The art of social movement: Cultural opportunity, mobilisation, and framing in the early formation of the Amber Collective

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Abstract

This article utilises social movement literature to help explain the early cultural formation of the Amber Collective—a longstanding egalitarian arts group from Northeast England—and the broader oppositional film movement of which it was a part. More specifically, we attempt theoretically to rework traditional social movement concepts like political opportunity, mobilisation and framing by developing their cultural corollaries. In doing so, we attempt to contribute modestly to wider debates within social movement theory itself about the conditions under which certain types of cultural organisations can originate, form, legitimate, and sustain themselves. Emphasis here is placed on the relationship and shift from political to cultural opportunity; the mobilisation of cultural institutions, networks, leadership, and social ties in the formation of oppositional film movements and organisations like Amber; and the framing processes undertaken to identify and distinguish themselves from the cultural mainstream. In the conclusion, we briefly touch on a number of questions regarding the application of our framework, more generally, for understanding collective action and the cultural formation of arts organisations today.

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1. Introduction

The first London meeting of what was to become the four-plus-decades old egalitarian film and photography collective Amber, is documented in a handwritten note in Finnish by one of the groups original members, Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, dated the 15th of December 1968 (see acknowledgements). In addition to naming those present, the scrap of paper also revealed the group’s intended engagement with a range of economic, political and educational issues, as well as its

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emphasis on ‘industrial documentary’. Made up largely of Regent Street Polytechnic film students, this gathering included a group of friends who studied, lived, worked, and in some cases, protested together. For instance, a number of them had participated in anti-Vietnam marches and had worked together to shoot a film entitled *All You Need is Dynamite*, focussing on the Grosvenor Square riots that took place around the same time that student/worker protests erupted in Paris.

Fast-forwarding forty years to their film *The Pursuit of Happiness*, Amber’s homage to the ‘spirit of 1968’ in their work is captured in the opening quotation on the back of the DVD jacket: ‘Integrate life and work and friendship. Don’t tie yourself to institutions. Live cheaply and you’ll remain free. And then, do whatever gets you up in the morning.’ The significance of connecting one’s philosophy, strategy, and organising principles back to one’s roots should not be underestimated. In fact, we would argue that the Amber ‘case’ has a broader academic and policy significance for contributing to social movement debates about the general conditions of emergence, formation, and sustainability of oppositional cultural movements and organisations (see also Chen and O’Mahony, 2009). Formed within the broader context of the social movements of the late 1960s, the Amber Collective has carried forward elements of this founding moment in its work/life practice over four decades. As Murray Martin, one of the key founders of the collective, stated in his reflection back on the organisation’s ‘modus operandi’: ‘That’s the way we worked, and I think that it’s a product of 1968’ (Martin, 2002).

Despite clear connections between the arts and wider social movements, there have been relatively few attempts to understand this link theoretically or to produce empirical studies in this area until relatively recently (for example, see Baumann, 2007; Crossley, 2009; Isaacs, 2009; Lee and Lingo, 2011; Reed, 2005). This is in spite of the fact that it has been three decades since Becker’s (1982) *Art Worlds* reminded us that the production of art is a social process—not to mention the publication of a plethora of works on art/culture emphasising issues of power (Bourdieu, 1996; DiMaggio, 1982), networks (Bottero and Crossley, 2011), and institutions (Peterson and Anand, 2004). By the same token—with their emphasis on state-oriented political protest, demonstrations and campaigns—studies of social movements (Della Porta and Diani, 2006; McAdam et al., 2001; Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 2004) have, for the most part, tended not to consider struggles in the arts and cultural field as examples worthy of study (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008; Reed, 2005).1

In this article, we aim to bring these areas of study together by utilising and modifying aspects of the social movement literature to help explain the early cultural formation of the Amber Collective, as well as the broader oppositional film movement of which it was a part. In doing so, we attempt to modestly contribute to wider debates within social movement theory itself about the conditions under which certain types of organisations—including cultural and artistic ones—can be viewed as social movements, as well as how they might differentially originate, form, legitimate, and sustain themselves (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008; Baumann, 2007; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011; McAdam et al., 2001). We do this through reworking social movement frameworks concerned with political opportunity, mobilising structures and framing and by developing cultural movement formation corollaries (for a similar use of these terms to theorise artistic legitimisation, see the Baumann, 2007 article—although as we go on to argue below, we differentiate our approach significantly from his). Specifically, we look at the interaction between

1 The arts are not mentioned as a category in the index of either Tarrow (1994) or Della Porta and Diani (2006), and a perusal of one of the main journal for the study of social movements (*Social Movement Studies*) shows that it does not contain a single article on an arts-based social movement, like a study of the alternative and oppositional film movement in the UK in the 1970s, despite their being a range of books on this topic, (i.e., Curtis, 2007; Dickinson, 1999; Reekie, 2007).
wider political opportunity structures and their impact on the opening up of cultural opportunities for the oppositional film movement and its organisations. Additionally, we analyse the mobilisation of cultural resources, organisations, leadership, networks and social ties necessary for oppositional film groups like Amber to cohere and form. Finally, we look at how this film movement defined (or framed) itself as ‘independent’, with groups like Amber forming themselves specifically around a collective ethos dedicated to providing alternative representations of working class communities through the adoption of a unique artistic practice. The point is not simply to argue that Amber is a unique case study, valuable in and of itself (which it is), but to use its story to reflect back onto issues and debates within social movement theory itself, as well as its applicability to cultural, organisational, and other realms of social life (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008; Davis et al., 2008; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011; McAdam et al., 2001).

Originating in London in the late 1960s, and quickly moving to the Northeast city of Newcastle Upon Tyne, the Amber Collective is still active in filmmaking and photography—producing over forty films and hundreds of photographic exhibitions (the vast majority documenting changes in working class life and work in the region; see Hochscherf and Leggott, 2007). Its facilities, the Side Gallery and cinema developed in the mid-1970s, have acted as a focal point for independent filmmaking and documentary photography both nationally and regionally (see Newbury, 2002; O’Reilly, 2009). The collective was also an instrumental player in creating the film ‘workshop movement’ in the early 1980s, defined formally by the creation of a union-backed agreement/declaration with Channel 4 that set out very different principles and structures for small independent groups involved in filmmaking—including collective management, non-hierarchical working relations, equal pay, flexible division of labour, continuity of employment, and integration of production, distribution and exhibition (for a discussion of Amber’s approach to alternative ‘cultural work’, see Vail and Hollands, 2012). Academically, Harvey (1978) includes Amber in her study of the impact of May ‘68 film culture on the UK, and Dickinson (1999) cites it as one of her main case studies in her study of the UK oppositional film movement, due in part to its amazing longevity.

The empirical material of our case study of Amber comes from a broader ESRC funded project (RES-000-22-2863) looking at its organisational structure and cultural practice in light of broader concerns of what constitutes ‘transformative arts’. The main methodology adopted consisted of conducting 57 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in 2009–10 with all the present members of the Amber collective, a significant number of former members, and finally a wide range of key individuals involved in the film/art field deemed pertinent to the organisation (i.e., funders, union, other workshops/film companies, film/TV producers, other theatre/film cooperatives, actors/photographers who worked with the organisation, and representatives from communities that Amber filmed). In addition, we have benefited from having full access to a range of interview material produced by Amber itself, as well as complete access to its forty-plus year old set of archive material. As such, we have been able to crosscheck, contextualise and compare interviewees’ interpretive and historical recollections with each other, as well as with historical archive records and other sources of evidence.

In the first part of the paper we provide a discussion of the broader context of our study by looking briefly at a range of work concerned generally with cultural production and formation

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2 In using the term ‘transformative arts’ here, we are referring to an assessment of Amber’s transformational capacity on a number of criteria—including its effectiveness in documenting/depicting social change; expanding its ideas about creative practice/production; encouraging aspects of art as social learning; acting as a vehicle for enacting social transformation; and providing a counter-hegemonic force in the art/social world.
(Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1996; DiMaggio, 1982; Peterson and Anand, 2004), as well as review some attempts to use social movement concepts in the study of the arts (Baumann, 2007; Isaacs, 2009; Lee and Lingo, 2011). We then introduce some of the main concepts from the social movement literature—namely political opportunity, mobilisation and framing—and explore how they might be reworked to explain the cultural formation of the UK independent film movement. This is followed by an in-depth study of the origins and early formation of the Amber Collective—an example justified not simply due to its centrality in the film workshop movement (O’Reilly, 2009) or its longevity (Reber, 1996), but because it is an ideal sociological case to look at in terms of cultural movement formation and social movement theory. In the conclusion, we briefly touch on some key questions concerning the application of this framework for understanding the cultural formation of arts organisations today, as well as what it offers to current social movement thinking about oppositional sustainability.

2. From social to cultural movement formation: culturally rethinking opportunity, mobilisation and framing

The main premise of this paper suggests that the social movement literature and a reworking of its conceptual field provides a useful framework for explaining the cultural formation of the UK independent film movement and the creation of oppositional cultural movement organisations (e.g., the Amber Collective). Dickinson (1999, pp. 2–3) argues that concepts like ‘independent’, ‘grant-aided’, ‘non-commercial’ are too vague, while terms like revolutionary, experimental and avant-garde are too limiting to describe this film movement. As such, she prefers the term ‘oppositional’ to denote a film movement that struggled against the cultural mainstream in terms of content, practice, and philosophy (points we return to empirically). We recognise that the term ‘cultural formation’ is an extremely broad term and can be interpreted in a variety of ways, with analysts linking it to the legitimisation of artistic products (Baumann, 2007), genres (Isaacs, 2009), institutions and organisations (Peterson and Anand, 2004), groups and elites (DiMaggio, 1982), fields (Bourdieu, 1996) and networks (Becker, 1982). To distinguish our focus, we are concerned specifically with cultural movement formation, where we explicitly are referring to the conditions, emergence and early formation of distinguishable artistic and cultural groups and organisations that can be deemed oppositional. Prior to defining and re-working some key social movement terms and concepts, and fleshing out what we see as the main aspects of oppositional cultural movement formation, it is instructive to contextualise briefly our approach by making links with some other perspectives concerned with related, yet slightly different, aspects of cultural formation.

Bottero and Crossley’s (2011) recent general article on worlds, fields and networks in the work of Becker and Bourdieu is suggestive in applying both of their work to art and cultural fields. For example, Becker’s (1982) classic work Art Worlds is a useful starting point for thinking about art and culture not just as the individual product of the artist, but as a more collective process involving networks, resources, strategic action, and social cooperation. His concern with artistic resources, for instance, is suggestive for our analyses—despite the fact that Becker sees these largely in terms of networks (which we also consider important), rather than more widely in terms of institutional resources. He also has some interesting things to say about what he calls artistic ‘mavericks’, who kick against the conventional art world, creating new ways of working and challenging social norms (Becker, 1982, p. 235). Similarly, the much cited work of Bourdieu (1977, 1996) on art, practice and cultural formation hints at the relevant point that the arts world is a complex field of forces, highly constrained by wider structures of power and the ability of some social groups to define it, yet he still sees it as an arena of contestation. His core ideas of
social, cultural and symbolic capital are equally suggestive of how cultural movement formation occurs generally, yet as Crossley (2003) admits, Bourdieu’s theory of crisis does not help flesh out the preconditions of oppositional cultural movement emergence and formation as fully as it might.

Also influential in understanding cultural formation is a body of work associated with more institutionalist approaches to art and culture subsumed under a ‘production of culture perspective’ (see DiMaggio, 2000; Peterson and Anand, 2004). This approach helpfully emphasises ‘extra’ cultural processes and conditions, as well as the role of organised institutions in cultural production. Peterson’s work is particularly central to this perspective (Peterson and Anand, 2004; see also Peterson, 1990), with its core idea that culture is shaped by six major facets of production—those of technology, law and regulation, industry structure, organization structure, occupational careers, and markets. While this approach helpfully situates cultural formation within a more ‘meso’ perspective, in doing so, there is a tendency to downplay wider political forces in its analyses (see Peterson and Anand, 2004). Isaacs’ (2009, p. 939), for instance, argues that ‘...cultural sociologists frequently neglect the role of movements in cultural innovation and change’. With regard to Peterson and Anand’s (2004) discussion of ‘organisational structure’ and ‘markets’ as factors affecting cultural production, there is also no real discussion of oppositional cultural formation and alternative (non-market) forms of production, which characterise our case study. DiMaggio’s (1982) classic work on the consolidation of high art in America by class elites in the 19th century is an exception to this critique of a lack of a political dimension, and it also usefully emphasises the role of organisations and institutions in cultural transformation. Yet, we would also argue that DiMaggio’s analyses makes it difficult to explain the emergence and formation of oppositional cultural movements in the face of the power of elites.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge some academic work that has concerned itself with the link between art, culture and social movements. Isaacs’ (2009) research suggestively links the rise of the US labour/proletarian novel sub-genre of the late 19th and early 20th centuries with political change and social movement theory. More directly related to our research is Baumann’s (2007) work on using social movement concepts to develop a theory of artistic legitimation. Baumann (2007, pp. 47–48) is specifically concerned with explaining how cultural and artistic products and forms come to be defined as legitimate and successful—through the use of the key social movement concepts of opportunity, resource mobilisation and framing (concepts that we come back to in detail shortly). In short, Baumann (2007) is concerned with describing how all forms of artistic legitimation act in similar ways to social movements, while we are concerned specifically with how oppositional cultural movements not only attempt to differentially legitimise themselves, but under what conditions they emerge and form.

So although we also utilise a similar conceptual framework to Baumann (2007), we do so in ways that are quite distinct, for the purpose of producing a very different kind of analysis. While Baumann (2007) is concerned exclusively with using social movement ideas to develop a theory of artistic legitimation, our focus instead is on cultural movement emergence and organisational formation. Similarly, Baumann is primarily concerned with artistic and cultural outcomes generally, subsuming much of the analyses under the banner of legitimation, rather than exploring the specific conditions behind oppositional arts movements’ origins and how this might differ from the cultural mainstream. In doing so, Baumann (2007) implicitly suggests that the legitimation of all arts products and movements are the same, whereas we want to argue that it is important to distinguish arts movements that are inherently political and oppositional from others that are not. We utilise, but also differentiate, Baumann’s (2007) understanding of these three social movement
concepts throughout this section, however—both to buttress their explanatory importance, as well as to draw out differences of emphasis between his work and ours. Similarly, while Isaacs’ (2009) work has some relevance with regard to explaining the emergence of artistic genre through reference to social movements, and therefore has some crossover to our discussion of the creation of the UK independent film industry, our emphasis in this paper is on the conditions of its emergence and its early formation into a movement, not on the categorisation of its representations.

The closest example of research interested in how arts organisation can mimic social movements and see themselves as akin to social movement actors is the recent work of Lee and Lingo (2011), and they highlight a number of factors our paper explores—for instance, how arts ‘performance’ movements require resources and networks to function, and how they attempt to legitimise and frame themselves. At the same time, Lee and Lingo’s (2011) empirical cases are based on examples of rather temporary, umbrella arts networks, rather than a sustained cultural organisational movement like the UK independent film and workshop movement. As such, they are not as concerned with looking at the wider political context and opportunities for cultural movement formation, and they do not explicitly utilise social movement concepts in the way that we or Baumann (2007) attempt to do. With regard to justifying our focus on cultural movement emergence and formation, even Lee and Lingo (2011, p. 318) agree that ‘very little research has attempted to study arts organizations as social movement actors’.

To summarise, building upon the varied perspectives on cultural formation discussed above, we wish to advance a specific understanding of cultural movement origin and formation through the modified use of social movement concepts applied to an empirical case study. The challenges are to build upon and extend some of the work in cultural sociology and begin to rework key social movement concepts to account for the emergence and formation of oppositional cultural movements. The difficulty with the latter task is partly that ‘classic’ definitions and studies of social movements have tended to focus on examples of state directed political protest (like strikes and demonstrations) and campaigns framed around clear examples of social injustice (McAdam et al., 2001; Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 2004)—and, as such, the arts, and oppositional cultural movements more generally appear to be rarely considered (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008; Reed, 2005). Yet, it is equally clear that many of the ‘70s film collectives in the UK, including Amber, had their roots in social movements coming out of the of the 1960s, characterised in particular by the student/worker protests in Paris of 1968 (Touraine, 1971), as well as being influenced by a range of generational, ideological and countercultural shifts (Dickinson, 1999). Significantly, these counter-currents provided important repertoires (Tilly, 2004), opportunities, and resources necessary for the alternative film sector to mobilise, emerge and grow—including the radicalisation of universities (Cockburn and Blackburn, 1969), cultural shifts towards the struggle over the means of ‘symbolic production’ and critiques of ‘everyday life’ (Caute, 1988; Reynolds, 2007), and changes in value systems conducive to collective working, living and playing (Miles, 2004).

Prior to outlining how particular social movement ideas and concepts might be reworked in an analyses of a cultural organisation or movement formation, some definitional clarification is in order. First, Charles Tilly (2004) classically defines social movements as a set of contentious campaigns, displays and repertoires, whereby groups make collective claims on others. Tarrow (1994, pp. 5–6) additionally sees social movement as ‘collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities’. The literature has also emphasised what has been called ‘social movement organisations’ (SMOs)—defined as formal organisations that attempt to implement a movement’s goal, or as a marginalised association of people making claims about how society could be differently organised (Della Porta and Diani, 2006, p. 140). In general, these definitions have been
interpreted largely in political terms (i.e., political demonstrations, strikes, campaigning organisations involving some form of action regarding the state)—although in more recent work, increased emphasis has been given to movements’ social (Melucci, 1989), emotional (Goodwin et al., 2001), and cultural dimensions (Reed, 2005). However, it might be argued that traditionally, at least, social movement theorists have tended to define culture rather specifically as symbolism or identity, and they have not necessarily been interested in cultural movement emergence and formation per se (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008; Lee and Lingo, 2011).

We would like to suggest that such social movement definitions are not completely at odds with those art/cultural movements and organisations that have social movement roots (unlike Baumann [2007], who seems to apply social movement ideas to all forms of artistic legitimation), but that additional conceptual reworking needs to be done. We would, in fact, differentiate oppositional cultural movement formation from more diffuse artistic and stylistic cultural movements—like, for example, abstract expressionism, which although no doubt a product of a particular social and political context, and offering up a cultural ‘challenge’ at the time, did so in rather unintended, unorganised, and largely aesthetic terms. Contrast this with examples like Bryan–Wilson’s (2009) study of the Art Workers Coalition in New York or the workshop movement in the UK (Dickinson, 1999), both of which (a) possessed a wider normative political commitment as ‘art workers’ (rather than just aesthetic concerns); (b) emerged and formed into recognisable oppositional organisations; and (c) intentionally and collectively challenged the wider power structure through arts-based ‘claims-making’ directed towards media elites, social institutions, and political authorities.

We are, however, not arguing for a complete redefinition of terms here, or suggesting that all cultural movements and cultural movement organizations (CMOs) are exactly equivalent to social movements and SMOs. Following Bourdieu (1996), cultural movements and CMOs may indeed have their own specific peculiarities, dynamics and aspects in the cultural field—even if they are tied to wider power structures. The important point is that the social movement literature provides us with some useful conceptual tools that can be appropriated to help illuminate cultural movement formation/organisation and to advance our thinking about them. In borrowing on this literature, it is generally recognised that the study of social movements is theoretically and conceptually eclectic and that the most explanatory approach needs to draw liberally from a range of different perspectives (Canel, 1997). It also needs reiterating that the social movement field is constantly changing, critiquing, and appraising its own conceptual field (for instance, see McAdam, 2003; see also Davis et al., 2008; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011; McAdam et al., 2001).

Despite challenges from more culturally based approaches in the field (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008; Reed, 2005), in our view, the most relevant explanatory conceptual framework to adapt from the social movement literature still includes an analyses of three key elements (also highlighted by Baumann, 2007): (a) political opportunity structures, (b) processes of mobilisation, and (c) framing. In short, ‘political opportunity’ concerns dimensions of the political environment that predispose collective action or not; ‘mobilisation’ refers to resources, institutions, networks, leadership, ties and identities to which collective actors have access; and ‘framing’ connotes the way in which social movements define and shape themselves through the creation of injustice frames and grievances (Tarrow, 1994). The theoretical innovation here involves transforming these concepts to apply to oppositional cultural formation and organisation—hence, we are interested in developing below the ideas of cultural opportunity, cultural mobilisation and cultural framing.

The social movement literature on political opportunity structures comes from a variety of perspectives—including social movement theorists like Touraine (1981), who refers to macro
structural transformations and long-range social change that create new sources of conflict and new forms of collective identity in society (the ‘why’ question)—as well as approaches that emphasise the relationship between institutional politics and protest (political process perspectives, see McAdam et al., 2001; Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 2004). Emphasis on electoral instability, political alignment/realignment, tolerance for protest, along with a host of other factors, characterise this approach (Della Porta and Diani, 2006, p. 16), addressing the question of not only ‘why’, but also the ‘why now’ aspect of social movements. More recently, social movement theorists have argued for a more dynamic type of analysis (McAdam, 2003), and they have discussed the idea of ‘attribution of opportunity’ in order to counteract too structuralist an explanation, whereby according to McAdam et al. (2001, p. 43): ‘No opportunity, however objectively open, will invite mobilization unless (a) it is visible to potential challengers and (b) perceived as opportunity’.

Whilst recognising the importance of a political opportunity structure perspective for understanding the wider social context of cultural movements, some of its weaknesses (too much emphasis on exogenous forces, deciding which political factors are most important, structural determinism, etc.; see Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008) also have implications for thinking through the idea of cultural opportunity structures. For instance, to what extent are cultural opportunities shaped and determined by wider political opportunities, and to what degree might cultural opportunity structures have their own autonomy (Bourdieu, 1996)? Additionally, are there social periods where oppositional cultural rather than political opportunities are most propitious, and what are the main factors that combine to produce this? Are there situations when cultural opportunities are more readily recognised and taken (certain places, eras, events, etc.)? Baumann’s (2007, p. 53) work here is concerned primarily with how opportunity structures can influence artistic legitimacy, while our focus here is on how structures, places, and perceptions can facilitate cultural movement formation. Our research data (outlined in the next sub-section) suggest that the centrality of macro-level economic, political and social change (e.g., Paris of May 1968)—alongside a weakening of the values of elite mainstream western culture (Williams, 1961)—are paramount in the formation of an oppositional film movement in the UK in the late 1960s (Harvey, 1978). Yet the ‘political failure’ of May ’68 may have equally helped create more, not less, alternative cultural opportunities, with radicals forgoing the political demonstration for the production of alternative cultural images.

A second body of literature in social movement studies is concerned with the actual process of mobilisation (that is, a more micro ‘how’ type of analysis; see Canel, 1997). While this work is rather eclectic in its orientation, it has tended to focus on the resources, institutions, organisational leadership, networks/ties and identities that aid a movement’s political mobilisation (see Tarrow, 1994, Chapter 8). Two aspects of this work are critical to our analyses of cultural mobilisation. First, there is the emphasis placed on existing institutions and organisations as active sites for mobilisation—what McAdam et al. (2001, p. 44) refer to in their work as social or ‘organisational appropriation’ (e.g., institutions like church congregations being appropriated as sites of mobilisation for the civil rights movement in the USA). While Baumann’s (2007, p. 55) work tends to focus on artistic institutions as resources of legitimisation and validation (e.g., museums, universities as centres of accreditation), we would instead emphasise the importance of university art/film departments, radical bookshops and film societies as cultural mobilising resources for the development of the oppositional film in the UK in the late 1960s. Baumann (2007, p. 56) also emphasises ‘tactics and strategies’ as resources, while we and other social movement theorists (Tarrow, 1994, pp. 21–22) would place more emphasis on the importance of networks, organisational leadership, and personal social ties for
connecting up, motivating and diffusing cultural movements. For example, McAdam’s (1988) work on the 1964 campaign to increase voter registration in Mississippi shows that social networks and close friendship ties were vital to the movement’s retention and mobilisation of its volunteers. With regard to leadership, Morris and Staggenborg’s (2003) work shows that even in the most egalitarian of organisations, there may well be certain figures who dominate based on their charisma and social skills (see Fligstein, 2001). Finally, Crossley (2009) has argued that the formation of social networks through ‘key actors’ was crucial to the formation of a critical mass of actors necessary to create Manchester’s post-punk scene in the mid to late 1970s. As we shall demonstrate below, similar institutional appropriations, social networks, organisational leadership issues, and close friendship ties were instrumental to both the wider UK oppositional film movement and to the formation of groups like the Amber Collective.

A final concept from the social movement literature relevant to this paper is what Tarrow (1994, p. 22) refers to as ‘collective action frames’. In order to distinguish themselves and further collective action, movements need to provide a clear interpretive structure, ideology, or frame around which to mobilise (Snow and Benford, 2000). This ‘framing work’ involves the need to develop a clear philosophy to ensure consensus—as well as the creation of mechanisms for ensuring shared understandings, trust, cooperation and identity (Della Porta and Diani, 2006, p. 92; Melucci, 1989). Oliver and Johnson (2001) importantly emphasise that frames (or rather, in their view, ‘ideologies’) are also crucial in structuring group norms and organisational practice. Social movements also need to contrast their worldview with elite/authority ones in a process described as ‘frame alignment’ (Snow, 1986), and this invariably is conducted through the utilisation of an injustice or grievance frame (e.g., the civil rights movement’s concern with ‘race’ equality).

While social movement framing is itself a cultural phenomenon, framing for a cultural movement or organisation may take on slightly different forms. Baumann (2007, pp. 57–58), not surprisingly, discusses artistic framing also wholly within a legitimation framework, while we are interested much more in how framing ideology works to define group norms and structure cultural movement formation. For instance, not only did the oppositional film movement in the UK frame themselves as ‘underground’ and ‘independent’ as a protest against the mainstream film industry’s failure to provide an outlet for ‘alternative representations’, they also adopted different practices and set up alternative organisations and institutions (Dickinson, 1999). Similarly, the film workshop movement (in which the Amber Collective was a central mobiliser and challenger) also utilised injustice frames about the media’s under- and misrepresentation of marginal communities—thereby sharing norms and emulating one another, factors that structured their organisational form and artistic practice. In the next section, we develop the concepts of cultural opportunity, cultural mobilisation and cultural framing more empirically—doing so through reference to the emergence of a general oppositional film culture in the UK, before turning to the Amber Collective as a case study of cultural organisation-forming within a social movement context.

3. Applying concepts: the emergence of an oppositional film culture in the UK

While May 1968 is often viewed as one of the key political opportunity catalysts for the development of an oppositional UK film culture (Harvey, 1978), a range of earlier political, generational and counter-cultural changes were beginning to be felt in the UK, which contributed to the widening of alternative cultural opportunities. While post-war optimism was blunted by continued class hierarchy, rationing, dominance of an establishment media, and the Conservative Party’s successive electoral victories in the 1950s—the beginnings of an altered cultural landscape in the 1960s (Williams, 1961) set the scene for an explosive close to that decade.
Dickinson (1999, p. 20) cites the beginnings of New Left politics in the UK as being significant, along with changing generational attitudes towards style, sex, music, literature and drug use (see also Hall and Jefferson’s [1976] discussion of post-war resistant youth subcultures and Miles’ [2004] recollections about the rise of countercultural values that prefigured hippie culture, communes and collectives). This, ‘the times they are a changing’ political spirit is expressed by one of our interviewees in relation to his move from mainstream employment into the alternative possibilities of the acting field in the mid-1960s:

I’d worked for ten years doing everything and you know, you get fed up with people telling you what to do and you think, ‘Oh well, I’ll be an actor [laughter]—get out of that’…Well yes, those sixties were still hierarchical, you know. I remember working as an accountant, going in with a stiff tie and having to stand up when the boss came in. . .Politically it was an enormous time of change, and I went in, I’ve forgotten, 1966 or something like that, 1965, I went to acting school as a working-class Londoner, voting Conservative, and came out a member of the Socialist Workers Party—you know. . .It was such a time of change. It was extraordinary change, you know. (Newcastle Cooperative Theatre Director)

Despite the artistic optimism here, numerous commentators have argued that the mainstream media, art and film industries in the UK continued to exist largely as hierarchical, conservative and exclusionary cultural arenas well into the ‘60s (Dickinson, 1999; Frith and Horne, 1987). Despite early interventions like the Free Cinema Movement in the mid-1950s and the related growing success of ‘New Wave’ British directors in the early 1960s—in the main, the UK film industry was characterised as conservative and out of touch, with strong hierarchical tendencies, vertical integration, and rigid practices/craft restrictions, with film on TV limited by bureaucratic monoliths like the BBC/ITV duopoly (Dickinson, 1999). Ironically, the election of a Labour government in 1964, and again in 1966, fuelled rather than tamed New Left critiques of culture and media. Dickinson (1999, p. 37) argues that a focus on reassessing British cultural life, concern with third world politics, and engagement with European cultural theory all helped to politicise an entire generation culturally. By the late 1960s–early 1970s, the radicalisation of a wide variety of institutions in UK society provided a wider political context for the arts and clearly influenced future oppositional filmmakers—in the following case, a prominent member of the workshop movement:

So I became an apprentice in the print industry. And I sat with this guy and argued with him about politics and that’s where I got a beginning with the trade union. . .But I became involved in politics then, really active in politics. . .There was a sort of counter-culture as well which I also. . .[laughs] . . .I inhabited both worlds. Oz magazine was there. . .The London School of Economics was giving weekly lecture. I was going there to lectures. There was an extraordinary. . .[laughs] . . .sort of wild kind of politics called Lotta Continua. . .There was much more a melting pot in the universities of politics, and in international politics, and a concern for international politics. . .So the setting was a sort of mad young leftist. . .So, anyway, here I’m in London, incredibly interesting time. The revolutions we talked about. Mad at times. Good fun. (Former Workshop Member)3

3 Oz was a satirical underground humour magazine, which underwent a series of obscenity trials in the 1960s–early 1970s, while Lotta Continua (continuous struggle) was a left wing student/worker movement formed in the late '60s in Italy.
However, it was the events, and also the aftermath, of the student/worker protests in Paris of May 1968 that appear most influential in the emergence of an oppositional UK film movement (Harvey, 1978). Reynolds (2007) argues that the faltering of a backward-looking economy and establishment government in France—combined with the emergence of a new and different generational value system—meant that there was a real political opportunity to challenge the existing society (see also Tarrow, 1994, pp. 175–179). Crucial to this ‘new social movement’ politics were two elements relevant to the formation of an alternative UK film culture. First, although May ‘68 contained elements of traditional worker and left struggles, the events were prompted largely by student protests and new left political forces—which railed against both state and capital, as well as challenged the technocratic control of social life, knowledge and meaning (Caute, 1988; Touraine, 1981). Second, was the movement’s desire to live and work differently, including the importance of producing an alternative culture/media to the mainstream (Feenberg and Freedman, 2001)—both ideas held together by a commitment towards working cooperatively and collectively.

Ironically, the political ‘failure’ of May ‘68 actually to change the system may, in fact, help explain the shift away from more traditional forms of protest in the UK to increased resistance in the symbolic and cultural realm (i.e., a shift from political to cultural opportunities). Part of this shift of emphasis came about through the actual physical expulsion/migration of French radicals to London following the defeat of May 1968 protests, but part of it was also related to the newfound belief that art and culture could become vehicles for social change (McAdam et al.’s [2001, p. 43] ‘attribution of opportunity’ idea), as the following quote from an early film collective member reveals:

I suppose you have to start with May/June ‘68 in Paris. It’s a sort of longish story, but really what happened there was, and I think distinguished the early collectives in the ‘70s, was that the inspiration came much more from Europe... lots of Europeans and Americans all came to London—and so there was this sort of boom, because all these sort of radicals and crazies, you know, extremist—that’s a really terrible word to use, but they were completely off the wall and they were just dumped in London. So suddenly you had this great ferment and sort of strange injection of people and ideas, some of which spilled over into film... and there was such a sense of urgency to show the world what was happening, the new spirit, the cultural political revolution, and there was a kind of directness that somehow you can make films and something would happen. (Former Member of Cinema Action)

While the above quotation directly hints at this wider shift from political to cultural opportunities, it does not in itself explain the processes of cultural mobilisation behind the UK oppositional film movement. For this, it is important to look at the ‘social appropriation’

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4 ‘New social movements’ generally refer to ‘post-industrial’ society-based movements that became dominant in the second half of the 20th century (including civil rights, feminism, peace and anti-globalisation movements, etc.)—which contrasts with older industrial society, class-based and purely economic movements with regards to types of participants, organisational form, and goals. Ironically, the catalyst social movement referred to here—May 1968, which gave rise to new ways of theorising (i.e., Touraine, 1981)—combined both new and old (labour) elements. Interestingly, our case study of cultural movement formation here (the independent film and workshop movement) shows a diversity of concerns—including the third world, feminism, race and, in the case of Cinema Action and Amber, a preoccupation with class (although the former organisation was largely concerned with labour issues, while Amber was more concerned with cultural issues, as well as economic ones). See Pichard (1997) for a critique of too easy a separation between old and new social movements.
(McAdam et al., 2001, p. 43) of pre-existing institutions—such as universities and art schools—and organisations like alternative bookshops, film clubs and societies in the formation of this cultural movement. For instance, radicalisation of UK universities in the late 1960s was happening, spurred on by student demonstrations against overseas tuition fee hikes at London School of Economics in 1967—as well as by student involvement in anti-Vietnam war protests, especially the Grosvenor Square riots in 1968 (Steadman Jones, 1969). The student-led protests in Paris of May ’68 also influenced UK students, not only in terms of them challenging decisions, but also in their questioning the very way universities were run. With particular reference to changes in the arts world, the six week long occupation of Hornsey College of Art was triggered first by a dispute over control of the student union funds, but extended into a critique of all aspects of art education, including the social role of art (Nairn and Singh-Sandu, 1969; Tickner, 2008). While the initial intervention was an occupation of the building, students quickly began to set up committees and activities designed to reorganise and radicalise the entire art school curriculum both internally as well as externally (see Students and Staff of Hornsey College of Art, 1969).

Equally important was the organisation (and in some cases usurpation) of a range of film clubs, societies and arts events in UK (some of which occurred in universities)—which would eventually contribute to the creation of an oppositional distribution network for an emerging underground film movement. Perhaps the most well known example of how networks of existing groups and key leading actors came together collectively around the medium of film was the formation of the London Film Makers Cooperative (LFMC). Through various events and festivals, key members of a previously existing film club Cinema 65—set up first as an alternative arts organisation in 1953 and re-launched as a film society at an alternative London book shop (Better Books) by Bob Cobbing in 1965—met up with a number of influential US and UK experimental filmmakers, producers and writers (Stephen Dwoskin and Simon Hartog, amongst others), which led to the formation of the LFMC in 1966 (Reekie, 2007). Inspired by the New York based artist-led Film Makers Coop and having an interest in experimental and avant garde filmmaking, the LFMC became a nexus point for those committed to working cooperatively to assist film production, distribution and discussion/critique (including screenings, providing shared equipment/facilities, producing a magazine, etc.). An additional network was created between the LFMC and the London Arts Lab (where the formers’ films were shown for a time when their own premises closed)—set up by the charismatic American Jim Haynes in September 1967 as a counter-cultural arts complex housing a gallery, theatre, restaurant, bookshop, studio and workshop space, which also screened alternative and experimental films (Curtis, 2007). The diffusion of this model led to an estimated 150 arts labs being set up in the UK over the next few years.

Another central cultural movement organisation was the setting up of The Other Cinema in 1970—a non-profit, independent film distribution company in London, which screened alternative and independent films from both abroad and later from the UK (see Dickinson, 1999, p. 43). In addition to serving as a meeting place for independent filmmakers—in fact, two of the key figures in the creation of the workshop declaration, including an Amber member, actually met at a screening here—it was seen as an important outlet for oppositional films and work that was difficult to see in the UK at the time:

…but it was The Other Cinema distribution, having a cinema so that we had an outlet to release movies as well as show a history of great historical stuff. People now, younger audiences, think, ‘What was the problem? You can get anything everywhere,’ but you read about these films, but you couldn’t see them. (Former Workshop Member)
These film networks/key actors/organisations are all examples of cultural mobilising structures—which acted as central meeting and information-sharing sites, creating close personal ties and friendships (and, in some cases, rivalries), diffusing common organisational forms and producing enough critical mass for the formation of a oppositional cultural movement (see also Crossley, 2009).

Unsurprisingly, a wave of film groups began to spring up post-1968, with many based on key actors, close friendships, and relationship ties (see the oral histories in Dickinson, 1999; for the role of ties in social movements generally, see also McAdam, 1988). In terms of cultural framing, while many were concerned with ‘rights’ politics and injustice frames (class, women, third world), their artistic mission was rooted not so much in direct political protest, but how these subjects were expressed in art and the media. Again, unsurprisingly, the organisational means to accomplish this was through the formation of film/media collectives. As one of our interviewees involved in the arts in London (photography) in the late 1960s explained, ‘I think coming out of that kind of context of what was going on in the 1960s, it seemed like a perfectly kind of reasonable...people did think about living collectively and working collectively’. A raft of UK film collectives were spawned in the late 1960s and early 1970s—including Amber (1968), Cinema Action (1969), Berwick Street Collective (1972), Angry Arts (which later spawned Liberation Films), Four Corners (1972), the London Women’s Film Cooperative (1972) and Politikino, which emerged out of The Other Cinema. The close connection between many of these organisations—created through the gift economy, personal ties, growth of a common frame, and the diffusion of this collective form—was, as one interviewee described it, the beginnings of an independent film movement:

By that time there was something emerging in London that loosely...well, became the independent film movement. I also worked with a group called Liberation Films who were in North London. I used to edit their films, and they had come out of 1968 but they were very much interested in community arts and community...And things like Cinema Action were going. Cinema Action came directly out of the events of 1968, and the Berwick Street Collective, and by that time the Independent Filmmakers’ Association had been formed in London, and so I was a member of that. (Former Amber Member 2)

One of the key moments in the coming together of this movement was the formation of the Independent Filmmakers Association in 1974, a cultural equivalent to a social movement organisation (SMO). The existence of this association, plus the recognition that there were specific funding opportunities for independent film (e.g., first the British Film Institute and later the Channel 4 independent film and video branch), signalled an important moment for framing and legitimising the movement—despite the fact that it was internally divided and relatively short lived (Dickinson, 1999). More permanent was the cultural formation of the workshop movement exemplified through film collectives like Amber, which we examine through the lens of cultural opportunity, cultural mobilisation, and cultural framing in the next section.

4. Cultural organisation-forming in a social movement context: the case of the Amber Collective

In an interview lodged with the British Library in 2002, Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen—one of the founders of Amber—reminisced about its early formation when she was a second year film student at Regents Street Polytechnic in London:
We had this embryo idea developing that we could work independently, outside of television, outside of mainstream film industry. We could actually survive in some way. ... It wasn’t a money-making enterprise; it was a philosophical approach to life, and quite political, and that’s not surprising, really. 1968, I mean there were a lot of collectives forming around the country... and we had this sort of optimistic confidence that we could make our own futures; we could just take it all into our own hands, and also have an input into society through it. (Konttinen, 2002)

Inherent in this quotation are the three elements inherent to cultural organisation forming in a social movement context discussed earlier. First, it directly acknowledges the political background with direct reference to 1968 and hints at an acknowledgement of the cultural opportunity structure available at this time (other arts collectives forming). Second, in terms of cultural mobilisation, there is clear recognition of alternative artistic values and philosophies—and a belief in a different way of doing art—developed in this case through common experiences of a university film school. Finally, there is a very clear attempt to culturally frame and form an arts organisation that could work independently of the commercial structures of the film and media mainstream discussed earlier. In this section, we will examine these processes empirically, in order to explain Amber’s emergence and early cultural formation.

It is no surprise to find that the Amber Collective, like numerous other UK film collectives in the late 1960s, emerged in a political opportunity structure characterised by upheaval and rapid social change—including protests against the Vietnam war, student occupations of universities, and of course, the events in Paris of May ’68 already discussed. Yet, a number of Amber members also bore witness to earlier counter-cultural shifts that had slowly challenged the political and cultural status quo of the early ’60s. One founding member recalled an early fascination with collective activity and living, despite her parents’ conservative outlook, while another, Murray Martin, spoke of the early ’60s art world as ‘a very oppressive period’, a fact that propelled him into both political and cultural action (Dickinson, 1999, p. 248). A member joining later in the 1970s remembered being politicised in 1967 by his involvement in a student arts festival and through his [her?] exposure to changing cultural theories of the media. By the end of the decade, politics and culture were decidedly entwined—embedded in a generational desire to live, work and play differently.

Immediately prior to forming, some Amber members (the majority being film students) were already involved in political struggles—a fact that may have predisposed them to become part of a collective organisation. For instance, one of Amber’s original members was involved in the famous occupation of Hornsey School of Art (Tickner, 2008), while another founder recalled marching with future Amber members in various anti-Vietnam protests in London. Several of the founders were involved in making a student film about the Grosvenor Square riots, so they were already combining politics and art. So, a significant pre-determining factor—as discussed by McAdam (1988) in terms of joining (and staying) within a social movement organisation—appears also to be true of cultural organisations; that is, prior to its formation, a number of founding Amber members had close personal ties and were already friends—working together on student projects, living together at times, and sometimes protesting together. In Crossley’s (2003) terms, they already had developed a ‘radical habitus’ together (a lived predisposition to radical activity).

It is also unsurprising, then, to find that cultural mobilisation of the group takes place within the context a growing radicalisation of UK universities, polytechnics and art/film schools (Nairn and Singh-Sandu, 1969). Part of the reason why universities can become oppositional
mobilisation sites of social and cultural movements is that they bring together similarly situated groups of people into a densely populated social space with common experiences and lifestyles (Steadman Jones, 1969). In terms of social makeup, the majority of future Amber members were artistically inclined, relatively young, unattached, and with few economic or domestic responsibilities. A key catalyst in terms of mobilising and coalescing the group was the organisation of a student protest at Regents Street Polytechnic film school itself. Spurred on by the events of May 1968 and the student activity at Hornsey Art School, a protest against an imbalance in the curriculum between photography and film was initiated (instigated largely by Amber founder Murray Martin). While the protest was in vain, it galvanised some of the students together, prompting discussions of starting a group of independent filmmakers and photographers (Konttinen, 2002).

These previously overlapping networks, activities and social ties between this particular group of students became absolutely central to the formation of the Amber Collective, as was the emergence of a strong, capable and visionary leader (see Fligstein’s [2001] idea of social skill here). Murray Martin, both a student and lecturer at Regent Street, and key to many of the events just mentioned, can only be described a ‘one man cultural mobilising structure’ (see Morris and Staggenborg, 2003). While we refer to a number of important ways Martin helped to inspire, mobilise and frame Amber below, his particular impact on the group is perhaps best described in his own words in an interview he conducted with the British Library in 2002:

I’ve never been a person that wants to totally impose things, although I think I’ve taken quite a central role in the group. I think we do it through debate. I mean, there was a discussion about what we should do. I think I mentioned already that I was already engaged in documenting working class life, and that’s what interested me, and I think, ultimately, that evolved into Amber’s mission statement…What was important to me was that the individuals who you then attracted and who stayed felt passionate in the same way, and that very quickly became the basis of the evolution of the group, I think…So, in a way, I was always dragging everybody towards us documenting a working class life, although as a creative collective. (Martin, 2002)

Martin’s previous experience as a working class art student, and then as a lecturer in Newcastle in the early 1960s, had a profound effect on him, and that influence was almost directly transferred to his vision of what Amber could become. Trained as a painter, he became unsatisfied with individualist approaches to art, in favour of a collective/collaborative practice, and he eschewed painting for the media of film and photography, which he saw as more socially influential. He also developed a real passion for the industrial Northeast of England and the importance of documenting working class life and culture there as a political as much as an artistic project (Martin, 2002).

This is not to suggest that Amber was simply the product of a singular vision or charismatic leadership. In order to effectively mobilise a group, and to create consensus around its purpose, members have to be able to identify with and share in its key cultural frame. Unlike a number of other explicitly political film collectives (Cinema Action, for instance; see Dickinson, 1999, pp. 263–288), Amber, though broadly describing itself as socialist, was never ‘party political’. Instead, the collective adopted a broadly humanist and practical approach to art—drawing both inspiration and practice from a rather unlikely source, the idealist British philosopher RG Collingwood and his book, The Principles of Art (Collingwood, 1958). The main idea garnered here was that art, rather than being a product of the individual, was better understood as a
relationship, a process of learning, between the artist and the community. A key passage from Collingwood, often quoted by Amber over the years, sums up the basic position:

The artist must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts. His business as an artist is to speak out, to make a clean breast. But what he has to utter is not, as the individualistic theory of art would have us think, his own secrets. As spokesman of his community, the secrets he must utter are theirs. (Collingwood, 1958, p. 324)

The general frame provided by Collingwood encouraged the development of a sustained artistic relationship with a chosen community, the sixties counter-culture provided the organisation form (an egalitarian collective), and Martin provided the focus (what was happening to the industrial North East working class in the wake of post-industrial change). All of these elements, plus the significance of ‘place’ to the collective, marked Amber as an oppositional arts group at the time. As such, one of the most significant decisions taken by the collective was to move out of the mainstream film culture of London in search of an appropriate industrial working community to document. Indeed, some members have argued that Amber only became a ‘real’ entity when they eventually physically moved to Newcastle—and in the end, only about half of the original Regent’s Street group made the commitment to relocate. The eventual move to Newcastle, and the impact of this locality on the organisation, was highly significant in influencing the cultural opportunity structure available to them (what McAdam et al. [2001] refer to as an ‘attribution of opportunity’) and further consolidated the collective’s mobilising and framing strategies. With regard to expanding the collective’s cultural opportunities, the idea was to move away from the commercial pull of London cultural life (despite it having a significant oppositional critical mass and its own indigenous working classes) to a location where industrial and working class culture was clearly more visible and homogeneous. Equally important however, was the fact that the smaller Newcastle cultural scene and lower cost of living offered the group the freedom to organise as it saw fit, to become self reliant, to innovate culturally, and eventually, to diffuse their model of work more easily.

Key to this move was the fact that the group (specifically through Murray Martin) had existing social ties in the area, including access to employment networks. As one Amber member recalled, ‘I think Murray got the job for me—he got jobs for everybody’ (Existing Amber Member 1). With these networks, a good number of early members were able to pick up part-time lecturing posts in film schools around the North East, which were seen as the best way to maximise time for artistic work. As one member recalled, lecturing one or two days was enough to pay for five ‘creative Amber days’ (including weekend working) (Existing Amber Member 2). While this employment scenario appears reminiscent of the well-known artistic ‘portfolio worker’ scenario of today, it was in fact used quite differently by the group to consolidate their collective structure and frame their egalitarian principles. As Martin explained:

‘What we did though, very quickly, we sat down and said, how’re we going to survive? . . . we did structure ourselves in a physical way which was on an egalitarian basis, where we all got paid the same way. Anything we earned came into the company, a

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5 Recent access to a long lost diary of Murray Martin shows that the move to Newcastle was not as straightforward as previous accounts have portrayed it. Significant disagreements about relocating led to Martin locating to the region himself for a period of time—and various members coming and leaving the area. The significance of place on group is the subject of a separate paper we are writing.
percentage went towards making sure work took place and a percentage went towards making sure we could survive and live. (Murray Martin interviewed by Pete Bell, Easington 24.09.99)

The ‘Amber wage’—an equal amount paid out to each member each week—instantly became an important symbol of the groups’ commitment to egalitarianism and putting the survival of collective before the needs of the individual artist (the group still operates a collective wage structure today). The formal ‘framing’ of the organisation as an egalitarian collective also provided the grounds for the groups’ Spirit of ‘68 motto of ‘live cheap, be free and independent’. As one member recalled: ‘…basically, the idea was to live on as little as possible. I think we just used what we got (Amber wages) and lived on everything second hand…But it was true that it was possible to live on very, very little’ (Existing Amber Member 2).

The early loss of some of its original members a year into the move to Newcastle also had an impact on further refining Amber’s frame identity. While some members left because they still had strong ties to London (in fact, one or two never completely uprooted from the capital), others found they did not take so readily to Newcastle and its industrial inhabitants. As one former member, who left only after a year in the city, said, ‘I also found that I didn’t really share the same affection for the North East working class culture’ (Former Amber Member 3), citing his Southern, middle class accent as a significant barrier. With the original group reduced to three members, the recruitment of new people was consciously framed around class background and one’s relationship to the culture of the region, as the quote below from a newly joining member from Newcastle aptly demonstrates:

…but I was from again a working class background…and I actually had and still have an enormous respect for the, well, the people I can group amongst, and the fact that they did fairly ordinary jobs, but I thought were very dignified people and they were almost kind of invisible. Nobody bothered to make, or very few people bothered to make films about their lives because they weren’t thought to be interesting. (Former Amber Member 1)

Early remobilisation of the group in Newcastle, through a careful process of recruitment, occurred through existing social ties, the extension of gift labour, and the existence of artistic networks (e.g., new members were drawn from older friendship networks, through seeing someone’s work at a film festival, and through a local art college connection). All three of the new members recruited in Newcastle in the early 1970s spoke to us about their working class backgrounds and connection to the area as reasons for joining Amber. One, in particular, talked about the importance of developing a shared artistic interpretation of the world and how ‘seeing things in the same way that other people saw things’ (Existing Amber Member 1) was crucial to the collective.

However, the specific collective form and bonds Amber developed early on were not just based on a shared political connection to the working class and commitment to the region. It could also be described (and was, by many interviewees) as a ‘family collective’ held together by strong emotional bonds (for a discussion of the role of emotions in social movements, see Goodwin et al., 2001). As one collective member liked to put it, ‘it’s quite a kind of strong emotional base’ (Existing Amber Member 1). In its early days, amidst engaging in a range of different types of labour, the collective often bonded over activities like bargain hunting, days out scoping out possible projects and industrial buildings, and socialising in working class pubs.

Finally, equally important in sustaining Amber early on were the social ties and bonds it formed with other artists and arts organisations in the Northeast. In order to shield themselves
from the mainstream, alternative cultural organisations may gain benefits from seeking out links with other like-minded organisations (McAdam et al.’s [2001] idea of emulation in social movements). For instance, some of Amber’s first links in the region were with Live Theatre (then a worker cooperative) and Bruvvers (another theatre cooperative). While initially acting as an enthusiastic supporter of Live, Amber (again through the persona of Murray Martin) also helped provide them with office and rehearsal space and even took over the running of the theatrical group temporarily when their founding director resigned. Similarly the founder of Bruvvers worked with Live and Amber to produce one of the first collective theatre productions in the city, and the various organisations often shared writers, equipment and resources. Additionally, Amber also forged close relationships with a range of regional photographers around specific projects, which were then later displayed in their gallery. While much of this support can be seen as ‘gift labour’, and was also tied in with Amber’s vision of developing an integrated alternative regional arts practice, it also worked to provide them with new cultural opportunities, helped them to further mobilise resources, and framed them as a leader of oppositional culture in the region.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have utilised the social movement literature, through modifying three of their key concepts, to help explain the early cultural formation of the Amber Collective and the broader oppositional film movement of which it was a part. In doing so, we have attempted theoretically to rework traditional social movement concepts like political opportunity, mobilisation and framing by applying them to a cultural movement and to a specific case of cultural organisation-forming. Emphasis here was placed on the relationship and shift from political to cultural opportunity; the mobilisation of cultural institutions, networks, leadership, and social ties in the formation of oppositional film movements and organisations; and the framing processes actors undertook to distinguish themselves and structure their organisation. Such an application was not designed simply to apply an old model to a new phenomenon (a cultural movement vs. a social movement), but also in turn to use the case study to contribute modestly to wider debates in social movement thinking.

In the conclusion, we want to use our case study and argument to briefly make a number of general points about what the study of Amber and its broader cultural movement might tell us about current thinking regarding the strengths and weaknesses of social movement theorising. First, what does our paper have to say about the combination of factors and political/cultural conditions necessary to produce an oppositional arts organisation like Amber? Regarding the political process and opportunity literature (Tarrow, 1994), it might be argued that Amber and its broader movement were formed in a rather unique period of social change and upheaval. At the same time, we have argued that although cultural opportunity is connected to macro-level social and political events, it is not completely determined by these forces, but may possess its own level of autonomy and effect (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008; Bourdieu, 1996). Blocked political change, in fact, can result in the perception that new cultural and artistic opportunities and practices are both necessary and possible, making the link between politics and culture a more dynamic process (McAdam, 2003). Institutionalist perspectives (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008; Peterson and Anand, 2004) come into play here, and one might argue that the formation of collective arts groups like Amber was also made possible by the cultural radicalisation of existing institutions like universities, art schools, and cinema societies. Also important here were the coming together of networks and groups (see Crossley, 2009) based on normative political
ideologies and oppositional artistic practices, strong leadership and social skill (see Fligstein, 2001), close social ties (see McAdam, 1988), and emotional commitment (see Goodwin et al., 2001) to collective forms of organisation. Ideologically (see Oliver and Johnson, 2001), there was a role, and perceived need for an oppositional cultural formation in the early 1970s—the independent film movement—to challenge, differentiate, and frame itself outside mainstream cultural institutions and arts organisations (see also Chen and O’Mahony, 2009).

Amber’s longevity and sustainability—in the face of the demise of the broader independent film movement and the increased commodification of the film and TV industries today—has important implications for the study and theorisation of how movements sustain themselves, a perceived weakness in social movement studies (McAdam, 2003). Recent theorisation of ‘collective strategic action’ by Fligstein and McAdam (2011) highlights a number of important processes that enable oppositional sustainability (or, in our case, ‘transformative arts’)—including the ease by which innovations can be diffused across a field; the extent to which oppositional challengers mount a united front; their ability to recruit new members and broaden their coalition; and the presence of a serious exogenous shock that reorients the incentives and motivations of all actors in a field. At the same time, we would argue that it is also important to examine more internal organisational processes relating to the type of social or cultural movement organisation under study. For example, in reference to our case study, Amber has been able to hold onto its original frame and principles without losing the capacity to innovate—with the Collingwood mantra of ‘art as a learning relationship’ between the artist and the community being sustained throughout its forty-odd years. As one of the current Amber members’ has recently stated, ‘I think that sense of a super narrative has always been part of Amber, much more so than most organisations. There’s a very, very strong sense of what it has done and how it all fits together’ (Existing Amber Member 3). Key to this is how members have been able to ‘imprint’ such a frame into their organisations structure (see Johnson, 2007) and artistic practice—drawing creatively upon it over time. More comparative empirical work needs to be conducted on ‘successful’ and ‘less successful’ oppositional movements in order to help us further refine our theoretical and conceptual toolkit.

Finally, in terms of politics and policy-making, what is the significance of our argument and case study? In light of the present crisis of the UK film industry—not to mention a series of longstanding issues about the limits of its current organisational structures and work practices (Blair, 2001; Davenport, 2006)—policy makers and practitioners might indeed have something valuable to learn from social movement theory applied to cultural movements and long-sustaining arts organisations like Amber (Dickinson, 1999; O’Reilly, 2009). Of course, we are very much in a new era now—characterised by neo-liberal policies towards the arts, funding cuts, and a return to patronage, yet at the same time are also immersed in a technologically led desire for creativity, networking and cultural ‘commons’ (Gielen, 2009). The crucial questions, then, are what are the new conditions necessary for the formation of future oppositional artistic movements, and what can we still learn from our explanation of past cultural movements?

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