

Hunting, Fishing, & Shooting the Working Classes

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With the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1984-85 miners strike upon us a certain amount of attention rehashing and probably remystifying that pivotal period in UK politics can be expected. Now consigned by the mainstream media safely to the past, moreover, the strike seems fair game for packaging in the heritage industry's procession of spectacles trivialising and sanitising historical significance. Quite how it could be spun to suit New Labour's threadbare corporate Cool Britannia formulations remains to be seen – especially given the preceding demoralisation of the miners as the 'enemy within'. True, local areas most affected at the time and since should prove less amenable to such calumnies – yet, for example, while the combination of 'living history' with nostalgia persists at the annual Durham Miners' Gala (albeit with dwindling attendances), this heartland of militant mining culture¹ also hosts the original industrial theme park at nearby Beamish. Of course, a wide range of more faithful records of the 1984-5 events also exist in the public domain in the form of various archives and publications, but these tend to be created by and for specific constituencies and rarely impinge on general awareness.

One exception is Jeremy Deller's artwork *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), involving a full-scale re-enactment of the iconic confrontation between pickets and police at the South Yorkshire village and cokeworks. Mobilising massed ranks of military hobbyists and remaining participants from both sides of the June 1984 clash, Deller questioned the role of memory, documentation and media in personal and national history². But whatever value is ascribed to such enterprises, questions of the 'legacy' of the strike and the wider upheavals in British society it exemplified had already entered the popular imagination via cinematic treatments of the consequences of 1980s deindustrialisation. Here the social-realist tradition continues to provide visual narratives which take seriously the problems and possibilities of the everyday lives of ordinary working-class people, based on purportedly accurate accounts of lived experience which resist the commercial imperatives of more obviously recuperative genres like soap operas and 'reality TV'. Now, with the prospect of mass unemployment again looming – in addition to the working poor of increasingly casualised, insecure work patterns and impoverishment of substantial swathes of the population in the meantime – it seems pertinent to take stock. What follows sketches the patchy tradition of UK social-realism before considering a particularly consistent exponent – the Amber collective – whose 40th anniversary is also this year.

The Ambiguous Real

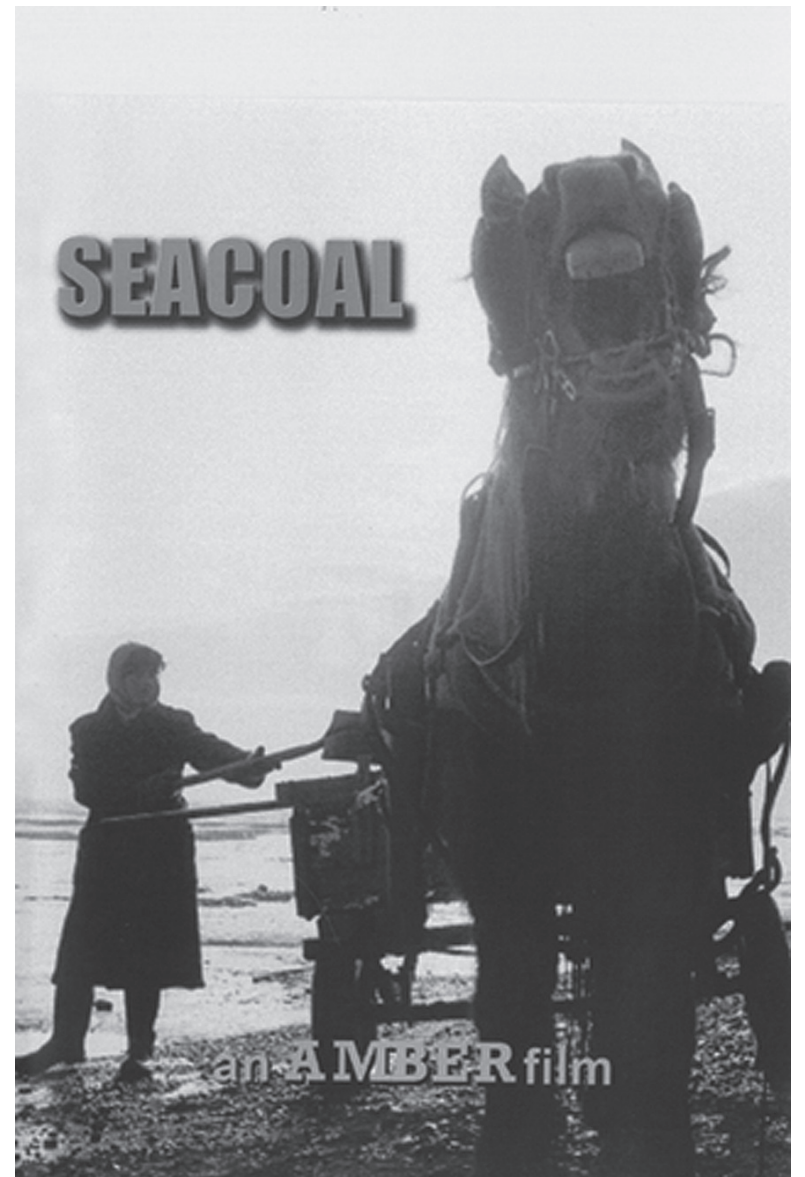
British social-realist film-making originated in the 1930s documentary movement's desire for the cinema to play a positive role in society beyond entertainment for profit. To its leading figure, John Grierson, the "creative interpretation of actuality" allowed the scientific capture of living patterns beneficial for state planning and control, educating those in charge and artistically enhancing a public sense of national unity – especially during the Second World War. The paternalism, patronisation and elitism of this vision, along with the intrusive middle-class voyeuristic tourism of Mass Observation's sociological-anthropological recording projects, still haunt the descendants of these traditions³ – who generally echo the humanist responses of Humphrey Jennings and other documentary directors of the time that their

aesthetic strategies were supposed to represent the lives of the objects of the camera's gaze so that the films 'belonged' to those portrayed, who otherwise remained invisible⁴.

Nevertheless, British realism sunk further into complacent conservatism in the postwar welfare state consensus which did, however, permit fractions of working-class youth into higher education and the cultural sector – whereupon a generation of Angry Young Men railed against the multiple alienations of 1950s mass bureaucratic society and consumerism. Meanwhile the international success and acclaim of Italian neorealist cinema's tragic, monumental portraits of lower-class characters transfixed in poverty helped prompt New Waves across Europe – including the highly successful Northern 'kitchen-sink' films of the 1960s which dramatised masculine dissatisfaction with the drudgeries of home, community and working life⁵. Then, when the 'swinging sixties' bewitched subsequent domestic cinema and spawned countless avant-garde and countercultural currents, socially-conscious film-makers like Ken Loach and Alan Clarke migrated into hard-edged 1970s 'public service' television drama, dissecting the dark underbelly of the steadily unravelling social-democratic settlement finally laid to rest by Thatcherism.

Amid widespread intellectual disorientation accompanying the Conservatives' brutal structural adjustments, 1980s British cinema is best characterised as predominantly escapist – whether to other times and places, or visiting the 'margins' of a political landscape where collective issues were rendered purely private personal problems ripe for coercive managerial or therapeutic intervention now that there was 'no such thing as society'. Those film-makers working within broadly realist paradigms heightened and twisted their characterisations and narratives to surreal degrees; delved into dreams and fantasies searching for the hope or pleasure apparently absent given prevailing conditions; and sought hitherto neglected milieus whose position, identity or culture was sufficiently visibly distinct from failing respectable lifestyles to offer novel routes for aspiration and social mobility. Most of all, long-shunned but eternally popular Hollywood genre conventions were resuscitated throughout the decade, offering cautionary tales of individual transcendence to console progressive film-makers and audiences alike.

Despite a welcome widening of perspectives from which experience might be considered 'authentic', however, the 1980s postmodern play of commodified differences and stylistic gymnastics couldn't indefinitely divert attention from intensifying economic inequality and the persistent chronic material deprivation of millions in the 1990s. Official discourse preferred fashionable sophistry concerning an abject 'underclass' socially-self-excluded from buying into credit-bubble consumerism, but established film-makers like Loach and Mike Leigh emphatically reaffirmed the blatant continued salience of social class, even if its co-ordinates were once again cut adrift from secure wages⁶. Other more visually and structurally innovative films variously glossed their honest 'miserabilism' with surrealism (e.g. *Trainspotting*, dir. Danny Boyle, 1995), expressionism (e.g. *Nil By Mouth*, dir. Gary Oldman, 1997)⁷, or – benefitting from New Labour rebranding – heritage nostalgia (e.g. *Brassed Off*, 1996, dir. Mark Herman) and sentimental manipulation and wish-fulfilment (*The Full Monty*, dir. Peter Cattaneo, 1997⁸; *Billy Elliott*, dir. Stephen Daldry, 2000), occasionally yielding box-office bonanzas.



These trends have continued across the millennium, though with a few new directors more confidently experimenting with social-realism, expression and genre in the 'independent' sector where funding is just as precarious as career prospects elsewhere⁹. Often themselves from humble backgrounds witnessing the damage to the social fabric, they tend to resist pandering to mainstream commercial/political/middle-class archetypes by demonising or romanticising the contemporary lower-classes. Instead more subtle and complex evocations of working-class social adaptation to hardship grope for germs of the creative solidarity capable, one day, of providing a basis for a decent workable future¹⁰. Paradoxically, unhinged from the heroic dignified menace of men's industrial labour, latent questions of social reproduction thus re-emerge from behind the means of production. And, as it happens, Amber had already been seeking hope in the face of such adversity in North East England, albeit less troubled by postmarxist and postmodernist prognostications.

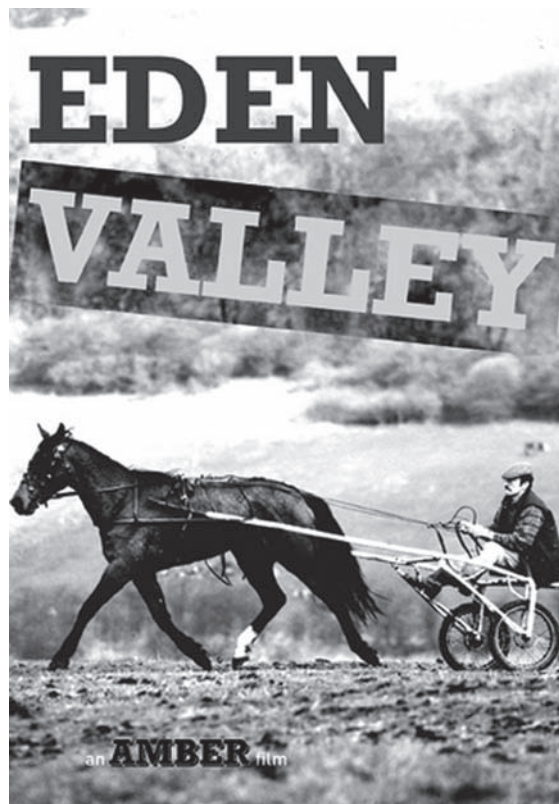
Amber Dexterity

Amber's original collectivists moved from London to Newcastle in 1969 to document working-class culture by living among and working with and for its inhabitants, and to record the area's embattled craft practices before they finally vanished. Through various accidents and artful dodges they eventually acquired city premises on the Tyne and set up a photographic gallery, workshops and cinema. In addition to regularly organising international exhibitions, the Side Gallery gradually established a unique and

extensive photography collection – but the ideal for the group's own new work was maximal protracted immersion, building consultative trust in communities or situations before filming there. As well as yielding classic heroic documentary, experiments hybridising forms and methods – often well ahead of fashion – provided greater range and effectiveness¹¹. The cultural work attracted links with various grass-roots arts initiatives and often proceeded alongside activism and campaign work, including sustained support for the 1984-5 miners' strike¹². But the desire to merge wider concerns in less urgent contexts required painstaking long-term commitment, and their feature-length documentary *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2008)¹³ would have showcased a family of travellers settled in County Durham – exemplifying Amber's attempted integration of life, work and friendship – but then changed course to commemorate the sudden death in 2007 of founder-member Murray Martin.

The preservation for posterity of visual records of endangered forms of working life now well-established, one impetus towards making full-length fictional features was that narrative structure and film editing facilitate greater attention to social dynamics among their subjects rather than just objectively placed physical routines. Also, significant changes in the film-making funding environment entailed the recently unveiled Channel 4 offering revenue support to regional film workshops – facilitated by an ACTT union deal Amber helped broker – and its commissioners were especially keen to screen new drama. So material documenting a travellers camp gathering waste coal on a Northumbrian tideline was opportunistically bolted onto a bare biographical storyline in 1985's *Seacoal*. This was followed four years later by *In Fading Light's* more conventionally cast and fully-scripted story of small-scale fisheries sailing from North Shields, this time widening the ambit to knit together social intercourse among the trawlers at sea with their home lives. Completing this more traditionally observational strand, *Eden Valley* (1994) described the precarious existence of a County Durham horse trainer in a haunting study of harsh landscape and natural rhythm passing through a minimal father-son narrative arc.

Sensitively detailed and lyrically realised though these films are in chronicling tenuous patterns of making ends meet, a sense of overdetermination is palpable – in the physical rigour of the activities involved and being circumscribed by arbitrary external forces and interests. Only the insertion of gender and generational texture provides lines of flux to complicate and defy otherwise resolutely static, backward-looking portrayals. Of course, Amber's photographic and documentary film practice had



always paid attention to the social networks and community activities they observed around them – even if hitherto brought together only rather uneasily with the over-riding focus on labour under the banner of working-class culture. But now – again partly due to circumstance – fictional explorations of the impact of economic adversity on family and community cohesion assumed centre-stage, with the specificities of subsistence modes increasingly framed with merely a contributory, if still baleful, role in ensembles of social reproduction. This cycle started with *Dream On* (1991) following a group of women on a North Shields sink estate finding renewed strength in mutual support, mobilising the cathartic potential of shared fears and fantasies to overcome personal and collective trauma.

Perhaps predictably, this film risked romanticising the magical resilience of women's social labour counterposed to the pathos of men's lost breadwinning grandeur – a schematic segregation partly mitigated by adroit comic and carnivalesque elements (and painfully wooden dream sequences). In the subsequent East Durham trilogy the temptations of wishful thinking are resisted by hinging narrative poignancy on the conflictual ambivalence of family and friendship ties in a local community wrecked by the withdrawal of its economic bedrock. Emerging from Amber's long-term 'Coalfield Stories' accumulating images, stories and ideas from residents in and around the Easington area (where *Eden Valley* was also set), these organically connected films represent alternate perspectives on the same situation. *The Scar* (1997) centres on a former activist in the Women Against Pit Closures group – as elsewhere, crucial to nourishing the miners' local base and propagandising further afield. Her family left broken and bereft after the strike's defeat, an appetite for life is revived by an affair with the manager of the private opencast which replaced the deep mine (providing a small fraction of its jobs), but she's unable to stomach the selfish consumerism and antisocial isolation of the future she foresees – and neither can he then accept the cynical corporate agenda he's asked to serve.

Though tantalising viewers with the prospect of oversimplistic romantic closure, *The Scar* refuses *Dream On's* arguably 'easy' options. Like *Father* (2001) further muddies waters by juggling the contrasting predicaments of three generations of a single family. The grandfather holds onto his beloved pigeon loft earmarked for compulsory demolition for leisure sector development, while his estranged son – also a former miner – juggles self-exploitation teaching and composing music but lacks the resources to sustain his marriage. He might carve out breathing space with a local council contract – but only by persuading the old man to cave in. Meanwhile his young son grapples with late childhood's gamut of dilemmas, but even without Attention Deficit would struggle to glimpse coherent guidance on how to grow

from the role-model muddle around him. But as separately tortured trajectories intersect, private pain, anger and confusion are woven back into mutual concern, averting irreversibly violent resolution. And, though less straightforwardly than in *The Scar*, the tentative outcome again revolves around attitudes converging, refusing to concede their futures to external institutional agendas whose exploitative corporate whims are felt as personal insults on top of earlier grievous injury.

Like Father also marked a decisive departure in casting non-actors in all the leading roles whose own life-histories closely paralleled their characters, producing convincing acting and boosting the denouement's credibility. *Shooting Magpies* (2005) trumped this innovation by additionally translating the real-life relationship between the two main actors into the plot – even including their testimony direct to camera – examining the most depressed neighbourhoods where drug addiction's ramifications ripple out, colliding with other survival strategies and raising questions of collective and individual obligation. A young mother strives one last time to help wean her partner off heroin with the help of a friend who is himself a single father shielding his son from delinquency. But his altruistic motives prompt lapses of judgement which could prove suicidal – metaphorically in terms of local respect, and physically in an environment where summary justice accompanies slights real or imagined. While she finally admits defeat, and manages to move on, his fate is left hanging – and the harsher brightness of the digital video filming accentuates the unpromising choices available in a story where, for every advance for one character, another's downfall beckons. Yet, despite tragedy looming on all sides, generosity, tenderness and goodwill persist in generating the possibility of avoiding surrender to the war of all against all.

Amber Valence

What distinguishes Amber's cinematic practice from conventional social-realism is scrupulous engagement with their subjects to generate content and texture, rather than parachuting in to exploit indigenous resources for externally pre-defined purposes. Relationships are built after approaching a community and offering their craft skills, subsequently drawing on those found and their surrounding cultural patterns. From images, interactions and interviews collected, stories lending themselves to dramatic treatment develop in active collaboration with local people whose feedback reinforces authenticity measured by their responses. However, despite following the axiom that artists should bracket their own concerns to reveal those of the community in which they work¹⁴, Amber's films demonstrate two related sets of contradictions. These concern the material grounds upon which they enter the lives of target networks – exactly how outsiders become insiders – and the interpersonal co-ordinates within which film narratives then emerge. But while compromising the transparency of the final output in both its social and realist dimensions, these problematics also help explain the genre's – and Amber's – continuing powerful fertility as well as illustrating its inherent political ambivalence.

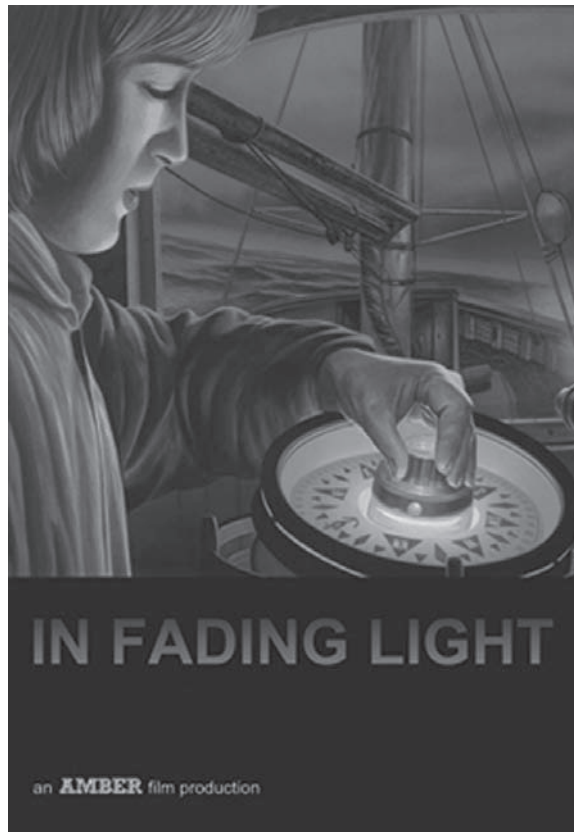
Alienated from traditional proletarian backgrounds after bourgeois betterment via higher education, reconnection has in effect been sought with the lost social anchorings of group members' own family and class heritage. An ensuing celebratory nostalgia projectively identifies with 'organic' settings where apparently objective, culturally-fused reflections of economic and geographic conditions nevertheless eternally melt into air in the march of 'progress'. Furthermore the bulk of the contemporary lower-classes are left behind in favouring marginal milieux less afflicted by contemporary respectability and consumerism – but here the confusing multi-hybridity of class and cultural influences already saturating the film-makers' biography can also be more readily disavowed. Yet their relatively privileged modern lifestyle choices are mystified within the plots into the arbitrary exigencies of necessity confounding



passionate relations between characters – whose ‘natural’ discovery of new environments is the fictional alibi for poring over them¹⁵. To varying degrees, therefore, the dynamics behind the film narratives are driven as much by resonances with the artists’ personal issues as the real situations of those depicted – and, as righteous criticisms of documentary method and ethnographic bias emphasise, the credibility of observational detachment is inexorably undermined by such compelling hidden agendas.

Just as inevitably, the economic underpinnings and corollaries of the films’ development and production are also disguised in their manifest content. For example, the group’s approach has usually entailed direct financial intervention to buy physical infrastructure¹⁶. Seen as supplementary ‘tools of the trade’ this certainly reinforces their credible seriousness, but also sets precedents of inequitable patronage in dealings with locals lacking the wherewithal to solve problems this way. Indeed, questions of property ownership in the narratives usually represent agonising all-or-nothing life-changing decisions rather than strategic investment options – while characters representing big money and associated power tend to be our heroes’ unequivocal nemeses. Similarly, the funding for community photography or other documentary projects – whose output later feeds into the films – often originates in local government or other insitutional remits. This implicates the film-makers in hierarchical circuits of influence which again militate against the clarity of horizontal mutual exchanges among equals, and further implies selective local engagement with those individuals more amenable to such external pressures or able to realistically afford public exposure and official oversight.

All these inconveniences corrupt the impossible humble humanism of Amber’s ideals, leaving the results open to the weighty objections levelled at documentary genres and realism in general and social-realist cinema in particular. But the shortcomings cited here could never begin to be tackled in mainstream cinematic apparatuses – since storylines, settings, characters, scripts and outcomes are fixed so long in advance according to the supposed superior wisdom (or stupidity) of their vanguards of production variously incorporating discourses of power and the bottom lines of capital. Little more than duplicitous lip-service is typically paid to any deeper correspondence with lower-class experience, whereas Amber’s wilful autonomy and extreme care and patience bring such issues to the surface. In a sense, the process they embark on in their artistic sphere to get each low-budget film made mirrors, however inadvertently and partially, the conjunctures routinely faced by social strata who lack the clout to assert their own interests – requiring the mobilisation of the fullest range of resources available, however tainted, to prise as much personal and communal benefit and meaning as possible from conditions imposed from outside. So the real secret of Amber’s success may lie squarely in their collective ethos, putting their own integrity genuinely on the line to nurture and maintain intimate intercourse with others and to share the results. As Murray Martin’s motto – the informal manifesto of the whole group – has it: “Integrate life and work and friendship. Don’t tie yourself to institutions. Live cheaply and you’ll remain free. And, then, do whatever it is that gets you up in the morning”.



www.tomjennings.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk

Notes

- Whose more forward-looking manifestations include an engagement with last year’s Climate Camp and subsequent debate: see John Cunningham, ‘A Climatic Disorder?’ [review of] ‘Class, Climate Change and Clean Coal – the Climate Campers and the Unions’ conference, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1 November 2008’ (www.metamute.org). Also commemorating the 1984-5 strike is a ‘Working Class Bookfair’ organised by Tyneside IWW and others to be held at the Linskill Centre, Linskill Terrace, North Shields, Tyne & Wear, 14th March, 11am-4pm. Involved in both initiatives is Dave Douglass, former NUM branch official, whose *Pit Sense Versus the State* (Phoenix Press, 1994) is one of the most clear-sighted explanations of the miners’ radicalism.
- A feature-length television documentary directed by Mike Figgis about the event was broadcast on Channel 4 on 20th October 2002. Deller’s own catalogue of the work was published by commissioners Artangel in *The English Civil War Part II: Personal Accounts of the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike* (ed. G. Van Noord); see also a comprehensive discussion by Alice Correia in ‘Interpreting Jeremy Deller’s *The Battle of Orgreave*’, *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp.93-112, 2006. For blunt firsthand analyses of the strike’s policing and media coverage, see Dave Douglass, *Come and Wet This Truncheon and Tell Us Lies About the Miners*, ASP/DAM, 1986. And for a powerful relevant literary fictionalisation, see David Peace’s GB84 (Faber 2004) – whose previous bitter ‘Yorkshire noir’ cycle is adapted for television in Channel 4’s *Red Riding* trilogy this month.
- For an interesting comparison in the field of social documentary photography, see Darren Newbury, ‘Telling Stories About Photography: The Language and Imagery of Class in the Work of Humphrey Spender and Paul Reas’, *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp.69-88, 2001. For an exhaustive treatment of documentary photography, see John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday*, Manchester University Press, 1998.
- A useful historical summary up to the 1990s can be found in Samantha Lay, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit*, Wallflower, 2002.
- Cf. John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, BFI, 1986.
- See Roger Bromley, ‘The Theme That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Class and Recent British Film’, in Sally R. Munt (ed.), *Cultural Studies and the Working Class: Subject to Change*, Cassell, 2000.
- In ‘Reimagining the Working Class: From *Riff-Raff* To *Nil By Mouth*’ (in Sheila Rowbotham & Huw Beynon, eds., *Looking At Class*, Rivers Oram Press, 2001), Kerry William Purcell considers the films alongside contemporary visualisations of social class in the photography of Paul Graham and Nick Waplington; whereas Glenn Creeber’s ‘“Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man”: Social Class and the Female Voice in *Nil By Mouth*’ (in Munt, note 6) interprets its erosion of male perspective in terms of previous social-realist cinema.
- Jill Marshall also discusses shifting gender relations after deindustrialisation in ‘Going For the *Full Monty*: Comedy, Gender and Power’, *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp.31-48, 2000.
- For example, Carine Adler, Pawel Pawlikowski, Lynne Ramsay, Shane Meadows, Penny Woolcock, Kenny Glenaan and Andrea Arnold, among others.
- Such cinematic contrasts of violence and conviviality are recurring globally, with rich parochial inflections in France (e.g. Guédiguian, Kechiche), Belgium (Dardenne brothers) and Romania; in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico and even further North (John Sayles).
- Including dramatised sequences within investigative documentary, as with 1960s de facto Newcastle mayor orchestrating his rotten borough in *T. Dan Smith* (1987). For levels of resonance achieved, see, for example, founder-member Sirkka-Lisa Kontinen’s tapestries of public communal cement – in *Byker*’s (1983) pre-slum-clearance back-to-backs, *Step By Step*’s (1985) North Shields dance school, and *The Writing In The Sand*’s (1991) windswept Northumbrian beach playgrounds.
- Setting up a Current Affairs Unit to co-ordinate work for the NUM and the strike’s public face. Previous campaign work had included preserving part of Newcastle’s historic Quayside (where their operations are based), and earlier solidarity at Vickers Armstrong in Scotswood at the request of the stewards’ convenor there. Protracted later involvement with an ex-mining community also yielded, among other things, the recent fiction films.
- Which received a television premiere on Channel 4’s More4, 10th December 2008. Full details and summaries of Amber/Side projects, exhibitions, photographic resources and film productions, including VHS, DVD and print publications, can be found at www.amber-online.com. Interviews with Amber members giving insights into their intentions and motivations can be found in *The Pursuit of Happiness* and also in: Huw Beynon, ‘Documentary Poet’ [interview with Murray Martin], in Rowbotham & Beynon, *Looking At Class* (see note 7); Neil Young, ‘Forever Amber: An Interview With Ellin Hare and Murray Martin of Amber Collective’, *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 4, pp.61-80, 2001; Darren Newbury, ‘Documentary Practices and Working-class Culture: An Interview With Murray Martin (Amber Films and Side Photographic Gallery)’, *Visual Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp.113-128, 2002; and Jack Newsinger, ‘Together We Stand’ [interview with Graeme Rigby], *Vertigo* magazine, No. 11, August 2007.
- Inspired by R.G. Collingwood’s liberal-humanist idealist philosophy in *The Principles of Art*, 1938.
- As a desperate housewife flees spousal abuse to Lynemouth (*Seacoal*); a daughter mends fences with her ship’s captain father (*In Fading Light*), or an Irish wise-woman doesn’t with her publican son (*Dream On*); a juvenile delinquent seeks sanctuary with his absent dad (*Eden Valley*); a working-class lad made good fails as management material (*The Scar*); a self-employed community worker juggles family and career (*Like Father*); and an ex-youth worker mentors others but risks losing himself (*Shooting Magpies*).
- Such as purchasing a caravan and horse in Northumberland; then a trawler and pub (both fully-functioning) in North Tyneside; and then acres of land, more horses and buildings in East Durham.