

Distribution and Curation: On not becoming confused

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A long time ago, in a distant, less regenerated London, the notion that film and video distribution was a key cultural and political activity led to the DIY founding of a number of small, specialised distributors, such as the London Film-Makers' Co-op (LFMC, 1966), The Other Cinema (TOC, 1970), London Video Arts (LVA, 1976), Cinema of Women (COW, 1979) and Circles Women's Film, Video and Performance (Circles, 1980). Later, in the first half of the 80s, this notion also led the Greater London Council (GLC) to commit significant sums in development grants to independent film and video distribution, under its then new-fangled Cultural Industries policy. In late 1983 TOC's application to the GLC to set up a(nother) cinema¹ intersected with a GLC report² which recommended investigating establishing a new exhibition venue for film and video in central London, to be a resource to independent distribution. The preface of the report lays this out clearly:

The reason for this focus [on the distribution and exhibition branches of film and video] is that the various systems of distribution/delivery of audio-visual output are economically and culturally *pivotal*. Control over their structures and policies is the main determinant in deciding which producers are to be linked with which audiences and by what means.³

This is the backstory to the opening of the Metro Cinema in Rupert St (name changed to The Other Cinema in 2003, recently closed), a 'West End Showcase' to be open to all London's small independent distributors. In fact, it outlasted most of them.

The point of this though is not to eulogise the past and bemoan its passing, but to try to move in on a certain ambiguity that sometimes surrounds 'distribution', and encapsulated in the term "distribution/delivery". Distribution is often described as occupying the space between production and exhibition, but this space contains a number of stages and activities. One way or another, distributors promote their collection, be it through a catalogue and 'new work' bulletins, or more focused efforts on a discrete number of titles. Independent programmers or curators can find a venue and then select from distribution collections, and a curatorial agency can likewise select from distributors' holdings and create packages to be pushed. A programming unit in a major funder, such as the BFI used to have and the Film Council (FC) is currently acquiring, will select work from its own or others' distribution for entry into the pipeline that ends at a series of screens around the country. There are also production schemes, such as *Animate!* or *Digital Shorts*, which shepherd the work from production to audience. So various activities occupy this space between production and exhibition, and these create a number of options when it comes to traversing the space.

A curatorial agency such as Film and Video Umbrella (FVU), who take an active part in bringing a package to an audience, is engaged in distribution. Schemes that link production to dissemination are also engaged in distribution, and both of these lever a major promotional push to a small but enviable part of the public sphere against the narrowness of their offered pipeline. This may involve a(nother) distributor who maintains a collection, rather than promoting a smaller set of works for a limited period, as when FVU curated from LFMC, LVA and Circles' collections and the FC deposits its digital shorts with Short Circuit Films. But it also may skip such a distributor, as when FVU acquired work direct from festivals and makers. Though it is within the space of distribution, this end-focused activity is distinct from the activity of maintaining a distribution collection (though one organisation may do both). Prising open a subsection of the public sphere is arduous and often expensive, so it's hardly surprising that this activity in particular has attracted an increasing degree of institutional muscle and management from cultural funders, directly or indirectly. Funders, such as the AC, BFI or FC, have a major remit to ensure that works in their area are seen by the public,

whether this means getting them into galleries or onto 209 digital screens. Such interest, and the existence of such schemes, is a good in itself and a substantial bonus for makers who are taken up by it. But in the absence of the wider distribution activity – the maintenance of distribution collections rather than the fielding of discrete, pre-selected packages typically made available for a fixed time – there is the risk that this subsidised and managed attempt to catapult particular items of UK film or moving image culture into the public sphere becomes confused with the culture itself. This is a risk to all levels, as funders and funding schemes typically look for pre-existing innovation to assist, and have not to date succeeded in creating it through funding. They seek to uncover and expose innovation, but that innovation has to come from somewhere. These schemes and projects are an attempt to promote the culture and some of its products, but they are not the culture.

Back in the distant, less regenerated London, over the 14 years between 1966 and 1980, successive waves of film and video activists created their own distributors off their own backs for their own purposes. The point is not so much to romanticise these people or their era, as to look at the practical utility then perceived in founding distribution organisations. Each of the small, specialised distributors mentioned above was formed on the back of a wave of activism which had little or no means of accessing the public sphere that it did not make for itself. While levering open a subsection of the public sphere was certainly an objective which was achieved from time to time, as with TOC's theatrical release of *La Battaglia di Algeri/The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1965), Circles' of *Unsichtbare Gegner/Invisible Adversaries* (Valie Export, 1977) and COW's of *De Stilte rond Christine M./A Question of Silence* (Marleen Gorris, 1982), in practice the most obvious effect was to strengthen activity beneath this level and within the cultural milieu itself.

Screening groups and, often, local production preceded the founding of the distributors, but at that level of activity screens and works need to find each other somehow, over and over again. The situation is worse with overseas work, which would normally only be in the UK temporarily if at all. The founding of a distributor provides a central resource for show organisers to find work and makers to submit it. Each of the distributors mentioned here quickly built up substantial collections of local and international work which then became available within the cultural milieu. Just in terms of providing contact with international currents, it was the LFMC that secured the prints from P. Adams Sitney's New American Cinema touring package in 1968, Circles that made all of Maya Deren's films available in the UK for the first time, TOC that introduced *Hora de los hornos/Hour of the Furnaces* (Octavio Getino, Fernando E. Solanas and Santiago Álvarez, 1968) and many other Latin American films to the UK, while COW imported many films from Australia, the US, Canada and Europe, and LVA's first catalogue included a substantial amount of overseas video art, which they quickly set about exposing. Curation, programming or 'setting up shows' was already going on prior to the founding of the distributors. Most of this was at a level well below notice in the public sphere, and it was this kind of activity that was chiefly boosted by the distributors. Small beer maybe, accumulating little money and initially surviving substantially off volunteer labour, and, at one time or another, LFMC, LVA and Circles were operated out of a flat. But, in making an increasing array of works available, the distributors played an integral part in the upsurge in writing, debate, and the myriad of smaller screenings and events through which the works were exposed and the community cohering around them could meet. Events such as the *First Festival of British Independent Film* at the Arnolfini in 1975, *Perspectives on British Avant-Garde Film* at the Hayward Gallery in 1977, through to the opening of Channel 4 to independent and experimental work in 1982, were cases of this activity surging upwards, rather than being diligently sought out from above. It's hard to imagine how this head of steam could have built up without the availability of works, which was guaranteed by the distributors.

This brings us back to the issue of the contemporary, energetic promotional programmes and agencies which occupy the area of distribution between a distribution collection and the audience, whether the individual works handled have ever been entered into a collection or not. It is of course

excellent that so much institutional muscle has been bent to the difficult task of helping works to enter the public sphere, be it cinemas, galleries or television slots. But the concentration of resources necessary to such a substantial push means that only a limited number of works can be so treated. Further, these efforts are aimed at relatively high profile exposure, even though it's marginal in terms of the mainstream public sphere. There is no problem with this in itself, but in another way, it's of little enough relevance to the culture that would produce the innovation that these schemes would assist. This culture has tended to cohere around smaller, less pressurised venues, and thrive off a broader and less administered selection of works. Even as some makers, programmers and kinds of work formed the institutional alliances that made more concerted promotional pushes possible, the existence of the small distributors ensured that there was sufficient diversity and access to maintain the push from below. Because of the interdependence of curatorial activity and funder-lead promotional schemes on a cultural ferment to supply innovation, the impoverishment of a cultural ferment occasioned by the waning of its own distribution mechanisms is a disaster all round.

Clearly the supply of culturally and aesthetically diverse works has not completely dried up, nor have all distributors touching such things collapsed. The pathways for makers between complete invisibility and mainstream marginalisation will remain narrow and peculiar and, though attempts by the FC and various regional initiatives to map, pave and administer this path are laudable enough, they are beside the point here. These schemes are only conduits through which items of extant cultural activity might be sucked up to a minor theatrical release or broadcast. A big jump to be sure, but a focus on this leaves aside the question of the cultural activity being mined, and who exists for whose sake. If it were accepted that the existence of such schemes, on their own, was an adequate solution to the crisis in big and small UK film distribution, then the implication would be that the film and moving image culture had accepted a place as a supplier of primary produce and labour for government-backed experiments aiming to incrementally diminish US dominance, or incrementally increase the consecration of the moving image as art. There is more to film and moving image culture than this, and more to distribution than a discrete number of curatorial initiatives and programming pushes, however well thought out and executed.

Returning, finally, to the TOC cinema, it's clear that it was intended to be a standing pipeline for small distributors into London's West End, the most glamorous and highly capitalised cinema territory in the country. Though its function was to shepherd works over the difficult last legs of the journey to exposure in a small section of the public sphere proper, unlike many schemes since it was predicated on the existence of the small distributors and the milieu they were a part of. Looking again at the original GLC report, it's worth zeroing in on the following subsection:

Control over [the] structures and policies [of various systems of distribution/delivery of audio-visual output] is the main determinant in deciding which producers are to be linked with which audiences and by what means.

Though in 1984 the GLC handed some power over this to the small distributors, via a facility to be run by one of their number, clearly what influence the small distributors once had in this way has radically diminished as their numbers have thinned. For this reason, it's a big enough blow that the TOC cinema has shut, but it is the usually unremarked event of the TOC ceasing to distribute its own collection, several years ago, that really illuminates the current situation.

¹ "Other Cinema GLC Application: A New Central London Independent Cinema/Production Centre" TOC, November 1983. Source: Independent Film, Video and Photographers' Association Records, Adsett Centre, Sheffield-Hallam University. NB, this was to be TOC's third cinema.

² Simon Blanchard, *Film and Video Exhibition and Distribution in London* (Economic Policy Group Strategy Document no. 21), November 1983.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.