

The Creative Producer – The Michael Klinger Papers

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Introduction

This paper is based on documents that were deposited at the University of the West of England in 2007 by Michael Klinger's son, Tony. The Klinger Papers are an archive that consists of approximately 200 suspension files and numerous screenplays concerning 21 projects on which Klinger worked as producer or executive producer from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s. They are a very rich source of material, not available elsewhere, including itemized breakdowns of production costs; film grosses; copies of financial agreements with investors; distribution sales and territorial rights; television broadcasting deals; negotiations with authors and actors over rights and payments; company profit and loss accounts and promotion and publicity material. Comprehensive material exists for several films, including *Gold* (1974), which I have chosen as a case study. I was awarded a two-year AHRC Research Grant in July to catalogue and interpret these papers. The essential elements are: appointment of a full-time Research Assistant (RA) who will work under my supervision to catalogue the Papers; place selected documents online; conduct interviews with me of several creative personnel who worked closely with Klinger; co-author articles and a monograph on Klinger; organise a mid-point symposium that will debate the role of the producer in British cinema. This last element forms part of a wider project, which includes my work on Sydney Box and the monograph published in Manchester University Press's 'British Film Makers' series, whose (modest!) aim is to re-write British film history from the perspective of the 'producer-artist', a formulation I'll

come back to in conclusion. The project will commence in January after the RA has been appointed.

The Producer



the Klinger News

“I am an Independent. I make the pictures I like and which I feel will entertain the international audience.”

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KLINGER BLASTS OFF WITH THE MIGHTY DOZEN

Although Michael Klinger was the most successful independent producer in the 1970s, he has become one of the legions of the lost in British cinema. This occlusion, is symptomatic of the neglect of the producer’s role within British cinema studies (and within Film Studies in general – see Spicer, 2004), which, in Alexander Walker’s deft formulation, ‘has to be resisted if films are to make sense as an industry that can sometimes create art’ (Walker, 1986, p. 17). The producer is conventionally characterised as conservative, philistine and anti-creative, as summarised by Ben Hecht’s outburst: ‘The producer is a sort of bank guard. His objective is to see that nothing is put on the screen that people are going to dislike. This means practically 99 per cent of literature, thinking, probings of all problems.’ (Quoted in Bernstein, 2000, p. 394). In contradistinction to other creative personnel in the film industry – actors, set designers, screenwriters, directors, cinematographers – the producer does not possess a set of specific craft skills but rather what Leo Rosten defines as ‘the ability

to recognize ability, the knack of assigning the right creative persons to the right creative spots. He should have knowledge of audience tastes, a story sense, a businessman's approach to costs and the mechanics of picture making. He should be able to manage, placate, and drive a variety of gifted, impulsive, and egocentric people' (Rosten, 1941, pp. 238-39). Above all – and this, I suggest is his or her real importance for analysis – the producer is involved in the whole production process, as Michael Balcon characterizes the role: '[t]he one person who can apprehend a film as an entity and be able to judge its progress and development from the point of view of the audience who will eventually view it'; a mediator between commerce and creativity, having 'a dual capacity as the creative man and the trustee of the moneybags' (Balcon, 1945, p. 5). However, this role as mediator and anticipator of audience taste does not have to be conservative, as Sydney Box argued: 'A film producer has two responsibilities: to the public and to his backers. If he is an imaginative and courageous producer, the two may coincide. The ideal producer, it seems to me, must always look ahead and try not merely to acquiesce in box-office trends but to lead public opinion and gauge future audience requirements' (Box, 1948).

With these general formulations in mind, I'd like to review Klinger's career briefly before turning to my case study to exemplify and concretise some of the key issues.

Klinger's Career

Rotund, cigar-chomping and ebullient – Sheridan Morley described him as resembling “nothing so much as a flamboyant character actor doing impressions of Louis B.

Meyer³¹ – Michael Klinger might seem a caricature of the producer, but this image belied a quicksilver intelligence, photographic memory and a cultivated mind.



(Michael Klinger on location with *Gold*; courtesy of Tony Klinger)

Born in 1920, the son of Polish Jewish immigrants who had settled in London's East End, Klinger's entry into the film industry came via his ownership of two Soho strip clubs, the Nell Gwynn and the Gargoyle – that were used for promotional events such as the Miss Cinema competition and by film impresarios such as James Carreras – and through an alliance with a fellow Jewish East Ender Tony Tenser, who worked for a film distribution company, Miracle Films. In October 1960, 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 Compton Film Distributors which started out with a modest slate of salacious imported films (e.g. *Tower of Lust*) and a series of imaginative publicity stunts. However, finding it

difficult to obtain sufficient films, Klinger and Tenser started making their own low-budget films, beginning with *Naked as Nature Intended* (November 1961) directed by George Harrison Marks and starring his girlfriend Pamela Green (Hamilton, 2005: 10-14).

On the strength of a modest success, Tenser and Klinger formed a new company, Tekli, to make several films – including *The Yellow Teddybears* (1963) and *The Pleasure Girls* (1965) – that combined salaciousness with an attempt at examining serious sexual issues, an assortment of different genres – comedy, period horror and sci-fi – and two ‘shockumentaries’ – *London in the Raw* (1964) and *Primitive London* (1965).

Klinger and Tenser were highly ambitious, but culturally divergent. Characteristically, when Roman Polanski arrived in London and approached the pair to obtain finance having failed elsewhere, it was Klinger who had seen *Knife in the Water* (1962) and therefore gave him the opportunity, and the creative freedom, to make *Repulsion* (1965) and the even more *outré* *Cul-de-sac* (1966). Although *Repulsion* in particular had been financially successful, and both films won awards at the Berlin Film Festival that conferred welcome prestige on Tekli, 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 differences led to the break-up of the partnership in October 1966.

Klinger set up a new company, Avton Films and continued to promote young, talented but unproven directors who were capable of making fresh and challenging features: Peter Collinson’s absurdist/surrealist thriller *The Penthouse* (1967); Alastair Reid’s *Baby Love* (1968), another film that focused on a sexually precocious young female, but with an ambitious narrative style that included flashbacks and nightmare

sequences; and Mike Hodges's ambitious and brutal thriller *Get Carter* (1971).

Although *Get Carter* is now routinely discussed as Hodges' directorial triumph, it was Klinger who had bought the rights to Ted Lewis's novel *Jack's Return Home* because he sensed its potential to imbue the British crime thriller with the realism and violence of its American counterparts and who had succeeded in raising the finance through MGM-British all before Hodges became involved.

Part of Klinger's success was his ability to tap into various markets. In the 1970s he continued to make low-budget sexploitation films with the "Confessions of" series (*Window Cleaner/Pop Performer/Driving Instructor/Holiday Camp*, 1974-78) for which he acted as executive producer and whose modest costs could be recouped (in fact they made substantial profits) even from a rapidly shrinking domestic market² and partly compensate for an industry that now lacked a stable production base, was almost completely casualised, and where there was a chronic lack of continuous production. Klinger continued to produce more *recherché* and challenging crime thrillers, including Reid's neglected *Something to Hide* (1972), Collinson's *Tomorrow Never Comes* (1978) and Claude Chabrol's *Les liens de sang* (*Blood Relatives*, 1978). However, Klinger's main energies went into the production of big-budget action-adventure films – *Gold* (1974) and *Shout at the Devil* (1976) – aimed at the international market.

Given the parlous state of the British film industry, such a strategy may seem odd or even reckless. However, the selection of the action-adventure film was based on Klinger's estimation of public taste – particularly the popularity of the Bond films – and his conviction, in the context of a dwindling domestic market, that international productions that could hope for worldwide sales were the route to survival for the British film industry. Indeed, he repeatedly attacked the insularity, parochialism and

timorousness of the British film industry in the trade press.³ Klinger also saw an opportunity, with the withdrawal of large companies (notably Rank) from production, for ambitious (and, one might add, courageous) independent producers to fill a production vacuum. His problem was that he could no longer rely, as he had done for *Get Carter* and *Pulp* (1972), on American finance. As Alexander Walker has shown, it was largely American money that had sustained the British film industry in the 1960s and the withdrawal of Hollywood studios from the industry in the 1970s was swift, unceremonious and catastrophic. The production history of both Klinger's action-adventure films would reward extended analysis – *Shout* was 'one of the biggest independently financed films in British cinema history'⁴ – but for brevity's sake I will focus on *Gold*, a more manageable focus than Klinger's negotiations with Wilbur Smith outlined in my abstract, but it does encompass that relationship.

***Gold*: genesis and production context**



[Klinger on location with *Gold*; the man to his left is Peter Hunt, the director; courtesy of Tony Klinger]

Gold is primarily a disaster movie – a very successful genre in the 1970s – beginning and ending with tense sequences depicting underground disasters in a South African gold mine. Its hero, the mine’s General Manager Rod Slater (Roger Moore), is a contemporary, classless self-made man of action, whose virility derives from his dangerous, exacting work and who shares with James Bond – particularly through the casting of Moore who had just had starred in *Live and Let Die* (1973) – a refined hedonism and compulsive womanising.



(*Gold*: Roger Moore as Rod Slater; courtesy of Tony Klinger)

Slater falls in love with Terry Steyner (Susannah York), the wife of his devious bisexual boss Manfred Steyner (Bradford Dillman), and the daughter of the

mine owner Hurry Hirschfield (Ray Milland). Unbeknown to Hirschfield, Steyner works secretly for a shadowy international cartel (another Bondian ingredient) led by Farrell (John Gielgud). By masterminding an operation to tunnel through to a supposed new vein of gold which will breach the sides of a vast underground lake, Slater becomes an unwitting pawn in the cartel's scheme to flood the whole of South Africa's central mining complex and thus force up the price of gold. Lured away by Terry, another unwitting pawn, for an amorous weekend at Hirschfield's country retreat, Slater returns in the nick of time and, together with the strongest black miner, Big King (Simon Sabela) saves the mine from disaster. Sabela, the 'noble savage' sacrificing his life to save the mine – Alexander Walker saw him as a latter-day Bosambo from *Sanders of the River* (1935) – is one of several residual elements of the Empire film in *Gold* which repeatedly emphasises its exotic African location, including the aerial shots of big game, and its perfunctory depiction of black tribal dancing as an erotic spectacle for the white couple.



(*Gold*: On-screen rugged action: Big King (Simon Sabela) and Rod Slater (Roger Moore) try to save the mine from flooding; courtesy of Tony Klinger)

Even with the action-adventure genre, Klinger was looking to produce a series of films all derived from the bestselling novels of Wilbur Smith. Klinger acquired the rights to *Shout at the Devil* (1968) and *Gold Mine* (1970), buying the latter even before publication, judging that Smith's brand of modern exotic action-adventure was ideal cinematic material.⁵ He continued, throughout the 1970s, to try to produce further films based on Smith's novels – succeeding with *Shout* but failing with *Eagle in the Sky* (1974), *The Eye of the Tiger* (1975) and *The Sunbird* (1972). In May 1970, while *Get Carter* was still in production, Klinger was in active discussion with Smith over a screenplay based on *Gold Mine*.⁶ Klinger was anxious to build on the cordial relationship he had developed with *Get Carter*'s financiers, MGM-British that had made the only Smith adaptation so far – *Dark of the Sun*, released in Britain as *The Mercenaries* in 1968. MGM-British bought out Klinger's option on *Gold Mine* and engaged him as *Gold*'s producer on similar terms to those he had negotiated for *Get Carter*, thus affording him what he believed would be a free hand in scripting and casting.⁷ However, although Klinger engaged Smith to complete the adaptation of his own novel, MGM-British brought in an experienced scriptwriter, Stanley Price, to rewrite. A clearly exasperated Klinger complained that he had 'no knowledge whatsoever of your deal with Stanley Price other than the overall figure I understand you have agreed to pay him is £5,000'.⁸ However, as part of the sudden withdrawal of American finance noted above, MGM-British withdrew its interest in August 1973.⁹ Klinger purchased the rights to the Price screenplay and, as an accomplished script editor, made some changes himself.¹⁰

However, while he might have been free of interference, with MGM's withdrawal, Klinger lost his major source of production finance and also his distribution guarantees in the all-important American market. To overcome these

problems took a huge effort, particularly as Klinger was unable to raise the necessary finance in Britain, where the dearth of production finance was acknowledged officially to be chronic.¹¹ Klinger himself had drawn attention to this on a number of occasions, lamenting: 'I try – and fail – to get British money every time ... It is the hardest place in the world to raise money for films. As a result, we are letting ourselves be used as a workshop.'¹² Emphasising that *Gold* would be shot entirely on location, Klinger turned to South African businessmen not used to backing films but whom he persuaded would see a handsome return on their investment.¹³ Although this deal ensured that *Gold* could be made (for around \$2,000,000, a figure quoted in several reviews), it was always a precarious arrangement that generated considerable mutual mistrust. In particular, there was a protracted wrangle over who was responsible for paying the overages when the film went over budget as the mine-disaster sequences proved to be more costly to shoot than was anticipated and involved an expensive studio recreation at Pinewood. Klinger's South African financiers expected to see a return on their investment based on the original estimates that they had agreed and not the final costs.¹⁴

Because the scope and scale of *Gold* was extraordinarily ambitious for an independent British producer, its production required adroit budgeting, careful casting and strict overall control. Convinced that Roger Moore was ideal for the lead and could guarantee international sales, Klinger had negotiated with Moore even before he attained superstardom as Bond. As the lynchpin, Moore was offered a lucrative deal: a fee of \$200,000 plus five per cent of *Gold*'s gross.¹⁵ Although Klinger could use Moore's star power positively – to raise finance and persuade other star names (John Gielgud, Ray Milland and Susannah York), to take prominent parts – it could also work negatively. Klinger judged that the director of *Duel* (1971), Steven Spielberg,

was ideal for an action picture, and another talented young film-maker whom he wanted to promote. However, Moore was unwilling to entrust the direction of a major film, at what he judged to be a critical point in his career, to someone aged only 27 and vetoed Klinger's choice.¹⁶ Klinger then decided to opt for the experienced Peter Hunt who had edited several Bond films before directing *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969) and assembled a crew of other Bond regulars along with his others he had already worked with, including art director Alex Vetchinsky and director of photography Ousama Rawi. Klinger also hired the highly experienced composer Elmer Bernstein to score the film and placed his own son Tony in charge of the second unit direction.

Thus although Klinger may have been frustrated by not getting Spielberg, he has assembled a talented crew, experienced in action-adventure film-making, many of whom he knew well, and over whom he was able to exercise close supervision. Klinger was a 'hands-on' producer, present throughout the shooting in South Africa as well as the restaging of some of the underground sequences at Pinewood. In particular, he arranged the viewing of the daily rushes to check for quality. His presence became very necessary because the craft union, the Association of Cinema and Television Technicians (ACTT), disapproved of its members working in the apartheid state of South Africa and threatened not to handle the film in post-production and discipline the crew (Mitchell, 1997, p. 83). Klinger robustly defended his choice of location as the only appropriate one and argued that he should be supported for creating work in a time of crisis within the industry. He also appointed a QC to act for the technicians once they returned to England.¹⁷ Reluctantly, under pressure from some of its own members, the union agreed not to hinder the production.¹⁸

***Gold* – Distribution**

In addition to struggling to raise production finance, Klinger had immense difficulties as an independent in obtaining a distribution agreement, crucial to *Gold*'s financial viability. He first approached British Lion in November 1973 as potential UK distributors, describing *Gold* as a 'British Quota [that] has *Poseidon Adventure* possibilities'¹⁹, a reference to the most successful of the early disaster movies. British Lion's Chief Executive Michael Deeley declined, arguing that the drastic reduction in the British 'cinema market' coupled with rising costs for releasing a picture meant that 'there is only a limited chance of making a profit out of a straight UK deal'.²⁰ Deeley's response reveals much about the domestic market at this point. The Rank Organisation also declined, as did Nat Cohen at Anglo-EMI, but a deal was struck with Hemdale, a relatively new organisation, founded in 1968 by David Hemmings and John Daly. Although Hemmings had left the company in 1970, Hemdale had established itself as an up-and-coming production/distribution company and was ambitious to increase its share of the market. Knowing the pressures on independent producers, Hemdale was able to drive a hard bargain, offering Klinger a guarantee of only £100,000 from the UK market, not the £200,000 he had been seeking.²¹

Negotiating an American distribution deal was equally tortuous. Klinger hired Irvin Shapiro of Films Around the World Inc. in order to tout *Gold* around the Majors. Paramount expressed an interest and its President, Frank Yablans, commented somewhat equivocally: 'the characters tend to be two-dimensional and the story is not original' but 'the mine sequences could work out to be very exciting visually'.²² In the end, Paramount passed on *Gold* and it was the lower-ranking Allied Artists (AA) that finally offered to finance the film. Klinger, disappointed by Shapiro's failure to conclude a deal, had negotiated the arrangement himself at Cannes.



(*Gold* and its makers – left to right: John Hogarth (executive for Hemdale, distributors); Paul Kijzer (sales agent for Avton Films); Michael Klinger (producer and head of Avton Films); Peter Hunt, standing (director); John Daly (co-founder of Hemdale and chief executive; courtesy of Tony Klinger)

Conclusion

Much more could be said about *Gold* – its exhibition, uneven critical reception, visual style, characterization and narrative and its relationship with other British action-adventure films – in all of which Klinger was intimately involved – but for brevity's sake I have limited myself to its production history and what this demonstrates about the acute difficulties producers faced in the 1970s British film industry, an era of acute audience decline and chronic fragmentation where distributors ruled the roost and producers had to be nimble-footed to survive let alone prosper. But I want to conclude by returning to the importance of the producer's role in general terms.

The particularities of the British film industry led John Caughie to conclude: '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 (Caughie, 1986: 200).’ A ‘producer-artist’, of course, is not the same entity as the *auteur* director whose artistry may be recognized through a signature visual style or consistent thematic preoccupations that can be elucidated through the detailed textual interpretation of his or her films. As with most producers, Klinger’s oeuvre was diverse and heterogeneous and would elude such an analysis. On the contrary, understanding a producer’s art, as Vincent Porter argues, lies in appreciating his or her ability to manipulate creatively the complex and interlocking relationship between four key factors: an understanding of public taste – of what subjects and genres could attract a broad audience; the ability to obtain adequate production finance; the understanding of who to use in the key creative roles and on what terms; and the effectiveness of her or his overall control of the production process (Porter, 1983: 179-80). It is inescapably collaborative. The problem in appreciating the ‘art’ of commercial feature film-making is that it is, for the most part, invisible. The critical challenge is to render that art visible by a detailed examination of the production process, understood as encompassing not only the shooting of the film, but also its genesis (as an idea, a script or even a hunch), and also its distribution, marketing and exhibition. This requires considerable efforts of excavation, of archival documentation, as well as analysis. However, without that effort, and without appreciating the cultural and economic significance of the ‘producer-artist’, we are not going to understand the 1970s, or the history of the British film industry in general.

Appendix: Michael Klinger: Filmography

Naked as Nature Intended (1961) pc. Markten/Compass, dis. Compton

That Kind of Girl (1963) pc. Tekli, dis. Compton

The Yellow Teddybears (1963) pc. Tekli, dis. Compton

London in the Raw (1964) pc. Trotwood Productions, dis. Compton

Saturday Night Out (1964) pc. Compton-Tekli, dis. Compton

The Black Torment (1964) pc. Compton-Tekli, dis. Compton

Repulsion (1965) pc. Tekli, dis. Compton

Primitive London (1965) pc. Trotwood Productions, dis. Cinépix Film Properties

A Study in Terror (1965) pc. Compton-Tekli, dis. Compton

The Pleasure Girls (1965) pc. Tekli, dis. Compton

Cul-de-Sac (1966) pc. Compton-Tekli, dis. Compton

Secrets of a Windmill Girl (1966) pc. Searchlight-Markten, dis. Compton

The London Nobody Knows (1967) pc. Norcon, dist. London Films

The Projected Man (1966) pc. MLC, dis. Compton

The Penthouse (1967) pc. Tahiti, dis. Paramount

La Mujer de mi padre/Muhair (The Woman of My Father, 1968) pc. Compton Films International, dis. Haven International Pictures (USA)

Baby Love (1968) pc. Avton, dis. Avco Embassy

Barcelona Kill (1971) pc. Avton, dis. Scotia (West Germany)

Get Carter (1971) pc. MGM-British, dis. MGM-EMI

Pulp (1972) pc. Three Michaels, dis. United Artists

Something to Hide (1972) pc. Avton, dis. Avco Embassy

Rachel's Man (1974) pc. Longlade, dis. Allied Artists

Gold (1974) pc. Avton, dis. Hemdale

Confessions of a Window Cleaner (1974) pc. Swiftdown, dis. Columbia

Confessions of a Pop Performer (1975) pc. Swiftdown, dis. Columbia

Confessions of a Driving Instructor (1976) pc. Swiftdown, dis. Columbia

Shout at the Devil (1976) pc. Tonav Productions, dis. Hemdale

Confessions from a Holiday Camp (1977) pc. Swiftdown, dis. Columbia

Les liens de sang/Blood Relatives (1978) pc. Classic Film Industries/ Cinevideo-Filmel, dis. Filmcorp Productions

Tomorrow Never Comes (1978) pc. Classic Film Industries/Montreal Trust/Neffbourne, dis. Rank

Riding High (1981) pc. Klinger Productions, dis. Enterprise Pictures

The Assassinator (1988), pc. Ice International, dis. Cameo Classics

¹ 'Klinger the Independent', *The Times*, 20 December 1975.

² The Cost of the four 'Confessions of' films was only £3,000,000 but the box-office gross was £22,000,000; Klinger Papers (KP).

³ 'British Film Industry Missing Boat by Emphasizing Insular Pix: Klinger', *Variety*, 17 May 1972; 'Int'l Mkt. Key To British Production's Recovery: Klinger', *Variety*, 26 September 1973.

⁴ 'Ex-Engineer Klinger Film Plans Run to 43 Mil. In Two Yrs.', *Variety*, 5 November 1975.

⁵ Klinger also acquired the rights to *The Sunbird* (1972), *Eagle in the Sky* (1974) and *The Eye of the Tiger* (1975), but was not able to produce any of these.

⁶ Letter to Michael Klinger from Wilbur Smith's solicitors, 13 May 1950; (KP).

⁷ Letter from Peter Stone at MGM-British to Klinger, 3 December 1970; KP.

⁸ Letter from Klinger to Stone, 6 April 1971; KP.

⁹ See the letter from Klinger's solicitor Raffles Edelman to Klinger, 7 August 1973; KP.

¹⁰ There is copy of a contract made with Chadwick Hall for 'rewriting and polishing' the screenplay (KP: 17 September 1973), but I have been unable to unearth any information about this writer.

¹¹ See Cmnd 6372 - *Future of the British Film Industry: Report of the Prime Minister's Working Party* [the Terry Report] (London: HMSO, 1976).

¹² Quoted in Garth Pearce, 'Klinger's crusade – put Britain back into its own big picture', *Daily Express*, 21 January 1977.

¹³ See the covering letter from Edelman, 6 August 1974, and the three agreements with Tony Factor, Dennis Bieber (Soco Properties) and the Ellerine Brothers; KP. The agreements were made with Metropic, Klinger's holding company based, for tax

reasons, in Vaduz, Liechtenstein.

¹⁴ See the letter from London lawyers Fluxman and Partners acting on behalf of the South African financiers, 1 April 1977; KP. The matter dragged on and was the subject of legal proceedings, finally being referred to arbitration in 1981.

¹⁵ Contract, dated 18 January 1974; KP.

¹⁶ Information obtained from an interview with Tony Klinger, 11 June 2008.

¹⁷ Hugh Herbert, 'Will *Gold* bite the dust?', *Guardian*, 24 November 1973.

¹⁸ Mitchell, 1997: 215.

¹⁹ Letter from Klinger to Michael Deeley at British Lion, 23 November 1973; KP.

²⁰ Letter from Deeley to Klinger, 3 December 1973; KP.

²¹ Letter from John Hogarth at Hemdale to Klinger, 16 January 1974; KP.

²² Letter from Yablans to Shapiro, 6 November 1973; KP.

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