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Feminism and Film Distribution:

An Analysis of Cinenova's Management Committee Meeting Minutes, 1991–1997

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Abstract

Cinenova was relaunched in 1991 from the pre-existing women's distributor, Circles, which had operated throughout the 1980s. In keeping with their founders' feminist politics, both Circles and Cinenova were run via a non-hierarchical management structure and had as their main focus the distribution, promotion and exhibition of films and videos made by, for and about women. As the funding and economic climate became harsher during the 1990s, however, this organisational model was severely tested, as Cinenova's workers were forced to try and survive on a more commercially viable basis. This article uses Cinenova's management committee meeting minutes from 1991–97 to explore how its management practices impacted on its operation and effectiveness.

Keywords

Cinenova, Circles, feminism, film distribution, management practices

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Britain saw the birth of a modern independent film movement.¹ Alongside the emerging production workshops a number of distribution services and organisations were set up to ensure that the work being produced got seen by audiences.² While some workshops – such as Leeds Animation, Amber, Liberation Films and Sankofa – self-distributed their own work, organisations such as the London Film-makers' Co-op, The Other Cinema, LVA, Cinema of Women and Circles undertook to distribute work made by a wide range of film- and video-makers. Each specialised in particular areas of moving image work, but in the course of the 1970s and 1980s all five built extensive national and international audiences for the work they distributed. However, given that these distributors were all committed to making available non-mainstream and less commercially orientated work, their levels of earned income remained modest – in some cases less than £10,000 per annum and rarely over £50,000 per annum – and insufficient to cover the full costs of their distribution operations. In their early years in particular, unpaid and (often intermittent) low-paid work remained crucial to their sustainability. However, such conditions imposed limitations on the scope of their activities, and during the latter half of the 1970s and early 1980s most of the organisations applied for and received public funding which enabled them to consolidate and develop their activities.

Entry of revenue funding into the growing independent film (and subsequently video) sector in the 1970s, followed by a significant round of funding cuts at the end of the 1980s and changed funding priorities during the 1990s, provide an important institutional context for understanding the trajectories and fates of these distributors³ – such as the move of the London Film-makers' Co-op and LVA to shared premises in London's Hoxton Square in 1997 and their eventual merger in 1998–99. However, the smallness of such organisations – often run by no more than a handful of people – means that the individuals involved, their politics and the resulting ways in which they manage the organisations, together with the decisions they take, can have a significant impact on the way those organisations operate and in turn on their effectiveness. Thus, it is possible to argue that to more fully understand how these organisations evolved, a consideration of what can be termed their management practices is equally necessary.

To explore this further, this article investigates Cinenova, the still operational women's film and video distributor that emerged from the relaunching of Circles (see <http://www.cinenova.org>), as a case study. The choice of Cinenova is governed by two factors. First, a near complete set of Cinenova's management committee meeting minutes from just after its launch in October 1991 through to late 1997 is available for scrutiny and provides an accessible and valuable source of information about the organisation's management practices and the management decisions taken. Second, as a successor effectively to both Circles and Cinema of Women, and similarly informed by feminist sensibilities, Cinenova adopted almost by default some of its predecessors' management practices, while having to operate under very different market conditions and circumstances. This created a tension which renders very visible the strengths and weaknesses of those management practices and how they impacted on the effectiveness of the organisation.

Methodological issues

The use of Cinenova's management committee meeting minutes and their attachments (such as covering letters, reports and discussion documents) can be categorised as archival research – although these documents have not been accessed via any formal institutional archive. Organisations like Circles, Cinema of Women, the London Film-makers' Co-op, LVA and The Other Cinema nearly always suffered from under-resourcing, a high turnover of staff, limited space and the need to adapt rapidly to changing conditions of operation. As a result, methodical keeping and retention of records was not necessarily a high priority. In these circumstances, what documents survive tend to be partial, and frequently come from a combination of funders' archives, whatever has been handed on to and/or kept by successor organisations, or from individuals who have been involved with the organisations in some capacity. Although Cinenova continues to survive, it has faced similar challenges, particularly that of under-resourcing, throughout the 1990s, culminating in the loss of its revenue funding in 2000 and a scaling back of its operations.

In such circumstances, access to an organisation's records is not necessarily straightforward, but in the case of Cinenova I served as a member of its management committee between late 1991 and 1997 and kept virtually all the committee meeting papers from those first six years of operation. These have already contributed to a larger research project, funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (2002–5), for which I was the Principal Investigator. That project studied nine independent film and video distributors in the UK, including the London Film-makers' Co-op, The Other Cinema, LVA, Circles and Cinema of Women mentioned above, as well as Cinenova. In the light of the promised potential of digital distribution to deliver a far wider range of moving image work to audiences, the project identified an urgent need to develop a greater awareness and better understanding of the factors that shape and influence the distribution process whereby some films are more widely seen while others are not. To that end, the project examined documentation from each of the nine organisations and conducted interviews with a range of people who worked for them or served on their management committees, and with key personnel from their funders, a number of curators and programmers who worked with them, multiple film and video makers distributed by them, as well as a number of TV commissioning editors and producers. Alongside other outputs, the documentation amassed during that project resulted in the setting up of the Film & Video Distribution Database (<http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk>), which makes freely available a selection of the material from the nine distributors studied – including Cinenova's management committee meeting minutes – as well as material from their funders and other related organisations. While the larger research project drew on a wide range of documentation via a multiple-case study approach to draw out analytic generalisations about the distribution process,⁴ this article is concerned with exploring what we can learn from a particular type of documentation about the way a small, politically committed organisation was managed..

Such documents cannot of course give us full and unproblematic access to the past or to fixed historical certainties. Rather we use them to deduce historical 'facts', which we then retell as narratives. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot explains, this process – what he terms 'historical production' – is riddled with 'silences', which he argues enter the process at four crucial moments: 'the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance).'⁵

If this is the case, Cinenova's management committee meeting minutes, as *sources*, have created a particular set of 'facts', to the exclusion of others. But even these so-called facts, cannot be taken at face value. As Carolyn Steedman suggests, our sources – and hence the 'facts' they create – have always been produced from someone else's perspective, for their own particular purposes.⁶ In the case of LVA, for instance, some documents were produced specifically to demonstrate to its funder that the distribution activity supported represented 'value for money', while a

'Development Prospectus' produced by Cinenova in 1994 detailing potential income generating activities was aimed at persuading its funder to increase the organisation's level of funding.⁷ Hence as Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier note, such sources 'can never be made fully reliable'.⁸ They are already a particular retelling of past events and actions.⁹ Although not a part of any formal institutional *archive*, my retaining of Cinenova's minutes can nevertheless be viewed as constituting Trouillot's process of fact assembly. Just as a formal archive is made from a specific selection of documentation from the past, my personal collection of the management committee minutes is equally selective, given the absence of other kinds of documents that would have been generated by Cinenova (such as financial records or correspondence with funders, filmmakers and hirers). And my analysis of those minutes will be a moment of fact retrieval, one guided by the questions I ask and hence producing a very specific *narrative*. But the aim here is precisely to tease out a very particular history – the moment of retrospective *significance* – of management practices guided by feminist sensibilities and their impact on the organisation. As Michelle Leigh has demonstrated,¹⁰ with careful reading of our sources – often reading between the lines or, as Steedman expresses it, reading 'for what is *not there*' (author's emphasis)¹¹ – by bringing contextual information to bear, we can make them yield meaningful stories.

Cinenova in context

In the wake of the second Women's Movement, an increasing number of women turned to filmmaking as both an artistic or documentary practice and as a possible profession. In the UK, Circles and Cinema of Women (COW) were set up in 1979–80 to cater to the needs of such filmmakers, needs which their founders felt were neglected by existing distributors through their privileging of commercial interests or male traditions of the avant-garde.¹² Circles was keen to ensure that women filmmakers at the more experimental end of the spectrum were distributed and promoted in the context of their own concerns; while COW wanted to ensure that documentary and feature filmmakers were able to retain control over their own work and how it was exhibited. Hence both organisations were rooted in the politics of feminism, aimed at prioritising the interests of women filmmakers, and were, unsurprisingly – even necessarily – set up by or with the close involvement of the filmmakers themselves. Circles was set up as a cooperative, with all filmmakers who placed their films in distribution with the organisation becoming members with voting rights, and COW was set up as a workers' collective.

Both organisations succeeded in developing wider audiences for the work they distributed by, for instance, developing touring packages of films (Circles), engaging in cinema releases (COW) and selling to television (both). When both Circles and COW were informed in spring 1990 of substantial cuts to their revenue funding, they embarked on discussions to consider a possible merger. In the event, the merger negotiations broke down and COW was forced to close.¹³ Nevertheless, when Circles relaunched as Cinenova – with an initial funding package from the BFI of £30,000 for its first year of operation to help it move to self-sustainability (a level of funding

that was reduced in subsequent years) – the new organisation effectively became the successor to *both* its predecessor organisations. Not only did Cinenova take over Circles' catalogue and business, but it also became custodian of COW's remaining records and, more importantly, invested considerable time in trying to acquire COW's collection of films¹⁴ – partly because expanding its own collection offered the potential of generating higher levels of distribution income (which tended to range between £20,000 and £25,000 per annum during the period under discussion); and partly because it was simply unthinkable that a substantial body of women's work should suddenly become unavailable to UK audiences. Furthermore, Cinenova inherited by default the role that had previously been shared by Circles and COW: that of developing wider audiences for women's film and video work. As Cinenova observed in a funding application made to the Arts Council within six months of launching, the new organisation was 'committed to the promotion of film and video made by women ... to as wide an audience as possible'.¹⁵ Thus, as the sole surviving women's distributor, Cinenova inherited both a significant legacy and, with it, a considerable burden of responsibility.

However, Cinenova found itself operating in radically different conditions to its predecessors. Crucially, in the face of declining grant aid, earning self-generated income became a far greater necessity for organisations like Cinenova. Indeed, its management committee meeting minutes for January 1992 went so far as to note 'the [organisation's] primary objective of making MONEY'.¹⁶ But generating higher levels of earned income proved challenging in the 1990s. The 1980s had, for instance, seen several touring packages of films by women fielded by Circles and others, such as Circles' *Her Image Fades as Her Voice Rises* (1983–84) and the Film and Video Umbrella's *A Camera of One's Own: New Films by Women* (1986). It was not unusual for these packages to attract nine, ten or even more bookings in the space of a few months.¹⁷ However, when Cinenova tried to launch a *New Wave Women* film package in 1992–93, with Arts Council support, they secured only three bookings in the space of nearly twelve months, failing to reach the target of eight set by the Arts Council as a condition of the funding.¹⁸

'Reading' the minutes

According to Cinenova's management committee meeting minutes, the basic management structure in place to run the organisation in these changed circumstances consisted of (usually) two paid workers (supplemented by occasional short term volunteers, student placements or freelancers to undertake specific tasks), who reported to an unpaid/volunteer management committee that met on average every six to eight weeks. In particular, the minutes for the November 1992 meeting noted that 'as a membership organisation no changes in the constitution can be made without convening an EGM'.¹⁹ This latter suggests that Cinenova had simply inherited Circles' cooperative model, with all filmmakers who placed their films with Cinenova becoming members with voting rights at AGMs. This is further evidenced whenever a management committee meeting hosted an AGM: it is clear from the list of attendees and

apologies that filmmakers in distribution with Cinenova were invited to attend.²⁰ In the context of this basic management structure, it is possible to argue that, through a careful reading of the minutes, three key issues emerge in relation to the organisation's management practices and their impact on the effectiveness of the organisation: the composition of the management committee, the need for that committee to be 'active', and the need to define its precise role.

Composition of the management committee

Nowhere in Cinenova's minutes does it state the maximum size of the management committee. But in a BFI funding application, made in December 1992 and circulated to the management committee, Cinenova noted nine current members and the intention to increase the membership.²¹ For the May 1995 meeting, the minutes list ten committee members, including both attendees and apologies; for the September 1996 meeting eleven are listed; while the minutes of the January 1997 meeting noted that three people were interested in joining the committee but there was only one vacancy. This would suggest that from 1993 onwards the management committee was expected to have twelve members, but the actual number varied – and across the 1991–97 period the minutes usually list between eight and ten members. However, even operating slightly below full capacity (assuming all non-attenders submitted their apologies), this is still a considerable number. But only a handful were reasonably regular attenders: at some committee meetings, the number was as low as two or three; rarely was it more than six and the average was around five. The significance of this in terms of managing the organisation depends on what was expected of the management committee, something which will be returned to later. However, the issue of attendance was deemed sufficiently important at the May 1994 meeting for a decision to be taken that 'management members would be asked [to] resign if they missed more than three meetings in a row without good reason'.²²

Just as important, if not more so, was the issue of recruiting committee members – or more specifically, *appropriate* members. In its early months of operation and initial recruitment drive, Cinenova was keen 'to involve women across a wide spectrum of experience, most but not all involved in film and video as teachers, filmmakers, distributors but also those from other fields with a keen interest in the media'.²³ This suggests that, to start with, input and support from a wide network of women, largely external to the organisation itself, was deemed desirable in the new economic climate. If Cinenova was to increase its distribution income, it would have to expand the markets for the work it distributed and hence having a broader based management committee, drawing in knowledge of other sectors, would seem logical. However, the minutes from the November 1992 meeting – just one year later – voiced far more specific requirements, noting '[w]e need to co-opt at least two more women onto the management committee, with skills/previous knowledge of finance and film/video distribution'.²⁴ The need for particular skills was reiterated a month later in the above mentioned BFI application, in which Cinenova identified 'legal and financial knowledge as the ... most necessary areas to fill'.²⁵

While several women expressed interest in joining over the years,²⁶ and some of them clearly did become committee members, the minutes suggest that Cinenova in fact struggled to find the kinds of skills and knowledge that matched its needs. At the January 1992 meeting, for instance, committee member Anna Liebschner was noted as asking 'how realistic it is to obtain other sources of funding', and fellow member Sara Bowman asked whether 'the BFI would assist with fundraising'.²⁷ Although not unreasonable questions, having to ask them is nevertheless indicative of a lack of understanding of the grant-aided sector in which Cinenova was operating. In 1993, aiming to bring some marketing expertise to the committee, Harriet Willis from the publicity department of Twentieth Century Fox was invited to join, but she attended only two meetings.²⁸ No mention is made in the minutes of her resigning, but no apologies are registered for subsequent meetings either. It is not unreasonable to deduce that Willis simply withdrew because she found the sector in which Cinenova operated too far removed – in terms of scale and resources – from the commercial industry sector of her day-time employment. By autumn 1994, as if in recognition of the difficulties of recruiting members with financial knowledge in particular, the minutes record paid worker Kate Norrish asking the management committee (now renamed 'the Board') 'what kind of financial training they would find most useful'.²⁹ If the organisation could not recruit women with the financial expertise they needed, an alternative was to train up their existing members.

Of all the names listed in the minutes, both as current and prospective members, across the 1991–97 period, only one – Sara Bowman – was a filmmaker in distribution with Cinenova and she attended only one meeting, in January 1992. Her apologies are not recorded for subsequent meetings, and her name does not figure across the September 1996–January 1997 period, when there was only one vacancy on the Board (although her resignation as one of the organisation's directors was noted in the minutes for the January 1993 AGM³⁰). Again it seems reasonable to deduce that Bowman resigned from the management committee or withdrew fairly early on. Just as the composition of the management committee/Board did not include Cinenova's filmmaker members, the decision to invite new members to join was also taken without reference to them. The October 1994 minutes record that a prospective new member, Kavita Hayton, 'introduced herself and asked to be elected onto the Board. ... She was voted onto the Board unanimously'.³¹ Thus it appears that the wider filmmaker membership of Cinenova was not actively involved in the management of the organisation in any way, something which is borne out by the filmmakers' lack of attendance at AGMs. Although invited, no more than three ever attended an AGM during the period under discussion, and while not all would have lived in London where Cinenova was based, only a further handful sent apologies – from a total of well over 200 filmmakers in distribution with the organisation.

The need for an 'active' management committee

The composition of the management committee and the issue of attendance became all the more important in view of a seemingly growing expectation – requirement even – that its members should be ‘active’ in the management of the organisation. When Cinenova undertook its initial management recruitment drive in late 1991, the committee was envisaged ‘as operating primarily in an advisory capacity, responding to new initiatives and ideas as opposed to simply rubber stamping decisions’. While the exact nature of ‘responding to’ was not clarified, it was made clear that members would be expected to attend regular management committee meetings, but that ‘[a]ny further commitment in terms of time would be *entirely your own decision*’ (my emphasis).³²

However, within months of launching, the expectations appear to have increased. In the minutes for the January 1992 meeting, for instance, paid worker Liane Harris is recorded as talking about ‘the *necessity* for management to be active in the running of Cinenova’ (my emphasis).³³ This was in the extraordinary context of one of the two staff posts being vacant and in the process of being advertised, with the workload noted as far exceeding the capabilities of a single paid worker. Nevertheless, the new management committee members, having been invited to take on an ‘advisory’ role, found themselves being asked to ‘help with finding volunteers and help organise working parties for specific events and/or help with events and projects directly’, with at least two of them also being required to help interview applicants for the advertised post.³⁴ Although this was a substantial shift in the demands being made, committee members Azza Rahman, Joanna Peberdy and Carla Mitchell responded quite quickly: a few months later they are recorded as setting up a planning group to ‘develop strategies for short and long term income generation ... [which] could involve organising fundraising events etc’³⁵ and to work on a campaign aimed at ‘generally raising Cinenova’s profile’.³⁶

A few months later, Cinenova’s two paid workers Liane Harris and Kate Norrish started to turn to the management committee for further input and direction – more than just advice and help. In a letter sent to committee members on 2 September 1992, they reported that: ‘We feel that “women’s films” has lost meaning as our markets are so broad and we have lost sight of what our objectives are’. They went on to argue that ‘the situation has reached the point where radical changes in the organisation must now take place’.³⁷ Although Harris and Norrish had some ideas about what those changes might be, they wanted to discuss with the management committee ‘what each member thinks Cinenova is about’, and asked members to consider ‘ways YOU think Cinenova can “transform” itself to make it a viable company given the actual resources we have’ (emphasis in original).³⁸ At the next management committee meeting on 9 September – called as an ‘emergency’ meeting³⁹ – a wide ranging discussion took place, which included debate about Cinenova’s identity. Part of this revolved around the need to prioritise distribution activity as the area that generated income versus the commitment to ‘promoting work by women’ even though ‘promotional activities tend not to directly generate income’.⁴⁰ But it also raised the issue of the legacy they had inherited from COW and Circles, and the question of who the audiences were for

Cinenova's films in the 1990s. An additional issue raised by paid workers Harris and Norrish was that 'Management's role in shaping the company needs to be formalised'.⁴¹

Thus it is clear that, within a year of Cinenova launching, the paid workers were looking to the management committee to take the initiative, especially in determining Cinenova's future direction and priorities and its relationship to its predecessor organisations, Circles and COW. Yet, it is possible to argue there was also a growing awareness that the management committee members, with limited understanding of the sector in which Cinenova operated and recruited to perform primarily an advisory role, were ill-equipped to address the demands that were being made of them. Over the next two years, initiatives were undertaken to effectively 'educate' the committee members about the organisation's business. Whether these were at the behest of the paid workers or at the request of management committee members is not always clear. But only with a better understanding of Cinenova – the work it distributed, how it functioned, and the sector within which it operated – could the committee members provide realistic input and direction. There is no evidence in the minutes, for instance, that the above mentioned planning group, set up in 1992 by committee members Rahman, Peberdy and Mitchell, was able to devise effective income generating and profile raising strategies that were or could be implemented. A fairly obvious and straightforward initiative that was implemented was providing the management committee with the opportunity to view Cinenova's new acquisitions.⁴² But one of the first initiatives, taken immediately following the September 1992 crisis, was to instigate 'a formal financial report back with photocopied annotated cost reports for the period' at every management committee meeting.⁴³ However, while this made apparent the levels of income and expenditure – 'giv[ing] management a much better financial perspective'⁴⁴ – it eventually raised the need for committee members to more fully understand the financial information they were provided with and, when deficits occurred, their liabilities. This is what led to the proposed financial training for existing committee members.⁴⁵

As already noted, however, members' attendance at management committee meetings tended to be erratic. When, as mentioned above, new member Kavita Hayton was 'voted onto the Board unanimously' at the October 1994 meeting, only half the Board members were actually present. According to the minutes of the April 1995 meeting, there had also been some confusion over the dates of the financial training sessions and two members had missed it.⁴⁶ Although in those instances, the absences did not stop the vote or the scheduled training taking place, members' difficulties in attending regularly rendered management by committee problematic. On the one hand, it meant that some decisions were taken without full management committee consultation – as with the election of new Board member Hayton – while on the other, it could make progressing some areas of work a very lengthy process. In mid-1994, for instance, paid workers Kate Norrish and Helen de Witt (who had replaced Liane Harris) required the management committee to make policy decisions on the management of Cinenova, which involved reviewing the organisation's mission statement, equal opportunities policy, cultural policy and filmmakers

contracts, as well as 'Employment; Acquisition; Grievance, Sale and Hire Agreements; and Job Descriptions'.⁴⁷ But it took a full two years to complete the process.⁴⁸ Although the task was a substantial undertaking, it was prolonged because policy review meetings or discussions had to be postponed on at least two occasions due to too few management committee members being available.⁴⁹ Indeed, in 1994, just as Cinenova was initiating its policy review, members Anna Liebschner and Satwant Gill resigned, both of whom had served on the committee from Cinenova's launch in 1991.⁵⁰

The requirement for an organisation's management committee to be 'active' is understandable when the committee members are drawn from its wider membership and/or have a vested interest in the organisation. The wider membership in Cinenova's case was its filmmakers and it would have been in their own interests to help make the organisation as effective as possible. Yet, with the brief exception of Sara Bowman, they did not form part of the committee's membership or take an active role in the running of Cinenova. How intentional this was is not addressed in the minutes. It is clear, however, that while the commitment to promote films and videos by women to 'as wide an audience as possible' remained central – the minutes are littered with reports of the workers undertaking self-directed initiatives pursuing this aim – the need to try and ensure Cinenova had access to a range of appropriate 'business' expertise quickly became and remained crucial. It was of course unlikely that such expertise could have been sourced from among the organisation's own filmmakers. Hence, the attraction of marketing expertise brought in from Twentieth Century Fox, and later, in January 1997, of solicitor Vivien Enharo to bring legal expertise.⁵¹ However, trying to source that expertise from women working outside the sector within which Cinenova operated and/or from women with full-time work and other commitments elsewhere not only proved challenging, but also begs the question of how 'active' the paid workers could expect their volunteer management committee members to be. Indeed, when members Liebschner and Gill resigned from the committee in 1994, both cited paid work pressures as a factor in stepping down.⁵²

The need to define the management committee's role

What emerged fairly early in Cinenova's history – and is evident in the above discussion – was in fact a lack of clarity about the exact role of its management committee, and hence also about what could or should be expected of its members. The minutes for the 'emergency' management meeting called in September 1992 noted the view that, certainly for some, 'The role of management is not entirely clear'.⁵³ Two months later, at the November 1992 meeting, this is articulated more clearly as 'centred around the division between management as a legally liable employer, and as an informal advisory group'.⁵⁴ But it is not until the May 1994 meeting that the suggestion is tabled that 'a document should be drafted to outline the responsibilities of members of Management', although this appears to have been prompted in part by poor

attendance at management committee meetings.⁵⁵ However, at the following meeting, in June, it is minuted:

It was decided that the workers would draft a document that detailed the legal responsibilities of Management members based on the booklet CARE, DILIGENCE AND SKILL. The draft would be discussed at the next meeting before a formal document is drawn up to be presented to all Management members.⁵⁶

It was the process of starting to draft this document which triggered the policy review in July 1994, as workers Norrish and de Witt discovered 'it was impossible to complete the document without the Board making some policy decisions'.⁵⁷ As noted above, the policy review took two years to complete, which postponed clearly identifying the responsibilities of the management committee. Yet, in the meantime the committee members were increasingly required to behave as employers. One of the issues that was discussed at management committee meetings, for instance, was workers' hours and salaries. At the October 1995 meeting, with only three committee members present, there was 'an extensive discussion about changes in the workers' hours', which resulted in an agreement that both paid workers should move from their contractual four-day working week to a full-time five-day week. The rationale given in the minutes for this decision was, firstly, that 'Cinenova would benefit from additional worktime and consistency of service, and the workers would have increased financial security'; and secondly that, due to the implementation of a development plan, 'Cinenova's turnover has increased dramatically ... and we are currently achieving the figures projected for year 1996-7 one year in advance'.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the decision had to be reversed three months later at the December 1995 meeting. According to the minutes, this was because the increase in turnover had not produced the net income required to cover the increased salaries that would result from both workers moving to a five-day week. As the minutes clarify, the main reason for this was 'the fact that 50% of all earned income (70% in the case of TV sales) is returned to the filmmakers' in royalty payments – this is a far higher percentage than that offered by distributors in the commercial sector, and one that is only feasible and sustainable when the distributor is sufficiently subsidised via a generous level of revenue funding or low-paid/volunteer labour. In addition, of course, any increased distribution activity necessarily resulted in an accompanying 'increase in distribution expenses'. Indeed, the workers reported that, despite the increased turnover, 'it looks like Cinenova will end the financial year with a deficit'.⁵⁹ Thus, despite the financial training, the management committee had agreed a decision in October 1995 that was financially unsustainable.

Yet, a few months later at the May 1996 meeting, it was reported that a 'finance sub-committee' (although there is no indication of who comprised that committee) had decided to raise the salaries of the two paid workers. This decision was justified in the minutes partly on the basis of a Lottery award received by Cinenova 'increasing our fixed assets so providing a healthy balance

sheet'.⁶⁰ In January of the same year, the minutes also noted that Cinenova was considering reducing the royalty percentage paid to filmmakers from 50% to 40% to offset the looming year-end deficit mentioned above. Aside from increasing their prices – which research elsewhere has shown the UK market would not sustain⁶¹ – this was virtually the only course open to Cinenova to improve its financial viability and thus support increased pay levels. The January minutes cite the American women's distributor Women Make Movies as having already taken that course of action, but note it was decided to initially talk to other distributors in the UK independent sector about their royalty splits. The meeting also appears to have agreed to offer new filmmakers 'the opportunity to waive their rights and Royalties', while 'older, established filmmakers would be invited to donate their annual Royalties to Cinenova'.⁶² Yet, two months later, at the March 1996 meeting, the problem of the 50% royalty split was reiterated, but no further mention made – at this or subsequent meetings – of the proposal to consider changing it in Cinenova's favour, nor confirmation provided that the options of filmmakers waiving or donating royalties had been implemented.⁶³

Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly given the lack of clarity over their responsibilities, the role of the management committee appears to have shifted over the years from an advisory one, through the requirement for active participation in the day to day running of Cinenova, to that of employer. The latter, however, resulted in the committee being torn between conflicting demands. On the one hand, it is possible to argue that its members were guided, in their role as employer, by a desire to see Cinenova's women employees properly work-loaded and fairly recompensed for the duties their jobs entailed – something which would of course have also been in keeping with the organisation's feminist roots. As early as September 1992, for instance, in light of their four-day week contracts, one of the workers had observed in a letter to management committee members that: '*As you know*, the work load far exceeds the capabilities of two workers' (my emphasis).⁶⁴ In a similar vein, the decision in May 1996 to award the workers a pay rise also stemmed from a perceived need 'to maintain differentials if Cinenova were to employ an Arts Council trainee on a bursary'.⁶⁵ The implication here is that, despite their experience and levels of responsibility, prior to the pay rise the workers' salaries were little, if any, better than a trainee's bursary. But at the same time, as an employer, the management committee was forced to deal with the realities of Cinenova's financial situation and possible deficits.

On the other hand, Cinenova's status as a membership organisation meant that its management committee also had to consider the needs of its filmmakers. The high royalty split for filmmakers was part of the legacy inherited from COW and Circles (although it was also more or less the norm in the independent sector),⁶⁶ and it came from a commitment to return as much distribution income as possible to the filmmakers themselves. While it was proving difficult to sustain in the harsher funding climate of the 1990s, implementing a reduction in the percentage paid to the filmmakers would effectively privilege the organisation's needs over those of its

member filmmakers. As there is no further mention made in the minutes of subsequent meetings about the possibility of changing the royalty split, it is reasonable to deduce that the decision – although it might have provided the workers with better employment conditions and the organisation with greater financial stability – was never taken.

Conclusion

Based on the above ‘reading’ of Cinenova’s management committee meeting minutes, it is possible to argue that the management practices impacted on the organisation’s effectiveness in a number of ways. The most obvious is that, due to the nature of those management practices, there was an absence of clear leadership. This was a significant issue for Cinenova since, with declining grant aid and the need to survive on a more commercially viable basis, the paid workers increasingly looked to the management committee for direction. As Mike Leggett, a member of the London Film-makers’ Co-op, and Deb Ely, who worked at Bristol’s Watershed during the 1980s, have both argued, there is precisely a need for strong leadership when attempting to survive in a more commercial environment.⁶⁷ Moreover, Cinenova’s management practices had resulted in a management committee that did not have the expertise to identify initiatives that could “transform” ... it [into] a viable company’. As a result, there was a recurring concern with trying to recruit people to the committee with *appropriate* expertise – as if achieving the ‘right’ combination of skills was the key factor in enabling the organisation to become self-sustaining. Hence it is perhaps unsurprising that the management practices themselves were never overtly identified as part of the problem, nor was rethinking them raised as an option.

Nevertheless, there was clear recognition on the part of Cinenova’s workers that measures of some kind were needed to ensure the organisation would survive. One significant proposal was ‘to rid ourselves of what Circles and COW were (while of course not dismissing this history)’.⁶⁸ At the emergency meeting called in September 1992, the ‘legacy of COW and Circles’ was noted as one of the ‘problems’ the paid workers were experiencing. Thus, Cinenova’s position as a successor organisation was flagged up as an issue. Whatever discussion took place was not recorded in detail, but it is probably the closest the organisation came to radically rethinking how it operated and what it needed to change and do differently in order to survive on a more commercially viable basis. For instance, the minutes note that the workers had identified the need to address the question ‘what are we about’ and to develop a strong, clear identity for the new organisation. Yet, although paid workers Harris and Norrish had insisted ‘radical changes’ were necessary, the emergency meeting resulted instead in a list of action points that mostly addressed only the day to day running of the organisation. There was one exception, an action point to draft a mission statement⁶⁹. While a mission statement is an important part of an organisation’s identity and revising it can signal a new direction, in this instance it simply aimed to clarify what Cinenova was already doing. Thus, there was an awareness that the legacy

inherited from Circles and COW was causing problems – such as the financial drain resulting from the royalty split and the time required to try and acquire COW’s films – but as the sole surviving women’s distributor, any major changes would have constituted a significant break with its past – and by implication its feminist roots. Given the commitment at one level precisely to sustaining the legacy of COW and Circles – that is, ‘the promotion of film and video made by women ... to as wide an audience as possible’ – such a break appears to have been too radical a change to make. And of course, any changes in Cinenova’s constitution would have required the approval of its membership.

While ‘radical changes’ appear not to have been implemented, the nature of the management practices did give the paid workers scope for exercising their initiative. Hence they felt free to make demands of the management committee, drawing on it as a resource at their disposal in order to manage their challenging workload, and to insist it act as their legally liable employer, while also being able to exercise a degree of autonomy in initiating promotional projects without reference to or constrained by the management committee. And in an interesting role reversal, the workers also undertook to educate and train their employers. Indeed, on several occasions there is clear indication that the paid workers were far better placed than the management committee to take decisions on the organisation’s distribution practices and priorities. At the emergency meeting in September 1992, for instance, it was agreed to suspend an acquisitions ‘viewing committee’ and allow the two workers to take the acquisition decisions instead since they had the necessary experience to assess whether films would find audiences in Cinenova’s main markets.⁷⁰

Thus, the meaningful story that we can tease out from Cinenova’s management committee meeting minutes certainly points to the inadequacies of management by committee – especially when that process required paid workers and volunteers to work together and especially in the changed economic conditions of the 1990s – and this resonates with the histories of similar organisations operating in the same sector. For instance, when The Other Cinema’s Charlotte Street cinema was trying to operate on a more commercially viable basis and began to struggle financially, shortly after opening in October 1976, an assessment of the project conducted by a funders’ working party concluded that the collective management structure – also comprising paid workers and a volunteer management committee – had impeded its success.⁷¹ Nevertheless, in the case of Cinenova, there was an awareness, certainly on the part of its paid workers, of the need for changes, but the changes that might have made Cinenova more robust – especially changes in the management practices – were never implemented. Ironically, however, it was precisely the absence of strong leadership that meant Cinenova carried on increasing the visibility of a wide range of women’s film and video work by allowing its workers to continue with the promotional activities that ‘tend not to directly generate income’.

This very particular history of management practices is one that has, of course, been replicated across many small cultural organisations; it is not specific to film distribution nor to organisations informed by feminist politics. And it is a history that anyone who has been involved in such organisations will recognise. But, within the discipline of film studies this history and the nature of distribution activities are rarely studied or discussed, and hence have not been widely understood or addressed. This, to a large extent, accounts for the enthusiasm with which digital distribution was greeted in the early days of YouTube. However, as the last decade and the growing research into online distribution has demonstrated, while the distribution platform may have changed, the type of distribution activities required to build audiences for non-mainstream work are largely the same. As Nico Meisßner has so astutely observed, ‘while the Internet has opened up immense opportunities for independent cultural producers in terms of building audiences for their works ... [such distribution activity remains] a purposeful, labour-intensive and prolonged undertaking’.⁷² Thus, the effectiveness of small distributors, whether operating in the pre-digital era like Cinenova or via the internet, has a crucial impact on the diversity of our film culture, and that effectiveness is determined as much by their management practices, as it is by their actual distribution activities.

Notes

¹ S. Harvey, ‘The “Other Cinema” in Britain: Unfinished business in oppositional and independent film, 1929–1984’, in C. Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, British Film Institute, 1986, p. 237.

² See J. Knight and P. Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image*, Intellect, 2011.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The findings from the project have been published in Knight and Thomas, *ibid.*

⁵ M.- R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon Press, 1995, p. 26.

⁶ C. Steedman, *Dust*, Manchester University Press, 2001, pp. 150–51.

⁷ Cinenova (1994), Development Prospectus 1995/96–1998/99 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/dev-prosp9406.pdf>).

⁸ M. Howell and W. Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods*, Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 3.

⁹ See V. Sobchack, ‘What is film history? Or, the Riddle of the sphinxes’, in C. Gledhill and L. Williams (eds.), *Reinventing Film Studies*, Arnold/Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 302.

¹⁰ M. Leigh, ‘Reading between the Lines: History and the Studio Owner’s Wife’, in C. Gledhill and J. Knight (eds.), *Doing Women’s Film History: Reframing Cinema, Past and Future*, University of Illinois Press, 2015, pp. 42–52.

¹¹ Steedman, *Dust*, p. 151.

¹² Circles also brought back into UK distribution some historical women filmmakers, such as Alice Guy, Lois Weber and Maya Deren.

¹³ See Knight and Thomas, *Reaching Audiences*, pp. 187–89.

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- ¹⁴ See, for instance, Cinenova, Minutes of Extraordinary Management Committee, 9 September 1992, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins920909.pdf>).
- ¹⁵ Cinenova, touring package outline, February 1992, 1-2 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CN-ACGBapp1.pdf>).
- ¹⁶ Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Management Committee Meeting, 29 January 1992, 3 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins920129.pdf>).
- ¹⁷ See, for instance, ACGB, Subsidised Exhibitions April 1983/84 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/SubsExApr83-84.pdf>) and Cordelia Swann, Report to Film and Video Committee on the A Camera of One's Own tour and the progress of the Heroic Times tour, 3 November 1986 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/FVU-swann861103.pdf>). See also Judith Higginbottom, Report on Tour of Maya Deren's Work for South West Arts (June 1983), February 1984 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/Higginbottom0284.pdf>).
- ¹⁸ See Rodney Wilson (Director, FVB, ACGB), correspondence with Gill Henderson (Cinenova) 24 July 1992 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/wilson920724.pdf>); David Curtis (Film & Video Officer, ACGB), correspondence with Liane Harris (Cinenova), 7 July 1993 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/curtis930707.pdf>); and Kate Norrish (Cinenova), correspondence with David Curtis (Film & Video Officer, ACGB), 14 September 1993 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/norrish930914.pdf>).
- ¹⁹ Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Management Committee Meeting, 18 November 1992, 2 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins921118.pdf>).
- ²⁰ See, for instance, Cinenova, Minutes of the Cinenova Annual General Meeting, 13 January 1993 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins930113.pdf>) and Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Annual General Meeting, 1 March 1995 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CN-AGMmins950301.pdf>).
- ²¹ Cinenova, Funding Application for the BFI, 1993/94, 18 December 1992, 2 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CN-BFIapp93-4.pdf>).
- ²² Cinenova, Minutes for Cinenova Board Meeting, 11 May 1994, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins940511.pdf>).
- ²³ Gill Henderson (Cinenova), correspondence with Julia Knight, 12 November 1991, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/henderson911112.pdf>).
- ²⁴ Cinenova, Minutes, November 1992, 2.
- ²⁵ Cinenova, Funding Application, December 1992, 2.
- ²⁶ See minutes for meetings on 6 April 1994 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins940406.pdf>), 26 October 1994 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins941026.pdf>), and 29 January 1997 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins970129.pdf>).
- ²⁷ Cinenova, Minutes, January 1992, 2.
- ²⁸ See minutes for meetings on 11 August 1993, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins930811.pdf>) and 22 September 1993 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins930922.pdf>).
- ²⁹ Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Board Meeting, 7 September 1994, 2 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins940907.pdf>).
- ³⁰ Cinenova, Minutes, January 1993, 1.
- ³¹ Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Board Meeting, 26 October 1994, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins941026.pdf>). The minutes record the new member's surname as 'Heyton', but it was in fact 'Hayton'. It should also be noted that in 1994 the minutes switch from referring to 'management committee' to referring to 'the Board'. No explanation is given, the minutes continue to discuss 'management' and refer to 'management members'.
- ³² Henderson (Cinenova), November 1991, 1.
- ³³ Cinenova, Minutes, January 1992, 3.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Management Committee Meeting, 17 June 1992, 3 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins920617.pdf>).
- ³⁶ Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Management Committee Meeting, 15 July 1992, 2 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins920715.pdf>).
- ³⁷ Liane Harris (Cinenova), correspondence with Julia Knight, 2 September 1992, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/harris920902.pdf>).

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- ³⁸ *Ibid*, 2.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*, 1.
- ⁴⁰ Cinenova, Minutes, September 1992, 3.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, 1.
- ⁴² Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Board Meeting, 20 July 1994, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins940720.pdf>).
- ⁴³ Cinenova, Minutes, November 1992, 3.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid*.
- ⁴⁵ See, Cinenova, Cinenova Management Meeting minutes, 30 November 1994, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins941130.pdf>) and Cinenova Board Meeting minutes, 25 January 1995, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins950125.pdf>).
- ⁴⁶ Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Board Meeting, 19 April 1995, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins950419.pdf>).
- ⁴⁷ Cinenova, Minutes, September 1994, 1.
- ⁴⁸ See, Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Board Meeting, 10 July 1996, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins960710.pdf>).
- ⁴⁹ See Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Board Meeting, 4 October 1995, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins951004.pdf>), and Minutes of Cinenova Board Meeting, 6 March 1996, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins960306.pdf>).
- ⁵⁰ See Cinenova, Minutes, September 1994, 2, and Cinenova, Minutes, November 1994, 1.
- ⁵¹ See Cinenova, Minutes for Cinenova Board Meeting, 29 January 1997, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins970129.pdf>).
- ⁵² See Cinenova, Minutes, September 1994, 2, and Cinenova, Minutes, November 1994, 1.
- ⁵³ Cinenova, Minutes, September 1992, 1.
- ⁵⁴ Cinenova, Minutes, November 1992, 2.
- ⁵⁵ Cinenova, Minutes, May 1994, 1.
- ⁵⁶ Cinenova, Minutes for Cinenova Board meeting, 15 June 1994, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins940615.pdf>).
- ⁵⁷ Cinenova, Minutes, July 1994, 1.
- ⁵⁸ Cinenova, Minutes, October 1995.
- ⁵⁹ Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Board Meeting, 20 December 1995, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins951220.pdf>).
- ⁶⁰ Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Board Meeting, 29 May 1996, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins960529.pdf>).
- ⁶¹ See Knight and Thomas, *Reaching Audiences*, pp. 164, 191
- ⁶² Cinenova, Minutes of Cinenova Board Meeting, 24 January 1996, 1 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/CNmins960124.pdf>).
- ⁶³ Cinenova, Minutes, March 1996, 1.
- ⁶⁴ Harris (Cinenova), September 1992, 1.
- ⁶⁵ Cinenova, Minutes, May 1996, 1.
- ⁶⁶ See Knight and Thomas, *Reaching Audiences*.
- ⁶⁷ Mike Leggett and Deb Ely, in interview with Peter Thomas, 7 February 2004, conducted as part of the larger AHRC funded research project examining UK independent film and video distribution.
- ⁶⁸ Harris (Cinenova), September 1992, 1.
- ⁶⁹ Cinenova, Minutes, September 1992, 3.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 2.
- ⁷¹ BFI, GLAA, ACGB, GLC, LBA and ILEA, 'Assessment of The Other Cinema (Exhibition) Limited', 13 July 1977 (available at <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/ellis-j770713.pdf>).
- ⁷² N. Meißner, 'Opinion Leaders as Intermediaries in Audience Building for Independent Films in the Internet Age', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research in New Media Technologies*, 21:4, 2015, 469.