

Radical distribution: the GLEB (Greater London Enterprise Board) Cultural Industries Strategy

1. Contrary to certain rumours, we are not 'enemies of production' to use Brecht's phrase. Rather, it seems to us that over the past decade of radical cultural work, there has been a pre-occupation with production and a consequent lack of interest in (in some cases actual contempt for) the problems of distribution.
2. Therefore with limited resources the Cultural Industries Unit decided to prioritise investment in marketing, promotion and distribution projects in the field of independent cultural production. To date this has mainly been in book distribution where there has been more time to develop 'common services', and in promotion and distribution services for independent record labels. Video distribution at present seems to be the most under-developed area of cultural distribution. (Under-developed largely in terms of outlets, mailing lists, networks of audiences, etc, rather than in production.)
3. What can we learn from some of the actual successes of radical book distribution? (GLEB/GLC has funded 3 distributors: Turnaround - general radical book distribution; Bladestock - Afro-Caribbean; IPCO/Soma - Asian; all of whom have significantly increased demand for the books published by the small, medium size and large publishers they distribute.)

a) **The more you spend on promotion and distribution, the more you save.**

Marketing, promotion and distribution cost money, and cultural producers are going to have to learn to recognise this, rather than think they can do it on the cheap with a borrowed bicycle and a tatty duplicated leaflet. Publishers expect to pay 55% of the cover price for effective national distribution. And there's always more money to spend on top of that for promotion and marketing campaigns. But longer print runs which result from effective distribution mean lower unit costs which means cheaper books which means more buyers which means longer print runs and so on.

b) **Distribution is a part of production.**

If cultural producers have any sense of audience at all, then it naturally follows that distribution strategies are part of the production process itself. Book distributors like to be involved in discussions concerning price, presentation, design and ideal target audience before the book is sent to the printers. They can help the producer reach the audience s/he ideally wishes to reach. As radicals this is surely something we approve of, isn't it?

The political meaning of 'The War Game' and its impact, arose from its self-organised distribution and the social relations of viewing which were developed by it banning as a television commodity. Jane Root provides an exemplary case of the role of distribution in the production of meaning in her essay, **A Cautionary Tale: Distributing 'A Question of Silence' in Screen** (forthcoming).

c) **Distributors are usually more in touch with audiences than are producers.**

Book distributors are meeting booksellers, librarians, school teachers and academics nearly every day in their work. This means they are likely to be in close touch with new demands for new kinds of material, than are the producers themselves.

d) **Distributors keep producers informed about what other producers are doing.**

Because distributors are often involved in the early stages of book production, they know what other titles are being planned, by other producers. They can then plan linked promotion campaigns, build targetted or specialised catalogue lists, and in general give the individual product a political or generic context. Contextualisation is a key part of effective promotion to desirable audiences.

4. Cultural products without audiences are not cultural products. It is the audience which creates their meaning and brings them to life. Every time a book is read the novel is re-created once again anew. (As Sartre said, the reader lends the dead words and empty characters his or her own emotional life for the duration of the novel.) Every time a film is shown to an audience it is re-constructed dozens of times anew, a different product for every different member of the audience. The piles of old radical pamphlets and newspapers which gather dust in the back rooms, the vide-tapes which sit on the shelves undemanded, the catalogues which lay still unbundled in thw warehouse, testify to past forms of cultural production which were never realised, and therefore cannot fully be said to deserve the name of production. It is distribution which makes that link between the producer and the audience and which is, therefore, the key element in any definition of radical cultural practice.

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