this programme – it might be better described as a video, as it was made with semi-professional video equipment – anticipates what was to become the central discourse of mainstream youth programming by implicitly encouraging young viewers to try out the same kind of things for themselves. Having said this, it should be noted that Jonnie Turpie, who was the catalyst for these films, was constantly trying to incorporate new technical advances that came along in video. For example, the use of on-screen text captions to start a sequence or to deconstruct, challenge or poke fun at what is being said by an interviewee was a technique that was picked up later by several youth programmes on Channel 4. Jonnie Turpie went on to set up Maverick Television in 1994, and has pioneered the use of new technology in television, both in the use of small-format cameras and high-end post-production graphics.

### Importance of video & TV aesthetics

This brings us on to the subject of aesthetics. The Birmingham workshop was one of the first to utilize video technology as part of what we might term community outreach work. The workshops that used video developed slightly differently to other workshops; as Alan Fountain observed as early as 1983, "they are far more public-access orientated, seeing themselves more as a community resource". Community or process-based video practice placed the emphasis not on the end product but on a model of access for non-professionals. What was valuable about video to these workshops was that it facilitated collaboration, particularly due to the fact that you can immediately view back, discuss and edit what has been recorded; the various

processes of making a programme were more integrated and sometimes accelerated.

There is a tendency for the workshops that primarily used film – such as Amber and Black Audio Film Collective - to be remembered above others, as their best films had a limited theatrical release or an after-life on the festival circuit where they could attain awards. These workshops were also fully-functioning, technically competent units of people who could produce and direct. Amber, Sankofa and Black Audio were all groups who had met at college, bonded and started to develop as a co-operative. At Birmingham it was more a matter of bringing people in from outside the workshop to draw upon their skills or expertise for particular strands of development. We should also note that the rationing of workshop funds had a determining effect on activity that varied according to the workshop's ambitions. For collectives like Sankofa and Black Audio there was an inordinate pressure on each individual film to be 'representative' or to say as much as possible in one single filmic statement. Kobena Mercer has linked this to the 'burden of representation' attendant upon black filmmakers in a type of cultural production in which struggles over meaning are also struggles over resources, which determine who will be included and who will be excluded, who will get to speak and who will remain silent. To quote Martina Attille on the making of *Passion of Remembrance*:

There was a sense of urgency to say it all, or at least to signal as much as we could in one film. Sometimes we can't afford to hold anything back for another time, another conversation or another film. That is the reality of our experience – sometimes we only get the one chance to make ourselves heard (Atille 1988)

I want to say a bit more about how the workshop films, which are now archival artefacts, might have related to the wider ambitions and activities of the workshops that made them. But before that it is worth saying a little more about aesthetics, genre, and that old chestnut of the filmic aesthetic versus the televisual aesthetic. I was talking earlier about video, and it is interesting that the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop actually made an entire feature film on video, which was called *Out of Order*. In her review of the film for *Monthly Film Bulletin* in 1988, Pam Cook saw *Out of Order* as making a unique contribution to what she identified a new genre of

'radical romance', apparent in low-budget British films like *Letter to Brezhnev*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, and *Business as Usual*, which explored the relationship between love and politics, "seeing in the former the possibility of breaking through the alienating social divisions characteristic of contemporary Britain". Interestingly all of the above films were also funded by Channel 4, which had a run of form during this period.

Aesthetically all these films were quite different from each other, but shared an orientation towards the aesthetics of television. *Laundrette* was originally conceived of as belonging to the *Play for Today* tradition but was a surprise success in the cinema. *Out of Order* actively embraced televisual aesthetics and traditions, taking its cue from the regional focus of TV soap operas and crime series. It opened up the possibility of a relationship between British film and popular culture, and captured the postmodern zeitgeist in the way that it eschewed the linear or episodic narrative of TV drama for an aesthetic more akin to 'channel hopping'. This engagement with the vocabulary and traditions of television was probably the most innovative aspect of the Birmingham Workshop and it was relatively unusual in the workshop sector. Some years later Alan Fountain (of Channel 4's IF&VD) advertised a call for commissions for 'Television with a Difference' asking explicitly for "work which was very much to do with television and the history of TV and was experimental in relation to television form" and received no such work at all. Such disappointments only served to reinforce the concerns of C4's IF&VD that the workshops were not quite delivering the goods, and C4's long-term commitment to the workshops ceded to a more conventional form of funding on a project-by-project basis.

This was a great cause of concern for the independent sector, as it was precisely Channel 4's continuity of funding that had initially helped to build a local film-making infrastructure. The Birmingham Workshop, had to some extent sought to replicate the success of the North East in providing audio-visual training provision locally and regionally. The programmes I discussed earlier acted in a sense as shop-windows for the wider cultural project of the workshop as a whole. In the context of an examination of film and video distribution, Sean Cubitt has noted how such work covered a variety of functions - training; campaigning; education; archival documentary; and expression from and to a specific community – and was

distributed in different forms – as a TV broadcast; screened at independent video festivals; and distributed widely on videotape (in the case of the Birmingham videos, with teacher's study notes by Jim McGuigan and Lesley Watson).

I don't want to go into too much detail about how the end of the workshop sector but clearly the kind of integrated practice upon which the workshops had originally been predicated was soon to fall victim to reductions in support from the BFI, Channel 4 and the Arts Council that were signs of an increasingly commercialised and casualised production sector. As Julian Petley anticipated in 1995, "permanent production bases with distinct commitments to their local communities" were increasingly to be surmounted in favour of one-off productions here and there from the mushroom growth of independent companies which were in fact highly dependent companies. There may, however, also be some truth in the notion that the workshop sector lacked a coherent philosophy or policy about its relationship towards the broadcasters which meant that it got left behind during the campaigning for a greater quota of programmes from independent producers. An interesting snapshot of this debate within the sector is provided by the minutes from a meeting of the Independent Film, Video and Photography Association on the 6<sup>th</sup> February 1989, which captures an exchange of views on the importance of non-broadcast activity such as community outreach and training. It was felt by some that the sector should not be seen as a training ground for the TV industry, whereas others felt there was a danger in articulating their projects merely in terms of opposition to the mainstream. One contributor felt that the provision of Channel 4 funding made the independent sector into an area of Research & Development into modes of production for deregulated TV, which was unfortunate given their support for the concept of public service broadcasting and unionised labour. However in pragmatic terms she felt that re-defining the sector as R&D for indigenous audio-visual production might be a way of forging a relationship with the industry, and might represent a crucial strategy in pursuing new funds.

## Conclusion

So, in conclusion, looking at the influence of cultural studies and notions of 'access', clearly the Channel, and the Workshops who produced work for the Channel,

attracted groups of people who were concerned about examining society critically, who were advocates of pluralism and giving voice to excluded minorities. As Peter Keighron put it in 1991, “The Independent Film and Video Department was the channel’s reward to a powerful lobby of film and video workshops, experimental filmmakers and various groupings informed by the cultural politics of the 1960s and 1970s.” They formed what might be described what Alan Fountain called a ‘cultural front’. In an interview for our project, Alan said:

“I always feel in a way what happened...at the beginning of Channel 4, it was sort of 60s politics finally hit television but it was like, you know...10 to 15 years later! And if you look at a lot of my colleagues at Channel 4...Carol Haslam, Sue Woodford, Paul Madden, Michael Kustow – these are all people who are ‘68 people in various different ways. Carol was sort of a big Stuart Hall fan...A lot of those feelings and politics...we shared in different ways...”

It could be said that Channel 4 arrived at that moment when the consensus and the ideals of the 1960s had been eroded but before the new Thatcherite consensus of monetarism and individualism had asserted itself. Perhaps Channel 4 can be seen as one of the last heirs to the post-war settlement which produced not only the Welfare State but also a cultural ‘health service’ of state-subsidised arts and media.

## Bibliography

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