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Utopian Montage: exploring transnational folk cinemas online as part of the 2020 Folk Film Gathering film festival during the Covid-19 pandemic

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This essay explores some of the simultaneous limitations and affordances the Covid-19 pandemic has created for emergent perspectives upon a transnational folk cinema. Merging aspects of more traditional scholarly enquiry with the research-by-practice embodied within Scotland's Folk Film Gathering film festival, we position two case studies – of Nadir Bouhmouch's Amussu (2020) and the Amber Collective's Like Father (2001) respectively – within some of the broader question underlying attempts to bring the conviviality of community-focussed filmmaking and cinema-going online during the pandemic.

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Nadir Bouhmouch's documentary *Amussu* (2020) features a sequence depicting the Imider Film Festival for Environmental Justice, a small village film festival at which films are projected outside at night, under the stars. Recalling Dina Iordanova's discussion of the transnational interstitiality of film festivals (Iordanova & Cheung 2010: 15), the sequence serves to connect the hyper-local setting of the Imider Film Festival – whereby screenings take place alongside speeches, poetry recitals, comedy performances, races, and other forms of collective celebration – with the Imider community's explicit intention to connect its own experiences with those elsewhere in the world (Chambers & Higbee 2021: 56). *Amussu* documents the community's resistance to the encroachments and exploitation of resources of a transnational mining corporation with links to the Moroccan royal family. The film embodies a conscious act of communicative praxis on behalf of both its director and the Imider community who collaborated on, participated in and commissioned it; articulating a desire to project the story of the community's resistance far beyond the walls of Imider. Following the Amazigh proverb 'Tar Izli Ur tamu' (an event without its poem is an event which never happened), the community saw *Amussu* as existing in continuity with forms of indigenous poetry and oral culture, stating the film 'does not mean that we will substitute the poetry of our ancestors with cinema. But rather that we will combine the two arts to strengthen our cultural heritage and the legacy of resistance.' (Movement on the Road '96 2019). As such, *Amussu* has complex and sophisticated engagement with the contemporary and the traditional, the bounded and the cosmopolitan, the local and the global.

Introducing one of the screenings at the Imider Film Festival for Environmental Justice in *Amussu*, a member of the community declares 'there is a struggle for the right of the people to cinema. Cinema is for everyone. It shouldn't be elitist. And cinema can be a tool in the hands of the people.' Despite growing relevance amidst contemporary world politics, the correspondent notions of a *folk* or *people's* cinema remain relatively unexplored within global film studies. Beyond passing mentions in the work of anti-colonial Third Cinema scholars such as Teshome Gabriel (1982: 32), the intersecting questions of what a folk cinema has been within world film history, is today amongst contemporary film practice, and might be in the future have yet to be fully explored, at a moment in world history in which appeals to 'the people' proliferate the language and imagery of highly divergent political projects (Chambers & Higbee 2021: 42). Drawing from contemporary enquiries into contemporary populism (Laclau: 2005, Mouffe: 2018), the critical project of a folk cinema which the authors of this essay have sought to re-inaugurate through a series of preliminary studies (Chambers, 2018; Chambers & Higbee 2021; Chambers, *in press*) is thus of investigating the different ways in which cinema has sought to articulate divergent folk-concepts and images of 'the people'

within diverse historical locations in world cinema. Such a project is not disinterested. Describing the manner in which 'empty' or 'floating' signifiers such as *the people* or *the folk* become contested images at moments of political dissonance, Ernesto Laclau states 'the 'floating' dimension becomes most visible in periods of organic crisis, when the symbolic system needs to be radically recast' (2005: 132). Amidst what Chantal Mouffe has described as 'a populist moment' (2018: 9), the Western world in 2021 faces not only interlinked political and environmental crisis but the relatively unprecedented medical crisis of a global pandemic. In such a moment of crisis, the praxis of a folk cinema – rather than a distanced, disinterested act of 'objective' scholarship – actively participates within dialectical, articulatory struggles for contemporary political hegemony, seeking to reclaim images of *the folk* and *the people* for progressive, anti-imperial projects advocating radical, polycentric multiculturalism (Shohat & Stam, 1994: 48).

As with other films falling within the frame of a folk cinema, *Amussu* has a strong sense of a primary (Chambers, in press: 402) or authenticating audience (Cade Bambara, 1993), to whom it speaks first and foremost, whilst simultaneously being consciously shaped to address global cosmopolitan audiences on the festival circuit. After the film's world premiere, which took place in Imider in a community setting similar to that seen at the Film Festival for Environmental Justice, *Amussu* travelled onwards to frontline documentary festivals around the world such as Amsterdam's IDFA and Ontario's HotDocs. In May, the film was due to screen at the Folk Film Gathering, a small annual festival in Edinburgh positioning itself as the world's first festival of folk cinema, at a screening at Edinburgh Filmhouse that would have marked its UK premiere. Curated by one of the authors of this essay (and as we explore in detail below), the Folk Film Gathering serves as a form of embodied research through which to explore the ongoing questions of a folk cinema in a 'peopled' setting, with diverse audiences. Here, *Amussu* was to screen alongside a diverse, international programme consisting principally of second-run cinema – such as Mike Alexander's *Mairi Mhor: Na h-orain'sa Beatha* (1994), Bill Douglas' *Comrades* (1986), Herbert J Biberman's *Salt of the Earth* (1954) and the Berwick Street Collective's *Nightcleaners* (1975) – exploring cinematic representations of community resistance arising from diverse moments in world film history. Reflecting *Amussu*'s sense of the ways in which cinema interfaces with the traditional arts, each of our films was to be introduced with live oral folk song or oral storytelling performances, many of the screenings followed by audience discussions, as part of the festival's ongoing exploration of the ways in which cinema can foster a similar sense of shared experience to the folk arts, in a manner not dissimilar to the races and comedy performances in Imider.

Like many film festivals across the world, the 2020 Folk Film Gathering cancelled its in-person screenings to follow the social distancing measures introduced in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The task of reimagining aspects of the festival's delivery to present revised aspects of our programme online subsequently presented an opportunity to reflect critically upon the ramifications such new forms of dissemination and interaction might have for emergent understandings of a folk cinema. In a time of changing media and expectations as to paradigmatic forms of social interaction, what new affordances and limitations might be generated for our evolving understandings and experiences of a folk cinema? Film festivals during the Covid pandemic have increasingly undermined the expectation that 'for the festival to happen, organisers and audiences must come face-to-face in exactly the same place at exactly the same time' (Iordanova, 2010a: 13). How, then, did online delivery effect the composition of the Folk Film Gathering's audiences, and did it open up the greater, more democratic degrees of access that would seem befitting of a 'people's cinema'? Did an online environment eliminate the possibility of the in-person collectivity and conviviality our audience members have grown to prize as part of the live, in-person editions of the Folk Film Gathering? Or did that sense of community remain, albeit translated into a different form?

Employing what Ross Gibson has described as the intersecting emic (interior) and etic (exterior) perspectives of research-by-practice (Gibson, 2018: vii) alongside more traditional modes of film studies scholarship, this essay presents a critical contextualisation of two of the films screened at the 2020 Folk Film Gathering – Nadir Bouhmouch's *Amussu* (2019) and the Amber Collective's *Like Father* (2001) – within our experiences taking the Folk Film Gathering online during the Covid-19 pandemic (alongside the exhibition practices of the filmmakers themselves). In doing so we seek to explore some of the subsequent implications and inflections 'going online' may have for a folk cinema. Given the limited scope of a single essay, this study is best read alongside our earlier explorations of a folk cinema, in particular regarding tentative positive definitions and some of the tensions and problems surrounding the world *folk* (Chambers, 2018), how understandings of a folk cinema may be inflected from a transnational perspective (Chambers & Higbee, 2021), the persistent dangers of exoticism within a folk cinema (Chambers, 2022) and the place of audience within a folk cinema (Chambers, in press). Here, firstly situating the screening practices of the Folk Film Gathering within a consideration of the ways in which film festival exhibition can serve as embodied research (before placing our subsequent case studies within this context), this essay ultimately reflects upon some of the novel forms of solidarity cinema has been able to foster during the pandemic as well as its limitations.

Framing a folk cinema through the embodied research of the Folk Film Gathering

Whilst there is a growing body of research exploring the place of the film festival within transnational, diasporic cultures (Iordanova & Rhyne, 2009; Iordanova & Cheung, 2010 & 2011; Iordanova & Torchin, 2012; Marlow-Mann, 2013; Iordanova and Van de Peer, 2014; Wong, 2011; de Valck et al., 2016), there is yet to be much written on the film festival *itself* as a form of research. Since its inception as part of Jamie Chambers' doctoral work, Edinburgh's Folk Film Gathering has served, complexly, as a form of embodied research; a means of exploring the emergent possibilities of a folk cinema within diverse public forums. Given our assertion a folk cinema is that which multimodally (at moments during production, representation and exhibition (Chambers, 2018: 88; Higbee et al., 2020) pursues a greater interface *with people*, the 'peopled' contexts afforded by both traditional (and, in 2020, less traditional) forms of cinematic exhibition seem a crucial forum through which to explore the ways in which folk culture and cinema may intersect.

As tentatively explored by Chambers (2018, some of the early scholarly activity of a folk cinema involves what may be described, with a degree of unease, as canon formation or – more playfully and contingently – as a speculative act of montage or assemblage in which aspects of difference are placed alongside each other in order to invoke degrees of resonance (and, at times, dissonance). Here we explicitly draw upon cinematic notions of montage in which the co-positioning (and, at times, collision) of two shots creates a contingent meaning that, complexly, is greater than the sum of its parts. This act of Utopian montage, co-positioning the divergent experiences of diverse communities to explore possible solidarities, we argue is one of the core activities of a folk cinema: positioning films arising from disparate socio-historical origins in such a manner as to highlight points of intersection, commonalities of practice and community experience. In this respect a folk cinema draws upon the Utopian 'folk' activism of Hamish Henderson in Scotland (Neat, 2015) and the world folk revival more generally, in exploring points of commonality between community experience in highly divergent socio-historical locations. James Clifford describes discovering the Utopian collectivity of the world folk revival in the 50s:

> In Greenwich Village [I] discovered folk music, and the Left...[I] was a folkie..."The Weavers performed medleys: 'Songs around the World'; An Irish fiddle tune, a Virginia reel, and African chant, a Negro spiritual, an Israeli hora, a Japanese song about the Hiroshima bomb. Every song and tradition was accessible, noble, progressive. All 'folk music'. (1997: 97)

Here, the amorphous, ambivalent (Chambers & Higbee, 2021: 44) signifier of *the folk* or *the people* serves as a permeable space in which divergent cultures and communities may be co-positioned in solidarity. Whilst such Utopian collectivity and comradeship may now seem somewhat naïve within a contemporary context, wherein the global village of the 50s folk revival seems a far cry from the contemporary global scrummage of competing populisms, we argue that in 2021 – wherein the politics of the local and its connection to the global is arguably more important than ever before in an increasingly interconnected digital world – a folk cinema presents a valuable opportunity to foster solidarities between progressive movements increasingly delineated by the particularities of identity and socio-cultural locations. In this respect, as we have argued elsewhere (Chambers, in press: 417), a folk cinema serves as a liminal space within which to explore points of intersection between apparently divergent traditions within world cinema often rehearsed as irreconcilable; in particular an independent western Second cinema, a postcolonial Third Cinema, and an indigenous Fourth cinema. A folk cinema thus recalls a project of comparative literature, albeit within the relatively delineated parameters of Chambers' early, four-part definition of a folk cinema (2018: 88); grouping together films from throughout world history that pursue i) revisionist representation, ii) ethnographic verisimilitude or cultural accuracy, iii) collective rather than individual perspective, and iv) a translation of older cultural forms (such as orality).

It is both one of the central weaknesses and strengths of a folk cinema that it lacks a clearly delineated historical subject: rather than the relatively historically-situated postcolonial experiences articulated by a Third Cinema,[1] or those of indigenous communities within a Fourth Cinema, the 'people' or 'the folk' within a folk cinema are a collective subject that – recalling Ernesto Laclau's discussions of the empty signifiers of populism (2005: 71) – are impossible to fully define; a decentred universal 'identified not with an established set of principles and values, but rather with an empty placeholder that is impossible to fill definitively' (Williams and Srnicek, 2015: 77). We argue that it is precisely the looseness and permeability of 'folk' – the ability to serve as a means of being 'together with difference' (Ien Ang, 2001: 81; cited in Iordanova, 2010a: 36)across multiple 'ethnic sphericules' (Cunningham, 2008; cited in Iordanova, 2010a: 34) as Dina Iordanova has described film festivals – that continue to situate

[1] Whilst the propositions of a Third and Fourth Cinema seem significantly more historically-determined in relative term than a folk cinema, it is important to acknowledge here that aspects of the postcolonial theory underlying Third Cinema have themselves been criticised by commentators such as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (*Unthinking Eurocentrism* (London: Routledge, 1994; p. 38–39) for the manner in which they risk to reify the postcolonial subject, thus ignoring or eliding the specific historical, cultural and geographical conditions of colonization in different periods of history and places around the world.

notions of 'folk', more than 70 years since the world folk revival, as a useful Utopian space, permeable to difference and particularity. In this respect, a folk cinema serves gently to highlight new, perhaps reconciliatory perspectives within global film studies topographies increasingly characterised by what Gayatri Spivak termed 'strategic essentialism' in their delineations of particularised identity and experience (Chambers, in press: 417). Whilst we have no wish to challenge the particularity of the highly contingent, divergent experiences leading to the different ontological propositions of – for example – a postcolonial Third and indigenous Fourth cinema – we hope that a folk cinema may provide a permeable, inclusive space both welcoming and encouraging of difference, whilst simultaneously fostering reflection upon possible areas of solidarity and commonality. In this respect emergent perspectives upon a folk cinema can be seen to prioritise a sense of polycentrism, intersecting and in dialogue with multiple other approaches within world film studies.

Our programming for the Folk Film Gathering since the festival's inception in 2015 can be seen to embody the same experimental act of Utopian montage articulated in our more traditional scholarly outputs, whereby films from highly divergent historical locations are co-positioned in order to illuminate synergistic aspects of shared practice and perspective; such as Morocco's *Amussu* and Scotland's *Play Me Something* (Chambers & Higbee, 2021), or the work of John McGrath in the Scottish Highlands, Amber Collective in the North-East England, Jorge Sanjines in rural Bolivia and Barry Barclay in indigenous New Zealand (Chambers, in press); or indeed the work of Nadir Bouhmouch with indigenous communities in Morocco over the past five years and the Amber Collective with working class communities in the North-East of England over the past five decades, as we explore below.

Through the same acts of montage, the act of assembling the programme of the Folk Film Gathering is thus (in a manner highly proximate to our written scholarly outputs) that of attempting temporarily instantiate a folk cinema, through a constellation of films of divergent origin, co-positioned so as to elicit aspects of solidarity and commonality alongside each other (Chambers, in press: 419). As the majority of films screened at the festival are 'repertory' or second-run (older work that has perhaps not been in distribution for some time), organising our annual programmes tends to involve parsing world cinema history to make curatorial connections across space and time in order to instantiate a folk cinema. Since its inception in 2015, the films screened at the Gathering have thus been drawn from diverse traditions within world cinema, including Second (independent, art) cinema with a political dimension (*Matewan* (1987), *La Ville Est Tranquille* (2000), *The Happy Lands* (2012), *Comrades* (1986), *Winstanley* (1975)), interest in folk tale or folk culture (*November* (2017), *Vacas*

(1992), *Song of the Sea* (2014), *Chanson D'Ar-Mor* (1934), *Akenfield* (1974), *Penda's Fen* (1974), *Blackbird* (2014), *The White Reindeer* (1952)), or made collaboratively within communities (*Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015)); the collectively-made, community-engaged films of the British workshop movement (films by the Amber Collective, the Berwick Street collective); Italian neorealism (*Bitter Rice* (1949)) and its antecedents (in particular the films of the Taviani brothers and Paolo Pasolini); aspects of Third Cinema (*Barrovento* (1962), *Harvest: 3000 Years* (1976); *Killer of Sheep* (1976)) and Fourth Cinema (*BeDevil* (1993), *Maliglutit* (2016), *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk* (2019), *Pathfinder* (1987), *Kaisa's Enchanted Forest* (2016), *The Kaipara Affair* (2005)); and documentaries with either an explicit (*Tempus De Baristas* (1993); *Lion Hunters* (1965)) or implicit (*Laulu* (1994), *Land of Song* (2015), *Journey to a Kingdom* (1992), *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), *Summer Walkers* (1976)) ethnographic focus. Whilst we have screened both documentary and dramas, all films programmed tend to inhabit what the Amber Collective's Ellin Hare has described as an 'interface between documentary and fiction' (Newsinger, 2009: 388). whereby documentary modalities remain present within fictional narratives, through aspects of ethnographic research, or community participation in production. Finally, the Folk Film Gathering frequently seeks reflexively to enact the local-to-global trajectory we have elsewhere discussed as central to a folk cinema (Chambers & Higbee, 2021: 47), through situating a core of films reflecting local experiences of folk culture in Scotland, amongst those depicting community experiences elsewhere in the world.

This co-positioning of very different films within the same space has allowed us to challenge some of the assumptions of both an emergent folk cinema and the word *folk* itself. Our inaugural programme in 2015 sought, for example, to challenge the notion that folk culture denoted only the experiences of rural, traditional communities, through positioning films with more familiar 'folk' enactments of a distant rural past (such as Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* or the Taviani Brothers' *Kaos*) alongside those focussing on collective experiences within an urban present (Ken Loach's *Up the Junction* and Amber Collective's *Dream On*) wherein karaoke, popular songs such as 'I Will Survive' and contemporary working class culture take the place of what is more conventionally considered folk song. *Dream On* and *Up the Junction* also served to trouble the representations of *the folk* as being either explicitly or implicitly male, through explorations of female-led collectivity. At moments our festival programming and more traditional scholarly outputs have intersected more explicitly, such as the convergence between Chambers' research exploring the congruity and compatibility between emergent understandings of a folk cinema and existing 'folk horror' discourses ('Troubling Folk Horror', 2022), and the Folk Film Gathering's 2019 programme, which

saw the cautious inclusion of certain peripheral titles from the folk horror canon such as *The White Reindeer*, *The Owl Service*, *Red Shift*, and *Viy*.[2]

The praxis of a folk cinema enacted within the Folk Film Gathering's annual programmes should be seen as experimental, haunted by the possibility of failure. An aspect of our programming that has proved particularly provocative in this respect, resulting in moments of dissonance amongst our audiences, has been the place of ethnography within a folk cinema. Recalling the charged encounter in which Senegalese Third Cinema luminary Ousmane Sembene accused French ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch of filming Africans 'like ants under a microscope' (Cervoni, 2008: 4) the persistent associations between the etic camera of the ethnographer and the insidious interests of imperialism[3] have meant that the etic (outsider) and often exoticist registers of ethnographic film have at times sat uneasily within our programmes, alongside the more politicized work of a Third or Fourth Cinema. This discomfort manifested itself in particular in a heated discussion session following a screening of the poetic ethnography *Shepherds of Berneray* (1981) in 2016, at which the etic, exoticist perspective of American filmmaker Allen Moore (and in particular his decision to film a shepherding practice of oral castration almost entirely discontinued on Berneray at the time of filming) was gently challenged by members of the audience with ties to the Hebridean communities depicted in the film. Whilst tensions remain, early reconnaissance within a folk cinema demonstrates that aspects of ethnography remain present within even the most politically-committed of cinemas (as Hanlon has explored in relation to the work of Jorge Sanjinés (Hanlon, 2013)). Further, films such as Safi Faye's (herself a protégé of Jean Rouch's) genre-defying *Letter to My Village* (1976) serve in themselves to trouble clear distinctions between emic and etic perspectives within ethnography.

Dina Iordanova has drawn on Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' to discuss the ways in which festivals frequently serve as liminal spaces in which a live, in-person collectivity complexly sits in as a referent for a broader, less tangible 'community' not in attendance (Iordanova, 2010a). Whilst Anderson's initial conception of imaginary communities stemmed largely from a consideration of print media, Iordanova argues compellingly that cinema and the festivals through films are disseminated and celebrated are a central, contemporary means of espousing collective identity. Iordanova's notion of the film festival as an embodied means of 'imagining

[2] Alongside prioritisation of collective paradigms, this exploration of genre has helped further challenge the notion of folk cinema as auteur cinema, preoccupied with the individualist genius of great directors.

[3] Johannes Fabian provides an incisive account of how the supposedly relativist projects of seminal anthropologists such as Margaret Mead was often underscored by implicit imperial motives in *Time & The Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014) p. 48–49.

community' holds multiple, complex resonances for the Folk Film Gathering and a folk cinema more generally. She writes that live, in-person festivals 'practically suspend the "imagined" element of the community by substituting it with a very real one that is, nonetheless, configured around the same axis of imagination that drives the ideas of nation and nationalism'. As we have explored elsewhere, in-person audiences frequently also serve as a complex stand-in for *the folk* or 'the people' within the practice of 'folk' filmmakers such as Jorge Sanjines or Barry Barclay, performing to a certain extent the role of 'the people' or 'the community' within the act of cinema (Chambers, in press: 416). When *Amussu* presents cinema as 'a tool in the hands of the people', for example, the assembled audience at Imider Film Festival for Environmental Justice acts both synecdochally and metonymically as a representative, embodiment of, stand-in or metaphor for 'the people'. Indeed folk cinemas (such as Haile Gerima's *Harvest: 3,000 Years* screened at the Folk Film Gathering in 2018 or Timothy Neat's *Play Me Something*, which opened our inaugural edition) frequently attempt to address audiences as a collective subject, actively seeking to interpellate the homogenous, bonded, and energised body of 'the people', from the more heterogenous, disparate body of the audience.[4] As above, unlike the relatively more historically-delineated propositions of a Third or Fourth Cinema, however, a folk cinema lacks the clear sense of a historical subject unified by a shared demand (one of Ernesto Laclau's core criteria for the establishment of 'a people' (2005: 73)). Even more than Iordanova's discussion of the elusive linguistic and/or national community inferred from a Spanish film festival (2010: 12), therefore, equations drawn between the in-person collectivity of the audience and the broader categories of either *the folk* or *the people* are even more partial and problematic, an inferred collective subject several degrees more imaginary or metaphorical. Any enactment of a folk cinema is therefore a partial, contingent *performance* of cross-community solidarity. Here solidarity should be seen *as a verb*: actively enacted, built or performed; temporarily instantiated through the momentary togetherness or conviviality that arises from the sharing of a story, a song, or a film (Chambers, in press: 399). As we have explored elsewhere (Chambers & Higbee, 2021: 46), Timothy Neat's *Play Me Something* – wherein a group of disparate travellers in a Scottish airport slowly cohere in a moment of temporary community as they listen together to a story told to them by John Berger's mysterious storyteller about two lovers at a communist party festival in Italy – serves in itself to demonstrate both the potential and contingency of a folk cinema, existing in fleeting moments of togetherness, possibility and becoming.

[4] Political theorist Rory Scothorne wrote in 2020 of Scotland as a 'nation without a people' (2020), inferring that a disparate body of people living in relative proximity does not necessarily comprise a 'people', if lacking collective consciousness, a unifying demand (as Ernesto Laclau has discussed) and the motivation toward historical agency.

The Covid-19 pandemic has recast the shifting, emergent questions of a folk cinema in surprising news ways, revealing both new affordances and new limitations. The intense pressure placed upon already vulnerable communities amidst the pandemic places cinema as at best a secondary concern amidst more urgent questions of public health, community livelihoods and worsening economic precarity. At the same time, an increasing emphasis on social-distancing and relative social isolation placed a particular focus on the arts in the UK during 2020 as a source of solace and well-being at a point when many other cultural activities became impossible. Hosting the 2020 Folk Film Gathering amidst the pandemic, we were therefore motivated by the possibility of providing a free, public arts event accessible to audiences not only in Scotland, but across the UK. Calling into question previous assumptions that film festivals constitute '"live" events that convene only in one place at a time' (Iordanova, 2010: 13), running the Folk Film Gathering online reframed notions of 'imagined community' in unexpected new ways.

We were particularly interested in the affordances running a festival online might open up for a decentralised, and perhaps more diverse and dispersed audience than we would usually expect at our in-person screenings at Edinburgh Filmhouse. Responding to an open editorial written by the director of the Folk Film Gathering exploring the festival's 2016 programme, a member of the public resonantly criticised the restricted access of a film festival with the democratic pretension of folk culture that limited itself to paying audiences within a relatively bourgeois art-house cinema in Edinburgh:

> I found myself thinking about cultural seclusion in a different sense, and wondering whether there might not be some way to open these up to others, like me, excluded from this particular discourse by location (I live a day's drive from Edinburgh), purse (I have just the basic pension), or personal circumstances (I have chronic health problems which leave me bed-ridden much of the time). There must be many others similarly prevented for one reason or another, from seeing and discussing the films. Yet we have the technology to make this possible. Might there not be a way to give access to the programme and discussion about its components in a curated presentation online?[5]

Albeit in hitherto unimaginable circumstances, the Covid-19 pandemic allowed the Folk Film Gathering a long-awaited opportunity to try to address these concerns, in offering a programme that was bound neither by geographical location nor ticket prices, and for which access was dependent solely upon having a means to access the

[5] See comment section: bellacaledonia.org.uk/2016/04/25/nowt-so-queer-as-folk. Accessed on 19th July 2021.

films digitally online. Beyond the presentation of the films themselves, these new circumstances also created interesting implications for the online post-film discussion sessions following several of the films, which were again not geographically bound, allowing participants to join from anywhere in the world. These discussion sessions in particular, as explored in detail below (both during the Folk Film Gathering and in the parallel online exhibition work of the Amber Collective over the same period), allowed a fascinating insight into how the Utopian montage of a folk cinema – connecting up highly disparate socio-cultural localities – could, within a digital setting, extend beyond the film to be instantiated through the uncanny cultural and geographic heterogeneity of an online audience.

In what follows we present case studies of two of the films shown as part of the 2020 edition of the Folk Film Gathering: Nadir Bouhmouch's aforementioned *Amussu* (2020), a politically charged documentary about the resistance of an indigenous community in southeast Morocco, and the Amber Collective's *Like Father* (2001), a drama made with non-actors in the ex-mining community of Easington in the North East of England, about the wake of the 1980s miners' strike. In seeking to co-position both films within the frame of a transnational folk cinema, we use the post-film discussion events in particular as a means exploring the ways in which the ongoing international lives of both films through online digital screenings serves to highlight certain emergent questions and themes within the study of a folk cinema.

In doing so we argue these case studies help begin to answer one of the most pressing questions for a folk cinema: returning to *Amussu*'s resonant notion that "there is a struggle for the right of the people to cinema", we ask, *what value or purpose does cinema hold for 'the people' themselves*? As a cinema assuming a privileged proximity with people (in the same way that documentary film assumes a privileged proximity with *reality* or *truth*) – we argue a folk cinema must have a concrete use-value for *people*, the potential absurdity of an etic bourgeois cinema in pursuit of exoticist, touristic fetishisations of otherness being only too close at hand (Chambers, 2022). Such a question reappears within the parallel contexts of a politically engaged, western second cinema, a postcolonial Third Cinema and an indigenous Fourth Cinema. Third Cinema discourses in particular are alive to the more cynical ways in which subaltern experiences can be appropriated and aestheticized as a means of bourgeois spectacle and achievement. Teshome Gabriel in particular has criticised 'the exploitative nature of some Third World film-makers who peddle Third World poverty and misery at festival sites in Europe and North America and do not approach their craft as a tool of social transformation' (1989: 32). Gabriel's scepticism is eloquently echoed elsewhere within a Second cinema context, within the testimony of Austrian documentary director Michael Pilz:

> Before filming HEAVEN AND EARTH (1979) I had tried to get into conversation with a farmer because I wanted to get him to collaborate on my film project. It was winter and there was deep snow high up in the mountains. The farmer was in the forest falling trees that the storm had cracked. After a long wait he finally gave me five minutes and I told him about my plans. He replied briefly and simply that he would not be right if he was filmed in his laborious work. Later, people would sit in comfortable chairs in heated theaters and watch him work. In his eyes people don't work sitting in the movies watching other people work. They're enjoying themselves. And he didn't want to be exploited in favor of such a pleasure of others. He felt such inequality unfair and he didn't want to support the wrong.

This same distance between cinema and lived experience is voiced again elsewhere within what broadly might be considered a Fourth Cinema context by Sam Yazzie, a Navaho medicine man approached by the anthropologist Sol Worth as part of the since-problematised (Ginsburg, 1991: 96) *Through Navajo Eyes* project, wherein Navajo community members were encouraged by anthropologists to take up cameras to film their own lives. As Michelle H. Raheja describes

> Yazzie asked the filmmakers, through his interpreter, an oft-cited series of questions about the 'use' of film: 'Will making movies do the sheep any harm?' After Worth assured him that it would not, Yazzie asked, 'Will making movies do the sheep any good?' Again, Worth said that it would not. Yazzie responded, 'then why make movies?' (2014: 19)

Asked within three divergent, yet parallel contexts, emerges this crucial question for emergent perspectives upon a folk cinema: what value does it hold for 'the people' themselves?

The following case studies, considering *Amussu* and *Like Father* within a continuity of their moments of production, exhibition histories and online screenings in 2020, seeks to foreground this question of the value a folk cinema holds for those it frames as 'the people', amidst broader considerations of how our emergent understandings of a folk cinema may be partially reshaped by the Covid pandemic.

Amussu (Nadir Bouhmouch and Imider community, southeast Morocco, 2019)

Amussu was the only film screened during the Folk Film Gathering's online 2020 edition that constituted a UK premiere. In partnership with the Scottish Documentary Institute the film was made available online, for free, over a 48-hour period from Friday 29th

May to Sunday 31st May. On the request of the film's producer the film was geo-blocked, meaning it could only be watched by UK audiences, placing limits upon our ambition to make the content as widely available as possible. Despite making the film available for free, we ironically found we received a smaller audience (27 for the film itself and 13 for the Q+A) than we would have expected had we hosted the film for paying audiences at Filmhouse (where our average audience at in-person screenings in 2019 was 59). Given the speed at which the festival had to pivot to an online delivery, this may have been as a result of reduced promotional activity. Further, the weekend in question saw perhaps the sunniest weather in Scotland in 2020 after a prolonged lockdown, meaning audiences were perhaps disinclined to spend further time inside, staring at their screens. In later discussion with colleagues in Scotland's exhibition sector, it has since been suggested that uptake of free screenings (in terms of the ratio of sign-up to attendance) may also be less likely to translate to concrete engagement than if we had introduced a small, token ticket price to incentivize those who had booked to concretely attend (certainly, the drop off between those who signed up to attend the Q+A (55) on Eventbrite and those who attended (13) was significant).

Midway through the period in which *Amussu* was available to screen, the Folk Film Gathering hosted a live, online discussion session with the film's director Nadir Bouhmouch (in Marrakech) hosted by SDI Director Noé Mendelle (in Portugal). Almost all quotations cited in this section are taken from the interactions and discussion that took place during this event. During the discussion, Bouhmouch was latterly joined by Moha Tawja, a member of the Imider community who had participated in the making of the film, shooting *Amussu*'s iconic image of a woman's face eclipsed by a megaphone. This in itself evidenced a key affordance of a remotely-hosted Zoom event, allowing members of the community with whom the film was made to participate in the post-film discussion. Joining the session from the rural locality in southeast Morocco in which the film was shot, Tawja's presence amongst a cosmopolitan group of festival audience-goers scattered across the UK served to connect the discussion relatively directly to the local context in which the film was shot. As we were later to find again during the Q+A session for Amber's *Like Father*, this online discussion became a space in which a series of different localities were thus able to interconnect relatively seamlessly (albeit – particularly given Tawja's difficulties in finding a reliable internet connection – not unmediated by aspects of western privilege). This was one of the most significant affordances of the online delivery necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic, serving to connect local and global in an uncanny digital moment of Utopian montage and solidarity that, in certain respects, continued the chain of local-to-global connections consciously inaugurated within *Amussu* itself.

As we have discussed elsewhere (Chambers & Higbee, 2021: 51) a conscious approach to exhibition strategies, and in particular the use of online platforms to distribute films for free has been characteristic of Bouhmouch's earlier practice, many of his previous films being distributed for free online (www.nadirbouhmouch.com). Notably, *Amussu* was preceded by an earlier collaboration with the Imider community which deliberately formulated its title as a hashtag: *#300 kmSouth* (2016). Recalling Bouhmouch's work as an activist within the February 12 movement (in response to the wider Arab Spring), democratised technologies and non-monetised means of distribution can here be seen as inseparable from a broader project of activism; the objective of reaching cinematic audiences inextricable from that of disseminating messages and raising global awareness. In this respect Bouhmouch's practice prompts interesting considerations of the contemporary folkways of digital distribution; using democratic digital platforms to distribute free content, in a manner recalling the folkways in which folk songs travelled within the folk revival. (Chambers & Higbee, 2021: 51).

Alongside its credentials as activism, *Amussu* articulates a sophisticated aesthetic ambition and intention to address cosmopolitan audiences on the global festival circuit. The film thus has a reflexively ambivalent manner of speaking, balancing a number of different registers to speak simultaneously at local and global levels, a phenomenon Stuart Murray has elsewhere – in regard to the films of Fourth Cinema figurehead Barry Barclay – described as 'ventriloquism' (2008: 59; see also Chambers, in press: 417). As Bouhmouch remarked during the post-film discussion, 'people across the political spectrum can watch [*Amussu*] and get something from it: a liberal will watch it and feel something, an Islamist will watch it and feel something, a Trotskyist will watch it and feel something'. Considering this multivoicedness, Bouhmouch has elsewhere expressed concern about what might be lost in terms of the film's intended significance, within the processes of translation and decontextualisation through which folk cinemas move outwith local screenings to be screened to more cosmopolitan audiences within broader neoliberal contexts (with the attendant dangers of exoticism such a process may incur (Chambers, 2022)). To this end Bouhmouch has discussed the careful creation of written 'paratexts' (formulated in collaboration with the communities participating in *Amussu*) to accompany the film,[6] in an attempt to ensure the film is read as intended:

> With *Amussu*, I tried to produce paratexts around the film, writing essays and articles around the film, so I protect it from being used in a way that I don't want it

[6] Bouhmouch's practice in this respect interestingly recalls that of Zacharius Kunuk and IsumaTV in Northern Canada (who published carefully-curated monographs to accompany the films *Atanarjuat* and the *Journals of Knud Rasmussen*).

> to be used. It's supposed to be a statement against capital, against environmental destruction, and I can't let it be absorbed by something else.[7]

Amussu's multivocality of utterance is also reflected in the film's screening history. As Bouhmouch recounted during the post-film discussion, the film's premiere took place within the village, in a situation likely not dissimilar to that depicted within the film at the Imider Film Festival for Environmental Justice. Recalling the 'first audience' of folk filmmakers elsewhere in film history (Chambers, in press: 401), Bouhmouch describes how:

> We did the world premiere at the protest camp. The idea was that the film should not have its world premiere in a major festival or anything like that, it should be done there at the camp, with the community being there. It was really great. They built a big tent, on the camp. There were University students coming in solidarity caravans from the region, there were farmers and nomads that were passing by that came to watch. It was the best premiere that anyone could ask for, so that's how we launched the screenings here in Morocco.

What Bouhmouch describes as the film's 'urban premiere' at the Fize D'Or was a more complex affair. The film's tensions with the Moroccan state meant for a somewhat fugitive shoot, which – whilst unsanctioned at a national level – was not only sanctioned but commissioned locally by the Imider community. Bouhmouch and his crew thus had to rely upon the participating communities for sanctuary and warnings as to police presence, for neither the mining corporation nor the local police dared enter the Mount Abblan protest camp where much of the film was shot. Bouhmouch thus found himself co-creating a film that was sanctioned and actively commissioned locally, outlawed nationally, and subsequently endorsed globally by festival programmers and the transnational solidarity of other protest groups. *Amussu*'s fraught production history subsequently led to ironic tensions for its 'urban' premiere in Agadir, as Bouhmouch describes:

> The day before the festival was supposed to start, the director calls me and tells me that the film was censored by the Centre Cinematographique Morrocaine. So he tells

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[7] See: Nadir Bouhmouch, 'Amussu: experiment for a cinema from below' in Open Democracy (online), 1st April 2019, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/amussu-experiment-cinema-below/ (accessed on 19th January 2021); and Movement on the Road 96, 'Amussu: participatory art and cinema as a means of resistance', in Open Democracy (online), 26th March 2019, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/amussu-participatory-art-and-cinema-means-resistance/ (accessed on 19th January 2021).

> me, wait... He made some phone calls. Basically I don't know how it happened, but they finally said 'OK you can screen the film, but because you didn't get the authorisation to shoot we can't screen it as a Moroccan film'. So luckily, we had got a grant from the Doha film institute, the co-producer was from Qatar. So, in the entire world the film is a Moroccan film, except for Morocco where it's a Qatari film.

The ironies of *Amussu*'s official status within Morocco at the time[8] points (as encountered similarly by the Amber Collective below) to the dissonance folk cinemas frequently encounter within national frameworks. Recalling the tense relationships with nation states frequently experienced by Fourth Cinemas (Chambers & Higbee, 2021: 55), the 'people's register' of a folk cinema tends to embody highly localised experiences that perhaps inevitably invoke dissonance within the metonymic, homogenising programmes of the nation-state. It therefore seems both significant and inevitable that *Amussu* actively pursues a transnational trajectory in seeking connections and solidarities beyond Morocco. For Moha Tawja, one of the affordances of *Amussu* as a carrier for the Imider community's experience is as a means of communication able to reach beyond a repressive national context to share experiences with potential allies elsewhere in the world. In this respect, the screening and discussion events within the Folk Film Gathering can be seen as one of the intentional endgames of the communities' conscious strategy to project their own experiences beyond either a local village, or national context within Morocco. As Tawja described during the post-film discussion:

> Nowadays we have little energies, and we want to focus on the film to have the chance to show it everywhere in the world, and to share [our] experiences. [*Amussu*] is also like an archive of our resistance, to pass the message to the next generation. It is how we can maintain the idea, even if the movement – the concrete actions [at a] local level [are] now ended. But we want to save the idea, and to pass the idea to the next generation, so that the movement is still alive, and [can] look for new strategies and new actions, dependent on our capacities and what we have. There is a black-out [on] many things [in the] official media. The organisation in Morocco, they don't want to talk about this issue, because the silver mine is owned by the royal family. There is not enough support and solidarity inside Morocco ... The film tells a story of resistance. For us [it is] an action, a piece of this resistance. Making this film for us [was] one of our many actions of resistance. Yes, it is a good thing to show our story, and to share our experience with other activists and other communities around the world,

[8] Adding to the complexity, *Amussu* was subsequently screened as part of the 'national' festival in Tangier as a Moroccan (rather than Qatari) film.

> but also to archive and to document our story and our resistance. [The protests our parents were involved in] in 96 or 86, we don't have access to any photos or video of these. We have just stories told by our ancestors, by our parents. We don't have anything else. Now, with this film, it is a good thing to have an artistic product, to archive the story and to archive the resistance, for many years now. This is our vision for this film and the benefit for the movement and local community of Imider.

Recalling the Amazigh proverb that an event without a poem is an event that never occurred, Tawja here presents a powerful rationale for a folk cinema, answering the provocations of Michael Pilz and Sam Yazzie as to the use-value of cinema for embattled communities worldwide. For Tawja, *Amussu* is – in a manner complimenting (rather than supplanting) oral history – a means of recording counter-hegemonic community experiences in fraught socio-political contexts wherein such experiences are at best elided and at worst suppressed and erased. Recalling Chambers' early definition of a folk cinema, cinema thus serves as a powerful means of articulating revisionist counter-history. Further, recalling discussions of the ways in which cinema might be seen to echo the transnational pathways of the folk revival (Chambers & Higbee, 2021: 41), cinema is also here an explicit means of seeking international solidarity and projecting local community experience globally, themes that will be encountered again below in discussion of the Amber Collective' *Like Father*.

Like Father (Amber Collective, Northeast England, 1991)

Moha Tawja's notion of cinema as an archive of community experience, a means of recording vulnerable counter-histories in contexts wherein they would otherwise be elided or erased, holds considerable resonance for the work of Newcastle's Amber Collective. At the time of writing Amber have been living and working in Newcastle and wider Tyneside for over half a century, documenting the changing lives and histories of working class and subaltern communities in the north-east of England through embedded, collaborative working practices. Many of Amber's members hail from working-class backgrounds themselves (albeit often outside of Newcastle), and have frequently gone on to live in the communities the collective has worked with, giving Amber the complex perspective of both insiders and outsiders on the communities represented in their work.

As we have explored elsewhere, Amber's adoption of 'salvage' techniques in documenting working class histories, disappearing labour practices and shifting cultural histories serves to trouble scholarly scepticism and disdain regarding 'salvage paradigms' within documentary filmmaking (Chambers, 2017). Whilst salvage paradigms have frequently been criticised by commentators within cultural studies such as James Clifford for

their positioning of the (usually etic) 'recorder and interpreter of fragile custom [as] custodian of an essence, unimpeachable witness to an authenticity', such narrow readings of the potential usages of salvage (readings Clifford has since nuanced (1997: 176), particularly in regard to the 'articulation theory' of Stuart Hall and Gramsci (2013: 59; see also Hall, 1996: 47) allow for no consideration of the fraught political contexts in which 'salvage' documentary impulses may embody relatively emic acts of counter-hegemonic resistance, preserving and furthering community consciousness otherwise denied visibility, legibility or the means of establishing forms of continuity.

Like Bouhmouch, Amber's films adopt a conscious, sophisticated multivocality in addressing multiple audiences, speaking both to a relatively defined 'first' (Chambers, in press: 401) or 'authenticating' (Cade Bambara, 1993) audience in the community represented within the film (who are given a veto over any aspects of the film they do not deem appropriate (Chambers, 2017: 180) alongside more speculative, cosmopolitan audiences globally on the festival circuit and beyond. As one of Amber's founding members, Murray Martin, remarked:

> You have to engage with those communities or those individuals and begin to say things about their lives which you believe to be accurate and ultimately they believe to be accurate, however difficult those statements are. At the end of the day the success or failure of a piece of work by Amber is the community you make it about looks at it and says "that's right."[9]

Significantly, Martin's words here were singled out by Bouhmouch during a later conversation with Amber (as below). Recalling in certain respects *Amussu*'s struggles with the Moroccan state, Amber have also experienced a certain sense of dissonance at a national level, the collective's work never finding quite the level of recognition or renown that one might expect, given their 50-year contribution to UK film culture. As Amber's Ellin Hare noted:

> It's fairly general of all [Amber's] films that we have always had difficulty distributing the films in [the United Kingdom]. We had good television outlets for all the films that were made in the 80s and 90s, but in terms of cinema it has been much more difficult. And even festivals, actually. Obviously we've showed films at London Film Festival, at Edinburgh, but we've never been particularly lauded, I would say, on the festival circuit in Britain, whereas in – certainly France, but also back in the day all over the world – the films were taken up very enthusiastically received. … I know that Ken Loach has also had that experience, that he has been very popular in France. [Conversation with authors]

[9] Quoted in Amber's documentary film The Pursuit of Happiness (2008).

Beyond first audiences in the communities in which the films were shot Amber's work has frequently found greater recognition and engagement outside its country of origin. As Amber's Sirkka-Liisa Kontinnen has remarked, 'photographers who work internationally say there's nothing like it in the rest of the world in terms of scale, commitment and the continuity of narratives within it. It's true in terms of filmmaking as well. We are very well known locally and we're very well appreciated internationally' (Leggott, 2020: 335). Recalling *Amussu*'s struggles with the Moroccan authorities, there is again an interesting sense again of 'the national' as a missing link in the chain between local and global, pointing to the broader dissonance folk cinemas frequently (and perhaps characteristically) seem to find within the homogenising, metonymicizing framework of the nation state (Chambers & Higbee, 2021: 57).

A sense of folk cinema's solidarities between the local and the global is reflected with Amber's own experiments with exhibition practice since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly spurred on by the pandemic to experiment with more democratised forms of distribution, Amber have themselves been exploring the affordances online screenings create for engaging with audiences through their semi-regular Off Side programmes. Like Bouhmouch and folk cinema practitioners elsewhere in the world (Chambers, in press: 410), Amber actively participate in the manner in which their films are exhibited and distributed (reflecting the collective's founding desire to control not only the means of production but also distribution of their own work). Amber own their own small, 51-person capacity screening space in Newcastle (the Side Cinema) where they have frequently presented themed programmes of second-run cinema. Further, in the years preceding the pandemic, Amber had been experimenting with a series of screenings – dubbed Fire Side Cinema – within the community of Easington colliery (where Amber's 'Coalfields Trilogy' – *The Scar* (1996), *Like Father* (2001) and *Shooting Magpies* (2005) – was shot and where key members of the collective still live. Here, taking place in a barn, preceded by music and followed by a bonfire, cinema was again placed amidst other forms of communal recreation and conviviality, not dissimilar to the races and comedy performances in Imider, or the live music and storytelling at previous instances of the Folk Film Gathering. Amber have since found that the chance to reach decentralised audiences through their digital Off Side programmes – offered for free since the beginning of the pandemic, without any form of geoblocking – has resulted in a significant increase in uptake of their programming which, due to the complexity securing licenses to host free online screenings, has focussed to-date almost entirely on their own work. In comparison to the 51 in-person capacity of the Side Cinema, the initial Off Side retrospective season of Amber films in the late Spring 2020 enjoyed a significant increase in numbers: *Pursuit of Happiness* was watched 136 times, and 39 participants attended the Q&A. *Byker* was watched 1001 times, and 82 participants attended the Q&A. *The Scar* was watched 136 times, and 34 participants attended the Q&A). Whilst Amber's

streaming platforms do not as yet allow for audiences to be broken down in terms of geographical location, Amber's curation and development officer Dawn Felicia-Knox attests from her experiences chairing post-film screenings that Amber's returning audiences – many of whom hailed from the communities in which the films were initially made – were subsequently augmented by a decentralised, digital audience, including international participants from the United States, Germany and elsewhere in Europe.

Similar to the post-film discussion of *Amussu*, Amber have been struck by the ways in which digital forums open up uncanny, liminal spaces bridging between divergent localities. Felicia-Knox describes how many of Off Side's post-film discussion sessions have modulated between the formal register of the traditional, post-film Q+A and the more informal registers of reunions for those who originally participated in the film. This is in keeping with Amber's recent film output – particularly the documentaries *From Us to Me* (exploring community perspectives upon the German Democratic Republic before and after the fall of the wall) and *What Happened Here* (about the British miners' strike of the 1980s and its subsequent fall out within the Easington community) – which itself seeks to revisit the past within the frame of the present, placing material from the collective's considerable archive in the context of newer footage shot with the same participants. Off Side's online discussion sessions around these films have thus served as uncanny, liminal spaces where the past and present, the local and international and the public and personal intersect.

The digital settings of these post-film discussions have reportedly created multiple new affordances for Amber's programming and audience engagement. On a more mundane level, where an in-person post-film discussion would previously have directly followed the screening of a feature-length film, the asynchronous format of online discussion (where an audience will not necessarily have watched the film immediately prior to the session) allows for longer, deeper sessions of up to an hour. More complexly, Felicia Knox and Hare have found online settings – perhaps strangely given the lack of physical co-presence – often allow for a greater sense of intimacy between participants, sometimes leading to the sharing of emotional, personal testimonies, as in the recent discussion following Off Side's free screening of the Ceddo workshop's *The People's Account*.[10] Whilst the live, in-person conviviality of sharing the same physical space is gone, so too is the concrete spatial divide between those in the audience and those on the panel, as Felicia Knox describes:

> If we had a panel on a stage … you wouldn't have that same sort of dialogical way of working. In our cinema we try … to have that conversation and make it feel

[10] Off Side's discussion session with Ceddo Workshops' Menelik Shabazz can be watched here: https://vimeo.com/464920428.

> conversational, and I feel we were able to carry that digitally. Ellie talked at one point about how Zoom felt like it was equalizing... If you choose to watch on gallery view, everybody has the same size of square. So when I record [discussion sessions on Zoom] I record the first 25–30 minutes [led by the panelists] in speaker view, and then I break it into gallery view, so we're all equal in the dialogue.

Felicia Knox feels the tendency for Off Side's post-film discussion sessions to modulate between formal and informal, public and personal, stems not only from the relatively democratized digital affordances of Zoom, but also from Amber's collective, participatory approach more generally:

> It's part of that collective way of working. There are really permeable borders between who is the filmmaker and who is the participant and who is the audience. I think the digital does allow that in a lot of ways, but I also think it's part of the way Amber tell stories, as documenters, letting stories slowly unfold in a community that are reflective of lived experiences. Then, of course, there is a shared ownership and if we can translate that online, then we can have a shared, equally valid experience of the event.

Again, there is here a sense of online discussions serving to extend folk cinema's Utopian montage of collectivity and solidarity. Whilst the in-person conviviality of a shared experience of a song, story or film is perhaps gone, other, more unfamiliar forms of conviviality and shared experience between decentralised audiences remain.

Returning to the Folk Film Gathering, the festival has since its inception in 2015 Whilst ostensibly a social-realist drama with actors and script, Amber's *Like Father* nonetheless explores the same 'interface between documentary and fiction' as much of the collective's work, using the modality of drama to explore real life community experiences in the aftermath of the 1980s miner's strike. The film follows the struggles of Joe Elliot (non-actor Joe Armstrong), an ex-miner feeling the community's loss of livelihood after the pit closures reflected in his disintegrating family, and in particularly in estranged relationships with his son Billy and father Arthur. *Like Father* was made freely available over the 3 days of the Folk Film Gathering, and during that time was watched by 126 times. Whilst 33 registered for the post-film discussion, only 9 participants ultimately attended, perhaps again reflecting the uncommonly good weather in northern Britain that weekend. The discussion session that accompanied the film served to evidence the digital conviviality of Amber's Off Side discussions to date, serving as a liminal space between past and present, public and personal (varying between the formal register of a Q+A and a reunion between the film's cast, crew, and general participants) and between the local and the transnational (with a small number of participants joining from Scotland and Europe). Late in the discussion, we were joined by Joe Armstrong, the star of the film.

Recalling Moha Tawja's framing of *Amussu* as an archive of community experience serving to connect the lived experiences of different generations, Armstrong spoke powerfully of what he saw as being the ongoing value of the film, two decades after its production:

> You don't realise what you're portraying at the time. 20 years ago, things were different. We were different, I was different, certainly, and it was a new experience. So I thought, wow, this was brilliant, to have someone to listen to your story and to actually make some sort of film about it, and to show how the North-East and East Durham has changed politically, and the landscape. And looking back on it now, 20 years since we done that, how much has changed. It's incredible to see, the things we done then, and what we got out of the story was brilliant. For me, as a non-actor, non-professional, a fantastic experience. And they were so patient, even when I ran over Pete's camera. I lived to tell the tale. They were so patient with you and never demanded you to be something you weren't. They'd give you the lines, let you get on with it. And it developed like that. And I think it was the same for all of the non-actors... So it's been a great experience. I'm still poor, I'll never get famous, but never-mind, we weren't in it for the fame and the money, were we Gary? It was just making a historical account of how it was in East Durham, and it still stands the test of time. It still looks great, the story still lifts you, no matter what industry is ending, no matter what the journey is, the same values have carried on through the years. It's not just about building something new at the expense – and knocking something old down, in addition, just for money, and people making money. Where in today's culture its money first, people second. And that's the bigger change I've found now. That's the worrying change. Profit before people, and I'll never go along with that.

Unlike *Amussu*, whose production had taken place relatively recently, Armstrong's comments on *Like Father*[11] provide a perspective from within the community upon whether Amber's approach had weathered the test of time, almost two decades after the film's initial completion. Here, again, would seem an answer to the question posed by Pilz, Gabriel and Yazzie within the parallel contexts of a Second, Third and Fourth

[11] There is a tendency in the discourses surrounding a folk cinema, to present the voices of certain interlocutors as somehow emblematic of 'the voice of the people', such as the testimony of Juan Chimbo, which serves as a prologue to Jorge Sanjinés *Theory and Practice of a Cinema With The People*. Here there is perhaps a danger of presenting certain voices uncomplicatedly as representatives of a homogenous, bounded body, thus pointing again to certain problematic tendencies within political populism and the word *folk* itself that we have elsewhere tried to dissect (see Chambers & Higbee, 2021:.45). Whilst we should perhaps therefore be careful in positioning Armstrong as the spokesperson of a homogenous, bounded community it is notable that of all those who participated in *Like Father*, Armstrong was perhaps in the greatest position of vulnerability, playing a role very close to his own traumatic experiences in the wake of the miners' strike. In this respect, Armstrong's continuing support of the film, and good relations with Amber are a significant testament not only to the integrity of the film, but to Amber's working approach more generally.

Cinema as to the *purpose* of a folk cinema, as a means of recording community experience and counter-history, serving as a connective tissue and form of continuity between different generations. Felicia Knox describes multiple further occasions throughout the Off Side screenings in which cinema served as a point of connection and reflection between different generations, perhaps most notably when Amber's newest film *What Happened Here* served to connect Easington activists past and present, through the question of how best to provide food for a struggling community:

> *What Happened Here* grew from [Amber's] archive, and from over 38 years' experience ... of working with Easington colliery. ... Heather Wood is the heart of the story: Heather and her mum were the ones who organised the women to feed everyone during the miner's strike. During the [Off Side] discussion there was a very significant moment when Chris and Bill who run what's called Cafe Together in Easington now – a communal food sharing space, that they're quick to say is not a soup kitchen, but rather a place where people and come and eat together – were talking about the work they do, and Bill said 'I could take a lot of advice from you Heather, how did you feed all of those families in the 80s?'. Practical lovely moments, of 'how did you do it, because we're struggling'.

Conclusion

The Utopian montage of Morocco and northeast England arising from the co-positioning of *Amussu* and *Like Father* in the Folk Film Gathering's 2020 programme reached perhaps its fullest articulation during a further online discussion session (recorded privately and then shared publicly alongwith the festival's wider programme) in which we invited Nadir Bouhmouch and key members of the Amber Collective – Ellin Hare, Peter Roberts and Sirkka Liisa-Kontinnen – to directly discuss together aspects of their shared practice. It is once again notable here that, given the modest means of the Folk Film Gathering, curating a discussion session of this sort would likely have proven far beyond our resources, and indeed would not have occurred to us to attempt digitally were it not for the simultaneous restrictions and affordances of the Covid era. As neither Bouhmouch or Amber seemed to have much awareness of the other's work we arranged for each to share several links to films (including *Amussu* and *Like Father*) in advance, in order to attend the discussion with a fuller understanding of each other's work. The subsequent discussion served fascinatingly to illuminate further aspects of commonality and shared practice, albeit arising from highly divergent locations.[12]

[12] The full discussion between Amber and Bouhmouch can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hj-yKLxV164&feature=emb_title.

Of particular interest was a discussion about respective ontological perspectives of cinema, led by Bouhmouch's assertion that:

> It's important to remember that our relationship with the camera [in Morocco] is not the same one as what you would find in the UK, in the sense that, as a colonised people, our first contact with cameras came through colonialism. The first time our grandparents saw a camera was, there was a line of French legionnaires, and right behind them, you had the cameramen, the propagandists. So we quickly came to recognise, I think collective memory, that cameras were something that was foreign [and] alien to us, that was used for amassing power, for a certain group of people. So the idea about demystifying the apparatus [for the Imider community who participated in *Amussu*] was taking it down and letting it be something that is futile, that is no longer alien in a community like this.

Here Bouhmouch's imperative of decolonising the role of the camera recall Barry Barclay's discussion elsewhere of the pre-colonial 'camera on the shore' within Fourth Cinema (2003: 8), which watches – pre-extant – as the colonists arrive. Interestingly, however, Amber's Ellin Hare answered Bouhmouch by inflecting the relative position of the camera within the working-class communities in wider Tyneside represented within the collectives' work:

> Nadir talks about colonialism, and people's understanding of the camera being behind the legionnaires, and how they saw it as the enemy: well I think that's very similar to what happened in the miners' strike, where all the media was behind the police lines. Nobody was shooting from the point of view of the pickets. The understanding that people gain through that, and I think this applies to a lot of different [political] struggles, [is that] if you've been through a struggle, and you've seen how it got portrayed in the mainstream media, you then have a completely different attitude after that to the media. At the beginning of the miner's strike, the miners really wanted to talk to the cameras, because they wanted to get their point, their experience across, and then when they saw what came back, and they saw what was actually being shown, and the story that was actually being told, they then became very suspicious about the media, and that affected [Amber].

In utilising the frame of a folk cinema to highlight points of intersection between the different yet mutually-resonant practices of Amber and Bouhmouch in this respect, it is certainly not our intention to attempt to position divergent community experiences arising from highly contingent socio-historical locations as being in any way equal

or homogeneous. Alive to what Etienne Balibar has discussed as 'the violence of the universal' (Birnbaum, 2017), Bouhmouch spoke during the discussion of his wariness of the homogenising discourses of universalism within western liberal film culture:

> There is this discourse of universalism, of the universal, you hear it a lot with filmmakers saying something like 'my film is about the human condition', or 'my film is a universal film that touches the world', and as filmmakers from the global south, we know those films don't work for our communities. You can't show, what they call in Cannes a universal film, to someone in Imider.

Nevertheless, whilst resisting simplistic equivalences, and recognising the important ontological particularities of experience represented respectively within films as different as *Amussu* and *Like Father*, there remain important commonalities of experience and practice (as the discussion between Bouhmouch and Amber eloquently illustrated) between what might normally be positioned as highly divergent traditions of cinema, which the frame of a folk cinema helps illuminate. All similarness in this respect is inextricably tethered to difference, and thus each point of comparison serves as an imperfect equivalence not dissimilar to James Clifford's discussion of translation, wherein something is carried across, something is lost, something is gained. Again, the notion of Utopian montage, in an almost Eisensteinian sense, we thus hope implies the co-positioning of two (or more) aspects of *difference*, each bringing out a certain resonance with the other, the resulting relationship being more than a sum of the parts. Perhaps in this respect, all establishments of solidarity across cultural, social and historical fault lines are moments of montage, acts of imagination and becoming wherein both parties seek, imperfectly, aspects of the self in the other (to borrow GA Cohen's resonant phrase (2012)).

The conversation between Bouhmouch and Amber proved concretely productive: following the session discussions have begun about the possibility of Amber visiting Morocco to present a retrospective of their work, and Bouhmouch and Sirkka Liisa-Kontinnen subsequently organised a date for Kontinnen to be able to feed into a new photography project Bouhmouch is now working on. As Bouhmouch since described to us:

> As a young filmmaker, I can only feel grateful for the chance to have a dialogue with people who played a part in building the type of thought and practice that inspires my own work today. I came out of the conversation feeling less lonely in my approach, that there are others who see value in collective and participatory cultural production. In this sense, it was a validating experience which has left me encouraged and re-energised.

Amber similarly seem to have taken energy from the chance to engage with a young filmmaker pursuing a similarly collective, counter-hegemonic concerns albeit in a highly different socio-historical context. As Ellin Hare describes:

> As a survivor from the days when collective film making just seemed 'normal' it was great, in this increasingly individualistic world, to find a young filmmaker who was wanting to explore that territory afresh. Actually, I would maintain that filmmaking has always been collective, just not recognized as such. What Amber and other collectives from the 80's were exploring was how working collectively gelled with an approach to making films with and about communities. What was inspiring and vindicating about seeing Nadir's work and talking with him was to see how his approach drew out the collective nature of the struggles he was documenting.

Whilst it would seem callous to talk of silver linings within an ongoing global crisis as challenging and distressing as the Covid 19 pandemic (particularly given the increased pressures the pandemic puts on collective values already under decades of siege from neoliberal hegemony (Chambers, 2020), our experiences within the 2020 Folk Film Gathering (alongside Amber's parallel experiences with Off Side) suggest that the digital affordances opened up through the increased prominence of online technologies such as Zoom may serve to significantly expand the scope of possible solidarities within a folk cinema. Whether enabling conversations or the sharing of resources between filmmakers in very different parts of the world, serving to open new bridges between the localities in which films are made and the solidarities sought subsequently with transnational audiences worldwide, or opening up new forms of heterogeneous conviviality in liminal online discussion sessions, the considerable obstacles of the Covid-19 pandemic have served to inaugurate new forms of Utopian montage within a folk cinema; and, crucially, to open up new avenues of possibility for the advancement of counter-histories, and shared experiences of cinema which serve to connect different generations in the ongoing work of resistance.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Filmography

#300 kmSouth (Nadir Bouhmouch & Imider Community, 2016)

Amussu (Nadir Bouhmouch & Imider Community, 2020)

Akenfield (Peter Hall, UK, 1974)

Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner (Zacharius Kunuk, 2001)

Bitter Rice (Giuseppe De Santis, 1949)

Barrovento (Glauber Rocha, 1962)

BeDevil (Tracey Moffat, 1993)

Blackbird (Jamie Chambers, 2014)

Byker (Amber Collective, 1983)

Comrades (Bill Douglas, 1986)

Chanson D'Ar-Mor (Jean Epstein, 1934)

Chronicle of a Summer (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961)

Dream On (Amber Collective, 1991)

From Us to Me (Amber Collective, 2016)

The Happy Lands (Robert Rae and Scottish Theatre Workshop, 2012)

Harvest: 3000 Years (Haile Gerima, 1976)

Land of Song (Aldona Watts, 2015)

Laulu (Selma Vilhunen, 1994)

La Ville Est Tranquille (Robert Guédiguian, 2000)

Like Father (Amber Collective, 2001)

Lion Hunters (Jean Rouch, 1965)

Journey to a Kingdom (Timothy Neat, 1992)

Kaisa's Enchanted Forest (Katja Gauriloff, 2016)

The Kaipara Affair (Barry Barclay, 2005)

Kaos (Taviani Brothers, 1984)

Killer of Sheep (Charles Burnett, 1976)

Letter to My Village (Safi Faye, 1976)

Mairi Mhor: Na h-orain'sa Beatha (Mike Alexander, 1994)

Maliglutit (Zacharius Kunuk, 2016)

Matewan (John Sayles, 1987)

Nightcleaners (Berwick Street Collective, 1975)

November (Rainer Sarnet, 2017)

One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk (Zacharius Kunuk, 2019)

The Owl Service (BBC television series, 1969–1970)

Pathfinder (Nils Gaup, 1987)

The People's Account (Ceddo workshop, 1985)

Penda's Fen (Alan Clarke, 1974)

Play Me Something (Timothy Neat, 1989)

The Pursuit of Happiness (Amber Collective, 2008)

Red Shift (John Mackenzie, 1978)

Salt of the Earth (Herbert J Biberman, 1954)

The Scar (Amber Collective, 1996)

Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (Sergei Parajanov, 1965)

Shepherds of Berneray (Jack Shea and Allen Moore, 1981)

Shooting Magpies (Amber Collective, 2005)

Summer Walkers (Timothy Neat, 1976)

Song of the Sea (Tomm Moore, 2014)

Songs My Brothers Taught Me (Chloe Zhao, 2015)

Tempus De Baristas (David MacDougall, 1993)

Up the Junction (Ken Loach, 1968)

Vacas (Julio Medem, 1992)

Viy (Konstantin Yershov and Georgi Kropachyov, 1967)

What Happened Here (Amber Collective, 2020)

The White Reindeer (1952)

Winstanley (1975)

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