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Moving with the Times: Surviving Film Collective Cultures in British and German Contexts

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Abstract

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This article examines recent developments in documentary film-making in British and German film collective cultures owing to evolving socio-political and socio-economic circumstances since the countercultural era. Research on film collectives has tended to concentrate on their socio-political function as a platform for agitation, enquiry, exposition and expression of alternative perspectives. This function, it is argued, renders film collective cultures distinctive in facilitating democratic practice.

However, the aforementioned circumstances have gradually fostered other ascendant imperatives alongside the socio-political function, the interplay of which causes huge problems for film collective producers as do demands from subsidy and broadcasters. Drawing on relevant scholarship and ethnography, this article explores producers' responses to a) the competing imperatives, b) to pressures from subsidy and broadcasters, and c) to perceptions of work following these.

My main argument is three-fold: first, producers have devised mechanisms to circumvent pressures some of which though pragmatic, threaten to undermine the socio-

political significance of film collective cultures in democratic communication. Second, I emphasise the need to revise the theoretical propositions guiding this field to reflect current developments. Third, I suggest further research on the impact of increasing professionalization and commercialisation, on appropriate strategies for self-sustenance and on effective ways of preserving the history of film collectives as part of a shared heritage.

Introduction

Film collectives – also known as film workshops or film cooperatives often lumped together as 'experimental, poetic, underground, ethnic, amateur, counter, non-commodity, working-class, critical [and] artists'' (James 2005, 13) forms of film-making and mostly considered to be relatively independent of state and commercial interests - tend to be associated solely with a social function which consists in prioritising civic values as reflected in observing, describing, explaining, critiquing and analysing historical and contemporary aspects of community and public life with a view to informing and improving our understanding of the world around us (Blanchard and Harvey 1983; Dickinson 1999; Harding 2001; Andersson and Sundholm 2012). Informed by socio-political imperatives, the resultant predominantly documentary work tends to be characterised by broader participation and inclusiveness in its making, and is intended as a corrective to the dominance of mainstream media – public-service and commercial media alike. As such, it is claimed that film collectives demonstrate a peculiar culture of socio-political value in facilitating informed and inclusive civic debate and deliberation in ways that mainstream media have proven unable or unwilling in the wake of ideological and proprietary constraints.

However, my research shows that as socio-political, socio-economic and technological circumstances have gradually changed, other emergent imperatives of a professional, artistic and commercial nature now play an equally key role in the making of documentaries in film collective cultures. The interplay between socio-political imperatives and professional, artistic and commercial ones can be conflicting, thereby pushing film collective producers in different directions. Moreover, producers can be subjected to pressures from subsidy and broadcasters, all of which pose serious problems to producers' work. The ways in which producers respond have not been sufficiently researched.

This article addresses this gap by analysing three key aspects: the response of producers to the contrasting imperatives and to pressures from subsidy and broadcasters, and producers' perceptions of their work following these. I argue that the evolving environment in which producers operate sometimes compels them to prioritise professional, artistic and commercial imperatives over socio-political ones and to give in to pressures from subsidy and broadcasters, a scenario that risks undermining their social function and contradicts claims for their distinctiveness in promoting democratic communication. In view of this empirical evidence, I draw attention to the urgency to update the conceptual framework guiding this field and to future research on the impact of the latest developments in the sector.

Methodology

In a bid to effectively analyse how producers in film collective cultures respond to competing imperatives, cope with demands from subsidy and broadcasters, and perceive their work following these, I draw on perspectives from the political economy of communication approach, critical sociology of cultural production and other relevant scholarship to theorise practice in contemporary collective film-making cultures. This synthesis, coupled with ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2009 and 2011 at five film workshops in Britain and Germany, allows for a comprehensive analysis of the key processes that have informed documentary film production in the respective film collective cultures to date. My ethnographic research consisted of semi-structured qualitative interviews[i], participant observation, and the study of documents and artefacts (including content analysis). For my purposes here and given limited space, I focus only on three film collectives: *Stratham Productions* in Britain, and *West Berlin Collective* and *Nordhausen Productions* in Germany.

I selected these organisations based on longevity (in existence for at least twenty years), claims to a subscription to both a socio-political function and to professional, artistic and commercial values (based on their proclaimed mission and past documentary work), and the receipt of subsidy and/or commissions from broadcasters. I use pseudonyms to refer to each one of them and to the documentary films discussed in compliance with both conventional research ethical standards (particularly anonymity and confidentiality) and the terms under which I was offered 'privileged' access to conduct this research.

It is worth noting that whereas the case studies in this article are not necessarily typical of the collective film-making cultures in both Britain and Germany, they reflect contemporary practice in both contexts as we shall see. More importantly, the underlying political and structural differences between Britain and Germany are neutralised in two ways for my intentions here: first, my objectives in this article are not solely comparative. Second, I focus on the shared factors that have influenced the trajectory of the respective film collective cultures in both countries the most relevant of which are a relatively common social democratic culture, a similar history of the countercultural movement, a growing disenchantment with dominant ideological discourses in public-service and commercial media, and perceived widespread societal injustices among other things.

Theorising film collective cultures

Collective film-making cultures grew out of the workshop movement in the West which itself emerged out of the countercultural period, particularly between the late 1960s and late 1970s. Comprising predominantly film students, political-activists and numerous campaign groups, film collective producers recorded the prevalent political and social concerns at the heart of social movement activity at community, regional, national and international levels, particularly around housing and trade union disputes, nuclear power, environmental issues, the anti-apartheid struggle, opposition to the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights and Feminist movements among others (Dickinson 1999). For instance, established in 1968 in Britain *Amber Films* recorded 'traditional regional working-class communities in the North East, highlighting 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"' (Newsinger 2009, 131). Similarly, *Medienpaedagogikzentrum* (mpz) - founded in 1973 in what was West Germany at the time - engaged primarily with squatting and related issues, labour struggles, environmental concerns and the improvement of school and higher education curricular (Medienpädagogik Zentrum Hamburg e. V.).

By contrast, other film collectives engaged predominantly in distribution and exhibition work. For example, *Angry Arts, Politkino* and *The Other Cinema* in Britain and *Rosta Kino, Kino Arsenal* and *MedienOperative e.V* in former West Germany were the most well-known at the time. The work produced, distributed and exhibited entailed critiques of the established historical and ideological narratives in public communication inherent in mainstream media, offered alternative perspectives on social and political developments, and was circulated through video technology outside of traditional media (Blanchard and Harvey 1983). This derived from two significant developments.

First, mainstream public-service media were monopolised by national governments in Western Europe throughout the 1970s until the early-to-mid 1980s (Murdoch and Golding 2005). Whereas some national governments experimented with public-access television - albeit under tight restrictions (Hollander 1992), critics argued that this further reinforced the marginality of excluded, under-represented, and activist groups and prevented them from gaining broader credibility (Murdoch and Golding 1977). In Britain, for example, although the introduction of the Grant-Aided Workshop Production Declaration in 1982/3 facilitated the commissioning of film collective documentary work by Channel 4 until 1989, only a few film collectives appear to have benefited from this opportunity (Dickinson 1999). Moreover, governments such as that in former West Germany tactfully delayed implementing public-

access television experiments for nearly a decade (Hollander 1992, 11). Overall, the tight restrictions and delay tactics derived from an anxiety that national governments felt these potential experiments would have as political and social tools for mobilisation (ibid.; Home Office 1987).

Second, the mid-1980s ushered in an era in which public-service media underwent rapid and significant changes owing to technological advancement and deregulation with associated issues such as vicious competitiveness and audience segmentation (Murdoch and Golding 2005), all of which compelled such media to cut down on civic programming in a bid to survive under the prevailing conditions. More importantly, the newly deregulated media environment fostered the emergence of commercial media corporations whose ownership was concentrated in a few hands, something that political economists of communication assert can be utilised to exercise control and power over the production and circulation of ideas and beliefs in media programming (Hesmondhalgh 2006). This has two grave repercussions for democratic communication according to the political economy of communication tradition.

Firstly, control and power are employed to bolster the dominance of elite and proprietary interests and values while simultaneously excluding perspectives considered to be outside of what is generally considered to be the norm (Murdoch and Golding 2005). Secondly, control and power not only encourage monopolistic trends, but they also promote the production of populist media products which take the place of 'public affairs programmes, reasoned discussion and […] pluralistic representation' (Curran 2002, 227) all of which are key ingredients in democratic practice. These views, coupled with the exclusion from public communication in mainstream media, have driven film collective cultures over the past decades to provide alternatives to prevailing media systems. In doing so, producers have drawn on social and political theory to advocate 'alternative publics' (Fraser 1992) through which 'counter-hegemonic cultural activity' (O'Connor and Downing 1995, 16) can be undertaken to challenge dominant narratives, distortions and structural inequities. The interaction between the principles guiding such cultural activities and the evolving socio-political, socio-economic and technological circumstances within which collective film-makers operate make for a dynamic context of cultural production.

The dynamism of contemporary film collective cultures

The different imperatives mentioned above orient documentary film production in collective film-making cultures in different ways. I noted above that film collectives have tended to be associated with an exclusively social function which prioritises the promotion of civic values and alternative perspectives through the interrogation and exposition of relevant issues in community and public life. Such expository and questioning work is crucial and distinct given that it might not feature in the mainstream public-service and commercial media. This claim to distinctiveness in the facilitation of democratic practice is what I conceptualise as socio-political imperatives.

Professional imperatives, by contrast, require contemporary film collective producers to prioritise the adoption of conventions that help organise and structure documentaries. Such conventions encompass skills, competence and a good sense of judgement all of which require producers to collect, frame and edit material in such a way as to change it from a mere record of actuality into a form which can be referred to as 'documentary discourse' (Kilborn and Izod 1997, 4). In other words, these conventions enable producers to 'weld various components (words, music, images and sound effects) into an artefact that can have both functional and aesthetic appeal' (ibid.: 12). In doing so, nearly every stage in this process requires serious consideration of ethical issues as reflected in the commitment to the purpose of documentary work, to the funders of such work, to the subjects therein and to the audience for which such work is intended (Gross *et al*. 1988, 6 *cf.* Katz 2003, 334). Other important components of professional imperatives include budgeting, project management, administration, marketing and distribution (Rosenthal 2007).

Artistic imperatives, though difficult to pin down, are broadly understood by collective film-makers as possessing numerous dimensions: the ability to present work in interesting and compelling ways, the ability to demonstrate 'technical competence of the final work, its ambition and originality, its ability to communicate the ideas or feelings of its creators to audiences and the nature and longevity of its impact' (Matarasso 2000, 53), and 'the ability to question, make connections, innovate, problem-solve, communicate, collaborate and [...] reflect critically' (Parker and Sefton-Green *cf.* Oakley, 2009: 4). In sum, artistic imperatives – similar to socio-political ones - drive producers 'to generate novel and useful ideas and solutions to everyday problems and challenges' (McIntyre 2012, 5).

Lastly, commercial imperatives compel producers in collective film-making cultures to identify 'a market that needs to be specifically targeted, but creatively so, as it is likely to be alienated by the aggressive strategies commonly found in [mainstream media]' (Berra

2008, 163). Such a market might constitute 'a small customer group, with similar cultural needs, and personal characteristics, such as age, gender, race, interests, abilities, disabilities, income, or occupations' (ibid.) or comprise audiences whose needs and interests are not catered to by mainstream media. In other cases, the greater the purchasing power of a given audience, the more likely market-oriented production decisions will dictate the nature and content of documentary work. In essence, such a market, according to Berra, should be of sufficient size to be profitable and sustainable, should distinguish itself from the mass market and have the potential of manageable growth by providing opportunities for new companies to succeed based on instinctive knowledge of the market rather than pure financial acumen (2008, 164).

Sociologists of cultural production argue critically that formulaic cultural practices and commercial interests promote the making of standardised and bland cultural work geared towards profit maximisation (McIntyre 2012), something that is clearly out of tune with artistic and socio-political imperatives which tend to prioritise the making of novel and relevant symbolic outputs and aesthetic experiences that attempt to address the needs and interests of community and public life. This raises the question as to how contemporary film collective producers go about their work whilst operating within a mesh of mechanised cultural practices and commerce-driven motivations. In addition, the receipt of subsidy and particular commissions from broadcasters - though mostly intended to facilitate the production and circulation of cultural work that is aesthetically pleasing and socially relevant but may not otherwise be commercially viable - can sometimes constrict producers' independence owing to certain conditions and/or restrictions attached to it.

Contrasting imperatives: interplays and concessions

We have seen that film collective producers devoted themselves to socio-political objectives from the outset. On its inception in 1976, for example, *Stratham Productions* targeted particularly three local communities in London with a particular focus on housing problems. Founded in 1978, *West Berlin Collective* addressed predominantly the radical left-wing scene in (West) Berlin with propagandistic material subverting the capitalistic system while *Nordhausen Productions*, established in 1979, made documentary work that primarily supported the environmental and urbanisation movement in Berlin.

However, owing to changing socio-political, socio-economic and technological circumstances from the mid-to-late 1980s onwards, these film collectives began to pursue

larger audiences and to document wider subject matter in response to the shifting dynamics in society. Producers strove to address the needs and interests of disparate, previously un-catered to audience groups. Whilst this move was mostly driven by socio-political imperatives, it was also motivated by the desire to tap into the niche markets that the new audience groups provided in tune with commercial imperatives. The move was also intended to strengthen documentary film production in collective film-making cultures by adapting self-sustaining strategies outside the confines of the dominant media industries and funding structures.

Stratham Productions

I noted above that from 1976 *Stratham Productions* targeted three local communities in London in an effort to address prevailing housing problems and associated issues like homelessness and squatting as Charles – the founder - recollects:

> For as long as I can remember, the three were […] synonymous with deprivation, crime, housing problems, squatting, immigration etc But the way [local] authorities talked about these things made you think the problems created themselves. Often you could trace that back to [the failings of the authorities]. That became very clear [in our documentaries].

An illustrative example is a documentary I studied during my ethnographic fieldwork at the company entitled *Home Streets At The East End*. My analysis of the content of the film showed that producers tackled housing problems in one of the three communities that culminated in widespread protests. Many community members recorded in the film held the housing authorities accountable for these problems, pointing to what they perceived to be inefficient and poor housing management given that many houses were often left empty for prolonged periods prior to redevelopment. But at the same time, squatters were being evicted without being offered appropriate alternatives, a situation that led to disturbances. Overall, the film records the living situation of squatters in different neighbourhoods and documents some of the riots that erupted as a result of attempted evictions by the police. Much of the behind-the-scenes work of the Squatters' Union which strove to prevent the evictions and negotiated deals with the local authorities on behalf of the squatters features prominently in the film.

From the mid-1980s onwards, *Stratham Productions* addressed wider audiences in response to the pressing themes of the day and in part enabled by funding from Channel Four as revealed by my analysis of the company's documentary catalogue and as reflected in Charles' remarks from the interview:

> Obviously the kind of films we've made over the years have tended to focus on what's currently happening in London. So, with those kind of films, we've tried to reach more people. It's not that we lost interest in [the three initial local communities]. In the early days of Channel Four, the kind of agenda of Channel 4 was much more about programmes that might challenge popular assumptions. They might have been radical ways of looking at problems. They might have been opening up subjects that had never been talked about or simply exposing things that certain people didn't want exposed for whichever reasons. As long as they fulfilled those criteria, Channel Four was willing to fund them because there was a diverse audience for them.

The scope of themes *Stratham Productions* engaged with henceforth included animal rights, urbanisation and environmental issues among others. In particular, the theme of urban regeneration during this period became quite prominent in the wake of plans to redevelop the Docklands in East and Southeast London. Identifying this as a pressing issue as stated by Charles in the interview, producers highlighted what they perceived as the benefits and limitations of the redevelopment plans, a move that I argue harmonised with socio-political imperatives.

On the one hand, according to Charles, the regeneration of the Docklands appealed to many people in the area not only in light of the potential improvement of the physical setting and the economy, but also the creation of diverse social amenities for local communities. This was not surprising considering that until that point the area had experienced relatively high levels of poverty and deprivation. On the other hand, however, Charles added that some people voiced their concern that they could be driven out of their neighbourhoods, especially if it turned out that they could not afford to pay the high rents demanded for the redeveloped housing. Others were anxious that the heritage of the area would be irrevocably destroyed and as such, were resentful of the redevelopment plans.

Addressing these complex circumstances in the documentary *Annexation Of The Docklands (1987)* when redevelopment was underway, my examination of the film found that producers outlined the history of the docklands, highlighting its initial status as one of the most prominent industrial ports in the world. The film provided a wider context of how the docklands became defunct in the late 1960s, exploring the gradual changes in (global) trade patterns that eventually fostered the decline of industrialisation and the impact this had on the surrounding area. The examination revealed further that many of the accounts in the film were provided by community groups with which producers closely worked, interspersed with interviews with local authorities and former port workers. The documentary particularly focused on the initial period when opposition to the redevelopment plans was at its peak.

Overall, based on Charles' interview account and on my analysis of the content of the film, it can be said that the timeliness of *Annexation Of The Docklands* pointed to how collective film-makers at *Stratham Productions*, in collaboration with communities, former port workers and local authorities, responded to a pressing theme in alignment with socio-political imperatives. Professional imperatives were displayed in the sense that extensive research into this relatively new phenomenon of urban regeneration in the 1980s was conducted over a lengthy period of time, yielding material which was combined with lived experiences in the communities and skilfully assembled into a 'knowledge-enhancing' documentary (Kilborn and Izod 1997). Similarly, artistic imperatives were reflected in the technique used to portray the subject matter in an innovative and entertaining way in an effort to heighten the impact of the film. A case in point was the visual representation of forms of employment such as dockers and ship chandlers that no longer exist.

Additionally, subsidy from the British Film Institute (BFI) and funding from Channel Four also contributed significantly to the making of *Annexation Of The Docklands*, thereby demonstrating a successful interplay between the different imperatives on the one hand, and BFI subsidy and Channel Four funding on the other for the first time in the history of *Stratham Productions*. All in all, my study of documentary evidence, coupled with the semi-structured qualitative interview I conducted with Charles as well as the field notes I took as a participant observer at *Stratham Productions* demonstrated that this is how the company has tended to work to date.

West Berlin Collective

The *West Berlin Collective* aimed to reach the left-wing scene in Berlin from the late 1970s onwards, particularly through 'indulging in agitation and propaganda' as Ralf – one of the founding members – remarks in the semi-structured interview I conducted with him:

> [Back then] I would say that we produced films that reflected the views of [the left-wing scene]. This was particularly so because we made films as a part of the social movement. We were definitely partisan in that we indulged in agitation and propaganda which was the declared goal

This is best illustrated by *Stamp Out The Capitalists (1982)* - a documentary I reviewed during my ethnographic fieldwork at the collective in order to gain an enhanced understanding of the film-making culture at the time. My review found that the film recorded events on the streets of (West) Berlin before and during an official visit of Ronald Reagan (the former U.S President) to (West) Germany in 1982 after attending a NATO summit in Bonn. Prior to Reagan's visit in Berlin, squatters were evicted from various disused buildings

across the city, a scenario that led to widespread discontent within the left-wing scene in general, and the Squatters' movement in particular. The left-wing scene therefore rallied support to protest against the evictions at what famously became the 'Anti-Reagan Demonstration'. Furthermore, *Stamp Out The Capitalists* did not use commentary but a passive, observational style letting events speak for themselves. In doing so, it juxtaposed the 'sanitised' images on mainstream television showing the conference venue and participants in Bonn with the images on the streets of the mass demonstration capturing special police forces beating up demonstrators in the vicinity of the barriers that fenced off the inner-city where Reagan's entourage was presumed to be.

According to Ralf's interview account, *Stamp Out The Capitalists* was popular with the left-wing scene because it was propaganda proper intended to serve agitation purposes. As Ralf's comments below indicate, this mode of documentary film production at *West Berlin Collective* persisted until the late 1980s when producers transitioned from addressing exclusively the radical left-wing scene in Berlin to pursuing larger audiences in an effort to respond to the compelling issues of the day, particularly the perceived demerits of the capitalist system:

> We don't make films that way today. Although we are still part of the social movement, we operate differently I guess due to our personal development over the years and partly as a result of professionalism […] 1988 was really the turning point before and during the IMF demo [An anti-imperialist demonstration against the summit convened by the International Monetary Fund in Berlin in 1988]. So, we filmed scenes on the streets and showed rough edits to people in parks and pubs. Although the quality was really very poor, some people found [the edits] quite interesting. We tried to get discussions going by putting [the events on the streets] into a general political perspective, you know, that capitalism was spiralling out of control. But it didn't really work the way we wanted so we gave that up (Ralf).

Ralf appears to attribute the significant shift in tackling broader themes that respond to the concerns and interests of diverse, wider audiences to 'personal development' and 'professionalism'. From an organisational theory standpoint, the former can be understood in the context of improving self-awareness of one's work and defining or redefining one's identification with such work over a given period of time (Meyer 1997). This is vindicated by Ralf's retrospective hint at the realisation that making propagandistic films did not always generate the desired results elsewhere – both in the interview and in informal conversations. As explained above, professionalism can be viewed as a commitment to ethical considerations and conventions required to arrange ideas and subject matter into

'documentary discourse' in an effort to explain and analyse problems in public life with a view to seeking solutions. These developments lead me to argue that the seamless interaction between 'personal development' and 'professionalism' on the one side, and subsidy and funding from broadcasters on the other were instrumental in enabling the shift.

To illustrate this, Ralf named three documentaries in the interview all of which I explored: *Rogue Imperialism* (that unearthed the problems associated with advanced capitalism in the public interest), *The Storm of Freedom Is Brewing* (which captured the slow but steady changes that were taking place in former East Berlin in the late 1980s that eventually culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall), and *Steelworks Alarm* (that presented an ethnographic take on the events that unfolded as part of a trade union protest at an engineering plant that was destined for privatisation). Ralf added that both *Rogue Imperialism* and *The Storm of Freedom Is Brewing* were showed in cinemas while *Steelworks Alarm* was bought by a television station. My involvement in documentary film-making at *West Berlin Collective* as a participant observer, combined with my exploration of documentary evidence demonstrated that producers today make even more diverse documentary work that speaks to a more 'varied' audience than in the earlier years, a development that is substantiated by Ralf's interview remarks:

> I wouldn't say we've got a particular audience that we address. It's rather varied. Our educational films fit in more with young people in schools and tertiary institutions, but also school dropouts with a last chance to obtain some form of qualification. [Our political films] are more suited to charities, campaign groups and the kind of people they work with […] We don't really have a clearly defined audience now like we did when we made films for [the left-wing scene]

Nordhausen Productions

On its inception in 1979 in (West) Berlin, *Nordhausen Productions* engaged in the making of documentary work that primarily supported the environmental and local urban social movements as my ethnographic fieldwork at the company discovered. Social photography and publishing were part of its repertoire which – based on my survey of accessible archival material at the company and on the account from the semi-structured interview I carried out with Gerhard the founder – encompassed mainly:

> campaigning for [less resourced] tenants in increasingly gentrifying neighbourhoods in and around Berlin using video, taking photographs of dilapidated buildings […] of comrades arrested by police for disruption at demonstrations and publishing fliers and posters for [fellow social movement activists] for use at protests and demonstrations.

In response to the evolving socio-political and socio-economic circumstances from the mid-1980s onwards, *Nordhausen Productions* underwent a major change. With the demise of communism and the subsequent collapse of the former German Democratic Republic, producers moved to Thuringia for three reasons: the precariousness of the film collective culture in Berlin, the prospect of greener pastures in the newly formed broadcasting landscape in Thuringia, and the potential fulfilment of an ambition as Gerhard recollected in the interview:

> In the late 80s things [in the film collective culture] in Berlin were bleak and by the [early] 90s, our work was hitting rock bottom. For us it was a period of anxiety and uncertainty despite loving what we did. But in 92/93, we became aware that public-service broadcasting in Thuringia was in its fledgling stages and the prospects of working as documentary film-makers looked quite good. We moved there and were immediately offered commissions by CGB [a regional public-service broadcaster] to cover events in particular regions in the state of Thuringia. At the time, programmes were broadcast only during weekdays, from Monday to Friday. But then broadcasts were introduced on Saturdays and later on Sundays as well. This necessitated more personnel to fill the extra broadcast formats. Since this meant producing more programmes, we were asked by CGB if we would contemplate creating an independent production company which we did. We had always thought of making the transition to creating a semi-professional independent production company in which we would try to hit two birds with one stone: Get social justice issues and environmental concerns into mainstream media as much as possible for a broader audience and be able to make a sustainable living out of it.

A synthesis of insights gained into the documentary production culture at the company from analysing documents and artefacts and from the interview and informal conversations with Gerhard suggests that this development transformed *Nordhausen Productions* into a hybrid organisation which wore two hats: as an independent production company and as a film collective. This meant that producers made a range of broadcast programmes for CGB that covered numerous themes and targeted a much wider audience while simultaneously pursuing political and campaign documentary work around social justice themes. However, a closer examination revealed that this set up was ridden with tensions in that producers mostly prioritised the former because it was their bread and butter and harmonised with professional and commercial imperatives as opposed to the latter which was not always commercially viable and as such, relegated to the edges. The fact that producers ‘strictly don’t mix the two at all’, as Gerhard noted, had to do mainly with broadcaster requirements which I discuss in the next section.

Despite these tensions, many documentary films I studied at the company pointed to a mostly smooth interaction between the different imperatives. An illustrative example was the

production of the documentary *Safer in Exile than at Home (2006)* which narrated the story of a German Jew named Karl who had lived in Thuringia and fled the Nazi pogroms in Germany during the 1930s, spending more than five years on the run in Europe before being forced to take refuge in a dictatorial state in the Caribbean. What is interesting about the documentary is the artful assemblage of historical accounts, archival material, photographs and the dramatic portraiture of Karl's personality. The film comes across as exploratory, educative, dramatic and tragic yet entertaining all at the same time, something that made it a huge commercial success as Gerhard emphasised in the interview. Further still, Gerhard's account indicated that professional imperatives were reflected in the routine arrangements that included contacting Karl in the Caribbean, doing the obligatory research into the subject matter, writing the funding proposal, organising the shoots and postproduction. The exploration of the lived experiences of German Jews through Karl's story in an artful, entertaining and skilful way, I argue, points to a successful navigation between socio-political, artistic, professional and commercial imperatives.

The negotiation of autonomy and perceptions of work

Whereas subsidy and funding from broadcasters help to cover production costs and producers' remunerations in collective film-making cultures, the strings attached to them can sometimes impact the nature and content of documentary work in ways that constrain producers' autonomy. Charles of *Stratham Productions*, for example, remarked that subsidy was 'about control' and that having 'a viewpoint that is different to the one of the funders' meant one would not get funded. The fact that Charles does not 'want to do anything just to get funding' renders subsidy virtually out of the company's reach. In a similar vein, broadcasters might exert influence not only on the format and style of documentary films including the approaches employed and the themes treated, but also on the function such work might fulfil (Kilborn and Izod 1997; Rosenthal 2007).

As hinted at above, my ethnographic fieldwork revealed that the main reason why campaign documentary work around social justice issues at *Nordhausen Productions* played a marginal role was because it was 'disturbing' for CGB and often, did not yield any income as Gerhard divulged. In the case of *West Berlin Collective*, Ralf intimated that 'mainstream media find [the collective's] work far too controversial and provocative to be disseminated to their audiences' implying that such work was perhaps not comforting and popular enough despite its perceived socio-political relevance. Still at *Stratham Productions*, producers' work was allegedly declined by the BBC on the grounds that such work was filmed in obsolete

formats and as such, was not 'broadcast standard'. On other occasions where producers employed conventional broadcast formats, Charles claimed the BBC raised other arguments not to have to broadcast that work[ii].

This begs the question how film collective producers negotiate their independence amidst such tensions. Based on my analysis of producers' accounts from the interviews and informal conversations, on the examination of documentary evidence, and on my observations as an ethnographer at each of the case study organisations, I found that collective film-makers have gradually developed mechanisms to confront these constraints. Producers at *Stratham Productions*, for instance, have adopted a series of cost-saving production techniques to circumvent control from subsidy which involve 'using [their] skills and resources to do other things like [...] running workshops', reusing outdated equipment and acquiring 'independent commissions' with no strings attached from abroad. At the time of my fieldwork at the company, two fairly small independent commissions had been secured to mine, digitise and preserve the company's media archive.

With regard to influence from broadcasters, collective documentary producers at *Stratham Productions* work around broadcaster restrictions by making '5-10 minute clips' for campaign purposes which are then posted online while simultaneously 'get[ting] a lot of [their] films shown at screenings and festivals, especially at the BFI' as well as selling DVDs online. At *West Berlin Collective*, I found that producers circumvent broadcaster control in two ways. First, they broadcast many of their documentaries at Berlin's popular public-access television - *Berliner Open Access TV* - which tends not to interfere with producers' work provided such work fulfils the basic technical and ethical (and sometimes artistic) programming standards of the station.

Second, producers utilise their skills and equipment to make non-corporate films as a means to diversify their income base. Many such films featured in exhibitions, presentations, public-service announcements and artistic installations. An illustrative example hereof included exhibition films for a 'refugee museum centre' in Berlin which was the first port of call for refugees fleeing Communist East Germany between 1953 and 1990. In regular intervals, *West Berlin Collective* is commissioned to make films about the museum centre's educational programmes and other special events with a view to maintaining 'a [visual] record of the causes, process and consequences of the inner-German division'. At the time of writing, the collective had digitised about one-third of its entire media archive with a view to conserving 'the rich and not so well-known history of social movement activity in Berlin'.

At *Nordhausen Productions*, my findings suggested that as long as producers toed CGB's line by producing work that was 'dressed up' in conventional broadcast formats, did not stir controversy and had some relevance to the region of Thuringia, they seemed to enjoy a considerable amount of autonomy. This is best illustrated by *Safer in Exile than at Home* discussed above where producers' interests coincided with those of the CGB, something that gave the former leeway in the production of the film. Gerhard noted in the interview that both parties wanted to make a film about this extraordinary story since it had special relevance to Thuringia and touched upon the broader historical context of the situation in which German Jews found themselves at the time. It is worth noting that producers at the company now utilise their skills and resources to make mostly corporate industrial productions as a means of diversifying their remuneration sources owing to declining commissions from CGB which is struggling as a result of successive budget cuts. One might argue that not only do the alternative sources of earning income help producers circumvent the various forms of control, but they also cross-subsidise the making of socio-political documentaries.

Following competing imperatives and pressures from subsidy and broadcasters, I now analyse how these collective film-makers perceive their work – both from an individual and organisational perspective. This analysis is based on the collation of data obtained from the review of accessible documents and artefacts, accounts from the semi-structured interviews I conducted as well as the notes I recorded as a participant observer at the case study organisations. Four recurrent aspects shaped producers' perceptions the most: impact, versatility, having the right hunch, and a high degree of emotional investment in work.

To begin with, producers revelled in the pleasure derived from the impact of their work, particularly where such work 'influence[d] people or politics', 'change[d] situations on the ground' and had 'an effect on public discussion'. This desire to engage in work that acts as a corrective to the many ills in society despite the considerable challenges with which producers are confronted, I argue, points to a commitment to socio-political imperatives. Versatility is another aspect that producers perceived as being central to their work. There was an appreciation of the multiple facets of collective documentary film-making ranging from 'researching, being able to write bits of text, reviewing' to 'the excitement and tension day in, day out' to being able 'to switch from one thing to another as quickly as possible', all of which are associated with socio-political and professional imperatives. This varied nature of work can be seen to open up a wide variety of experiences which might generate enthusiasm and dynamism as opposed to boring and monotonous work.

The third aspect – having the right intuition – equally played a key role for collective film-makers. I learnt that they derived satisfaction from learning 'that there [was] actual demand for' their work and that such work was recognised as aesthetically 'interesting' and 'relevant' by others all of which vindicated the fact that producers were on the right track, particularly so if that work also sold. This tended to be the case where there was a smooth interplay between the different imperatives on the one hand, and subsidy and/or broadcaster support on the other. The fourth aspect concerned a high emotional investment in work. There was mention of 'never ever going to swap [collective film-making] for anything else', of 'the constant fear' of how their documentaries would be received, and of the chronic lack of sufficient resources which fostered the frustration of 'always hav[ing] to hit the brick wall'. I argue that this close attachment to work points to a sense of calling that is of service to society and harmonises with socio-political, artistic and professional imperatives. Overall, it was interesting to note how virtually all the producers claimed enjoyment and gratification from their work despite the numerous tensions, contradictions and problems with which they are faced.

Reconceptualising film collective cultures: Toward a third sector?

These perceptions, coupled with the examination of producers' routines above, suggest that practice in film collective cultures has moved on meaning that there is an urgency to update the theoretical propositions guiding this realm. Whereas film collective cultures during the countercultural era never assumed a singular identity, this research suggests that contemporary collective film-making operates on the principle and identity of the 'third sector' that encompasses non-governmental organisations [...] which principally reinvest their surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives (Wigglesworth and Kendall 2000). Such organisations attempt to fill the gap left by the public-service and private/commercial sectors which have failed to adequately address the needs of the public, and in doing so foster institutional diversity, enhance innovation and to some extent, inhibit monopolistic tendencies by adding a sphere of self-organisation alongside that of the state and the market (Anheier 2002).

The distinctiveness of the third sector derives from the fact that it foregrounds the delivery of services tailored to the specific needs of members of civil society (sometimes in partnership with the public sector) in ways that the public and private/commercial sectors are unable or unwilling to (ibid.). We have seen that the case studies examined in this article demonstrate the characteristics of the third sector: they cross-subsidise documentary work to

further socio-political causes albeit to differing degrees, make challenging, expository and inclusive work that mainstream media shy away from for some of the reasons discussed above, and constitute a space that attempts to remedy the increasing monopolistic grip of dominant media over what is produced and circulated in society. It is in this sense that I stress the need to reconceptualise contemporary film collective cultures.

Conclusion

We have seen that contemporary collective film-makers have tended to successfully navigate between socio-political, artistic, professional and commercial imperatives on the one hand, and demands from subsidy and broadcasters on the other mainly by devising mechanisms to try and safeguard against tensions and control. Cross-subsidisation and access to a range of options to circulate work are two key such mechanisms. The former can be seen not only as signalling a high level of pragmatism which helps ensure survival in the marketplace, but also as pointing to an increasing commercialisation of this underfunded sector. Increasing commercialisation, one might argue, can potentially distract producers from core documentary work, something that would threaten to undermine the socio-political value of collective film-making cultures. We have also seen that film collective producers employ professional norms to guide them in the meaning-making process in much the same way as mainstream media workers do and that some collaborate closely with public-service broadcasters. All this counters much of the portrayal of collective film-making cultures as inherently unprofessional, amateurish and autonomous of commercial interests.

This article draws on these insights to argue for a rethinking of the conceptual framework guiding film collective cultures in light of a move toward the identity of the third sector – a space of self-organisation that strives to integrate economic and social goals to further socio-political change. This move flags up three aspects that require further research: First, it would be interesting to explore how increasing professionalization and commercialisation impact the ethos and hitherto practice in collective film-making cultures and ascertaining whether there is a danger the field would lose its socio-political identity and distinctiveness? Second, it would be crucial to pursue research that developed appropriate business models and funding initiatives that enabled companies in the sector to operate on a stable economic base while simultaneously honouring their socio-political function. Third, there is a need to investigate how the media archives of collective film-making organisations could be digitised more widely with a view to preserving social movement history as part of a shared cultural heritage that would also inform traditional film studies.

Notes

[i] It is important to mention here that I also obtained some of the findings from relatively informal conversations with the collective film-makers, especially during lunch breaks or travel journeys to and from shoots and screenings.

[ii] An illustrative example concerns a documentary called *Random Incarceration (2009)* that I reviewed. It explored the notion of 'extraordinary rendition' whereby perceived fundamentalist Muslim suspects around the world are pursued and captured by the U.S government in its 'war on terror'. According to Charles' interview account, the documentary was rejected by the BBC on the basis that it 'was too biased' and as such, 'did not fulfil the requirements of the documentary genre', although it recorded favourable reviews at a number of screenings and high online DVD sales.

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