

Mapping City Space: Independent Film-makers as Urban Gazetteers

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The use of film as an analytical tool to map the shifting dynamics of urban space has a precedent in the work of the film-maker and architect Patrick Keiller. Writing about his experience of exploring the urban landscape in early films for his project *The City of the Future*, he observes that films are evidence of how little the material fabric of our cities has actually changed; people continue to live and work in urban environments inherited, in the main, from the nineteenth century and adapted for twenty-first century purposes (2003: 276). Keiller's observations are based on the collection of a corpus of over 2,000 films held in the UK National Film and Television Archive dating from the early 1890s to the 1950s which form the basis of an exploration 'between the familiarity of old city fabric, the strangeness of the past, and the newness of present-day experience'.¹ The Liverpool-based *City in Film* project is collating and analysing a database of films made in and about the city from the earliest recordings shot by Alexandre Promio for the Lumière Brothers in 1897 to the early 1990s. One of the aims of the project is to record and analyse the rich body of work created in and about the city by independent and amateur film-makers. In this article, the focus is on amateur films dating from the 1950s, a rich and significant source of images of the city that until recently has received scant attention from film scholars.

Many surviving films from the early days of amateur production found in the UK's regional film archives, particularly those from the 1920s when the ownership of a cine camera was still the prerogative of a wealthy upper-middle-class and aristocratic elite, fall into a category described by anthropologist Richard Chalfen (1987) as the 'home mode' of production – family films produced by bourgeois individuals. The development of the cine societies, however, with their emphasis on the shared ownership of equipment, film stock and facilities, along with their collective production ethos, democratised the amateur film move-

ment, bringing amateur production within the sights of a much wider group of people.² By the early 1930s, the collective ethos and the national organisational structures which the clubs had developed challenge the notion that amateur film-making is necessarily an individual, domestic practice. Little attention has been given to the wide range of films created by the cine clubs: group film-making projects were the principal means of involvement in the clubs, with short dramas and documentaries featuring prominently on the production slate. Magazines and journals such as *Amateur Cine World* and *Pathoscope Monthly* catered to the local clubs as well as to individuals, encouraging readers to think of projects that would offset the costs involved in purchasing equipment and film stock by becoming valuable investments that would recoup healthy returns in the future. Disappearing customs and the rapidly changing landscapes of Britain's towns and villages were singled out as particularly important topics for cine club documentaries, enshrining them on celluloid for future generations to enjoy: 'Old towns, quaint customs, the everyday life of the people, the gradual substitution of new towns for old, the ever changing suburbs, the pageant of the seasons ... there is a veritable wealth of opportunities for the man with a Motocamera' (McKeag 1934: 5).

Locally produced documentary films have received scant attention from film researchers, not least, perhaps, because the depiction of place in moving image culture is usually considered through a focus on the *mise-en-scène* of fiction films, where it is usually conceived as either an imaginary or a mediated construct.³ In *Imagining the Modern City* for example, James Donald creates a richly textured analysis of the ways in which the imaginative and perceptual identities of cities such as Los Angeles, Berlin and London are mediated through mainstream genre films using the expressionist palette of *film noir* to create psychologically taut environments seething with anomic anxiety, sexual tension and criminal intent. In contrast, the topographical *mise-en-scène* of amateur actuality productions seems 'artless', lacking expression; the absence of character-driven narrative shifts attention to narration of space as place, often through a focus on particular sites that, resonant with the mythos of place, emphasise locality and its construction at specific historical moments. Local actualities offer moving tableaux of spatial and topographical detail, mapping shifting contours of place and regional identity during the twentieth century. For amateur film historian Patricia Zimmerman, 'the visual structures of these works map localised micro histories rather than nationalised phantasmatic representations' that are not simply local but 'crisscrossed hybrids between the local and the global, between the psychic and political terrains' (2001: 109). Although

not necessarily challenging dominant conceptions of urban and rural space and place as constructed in national film culture and film historiography, these actuality films constitute a level of image-making activity at the local level that extends and enhances interpretations and understandings of place.

The aim of this article is to explore how amateur films made by Merseyside film-making groups in the 1950s and 1960s map a 'localised micro history' of Liverpool city centre at a time of redevelopment and change, the moment of the emergence of the Mersey sound, a decade when the mythos of the city resonated with an economic and cultural confidence that led to Liverpool being designated by the city council as 'City of Change and Challenge'. The amateur films under consideration here form part of the Pleasures Past series, created and produced by independent film-maker and collector Angus Tilston. Tilston's work as a collector, film-maker and producer has made a wealth of amateur material available for public consumption. Founder of Swan Movie Makers Wirral in 1954, Tilston is well known in amateur circles for his video productions and has developed national and international connections with other amateur societies and organisations world wide that have encouraged people to donate their footage to him. Keen that their films should continue to be screened rather than languishing in boxes in attics or be thrown away when they died, their wishes have been honoured by Tilston, who has kept the films in circulation through regular screening events at local clubs and old people's homes and, latterly, by making work available as part of his Pleasures Past series. Compiled from a personal collection of more than 800 films, with contributions from friends and colleagues, footage donated by the partners and heirs of deceased film-makers and small amounts of commercially produced material, the series ranges from transport and tram films to local historical compilations including five films featuring Liverpool through the decades.⁴ There are around 100 items featuring the city and its immediate environs in the collection, the bulk of which date from the early 1950s to the early 1980s, the heyday of the amateur film movement and the Merseyside cine societies.

The activities of the cine clubs during the 1950s and 1960s corresponded with the planned modernisation of the city of Liverpool and its environs as the city strived to respond to economic change. While films commissioned by the city council emphasised the cultural life of the city and its thriving manufacturing sector in order to attract new businesses and investment,⁵ the burgeoning cine club movement recorded city centre streets and buildings, mapping 'time as it was being lived' in the everyday public spaces of the city's central shopping

and market areas (Bruno 2002: 259). Neither straightforwardly ethnographic document nor documentary record, this topographical footage records the details of place with an intensity that speaks to an emotional response to modernisation as the known city becomes another place, a response that insists on the value of both personal and shared memory through the collective activity of cine club screenings and of collating footage of times past to make it available for contemporary consumption.

From the earliest days of film-making, an iconography of Liverpool on film was established that focused on buildings, streets and the waterfront as the hallmark of the city's identity. The first surviving footage of Liverpool shot by Alexandre Promio for the Lumière Brothers in 1897 consists of a number of unrelated sequences of observational camerawork that feature the city's early Victorian architectural landmark to civic pride, St Georges Hall, shots of the central shopping area and, unusually, several extended tracking shots of the waterfront taken from an electric train on the overhead railway, some of the first shots of this kind to be recorded. In 1897, the docks are filled with the tall masts of sailing ships and it is, in these pre-Liver Building days, the view of Jesse Hartley's Albert docks and the northern dock complex from the overhead railway (known locally as the 'dockers' umbrella') that attract tourist attention and distinguish the Liverpool waterfront from its other dockland competitors.⁶ Much of the amateur film of the city shares striking similarities with this early footage, echoing early cinema's emphasis on recording locality, also found in the Edwardian films of the city shot by Mitchell and Kenyon, where a tram ride from the docks through the city streets repeats the motif of the phantom ride, a popular crowd pleaser in Reynolds wax museum on Lime Street where the earliest films were shown (Toulmin 2006). Journeys into and around the city form the substance of early amateur work made in and about the city; home movies made by the wealthy Preston family in the 1930s, for example, feature day trips to Liverpool, touring around the docks with local dignitaries and greeting important visitors disembarking from visiting liners.⁷

With the proliferation of the cine clubs in the 1950s and 1960s, the number of films featuring the city as subject matter increased markedly. The City in Film project has documented some forty items featuring the city centre and waterfront made by amateur film-makers between charter year (1957) and the late 1960s. Many of these are raw footage, edited in camera; others are edited to create a typical journey (often embarking on the ferry at Birkenhead for a trip to Liverpool) or leaving the city for a day out. By the late 1950s, the Royal Liver and Port of Liver-

pool buildings, along with the Cunard building at Liverpool's Pier Head, had attained the iconic status associated with the 'Three Graces' that it has today, and most of the footage shot at this time includes images of these buildings. Numerous films record the ferries traversing the Mersey such as *Boat for Businessmen* (Norman Couch, Heswall Cine Club, 1961) which focuses on the busy commuter river traffic, while other film-makers created semi-dramatised documentaries about the experience of crossing the Mersey from a particular perspective, such as *Fair Play* (George Gregory, Swan Movie Makers, early 1960s), which focuses on a young boy going for a day out to the seaside at nearby New Brighton.⁸ Other film-makers are more historically conscious in their intentions; aware of the rapidly changing topography of the city and its historical significance, they deliberately attempt to document the environment. In 1957 Eric Knowles of Hoylake Cine Group completed an ambitious record of the city's 750 year celebrations of its charter that includes images of the last tram to run from the Pier Head to the outer suburbs, the demolition of the overhead railway and the beginning of the construction of the Metropolitan Cathedral. Footage that seeks to capture particular city centre buildings and streets becomes more pronounced in succeeding years as the city undergoes an intense phase of modernisation and redevelopment. Here I will focus on four films that, between them, capture the dynamic of environmental transformation in the 1960s; whilst it is impossible to interpret from this footage the emotional investments of the film-makers in their subject matter, the different approaches they use are revelatory of their attitudes towards changes in the city centre as it undergoes rapid demolition and redevelopment.

Amateur films featuring people and places are often regarded as ethnographic documents because, according to commentators such as Hogenkamp and Lauwers, they offer 'detailed glimpses along the side streets of history, capturing ordinary people engaged in the rhythms of everyday life in situations overlooked by those who made more official records of historical change' (quoted in Nicholson 2002: 85). Many of the films in the Tilston collection focus on everyday life and social activity; as well as this ethnographic aspect, the films reveal how place is constructed not only materially in the form of buildings, streets and architectural sites but also through spatial use. I want to suggest that the first three city films discussed here are, in a way similar to photographs and other personal artefacts, primarily memory texts, created with the explicit intention of mapping the changing topography of the urban environment and its spatial use. Unlike ethnographic films, they are less concerned with people and their activities than recording place

itself, their iconographies redolent of the detail of buildings and streets, the film-makers recording a familiar place that is well loved. Although, in most cases, they exist without soundtracks to register their 'mood', today these films function as psychogeographic testimonies, vehicles for nostalgia. The journey or movement through city space undertaken with the camera implicitly locates point of view with the cinematographer, personalising the viewpoint as a relationship between self and place. Unlike Baudelaire's nineteenth century *flâneur* or Walter Benjamin's twentieth century bourgeois male whose disinterested gaze is frequently invoked by cultural theorists in their attempts to construct an objective, observational viewpoint of city streets and their diversions (see, for example, Gleber 1998), these city strollers are full of meaningful intent, intensely interested in the places they are documenting. Their aim seems to be the creation of a visual record of streets and buildings, a personal gazetteer which Giuliana Bruno (2002) has aptly described as a psychogeographical 'atlas of emotion', a uniquely twentieth century mode of looking that memorialises space as place through the making of a moving image map.

As with many cities in post war Britain, bomb damage from air raids during World War Two was the ostensible reason given by the city council for the demolition of damaged buildings and their replacement with the concrete and glass modernist designs popular with architects and planners. The widespread destruction of large areas of the inner city created an opportunity for the city council to draw up plans that aimed to reshape dramatically the historic centre to meet twentieth century needs. Following a government initiative that encouraged local authorities to prepare a new type of plan called a town centre map, Liverpool was one of the first cities to appoint a planning consultant. A series of reports on all aspects of the city's central area were published from 1962 onwards, summarised in the Liverpool City Centre Plan (City Centre Planning Group, 1965). The principle aim of the plan was to rationalise the use of space, a feasible aim in Liverpool because of the council's extensive ownership of land and property in and around the central area. Their argument was that, without modern transport networks to move goods to and from the city's extensive docklands, the port and its industrial hinterland would become less competitive both nationally and internationally. With roads, railways and canals historically radiating into the hinterland from the port, the principle concern was to make the city and its surrounding area an attractive prospect for industrial investment in a city where unemployment was twice the national average (2.6 per cent in June 1965 compared with the national figure of 1.3 per cent). The vast scale of redevelopment was realised

only in part, not least due to local opposition to one of the plan's most controversial schemes, the inner city motorway, which was only partially realised. The plan included the closing and relocation of the city's wholesale and retail fish, fruit, vegetable and flower markets from their historic home in Great Charlotte Street, where they had operated since 1822, to a new site on the periphery of the central area. In 1960 the city council reached agreement with Ravenseft Properties Ltd. to redevelop the central market area bounded by Lime Street, Elliot Street, Houghton Street and Roe Street as a pedestrian shopping precinct on several levels with a multi-storey car park, hotel and ballroom as well as a new retail market to replace the existing St Johns market.

The impending demolition of the historic central area prompted an emotional response from amateur film-makers. The films selected for discussion here are of particular interest because of the different ways in which they approach the recording of place. The first of these is the most conventional, both in terms of the treatment of its theme and in its attempt to emulate a professional style of documentary film-making common at the time. Made by Frank Pyett in 1962 in 16mm colour, this six minute film of the Queen Square fruit, vegetable and flower market has strong resemblances to a municipal promotional film in its use of expositional camerawork, structural attention to the detail of editing, use of voice-over narration and non-synchronous sound track. Designed to entertain as well as inform, the simple narration (recounted by a child) tells the story of a day in the life of the market from the perspective of a local resident, Tiddles the cat. The images, drawing on popular constructions of street market imagery complete with 'cheeky chappie' barrel boys and doughty stallholders, are similar to other accounts of the time such as Lindsay Anderson's award winning Free Cinema documentary of London's Covent Garden market *Every Day Except Christmas* (1957). In 1962, Liverpool's wholesale fruit and vegetable market occupied Queen Square, in close proximity to its former home in the bomb damaged St Johns market which was scheduled for demolition and redevelopment. There is no hint of these impending changes in this film, however; throughout the tone is celebratory, focusing on the wide range of produce brought to Queen Square from the market gardens and farms surrounding the city, from nearby Ormskirk and from the more distant North Wales. The film provides a number of locating shots of the square, revealing on two sides the crumbling facades of an assortment of mid-eighteenth century houses, a remnant of what historian Jane Longmore describes as 'the careful estate management of the Georgian corporation', which developed a series of squares and long terraces to house the city's fashion-

able mercantile elite (2006: 158).

Following a sequence of lorries arriving and porters unloading their goods, the visual tour around the market stalls continues with close-ups of brightly coloured displays of fresh fruit and vegetables (the film-maker clearly relishing the opportunity to work in colour rather than the more usual, for amateurs, black and white). The film concludes with a rousing flourish of 'Who will buy?', a direct homage to Lionel Bart's musical *Oliver!* that enjoyed a long run on the London stage after opening in 1960. This song, with its reference to Victorian street market traditions, is the only aspect of the film that situates it in a nostalgic vein; in all other respects, Pyett's film celebrates the market through its focus on the energy and liveliness of its everyday activity. Today, it is a colourful memorial to a square that no longer exists, although the fruit and vegetable market, located elsewhere, continues to thrive.

The sense of nostalgia and loss associated with viewing images of places that have long since disappeared is felt far more acutely in an untitled twenty minute film made by Liver Cine Group member Jim Gonzales in the early 1960s. Shot in black and white and edited in-camera with no soundtrack, the film begins with footage shot around the Pier Head and moves uphill towards the Dale Street area, as if arriving in Liverpool by ferry and strolling up through the city towards Lime Street station. Initially, the film-maker records the iconic buildings that populate the waterfront, taking time to carefully frame a mid-shot of the Liver birds with a pigeon perching in the foreground, then walking up past the former shipping offices, pausing to record the frontage of the historic Georgian town hall before plunging into the network of alleys that surrounds the old business area, the camera pausing again to focus on the details of buildings and street names. Arriving in the market area around Queen Square, the film slackens its pace markedly as the camera, moving slowly, spends more time noting the details of the buildings and repeatedly traversing the cobbled streets. Particular emphasis is given to the market gateways, to street names, to building frontages, the repetitive camerawork changing the forward trajectory of the journey into a cyclical form of reverie or contemplation. The whole area is strangely deserted with no other person in sight, creating an air of ghostly melancholy. The slow pace and repetitive camerawork seem determined to emphasise the materiality of the streets and buildings as if the act of filming in itself could guarantee a permanent memory of place.⁹ This memorialising gaze moves to a high vantage point on St. George's Plateau from where it can pan the familiar facades of the nineteenth century buildings on St George's Place, pausing on the fine detail of an early steel framed

building before moving on to the frontage of hotels and shops with their bright neon advertising signs that greeted a traveller arriving in Liverpool by rail. Returning to Queen Square via a slow tracking shot of the Great Northern Hotel on Lime Street, the absence of the busy outdoor market so vividly captured by Frank Pyett emphasises the shabbiness, dereliction and decay of the once grand square. The repetitive camerawork casts a last long(ing) look at the buildings, the final gaze of a documentary journey, the end of a moving memorial to the city's historic central market area.

If Gonzales' film creates a sense of nostalgia for an absent place, Eric Knowles' short sequences of untitled, unedited footage, shot soon afterwards, are similarly observational but are a more upbeat account of the changes wrought by new development, enhanced by the use of colour and the general air of productive activity that pervades the scenes. The building of a new road network, designed to relieve traffic congestion at the entrance to the Birkenhead tunnel and integrate the new Wallasey tunnel into an inner city motorway around the central area, was a hotly contested aspect of the City Centre Plan due to the number of historic buildings that needed to be demolished in its path. Knowles' footage includes sequences that show the building of the Dale Street flyover, and, unusually for an amateur film, footage shot from the top of St John's Beacon as it is being constructed that gives a bird's eye view of the new roadways under construction. The upbeat tempo of the film is enhanced by people (many of them workmen) smiling and waving at the camera, enjoying the value given to their activity by the film-maker. The overall mood created by the film, however, remains inevitably one of nostalgia; the new construction work is only slowly covering the gaps and holes in the streets and buildings, some of them still awaiting repair more than twenty years after they were damaged by bombs. With the flyover cutting off whole communities from the downtown areas that provided local amenities and traditionally served as their shopping centre, the people who used to populate this area have not returned. Traffic is sparse on the new flyover, and the surrounding pavements and streets, once busy with tradespeople and pedestrians, are deserted.

By the end of the decade, the upheavals wrought upon the daily lives of local residents by the building of the new road tunnel and the network that would connect it to the city centre were an increasing source of criticism. Commentary on transformation and change in the city centre develops a specifically critical, political character in *Us and Them* (1969), a 40 minute black and white 16mm film written and directed by Peter Leeson that documents the effects of the development of the new road network on the people living close to the central

area known locally as 'Scottie Road'. Established in the nineteenth century as the heart of Liverpool's desperately poor Irish community, the area trails alongside the northern docks, bounded on one side by the city's prestigious collection of nineteenth century municipal buildings – the Walker Art Gallery, and the William Brown Library and Museum. *Us and Them* has structural similarities to Frank Pyett's portrait of Queen Square market, but the project is far more ambitious, both in its attempt to record the disappearing communities of Scotland Road before they are re-housed in the new town estates beyond the city boundary and in its angry, polemical attack on the city council for its lack of regard for local residents who have to suffer the environmental hazards and physical upheavals created by the road building programme. The film loosely tracks the daily lives of a few individuals against the background of community life – shops, markets, the local parish church, Catholic schools and youth clubs, pubs, social clubs, the swimming baths and wash house. The soundtrack is sequential, the narrator's voice-over interspersed by sections of synchronised background sound, well-known Liverpool songs and the participants' personal comments. Although ethnographic rather than topographic in character, *Us and Them* warrants inclusion here because of footage that focuses on the urban environment. Attention throughout is constantly directed towards the appalling housing conditions and environmental squalor; local residents live in scruffy, walk-up tenement blocks owned and managed by the city's housing corporation or in semi-derelict streets of terraced housing being slowly demolished to make way for new industrial units and high rise flats. Cut against expositional sequences showing school life, shopping, youth and social club activities that emphasise everyday routines amidst the frenetic activity and chaos created by the road building are repeated images of isolated figures against landscapes of dereliction and decay: an old lady picks her way through rubbish to the shops, two young children play with a ball in a tenement courtyard beneath a sign that states 'No ball games allowed', and older children play in half demolished buildings surrounded by vast piles of rubble (the 'derries'). Nineteenth century tenement blocks, still inhabited by elderly residents, have gaping holes in their roofs; shops and pubs are boarded up because of vandalism. From the balconies of their walk-up flats in the densely packed 1930s tenements, residents look out over the vast new road scheme, increasingly isolated and cut off from local amenities and from each other. It is only a matter of time before they too are moved on.

Leeson's film, with its polemical critique of the way in which the corporation has treated local residents, straddles the borderline

between the activities of the mature amateur sector and the emergent workshop movement with its explicitly political forms of community based film-making practice that began to establish itself in the city during the early 1970s, and which is currently the focus of further research.¹⁰

Global pressures to modernise Liverpool's local economy in the 1960s created a surge of redevelopment not dissimilar to the wave of building work that has followed in the wake of designating the historic dockland area a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004 and winning the accolade of European Capital of Culture 2008. The films that recorded these changes did so from a range of perspectives, incorporating different techniques and, occasionally, a very particular way of looking at the city described here as a 'memorialising gaze'. For Patrick Keiller, city films suggest how little of our urban environment has changed: 'viewing film of, say, London in the 1900s, the immediate post-war period or even the 1970s, one is struck by the contrast between the familiarity of many of the spaces glimpsed and our distance from the lives of those who once inhabited them'.¹¹ But watching amateur and independent films of Liverpool, it becomes evident just how much has been lost. Bombing during World War Two damaged and destroyed large areas of Liverpool's docklands and city centre leaving vast tracts of land derelict. The further destruction of the city's residential core to make way for roads and transportation systems, as opposed to prioritising the repair of the existing fabric of buildings and housing stock, was undoubtedly an emotive issue, and one that these film-makers have captured through their mapping of the condemned areas. The re-orientation of the nineteenth century road network aimed to create a modern, mobile society in which the free flow of capital in the form of goods and the provision of services reflected a partnership between local political praxis and development finance, ostensibly for the good of the people but ultimately favouring capital investment. Rather than emphasising how much of our built environment remains intact, these films emphasise what has disappeared; they help us to remember what this city looked like, how space was used and what was gained and lost in the process of redevelopment – including the feelings of belonging associated with the sociality of place.

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Notes

1. 'Most of the films are included as documents of urban space but the selection also covers transport, communications, oil, electrification and some colonial subjects, including railway and port construction'. Patrick Keiller, notes on the database 'The City of the Future, Urban and Other Landscapes in the UK's National Film and Television Archive', Arts and Humanities Data Service, <http://www.vads.ahds.ac.uk/collections/CF.html>, accessed 28th April 2007.
2. The Newcastle and District Amateur Cine Club, now under a different name, is considered the oldest established cine club in Britain, although early journals suggest that clubs were being formed as early as 1923; see Coad (undated: 7).
3. Historians, by way of contrast, regard amateur films as immensely valuable; see, for example, Gomez (2007) on the role played by historians in creating the North West Film Archive as a repository for locally made films.
4. *Victorian Liverpool* (Angus Tilston, Pleasures Past, 1995), *Liverpool, Memories of a Vibrant City: the 1920s and 1930s* (Angus Tilston, Pleasures Past, 1993), *Liverpool, Echoes of the 1940s and 1950s* (Angus Tilston, Pleasures Past, 1994), *Liverpool and the Swinging Sixties* (Angus Tilston, Pleasures Past, 1994), *Liverpool in the 70s, 80s and 90s* (Angus Tilston, Pleasures Past, 2002). All these productions combine amateur footage with films commissioned by the city council and extracts from commercially produced news film.
5. See, for example, *Liverpool Soundings* (City of Liverpool Public Relations Office, 1966), *Rates for the Job* (City of Liverpool Public Relations Office, 1966) and *Turn Of the Tide: Liverpool's Emergence as an Industrial Power* (City of Liverpool Public Relations Office, 1967).
6. For a detailed discussion of the overhead railway and its significance as a tourist venue see Roberts (2007b).
7. See, for example, *Views of Liners 'Cedric' and 'Britannic'*, Preston family, North West Film Archive.
8. Most of the ferry films pre-date the more famous feature film *Ferry Cross the Mersey* (1965) starring Gerry and the Pacemakers. For a more detailed discussion of some of the ferry crossing films see Roberts (2007a).
9. Annette Kuhn suggests that memory texts of all types in all media share certain formal attributes, one of which is the distinctive organisation of time in which 'events are repetitive or cyclical' (2000:189).
10. A new generation of amateur/independents established the Merseyside Visual Communications Unit in the early 1970s and, later in the decade, the film and video workshop Open Eye.
11. See note 1.

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