

INTRODUCTION



In 2011, the UK National Commission for UNESCO announced the addition of twenty new items and collections to its round of inscriptions to the UK Memory of the World Register, a list of documentary heritage with particular cultural significance to the country.¹ This round included such varied documents such as the 1689 Bill of Rights, the diaries of Anne Lister (1806–40) and a collection of materials pertaining to the women’s suffrage movement in Britain between 1865 and 1928. There were also three collections of cinematic and photographic material: the recently discovered Mitchell and Kenyon collection of actuality footage from the early twentieth century, the output of the much-celebrated GPO Film Unit (1933–40), which laid the foundations of the British documentary film movement, and, finally, in the words of the register, ‘the narrative created through Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen’s photography and Amber’s films’.

This recognition for the films made by the Amber collective since their formation in 1968 was richly deserved, overdue even. As a celebratory document of the landscape, people and work of north-east England over a fifty-year period, they are significant enough in telling a clear story about the impact of the decline of traditional industries upon working-class communities. Yet the films are equally as important artistically, as part of a coherent, longitudinal experiment in documentary practice and an ongoing enquiry into the responsible artist’s engagement with place and with community. And the body of film work, however worthy of standalone analysis, is merely one facet of Amber’s legacy, alongside its photographic commissions and

acquisitions (and exhibitions in its gallery space and tours), campaigning work, local residencies and inspirational role in the ‘workshop movement’ of the 1970s onwards. The result is a collection of material, an archive that can today be explored physically and digitally – via Amber’s gallery space and a well-maintained website – but also, in their words, a ‘living network of relationships that continues to make the group’s work possible’.² Untangling Amber’s narrative, with its density of connective threads to their own history and future, and to a variety of fascinating people, places and concerns, is in many respects a challenge for the scholar, which may partly explain why this book is the first full-length survey of their films in relationship to broader developments in British cinema and television culture. Amber deserves recognition as a unique phenomenon: a non-hierarchical artistic group that, despite some personnel changes and periods of struggle, has operated for over half a century, projecting some of the political and aesthetic radicalism of its late 1960s origins into the second decade of the twenty-first century – and likely beyond.

Amber may have been recognized as the ‘most important and enduring collective to have emerged in Britain’,³ but in an interview carried out in 2000, their key founding member Murray Martin lamented how they had hitherto flown mostly beneath the critical and historical radar:

At times we feel a bit aggrieved that our existence isn’t even recognized. If you look at the histories of British cinema, it’s not recognized and yet, fifteen years ago, Lindsay Anderson was quoted as saying to someone who was doing a history of British cinema: ‘if you don’t include Amber there is no history of British cinema’. And yet we’re never mentioned.⁴

Martin’s grievance had some justification, in that Amber have tended to be overlooked, or merely mentioned in passing, in scholarly surveys and histories of British film and television. They are conspicuously missing from general histories like Sarah Street’s *British National Cinema* (1997), the *Routledge Companion to British Cinema History* (1997), Jim Leach’s *British Film* (2004), Amy Sargeant’s *British Cinema: A Critical and Interpretive History* (2005) and Robert Murphy’s four-part *British Cinema* anthology (2014), and merely glanced at in Murphy’s *The British Cinema Book* (2009), Justin Smith and Sue Harper’s *British Film Culture of the 1970s: The Boundaries of Pleasure* (2012), and Paul Newland’s *Don’t Look Now: British Cinema in the 1970s* (2010). Of Amber’s noteworthy contribution to British film culture of the 1980s, there is only a brief mention in John Hill’s *British Cinema in the 1980s* (1999) and in Lester D. Friedman’s anthology *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started* (1993).

However, Murray Martin’s claim about Amber’s relative invisibility holds less weight today than it did at the turn of the century, as in the intervening

years their history and their work have been acknowledged by a number of scholars of British visual culture, albeit often in relation to discrete contexts or timeframes. For example, there has been analysis of their early ‘salvage’ films within the context of both native documentary traditions and oppositional currents,⁵ close textual examination of the spatial politics at work in *Byker* (1983),⁶ consideration of the enunciation of ‘trauma’ in a later project concerning deindustrialization in County Durham,⁷ and a project interrogating the group’s philosophies and practices as a collective from a social sciences perspective.⁸ Such a heterogeneity of response to Amber is in many ways commensurate with the way in which the field of British film and television studies has simultaneously proliferated and atomized, and absorbed new disciplinary approaches. In a famous essay of 1986, Julian Petley identified a ‘lost continent’ of popular cinema – such as horror, crime, melodrama and so forth – overlooked by scholarship fixated on ‘realist’ traditions.⁹ More recently, a consensus has emerged that Petley’s advocacy initiated a ‘new wave of revisionism’ that has sought to dismantle canons as much as critical binaries.¹⁰ Indeed, some of the boldest claims made about Amber, such as Mike Wayne’s description of them as ‘possibly the most successful “studio” – in terms of sheer longevity – in British film history’,¹¹ can be understood in relation to this dismantling impulse.

Whilst it is thus difficult to make claims for Amber’s utter invisibility within the fields of film or documentary studies, I would argue that they have as yet been dealt with in an unsatisfactorily fragmented fashion, and that an interpretive, longitudinal history of their work is essential for a true grasp of their contribution to British film culture. Put simply, the body of scholarship around the group constitutes (as yet) an incomplete history.

As the title of this book suggests, my emphasis is predominantly upon the group’s output, as opposed to, say, their organizational or political principles, or their funding strategies, despite the importance of these to an understanding of their creative methods. As we shall see, there are some problems with calling mine a straightforwardly auteurist approach, given the obvious way that the group has emphasized collective authorship, as well as their sheer variety of emphasis and artistry over fifty years. However, their work is perhaps best characterized by a tension, or dialogue, between a commitment to authentic and responsible representation of people, places and experiences, and an ongoing experiment in artistic documentation. In order to convey the development of this experimentation in creative documentary, I have taken a broadly chronological approach, but it so happens that Amber’s *oeuvre* falls into (reasonably) distinct operational periods that form the basis of my six central chapters. In each, I utilize the films, which range from short documentaries to longer feature works, to establish Amber’s evolving aesthetic strategies against the backdrop of wider developments or currents in

British film and television culture, as well as Amber's own reflections on their achievements (sourced from my own interviews, as well as from pre-existing written and oral documentation).

So as to orientate the reader in the history and conceptualization of Amber, the next chapter begins with an overview of their development, followed by an itemization of some of the issues and concerns that dominate, and in some cases problematize, discussions about the collective and their output: for example, category dilemmas regarding their relationship with documentary and oppositional film culture, debates around their engagement with particular communities and people, their stance on vanishing places and industries, and confusion over their attitude to the crediting of authorship.

The more or less chronological approach that follows in subsequent chapters is susceptible to critique, as it is predicated upon the admittedly shaky notion that Amber's output can be coherently divided into discrete periods. The number of cross-references I give between films, and across chapters, is testimony to the manner in which many productions have developed organically out of, or in tandem with, other projects. However, my second chapter's concentration upon Amber work up until 1980 is hopefully non-contentious, given that, by most reckonings, their first decade constituted an 'apprentice period', immediately followed by a phase, during the 1980s and early 1990s, of considerable expansion and a move towards longer films, including more demonstrably 'fictional' ones. The sheer range of experimentation during this period is the reason why I have effectively devoted three chapters to it. For organizational reasons, partly to do with the parity of chapter lengths, I will dedicate the third and fifth chapters to their respective 'current affairs' and 'drama' strands. Of course, any such division bumps up against the obvious criticism that all of Amber's work derives from a 'documentary' impulse and that even their more 'pure' documentary work is creatively shaped or involves reconstruction. Similarly, the fourth chapter's focus upon the films with a strong authorial connection with Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen might seem to undermine the claims made elsewhere for Amber's non-hierarchical, collectivist identity: after all, I do not devote chapters to films directed by Murray Martin, Peter Roberts or Ellin Hare, even though a claim could be made for their work having an identifiably distinctive stamp. But a certain pragmatism comes into play here: the Konttinen films (actually co-devised with Peter Roberts) are strongly associated with the photographic work that bears her name, and have enough commonality of purpose, on the whole, to warrant being bracketed off in this way.

The sixth chapter considers the thematically coherent cycle of drama films made by Amber from 1995 to 2005, which consists of *Eden Valley* (1995) and a trio of films set in East Durham typically referred to by the collective as their 'coalfield trilogy': all four films offer reflections on post-industrial

society through stories of fractured family bonds or personal relationships, and move towards a gloomy assessment, in *Shooting Magpies*, Amber's last fictional feature film to date, of the damage wreaked by long-term unemployment upon a working-class community. Since *Shooting Magpies*, released in 2005, Amber have exclusively produced documentaries with a retrospective bent, and the seventh and final chapter pays attention to these backwards glances to previous projects and portraits of deceased individuals.

As I will acknowledge in the next chapter, one impediment in the way of the interested reader is that of access. Many of the works under discussion have had limited distribution, although this is hardly a unique scenario for parties interested in the histories of independent or experimental cinema beyond the commercial mainstream. My hope is that this book requires neither a passing nor a thorough knowledge of Amber's work to date and that the contextual and textual analysis herein gives the unfamiliar reader an entry point into a body of work that is potentially intimidating in its range and diversity. This is not to suggest that it is in any way an experiential substitute, of course, and a modest but significant aim of *In Fading Light: The Films of the Amber Collective* is to heighten the collective's standing within international film culture, and thereby encourage further viewing and discussion of this remarkable body of work.

Notes

1. United Kingdom National Commission for UNESCO. 2011. '2011 UK Memory of the World Register'. Retrieved 1 August 2019 from <https://www.unesco.org.uk/2011-uk-memory-of-the-world-register/>.
2. Amber/Side. 2015. *For Ever Amber: Stories from a Film & Photography Collection*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Amber/Side, 7.
3. G. Gee. 2017. *Art in the North of England: 1979–2009*, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 44.
4. M. Martin. 2000. 'Interview with Murray Martin by Darren Newbury' (unpublished transcript).
5. J. Chapman. 2015. *A New History of British Documentary*, New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; J. Chambers. 2017. 'The "Salvage" of Working-Class History and Experience: Reconsidering the Amber Collective's 1970s Tyneside Documentaries', in S. Clayton and L. Mulvey (eds), *Other Cinemas: Politics, Culture and Experimental Film in the 1970s*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 168–85.
6. A.H. Roe. 2007. 'Spatial Contestation and the Loss of Place in Amber's *Byker*', *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 4(2), 307–21.
7. R. Ashmore. 2011. 'Landscape and Crisis in Northern England: The Representation of Communal Trauma in Film and Photography', Ph.D. thesis. Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria University.

8. I am referring to the project 'The Promise of a Transformative Arts: A Political and Cultural Analysis of the Amber Collective' undertaken by Robert G. Hollands and John Vail. The articles published out of the project were as follows. R. Hollands and J. Vail. 2012. 'The Art of Social Movement: Cultural Opportunity, Mobilisation and Framing in the Early Formation of the Amber Collective', *Poetics* 40(1), 22–43; R. Hollands and J. Vail. 2015. 'Place Imprinting and the Arts: A Case Study of the Amber Collective', *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit*, 0(0), 1–18; J. Vail and R.G. Hollands. 2012. 'Cultural Work and a Transformative Arts: The Dilemmas of the Amber Collective', *Journal of Cultural Economy* 5(3), 337–53; J. Vail and R. Hollands. 2013. 'Creative Democracy and the Arts: The Participatory Democracy of the Amber Collective', *Cultural Sociology* 7(3), 352–67; J. Vail and R. Hollands. 2012. 'Rules for Cultural Radicals', *Antipode* 45(3), 541–64.
9. J. Petley. 1986. 'The Lost Continent', in C. Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, London: BFI, 98–119.
10. I.Q. Hunter. 2013. *British Trash Cinema*, London: BFI, 4.
11. M. Wayne. 2001, *Political Film: The Dialects of Third Cinema*, London, Sterling and Virginia: Pluto Press, 48.