

James Leggott, *In Fading Light: The Films of the Amber Collective* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2020), pp. 268, 21 illus., ISBN 978-1-78920-650-0 (hb), £110.

Considering the Amber film and photography collective first came together in 1968, it has taken a remarkably long time for a book on Amber to appear. As time has gone on the task of chronicling their output has, of course, become more formidable, and James Leggott can be commended for taking up the challenge and producing an illuminating retrospective of what has been recognised by James Chapman as one of the most unique and distinctive bodies of film in the history of British documentary (see p. 33).

According to Leggott, Amber has left occasional and vanishing traces within the scholarly histories of British film and documentary culture (p. 294), although there has been some innovative recent work from scholars in the field of visual culture and social sciences. Leggott considers whether Amber may have flown under the critical radar as a result of being perceived as 'regional' (p. 324), but in histories of British film culture Amber are frequently cited as a pre-eminent member of the cross-regional (film and video) 'workshop movement' of the 1980s, despite long predating the other groups, and typically without being 'taken up' for further discussion. In this sense they may have been a 'victim' of Murray Martin's success as a key player in driving through the national negotiations with ACTT, C4, the BFI and the Regional Arts Associations that enabled the Workshop Agreement and the consequent access of radical, Black, feminist and community-rooted filmmaking to national broadcast opportunity through Channel 4's *Eleventh Hour* and *People to People* slots.

One of the challenges in writing about Amber is their sheer longevity and the prolific nature of their output. Leggott has chosen a structure that is more or less chronological but which also groups together particular strands, such as 1980s 'Current Affairs and Investigations' (Chapter 3), the Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen Films (1983 to 1994, Chapter 4), and drama features (Chapters 5-6). By way of providing a rationale for his structure and methodology, Leggott adeptly anticipates several

potential lines of criticism in his introduction (which makes the reviewer's job difficult)! We are forewarned that the focus is 'on the output, as opposed to... [Amber's] organizational or political principles [as a collective]' (p. 15). But whilst very insightful in terms of its textual analysis of the output – which is bookended by scrupulous research and historiography - one thing which did feel somewhat lacking was a sense of the reception of the films by audiences and critics. How, and to what extent, did the output resonate? In 2006 (p. 324) Jeremy Isaacs recalled (and quoted verbatim) a letter he had received twenty years earlier (as first Chief Executive of Channel 4) from Malcolm Laver, a Romany man living on the dole in a council house; a self-described 'virtual recluse', he was induced to write as a result of identifying so strongly with the characters and story of *Seacoal*, and listed Bruckner, Wagner, Sibelius, Mozart, Channel 4 and BBC-2 as his 'friends'. Granted, such feedback is (as rare as) gold dust. But what about the critics? One of the most intriguing moments in the book is when Leggott grapples with a *New York Times* reviewer's assessment of *The Scar* (1997), along with *The Full Monty* (Cattaneo, 1997) and *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1996) showing as part of a package of eleven contemporary British films at the Film Society of Lincoln Center), as 'acknowledging the social and economic dynamism of post-Thatcherite England' (p. 235). That the reviewer could apparently fail to detect the high degree of scepticism and ambivalence towards the ostensibly empowering possibilities of 'creative' regeneration in *The Scar* suggests that it is the story of *personal* regeneration and of struggle against adversity (i.e. the trajectory of the central protagonist May) that 'translates' across cultures and territories; the social conditions that underlay the struggle and create the adversity do not. What was ironic about this particular example was that the film, like the other Amber feature-length dramas that form its 'Coalfield Trilogy' (*Like Father*, 2001 and *Shooting Magpies*, 2005), was about the human cost of regeneration.

The best compliment that can be paid to this book is that it entirely transformed my understanding of Amber Films, having previously considered them to be essentially a radical off-shoot of the Griersonian documentary tradition, capturing the vanishing industries and regional aesthetics of the North-East of England (akin to Philip Donnellan's early work for the BBC). Amber's work can instead

be characterised by its complexity – Leggott finds that in *Seacoal* (1985) and *In Fading Light* (1989), for example, ‘the...claim to realism does not derive merely from its commitment to representational accuracy but from its complex, multiperspective depiction of a work practice and the community around it’. The attention to both form and content here is crucial, and in fact this is one thread running through the study – the ‘tension, or dialogue, between a commitment to authentic and responsible representation of people, places and experiences, and an ongoing experiment in artistic documentation’ (p. 16). The experimental structure and presentational strategies of *T Dan Smith* and several other Amber films are fascinating and positively postmodern. It is also worth noting that a feminist thread that runs through much of their later work, and through feature-length dramas *Seacoal* and *The Scar*, which belies their reputation for constructing a working-class identity based on industrial labour and masculinity (see p. 36).

As Leggott notes, the umbrella term ‘independent’ filmmaking could cover anything from low-budget and traditional documentary or narrative traditions (e.g. most of Amber’s work) to avant-garde approaches that sought to attack commercial or filmic illusionism (p. 37). In interviews Amber have acknowledged that their initial work was somewhat out of step with the ‘deconstructive’ turn in film theory and practice of the 1980s. But many of Amber’s documentaries do bear evidence of the problematization of representation that was a hallmark of the ‘Brechtian’ mode of working-class documentaries of the (broader) era like *The Nightcleaners* (Berwick Street Film Collective, 1975), despite having very little in common with them aesthetically. And like the Black Audio Film Collective, Amber operated at the intersection of photography and film, and produced work for both the gallery space and the television screen.

Rather than a history of Amber as a social formation, James Leggott has created a scholarly but accessible guide to their output over a fifty-year period, which is likely to be a foundational text for those who wish to undertake further scholarly work on the collective.

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