



curated by
TRANSGRESSIVE NORTH

In partnership with
TradFest and
Filmhouse Edinburgh

*Supported by Creative Scotland
and Film Hub Scotland, part of
the BFI's Film Audience Network*

Dream On

Amber Collective

North Shields, England (1991)

'We make films *with* people, not *about* people' Murray Martin, one of the founding members of the Amber Collective says in *The Pursuit of Happiness*. Tyneside's Amber are demonstrably one of the most important and under-appreciated forces in British cinema; they are the best British filmmakers you probably haven't heard of yet.

As Martin's words illustrate, *people* are the bottom line in Amber's cinema. Discussing how Amber's aesthetic prizes the moments where performance and lived experience intertwine, Martin describes how it's "quite crucial to understanding why we root ourselves in a certain tradition of realism, and why we go into such *detail*; out of that engagement and experience comes a feeling about the people and a desire to express something about their lives, both about them and with them, which is why we use real people. The actors help us articulate it in a particular way, but we're really interested in the people themselves."

Amber's hallmark's is a deep commitment to cultural accuracy and sensitivity, achieved through periods of prolonged engagement and friendship with communities, that border almost on the ethnographic. The result is a remarkable series of films achieving a sense of place and authenticity practically unparalleled in British cinema. Spending often decades at a time in their engagement with a particular community, Amber's filmography is at times reminiscent of David Simon's more recent work for HBO (*On the Corner*, *The Wire*, *Treme*) in its commitment to embedded community portraiture. Amber's method depends not simply upon building trust, but becoming economic participants within a community, whether that means buying a fishing boat or a pub. Ellin Hare, another of Amber's core members (and the director of *Dream On*) describes how Amber's *Seacoal* began with the buying of a horse: "it wasn't long before we realised that - if we really wanted to have access and control - if we wanted to build a story here with actors and have control of it, we had to have a horse". Amber's films grow slowly, organically and in conversation; polyvocality and a sense of the choral is at the heart of both the collective's method and their aesthetic. Shunning standard notions of solo authorship, Amber have chosen largely to accredit the work of their films collectively, without singular ascriptions of 'director' or 'writer'. Together, however, they possess a distinctive voice; a bold sense of communal auteurship that makes an Amber production unmistakable.

Dream On outplays expectations in almost every respect, both in and outside Amber's canon of work. The film marks a break from the semi-Loachian, neorealist bent of Amber's earlier

work (*Eden Valley* and *Seacoal* in particular) to represent working class life in North Shields in ways that reach beyond social realism to incorporate aspects of surrealism, absurdism and magical realism. One of the earliest signposts of *Dream On*'s beautiful sense of daring is when one of its three female leads first turns to 'break the fourth wall' and address us, the audience, directly in her bathroom mirror. Then there is the poetic use of dream sequences, which - along with some of the film's stranger waking moments (such as the ghost in Peggy's side car) recall the folksy magical realism of Powell and Pressburger. *Dream On* also has an eye for the small absurdist details of its character's lives - of grown men talking to their goldfish and costumed figures taking out money at the cash point - that leaven the film's authentic sense of realism with flavour and humour.

Like Ken Loach's *Up the Junction*, *Dream On* also has a strong sense of 'choral' perspective - of a summed community protagonist rather than the solo voice of a hero or heroine. The three women at the film's core - Julie Rita and Kathy - all get equal billing in terms of screen time and, crucially, they all get a chance to talk to us directly in the film's remarkable mirror sequences.

As in *Up the Junction*, *Dream On*'s 'folk songs' are pop songs (Gloria Gaynor's 'I Will Survive' in particular is woven throughout the film to great effect). Products of a distant, capitalist music industry they might be, but they're shaped and *owned* by their singers as much as any traditional folk song would be. I attended Sheila Stewart's funeral last December, and whilst the service ended with Sheila's powerful recording of 'The Parting Glass' (a recording drenched in history) the funeral started with Sheila's choice of Westlife, and the congregation sang along to both, investing the two songs with equal emotion.

Perhaps *Dream On*'s most remarkable attribute, however, is the manner in which it bucks the archetype of British social-realist 'kitchen sink' drama. Borrowed from neorealism and literary naturalism, so many politically-aware British working class dramas have tended to employ tragic endings in the service of didactic social critique; the crippling weight of poverty, lack of opportunity and institutional dysfunction in reality expressed allegorically by the impossibility of happy endings from *Kes* to *Bicycle Thieves* to Amber's own *Seacoal*. Through the character of Peggy however, *Dream On* seems, remarkably, to preserve both Gramsci's pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will. The film's relative happy endings all seem to stem directly or indirectly from Peggy, who talks to lovers that other folk can't see, rides into town with a ghost in her sidecar, and has supportive cameos in each of the women's dreams. Peggy could thus be described as the primary engine behind the film's magic and optimism. It's all too easy to imagine the possible tragedy - the powerful weight of misogyny and disadvantage - that might threaten its central trio were it not for her magical intervention. As such the film manages to preserve at its core an enigmatic double reading: for whilst Peggy helps save the day, it is all too easy to imagine the film without her.

Ultimately, despite beautifully incorporated notes of surrealism, absurdism and magical-realism, *Dream On* never loses an anchorage in social realism, and an acute sense of place and historicity. It's perhaps most accurate to say that *Dream On* inflects, extends and innovates upon the social realist model Amber so expertly deployed in *Eden Valley*, rather than discarding it completely. However, considering the film's dream sequences, its to-camera addresses, its resolute yet uncaricatured emphasis on women's experience, and its unwillingness to resort to didacticism, *Dream On* is simply luminous alongside the comparatively more staid archetypes of British social realism. One can't help but wish there were more British films like it, and that Amber were a more prominent voice in British cinema.

Jamie Chambers / www.folkfilmgathering.com