

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Edge Hill University
Unit of Assessment: 36 - Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management
Title of case study: 'Participation': Rediscovering and repurposing the creative productions of the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop (BFVW) for new audiences and practitioners.
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Roger Shannon's research on the legacy of the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop (BFVW) has fed directly into the curation and digitisation of previously neglected productions from this pioneering collective, which are now available for public exhibition at arts centres, cinemas, galleries and festivals. The specific examples of the public articulation of the impact include the <i>Participation</i> exhibition at the Vivid Gallery in Birmingham (2009), the digitisation of the original BFVW material, and the <i>Hell Unltd/Traces Left</i> event at the Glasgow Film Theatre (2013) which Shannon co-ordinated. He also worked closely with musician Kim Moore in her composition and performance to accompany the <i>Hell Unltd</i> event.</p> <p>Three claims to impact stemming from Shannon's research are made here:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engaged new audiences with a previously lost aspect of Birmingham's cultural history – the important legacy of the Film and Video Workshop from the 1970s and 1980s and their influence on independent film and television production 2. Curation and digitisation of BFVW film and video material, now archived at Vivid Gallery in Birmingham, for new audiences, curators and artists 3. Rediscovery of the life and work of Helen Biggar, neglected collaborator of Norman McLaren and pioneer of the women's protest movement.
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Drawing on his role as Founding Director of the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop (BFVW) in 1979, and involvement in coordinating development and production of circa 25 BFVW films from 1980 - 1987, a key strand of Shannon's research since 2008 has analysed the legacy of the BFVW within the context of the history of independent film practice and regional film funding mechanisms in the UK. This research, alongside Shannon's knowledge exchange expertise on film funding and policy (as former Head of Production at the UK Film Council, BFI and Scottish Screen), has had a significant impact on understanding the role of the UK regions in film production. During 2012, for example, Shannon convened two major roundtable discussions on UK film policy and exhibition with participants including filmmakers and regional/UK policy-makers. Shannon's research in this case study responds to renewed interest in the Workshop Movement across Europe (e.g. <i>Studies in European Cinema</i> special issue, 8:3, 2012), and in the UK the attention given to the role that Channel 4 has played in film production (e.g. Brown 2007; Hobson 2007). Channel 4 was, alongside the BFI, the principal source of funding for independent film workshops yet there has been little research hitherto examining the unique contribution of the Birmingham Workshop, with its regional nuance on themes of race, youth, gender and politics (and connections with Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies: CCCS). Shannon's specific research into the BFVW, published in a special dossier in the <i>Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television</i>, documents its engagement in debates over the development of Channel 4, wider media policy issues, screen education and cultural politics, as well as exploring the way in which the work both reacted to, and documented, the rise of Thatcherism, and social and cultural events from 1979 onwards: for example, the inner-city disturbances, the miners' strike, and increasing social disparity and racial tensions. Its output in the 1980s amounted to over 25 films, including documentaries, dramas, series for television, campaigning films as well as <i>Out of Order</i> (1986), the first UK feature film shot entirely on video, and the Grierson Award-winning <i>The Miners' Tapes</i>. Shannon's research analyses why the films produced have been almost entirely overlooked in the interim and yet were critical to independent filmmaking in the UK, especially in representing a diversity of culture and politics.</p> <p>In particular, Shannon has explored and championed the work of Helen Biggar, the subject of <i>Traces Left</i> (1983), a BFVW documentary produced and written by Shannon, highlighting her role as Norman McLaren's key, yet forgotten and neglected, collaborator in his film work in the 1930s, in films such as <i>Hell Unltd</i> (1936). In two articles published in <i>Historical Journal of Film, Television and Radio</i> (References 1, 2), Shannon argues that the BFVW was drawn to the pioneering spirit of visual art as socio-politically engaged, exemplified by artists such as Biggar and McLaren (and their engagement with the Spanish Civil War), and that this participatory approach to art and</p>

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politics demands further exploration and recognition, including contemporary work such as that of filmmakers John Akomfrah (director of *Handsworth Songs* in 1986), who is also a product of the Workshop Movement with the film collective *Black Audio Film*. Thus, **Shannon's** recent research into the career of Helen Biggar, whose collaborative films have largely been neglected, makes an important contribution to a revisionist understanding of independent film work produced from the 1930s. It contributes by enabling hitherto unavailable work to be made viewable to the public through a digital archive, brings to light the key role of pioneering regional film movements, and raises important questions about both the processes of collaborative film authorship, and the historically neglected contribution of women artists such as Biggar to the protest movement. In sum, the key research findings in this research are evident in:

1. Establishing and analysing the role of the BFVW, and the films produced, in the wider film workshop movement and its critical engagement with art and politics
2. Arguing that Birmingham's CCCS graduates played a key role in the direction of BFVW activities and engagements with social issues including gender and 'race', both of which have been underexplored in research
3. Establishing the key role played by the BFVW in the development and evolution of Channel 4
4. Drawing on critical production studies work in offering a reappraisal of participatory production practices and the role of marginalised artists, presenting critical analysis of collective authorship in independent film-making cultures, and challenging traditional models of film authorship.
5. An understanding of the broad engagement with the ethnically mixed community of the region and distinctive creative partnership with young people initiated by the BFVW
6. Pioneering the rediscovery of the work and craft of Helen Biggar, mirroring the prominent role of women in the BFVW, neglected in film history accounts of UK cinema (cf. Margaret Tait)

Shannon was appointed Professor of Film and Television (0.6fte) 1 September 2007 and has remained in post since then.

3. References to the research

1. **Journal article** Shannon, Roger (with Long, Paul and Baig-Clifford, Yasmeen) (2013), "What we're trying to do is make popular politics": The Birmingham Film and Video Workshop, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 33:3, 377-95 [DOI:10.1080/01439685.2013.823025] Peer reviewed journal, SJR 0.145

2. **Journal article** Franklin, Ieuan and Smith, Justin (2013), 'Interview Dossier', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 33:3, 454-74 (interview with Roger Shannon on the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop and the Workshop Movement in the UK) [DOI:10.1080/01439685.2013.823029]

3. **Conference contribution** Shannon, Roger (Edge Hill), Baig-Clifford, Yasmeen (Vivid); Long, Paul (BCU) (2012) [The Birmingham Film and TV Workshop and UK Film Culture](#), Channel 4 and British Film Culture Conference – BFI Southbank, London, 1–2 November 2012 (invited conference paper, which formed the basis of the journal article above)

The *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* is the interdisciplinary journal of the International Association for Media and History (IAMHIST), published by Taylor and Francis, and is an important international forum for debate and investigating evidence produced by the mass media for historians and social scientists, and the impact of mass communications on the political and social history of the twentieth century.

4. Details of the impact

Claim 1: Engaging new audiences with a previously lost aspect of Birmingham's cultural history from the 1970s and 80s (Corroboration: Factual Statements 1-2; Other Sources 1)

Through his research into the BFVW and its engagement with socio-political themes of the period, **Shannon** stimulated wider interest and engagement in this largely neglected aspect of UK film history, but especially the overlooked role played by the Birmingham film collective and their influence (on Channel 4 and Independents such as Maverick TV, founded by BFVW member Jonnie Turpie MBE). **Shannon's** research thus led to an invitation from the director of Vivid Gallery

in Birmingham to participate in a roundtable debate in 2008 about the Film Workshop Movement, including director Alan Lovell (*Traces Left; 1983*).

One key outcome of this discussion was the curation of a public exhibition titled *Participation* at the Vivid Gallery (2 July - 1 August 2009), comprising the five-week exhibition, six screening programmes and four talks. **Shannon** was the principal consultant and adviser for this exhibition, curated the discrete film programmes, which documented films from BFVW and other workshops across the UK as a whole, including films from Belfast, Bradford, Cardiff, Gateshead, London, Newcastle and Sheffield, and gave the opening address. At the exhibition's core was the newly digitised body of film and video work from the BFVW that had been completely overlooked up to that point (**see Claim 2 below**). The exhibition made the work of the Birmingham Workshop far more widely available publicly than before, showcasing for a whole new audience the newly available BVFW films, including the 1983 BFVW Helen Biggar documentary *Traces Left*. 471 visitors were recorded at the gallery, with one remarking: 'The visit was great. I took my husband to see it afterwards. It made me think about the tradition of film, in aesthetic terms and in terms of representation of a specific time' (**Factual Statement 1**). Another said: 'It was a perfect introduction to learning about the artistic heritage of the region, and as an aspiring curator it has really inspired me to think about exhibitions that draw on the region's past'. The attendees were young and old, and their experiences were evaluated by Vivid (**Factual Statement 1**). Selected films from the exhibition were toured to the Foyle Film Festival (2010), with **Shannon** attending a discussion panel; screenings were held at the MAC (2012), which 'brought images of youth cultures [...] to the attention of newer audiences, prompting a wide-ranging discussion' (**Factual Statement 2**); IPS, Bournville (2013); and Glasgow Film Theatre (2013). 20 young people took part in a workshop prior to *Participation*, which drew parallels between the 'do-it-yourself' aesthetics evident in the 1980s underground and the 2000s. Screen West Midlands nominated *Participation* for a Digital Social Responsibility Award (2009) (**Factual Statement 1**). The exhibition programme, which included an essay commissioned from **Shannon**, was published online and had 9875 hits (**Factual Statement 1; Other Source 1**). The Vivid director attests to the impact of **Shannon's** research 'in showing us the significance of archives' and 'public engagement has demonstrated the ongoing hunger for events which tell the story and history of our city' (**Factual Statement 1**).

Claim 2: Rediscovery and digitisation of old BFVW film and video material, now archived at Vivid, for new audiences (Corroboration: Factual Statement 1)

Shannon played a role in Vivid's successful application for funding to the UK Film Council's Digital Archive Fund to digitise the BFVW materials, which had been recorded either on 16mm film or low-band UMATIC video, and thus inaccessible to a wider public audience for a number of years and vulnerable to degradation. The films now reside in Vivid's digital archive, where they are available for DVD copying and for future presentations, tours and screenings at arts centres, galleries and festivals (e.g. *Hell Unltd* screening/tour package; **Claim 3 below**). A showreel DVD was distributed to 30 schools, colleges, regional screens, museums and galleries in the Birmingham region.

Using this newly accessible material, a thematic package for schools/FE/HE groups was produced by Vivid with contextual material commissioned from the original BFVW filmmakers and producers, enhanced by social and historical commentaries commissioned from academics, including **Shannon**. In 2011, Vivid also developed a community partnership scheme, 'Home Movies', on the theme of 'home', drawing on films from the new archive. This programme was produced by Birmingham-based company Reel Access in collaboration with residents from Hodge Hill. Selections were screened at community venues in two areas of the city (Jan-Mar 2011) as part of a Birmingham Cultural Partnership initiative to support activity in local sites, which led to a group of people participating in a learning programme, developing basic programming and interpretation skills in order to produce a series of screenings in the Pump Centre (Hodge Hill) and Vivid (Digbeth). As part of this initiative, the group also facilitated a discussion evening, attended by 50 people, at which **Shannon** was a speaker. As one participant remarked: 'I liked the democratic feel to [the project] and the opportunity to work with a wider range of people from my usual circle of acquaintances. I am interested in film and also the culture of ordinary people'. Reel Access commented that access to the Vivid archive inspired them to '[build] on the ideas of using archive footage to create exhibitions and new work [...] and it is exciting to see how they shape

new work whether that be in the form of a new exhibition or a new piece of filmmaking'. The Flatpack Film Festival in Birmingham will screen *Property Rites*, in March 2014.

Claim 3: Rediscovery of the life and work of Helen Biggar (Corroboration: Factual Statements 3-5; Other Sources 2)

With the digital availability of the films, outlined in Claim 2 above, and a growing audience for film and documentary work made in the UK from the 1930s onwards, **Shannon** devised and curated a screening of *Hell Unltd*, Biggar's film with Norman McLaren, alongside **Shannon's** *Traces Left* at the Glasgow Film Theatre on 9 March 2013 to celebrate International Women's Day and the contribution of women artists in Glasgow to protest movements. A close relative of Biggar's has welcomed the impact of **Shannon's** research for 'reactivat[ing] interest' in her aunt's career, especially in her hometown of Glasgow (**Factual Statement 3**). Head film archivist at the Norman McLaren archive (collection GB 0559 GAA / 31) concurred, adding that **Shannon's** research has 'had the additional benefit for the University of Stirling of bringing to light papers relating to the making of *Hell Unltd* held in private hands. This material has now been transferred to the University of Stirling Public Archives where it is available for the public to consult alongside the rest of our extensive Norman McLaren Archive' (**Factual Statement 4**).

In addition to devising the event in conjunction with the GFT, **Shannon** worked closely with the composer and musician Kim Moore, advising her on Biggar's life and work, and especially the anti-war sentiments inflecting it, to facilitate her composition of a soundtrack and performance accompaniment to the silent *Hell Unltd* for the live performance at the screening. Moore has spoken of how her involvement in the project has affected her attitude to her practice, as well as making her more aware both of the impact politically engaged art and culture can have on society, and her own place in Glasgow's tradition of female artists. In particular, the two films in question have inspired her to start a project around what has historically happened to creative women.

Shannon introduced the screening and chaired a concluding question and answer session. As a consequence of the success of the event, a tour package has been assembled for theatres and arts centres, taking both films, *Hell Unltd* and *Traces Left*, and composer/musician Kim Moore across the country. By virtue of **Shannon's** ongoing work on Biggar and independent film of the 1930s, a Montreal-based writer and independent film researcher, who is working on a book and radio documentary on McLaren, 'discovered the truth behind this creative woman who was such an overlooked force in McLaren's young life and the Glasgow artistic-political scene of the period' (**Factual Statement 5**). As a consequence of **Shannon's** research there will now be a chapter about Biggar and her collaboration with Norman McLaren in her forthcoming book.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Factual Statements

1. Director, Vivid Gallery, Birmingham - addresses engagement of new audiences with a previously lost aspect of Birmingham's cultural history; rediscovery, digitisation and archiving of BFVW material.
2. Director, Midlands Arts Centre (MAC), Birmingham – addresses engagement of new audiences with a previously lost aspect of Birmingham's cultural history.
3. Helen Biggar's relative – addresses renewed interest in Biggar's career, especially in Glasgow.
4. Head Archivist, Norman McLaren Archive, University of Stirling supporting statement – addresses - Value of the research in reviving interest in the filmmaking career of Helen Biggar; confirms transfer of material to the Norman McLaren Archive, University of Stirling Archives.
5. Journalist, writer and independent film researcher – addresses influence on own work.

Other Sources

1. *Participation* Exhibition programme (2009)
2. *Hell Unltd* tour programme.