

A Fragile Existence: Analysing Women's Film and Video Distribution in the UK

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Introduction

Historically, feminist film theory has demonstrated a preoccupation with the representation of women in mainstream cinema, particularly with understanding how those representations are constructed and convey meaning (eg. Johnston 1973, Haskell 1973, Kaplan 1983, Creed 1993, Tasker 1998). This is obviously an important avenue of investigation as we are confronted with images of women in the visual media on a daily basis. Since feminist analysis suggested that women's real-life experiences have been largely excluded from mainstream film and media images of women have been predominantly constructed from a male perspective, a number of women filmmakers have also sought to make work that challenges dominant representations of women. They have done so by endeavouring to represent on screen the 'authentic' experiences of women in all their cultural diversity, by trying to construct a woman's viewpoint or by interrogating mainstream cinema's formal strategies (Kuhn 1982). Some notable examples are Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (USA, 1978), Jutta Brückner's *Years of Hunger* (West Germany, 1980), Marleen Gorris' *A Question of Silence* (Netherlands, 1982) and Ngozi Onwurah's *The Body Beautiful* (UK, 1991)

However, such interventions can only become productive in terms of raising awareness and helping facilitate social change *if* they are seen by audiences. Hence it is equally important to address how these 'different' representations *reach* their audiences. While film studies has been slow to critically address the role of 'distribution' – that which connects the producer to the consumer – women filmmakers operating outside the institutions of mainstream cinema and those working with them were quick to recognise its importance.¹ During the 1970s and 1980s women's film and video distributors were

¹ The distribution process tends to be fairly invisible, and historically it has been critically neglected in film studies which has tended to privilege examining the text and to a lesser degree audiences and cinema

set up both in the USA and across Europe in order to ensure that the work of women filmmakers reached their intended audiences. Many were shortlived initiatives, but at least two have endured and are still in existence today: Women Makes Movies in the USA and Cinenova (formerly Circles) in the UK.

Yet while Women Make Movies has enjoyed a stable existence and steady growth over the past twenty years,² is now commercially successful with an annual turnover in excess of \$1 million (Zimmerman 2005), and during the last three years has ‘returned more than \$1.5 million to women producers in royalty payments’ (Women Make Movies, 2006), the existence of women’s film and video distribution in the UK became and has remained a fragile one. Indeed, it is possible to argue that since 2001 Cinenova has been unable to fulfil all the roles of an active distributor. Whilst this fragile existence can be attributed in part to the vagaries of arts funding policies in the UK (Fowler 2002), it in fact results from the complex interplay of a number of factors. An analysis of these factors and the impact they have had on distributing work by women filmmakers in the UK forms the focus of this article.³

Fighting for Survival

Throughout the 1980s the UK boasted two women’s distributors: Cinema of Women (set up in 1979) specialised in campaigning documentaries and theatrical releases of contemporary art-cinema feature films, while Circles (set up in 1980) specialised in avant-garde material and historical titles. Together they played a crucial role in securing the visibility of and audiences for women’s film and video in the UK. For instance, Felicity Sparrow, the key founding of Circles, and Jane Root, an early employee of

exhibition. As Cinema of Women observed in 1983: ‘Many people are totally mystified by the distribution process and generally there isn’t much interest in it’ (Cairncross 1983). Although more recently a small number of books, book chapters and journal articles have started to address the question of distribution, it remains an under-researched field.

² Women Make Movies was originally set up in 1972 with an emphasis on production work, but after an internal crisis in the early 1980s, the organisation was revamped to focus on and prioritise distribution. Since then it has sustained steady growth (Zimmerman 2005).

³ Some of these factors were to a certain extent common across what became known as the independent film and video sector and affected other distributors operating in related areas, such as the London Filmmakers’ Co-op and London Video Access.

COW, were both very successful in the early 1980s in securing a number of television sales for the work they distributed⁴ (Sparrow 2004, McNulty 2004). Cinema of Women (COW) also attracted substantial press coverage and good audiences when they undertook cinema releases of *A Question of Silence* in 1983 and Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (USA, 1983) the following year, while Circles' compiled several packages of women's film – most notably *Her Image Fades as Her Voice Rises* (1983), *The Films of Maya Deren* (1984), and *Black Women and Visibility* (1987) – which toured fairly extensively around the UK over a number of years.⁵ By the late 1980s the organisations had also built up invaluable libraries of several hundred film and video titles, and in 1989 it seemed entirely appropriate when COW drew attention to its achievements by celebrating its 10 years 'in the business' with a series of screenings and a seminar at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts.

Although both organisations were initially dependent on volunteer labour, by the mid-1980s they had attracted considerable grant aid and become firmly established as part of the grant-aided sector. Indeed former COW worker Eileen McNulty has since argued that by the mid-1980s their dependence on grant aid had become part of the organisation's identity (McNulty 2004).⁶ In particular, because both COW and Circles were located in London they had been able to benefit from the Greater London Council's commitment to promote cultural diversity by supporting grass roots cultural production in the London region. As part of this policy, the GLC had identified an urgent need to intervene at the level of distribution since they had found that the grass roots initiatives had 'been hampered by ineffective distribution and marketing and their inability to exploit their own successes' (Greater London Council n.d: 12).

⁴ They were able to benefit in particular from the launch of Channel 4.

⁵ All three packages were actively promoted and toured for an initial two to 12 month period. At the time of its launch in March 1987 the *Black Women and Invisibility* package, for instance, had 11 regional cinema bookings lined up over an 8 week period. This kind of exposure then resulted in the packages still being booked fairly regularly for anything up to two or three years after the official tour had finished. Indeed, two women who worked at Cinenova, Helen De Witt and Laura Hudson, reported that seeing Circles' package of Maya Deren films during the late 1980s had a significant impact on their interest in film generally and in women's filmmaking in particular.

⁶ It's important to note, however, that this was not necessarily the intention when the organisations were set up. Felicity Sparrow in particular was strongly against the idea of Circles becoming grant-aid dependent and believes both Circles and Cinenova became too heavily dependent on public funding (Sparrow 2004).

When the GLC was abolished in 1986 the major responsibility for funding COW and Circles passed to the British Film Institute (BFI). However, by the end of the decade the BFI was itself faced with a reduced budget in the wake of funding cuts affecting the whole sector and was ‘struggling ... in terms of its own overheads and activities’ (Whitehead 2004). In the spring of 1990 therefore the BFI informed Circles and COW that substantial cuts were being made to their revenue funding: COW was to be cut by 40 per cent and Circles by 65 per cent.⁷ Since these cuts were large enough to threaten their continued existence, the two organisations launched a high profile press campaign to try and get the decision reversed. While the campaign was not entirely successful, the BFI did revise their approach to try and ensure the survival of one women’s distributor. In a meeting with Circles in August of that year, the BFI made it absolutely clear that they could not continue to fund *two* organisations (Holland 1990: 2).⁸ The options they offered were for Circles and COW to explore the possibility of merging or for the two organisations to essentially fight it out between themselves for the available funding. With the prospect of dwindling revenue funding in the future and an indication from the BFI of the availability of a three year funding package for the surviving distributor (Cinema of Women, 1991), the two organisations pursued the former option. They drew up a business plan in the spring of 1991 in which they outlined their plans for a merger and detailed the following as central to the new company’s long-term survival:

- a. The need to be more commercial, with the business plan taking them from grant-aid dependency to a breakeven point and self-sustainability on earned income in 4 years.

⁷ It should also be noted that the previous year the BFI had restructured and the two women’s distributors had become the responsibility of a newly formed Distribution Division, who in turn became a direct competitor.

⁸ The following year, Tony Kirkhope was requested by the BFI to act informally as a consultant to Circles and COW. He met with them on 10 March 1991 and according to notes from that meeting Kirkhope reported that while the BFI ‘understood and fully supported’ women’s film and video distribution, its Distribution Division, which had taken over responsibility for COW and Circles, ‘had found it very hard to justify the existence of both groups in the light of current funding cuts which are effecting [sic] the whole sector’ (in authors’ possession). These views are reiterated in various correspondence and notes from meetings throughout 1990-91.

- b. The development of a range of strategies/new markets to achieve this, particularly building up TV sales, but also doing cinema releases, marketing educational packages, setting up sub-distribution deals, exploiting European funding opportunities, and launching a women's video label.
 - c. Recruiting and retaining an effective team of staff.
- (Cinema of Women & Circles 1991b)

After more than a year of negotiations and uncertainty, however, the merger plans fell through, and COW closed down while Circles relaunched in October 1991 under a new name with the guarantee of just one year of BFI funding. Despite the difficulties of the preceding 18 months and an awareness of the considerable challenges that lay ahead the mood at Cinenova, the new company, was initially buoyant and optimistic (Harris 1991). And that optimism seemed justified, since according to Helen de Witt, a former Cinenova worker, production styles in women's work in the early 1990s were becoming more playful and entertaining which opened up the opportunity to take women's work to wider audiences (de Witt and Norrish 2004). Indeed, throughout the 1990s there was clearly still interest in and audiences for women's film and video work. For instance, in the early 1990s Cinenova were able to theatrically release both *Flaming Ears* (Hans Schierl et al, Austria 1992) and *Dialogues with Mad Women* (Allie Light, UK, 1993) on central London screens; a day seminar event in October 1994 at London's ICA, organised by Cinenova, addressing women's filmmaking and distribution sold out in advance (Cinenova 1994a); the following year Cinenova's turnover substantially exceeded their projections (Cinenova 1995); in spring 1996 the organisation was consulted by Shadow Minister for Women Tessa Jowell's researcher in order to supply questions for the Parliamentary Questions on National Heritage in June; in 1997 Cinenova launched a newsletter and witnessed a growing demand for their titles at film festivals worldwide; and in 1999-2000 the organisation released the independent feature film *Eileen is a Spy* (Sayer Frey, UK, 1998) and received an Arts Council England award for their online catalogue and website.

Yet by the late 1990s Cinenova was not only still heavily dependent on revenue funding, but had a mounting deficit as well. Although the workers managed to get the deficit more or less under control, they could not reduce it. When Cinenova eventually lost its remaining revenue funding in 2000, it was forced to cease active trading and has remained in existence since due primarily to the commitment of one volunteer worker and a small management board.

Thus at the end of the 1990s, the existence of women's film and video distribution in the UK came under serious threat for a second time. The obvious reason for this would appear to be that Cinenova had been unable to achieve the planned move from grant-aid dependency to self-sustainability that Circles and COW had identified as central to the long-term survival of women's film and video distribution in the UK – a transition which, according to Debra Zimmerman, has been crucial to the enviable success of Women Make Movies in the USA (Zimmerman 2005). However, the following analysis of why Cinenova had been unable to make that transition reveals that – despite the continued interest in women's filmmaking – Cinenova's existence *throughout* the 1990s was for a number of reasons a highly fragile one. This in turn rendered the likelihood of the organisation being able to become self-sustaining slim at best. If anything, the fact that it had continued for 10 years in what were highly adverse circumstances was a remarkable achievement.

The Lack of Commercial Viability

Part of the reason Cinenova was unable to effect the transition from grant-aid dependency to self-sustainability is that women's film/video distribution as it developed in the UK was simply not commercially viable.⁹ But this lack of commercial viability resulted from a combination factors.

When Circles and COW tried to get the BFI to reverse its decision in 1990 to cut their funding, central to their argument for continuing to fund women's distribution was the

⁹ This was also true for other areas of film and video distribution in the UK, such as artists' film and video.

fact that ‘a proportion of the work would always be non-profit making’, because there are relatively small audiences for certain types of work (Cinema of Women & Circles 1991a). And as both Felicity Sparrow and Eileen McNulty have pointed out, it can take years of sustained hard work to build up those audiences (Sparrow 2003, McNulty 2004). Hence its distribution would always require subsidising. But in view of the funding cuts affecting the whole sector, the BFI was adamant that while:

- We value much of the work and the aims of Cinenova ... if it is to have a long term viability it must be able to exist at a lower level of subsidy.
- The current level of subsidy is too high for the level of activity ... one measure is the level of subsidy per film/video distributed. This is currently approximately £100.00 per film, which we consider too high (Bell 1993).

Part of the problem for Cinenova, however, was that the majority of their business consisted of small transactions which were labour intensive to administer. While they were processing a considerable number of hires and sales across their whole catalogue, in contrast to Women Make Movies, the prices they charged for these was relatively low.¹⁰ And although the pricing structure covered the core distribution costs, it did not cover overheads such as salaries. But simply increasing the prices was not a viable option since, unlike the USA, the UK did (and still does) not have ‘a huge and wealthy educational sector’ which would sustain higher prices (Cinenova 2001). This proved a point of friction with some US filmmakers who were interested in having their work distributed in the UK, but were conditioned by the US market to expect far higher returns than Cinenova could achieve for them.¹¹ Indeed, as the VHS retail market took off, in the UK there was if anything an opposite tendency among distributors like Cinenova to *reduce* prices in an attempt to be competitive and widen the market for their titles.

¹⁰ For instance, Women Make Movies would be charging anything between two and four times as much as Cinenova for a VHS sale.

¹¹ Film and Video Umbrella experienced a similar problem in that UK arts venues could not pay the higher hire fees that artists from mainland Europe had come to expect.

Both funders and distributors alike believed therefore that crucial to any plan to becoming more self-sustaining was tapping into the growing television market because it can yield a much higher level of income per transaction and so requires a far smaller number of transactions to produce a significant level of income.¹² And according to Kate Norrish, a former Cinenova worker, ‘At that time, it did feel like there was a possibility that TV would be a new market for this kind of work’ (de Witt and Norrish 2004). Hence, a significant component of Cinenova’s business plan rested upon building up TV sales. However, it is precisely in the early to mid-1990s that television in the UK, especially Channel 4 who had been a significant supporter of the so-called independent sector, started to lose interest in and scale back its investment in this type of work. Also, given that it was the norm for distributors to retain only 25 per cent of the fee on a TV sale, Cinenova would still have needed to make a significant number of TV sales on a regular basis to achieve and maintain self-sustainability – something which would have proved difficult given the nature of their collection.

However, another factor that exacerbated these problems was the royalty split on sales and hires in the other areas of their business and the effect that split had on the potential to grow the business. Organisations like Circles and COW had been set up in part with a view to generating an income for the filmmakers and a commitment to returning a substantial proportion of the hire and sale fees to them. The London Film-makers’ Co-op, for instance, started out returning 75 per cent to the filmmaker, but by the mid-1980s and through into the 1990s a 50/50 split on non-theatric hires and sales was more or less the norm in the independent film and video sector. However, this was a *much* more favourable split for the filmmaker than commercial distributors offered and meant organisations such as COW and Circles had to generate a *substantial* increase in the volume of hires and sales to produce anything more than a relatively small increase in *net* income for the distributor (i.e. the distributor’s share after royalties have been

¹² It also increases the visibility of the work which *can* in turn impact positively on the level of sales and hires.

deducted).¹³ On a 50/50 split this was never sufficient to cover the costs of the increased worker time required to generate the increased volume of business.¹⁴

To try and address this problem in the face of dwindling grant aid some distributors in the independent sector did eventually change their royalty split to 60:40 in favour of the distributor.¹⁵ Although it was not always a popular measure with film/videomakers, the argument presented by the distributors (Women Make Movies among them) was that it was better to receive a lower percentage of something and keep the distributor in business, rather than get 50 per cent of nothing when the distributor went out of business (de Witt and Norrish 2004, Zimmerman 2005, Sargeant 2005). However, while a small number on the Cinenova board supported such a change, Cinenova did not feel able to change their royalty split. Helen de Witt has argued the fact that Cinenova was a membership organisation made it difficult to instigate such a change¹⁶ and also that other board members remained committed to its predecessors' founding principles which 'meant that those quite momentous decisions weren't taken' (de Witt and Norrish 2004). In the absence of additional grant aid to cover the costs of any increase in turnover, according to Kate Norrish, Cinenova became stuck in a classic 'growth-shrink' cycle: every time their turnover increased they did not have the financial resources to recruit additional staff to deal with the increased workload and hence they could not sustain the growth (ibid; Cinenova 1995).

Furthermore, much of the promotional work undertaken by Cinenova – to increase the visibility of the work they distributed and thereby build up audiences for it – did not necessarily generate a significant level of income for the organisation. For instance, Cinenova identified getting its titles screened at regional film theatres (RFTs) around the

¹³ There were in fact some exceptions to the 50/50 split (see, for example, Brunson: 226), but they were still always far more favourable for the filmmaker than any split offered in the commercial sector.

¹⁴ Thus, what very quickly becomes apparent is that for an organisation like Cinenova, any growth in earned income in fact resulted in the organisation requiring more revenue funding not less.

¹⁵ For instance, Albany Video Distribution did so, precisely as a survival strategy. And interestingly all but a very small number of their film/video-makers agreed to the change without argument or complaint.

¹⁶ Any filmmaker whose film was taken into distribution by Cinenova became a 'member' of the organisation and had voting rights at the AGMs.

country as a good way of improving the visibility of the work. In a development prospectus they stated: ‘Cinenova would like to have more films screened in the RFTs. Not only do RFT screenings reach a large and specific audience who are likely to be interested in the work but also having work shown on the RFT circuit is a mark of the quality of that work’ (Cinenova 1994b). And of course the work would also get written about and culturally validated in magazines like *Sight and Sound* and academic journals like *Screen*, which in turn meant there was a greater likelihood of the work being incorporated into further and higher education curricula. But while the number of people seeing the work certainly increased due to such initiatives, they tended to generate only very small amounts of earned income that did not cover the cost of promoting the work in the first place.¹⁷ Importantly, Cinenova recognised this very early on. In the board meeting minutes for September 1992, they observed that ‘promotional activities tend not to directly generate income’ (Cinenova 1992). But at the same time they insisted they were nevertheless committed to ‘promoting work by women’ – as their byline declared – and felt that promotional work ‘should therefore form the main part of our identity’. Hence, within 12 months of launching, Cinenova was split by a fundamental contradiction: despite the apparent need to urgently and significantly increase earned income, worker time was explicitly committed to supporting largely non-income generating activities.¹⁸

Unsurprisingly therefore, by the end of their first year of trading Cinenova were already failing to meet their targets for earned income. Indeed, while funders were insisting that their revenue clients had to exist at a lower level of subsidy, most were doubtful that any of their client organisations ‘were going to have more than a 5 or 6 per cent upturn in income generation’ (Whitehead 2004). In addition to encouraging client organisations to pursue new markets, funders were therefore also encouraging them to pursue other

¹⁷ Which could involve writing copy, designing and printing for marketing material and programme notes, as well as spending time building up relationships with screening venues. All these activities were time consuming and often involved hiring in freelancers with the relevant expertise. Also, in the 1980s COW and Circles had benefited from better and more extensive access to the RFTs via the BFI. However, as the BFI’s Distribution Division became a direct competitor in the 1990s, this relationship was not sustained.

¹⁸ As a result of this, for instance, they continued sending work to overseas hirers and to film festivals, even though they often experienced difficulties in getting prints/tapes back from hirers and usually did not receive payment for festival screenings.

sources of funding and indeed saw the securing of other forms of grant aid as equally crucial to an organisation's long-term survival. Cinenova heeded this and did succeed in attracting funding from sources such as the lottery, the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, but these were always for discrete projects which did not contribute directly towards developing the core distribution business of the organisation and its self-sustainability. Indeed, on occasions it did just the reverse, since doing the funding applications in addition to the day-to-day running of the organisation could actually increase staff costs and impact negatively on earned income as worker time was taken away from the core distribution activity.¹⁹

However, it is also relevant to note that during this era when arts funding bodies were supposedly pushing their revenue clients towards becoming more self-sustaining, Cinenova's year on year revenue funding actually steadily increased in the period 1993 to 1999. At the end of Cinenova's first full year of operation – 1992-93 – the BFI had informed the organisation that its revenue grant was going to be reduced from £30,000 to £17,500 (Bell 1993) to progress the shift to self-sustainability. When Cinenova complained that such a drastic cut after only one year 'means that we are being condemned to death by slow starvation, as opposed to being beheaded' (Henderson et al 1993), the BFI revised the offer up to £24,500 and in July 1993 passed responsibility for Cinenova over to the newly established London Film and Video Development Agency (LFVDA). Over the next six years the LFVDA gradually increased Cinenova's annual revenue grant until in 1999 it had regained its 1992 level of funding.²⁰ While the year on year increases were small and did not allow the organisation to grow or expand its activities, importantly the funding did continue to largely cover existing salary costs. Consequently it is possible to argue that the continual renewal and modest increasing of revenue funding year on year repeatedly removed the urgency and direct need for

¹⁹ This was the case in 1995, when Helen de Witt went from working 4 days per week to 5 days per week to cover for Kate Norrish who was working intensively on a lottery application. However, both Helen and Kate had previously been working 4 days a week each, totalling 8 person days per week. Hence Helen's 5 days a week represented a reduction in overall person days dedicated to core distribution activities while Kate worked on the lottery application, but increased salary costs by one additional day per week.

²⁰ Of course, in real terms this meant Cinenova experienced an overall reduction in its annual revenue grant across those six years.

Cinenova to prioritise the goal of self-sustainability. It also allowed them to continue to pursue their non-income generating activities, which in turn reinforced their dependency on grant-aid. It is unsurprising therefore that there was no serious attempt to examine how the organisation could be made more economically viable until earned income started to significantly fall off in 1998 and the organisation headed into serious deficit.

The Changing Market Place

While audiences for women's work still existed in the 1990s and, if anything, more women were making work, the difficulties discussed above were also exacerbated by the nature of the market place that Cinenova was entering – which was very different to the one in which their predecessors had operated. In the 1980s many women filmmakers had been keen to place their work with COW or Circles both as an act of support for a feminist initiative and because the distributors undertook and worked hard to secure appropriate audiences for the work (McNulty 2004, Sparrow 2003); hence the organisations had enjoyed a good supply of material to distribute. At the same time, COW and Circles had also been able to rely on an extensive and committed network of women's groups as a core audience for the work they distributed. As Judith Higginbottom has explained, due to the take up of feminism in a wide range of areas and its analysis of the world in terms of patriarchy: 'There was a natural audience [of women] which was very hungry for films by women' (Higginbottom 2003). But by the 1990s this supportive environment had started to break up.

As early as 1990 women film and video makers had started to resist the 'feminist' label and question the benefits of categorising cultural products made by women on the basis of the gender of their producers. They had started to feel that the inclusion of their work in a women's programme or women's film festival only served to reinforce their marginalisation (Knight 1992). Cate Elwes has also argued that in the course of the 1990s younger women, who had not experienced the feminist debates of the 1970s first hand, became more interested in pursuing professional recognition and career success than in supporting a feminist agenda (Elwes 2000: 10-11). While Cinenova had been

sufficiently optimistic in 1991 to talk about ‘opening its doors’ to work with far stronger entertainment and commercial appeal (Harris 1991, Knight 1992), in reality these shifts in attitudes made a significant proportion of women rather reluctant to place their work with a women’s distributor.²¹ However, on a rare occasion when Cinenova *were* offered a set of five feature films by a notable German woman filmmaker – Ulrike Ottinger – complete with English subtitles, they had no means of funding the acquisition costs. While COW had been able to turn to the BFI in the 1980s for a ‘soft loan’ to cover the acquisition costs for *A Question of Silence*,²² by the 1990s such sources had dried up. Ottinger is of course also a prominent lesbian filmmaker and, while feminist concerns appeared to be slipping into the background to a certain extent, Cinenova found lesbian film to be a growth area. According to Helen de Witt ‘without lesbian work and demand for it, Cinenova would have been in a much more difficult position’ (de Witt 2006). However, whilst this developing market certainly *eased* their difficulties, it was not sufficient on its own to sustain them.

In addition, the women’s groups who had been keen to hire the work distributed by Circles and COW also started to experience funding cuts by the end of the 1980s. As Laura Hudson, a former Cinenova worker, has observed: ‘[W]hat happened in the late 1980s and most of the 1990s is that people *think* that the fight [against patriarchy] has been won, and there’s no longer any need to redress the balance. Unfortunately that’s not really the case, but the funders’ priorities have changed and shifted and they’re no longer going to put money into something that is a women’s cause’ (Hudson 2004). As a result the women’s groups either disappeared or started to request discounted hire rates that Cinenova could ill afford to support. When Hudson worked at Cinenova in the late 1990s she also noticed that educational sales were declining and undertook a survey to find out why. Although she observes that there were a number of reasons, she asserts that ‘a lot

²¹ This shift in attitude was also reflected to a certain extent in the difficulties that Cinenova had, certainly from the mid-1990s onwards, in recruiting new people to their management board (see de Witt and Norrish 2004; Hudson 2004). De Witt and Norrish have also argued that a number of women filmmakers who had previously placed their work with Circles were less successful at getting production grants in the 1990s and hence were not making work.

²² The BFI loaned COW the money via an arrangement whereby the loan did not incur interest and was gradually repaid from box office receipts at the regional film theatres where the film was screened.

of it was because the people who were choosing films and teaching the film courses were male' and that many film studies courses had lost their feminist component (ibid). Thus Cinenova was less able than COW and Circles had been – even with the growing lesbian audience – to capitalise on a substantial pre-existing audience who were 'hungry' for the work they distributed.

That Cinenova had to do a survey to find out why educational sales were declining is indicative of the fact that to a certain extent the organisation had also lost the close contact with audiences that Circles and COW had initially benefited from. When Circles and COW set up the majority of their business was hires (either on 16mm or Umatic) and it was customary to send out an audience feedback sheet with all hires which was to be returned with the film or tape after the screening. While not all were necessarily returned, those that were could give the distributor a wealth of information about the make-up of audiences, what they wanted to see and how the material was used (McNulty 2004). With hires there was also a greater tendency for hirers to book by phone in order to check availability and details about the film/tape. Information gathered from these points of contact could be fed back into future acquisition and marketing decisions.²³ However, with the advent of the VHS cassette, a substantial proportion of business had shifted by the late 1980s to institutional video sales, and to some extent this closed down these important avenues of communication between distributor and audiences. As VHS sales didn't relate to specific screenings and the tape wasn't to be returned, there were no feedback sheets, while purchasers tended to send in written purchase orders rather than phone.

Cinenova's ability to deal with the changed environment was also hampered by the feminist distribution practice it had inherited from their predecessors. Both COW and Circles had been set up to ensure distribution opportunities existed for films and videos directed by women which 'speak from or about the position of women' (quoted in Knight 1992: 185). They also undertook to retain as much control as was possible over the

²³ For instance, negative feedback from hirers resulted in COW withdrawing a film about a lesbian on one occasion (Brunsdon 1986: 227).

presentation and representation of these films (Imeson 1982, Knight 1992). The need for this was demonstrated when, in the hands of a commercial distributor, Bonnie Klein's film about pornography, *Not a Love Story* (1981), was screened as part of a double-bill porn show in London's Soho quarter (Brunsdon 1986: 225). This obviously ran counter to the director's intentions for the film and was a direct result of Klein having no control over the context in which the film was used.

As the successor organisation, Cinenova inherited these commitments and – like COW and Circles before it – was keen to develop effective strategies for raising awareness of the work and getting it seen in appropriate contexts. Furthermore, while COW and Circles had each specialised in particular areas of women's filmmaking, Cinenova – as the *sole* surviving women's distributor in the UK – felt the need to promote as far as was possible the full range and diversity of women's film and video work. However, while Cinenova did indeed ensure a wide range of historical and contemporary moving image work by women was *available*, many of the titles in its catalogue were only rarely, if ever, hired or bought. To a certain extent, as Debra Zimmerman of WMM observes: 'That's a standard of distribution'. She asserts that: 'Every year, whatever we do, 10 per cent or 20 per cent of the films in the collection are going to make 80 per cent of the money' (Zimmerman 2005). Therefore, while they continue to make available 'artistically significant films' and feminist 'classics' that may not generate a substantial level of income, they always try to ensure they acquire the income-generating 20 per cent 'so we can survive and be able to distribute the other 80%' (Zimmerman 2006a). Also, according to Zimmerman, they 'clean' their catalogue regularly and de-acquire those films that 'become outdated due to political changes or ... do not "stand the test of time"' (ibid).²⁴

Like Zimmerman, a succession of Cinenova workers and board members were aware that some titles do not stand the test of time and thus evidenced little income generating potential. Indeed the organisation was effectively incurring an expense in terms of the

²⁴ Zimmerman also explains: 'In addition sometimes we realize that we don't have the resources to market work in the way it needs to [be marketed] in order to be successful. In those cases we return the rights to the filmmakers' (2006a).

storage space such titles occupied and the admin work required to maintain them in the collection. The filmmakers themselves were also aware of this and in the changed climate of the 1990s, according to Helen de Witt, a number of them were surprised that Cinenova was still distributing their earlier work (de Witt and Norrish 2004). Also, although Cinenova was aware of its position as successor to Circles and COW, according to Lianne Harris, in the pre-launch planning stages they had been pragmatic and decided that ‘we’re definitely not going to have feminism as the key word in our marketing of ourselves’ (Harris 1991).

Yet, while more commercially minded strategies such as actively promoting only the more popular titles, consigning others to an archive collection and de-acquiring those titles that had become outdated were discussed on a number of occasions at Cinenova, they were never pursued. One of the main reasons for this was that if the titles that didn’t shift in significant quantities were archived or de-acquired, they would effectively cease to be both visible and available in the UK, and thus a substantial part of feminist film history – however outdated the work appeared to be – would effectively disappear. In view of the reasons COW and Circles were set up, such a course would have at least in part undermined the *raison d’être* of a women’s distributor and – given the remaining commitment to COW’s and Circles’ founding principles – was ultimately unpalatable. Despite Cinenova’s awareness of the changed market place, the extent of its reluctance to pursue such a route was made evident in 2000-2001. When Cinenova lost its final revenue funding in 2000, discussions were initiated with Women Make Movies and a number of other organisations to explore future possibilities for housing the Cinenova collection. According to Debra Zimmerman, WMM offered to ‘take over the collection of films ... [and] keep the Cinenova name alive by identifying those films as part of the “Cinenova collection”’ (Zimmermann 2006a). However, Cinenova felt it would be ‘more of a friendly take-over’ (Cinenova 2001) and although they viewed WMM’s suggestion – mistakenly, it would appear – as an offer ‘to take on our problems and save us’, fears that the majority of the collection would be de-acquired prevented Cinenova from pursuing this course (ibid, Trotter 2004).

The Impact of Under-resourcing

The difficulties Cinenova faced in trying to deal with the changing market place were in turn compounded by the organisation's long-term underresourcing. From the outset, Cinenova received less revenue funding than had been projected in the original business plan drawn up by COW and Circles. The justification for the lower level of funding was that the BFI were far from convinced that Cinenova could achieve the shift to self-sufficiency detailed in the business plan.²⁵ Hence, according to Irene Whitehead, '[the BFI's] continued funding of Cinenova was a more a gesture of goodwill rather than a kind of acceptance that all was going to be well with them' (Whitehead 2004).

Although, as already discussed, the LFVDA did steadily increase Cinenova's funding from 1993 to 1999 and while that funding largely covered salary costs during that period, it enabled Cinenova to offer only fairly low levels of pay – £10,400 per annum in 1993 – and it did not always cover the cost of full time employment for the workers. Frequently workers would be employed for only four days a week, although they often worked additional unpaid hours in order to manage the workload. By the late 1990s Laura Hudson was paid £15,000 per annum, but reported regularly working 90 hours per week (Hudson 2004). Hence Cinenova – like so many other organisations in the sector – was permanently underresourced and this had a serious impact on the organisation's ability to recruit and retain an effective team of staff.

The low salary levels meant it was difficult to recruit workers with the necessary business skills and experience to develop the organisation. Rather the organisation tended to attract creative practitioners or people with a passion for and knowledge of women's film/video work who were still at a fairly early stage in their careers or college leavers (Trotter 2004, de Witt and Norrish 2004). Hence, they were usually lacking the necessary contacts to, for instance, tap into the TV sales market, exploit European funding deals, or negotiate sub-distribution contracts. Furthermore, as Helen de Witt has

²⁵ One of their main concerns was that the projected income figures were unrealistically high and the BFI asked them to revise the plan to show lower, more realistic projections (Henderson 1991; Whitehead 2004).

observed: ‘Nobody had worked in any management positions, nobody had ... run an organisation before however big or small’ (ibid). But according to Hudson, since Cinenova operated with a staff of two, it was also unlikely that between them they would cover all the skills the organisation needed.²⁶ Also, as Hudson went on to assert, over the years the jobs, when advertised, attracted fewer and fewer applicants:

When I applied for the job there were ... only 11 applicants. When we tried to replace Helen [de Witt] there were even less, and when we tried to replace the person after that or the next one after that ... *nobody* applied for the job, not a *single* applicant. For my job, when they replaced me, there were only three applicants. (Hudson 2004)

Partly due to the difficulty in recruiting staff and partly as a cost saving measure, there was on a couple of occasions also a delay of several months in recruiting a replacement when someone left, leaving one worker to run the entire organisation. Indeed, for 18 months of Hudson’s four years at Cinenova she was the only employed worker.

These factors, combined with a lack of employment benefits and ageing office technology, meant that throughout Cinenova’s history there was also a relatively high turnover of staff. As Hudson has commented: ‘Huge amounts of work, very little pay, not very good conditions ... It’s not a combination that you’re going to keep staff’ (Hudson 2004). Indeed, within a couple of years of Cinenova launching, none of the original staff – the workers who had experienced the BFI’s demands for greater self-sustainability and helped devise the original business plan – were still there. Several years later, in a desperate attempt to recruit a suitable replacement for Hudson, the organisation even upped the offered salary to £21,000. But the successful applicant was still experiencing a salary cut of £9000 in order to take the Cinenova job and unsurprisingly left within three months (ibid). To try and address this problem Cinenova drew up a policy document which recommended that: ‘No-body should be employed at

²⁶ Again, these problems were characteristic of the sector (see Whitehead 2004).

Cinenova without the [interview] panel being satisfied that they are truly aware of the scope of the job and the working conditions' (Cinenova 1997).²⁷

These difficulties in both recruiting and retaining staff resulted in not only a growing backlog of work, but also the need to 'keep reinventing the wheel', as it were, in terms of running the organisation. That is, there was never a long-term accumulation of skills, experience and expertise within the organisation, from which it could grow and develop. By contrast it is interesting to note that Women Make Movies has enjoyed the continuous 'stewardship' of its current Executive Director, Debra Zimmerman, for over 20 years and has undoubtedly benefited from the expertise she has developed during that time.²⁸ At Cinenova instead, as each new set of workers learnt the business, they came to the same conclusions about the difficulties they faced and reiterated the same priorities as their predecessors, but either did not stay long enough to significantly advance those priorities or burnt themselves out within three to four years trying to achieve them with too few resources.

Although Cinenova employed some extremely enthusiastic, hard-working and committed workers – who made their own very valuable contributions – the organisation as a whole never secured and *retained* the effective team of staff they had identified in their business plan as central to their long-term success. But Cinenova's underresourcing also meant, as de Witt has observed, that the organisation could not always respond adequately to their customer needs and 'that affects your reputation' (de Witt and Norrish 2004). Hence, in terms of managing and developing its business, it's possible to argue that Cinenova was always operating from a position of weakness.

²⁷ Both Eileen McNulty (2004) and Felicity Sparrow (2003, 2004) have pointed to the fact that to some extent this is a problem that results from grant-aid dependency. The women who originally set up both COW and Circles did so because they *wanted* to, rather than because they were paid to do it – so they simply went ahead, did it, managed on shoe-string budgets and the dedication of volunteers. The main outcome of revenue funding, however, is the ability to pay salaries, which results in jobs done by paid employees who have certain expectations about levels of pay, working conditions etc. that the organisation may be hard pushed to meet.

²⁸ Indeed, long-term employment with one organisation in the film and video sector in the USA appears to be much more the norm. Those organisations have clearly benefited from their workers' accumulated experience in a way that the UK organisations on the whole did not (see Serra 2003; Angerame 2003).

Dealing with Funders

Cinenova's enduring problem with underresourcing was in its turn exacerbated by the organisation's relationship with its main funder. In the 1980s film and video organisations in the UK's independent sector tended to become heavily dependent on one major revenue funder – something which was reinforced by the fact that the funders themselves tended to be quite territorial about their portfolio of clients (Whitehead 2004). This relationship of dependency allowed funders to impose their own terms and priorities on their client organisations as a condition of funding. For instance, six months after the BFI announced the original funding cuts to Circles and COW, the BFI wrote to Circles agreeing to give them a £10,000 bridging grant to keep the organisation going at a basic level until the end of the financial year but stipulated that:

This assistance is *only available on the following conditions*: a) that it represents a 'cash limit', which Circles must live within and make whatever further economies may be necessary in the course of the year; b) that the terms of a separately funded consultancy, costing up to £2,000, to determine the future relationship of Circles and COW are established within the next four weeks, and that this consultancy reports within three months, an outline business plan for the new organisation projected forward three years. (Christie 1990, my emphasis)

Indeed, it is evident from some correspondence that revenue funders would at times adopt quite an authoritarian attitude in their dealings with their client organisations (Chrisfield 1995; de Witt and Norrish 2004). As a result the issue for Cinenova and organisations like it was not simply whether they were successful or not in getting funding, but also *managing* the relationship with their principal funder when they were. And there are at least two moments in Cinenova's existence where managing this relationship had a significant impact on the organisation's ability to operate effectively.

The first comes in its pre-history, during the negotiations with the BFI in the course of 1990. As late as August of that year, Circles and COW were still looking at the

possibility of somehow salvaging both organisations but, as indicated above, the BFI made Circles' receipt of a bridging grant conditional upon their undertaking a consultancy with COW to produce a business plan for a single new organisation. Circles and COW therefore gave up the idea of trying to save both organisations and came up with the required business plan for a new company – provisionally called Take Two – which as its name suggests was based on the combined staff expertise and catalogues of the two existing organisations. In late March 1991, after the business plan had gone through various revisions at the BFI's request, the BFI made a provisional offer of £45,000 to COW and Circles 'towards establishing and operating Take Two in 1991-92' (Christie and Whitehead 1991b: 1). However, it appears that in early April 1991 the BFI shifted from dealing jointly with COW and Circles in these discussions to dealing solely with Circles. And the outcome was that by late April 1991, rather than awarding the £45,000 jointly to COW and Circles, the workers at Circles had received confirmation from the BFI of £30,000 revenue funding for the new organisation for the financial year 1991-92 (Christie and Whitehead 1991), while COW was offered £15,000 to wind up and instructed to pack up and deliver their files to the BFI (Manning and Shabbaz Wallace 1991).

This exclusion of COW from the final planning stages was handled in such a way that it caused a serious rift between the two women's distributors, with considerable hard feelings on the part of COW's workers (Manning and Shabbaz Wallace 1991; Henderson 1991; Harris and Bratby 1991).²⁹ The loss of COW's goodwill deprived the new organisation of both COW's experience of theatrical distribution and the straightforward

²⁹ According to Henderson (1991), Circles were 'contacted by the BFI and asked to produce yet another budget with more realistic income figures and without including the wind up and redundancy costs for Cinema of Women. Circles was told that the BFI would contact you [COW] directly to discuss wind up and redundancy payments and that it would be confusing and counter productive for Circles to be involved in these discussions. We [Circles] were also informed in no uncertain terms that communication with Cinema of Women about this draft budget could jeopardise not only the whole hard fought for package but also create difficulties for all those involved'. Although unhappy about the instruction not to contact COW, Circles complied and this rather than the actual outcome caused much of the hard feeling (Manning and Shabbaz Wallace 1991).

acquisition of COW's library of films, together with the income they would generate.³⁰ Consequently, when it finally launched Cinenova spent considerable time trying to sort out the acquisition of COW's titles, not always with success. According to Irene Whitehead, it also meant that the stronger organisation – in terms of surviving in the new funding climate – was closed down. Although Circles was probably more 'culturally effective', she has asserted that '[COW] were more practical I think ... they had a greater business sense than Circles and had a better grasp of management and accounting' (Whitehead 2004). Furthermore, the whole turn of events created an unpleasant working environment in the early stages of the new organisation. As Kate Norrish, who started work at Cinenova in June 1992, nine months after its official launch, has commented:

[T]here was a legacy of paranoia after the whole Cinema of Women/Circles fiasco ... So that when I came in and took over that was the kind of environment in which we operated and so I think we constantly felt under siege. ... And no-one ever seemed to really know who had been played off by who against who, for what reason. But it just ended up in an incredibly antagonistic turn of events ... I think there was a lot of anger towards Cinenova in the early days. (de Witt and Norrish 2004)

The second moment in Cinenova's history came two years later, after the BFI had handed the organisation over to the London Film and Video Development Agency (LFVDA). In January 1994 the LFVDA informed Cinenova they were going to undertake an 'assessment/review' of its activities. According to the LFVDA the purpose of the review was 'to work with Cinenova in a detailed and systematic way to look at its policies, operations and plans for the future' with a view to agreeing priorities and examining the resource implications thereof (London Film and Video Development Agency 1994). Although Cinenova initially saw it as 'a great opportunity to establish a firm relationship with the LFVDA' and felt it could prove 'very fruitful' (de Witt and Norrish 1994), it nevertheless embroiled the new organisation in a number of additional activities. For

³⁰ Both de Witt (2006) and Zimmerman (2006) have stressed the significance of Cinenova's loss of the COW catalogue and have suggested that if a merger had taken place there would have been a higher likelihood that Cinenova could have succeeded because of the strength of COW's catalogue.

instance, Cinenova staff were required to attend a whole series of meetings – seven over an eight-month period – and undertake various review processes. Moreover, according to Kate Norrish, ‘we weren’t clear, really, what we were being reviewed on’ (de Witt and Norrish 2004). In an attempt therefore to give the process some kind of structure and ensure ‘that we were being accounted for on things that we wanted to be accounted for’ (ibid), she drew up and submitted a series of documents to the LFVDA, including a 30-page plus report on Cinenova’s activities.

Cinenova were also explicitly reminded that LFVDA policies formed part of the background to the review: ‘Of special relevance here is of course the LFVDA’s exhibition policy. In particular the criteria for funding should be borne in mind’ (ibid). As part of the review process Cinenova produced a 20-page development prospectus detailing various income generating activities they had researched and costed. Most of these were – unsurprisingly – aimed at increasing the *exhibition* of women’s work and focused on TV sales, regional tours of film packages, submitting work to film festivals and doing showcase screenings at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts and National Film Theatre. Accompanying the prospectus was a request for just under £25,000 of development funding to undertake the initiatives – in addition to their normal core activities – and take them to self-sufficiency in two-three years. Although it is debatable whether the exhibitions initiatives could have become self-sustaining, the LFVDA apparently accepted the prospectus and had ended up structuring the review process around it (Cinenova Board of Management 1995; Chrisfield 1995). Yet when completed, the review resulted in only a very small increase in Cinenova’s revenue funding for 1994-95, with the request for development funding ignored. Thus Cinenova had been obliged to engage in a process which took up a substantial proportion of staff time, yet did virtually nothing to help develop the organisation in any way.

The activity of dealing with the funder in both these instances lasted for around a year and not only added significantly to employees’ workloads, but also drained the organisation and its workers of energy (see for instance Harris and Bratby 1991, de Witt and Norrish 2004). This in turn meant the core distribution business – the very source of

earned income – became neglected and resulted in a backlog of work which seriously impacted on Cinenova’s ability to operate effectively. As Kate Norrish has observed, for instance, when she joined in 1992 she found that:

There were piles of files dating back to whenever, there were no systems for paying the filmmakers, there was never a database, there were no addresses because it appeared that there had been this *massive* fight [between COW and Circles], stuff had got lost and films had arrived and some films hadn’t and no one had checked the prints and the BFI had some things ... [So] in those early years, it was just actually getting things *functioning* on a day to day level. (de Witt and Norrish 2004)

Furthermore, for Cinenova, as for other granted-aided organisations, this process of managing the relationship with the funder impacted significantly on their sense of identity. As already mentioned, Circles and COW had initially been interested in trying to keep both organisations going as they had fairly distinct and separate identities and saw no reason why there should be only one women’s distributor (Burrows 2004). Indeed, from their points of view, the more organisations working for the visibility of women’s film/video work the better. Yet, in the business plan for the new company, in order to make themselves eligible for the available funding, COW and Circles argued that the distinctions between the two old organisations were now less marked and discussed the benefits of having one merged organisation. Thus it is hardly surprising that within a year of opening for business, Cinenova workers wrote to their board to call an ‘emergency’ meeting because, as they asserted:

[There is] an overwhelming sense that Cinenova lacks direction. We feel that ... we have lost sight of what our objectives are. This makes most of the projects we’re working on and any promotion we do about the company itself a nebulous task. Basically our energy is drained from this. (Harris 1992)

The overall effect of its dependency on one major revenue funder therefore was that Cinenova started off from a much weaker position than originally envisaged and was far less well-equipped in terms of resources, energy and identity in its crucial early years of trading to build itself a strong position in the market place.

Conclusion

While the above is not a comprehensive analysis of the difficulties facing Cinenova,³¹ it is nevertheless evident that its existence throughout the 1990s was a very fragile one. Moreover, the combination of the four factors discussed above – the lack of commercial viability, the changing market place, under-resourcing and the relationship with funders – made it highly unlikely that the organisation would be able to achieve the shift from grant-aid dependency to self-sustainability. Rather, it is tempting to argue – harsh though it sounds – that Cinenova was inevitably doomed to fail.

To have had a chance of emulating WMM's success in the UK context, Cinenova would have needed to become a very different organisation. Although its continuing commitment to the feminist goals of its predecessor organisations inhibited that possibility to a certain degree, Irene Whitehead has argued that London-based organisations in particular had in some ways little incentive to change. She asserts that the generous funding policies of the GLC had 'built up a whole level of expectation' among their client organisations with regard to their entitlement to be funded which was 'quite unreal' (Whitehead 2004, see also Sparrow 2004). Although Cinenova were fully

³¹ There were other factors that also contributed to Cinenova's difficulties, such as the BFI's insistence that they place their films with a despatch agency. The 'despatch agency' the BFI directed them to was, however, the film distributor Glenbuck which was the BFI's own subsidiary and Cinenova's direct competitor. And like Cinenova, Glenbuck was also under pressure to achieve self-sustainability and thus charged Cinenova 30 per cent of the hire fee for handling the films. Although it saved Cinenova workers time, it also substantially reduced their real income. Furthermore, customers were billed by Glenbuck for the full fee and Glenbuck then passed on a 70 per cent royalty to Cinenova. This meant that Cinenova also experienced a substantial delay from the point of booking to receiving payment which at times caused cashflow problems (de Witt and Norrish 2004). This despatch agency system was based on the model that Women Make Movies use; however, there were substantial differences – the company that WMM uses is not their competitor or their funder and charges only a small fulfilment fee, not a percentage of the rental. The fact that Glenbuck – a competitor – actually housed Cinenova's films also made it all the more difficult for Cinenova workers to arrange a handover of COW's films to the new organisation (McNulty 2004).

aware of the BFI's insistence that they move 'towards financial independence' (Harris and Bratby 1991a), Whitehead argues the GLC's policies bequeathed a legacy whereby funded groups were unwilling to fully face up to the changed environment and the reality of permanent funding cuts. However, she also concedes – with the gift of hindsight – that funding agencies should have done more to help organisations adjust (Whitehead 2004).

Yet ironically Cinenova has managed to survive – if not as an active distributor, then at least as a volunteer-based organisation that makes available a collection of women's film (see www.cinenova.org.uk).³² Although from one perspective it appears that funding kept Cinenova afloat during the 1990s, it is possible to argue that what has really sustained the organisation throughout its entire existence has been the personal and political commitment of individuals, together with their hard work. In this connection it is interesting to note that to a certain extent the same can be said of Women Make Movies. According to Zimmerman, when WMM reformed after their crisis in the early 1980s, she agreed to help keep the organisation going:

[b]ut I have to say that it was the most difficult thing I've ever done in my life and I don't know if I'd ever do it again if I had to redo it ... it was only me during the first year ... I used to have to put the answering machine on when I went to the ladies room so it wasn't easy. (Zimmerman 2005)

And while the organisation with its staff of nine is no longer dependent on her for its day-to-day running, she still plays a vital role in acquiring films, liaising with the filmmakers and promoting the organisation – a role which her staff maintain does not get undertaken in her absence (ibid). While such commitment in the US has resulted in a high profile organisation³³ with an enviable annual turnover, circumstances in the UK have meant that

³² As Helen de Witt has pointed out, 'a debt of gratitude is owed to Four Corners' where Cinenova rented office space. When Cinenova lost their revenue funding in 2000, Four Corners demonstrated their support for Cinenova by waiving office rental charges (de Witt 2006). This generous act has played a significant role in allowing Cinenova to continue to exist.

³³ In the WMM's November 2006 e-newsletter they announced they were associated with two of the 15 films in the Documentary Feature category that would advance in the voting process for the 79th Academy Awards. 'Women Take the Lead in Oscar Race' (2006), WMM ENEWS (22 November).

it has only been able to ensure the continuing *availability* of a collection of women's films.

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