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Rescue Recording: The Amber Film Collective and the Representation of Northern Working Class Identity

During the 1970s the identity of Northern England underwent a paradigmatic shift. Once being Britain's industrial heartland and the site of a rich working class culture, by the end of the decade the North could be defined by failed industry and unemployment, visually scarred by social housing planning disasters, and peopled by brutish and chauvinistic union men. This process culminated with the election of Margaret Thatcher and the retrenchment of the North-South divide in British social and cultural life, receiving its final expression in the 1984-85 Miners' strike.

During this period the Amber Film Collective, the first regionally-based Film Workshop, made a series of documentaries recording traditional industrial processes in the Northeast, a type of film that they have described as 'rescue recording'. Their stated aim was to document and celebrate the achievements of working class culture in the Northeast, a culture that was in decline as traditional manufacturing jobs disappeared and were replaced by low-paid, low-status work in the servicesector. Their work explores working class identity in the Northeast during a period of intense transformation in the region with old connotations persisting as well as being contested and supplanted.

This paper will discuss the representation of regional working class identity in Amber's work and argue that it represents both a change and a continuation in the aesthetics, values and practices of the British Documentary Movement founded by John Grierson in the 1930s. In particular it will be argued that Amber rearticulated what Andrew Higson has called the 'documentary idea' (1996) within an ideological model informed by the politics of the New Left and the ideal of autonomous arts practices that emerged from the independent film sector during the late 1960s.