

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Creativity and commerce: Michael Klinger and new film history

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The crisis in film studies and history concerning their legitimacy and objectives has provoked a reinvigoration of scholarly energy in historical enquiry. ‘New film history’ attempts to address the concerns of historians and film scholars by working self-reflexively with an expanded range of sources and a wider conception of ‘film’ as a dynamic set of processes rather than a series of texts. The practice of new film history is here exemplified through a detailed case study of the independent British producer Michael Klinger (active 1961–1987) with a specific focus on his unsuccessful attempt to produce a war film, *Green Beach*, based on a memoir of the Dieppe raid (August 1942). This case study demonstrates the importance of analysing the producer’s role in understanding the complexities of film-making, the continual struggle to balance the competing demands of creativity and commerce. In addition, its subject matter – an undercover raid and a Jewish hero – disturbed the dominant myths concerning the Second World War, creating what turned out to be intractable ideological as well as financial problems. The paper concludes that the concerns of film historians need to engage with broader cultural and social histories.

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### **The crisis in film studies, historiography, and new film history**

As a discipline, film studies is currently experiencing a crisis of legitimation. The 'death of cinema' has been repeatedly proclaimed with film now considered to be an outmoded, indexical, photochemical technology in the process of being subsumed in a digital future in which cinemagoing becomes increasingly a marginalized leisure activity. The dominant cultural form of the twentieth century is on the brink of extinction; the twenty-first will belong to 'new media' (for an extended discussion see Rosen 2001, 301-49, Rodowick 2007). We are now living, as Laura Mulvey has noted, in an era of 'post-cinema' in which film's status and significance needs to be reappraised and rethought (Mulvey 2007, xv).

Through different pressures, the study of history has also experienced a crisis of confidence. For a generation now, the discipline has been unsettled by the challenge of post-structuralist theories that have called into question its assumptions, protocols and conventional procedures. There is now a widespread scepticism concerning the possibility of objective knowledge about the past and an even more pronounced retreat from the construction of coherent explanatory and teleological narratives (see Attridge, Bennington and Young 1987 and Jenkins 1997). This questioning has had an impact on the more specific practice of film history in which the grand, evolutionary narratives that characterised earlier accounts have given way to local and micro histories, ones in which gaps and ruptures are foregrounded rather than smoothed over, and where the fragments of the past are understood not as transparent data or facts but problematic forms of 'evidence' subject to contestation (Sobchack 2000, 301).

However, the result of these challenges to film and history as disciplines has been a reinvigoration of scholarly energy rather than defeat and disillusionment. Film has begun to be re-situated within a wider historical configuration of visual technologies (Lyons and Plunkett 2007), 'a larger continuous history of moving images' (Carroll 1996, xiii), a broader history of modernity (Charney and Schwartz 1995), and of the changing nature of perception (Crary 1990, 2001). This 'turn to history' in film studies (Spicer 2004a) has come about because, Tom Gunning argues, the uncertainty of the contemporary moment has triggered an embrace of the 'dynamic potential of historical research to upset assumed genealogies and de-familiarize habitual practices and assumptions', to replace a linear history with one that is 'chaotic and protean' (2000, 317). As Georg Iggers argues in his authoritative survey of twentieth century historiography, in the process of responding to the challenges of post-structuralist scepticism, the historian should not abandon the traditional 'professional standards' of the discipline but continue to employ critical rigour in the interpretation of sources, to question their provenance and reliability and to be as sensitive as possible to their status and possible meaning (Iggers 1997, 10-12 and 140-45).

It is within this shifting and dynamic context that new film history has emerged, one that is theoretically informed with a 'self-reflexive awareness of its own discursive processes of writing and mediation' (Gledhill and Williams 2000, 297-98). New film history works with multifarious forms of 'evidence', with memories and myth as well as more conventional sources. As the editors of a recent collection of essays argue, new film history retains a fundamentally empirical basis in which the central importance of primary sources, including collections and archives, is fully acknowledged. There has also been a significant expansion in the range of sources

worked with, moving outwards from conventional documentation to new sources, especially those that have been disregarded or overlooked, including publicity materials, ephemera and fan magazines (Chapman, Glancy and Harper 2007, 7-8). Aware of the challenges to historical thinking and to the problematic status of film itself, new film history is avowedly revisionist in its conception and orientation. It is, they argue, especially exercised by examining the complexity of the relationship between films and their social and cultural contexts, investigating the complex nature of agency within the fluctuating dynamics of production and reception (ibid., 4-9).

In what follows I wish to take up some of the challenges of new film history through analysing the British independent producer Michael Klinger who was active between 1961 and 1987. I do so for five principal reasons. The first is a firm conviction that in a short article, a self-reflexive case study is the best method of substantiating theoretical ideas and issues. Second, concentrating on a producer unsettles the concept of the director as auteur which, while it may no longer command unquestioning allegiance, has dominated how the problem of agency has conventionally been approached in film studies. Third, the producer's role is essentially intermediary: he, occasionally she, mediates between the creative world of writers, directors, stars and cinematographers and the world of finance and business deals, thus encouraging a focus on the essentially collaborative and commercial nature of (feature) film-making and its relationship to social and cultural changes (Spicer 2004b and 2006, 1-7; see also Porter 1983). Fourth, I wish to remedy the disabling neglect (typical of producers as a whole) into which Klinger has fallen and, in the process, to use him as a means through which to reconsider the British film industry in the 1970s, conventionally the 'lost decade' – devoid of style, substance and taste. Finally, my analysis of Klinger is based on an archive of new primary material – the

Michael Klinger Papers (MKP) – that was deposited at the University of the West of England in 2007 by his son, Tony Klinger. The MKP consist of approximately 200 suspension files and over 40 scripts concerning 21 projects on which Klinger worked as producer or executive producer from the late 1960s to the late 1980s. They are a very rich source of material, not available elsewhere, including itemized breakdowns of production costs; film grosses; distribution sales and territorial rights; company accounts; extensive correspondence with a wide range of industry figures; annotated scripts; and promotion and publicity material.<sup>1</sup> In addition, on 3 December 2009 I conducted an extended interview with Tony Klinger, who worked as an assistant to his father from late 1972 onwards and was thus intimately involved in his affairs.

It is beyond the scope of this piece to reconsider fully Klinger's career. Instead, my aim is to explore the practices of new film history through a specific focus on *Green Beach*, a war film that Klinger tried, unsuccessfully, to make for over 20 years from 1967 through to 1987. I should emphasise that this exploration will concentrate on key issues rather than attempt an exhaustive treatment of the minutiae of this failed project. In choosing an unproduced film I am deliberately problematizing the object of study, what we might mean by a 'film text'. *Green Beach* exists as a book (by James Leasor, 1976) but Klinger's unrealised film is a 'lost' object, one that has no existence outside the archive. Like many 'films' – the archives of film-makers are littered with projects that never reached the screen (see North 2008) – *Green Beach* only has an existence and can only be understood through the documentation that exists in the MKP from which its history can be reconstructed, including its problematic relationship with its various sources, notably Leasor's book. However, it is not my purpose here to try to recreate, from the extant scripts, maybe a lost masterpiece, or, more neutrally, to speculate how *Green Beach* might have

worked as a film. Rather, I wish to use its abortive production history as a way of analysing the various constraints within which Klinger was working and thus reveal something about the parameters as to what was possible, acceptable or viable at this particular moment of British film and cultural history, thereby contributing to the larger revisionist history of the 1970s that is currently underway (see Shail 2008, Newland 2010, Harper and Forster 2010, Harper and Smith forthcoming). As Dan North has argued, focusing on an unrealized project is productive because ‘the lack of a finished film throws ... non-filmic elements into even sharper relief, shifting attention to the intricacies of the creative process and to the context in which that creativity began’ (2008, 8). As we shall see, the creative process in this case was closely interwoven with issues of ethnicity (Klinger’s Jewishness) and, because it was a war film, with the sensibilities of the combatants who were still living, with the contest between what I have referred to as ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ histories of the Second World War (Spicer 2004c) and thus with key issues of national identity, memory, and myth. I also wish to suggest that the significance of these ‘hidden histories’ of film-makers may be as important as the films that were produced, which suggests a major redirection of scholarly energies in the study of film history.

### **Agency: creativity and commerce**

Overall, Klinger’s career can be characterized as the continuous struggle between commerce (what would sell), cultural aspiration (making innovative, challenging films to showcase new and exciting creative talent) and entrepreneurial ambition (to make big-budget films that may rival American productions in the international marketplace). His early career was nakedly (in several senses) commercial, using his ownership of two Soho strip clubs the Nell Gwynn and the Gargoyle for promotional

events such as the ‘Miss Cinema’ competition, and by film impresarios including James Carreras – Chairman and Managing Director of Hammer Films – to lever his way into the film industry. In October 1960 Klinger went into partnership with fellow Jewish entrepreneur Tony Tenser who worked for a distribution company Miracle Films. Together they set up Compton Films which owned the Compton Cinema Club – that showed, to anyone over twenty-one, nudist and other uncertificated, often foreign, films – and a production-distribution company, Compton-Tekli, making a series of low-budget ‘sexploitation’ films beginning with *Naked as Nature Intended* (Harrison Marks, UK, 1961), an assortment of genre films and two ‘shockumentaries’: *London in the Raw* (Arnold L. Miller, UK, 1964) and *Primitive London* (Arnold L. Miller, UK, 1965). At the same time Klinger and Tenser acquired cinemas in London (converting the famous Windmill Theatre), Birmingham and Derby.<sup>2</sup> Thus Klinger occupied what one could describe as the sleazy side of Swinging London, exploiting the Soho sex industry, soft porn and sensationalism as the basis for a film career.

However, although Klinger enjoyed showmanship and making deals, he was neither a vulgarian nor Philistine businessman. His cultural aspiration was clearly demonstrated when he was approached by Roman Polanski, desperate to obtain production finance having failed elsewhere. Klinger had seen Polanski’s first feature *Nóż w wodzie* (*Knife in the Water*, Poland, 1962) and was therefore willing to give him the opportunity, and the creative freedom, to make *Repulsion* (UK, 1965) and *Cul-de-sac* (UK, 1966). Klinger appreciated Polanski as an *outré* talent capable of making challenging films and also as a means through which to increase his own and the company’s cultural capital. He therefore promoted Polanski’s films assiduously and both won awards at the Berlin Film Festival, thus representing a symbiosis of

directorial creativity and astute showmanship based on Klinger's own considerable cultural capital. By contrast, Tenser, always happier to stay with proven box-office material, sex films and period horror, saw Polanski as at best a distraction and at worse a liability. These creative and cultural differences led to the break-up of the partnership in October 1966.

Klinger's espousal of talented but unproven directors continued in his subsequent career as an individual producer. He produced the first feature of Peter Collinson, the challenging and controversial absurdist thriller *The Penthouse* (UK, 1967). This was followed with Alastair Reid's *Baby Love* (UK, 1968), another film focused on a sexually precocious young female, but with an ambitious narrative style including flashbacks and nightmare sequences, and later Mike Hodges' brutal and violent but also reflexive *Get Carter* (UK, 1971) that challenged the cosy conventions of the British crime thriller. Klinger retained his commitment to art-house films – Hodges' quirky black comedy thriller *Pulp* (UK, 1972) and Claude Chabrol's *Les Liens du sang* (*Blood Relatives*, UK/Canada 1978) – but continued to counterbalance these inherently risky ventures with the 'Confessions of' series (1974-77), sexploitation comedies (a staple 1970s genre) that proved to be highly successful. But the success of *Get Carter* enabled Klinger to mount a more ambitious production programme in the 1970s, the highpoint of which was two international action-adventure films: *Gold* (Peter Hunt, UK, 1974) and *Shout at the Devil* (Peter Hunt, UK, 1976) based on Wilbur Smith's middle-brow novels (Spicer 2010). In these productions, Klinger became the fulcrum of a highly complex film-making process involving lengthy negotiations with possible financiers in which the key creative agent was the producer himself allied to commodity fiction (Smith's popularity) and the box-office clout of his stars (in particular Roger Moore) rather than the director.



These films were designed to be commercial, to be sold worldwide, but they represented the actions of someone who had ambitions as a film-maker rather than simply as an entrepreneur. Klinger had sold his cinemas in 1967 to concentrate on production even though he was well aware that there was far more money to be made through real estate deals (Klinger 2009).

Overall, Klinger's activities show the complexity of the producer's role as he attempts to straddle modes of production – exploitation, middle-brow and art-house – that are normally regarded as mutually exclusive. In doing so he performed a key creative as well as commercial function, representing what John Caughie calls the 'producer-artist'. Caughie argues this role has a particular pertinence to the study of British film history: 'Outside of a studio system or a national corporation, art is too precarious a business to be left to artists: it needs organizers. The importance of the producer-artist seems to be a specific feature of British cinema, an effect of the need continually to start again in the organization of independence' (1986, 200). This aptly captures the multi-dimensional nature of Klinger's activities, with a complex union of art and commerce, and their importance to a film industry characterized throughout its history as under-funded, precarious and haphazardly organized. This emphasis on creativity, the producer-artist, offers a more adequate account, in my view, of the producers' role than that of John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny in their economic history of film-making who argue that the producer functions to 'attenuate' the inevitable uncertainty of how a film might perform in the marketplace (2005, 19). Producers also have a vital cultural function, as I shall try to demonstrate through my case study of *Green Beach*.

### **The Jewish entrepreneur**

A further crucial factor shaping Klinger's career, and one integral to his attempt to produce *Green Beach*, was his Jewishness. Although histories exist of modern British Jewry (Alderman 1998, Endelman 2002) and their characteristic role as entrepreneurs (Aris 1973), there has been no major study of the role of Jews in British cinema – a British equivalent of Neal Gabler's *An Empire of Their Own* (1988) – only an initial journal article by Kevin Gough-Yates (1992) that focuses almost exclusively on the 1930s. This is a major topic for further investigation that is far beyond the scope of this article, but Klinger would be an important component in that broader history, expending a enormous amount of energy and money producing the Biblical epic *Rachel's Man* (1974), advertised as 'the world's oldest and greatest love story photographed in the actual locations where the Old Testament story took place by Moshe Mizrahi Israel's most celebrated film-maker' (*Klinger News*, n.d.).<sup>3</sup> Although this project was ambitious and international, Klinger knew from the outset that *Rachel's Man* would never be a box-office hit, but a Jew, it was a film he felt compelled to make (Klinger 2009). *Green Beach* exemplifies these persistent tensions between a strictly commercial, entrepreneurial logic, and one derived from culture and ethnicity.

The origins of this project go back to 20 October 1967 when Klinger read an article in the *Jewish Chronicle* referring to a recent piece in *The Observer* that had reported the sensational revelations of Jack Nissenthal concerning his role in the Dieppe raid of 19 August 1942 when nearly 6,000 troops, mostly Canadian but with some British commandos, landed as part of Operation Jubilee. The Dieppe raid was highly controversial at the time and has remained a subject of intense debate for historians who have questioned its purpose, value and whether its orchestrator, Lord Louis Mountbatten, Chief of Combined Operations, exceeded his authority (see

Robertson 1967, Villa 1989 and Neillands 2005). Nissenthal was involved in the part of the operation known as 'Green Beach', the code name for Pourville, a small seaside town near Dieppe, where two infantry battalions from the South Saskatchewan Regiment landed. The twenty-four year-old Nissenthal, a working-class London Jew who had become an expert on radar, was the only non-combatant on the raid, deployed on an undercover mission for British Air Intelligence whose key objective was to ascertain the capability of the German radar system. Nissenthal's knowledge was judged so important that he had a bodyguard of ten Canadians and a British officer to see that he did not fall into enemy hands, or, if that seemed likely, to shoot him. He was also issued with a cyanide pill. Despite the heavy casualties, Nissenthal succeeded in obtaining important information concerning the German radar. Following the raid, several officers were decorated, but Nissenthal's undercover mission could not be officially acknowledged and thus his courageous exploits went unrecognized and remained unknown. In 1967, after twenty-five years, Nissenthal was no longer bound by the official secrets act and was thus at liberty to reveal his story with a view to publication.

Klinger wrote immediately to Nissenthal (23 October 1967), who had moved to South Africa and ran an electronics firm, fired up by this narrative of an unheard of Jewish hero from almost exactly the same background as Klinger himself.<sup>4</sup> Klinger sensed the thrilling possibility of making a dramatic, shocking war film depicting a secret mission that revealed the darker side of British war effort in which orders could be given for a civilian to be killed rather than risk being captured. The possibility of making this film comes at a crucial point in Klinger's career where, as noted, he was attempting to metamorphose from his showmanship/exploitation origins into a higher-status producer whose films had a strong chance of commercial success but

which were also capable of dealing with important subjects. Here was a genuinely sensational story rather than a factitious one, authentically shocking. More so than crime thrillers or Wilbur Smith adaptations, *Green Beach* was thus an opportunity for reputation building as well as financial gain in addition to being a statement about Jewish patriotism, the courage and daring of the working-class, and casting a sideways glance at the British war effort from someone who always regarded himself as outside the British Establishment (Klinger 2009).

It was an opportunity but one fraught with difficulties because of the acute sensitivity of the subject matter, steeped in contested accounts from varying viewpoints, exemplifying the importance of those ‘invested memories, murmurs, nostalgias, stories, myths, and dreams’ that Vivian Sobchack suggests are so vital to the film historian (Sobchack 2000, 313). The acute sensitivity of the story, at the highest levels, was revealed in a letter (3 December 1975) Klinger received from Mountbatten in which he admitted knowing about the attempts ‘to remove vital parts of the radar station’ but not of Nissenthal’s role or of the orders to shoot him: ‘The main point I want to make is that I personally had no knowledge whatever of all this nonsense and although the story is an exciting one it is one from which I hope I may be absolved for any responsibility.’<sup>5</sup> These sensitivities extended to Klinger’s relationship with Nissenthal with whom he cultivated a warm personal friendship. Klinger’s genuine wish to help Nissenthal get his memoirs published was tempered by the necessity to ensure he had exclusive film rights. Although he wrote to Nissenthal on 3 January 1968 to reassure him that ‘the subject matter will be dealt with in a worthy and honest manner’, Klinger always had very definite ideas about the nature of the story and the messages it should be espousing.<sup>6</sup> Klinger replaced the middle-class Barry Wynne – the author nominated by Nissenthal’s putative publishers Curtis

Brown as the writer who would craft his memoirs (working title *The Raid*) into a publishable form – with Benny Green, a broadcaster and prolific writer, especially of radio documentaries, who came from the same London working-class Jewish milieu. In a letter to Nissenthal (11 May 1971) Klinger justified his action by arguing: ‘the problem [is] to get a writer who will understand your background and mentality and be able to translate those things, together with the humour, to the public’.<sup>7</sup> In a slightly earlier letter (20 April 1972), Klinger had revealed that he was prepared to compromise the accuracy of Nissenthal’s memoir through the demands of producing a dramatic and cinematic narrative with a clear individual hero, commenting that Green had ‘settled the storyline and [has] possibly taken some artistic liberties, particularly in the area of the squad of Canadians who accompanied you. But I think it will make a great action picture and you come out of it as one hell of a character’.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately Green was too busy working on Klinger’s other projects and his own scripts to undertake the extensive research that was necessary and eventually withdrew.<sup>9</sup> This delay meant that *Green Beach* was overtaken as a priority by Klinger’s efforts to produce both *Gold* and *Rachel’s Man*. Klinger, his energies elsewhere, was unable to devote sufficient attention to *Green Beach* and started to lose control of the project. Anxious to have Nissenthal’s story made public, Klinger had brokered a deal with Heinemann, a Jewish firm and larger publisher than Curtis Brown. However, not only did Heinemann bring in its own writer, James Leasor, but decided to press ahead with publication despite Klinger’s preference that the film should be released first. Leasor was an experienced writer of fiction and non-fiction and the book *Green Beach* is based on Nissenthal’s memoirs supplemented by the writer’s own extensive research and interviews with those involved (Leasor 1976, 280-88), which gives due weight to the complexity of the Dieppe Raid, the

importance of the radar objective and the role of the Canadians. Heinemann published *Green Beach* in 1975 and when reissued as a Corgi paperback in 1976 it became a bestseller. Despite this success, Leasor's sober, measured account was not the book Klinger had wanted and was, in his view, far from an ideal basis for his intended film.

These vicissitudes may seem minor frustrations, but overall they had a very significant effect on the viability of the project which, though this is impossible to determine absolutely, missed its moment, a point I shall return to. As Lutz Koepnick (2002) argues, the film historian has to accept the importance of these contingencies and mistimings and give them due weight if she is to understand accurately the processes of film production and also the wider contours of film cultures.

### **The war film 1: genre and myth**

At this point Klinger turned to Stanley Price, who had adapted *Gold* and thus appreciated the importance of empathetic characterization and dramatic action, to write a screenplay. However, Price understood straight away the problems of using Leasor's book as a source and also how complex the task was of scripting *Green Beach*, for the task required balancing the conflicting demands of a screenplay that had to convey a lot of technical information about radar – the aspect that consistently exercised Nissenthal in his copious comments on various drafts – and create an exciting narrative that was true to the main 'facts' but also foregrounds Nissenthal's Jewishness. In a letter to Klinger (19 May 1975), Price observes that Nissenthal 'doesn't have any [character] in the book' and continues: 'I shan't bore you with the job I had trying to establish Jack's Jewish background, without making it schmaltzy like "Flight-Sergeant on the Roof" and Jack singing "If I was a Squadron-Leader" in Act Two', a reference to the smash hit musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (Norman Jewison,

USA, 1971).<sup>10</sup> This observation suggests another task for the historian in order to understand this project fully: a cultural history of the representation of Jewishness in British fiction. I will return to this point in the conclusion.

Price also discerned the acute difficulties in writing a war film in the mid-1970s, observing that Leasor's book is 'all rather gung-ho, jolly heroics when one reads it. I don't feel we can get away today with another stiff-upper-lip wartime romp ... So I've tried to make it a little more real.' Price's letter contains a mocking allusion to *The Dam Busters* (Michael Anderson, UK, 1955), one of several exhortatory epics of middle-class courage and fortitude that dominated the British box-office in the 1950s. As a group, these films formed a central element in what Angus Calder (1991) has identified as the dominant discourse about the Second World War, the 'myth of the Blitz', a heroic fable of courage, endurance and pulling together (see also Rattigan 1994). Collectively, these films constituted official forms of war commemoration that legitimated a particular version of national history (see Ashplant, Dawson and Roper 2000). Unwittingly, as Price recognized, Leasor's book reconfirmed this myth, and in the process elided the controversial aspects of the Dieppe raid. Mountbatten, for instance, emerges as a judicious ('catalytic') commander who not only did not sanction the orders to kill Nissenthal, but was not told about his safe return: 'If I had been told, he would most certainly have been decorated on the spot. To get him to do what he did and give him nothing is churlish' (Leasor 1976, 272).<sup>11</sup>

However, in the same letter, Price revealed that although he was conscious of these issues, he was wary that in trying to script a war film that was 'more real' and attuned to contemporary sensibilities, he was in danger of producing an anti-war film. Price was anxious that his treatment was 'getting too close to "The Dirty Dozen"',

which he felt would not work with British audiences and produce adverse reviews. *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, USA, 1968) depicts how a group of criminals led by the maverick Major Reisman (Lee Marvin) succeed in a daring mission that is important to the war effort despite the cynical attitude of the top brass. A huge commercial and critical success, *The Dirty Dozen* has been identified as initiating a brief cycle of revisionist war films (the “Dirty Group” movies’) that implicitly, through the brutality and violence and the ignoble attitudes of the characters, subverted the conventional values of the Second World War combat film thereby appealing to a generation who were becoming disillusioned by America’s involvement in Vietnam (Basinger 2003, 182-93). This cycle had an impact on British war films, notably *Play Dirty* (André de Toth, 1968) starring Michael Caine (Murphy 2000, 246-47). While not interested in producing an unpatriotic war film, and without wishing to import elements of *The Dirty Dozen* wholesale (especially the criminality), Klinger, as I have argued, was deeply attracted to a story that celebrated working-class (specifically Jewish) courage rather than conventional British middle-class *sang-froid* and, on several occasions, referred to *Green Beach* as “‘The Dirty Dozen’ that really happened’.<sup>12</sup>

Klinger’s attitude was confirmed by his son Tony who, in a memo to his father, argued that Price’s script hovered uncertainly between *The Longest Day* (Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, Bernhard Wicki, USA, 1962) and *The Dirty Dozen*. He concluded: ‘I feel that we must aim for the latter’s style which had the emphasis on some very strong characterizations built in very early[,] then action all the way. We must be allowed to do things that are *cinematically justifiable* even if we have to bend facts just a titchy bit’ (my emphasis).<sup>13</sup> For Klinger, the most pressing commercial issue was audience appeal: how to interest and engage a different generation of



cinemagoers (including his 25 year-old son) with changed sensibilities and a different take on the war, a younger audience than the book-buying public that had responded so positively to Leasor's account. However, Price continued to express concerns and in a further letter (10 September 1975) he complained about "fictionalizing" too outlandishly a story that has been so well-documented, and with so many of the characters still living'.<sup>14</sup> Klinger therefore felt he had no alternative but to look elsewhere for a writer.

Rather reluctantly, he turned to the book's author, James Leasor, even arranging for a screening of *The Dirty Dozen* as inspiration. In a letter to Klinger (18 August 1975), Leasor dutifully promised that his screenplay will avoid 'the quiet documentary approach or anything reminiscent of 1950's type British war films'.<sup>15</sup> However, despite his willingness and Klinger's extensive annotations on various drafts, Leasor was unable to provide the kind of script Klinger wanted and, in June 1976, was also dropped. Klinger then turned to Gerry O'Hara, a writer-director with whom he worked extensively in the 1960s. However, O'Hara wrote to Klinger (20 July 1976) expressing his surprise at Leasor's screenplay: 'for a man to have carefully, even too carefully, written the book and then thrown truth right out of the window in such a reckless way astonished me'.<sup>16</sup>

As Price had argued, it was especially difficult, if not impossible, to make a film based on a story that actually happened, elements of which were so well-known at that time and with many of those involved still active. Nissenthal's role may have been obscured and uncelebrated, but not the Dieppe landings themselves. Indeed, their thirty-fifth anniversary in 1977 was marked by parades in London and elsewhere. Both Price and O'Hara are also conscious that by the mid-1970s the counter-cultural expressions of discontent – including, of course, protests against the war in Vietnam

that had been part of the *Zeitgeist* when *The Dirty Dozen* was released – had attenuated, and that, certainly in Britain, there was a generic shift back to safer terrain. The major war film released in 1977, *A Bridge Too Far* (Richard Attenborough, UK), while not the same as a 1950s war film because its heroism was severely compromised, was not the left field ‘British Dirty Dozen’ that Klinger was seeking to make. At this particular cultural moment, Klinger’s fixed determination to produce a ‘British Dirty Dozen’ – really, as his writers recognized, an impossible dream – was therefore possibly misjudged. Film historians must attend to these short-term ideological fluctuations, what in Gunning’s terms could be described as the ‘chaotic and protean’ nature of the shifts in attitude that characterize the histories of cultural forms.

## **The war film 2: economics and national fictions**

Of course film production is an economic as well as a cultural activity, and a producer’s commercial nous is always crucial. From the outset, as expressed in a letter to Nissenthal (3 November 1967), Klinger conceived of *Green Beach* as a ‘mass appeal action picture’, a high-budget production intended to be sold world-wide.<sup>17</sup> However, during a period when cinema admissions plummeted, only low-budget films (such as the ‘Confessions of’ series) could hope to recoup their costs in the domestic market. More ambitious films had to have an international appeal in order to penetrate the all-important American market (Smith 2007). But, in an era of industry retrenchment, the problem was to raise adequate production monies. Alexander Walker (1985 and 1986) has argued that the swift and unceremonious withdrawal of large-scale American finance was the key explanation of the British film industry’s decline in this decade. Walker’s account needs to be qualified because, on closer

inspection, the process was more uneven and longer-term, with several short-term ebbs and flows, than he allows. Klinger, for instance, always entertained hopes of securing the backing of a major Hollywood studio throughout the decade (Spicer 2010).

However, the case of *Green Beach* problematizes a Marxist insistence on the determining force of the economic base because the difficulties Klinger encountered were as much ideological as economic: the Americans attitude towards the Dieppe landings was rather different to their British counterparts. Danton Rissner, United Artists' Vice President in charge of East Coast and European Productions – who had worked with Klinger on *Pulp* and with whom, as a fellow Jew, he enjoyed a cordial and informal relationship – could not see *Green Beach*'s fundamental appeal for American audiences. Rissner wrote to Klinger (7 January 1975):

even though I personally always like to see “the Jews” knocking the shit out of “non-Jews” and especially the Germans ... it seems that the Canadian/British raid on Dieppe was neither a notable success nor an utter disaster, but rather a frustratingly botched operation which at best turned into an ambiguous outcome.

Removed from the pressure of any national investment in the events, or a deep appreciation of the sensitivities involved, Rissner assumed that Klinger was ‘just using the book as a frame of reference for a movie’, precisely what the British writers felt they could not do and the wholesale compromise that Klinger himself could not countenance: it was ‘*The Dirty Dozen* that really happened’, not a fictional war film.

The Dieppe raid was indeed, a Canadian-British affair. Nissenthal always thought of his story as a ‘vital part of unknown Canadian history’.<sup>18</sup> It was an event that had huge significance and appeal north of the American border. Transworld Publishers (Corgi’s parent company) had pre-sold 40,000 copies of *Green Beach* in Canada, the highest ever pre-sales figure for a paperback.<sup>19</sup> Letters preserved in the Klinger Papers reveal a strong interest by a number of Canadian companies in the project and in the possibility of a co-production. The most persistent was Alfred Pariser of Cinepix in Montreal who wrote to Klinger (24 August 1972) advising him that a group of Canadian veterans, now ‘successful businessmen’, was ‘anxious to have a film produced that would glorify the involvement’ of Canadians in the raid.<sup>20</sup> In a subsequent letter (10 October 1972), he assured Klinger that this group had ‘substantial funds’ to invest.<sup>21</sup> However, Klinger was initially unwilling to deal with Canadian companies because they lacked the major financial resources or distribution networks of the American studios and because he always saw the story as an epic of Jewish heroism and a revelation about the ‘dirty war’ rather than one of Canadian valour and sacrifice.

With a British war film, Klinger might have expected support from indigenous sources, although this was something he had not previously enjoyed: both *Gold* and *Shout at the Devil* had been financed through South African backers. Klinger, like other independent producers, was caught in a double-bind during this period because, at the same time that American investment ceased to be forthcoming, major British companies were also withdrawing from indigenous production (Higson 1994, 219-21). However, here too there were inconsistencies and cross-currents in this general trend. Klinger received a very encouraging letter (19 August 1976) from F. S. Poole, Managing Director of the Rank Organization, clearly indicating that a deal had been

concluded in which Rank would part-finance *Green Beach* as one element of an ambitious package of four films.<sup>22</sup> The others were: *The Chilian Club*, a satirical comedy; *Eagle in the Sky*, an action-adventure story (another Wilbur Smith adaptation); and *The Limey*, a heist thriller. Sir John Terry, the Chairman of the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC), wrote to Klinger (12 January 1977) agreeing to support the film through a substantial loan.<sup>23</sup> However, although Klinger's production plans were now far advanced, the deal broke down without explanation. In the absence of written documentation, the historian has to search for other sources, in this instance, the oral testimony of Klinger's son who was, as has been shown, assisting directly in his father's activities. According to Tony Klinger, the Rank deal broke down largely because of internal dissension within the organization itself. Sir John Davis, Rank's Chairman, was in the process of disciplining his senior staff by refusing to honour any agreements they had made, thereby undermining his executives' position and divesting them of power (Klinger 2009). In support of Tony Klinger's explanation, one can adduce the evidence of a previous occasion, during the restructuring of the Rank organisation in 1947-48, when Davis had used the same ruthless tactics in order to impose his authority (see Spicer 2006: 138-39). Certainly there is no economic or commercial logic that would explain Rank's abrupt volte-face. Without Rank's support, the NFFC felt exposed and Terry wrote to Klinger (21 March 1977) introducing a new condition for its loan: that an American or 'other international distribution deal' had to be negotiated beforehand.<sup>24</sup> Klinger understood only too well that the NFFC's requirement almost completely undermined his bargaining strategy with potential foreign financiers. In desperation, he tried to scale down the film. A new writing team of David Pursall and Jack Seddon was hired and,

in a script that is preserved in Klinger's papers, they made a fairly inept attempt at cost-cutting by eliminating any depiction of the initial landings at Dieppe altogether!

After the collapse of the deal with Rank, Klinger's opposition to the possibility of a Canadian co-production noticeably softened. He asked Rory MacLean, a Canadian writer who had written the script for *Eye of the Tiger*, to write yet another screenplay for *Green Beach*. MacLean's third version (August 1982) – also preserved in the Klinger papers – was posted to a Canadian-Jewish producer, Saul B. Zitzerman of Orphic Productions, Winnipeg, accompanied by Klinger's letter (5 August 1982) which insisted: 'You know what we are driving at; it's "The Dirty Dozen" that really happened. We have taken a few liberties with a real story but we want action, some fun, authenticity and drama.'<sup>25</sup> Nothing came of this overture. In 1987 Klinger made a final attempt to produce a mini-series with CBC-Radio-Canada, but a note in the reply (15 June), from a CBC researcher questioned the authenticity of the MacLean script and opined that Canadian pride was offended by the glorification of an Englishman.<sup>26</sup> Thus *Green Beach* was stillborn, a Jewish war epic that never was, a casualty of deep-seated economic problems within the British film industry, of competing national sensibilities,<sup>27</sup> and of the internal politics of large corporations.

## Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of Klinger's failure to produce *Green Beach* has, I hope, demonstrated the need for film historians to seek out new material, to have a broad conception of the 'film text' as one aspect of the whole production process, and to understand the multiple and mutable nature of agency in the production process,<sup>28</sup> thereby problematizing<sup>29</sup> the idea of the *auteur* director as the central explanatory trope in film studies. As has been shown, in the attempts to make *Green Beach*, the key

relationships were those between the producer and his source, Jack Nissenthal, the various writers commissioned to write a filmable script, and Klinger and his possible financiers. In the voluminous correspondence concerning the project, at one point only, in a letter to Nissenthal (6 January 1977), does Klinger mention, in passing, that Lewis Gilbert is his preferred director.<sup>27</sup> Even then it is clear that this decision was less important than getting the script right and deciding who to cast in the lead role; for a long time Klinger hoped Michael Caine would play Nissenthal. Unlike the director's contribution, which can be discussed using the films themselves, the producer's 'art' is elusive because it is, for the most part, invisible. As this case study has demonstrated, the critical challenge is to render that art visible by a detailed examination of the production process that can be reconstructed using archival sources, but the understanding of what constitutes these archival sources needs to be broadened to include unproduced films as well as completed ones and what Sobchack identifies as memories, murmurs, myths and dreams.

\_\_\_\_\_ This focus on the producer would facilitate, not simply a business history of film, but *a cultural history of creativity in an industrial/commercial context*. This distinction has two dimensions. First, the film industry itself needs to be situated within a wider framework of entrepreneurial activity. As has been argued in this case study, a full understanding of Klinger's role as a producer-artist would need to encompass the history of Jewish entrepreneurship in the British entertainment industry, and thus include Klinger's cinema-building, his role in the expansion of leisure facilities, and his part in the Soho sex industry of the 1960s as well as his role in the British film industry that reached its peak in the 1970s. This history would be more far-reaching than Carroll's putative 'history of the moving image' as it includes a range of other entrepreneurial activities. Second, such a cultural history needs to

attend to the power of memory and myth as well as more obviously documented evidence because, as Raphael Samuel (1994 vii-ix) argues, they are causal agents with material effects that historians need to value and respect. As has been shown, myths surrounding the Second World War form an essential context in which to understand Klinger's aspiration to produce *Green Beach* but also the problems he encountered. As Carolyn Steedman (2001, 66-88) has argued eloquently, archives and their contents are sites of imagination as well as of documentation, offering a space for memory and dreams and the extant documents relating to *Green Beach* need to be read imaginatively in order to appreciate Klinger's difficulties. In essence, his desire to make '*The Dirty Dozen* that really happened' was an impossible fantasy that would unite the authenticity of the actual Dieppe raid with a subversive celebration of Jewish working-class heroism. And this celebration, as Stanley Price recognised, would need to engage with Jewish stereotypes in British fiction which themselves, as Steven Carr has shown in a Hollywood context, resonate with wider prejudices and assumptions about Jewish business acumen and the roles of Jews within society (2001, 1-20 and *passim*). Thus Klinger's failure to produce *Green Beach* tells us much about two central aspects of British cultural history: the profound and protracted contest about the meaning of the Second World War and the Jewish presence in Britain.

Attending to these two dimensions is, I recognise, a demanding agenda for film historians, but one that is necessary if film history is to make an important contribution to broader social and political histories rather than remain a marginal pursuit. In *A Crooked Line*, one of the most comprehensive attempts to analyse recent developments in historiography, Geoff Eley charts how 'new cultural history' has switched attention from the macro to the micro as part of the move away from totalising histories and the 'tyranny of grand narratives', towards ones that stress



ambiguities and complexities and ‘general epistemological uncertainties’ (2005, 156).

However, he argues that such an intellectual positioning of the historian’s role becomes marginalised unless the attempt is made ‘to keep relating our particular subjects to the bigger picture of society as a whole’ (Ibid, 11; see also Sklar 1990).

The task of the new film historian is thus part of this wider process that seeks to open out new perspectives in the continuing struggle to understand the past.

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<sup>1</sup> The Michael Klinger Papers (MKP) are currently being catalogued and investigated through a Research Grant award from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The collection will be made available to other researchers from c. March 2011 onwards with selected documents posted online.

<sup>2</sup> There is little material in the MKP about the 1960s; this account is largely based on chapters 1-4 of Hamilton (2005),.

<sup>3</sup> There were three editions of *Klinger News*, not dated but clearly published during Klinger's most productive period in the mid-1970s. *Klinger News* was essentially a publicity broadsheet that promoted Klinger's films and contained announcements about forthcoming projects.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Nissenthal, 23 October 1967, MKP.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Klinger 3 December 1975, MKP. When the book *Green Beach* was published, Mountbatten's disclaimer: 'If I had been aware of the orders given to the escort to shoot [Nissenthal] rather than have him captured, I would have cancelled them immediately', was included in all the publicity for the book and printed on its back cover.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Nissenthal 3 January 1968, MKP.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Nissenthal 11 May 1971, MKP.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Nissenthal, 20 April 1972, MKP.

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<sup>9</sup> See Klinger's letter to Nissenthal, 25 April 1972, MKP.

<sup>10</sup> Letter to Klinger, 19 May 1975, MKP.

<sup>11</sup> Leasor followed Nissenthal's lead in his memoirs entitled *Dieppe, the key to victory*, a copy of which is in the MKP; see also his later work (1987) *Winning the radar war*, published under the name of Jack Nissen, a form he regularly used in business transactions. Whether it was to veil his Jewishness is uncertain.

<sup>12</sup> See Klinger's letter to Goffredo Lombardo of Titanus Distributors, 30 June 1975, and his letter to Saul B. Zitzerman of Orphic Productions, 5 August 1982, MKP.

<sup>13</sup> Memo dated 13 June 1975, MKP.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Klinger, 10 September 1975, MKP.

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Klinger, 18 August 1975, MKP.

<sup>16</sup> Letter to Klinger, 20 July 1976, MKP.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Nissenthal, 3 November 1967, MKP.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Wing Commander Morrison in Information Services at the Canadian Department of National Defence in Ottawa, 18 November 1972, MKP.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Press Officer Wendy Tury to Klinger, 17 February 1976, MKP.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Klinger, 24 August 1972, MKP.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to Klinger, 10 October 1972, MKP. Pariser tried again when he moved to Signal Film Corporation of Quebec.

<sup>22</sup> Letter to Klinger, 19 August 1976, MKP.

<sup>23</sup> Letter to Klinger, 12 January 1977, MKP.

<sup>24</sup> Letter to Klinger, 21 March 1977, MKP.

<sup>25</sup> Letter to Zitzerman, 5 August 1982, MKP.

<sup>26</sup> Letter to Klinger, 15 June 1982, MKP. The researcher's name is not given.

<sup>27</sup> Letter to Nissenthal, 6 January 1977, MKP.