

Community Film

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Community Film is a variety of practices and approaches which emerged in the 1970s that claim to interrogate and challenge the dominant use of "film" and "cinema" in association with a global, big budget "industry". DeeDee Halleck noted in her 2002 book "It's one thing to critique the mass media and rail against their abuses. It's quite another to create viable alternatives.". Community film takes up that challenge at a local and global ("transnational") level; and further builds on the pioneering work of Many Voices, One World Report undertaken by UNESCO's International Commission for the Study of Communication problems, chaired by Sean MacBride, and its subsequent deliberations. Outside the global communications field, community film operates within education and informal community work; and in another direction as a contribution to human rights and political/campaigning/advocacy.

Debates about community film "groups" and individual self-expression

Many of the debates which occur in the "community film" field - as "theory" or as "practice" - can also be observed in discussion of cultural studies and community media. But scoping the working of twenty academic writers who have discussed the topic, and the broader field of enquiry, it is possible to outline some common principles that describe the dominant practices to be observed in community film work.

A useful starting point is to note that Community film" entails collaborative discourses and co-operative approaches, rather than the primacy of individual self-expression, which some critics have stated to be drivers for growth of entertainment-driven social media. The kind of cyber-scepticism in Evgeny Morozov's The Net Delusion appears to be more around social networking and whether it has the genuine potential to change civil and political life. The emphasis in some quarters on the value and impact of collaborative creativity or "mass innovation" is a more productive starting point for the discussion of the future impact of community projects in interactive digital contexts.

Cautionary note: the emphasis on community does not mean that the individual does not have a valued role; or lose his/her identity. The positive dimension suggests that the individual grows by virtue of community interaction. At best, collaborative film work balances speaking and listening; creating and criticizing.

Scoping the community film field

Community film need not be understood as a minority interest: recent work points to the mass-market evidence of community filmmaking available on websites such as YouTube and other platforms. Critical opinion on the "value" of Community media such as film is likely to remain divided across the spectrum for political and professional reasons. In the past, research on community film has also been hampered by the local, highly specific and ephemeral nature of the

productions; or by the sense that the participatory process was what mattered, rather than a lasting product available for distribution. A broader issue for researchers has been that the collective activities of small groups which are loosely organized falls "under the radar" in research studies of the third sector (civil society). In other examples such as "underground" film making the desire may be to avoid mainstream visibility. Others make a virtue of lack of resources available for projects by celebrating film making as "indie"; "guerilla"; "DIY"; "low budget", or even "no-budget."

Against amateurs?

In some quarters, there has been open hostility to the amateur aspects of social media. In his book *The Cult of the Amateur*, Andrew Keen asserts that "Out of this anarchy, it suddenly became clear that what was governing the infinite monkeys now inputting away on the Internet was the law of digital Darwinism, the survival of the loudest and most opinionated. Under these rules, the only way to intellectually prevail is by infinite filibustering." Perhaps by insisting on the value of working together Community film" claims to contribute to working against "undesirable" tendencies of lone attention-seeking individuals. (See also the notes on industry skills and professionalization, below)

Problems with collaborative approaches to film making

In participatory video methodology it is common to work with all participants as equal producers. The equal status of collaborators runs risks and has drawbacks that are symptomatic of all collaborative ventures. It may be idealistic, or impractical, for instance, to assume that everyone could have an equal contribution throughout the film making process. Collective decision making can become intractable and lead to ineffective and temporary compromises. There is a continuing problem of how to address a variety of dissenting or minority opinions. Collective action may lead to unreconciled positions and a lack of direction; or an inability to establish aesthetic coherence.

Mixed forms of collaboration

In mixed collaboration, a leadership role for a curator or director may be created in order to select and piece together a variety of contributions from a wider community. An example of Director(s) assembling and arranging a variety of community-generated films into one cohesive production is Kevin Macdonald and Joseph Michael's *Life in a Day* - a documentary film project born out of a partnership between YouTube, Ridley Scott Associates and LG electronics.

Community film, popular culture and mass media

Although there is the sense in Community film" and Community media" debates of a critical attitude to "entertainment" as unthinking escapism, and to "star culture" as celebrity, some academics have

proposed a more defensive or celebratory inclusiveness in critical responses. Also, in popular social media, for instance, more is being understood about the participatory nature of fan groups, even where that interactivity is being shaped top-down by celebrities and their agents.

Community film" draws on the democratic and participatory potential of new technology which has decreased the cost of entry for new film makers, new distributors, and wider, more interactive audiences. In the hands of a growing number of activists film has become a tool for community resistance. Taking the argument further, the traditional power triangle of film maker-distributor-spectator can also be challenged and opened up. On the other hand, the public availability of filmed protest movements may leave participants open to identification by those who seek to oppress them.

Discursive functions of Community film and the problem of representation

As a global phenomenon "community film" claims to respect the integrity and identity of the local community (and importantly, dialogues between local groups) against the perceived homogenization of the the dominant transnational industries that seek to erase distinctive voices in order to create their international products and brands. In that regard the discourses and practices associated with community film claim to be decolonizing and postcolonial. Some academic critics, on the other hand, have disputed whether documentary and ethnographic film can (or ought?) be neutral. In its storytelling role, Community film" runs the risk of being partisan, or serving the interests of one group against another. Conferences, festivals, and online platforms provide useful opportunities to discuss issues of fair representation, evidence, and objectivity. In that regard social media helps to critique what would otherwise be isolated productions.

Organizational practice and methodology

As an example of organizational practice and methodology Community film" draws on and emphasizes the collaborative nature of film making. The focus is on co-operation and team work rather than the self, the ego, the auteur, and the hierarchy that dominates mainstream cinema. Community film exponents believe that by employing more collectivist approaches than the "industry" their work may be liberating for communities, and may also develop creativity, rather than holding it back. Working with young people, Steve Goodman has noted that a video camera provides "a critical lens through which they can explore the world around them. It helps them to defamiliarize the familiar taken for granted conditions of life." (p. 3)

Sustainability, Advocacy and Activism

Exponents of Community film" suggest that it encompasses a range of sustainable tools and

emerging tool kits for the creative liberation of citizens and the planet. Accordingly, more political perspectives on Community Film" engage directly with film as a form of advocacy and activism, human rights, and more broadly, "video for change." Increasingly community faces and voices are used in film by organizations wishing to demonstrate evidence for their work, or the authenticity of the issues presented.

Against the mainstream?

A survey of community films presented at festivals and conferences suggests major differences from traditional notions of "film" as fictional; 90 minute's duration; big budget; commercial; entertainment; market-driven product. Accordingly, some community films as products of artist-collectives embrace avant-garde experimentation as well as process-driven approaches. Like community media, community film often sees itself at odds with the dominant modes of top-down, celebrity-driven, merchandising-dependent and consumption-driven models.

By working on a smaller scale than the global film industry, it is claimed that Community film" combats the specialization and alienation that big budget films incorporate as business practice. In "community film", (as in Participatory Video) the individual will have the opportunity to undertake a variety of roles and to learn a range of skills. Formal qualifications and traditional film industry experience are not required, although participants will often be guided initially by those with acquired technical and film project skills. Community film" places a greater emphasis on a willingness to learn, to experiment, and to take creative risks. Another set of approaches can be understood as a development of applied critical theory.

Critical comparisons with related fields

Community film" embraces and celebrates social documentary and political film approaches but does not confine itself to seeking participatory solutions to a specific social problem. It differs from participatory video methodologies (such as the "Fogo Process") where the approaches are better understood in terms of social science models of instrumental engagement which are outcome-focussed, or more ethnographic visual methodologies.

Drawing on other discourses and practices

Community Film" constitutes a broader field than participatory video methodology, by incorporating a wider range of community development practices and modes of facilitation. Furthermore, Community film" learns from related fields such as applied drama, process drama, improvisation, theatre for development; and creative approaches to education such as preferred learning style and multiple intelligence.

Training and Development

Any group of individuals coming together to make, watch and discuss film constitutes "community film" in action. Traditional notions of the trained professional crew, the film set, scripts, and acting skills, are not essential to the "community film" practice. The critical attitude to an enshrined professional guild and educational class comes through from the work of Ivan Illich, and more broadly Henry Giroux and Critical pedagogy.

Does community film have a future?

Similarly, examples of current work in the field shows that "community film" does not require traditional large scale cinema distribution. Community film" is a movement to occupy screens anywhere and everywhere that the traditional film industry does not have a monopoly. But the weaknesses of Community television in many parts of the world, and the stranglehold of global commercial satellite providers, suggests that Community film" is a weak force at present. However, additional channels have sometimes provided opportunities for screening of new video work emerging from the community and non profit sectors of civil society. One example is the British Community Channel (UK). In the UK future licences are planned in the field of locally grown tv news, current affairs and magazine style programmes ("The Government is committed to decentralising broadcasting to increase localisation.")

Further advances in the community film field are likely to spring from advances in technology and software (such as collaborative editing); further exploration of interactivity; better understanding of wiki-discourses and practices; improved bandwidth and infrastructure.

Social and Educational roles

Community film" operates on two interlocking levels (1) visual/media literacy and (2) digital media participation. In line with the UNESCO McBride deliberations it asserts that these are basic human rights. The first implies an ability to interrogate and discuss film and other media, rather than to be shaped as a passive consumer of the entertainment industry. The second entails opportunities for ownership of the means of production.

Furthermore, "community film" argues that active participation informs and alters literacy. It asserts that it does not make sense to have one without the other. (Would we tolerate a culture's claims to freedom and citizenship in which the majority reads but only a minority is empowered to write?) Steve Goodman has noted that "This approach to critical literacy links media analysis to production; learning about the world is directly linked to changing it." (p. 3)

Asking Questions

Community film" asks questions in order to promote liberation. Examples are: What's inside the frame, and what's outside? who is holding the camera? why this story rather than that; how was the film assembled and edited? who owns the film? who profits?

Community film" proposes that finding answers can be a shared practice rather than the work of a lone genius.

The definition of "community film" is in other respects an open set of questions and answers that those coming together for the purpose of "community film" will decide.

A Community film" definition or manifesto cannot fully describe or prepare for community film solutions which will of necessity be practical, local and specific. A finished manifesto is a straitjacket that holds back the creative life and energy of the people who have come together to make, watch and discuss community film.

Global dimensions and an open world

At best, Community film" promotes open dialogue and global debate about its own development as a practice. It remains open to debate whether it can live up to the aspirations and hopes claimed for it.

Building on the pioneering work of UNESCO, it could be argued that community film is shaping, and shaped by the emerging realities of a global consciousness and global communication. As the UNESCO (1980) MacBride Many Voices, One World Report noted :

"Every nation now forms part of the day-to-day reality of every other nation. Though it may not have a real awareness of its solidarity, the world continues to become increasingly interdependent. This interdependence, however, goes hand in hand with a host of imbalances and sometimes gives rise to grave inequalities, leading to misunderstandings and manifold hotbeds of tension which combine to keep the world in ferment. It is true that the patterns of domination and the conflicts of interest stemming from them cannot be made to disappear merely because the scope for communication has been broadened, but the increased possibilities of communicating can help to soften their impact by making every individual more alive to the problems and aspirations of others and every nation more conscious of the dangers lying in wait for the world community as a whole. In these circumstances, the importance of communication is fundamental. Moreover, as a result of the tremendous strides taken by science and technology the means now exist of responding to that need."