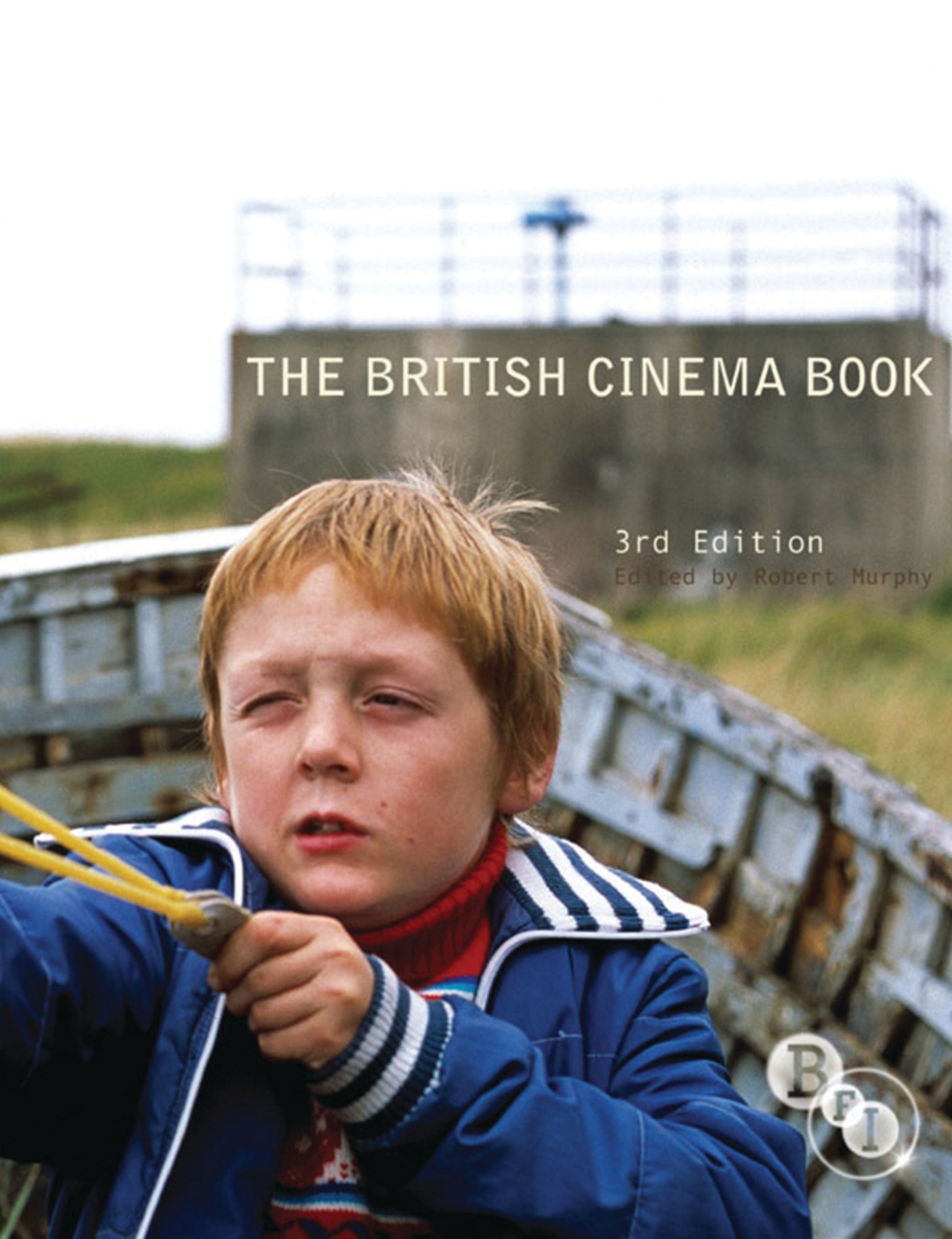
THE BRITISH CINEMA BOOK
3rd Edition
Edited by Robert Murphy
BFI

THE BRITISH CINEMA BOOK

Simon Magus (Noah Taylor) contemplates his lot as outcast and scapegoat (*Simon Magus*, Ben Hopkins, 1999)

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3rd Edition

Edited by Robert Murphy

For Rosie, Urs and Zora Feurer

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Introduction

Robert Murphy

It is over ten years since the first edition of *The British Cinema Book* was published. It was deemed necessary because the teaching of British cinema was becoming widespread and the two collections of essays on the subject, Charles Barr's *All Our Yesterdays* (1986) and Vincent Porter and James Curran's *British Cinema History* (1983), though full of interesting and original essays made no attempt to provide anything like comprehensive coverage of the subject. The last general histories of British cinema, George Perry's *The Great British Picture Show* (1974) and Roy Armes's *A Critical History of British Cinema* (1978) had become dated, and though Sarah Street's *British National Cinema* (1997), and subsequently Amy Sargeant's *British Cinema: A Critical and Interpretive History* (2005), offer useful insights, neither attempt the task of providing a comprehensive history. This is probably impossible now in a single volume; what *The British Cinema Book* attempts to do is to provide introductory essays on a rich variety of topics that together offer an overview of the major issues, history and debates about British cinema.

The choice of essays for the first edition was to some extent determined by who and what was available; back in 1997 British cinema was still a minority interest. By 2001 there had been an upsurge, reflected in the twelve new pieces, which ranged from Jon Burrows's examination of the Stoll Film Company in the 1920s to Steve Chibnall's assessment of the wave of crime films that hit British cinema at the end of the 20th century. In 1997 it would have been difficult to interest more than a very small core of enthusiasts in studio production in the 1920s, or to imagine that British cinema was ever again to attempt to storm the box office with popular genre films. Now the early history of British cinema is celebrated annually at the increasingly popular and prestigious Nottingham Silent Cinema Festival; and the production of low-budget genre films has continued, with Mike Hodges's *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (2003), Shane Meadows's *Dead Man's Shoes* (2004) and Paul Andrew Williams's *London to Brighton* (2006) taking the crime film into more interesting areas and horror enjoying an unexpectedly successful revival.

British cinema seems to be an ever-expanding field and it would have been possible to publish a third edition double the size of the second. New pieces were suggested on Scottish, Irish and Welsh cinema; on films set in London and films set in provincial cities; on actors, directors, art directors, cinematographers, editors, scriptwriters and producers; on music and musicals; on animation; on cinemagoing and audiences. Those that actually materialised concern the rich flowering of British silent films at the end of the 1920s and the surprisingly interesting films of the late 1960s; the representation of women in 1950s cinema and of gay men in mainstream British films; the upsurge of British Asian cinema which began in the 1990s; the phenomenon of British cult cinema and of post-British cinema; and a survey of the new generation of British films and filmmakers that has emerged since the mid-1990s. In several of the existing essays, contributors have inserted 500-word case studies on individual films that exemplify the concerns of their essay. Most of these films are available on DVD (though a few which are not have been included in the hope that they will soon become so).[1]

Enthusiasm for British cinema spilt out into the mainstream in 2007, when the BBC and the Film

Council organised a 'Summer of British Film', the high point of which was a seven-part series, 'British Film Forever'. Ill-informed and dull, it probably prejudiced a generation too young to remember cringing with embarrassment during the 'British Film Year' of 1985. Alex Cox argues that:

> Ten seconds' thought leads you to realise that the BBC and the UK Film Council aren't necessarily interested in British cinema *per se*. As quangos funded by the government, they are obliged to come up with a war-friendly – and essentially mid-Atlantic – version of British film history that suits their paymasters.[2]

Cox might be seeing conspiracy where there is only incompetence, but a worrying decline in standards was very clearly exposed when BBC4 replayed the well-researched 1993 series *Hollywood-UK: British Cinema in the 60s*, where directors, writers and actors rather than B-list celebrities talk about films. It is not as if the knowledge and expertise isn't there: Stuart Maconie's *Cinema Show* (2005–6), tucked away on BBC4, manages to find aspects of British cinema which are unusual and entertaining; and to show how things might have been done, *Arena* showcased *Flames of Passion*, a cogently argued ninety-minute polemic which took Raymond Durgnat's *A Mirror for England* as inspiration and argued that mainstream cinema between 1939 and the early 1960s was visually flamboyant, socially relevant, highly professional and immensely revealing of the society which supported it. The intelligent script, the selection of extracts from rarely seen films, the willingness to develop an argument showed producers John Wyver and Michael Jackson and director Mick Confrey to possess a knowledge of British cinema balefully lacking in most of the contributors to 'British Film Forever'.

Cox's criticisms of the UK Film Council might stem from its lack of enthusiasm for his own projects but that hardly makes them invalid. Unlike the British Film Institute, where troubles – which have multiplied in recent years – are publicly aired, it is not an easy institution to penetrate. Typical New Labour diseases – a fatal confusion of intentions and achievements, of presentation over substance – appear to be at least incipiently present. But skilled public relations have kept at bay the sort of hostile criticism the Arts Council suffered when it handled Lottery funding for film production. Only a brief scurry of indignation over the Film Council's involvement in *Sex Lives of the Potato Men* (2004) has caused any serious embarrassment. Bureaucracies are very good at protecting their backs, but come the next recession when some rising Treasury minister realises how much can be saved by pulling the plug on this seemingly safe little sinecure, the artificial edifice of New British Cinema might well collapse. Hopefully before that happens, a film culture will have been established which will be capable of sustaining a viable industry.

Notes

1. DVDs are best bought new or second-hand from the Amazon 'marketplace', though ebay is also an option. For *Joanna* (1968) and *Deep End* (1971) (and other obscure British films with cultish credentials) go to ZDD (www.zddvisualmedia.com). *The Love Test* (1935), *Dance Hall* (1950) and *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (1957) have not been released on DVD, though they do crop up on television.
2. Alex Cox, 'A Very British Cop-out', *Guardian*, 15 August 2007.

PART ONE

Debates and Controversies

1
The British Cinema: The Known Cinema?

Alan Lovell

> The great French film-maker, François Truffaut, once famously said that there was a certain incompatibility between the words British and Cinema. Well, bollocks to Truffaut.
> Stephen Frears

In the late 1960s I presented a paper, 'The British Cinema: The Unknown Cinema', to a British Film Institute seminar group. Its starting point was a suggestion that scholarly neglect of the British cinema was so great that it was effectively an unknown cinema. A lot has changed since then. Today, British film scholars can hardly be accused of neglecting their national cinema. In the space of thirty-five years we moved from scarcity to abundance. There are now available solid histories of the British cinema; detailed explorations of British genre film-making; analyses of important historical 'moments'; critical examinations of influential film-makers; wide-ranging anthologies; informed discussions of the economic and cultural context of current British film-making; informative accounts of Welsh and Scottish film-making.

Inevitably, there are still gaps. My priorities for further investigation would be: the contribution of cameramen, editors, sound recordists, set and costume designers, special effects – and of their union, ACT (later ACTT, now BECTU); British film acting, especially the rich late 1940s and early 50s tradition of female acting represented by Kathleen Byron, Googie Withers, Joan Greenwood, Pamela Brown, Jean Simmons and Deborah Kerr; and the historical development of British film audiences, including a detailed account of film exhibition.[1]

Despite these gaps, increasing critical interest has meant that the British cinema now exists as an object for study. Its contours, at least, are visible. Undoubtedly this is a substantial achievement. But what are the consequences of this work? How is the British cinema now perceived?

It is certainly perceived more positively. If you engage in a substantial act of critical recovery/discovery, you need some belief in the value of what you are doing. When I wrote this chapter, British film criticism showed strong signs of that built-in antipathy to 'things British' which George Orwell complained of.[2] The basic perspective was Marxist, with modern capitalism portrayed as being heavily dependent on the effects of ideology for maintaining its dominance. Cinema was seen as a major ideological institution and realism the form through which it sought to 'naturalise' capitalism.

But as Raymond Williams points out in *Keywords*, realism has a variety of meanings, some of which are contradictory.[3] It's a particularly difficult term to pin down in the context of the British cinema because definitions tend to be casual and operational rather than sustained and reflective. To encourage a more sympathetic and detailed interest in realism, I'll offer a sketch of its historical development.

In what sense were the documentary film-makers of the 1930s realists? They were realists because they believed it was the purpose of art to provide a true understanding of the world. Art had therefore to be socially responsible, it had to have a serious relationship with society. This general belief was given a more specific character by a belief in the 'heroism of modern life', a heroism which was principally located in the activities of working people.[4] Art could best provide a 'true understanding' if it focused on those activities.

Artistically, this second belief is important because it pushes artists towards naturalism, which I take to be a commitment to the importance of describing surface appearances.

The belief in social responsibility has been enormously influential on the British cinema. It is most often articulated in terms of the cinema having a serious relationship with society. As such its acceptance runs pretty much without challenge through the history of the British cinema from the 1930s to the 1990s. Its power can be seen in its acceptance by the film-makers and critics of the *Screen* generation, despite their claim to be 'anti-realists'.

The belief that cinema ought to have a serious relationship with society was one of the clearest motivations for strengthening the presence of realism in feature film-making in the early 1940s. The commitment to describing the heroism of everyday life was made easy by the war, but revealing the underlying forces of social change hardly seemed relevant when what mattered was winning the war.

In pre-war documentaries like *Coal Face* (1935), heroism was expressed through a formalist concern with visual composition and the use of sound. Increasingly, the documentarists came to think that this formalism was inappropriate. They felt it made the films remote, cutting them off from desired audiences. A preference for naturalistic description began to shape films. *Night Mail* (1936), with its awkward mixture of naturalism and formalism, marks this change very well.

A successful naturalistic representation depends heavily on the ability to convince audiences that what is being represented has been accurately observed. Because of the demands of manual work and the nature of the cinema, the documentarists found it easy to represent manual work convincingly. They didn't find it so easy to represent informal, personal relationships. *Night Mail* is again a good example. The representation is convincing when the men are deftly sorting the letters because they are sufficiently absorbed to ignore the film-makers. But when they are chatting and joking, they are clearly aware of the presence of the film-makers and their banter is awkwardly self-conscious.

Realist feature films faced similar problems. *In Which We Serve* (1942) is impressively convincing when it represents the ordinary seamen in action. When it represents their personal life, the conviction disappears. The problems are most evident in the dialogue, which is constructed around ungrammatical forms and catch-phrases giving the characters a 'quaint' quality. The actors add to the problems. In speaking the dialogue, they make frequent shifts between working-class and middle-class articulations. The overall effect is to patronise characters and/or make them comic.

Whatever the problems, realism clearly was a creative force in wartime feature film-making. In particular, *In Which We Serve* and *'Fires Were Started –'* (1943) seem to me to be films any national cinema could be proud of. But the creative impact of realism was closely tied to the war. In the post-war British cinema, its creative impact diminished. The belief that films should have a serious relationship with society was increasingly reduced to the exploration of topical subjects from within a conventional moral/social perspective. Naturalistic description became limited to scripts based on the lives of 'ordinary' people plus location shooting.

As a strong, creative presence, realism was not revived until the second half of the 1950s, when the Free Cinema writers and film-makers (Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson) reaffirmed realist beliefs. In his essay 'Get Out and Push!', Anderson incisively criticised liberal critics and artists for their irresponsibility and frivolity. He also argued for the urgency and importance of providing convincing representations of working-class life.[5]

Anderson's arguments were influential and played an important part in re-energising British film-making. His work was supported by the emergence of new writers (Alan Sillitoe, David Storey, Shelagh Delaney) and new actors (Rachel Roberts, Albert Finney, Richard Harris, Rita Tushingham) who, for a variety of reasons, were better able to cope with the demands of representing working-class life.[6]

For all its energy, this 'kitchen sink' realism was a short-lived and limited phenomenon. If we date its beginning to the production of *Room at the Top* in 1958, it was pretty much over by 1965. In fact, the dominance of realism was even more attenuated than this suggests. After *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), Karel Reisz directed *Night Must Fall* (1964), an adaptation of a 1930s stage thriller/melodrama. He followed this with an adaptation of David Mercer's surrealistic fantasy, *Morgan, A Suitable Case for Treatment* (1966). Lindsay Anderson's first feature, *This Sporting Life* (1963), has obvious Expressionist elements. Tony Richardson's first three films, *Look Back in Anger* (1959), *The Entertainer* (1960) and *A Taste of Honey* (1961), showed realist impulses, particularly through location-shooting, but all three were based on successful stage plays.

However, realism was not abandoned. Rather, it changed its form. In the late 1950s Brecht's work increasingly had an impact on British artistic culture. Crucially Brecht was a realist without being a naturalist – he believed that it was art's job to provide a 'true understanding' but he didn't believe this could be achieved through a description of the surfaces of life. The encouragement his work gave to a move from naturalism was supported by the influence of surrealism, which was also prevalent at that time.[7]

Lindsay Anderson's work clearly reveals both these forces at work – surrealism in *If . . . .* (1968), Brecht in *O Lucky Man!* (1973). The same processes can be seen at work in television drama. Dennis Potter's 'Nigel Barton' plays (1965) are strongly marked by the influence of Brecht. David Mercer moved from the naturalistic drama of the *Where the Difference Begins* trilogy (1961–3) to the surrealist-influenced *A Suitable Case for Treatment* (1962).

It can be argued that realism with a strong naturalistic dimension survived in series and serial television forms, from *Z Cars* (1962–78) and *Coronation Street* (1960–) to *Between the Lines* (1992–4) and *Brookside* (1982–2003). In terms of the British cinema, Ken Loach has been a distinctive figure because of his commitment to maintaining realism as a viable artistic form by modernising it. To achieve this, he used the advances in camerawork and sound made possible by the cinéma-vérité movement. He also addressed the problems posed by acting for naturalistic realism in a radical way, using little-known or non-professional actors and only giving them pages of the script on a day-by-day basis in order to keep them fresh. But perhaps his greatest commitment has been the reaffirmation of the critical dimension of realism by giving it a Marxist perspective.[8]

The strongest positive thrust from the new scholarship has been an attempt to validate 'anti-realist' film-making. Contemporary scholars have explored areas of film-making represented by Hammer horror films, Gainsborough melodramas and the *Carry On* comedies. Julian Petley outlines this position very clearly in his essay 'The Lost Continent':

> Of course, the vaunting and valorising of certain British films on account of their 'realism' entails as its corollary, as the other side of the coin, the dismissal and denigration of those films deemed un- or non-realist . . . These form another, repressed side of British cinema, a dark, disdained thread weaving the length and breadth of that cinema, crossing authorial and generic boundaries, sometimes almost entirely invisible, sometimes erupting explosively, always received critically with fear and disapproval.[9]

Dilute surrealism?: Dawn Archibald as the witch woman in Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* (1984)

The work that has been done in this area has been invaluable in calling attention to films and film-makers which have languished for too long without proper critical attention. If the claims made for them were persuasive, then a new and interesting account of the British cinema would have been constructed. Unfortunately the case for the anti-realist genres has been much weakened by its dependence for its sense of value on a 'dilute Surrealism'. Effectively, surrealism has operated as a form of easy genre-valuing, privileging the 'excess' of horror films, melodrama and low comedy as against the oppressiveness of realism.

The treatment of melodrama first alerted me to the weakness of the case. I remember preparing for a course on British cinema by reading the plot summaries of all the films made in 1946–7. What appeared to be a melodramatic current stood out. Many films seemed to be marked by extravagant plotting and characterisation. The dramatic forces which shaped the dramas were emotional and large-scale, the fictional worlds marked by erotic cruelty, violence and perverse relationships. I thought I had uncovered an extraordinary and disturbing area of British cinema.

Seeing the films proved a huge disappointment. I quickly become aware of how the elements which had interested me were downplayed and made safe by the writing, camerawork, acting and direction. I shouldn't

have been surprised. As contemporary scholars are fond of pointing out, British cinema has been heavily marked by qualities like good taste, restraint, reticence. Why should melodramas (or horror films or comedies) be free of these characteristics? Gavin Lambert sensibly remarked that he found it difficult to take *The Wicked Lady* (1945) seriously because its notion of wickedness was so suburban!

I think contemporary scholarship has fallen into a trap by posing excess and restraint against each other. British cinema is often most exciting when restraint and excess interact with each other. *Brief Encounter* (1945) provides a classic example of what can be achieved when the interaction takes place, and of the problems created when one dominates the other. The film is structured around Laura's monologue, which dramatically explores a struggle to use language to contain powerful, disruptive emotion. That may seem a simple operation, so it is easy to miss the art involved in making it work. Noël Coward's language appears simple, almost banal. But, through the use of varying sentence rhythms, it supports and encourages a performer to capture both restraint and excess. Similarly the railway station evokes both the 'ordinariness' of a branch-line station and the 'adventure' of train journeys.

In other parts of the film, the film-makers aren't able to create a successful interaction between restraint

It Always Rains on Sunday (Robert Hamer, 1947)

It Always Rains on Sunday provides some excellent examples of the strengths of the British cinema of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Acting was a particular strength of that era. *It Always Rains on Sunday* is graced with a number of fine performances. Googie Withers, in the central role, works within the restrained style that was dominant in the period. She gives the central character of the wife hiding an escaped convict an intense presence with a disciplined and consistent performance. It's all the more impressive in that the script doesn't always help her – some of the exchanges with her daughters are clumsily written. Working within the same style, Betty Ann Davies gives a similar intensity to the character of the betrayed wife. There are also some strong male performances. Those of John Slater and Sidney Tafler, as the 'spiv' and the errant husband, use a broad, expressive style – one that has roots in popular entertainment – to give their characters vivid and engaging presences.

Realism is usually cited as a central strength of the British cinema and *It Always Rains on Sunday* is frequently discussed within this context. With the benefit of hindsight, this seems misleading. There is, in fact, a creative tension between realism and Expressionism in the film. On location the night streets are uncannily empty with dark shadows and pools of soft, diffused light disguising their everydayness. The final sequences, which were filmed on location, are shot expressively rather than realistically; and in the climactic scene in the railway yard the geography of the setting is sacrificed in order to heighten the dramatic action.

Apart from the final chase sequences, a limited number of scenes are set in actual locations, and these are often incidental. The central action, the hiding of the fugitive, takes place in a set, the Sandigates' house. The design of this set (and other interiors), rather than realistic backgrounds, is one of the strengths of the film. There's an excellent use of compressed space with the smallness and proximity of the rooms emphasised. Privacy is difficult to find, which makes the hiding of the fugitive much more fraught. The credit for this obviously belongs to the art director, Duncan Sutherland; his achievement highlights production design as another of the strengths of the post-war British cinema, with the work of Alfred Junge, Vincent Korda and John Bryan being some of the best-known examples.

Robert Hamer undoubtedly brought a distinctive sensibility to *It Always Rains on Sunday*, but the tendency to see Hamer (along with a few others like Alexander Mackendrick and Michael Powell) as exceptions to a general mediocrity and detach the films he directed from the main body of British cinema is mistaken. As is evident from the acting, art direction, cinematography and other aspects of *It Always Rains on Sunday*, the quality of these films depends on effective collaboration and is more the result of an industry ethos than an individual talent.

FURTHER READING

John W. Collier, *A Film in the Making* (London: World Film Publications, 1947).

Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'* (London: Routledge 2000).

and excess. Alec, the other central character, is weak because his emotional situation is poorly defined. Little information is given about his relationship with his wife and he doesn't have the resources of interior monologue to express his feelings. As far as locations are concerned, David Lean and Robert Krasker are unable to generate images of either the countryside or small-town life which have the dramatic power of the railway station.

The creative interaction between excess and restraint can often be seen in films directed by Michael Powell. In *The Small Back Room* (1949) the hero, Sammy Rice, has an artificial leg that gives him great pain, which he tries to ignore. As he sits in an underground train with his girlfriend Susan, the pain is so great that he stands up to be more comfortable. Standing in a crowded train, Susan and Sammy are forced to become more physically intimate. Responding to his pain, she embraces him. The scene now gains an extra charge as the experience of pain produces a physical expression of sympathy with an erotic undertone. This charged feeling is carried over by a dissolve to the entrance to Sammy's flat, where the couple's physical intimacy is heightened by big close-ups of their faces in soft light with deep shadows as they embrace and kiss. The erotic feeling heightens as Susan takes off her coat and they embrace on the sofa. The erotic intensity that has been slowly built up is dispersed by a phone call asking Sammy to investigate a bomb explosion.

British cinema is often most exciting when restraint and excess interact: Kathleen Byron and David Farrar, *The Small Back Room* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1949)

I have deliberately introduced Michael Powell into my discussion because he has been a key figure in the critical attempt to construct a British anti-realist cinema. Undoubtedly the renewed interest in Powell has revealed a substantial film-maker. However, I believe his work has been treated in an uncritical way which hasn't helped the anti-realist case. For example, film criticism which has been otherwise alert to questions of national identity has been indulgent of the complacent and reactionary version of English identity dramatised in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) and *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946). Film criticism which has been alert to questions of class and gender has been indulgent of the snobbery and misogyny present in *Peeping Tom* (1960). The Powell/Pressburger partnership has never been critically scrutinised. The scripts of their films often have obvious weaknesses. Narrative development is uncertain, central characters thinly drawn, the comedy insubstantial and the whimsy irritating. Can we blame Emeric Pressburger for these faults or is the responsibility a collective one?

One of the most interesting areas of new scholarship has been the attempt to construct a case against a Thatcherite free-market approach to film production. It draws heavily on the way British films are thought to have constructed national identity, and has been put most sympathetically and intelligently by John Hill. Recognising the difficult economics of British film production, Hill argues that the case for government support has to be based on cultural grounds. It is necessary to establish that films play a valuable role in British society. For Hill, that value can be established through attention to the way films construct national identity. He points out that most of the scholarship which has explored this issue has been unsympathetic to the way films have done this. It has seen the identity they have produced as 'narrowly nationalist or else in hock to a restricted homogenising view . . .'.[10] He goes on to argue that this doesn't have to be so; a positive case for the British cinema can be made on its potential for constructing national identity:

> . . . it is quite possible to conceive of a national cinema, in the sense of one which works with or addresses nationally specific materials, which is none the less critical of inherited notions of national identity, which does not assume the existence of a unique, unchanging 'national culture', and which is capable of dealing with social divisions and differences.[11]

Hill's support for this possibility depends on a rather guarded affirmation of 1980s independent cinema, as represented by films like *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986). He suggests that films like these provide a more acceptable construction of national identity. Why they should be able to do this isn't explained. I suspect that beneath a sophisticated

Vera Drake (Mike Leigh, 2004)

In the fifty years between the making of *Vera Drake* and that of *It Always Rains on Sunday* the character of British film-making changed dramatically. That change is usually seen in terms of decline – fewer films, tiny budgets, limited audiences. However, these changes did have some positive consequences. Crucially, an interesting production area emerged, created out of a mix of television companies, state funding bodies and the film industry proper. The support they provided made it possible for some film-makers to work consistently and with a great degree of creative freedom. Mike Leigh is one of those film-makers.

The advantages for Leigh are most obvious because of the way it allows him to work with actors. Influenced by the work of John Cassavetes and Peter Brook in cinema and theatre, Leigh tries to make the gap between the actor and the script as small as possible. His actors are substantially involved in the creation of the script. As is well known, before the script is written Leigh works with the actors and, through a combination of research and improvisation, characters are developed. At the end of the process, Leigh uses this work to write the script.

Vera Drake is a stark, gripping drama of how unwanted pregnancies were dealt with in a society with strong class divisions – Britain in the early 1950s. It's a fine demonstration of what can be achieved in the new production structure. As might be expected, the acting is at the core of the film's achievement. In both major and minor parts it's of a consistently high quality. The basic style is low-key naturalism. Actors establish their characters by lightly emphasising the aspects of everyday behaviour – facial expression, posture, movement, tone of voice – they think appropriate. Because of their knowledge of the characters they can make these choices with confidence and sensitivity. The way Imelda Staunton establishes Vera through quick, busy movements, frequent smiles and a sympathetic tone of voice, is a perfect example of this.

Happy family life:
Imelda Staunton and Daniel Mays in *Vera Drake*

Large demands are made on the actors because of the way *Vera Drake* is structured. The narrative is made up of a series of vignettes. By using this form Leigh is able to create a detailed and varied social world. But if the vignette form is to work every detail has to be significant. And since most of the vignettes consist of simple interactions between a few characters, the actors carry the burden of making a scene significant. (They do receive excellent support, especially from Jacqueline Durran's costumes and John Bush's set decoration).

Vera Drake is particularly powerful because it is free from the unevenness often present in Mike Leigh's work. In other films, characters who are conceived and acted naturalistically combine uneasily with characters who are conceived and played with comic exaggeration. There are hints of comic exaggeration in *Vera Drake* (the daughter, Ethel, and some of the middle-class characters), but overall the writing and acting are impressively disciplined and consistent.

FURTHER READING

Michael Coveney, *The World According to Mike Leigh* (London: HarperCollins, 1997).

Mike Leigh, 'The *Vera Drake* Interview', *Sight and Sound*, January 2005, pp. 12–15.

surface, a simple critical position is evident – good films are ideologically sympathetic, bad films are ideologically unsympathetic. Since good (ideologically sympathetic) films can't be made within a market framework, there needs to be government intervention. I don't think this is a strong case either intellectually or politically.

The problems generated by this kind of discussion and possible ways out of them have been illuminated by a critical exchange in *Sight and Sound*. In a review of *Braveheart* (1995), Colin McArthur attacked the film for its reactionary account of Scottish national identity. The attack was based on an intelligently detailed account of the way 'regressive discourses' shaped the film. For McArthur these discourses are of an ideological kind – he talks about the film's 'ideological project' and in a reply to critics says that *Braveheart* has to deliver 'an ideological framework conducive to a mass audience'. He doesn't try to explain *Braveheart*'s success with audiences.

McArthur's critics, Sheldon Hall and Martin Price, both point out that a proper understanding of the relationship between *Braveheart* and its audiences can be better achieved through a discussion of artistic issues like genre and identification rather than political ones of national identity.[12] I am sympathetic to their position because I think they open up ways of dealing with a film's popularity with audiences.

Colin McArthur's and John Hill's position is fundamentally a realist one. Films should be judged by the way they provide 'true understanding' – for Hill, an expanded version of Britishness through a sensitivity to social difference; for McArthur, a historically accurate account of Scottish history. I don't think a satisfactory account of how films interact with their audiences can be developed from such an assumption. It's much too limiting and blocks off a proper discussion of entertainment in the cinema.[13]

This persistent linking of British film production with the question of national identity is odd. It has run through discussion of the British cinema for much of its history. That such a link exists is, at one level, a truism – any activity engaged in by British citizens can be seen as a way of constructing national identity. In discussions of British cinema it is taken for granted both that the link exists and that it is a politically important one – it often seems as if the cinema is the key tool for the construction of British national identity. At present, the belief in the importance of the link seems to depend heavily on the unacknowledged acceptance of the old view of the cinema as having magical powers of expression.

A few years ago, a teaching experience encouraged me to reflect on my attitudes to the British cinema. I saw *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* along with *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) and *Breathless* (1959) as part of a day school for students. Most of those students hadn't been born when any of the films were made and knew little about them. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was the one they most enjoyed. It had a simplicity and directness which was very attractive. In comparison *Rebel without a Cause* seemed sentimental and overwrought and *Breathless* clever-clever.

The students' response made me think how much British cinema had been underrated. My view was strengthened by Stephen Frears's robust affirmation of British cinema in his television documentary 'Typically British'.[14]

Frears's enthusiasm is surely justified. At the very least, a cinema which can produce films as varied as *The 39 Steps* (1935), *'Fires Were Started –'*, *Black Narcissus* (1947), *Henry V* (1944), *It Always Rains on Sunday*, *The Ladykillers* (1955), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *If . . . .*, *Kes* (1969), *Withnail and I* (1986), *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988), *Trainspotting* (1996), and *Vera Drake* deserves celebration. Arguments can be made that comparable cinemas like the French or Italian have, over their whole history, been superior to the British cinema but the differences are only relative ones. British cinema isn't a special case. There isn't some fundamental British cinematic deficiency which needs to be accounted for. Bollocks to Truffaut indeed!

Notes

1. A start has been made with Duncan Petrie's *The British Cinematographer* (London: BFI, 1995); Roy Perkins and Martin Stollery, *British Film Editors: 'The Heart of the Movie'* (London: BFI, 2004); and the BECTU Oral History Project.
2. See, for example, Victor Perkins, 'The British Cinema', *Movie* no. 1, 1962; Tom Nairn, 'Deceased at the Paramount Cinema Piccadilly – The British Cinema', *Cinema* vol. 3, June 1969; Thomas Elsaesser, 'Between Style and Ideology', *Monogram* vol. 3, 1972.
3. Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Flamingo, 1976), pp. 257–62. See also Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953).
4. The phrase is Baudelaire's but I've taken it from Linda Nochlin's book *Realism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).
5. 'Get Out and Push!' was published in the Angry Young Man anthology: Tom Maschler (ed.), *Declaration* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1957).

6. A comparison between Googie Withers in *It Always Rains on Sunday* and Rachel Roberts in *This Sporting Life* is instructive. Both actresses give their characters a hard edge by limiting their expressiveness. The combination of the characters' hardness and the actresses' erotic physical presence makes the characters vivid and distinctive. In contrast to Rachel Roberts, Googie Withers's performance is partially undermined by her delivery of dialogue, which consistently has middle-class articulations.
7. Surrealism influenced British pop music of the period, especially in the work of the Beatles. Its principal conduit was the art schools. David Mercer was originally an art student.
8. It is a mark of the political limitations of much contemporary film scholarship that a book about the contemporary British cinema – *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started* (1993) – had substantial discussions of Peter Greenaway's work and none of Ken Loach's. The new edition of the book (London: Wallflower Press, 2006) does include a chapter on Loach's work.
9. Julian Petley, 'The Lost Continent', in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1986).
10. John Hill, 'The Issue of National Cinema and British Film Production', in Duncan Petrie (ed.), *New Questions of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 15.
11. Ibid., p. 16.
12. Colin McArthur's review of *Braveheart* is in *Sight and Sound*, September 1995. Sheldon Hall's letter is in *Sight and Sound*, October 1995. Martin Price's letter with Colin McArthur's reply to both critics is in *Sight and Sound*, February 1996.
13. Film criticism has relied for too long on Richard Dyer's discussion of the issue in 'Entertainment and Utopia', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985). This was a brave attempt but its flaws are now obvious, particularly its failure to confront the art/entertainment distinction.
14. 'Typically British' (BFI TV) was first broadcast on Channel 4 on 2 September 1995. Frears could not have made his case without the benefit of our new knowledge of the British cinema. It is no accident that one of the writers of the programme was Charles Barr, who has probably done most to develop the new study of British cinema.

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2

British Cinema as National Cinema: Production, Audience and Representation

John Hill

Following the Oscar-winning success of *Chariots of Fire* (1981) on 23 March 1982, the film was re-released and showed successfully across Britain in the weeks that followed. On 2 April, the Argentinians invaded the Falklands/Malvinas and, three days later, the Thatcher government despatched a naval task force from Portsmouth which successfully retook the islands in June. In a sense, the coincidence of Oscar-winning success in Los Angeles and subsequent military victory in the Falklands seemed to link the two events, and the idea of a national resurgence in both cinema ('the British are coming') and national life became intertwined. Indeed, Hugo Young reports that David Puttnam, the producer of *Chariots of Fire*, was a subsequent guest of the Prime Minister's at Chequers and that there was 'much talk in the Thatcher circle about the desirability of something similar being put on to celluloid to celebrate the Falklands victory'.[1]

There are, however, two factors which complicate this story. Despite its reputation, *Chariots of Fire* is a more complex work than is commonly suggested. Indeed, a film which is reputedly so nationalist is surprisingly conscious of the complexities of national allegiance, focusing as it does on the running careers of two 'outsiders': Harold Abrahams, a Jew of Lithuanian background, and Eric Liddell, a Scotsman born in China. If *Chariots of Fire* did become identified with renascent national sentiment, then this was probably not so much the result of the ideological outlook that the film itself manifests as of the moment at which its success was achieved. The other complicating factor is that when the film was re-released it was as a part of a double bill with *Gregory's Girl* (1980). While this double bill was undoubtedly intended to showcase the range of new British cinema, there is also something a touch subversive in the way these films were coupled. For while both are British, they also represent rather different kinds of British cinema.

Chariots of Fire, at a cost of £3 million, was a comparatively expensive film for British cinema in 1980. And although it was strongly identified with 'Britishness' it was actually funded from foreign sources, including Hollywood. *Gregory's Girl*, by contrast, cost only about £200,000 and was financed from domestic sources, including the National Film Finance Corporation and Scottish Television. A clear contrast in formal approach is also apparent. Despite some play with temporal relations, *Chariots of Fire* employs a relatively straightforward narrative structure, organised around goal-oriented action and positive heroes. *Gregory's Girl* opts for a much looser, more episodic form in which surface realism, comedy and domesticated surrealism are combined in a way which successfully fuses British comic traditions with a modernist sensibility. These differences also extend to content. While *Chariots of Fire* is focused on the past, *Gregory's Girl* is resolutely of the present. The version of the past which *Chariots of Fire* constructs, moreover, is strongly identified with the English upper classes and male achievement, while *Gregory's Girl* is set among the suburban middle and working classes and gently subverts conventional stereotypes of male and female roles. And if both films are 'British', *Chariots* is very much an 'English' film whereas *Gregory's Girl* is clearly 'Scottish'.

Chariots of Fire (Hugh Hudson, 1981) focused on the past and strongly identified with the English upper classes

While both films are, at least partly, set in Scotland, there is a significant difference in the representations of Scotland which they provide. *Chariots of Fire* tends to look at Scotland from the outside (or rather from the metropolitan English centre), associating it with the 'natural' and the 'primitive'. *Gregory's Girl*, on the other hand, uses the 'new town' of Cumbernauld to avoid the conventional signifiers of 'Scottishness' and, in doing so, suggests an altogether more complex sense of contemporary Scottish identity. This, in turn, has links to what might be characterised as the films' different modes of cultural address. *Chariots*, with its enthusiasm for the past and links with conventional notions of English 'national heritage', offers an image of Britain that generally conforms to the expectations of an international, and especially American, audience. *Gregory's Girl* is a much more obviously local and idiomatic film. It too has an international appeal, but for an audience more likely to be European than American. And while *Chariots of Fire* is conventionally taken to be the landmark in the revival of British cinema, it may in fact be *Gregory's Girl* which provided the more reliable indicator of the way in which British film-making was developing.

Production

In the 1980s British cinema returned to the position in which it found itself in the 1920s when the government first introduced a quota for British films. In 1925 some 10 per cent of films exhibited in British cinemas were British; by 1926 this had dropped to 5 per cent.[2] The bulk of films shown were, of course, from the US. Following the abolition of the quota in 1983, the percentage of British films on British screens dwindled to similar proportions. Thus in 1992 the US had a 92.5 per cent share of the British exhibition market while British films accounted for only 4 per cent.[3]

The responses to US domination that have been available to the production sector of the British film industry in the 1980s and 90s are, however, different from those of the 1920s. In his essay on the conceptualisation of national cinemas, Stephen Crofts identifies a number of strategies available to national cinema production. For the British cinema the most important are what he describes as the imitation of Hollywood, competition with Hollywood in domestic markets, and differentiation from Hollywood.[4] The imitation of Hollywood involves the attempt to beat Hollywood at its own game, a strategy which has been tried at various junctures in the history of British cinema: by Alexander Korda in the 1930s, by Rank in the 1940s, by EMI in the 1970s and by Goldcrest in the 1980s. Given the competitive advantage which Hollywood enjoys over other national industries by virtue of its scale of production, size of domestic market and international distribution and exhibition network (among other factors), this has proved an economically unviable strategy and, despite some success with individual films, all such attempts have resulted in financial disaster. It is therefore the second, competitive strategy that has constituted the mainstay of British cinema.

As a result of the quota (and, later, some additional forms of state support), the existence of a commercial British cinema which did not compete with Hollywood internationally but only in the domestic market proved possible from the 1930s to – just about – the 1970s. The basis of this cinema, however, was a size of audience sufficient to sustain a domestic film industry. As cinema audiences began to decline, especially from the 1950s, the commercial viability of a cinema aimed primarily at British audiences came under threat. As a result, regular British film production (characteristically popular genre film-making) aimed at the domestic market came to a virtual halt after the 1970s when Hammer horror, the *Carry On*s and the

Confessions films all ceased to be produced. While it had previously been possible for British films to recoup their costs on the home market, this became an exception from the 1970s onwards. Only a minority of British films achieved a domestic gross of over £1 million during the 1980s, and even an apparently popular success such as *Buster*, which grossed £3.7 million in 1988, failed to recover its production cost of £3.2 million from British box-office revenues (given that only a fraction of these actually returns to the producer).

In consequence, the place of British cinema within the international film economy has had to change. Writing in 1969, Alan Lovell argued that, unlike its European counterparts, the British cinema had failed to develop an art cinema (or at any rate that the documentary film had served in its place).[5] During the 1980s, however, it was art cinema which was to become the predominant model of British film-making. The category of 'art cinema' is not, of course, a precise one and it is used here in a relatively generous sense. David Bordwell, for example, has attempted to define 'art cinema' as a distinctive 'mode of film practice' characterised by realism, authorial expressivity and ambiguity.[6] His definition, however, is too tied to the 1960s and fails to do justice to the range of textual strategies employed by art cinema in the 1980s and 90s. Thus, in the case of Britain, the category of art cinema may be seen to include not only the 'realism' of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh and the post-modern aesthetic experiments of Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway, but also the aesthetically conservative 'heritage' cinema of Merchant Ivory. In this last case, the 'art' of 'art cinema' derives not so much from the authorial presence of the director or the distance from classical narrational and stylistic techniques which such films display, as from the cachet of 'high art' which such films borrow from literary or theatrical sources.

For Crofts, art cinema is the prime example of a national cinema avoiding direct competition with Hollywood by targeting a distinct market sector. This model, he argues, aims 'to differentiate itself textually from Hollywood, to assert explicitly or implicitly an indigenous product, and to reach domestic and export markets through those specialist distribution channels and exhibition venues usually called arthouse'.[7] In this respect, the adoption of aesthetic strategies and cultural referents different from Hollywood also involves a certain foregrounding of 'national' credentials. The oft-noted irony of this, however, is that art cinema then achieves much of its status as national cinema by circulating internationally rather than nationally. While this means that art cinema (as in the case of Greenaway) may be as economically viable as ostensibly more commercial projects aimed at the 'popular' audience, it is also the case that successful British films have often done better outside Britain than within. A notorious example of this was Ken Loach's *Riff-Raff* which, at the time it won the European Film Award for Best Film in 1991, had been seen by more people in France than in the UK. Even in the case of the heritage film, it is international audiences, especially American, which have become a key source of revenues as well as prestige. As a result, it has become an attractive option to open such films in the United States before a release in Britain, as was the case, for example, with both *The Madness of King George* (1994) and *Sense and Sensibility* (1995).

In both these cases – the cinéma d'auteur which circulates in Europe and the heritage film which appeals to the US – it can be argued that the changed economic circumstances of the British film industry have led to a certain decline of 'national' cinema, insofar as the national address which earlier commercial British cinema appeared to have is no longer so evident. In this respect, much of the lamenting of the current state of the British film industry registers a sense of loss of the connection which it is assumed the British cinema once had with a national popular audience. There is a further twist to this argument, however. For, if the decline in domestic cinema audiences has made British film production increasingly dependent upon international revenues, it has also increased its reliance on television for revenues and production finance as well. The

Gregory's Girl (Bill Forsyth, 1980): gently subverting stereotypes of male and female roles

increasing interrelationship between film and television which has resulted has had consequences for how film is consumed, and for the way it may be judged to be 'national'.

Audience

The changing character of British cinema in the 1980s may be explained, then, in terms of the new production strategies that emerged in the wake of declining cinema audiences. In 1946, annual cinema admissions reached an all-time high of 1,635 million, but then fell steadily until 1984, when they plummeted to 58 million. There has been a subsequent increase – admissions reached over 123 million in 1994, but this is still less than for any year before 1974. It is these figures that provide the backdrop to perceptions of cinema's declining national role. For if the British cinema of World War II is still regarded as a watershed in national cinema, it is not only as a result of the films which were then made but because of the size of the cinema audience which attended them. In 1940, admissions topped 1,000 million for the first time when, partly because of a lack of alternatives, films were the most popular form of entertainment. In this respect, wartime cinema is regarded as pre-eminently 'national', because of the size and range of its audience.

Even at its peak, however, the cinema audience was never fully representative of the nation. A survey of the British cinema audience in 1943, for example, revealed that 30 per cent of the population didn't go to the cinema at all, and that certain social groups were more likely to attend the cinema than others.[8] Women went to the cinema more than men, the manual working class and lower middle class went more frequently than managerial and professional groups, town-dwellers more than country-dwellers. Most strikingly of all, the cinema audience was characteristically made up of the young rather than the old: the under-45s accounted for 85 per cent of the cinema audience but only 68 per cent of the overall population. Cinemagoing declined significantly with age, and 60 per cent of the over-65s are reported as never going to the cinema at all. The 'national' audience for British films, even during the 'golden age' of British cinema, was neither as homogeneous nor as socially representative of the nation as is sometimes assumed.

Audience factors are also relevant when considering the subsequent decline of the cinema. If the cinema audience has become a smaller proportion of the overall population and cinemagoing no longer occupies the central place in leisure activities it once did, the social character of the audience and its cinema-watching habits have also changed.[9] Cinemagoing has become even more heavily concentrated among the young, particularly the 15–34 age group, which accounted for 78 per cent of cinema attendances in 1990 (but represented only 37 per cent of the population). By comparison, only 11 per cent of the over-45s attended the cinema despite representing 46 per cent of the population. The class basis of cinemagoing has also altered. Cinemagoing is no longer a predominantly working-class activity, and in 1990 social classes ABC1 accounted for 59 per cent of cinemagoers (while representing 42 per cent of the population).[10] One explanation for this is the growth of multiplexes, which since 1985 have been responsible for reviving the cinemagoing habit, especially among car-owners.[11] Multiplexes have also made the cinema more attractive to women, who, following a decline in attendance in the 1950s, have accounted for about 50 per cent of the cinema audience in the 1990s. From the 1950s onwards, the working-class cinema audience has been in decline and has been replaced by an increasingly young and more affluent audience; this reflects more general trends in cinemagoing which have seen an increase in the importance of the 15–24 age group (estimated to be as much as 80 per cent of the worldwide cinema audience for English-language films).[12] This audience demography is clearly significant for national cinema: what is most popular at the cinemas is not necessarily popular with a fully representative section of the 'nation', but only with a relatively narrow segment of it.

A further complication is that, while these trends are fairly clear with regard to cinemagoing, cinemas themselves are no longer the primary site for viewing films. Despite the global decline in cinema attendances, Douglas Gomery has argued that watching films is more popular than ever.[13] People may no longer watch films in the cinemas but they do watch in increasing numbers on television and video, especially in the UK where TV and video penetration is very high by world standards. Some comparisons are appropriate. In 1994, for example, total cinema admissions in Britain were 123 million; in the same year, video rentals (which were dominated by feature films) amounted to 194 million (a considerable drop, in fact, from 328 million the previous year) and there were 66 million video-retail transactions.[14] In the case of television, the contrast is even more striking. There were considerably more films on TV than in the cinemas: in 1994, 299 features were

released in UK cinemas, of which thirty-five were 'wholly' British,[15] but in the same year 1,910 films were screened on terrestrial TV, of which 413 were British productions.[16] Films on TV were also watched by considerably more people. In 1994 the viewing figures for the top ten films on TV alone matched the total audience for all 299 films shown in the cinemas. This also meant that individual films, including British films, were seen by significantly more people on television than in the cinemas. The most popular 'wholly' British film of 1992, *Peter's Friends*, was seen by approximately four times as many people when it was shown on television in 1994 than in the cinema.[17] A commercially unsuccessful film such as *Waterland* was seen by nearly thirty-four times as many people when it was shown on television in 1994; if its television viewing audience of 3.3 million had been converted into cinema attendances, this would have put it in the box-office top ten for 1992.

Clearly, people watch more films on television and video than they do in the cinema; and the television/video audience is more representative of the 'nation' as a whole. The group which is over-represented in the cinemas – the 16–24-year-olds – is under-represented in the television audience, and those groups which are infrequent cinemagoers – the over-45s, social groups DE, country-dwellers – are much more likely to see films on TV.[18] While there are no precise figures, it does seem that many contemporary British films which are not regarded as especially 'popular' are nonetheless seen on television by as many people as 'popular' British films of the past. To put it provocatively, it may be that a British cinema that is generally regarded as being in decline is nonetheless producing films that are often seen by as many, and sometimes more, people as films made during the 'golden age' of British cinema.

There are provisos, of course. As has often been argued, the cinema experience and the television viewing experience are dissimilar: watching films on TV or video is characteristically less concentrated than in the cinema.[19] But it is also worth noting how habitual cinemagoing was in its heyday. Browning and Sorrell report that in 1946 nearly three-quarters of those who went to the cinema more than once a month did so whatever films were being shown and without choosing between cinemas.[20] Cinemagoing was only exceptionally an 'event' and, in a number of respects, television has taken over the cinema's former function of catering to the 'regular cinemagoer'. While this is true of most television scheduling of films, however, television can also use film as an 'event', breaking up the televisual flow and offering a 'special' experience. This commonly happens with the first screening of a Hollywood blockbuster but would also be true, for example, of Channel 4's heavily trailered first screening of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) in 1996, which attracted an audience of 12.38 million.[21]

Although films can achieve very high audience figures on television, other forms of drama (especially serial drama) achieve even higher figures. In this respect, the national reach of film is generally less than that of television drama. Indeed, John Caughie has expressed an anxiety that the growth in involvement of television in film production has led to an increased investment in drama on film aimed at the international market at the expense of more local forms of television drama. He contrasts the work of Ken Loach in the 1960s and the 1990s. *'Ladybird, Ladybird'*, he argues, 'circulates within an aesthetic and a cultural sphere which is given cultural prestige (and an economic viability) by international critics' awards, whereas *Cathy Come Home* circulated as a national event and functioned as documentary evidence within the political sphere'.[22] The point is well made but it sets up too stark an opposition. For if television drama circulates less as a 'national event' in the 1990s than it did in the 1960s, this is not simply the consequence of television involvement in cinema. It has more to do with the transformations which broadcasting as a whole has undergone, especially the increase in channels (both terrestrial and non-terrestrial), the rise of video (and its opportunities for alternative viewing and time-shifting), and the fragmentation of the national audience which has resulted. If the capacity of both television drama and film to function as a national event has lessened, this is partly because the national audience for television does not exist in the same way as it did in the 1960s and partly because neither individual television programmes nor films can lay claim to the same cultural dominance within the entertainment sphere that they once could. The national audience is in fact a series of audiences, which are often addressed in different ways. At the same time, the representations which British cinema then makes available to them have themselves become much more complex and varied.

Representation

There is a scene in David Hare's *Strapless* (1988) that is suggestive in this regard. A doctor, working for the NHS, addresses a group of assembled hospital workers

and speaks up on behalf of 'English values'. It is a scene with loose echoes of wartime movies such as *In Which We Serve* (1942) or *Henry V* (1944) in which morale-boosting speeches upholding traditional English virtues are delivered to an assembled group (in these instances, sailors and soldiers). There are, however, significant differences. In *Strapless*, the speech is delivered not by an Englishman but by an American woman, and the group she speaks to is not the homogeneous white male group of the earlier films but one which is differentiated by gender and ethnicity. By having an American defend the 'idea of Englishness', the film acknowledges the difficulty that such a speech presents for a contemporary British film and attempts to sidestep the irony which would, almost inevitably, have had to accompany its delivery by an English character (even so, there is still a hint of pastiche in the way the scene is realised). The difficulty of speaking for England is indicated, however, not only by the nationality of the speaker, but by the composition of the group she is addressing. Unlike in the earlier films, there is no confident assumption of who represents 'Englishness'.

Important works on British cinema by Jeffrey Richards on the 1930s, Charles Barr on Ealing and Raymond Durgnat on the post-war period have all uncovered in British films an effort to tell stories which invite audiences to interpret them in terms of ideas about the 'nation' and 'national identity'.[23] More recently, Andrew Higson has identified what he regards as a characteristic way of 'imagining the nation' as a 'knowable, organic community' in British films, which he links to a typically 'national style' characterised by episodic narratives involving multiple characters, a distanced observational viewpoint and a non-narrative use of space.[24] Clearly, there is a danger that such arguments underestimate the variety of British cinema and are too ready to make pronouncements about all British cinema on the basis of a selective sample of films (Higson's book deals with only five films in any detail). Nonetheless, it is equally evident that, if not all British cinema, then at least significant strands (such as wartime cinema and Ealing comedies) have evolved an aesthetic and a way of telling stories which clearly display a national-allegorical import.[25]

If this is so, then it is also apparent that the certainties concerning the nation upon which such films relied have, since the 1960s, increasingly dissolved. The strategy of national allegory, in this respect, has not so much been abandoned as refashioned to express a new sense of difference and even conflict. Films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987) continue to employ, with a few post-modern embellishments, the stylistic features of British national cinema which Higson identifies, clearly inviting the individual stories of its characters to be read in terms of an 'allegory' of the 'state of the nation'. They do so, however, to project a much more fluid, hybrid and plural sense of 'Britishness' than was seen in earlier British cinema. Such films are responding to the more complex sense of national identity that has been characteristic of modern Britain. In this respect, the interests of the art film (which are often individual and subjective) may be seen to have merged with the preoccupations of public-service television (which are characteristically more social and 'national' in scope). As a result, the alliance between film and television, which Caughie sees as lessening the local dimensions of television, may also be read as a strengthening of the local aspects of cinema.

Since the 1980s, it can be argued that not only has British cinema articulated a much more inclusive sense of Englishness than previously but that it has also accorded a much greater recognition to the differing nationalities and identities within Britain (including, for example, the emergence of a distinctive black British cinema). In this respect, British national cinema now clearly implies Scottish and Welsh cinema as well as just English cinema. Indeed, two of the most successful British films of the mid-1990s – *Shallow Grave* (1994) and *Trainspotting* (1996) – were very clearly Scottish. This has implications, not only for the inclusiveness of the representations of Britain which British cinema provides but also, as the example of *Gregory's Girl* indicates, for the way in which issues of national identity are then addressed.

Graeme Turner, writing of Australian cinema in the 1990s, has noted the suspicion that often accompanies discussion of both the nation and national cinema because of the socially conservative versions of national identity which these tend to imply. He argues that the post-colonial status of Australia means that its discourses of the nation are much less settled, and that it is possible for Australian films to provide 'a critical . . . body of representations within mainstream Western cinema'.[26] In the same way, the peculiar historical circumstances of Scotland and Wales – which may have gained economically from the British colonial enterprise but which, culturally, encountered subordination – provide an opening for a more complex negotiation of the discourses around the 'nation' than English/British cinema

has traditionally provided. *Trainspotting* is an interesting example in this regard. The most commercially successful British film of 1996, it was fully financed by the public-service broadcaster Channel 4, and combines an interest in social issues (drug-taking, AIDS, poverty) with a determinedly self-conscious aesthetic style reminiscent of the French and British 'new waves'. In experimenting with cinematic style, however, it also plays with the inherited imagery of England and Scotland. Thus when the film's main character, Mark Renton (Ewan McGregor), arrives in London, the film cheerfully invokes the most clichéd images of London in an ironic inversion of the touristic imagery which commonly accompanies the arrival of an English character in Scotland.[27] In a similarly iconoclastic manner, the film escorts its main characters to the Scottish countryside, not to invoke the 'romantic' beauty of the Scottish landscape but to provide Renton with the occasion for a swingeing attack on 'being Scottish' ('We're the lowest of the fucking low . . . . It's a shite state of affairs and all the fresh air in the world will not make any fucking difference'). So while *Trainspotting* may speak with a voice that is decidedly Scottish, it also does so in a way which avoids simple pieties concerning Scottish, or 'British', identity.

Conclusion

I have argued elsewhere that the idea of British national cinema has often been linked, virtually by definition, to discourses of nationalism and myths of national unity.[28] However, this formulation of a national cinema underestimates the possibilities for a national cinema to re-imagine the nation, or rather nations within Britain, and also to address the specificities of a national culture in a way which does not presume a homogeneous or 'pure' national identity. Indeed, as Paul Willemen has argued, the national cinema which genuinely addresses national specificity will actually be at odds with the 'homogenising project' of nationalism insofar as this entails a critical engagement with 'the complex, multidimensional and multidirectional tensions that characterise and shape a social formation's cultural configurations'.[29] In a sense, this is one of the apparent paradoxes that this chapter has been addressing: that while British cinema may depend upon international finance and audiences for its viability, this may actually strengthen its ability to probe national questions; that while cinema has apparently lost its 'national' audience in the cinemas, it may have gained a more fully 'national' audience via television; and that while the British cinema may no longer assert the myths of 'nation' with its earlier confidence, it may nonetheless be a cinema which is more fully representative of national complexities than ever before.

Notes

1. Hugo Young, *One of Us* (London: Pan, 1990), p. 277.
2. Cinematograph Films Act, 1927: Report of a Committee Appointed by the Board of Trade (London: HMSO, 1936), p. 5.
3. *Screen Digest*, December 1993, p. 280.
4. Stephen Crofts 'Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s', p. 50.
5. Alan Lovell, *The British Cinema: The Unknown Cinema*, BFI Education Seminar Paper, March 1969, p. 2.
6. David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice', *Film Criticism* vol. 4 no. 1, Fall 1979.
7. Crofts, 'Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s', p. 51.
8. Louis Moss and Kathleen Box, *The Cinema Audience: An Inquiry Made by the Wartime Social Survey for the Ministry of Information* (London: Ministry of Information, 1943).
9. In 'Cinemas and Cinema-Going in Great Britain', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* vol. CXVII no. 11, 1954, p. 135, Browning and Sorrell indicate that in the years 1950–2 the cinema accounted for over 83 per cent of all taxable admissions on entertainment (including theatre, sport and other activities). In 1992, by comparison, spending on cinema admissions accounted for less than 6 per cent of household expenditure on entertainment. See Monopolies and Mergers Commission, *Films: A Report on the Supply of Films for Exhibition in Cinemas in the UK* (London: HMSO, 1994), p. 90.
10. Karsten-Peter Grummitt, *Cinemagoing 4* (Leicester: Dodona Research, 1995), p. 1.
11. Between 1985, when the first multiplex was opened, and 1994 the number of multiplexes grew to seventy-one sites (incorporating 638 screens). By the end of 1993, about 40 per cent of all visits to the cinema were to multiplexes. See Monopolies and Mergers Commission, *Films: A Report on the Supply of Films for Exhibition in Cinemas in the UK*, p. 96.
12. See the figures used by media consultant James Lee in *Movie Makars: Drama for Film and Television* (Glasgow: Scottish Film Council, 1993), p. 44.
13. Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 276.
14. These figures are taken from the *BFI Film and Television Handbook 1996* (London: BFI, 1995), pp. 34 and 47.
15. *Screen Finance*, 11 January 1995, p. 13. *Screen Finance* defines films as 'wholly' British when they were made solely by British production companies.

16. *Screen Finance*, 8 February 1995, p. 12.
17. Figures for box-office revenue come from *Screen Finance*, 24 February 1993, p. 9. I have estimated admissions for individual films by dividing 1992 box-office revenues by the average realised seat prices for that year, as identified in Monopolies and Mergers Commission, *Films: A Report on the Supply of Films for Exhibition in Cinemas in the UK*, p. 102. Television viewing figures may be found in the *BFI Film and Television Handbook 1996*, p. 57.
18. Patrick Barwise and Andrew Ehrenberg, *Television and Its Audience* (London: Sage, 1988), p. 29. The renting and buying of pre-recorded videos is also highest among the 'lower' social grades, especially the C2s. See BMRB International Report: *CAVIAR* 10, vol. 3, *Report of Findings* (February 1993), p. 21.
19. As in the cinema the bulk of films watched by British audiences on television and video are American. But it is worth noting that television not only shows more British films than the cinemas but that, as the films it shows are from different periods, the circulation of British cinema for the modern audience also involves a sense of both its past and present. Thus in 1995, to take just one example, almost as many people watched Ken Loach's *Kes* (1969) as the same director's *Raining Stones* (1993). See *Screen Finance*, 24 January 1996, pp. 16–17.
20. 'Cinemas and Cinema-Going in Great Britain', p. 146.
21. These viewing figures made *Four Weddings and a Funeral* Channel 4's third most-watched broadcast ever. See *Broadcast*, 8 December 1995, p. 24.
22. John Caughie, 'The Logic of Convergence', p. 219.
23. See Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society 1930–39* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984); Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (London: Cameron and Tayleur, 1977); and Raymond Durgnat, *A Mirror for England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970).
24. Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*.
25. The idea of 'national allegory' has been employed, somewhat controversially, by Fredric Jameson in relation to 'Third-World' literature. See 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text* no. 15, Fall 1986.
26. Graeme Turner, 'The End of the National Project? Australian Cinema in the 1990s', in Wimal Dissanayake (ed.), *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 203.
27. The script refers to this interlude as a 'contemporary retake of all those "Swinging London" montages'. See John Hodge, *Trainspotting* and *Shallow Grave* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 76.
28. John Hill, 'The Issue of National Cinema and British Film Production'.
29. Paul Willemen, 'The National', p. 212.

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3

British Cinema's US Surrender – A View from 2001

Nick James

A sanctioned derision towards British cinema now exists that only partly derives from the failure of so many Lottery-funded films. It comes as much from a widespread recognition that psychologically the British film industry already 'leaves it to the Americans' and has done so ever since the collapse of the Goldcrest company in the late 1980s. Complaints about the American dominance of British cinema are as plentiful as the dollars that flow through Pinewood and Shepperton whenever big US films are made there. Yet this recent press attitude seems to go beyond the ingrained deference towards American cinema prevalent in British film-reviewing since the 60s. It represents a qualitative shift towards abjection: the acceptance of a future in which the British film industry can never be more than a handmaiden to the global – i.e. Hollywood-dominated – film industry.

Hollywood Rules the World

To accept Hollywood's methods of film-making as superior, without recourse to US-scale resources and without thought for the long-term consequences for film-making in Britain, is now a reflex action within the British film world. In making this claim I'm trying neither to rattle the rusty tambourine for national cinema – though any film critic wants to live in a country with a thriving film-making culture – nor to sling stones at the American Goliath. I simply want to look at the ways in which the continuing globalisation of the world's film industries compromises British cinema's attempts to define itself not only against a US mainstream which it otherwise cannot emulate, but in any coherent way at all.

By the global film industry I mean that predominantly controlled by Americans through vertically and horizontally integrated distribution and exhibition structures and whose centre is Hollywood.[1] By Hollywood I mean that industry town whose studios are bought and sold by multinational corporations (such as Japan's Sony, Australia's News International and France's Vivendi), and which employs talent from all over the world. This paradox tends to be read either as the perfect cover for the US industry's ruthless pursuit of global trade dominance, or as a genuine rapprochement that recognises and makes best use of the strengths of various national resources around the world. In my view, both readings are true and the latter is a response to the former.

The public is encouraged to see British film-making almost entirely in the context of a competition with the Americans. Winning an Oscar is the only universally acknowledged marker of success; by comparison a BAFTA award, like the press-sponsored awards or the film festival prizes, is a negligible achievement. The press can behave like this in part because talented Brits do win so many Oscars, especially in comparison with film-makers from other countries. Of course, this success comes from our sharing the same language with the Americans. Yet what the press now assumes is that film language is exclusively American, that global domination is a done deal and British films can now only be seen on US terms.

New Labour, New Cinema

In 1998–9 the British film industry, suddenly awash with Lottery cash, seemed for a moment like the British

pop music industry of the 60s: a place for making catchy youth anthems that could be knocked out at great speed using the talents of advertising and music promo directors. This brief combination of cash and *Zeitgeist* coincided with the last gasp of the mid-90s idea of Cool Britannia – the aura of success around Britpop and British fashion that the new Labour government exploited when it was elected in 1997. But it was also a response to a new interest among filmgoers in home-grown films inspired by the likes of Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996). Until *Trainspotting* came along, internationally successful British films tended to fall under the loose category of the 'heritage' movie – ranging from tasteful costume dramas directed by James Ivory such as *A Room with a View* (1985) to the upper-middle-class comedy of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994). But after the success of Boyle's aggressively youthful film about heroin addicts in Scotland, some fresh and vigorous new film-makers were given the chance to make features. The apotheosis of this brief burst of energy might be considered the international success of Guy Ritchie's *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* in 1998–9. But what happened in the wake of *Lock, Stock . . .* proved disastrous.

Cool Britannia was a marketing concept thoroughly complicit with the unashamed media populism that first drew accusations of Britain 'dumbing down'. It was as if making a film with a properly developed screenplay was suddenly against the spirit of the times. Two films of the soon-to-be lamented new British gangster genre are typical. The BBC-backed *Love, Honour and Obey* (2000) exploited the celebrity of Jude Law and his friends – Sadie Frost, Ray Winstone, Jonny Lee Miller and Rhys Ifans – and was shot in the crude home-movie fashion developed by the same collaborators in the execrable *Final Cut* (1998). *Honest* (2000) was directed by pop producer-songwriter Dave Stewart and starred non-actors Nicole Appleton, Natalie Appleton and Melanie Blatt from All Saints. These films were so gloriously and publicly inept (*Honest* was pulled from Britain's screens with phenomenal speed) that the industry tried to distance itself from them and to shrink back under the shelter of Hollywood competence and bigger budgets.

One indication of the extent to which the British film industry instinctively defers to America is the versions of Britishness it presents to the global marketplace. In the multiplex and blockbuster boom years of the 1980s and 90s, when British film fortunes were at their lowest, we became used to British actors being cast as evil masterminds in big-budget Hollywood films. More recently, in British movies, a new kind of character and class system has been created, mostly for export. In the wake of the US success of *Lock, Stock . . .* and the revival of Mike Hodges's classic British gangster movie *Get Carter* (1971), a violent and vicious caricature of young working-class criminality was given full rein in a rash of British gangster films such as *Rancid Aluminium* (2000), *Circus* (2000), *You're Dead* (1999), *Fast Food* (1999), *Gangster No. 1* (1999), as well as *Love, Honour and Obey* and *Honest*.[2] The alacrity with which British producers jumped on the gangster movie van, believing that here was one exportable genre they could exploit in a hurry, said much about the way Britain's production industry operates – that is, blindly, as a series of small competing teams trying to outdo each other in their craving for the Yankee dollar.

Alongside these denizens of disenfranchised youth, we were presented with a comic vision of middle-class English mediocrity stemming initially from the success of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* but coming to fruition in *Notting Hill* (1999), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Love Actually* (2003), and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004), whose worldviews are virtually identical. They take the comedy of incompetence, visible in such Ealing antecedents as *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), and make it into a defining middle-class trait. Like the friends of Hugh Grant's bookseller in *Notting Hill*, Bridget Jones and her pals are under-achievers convinced of their utter worthlessness, doing jobs badly as if by right. Even when he's Prime Minister (in *Love Actually*) Grant is nondescript, until his love for the slightly overweight tea-lady inspires him to stand up to the bullying US President. There's a strong undercurrent of self-hatred in these films, one that goes beyond traditional British self-deprecation. It seems accepting of, or actually defeatist about, the general 'dumbing down' of British culture. Of course these were mid-Atlantic co-productions, so the suspicion that this is a view of the British that meets with approval in Hollywood is a reasonable one.

It's tempting to see the 'gangster' and 'failure' caricatures of Britishness as mimicking the media's own postures. There's the thug jingoism that overrates any Brit Oscar victory as triumph, the shrugging middle-class defeatism that expects every British film to be a

disaster, and even perhaps the occasional lone megalomaniac who thinks that we could do Hollywood better than they do. Indeed Richard Curtis is brilliant enough to have built British film industry defeatism into the plot of *Notting Hill*, his romance between an insignificant British bookseller and a world-famous Hollywood movie star.

Culture Wars

Anyone writing about British cinema old and new will be struck by the contrast brought about by social change. Actors in films of the 1930s, 40s and 50s sound comically 'posh' today. This is not only because Received Pronunciation has been killed off but also because so many of the offspring of the 60s middle classes have adopted downshifting 'Estuary' accents. In those days of cut-glass accents it was easier for Americans to characterise British films as unwatchable (although harder to ignore the booming British cinema market). British films had some limited pre-war success in the US, notably with Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933). But when J. Arthur Rank was hoping to take a serious crack at the US market in the mid-40s, he was told that American audiences had several basic objections to British films.

1. The action was too slow.
2. There was too much dialogue.
3. The actors talked too fast and their accents and slang words were difficult to understand.
4. The actresses looked dowdy and the actors seemed effeminate.
5. The physical quality of the films often looked inferior to American productions.[3]

Many of these complaints still seem relevant today. In the immediate aftermath of World War II when Rank was operating, British audiences, as well as the left-wing critics of *Tribune* and the *Penguin Film Review*, thought that British films (particularly war films) were better than US films. One of the marked differences between then and now is that a critical caucus in favour of a national cinema no longer exists. Now, neither the film reviewers nor the industry really believe in national cinema. As Benedict Anderson and Colin McArthur have both argued, national identity is a cultural process of constant formation, and it's no accident that a suddenly fragile sense of identity has struck British film at a time when the United Kingdom itself seems to be fragmenting through political devolution. It's doubtful in the globalised future that we will talk about British cinema reflecting national concerns. We will continue to have heritage films supported by US finance – and gangster films and Richard Curtis comedies (though these can be seen as heritage concoctions along with the Jane Austen, E. M. Forster and other literary adaptations). But the likelihood of any widely distributed cinema that relates to the multicultural, digital-age, North/South-East divide experiences of today's English population seems remote.

International audiences remain hungry for British subject matter. James Bond, Harry Potter, the denizens of Tolkien's Middle Earth, even Mr Bean, have huge box-office appeal. But is it possible to imagine these films being 'all-British' productions? In the past Alexander Korda might have made them here, perhaps using Powell and Pressburger as his film-making team. Today such fantasy cinema is only conceivable under US control because of the scale of expectations raised by the US blockbuster special-effects movies of the 1980s and 90s. The films might have an all-British cast (as the Harry Potter films do), but most of the profit will find its way back to the American backers. What's at question here is not how high a national identity quotient it takes to make a film British but whether the idiosyncrasy of British literary work is recognised and backed in the UK. Despite the enormous strength of tradition of fantasy literature and film-making in Britain, film companies shy away from imaginative subject matter, and the strong impression gathered from the films they do make is that caution is ever the unconfident watchword.

British Films, American Rules

In May 2000 the Film Council complained that:

> the lack of support for script development is the single biggest problem affecting the ability of the UK industry to deliver a consistent flow of high-quality films. All sectors of the industry agree that . . . this results in finished films which are too often sub-standard and subsequently wholly or partially rejected by the distribution sectors.[4]

The three main potential sources of funding – FilmFour, the BBC and the Film Council's own Premiere Production Fund – quickly adapted to the new development/management culture. All these entities now have the same main aim in mind: to make

substantially profitable films with high production values. Such values necessitate big budgets and a determination to control risk factors as much as possible. Scripts have to be able to attract (US and UK) star casting, and work according to the precepts laid down by such American script gurus as Robert McKee, Syd Field and Linda Seger. Stories of British production heads returning from LA with evangelical fervour and wanting everyone to do everything the US way are as sadly routine as is their inevitable, eventual failure. If one looks at the films made via the development process (*Billy Elliot*, 2000, for instance) one might legitimately fear that all idiosyncrasies of structure and texture are routinely ironed out. In that context it is hard to imagine a Michael Powell or a Nic Roeg project ever having been commissioned.

A big budget is the clearest sign that you are making a film that matters. Nothing produces more excitement in the trade press than the bandying about of big figures. But big budgets have unfortunate connotations in Britain. They remind us of Lew Grade's comment about his 70s flop *Raise the Titanic*, that it 'would have been cheaper to lower the Atlantic'. And the $27 million failure of Goldcrest's Al Pacino vehicle *Revolution* (1985) casts its shadow long.[5] A couple of flops of such magnitude can send the whole British industry back into its shell. After Goldcrest collapsed, production had to rely on the television companies fostering a modest British realism from the likes of Ken Loach, Mike Leigh and Stephen Frears.[6] British film-makers wanting to work with bigger budgets usually went to Hollywood.

The approach now is more 'global'. In 2001 FilmFour made *Charlotte Gray* with Warners for more than £12 million. The previous year there was *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Miramax-backed) at £13 million, *Enigma* (a Mick Jagger consortium) at £18.5 million, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (Miramax-backed) at £13 million and *Kingdom Come* (Pathé/UA-backed) at £12.5 million.[7] Budgets are creeping up in answer to the complaint that British production values are too inferior for the multiplex age, but with higher budgets tends to come a co-production blandness. Big-budget films can be packaged and made here but only with US 'fire-control'. British producers access big budgets through a controlling US partner (typically Miramax, a company whose yen for British-originated subject matter is very pronounced), because even if the British could raise the finance they don't trust themselves to control the numbers.

British films are very often scolded for looking too much like television, and during the low-budget late 1980s and 90s, this was usually a matter of cleaving to close-ups because it's a cheaper mode of film-making. Many of our directors were trained in shooting television drama, and they do sometimes seem unduly shy of wider shots, but as British directors and cinematographers work regularly on large-scale Hollywood films, such reticence is clearly not endemic to British cinema. In any case some films require an intimate form of cinematography and the lighting style of, for instance, Barry Ackroyd (who shoots Ken Loach's films), is widely imitated across Europe. The push now is for films made for the international market to look 'cinematic', even when it may not be appropriate. It's hard, for instance, to see how the domestic love traumas of *Bridget Jones's Diary* required the same size budget as the epic *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, though the former's huge success presumably is its own justification.

When a film is entirely funded and shot in Britain and mainly for British consumption, however, the deferential mindset kicks in. The emphasis is always on how little money it can be done for, not on how much it needs to fully achieve its ambitions. For interesting recent British movies, such as Jamie Thraves's *The Low Down* (2000), the low budget (£1 million) is meant somehow to be a funky virtue, but the money was stretched too thin to help its fragile, subtle, tale of slacker lovers. On the other hand, in Saul Metzstein's *Late Night Shopping* (2001), another slacker love story pushed in a more American direction, the script seems skimpily underdeveloped for the opulence of its big-screen approach.

Nothing brings one up colder to the stark realities of the new global film industry than learning how few

Kate Ashfield, Aidan Gillen in *The Low Down* (Jamie Thraves, 2000)

British actors can 'open' a film budgeted above, say, £4 million. To be sure of your cash on the bigger-budgeted films you'd need some A-list movie stars and that has nearly always meant Americans (or Americanised foreigners such as Cary Grant, Sean Connery or Mel Gibson). British producer Herbert Wilcox recognised this in the silent period when he boosted international sales by importing D.W. Griffith starlet Mae Marsh for his *Flames of Passion* (1922), just as Working Title did by casting Texan actress Renée Zellweger as Bridget Jones. When the British film industry does manage to build up its own stars, it then has to compete with Hollywood for the actor's services – Keira Knightley, Jude Law, Daniel Craig, Kate Winslet – are certainly big, after their exposure in Hollywood or Hollywood-backed films, but they are also expensive.

It's worth noting, though, that many of today's international movie stars were 'discovered' in indie or art-house films, not big popular hits. This is true of Russell Crowe (*Proof*, 1991), Antonio Banderas (*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, 1989), Juliette Binoche (*Mauvais Sang*, 1986), Brad Pitt (*Johnny Suede*, 1991) and Leonardo DiCaprio (*What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, 1993) as well as Knightley (*Bend It Like Beckham*, 2002), Law (*Shopping*, 1994), Craig (*Love Is the Devil*, 1998) and Winslet (*Heavenly Creatures*, 1994). Perhaps Britain would be better at creating its own movie stars if it wasn't so desperate for a popular audience, or if British television were not such a sinecure for good actors who then find themselves passed over when big screen parts come along.

British Genres

In the 80s it was fairly easy to categorise the kinds of films the British were making. To the fore were Goldcrest-style epics (*Cry Freedom*, 1987, *The Mission*, 1986), heritage films (*A Passage to India*, 1984, *A Room with a View*, 1985) and historic moment films (*Dance with a Stranger*, 1984, *Hope and Glory*, 1987, *White Mischief*, 1987). Supporting these were television-backed social dramas (*My Beautiful Laundrette*, 1985, *Letter to Brezhnev*, 1985), comedies (*Withnail and I*, 1986, *Personal Services*, 1987, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, 1986) and political films (*Defence of the Realm*, 1985, *A World Apart*, 1987, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986, *Comrades*, 1986). A visionary sector might also be constructed for the maverick talents of Terry Gilliam (*Brazil*, 1985), Ken Russell (*Gothic*, 1986), Nic Roeg (*Eureka*, 1982), Derek Jarman (*Caravaggio*, 1986), Terence Davies (*Distant Voices, Still Lives*, 1988) and Peter Greenaway (*The Belly of an Architect*, 1987).

The 90s saw much of this fall away, especially in terms of quality, and a greater generic confusion of low-budget films rise up in its place. The epics more or less disappeared (until Miramax brought them back with *The English Patient*, 1996). Heritage films began to lose their lustre (for every *The Madness of King George*, 1994 there was a regrettable *Tom and Viv*, 1994). Social comedies (*Riff-Raff*, 1991, *Bhaji on the Beach*, 1993, *Secrets and Lies*, 1996, *Brassed Off*, 1996, *The Full Monty*, 1997) flourished, and there was a curious trend for producing American independent films (*Trust*, 1990, *Naked Lunch*, 1991, *Walking and Talking*, 1996) from London. But there were fewer political films and historic moment dramas and the wave of gangster films which followed in the wake of *Lock, Stock . . .* , proved even less successful than such films as *Shopping* and *Young Americans* (1993), which had at least proved effective calling cards for their ambitious, Hollywood-bound directors Paul Anderson and Danny Cannon.

In the twenty-first century there has, ironically, been a return to World War II, with big-budget adaptations of *Enigma*, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and *Charlotte Gray*. The success of *The English Patient* and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) might have sparked off this interest but it is the popularity of novels set in the period which has been the most significant factor. The one thing that is predictable about current international film genres is that they follow literary success. History and heritage will thus continue to provide most of Britain's exportable film stories, and nostalgia remains a better bet than any aspect of today's Britain.

Audiences

One disadvantage for any British film set in the present is how difficult it is to seem as universal to international audiences as any ordinary US film about, say, family life. By the careful knitting of recognisable heritage locations and US movie stars into their films, the production company Working Title has managed to conquer this problem. Somehow, for an international audience, the Notting Hill of *Notting Hill* seems as comfortably familiar a place as, say, the Seattle of *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993). One could also argue that the Sheffield of *The Full Monty* is recognisable to anyone living in an industrial town in the post-industrial era; and even that the decorative use of the 1980s miners' strike and an authentic North of England setting were contributing factors to the success of *Billy Elliot*. But this necessitates a compromise, smoothing away the specifically British aspects of the subject.

Since UK audiences mostly show such a pronounced preference for Hollywood cinema, it is often assumed that they should be treated no differently from US audiences. If you want to succeed with the smaller UK demographic, it is argued, then simply aim for the larger US one and kill two birds with one stone. But British producers seem curiously slow to recognise audience trends. The genuine stirrings of national interest aroused by *Trainspotting* were carelessly dissipated. And while Hollywood shifted from its reliance on a predominantly young male audience to cultivate neglected sectors such as children, girls, women and adults (i.e. those over twenty-four), British producers were still trying to please the legendary Des Moines teenage boy with gangster movies. The first crop of Lottery-franchise films – apart from the sumptuous *fin-de-siècle* concoction *An Ideal Husband* (1999) – made few concessions to audience preferences. Lynn Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999), a tale of love and survival on a grim 70s Glasgow estate, Gillies MacKinnon's *Hideous Kinky* (1998), centred upon a feckless mother in hippy-era Morocco, Simon Beaufoy and Billie Eltringham's *The Darkest Light* (1999), a prescient warning about foot-and-mouth disease and social tensions in a Yorkshire farming community, and *The Lost Son* (1999), Chris Menges's sombre story of the smashing of a paedophile ring by a world-weary French detective, are all worthwhile projects, but they seem very distant from the commercial films that the Film Council argues are required to create 'a sustainable British film industry'. The remainder of the bunch – *Janice Beard 45 WPM* (1999), *Fanny and Elvis* (1999), *Love's Labour's Lost* (1999), *Hold Back the Night* (1999), *It Was an Accident* (2000) and *There's Only One Jimmy Grimble* (2000) – are the inevitable misfires which might have been excused had the better films enjoyed any commercial success.

The good mother: Kate Winslet and Carrie Mullan in *Hideous Kinky* (Gillies MacKinnon, 1998)

Given the traditional antipathy to British films, there is a limit to the number that UK audiences can reasonably be expected to support. During the wartime heyday of British cinema, when critics and the public both (briefly) preferred British films to the US variety, production was at a low of less than fifty films a year. The current glut of production churns out on average at least two new British films a week. In an era when competing demands on leisure time – from the internet to club culture – are more urgent and plentiful than ever, it seems absurd to expect all these films to attract an audience. The problem of wanting 'a sustainable British film industry' is that the domestic market alone may never be hungry enough to support it. The industry is therefore obliged to have a global outlook, but without the resources or the advantage of the huge domestic market enjoyed by Hollywood.

Why Bother?

In terms of being the best European base for studio work, talent scouting, sales agencies and facilities houses, Britain continues to thrive – money earned in these ways has long outstripped any income from film production. But Britain's film companies now shy away from the idea of trying to take on the rest of the world out of any nationalistic impulse. We have been burned every time we do this, as the histories of Korda, Rank, the Grade brothers and Goldcrest confirm.

Now deference is built into every stage of the production process and the US way and the US market are seen as the only game in town. Britain's film industry can't afford to acquire the country's best subject matter. Its film companies want to make substantially budgeted films but generally have to draw in a US partner before they can raise the money. Attempts to please the American market lead to the ironing out of British idiosyncrasies and the reliance on settings and subjects that feel 'universal'. British producers need stars to open these films but only US films can make British actors into stars. Government support has boosted production levels, but few of the films appeal to a mass audience accustomed to big-budget Hollywood fare. US financial acumen and marketing muscle call the shots.

Implicit in the policies of the Film Council's New Cinema Fund is the assumption that cheaper digital 'film'-making will take the place of low-budget and independent film, and that its mode of distribution will not necessarily be through cinemas, but through any

number of alternative digital venues. For experimental film-makers the new technology might be seen as a liberating force. John Ellis, for example, argues that, 'The demand from critics that film-makers should create something called "British cinema" is one of the greatest psychic constraints on film-making in this country.'[8] The advent of the sort of artistically adventurous cinema Ellis proposes must surely be welcomed. But its appeal would almost inevitably be limited to a minority audience, and there would be worrying cultural implications if the creation of a subsidised cinema for intellectuals sanctioned the abandonment of popular cinema to Hollywood.

One might hope that the bigger-budget co-productions planned by FilmFour, the BBC and the Film Council will carve for Britain a larger niche of the international film-making market. But the US industry would only welcome such a state of affairs as long as the majority profits continued to leak back to the motherland. If Britain started to self-fund and claim that larger chunk for itself, the full historic force of US protectionism would again be weighed against British cinema.

So the sensible target for the Film Council is a much higher level of co-production that could keep everyone happy without the Americans feeling too threatened. The depressing consequence of this though, is more of the Natopudding – more films in the mould of *Chocolat* (2001) and *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. When one of the characters in Wim Wenders's *Kings of the Road* (1976) claimed that 'the Americans have colonised our subconscious', it was viewed as a controversial – if perceptive – insight. Now American cultural and economic dominance is accepted as a fact of life. It has its advantages (big-budget Hollywood cinema can sometimes be a joy to behold), but with such cultural homogenisation comes the danger that the stories told within this Americanised global subconscious will be vapid ghosts of what they might have been had cultural diversity survived. That's why we still need British movies.

Notes

1. According to David Puttnam, the crucial change came in the 1980s and 90s when the film industry's 'move towards international financing reflected the globalisation of capital which resulted from the deregulation of financial markets around the world'. David Puttnam, *The Undeclared War*, p. 324. For an explanation of vertical and horizontal integration see 'Vertical Hold', *Sight and Sound*, October 1994, p. 3.
2. See Chapter 41 by Steve Chibnall in the present volume for a more positive assessment of the gangster cycle.
3. Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry*, p. 73.
4. Film Council, 'Towards a Sustainable UK Film Industry', 2 May 2000, p. 14.
5. Figure from SIFT, the BFI's database.
6. For Goldcrest's rise and fall see Jake Eberts and Terry Ilott, *My Indecision Is Final*.
7. Figures from *Screen Finance*, 5 July 2000.
8. John Ellis, 'British Made', *Sight and Sound*, December 1991, pp. 33–4.

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4

Paradise Found and Lost: The Course of British Realism

GEOFF BROWN

> The cinema, it seemed for a moment, was about to fulfil its natural destiny of discovering mankind. It had everything for the task. It could get about, it could view reality with a new intimacy; and what more natural than the recording of the real world should become its principal inspiration?
> John Grierson, 'The Course of Realism'

Grierson and the Establishment of the Realist Aesthetic

The particular moment John Grierson writes about in his famous essay about cinema realism was the end of the 19th century, when Louis Lumière aimed his Cinématographe at workers leaving the Lumière factory in Lyons, at the train puffing into La Ciotat station, or his brother Auguste and his wife feeding their baby. In Grierson's eyes the moment of bliss did not last long. The Lumière workmen were scarcely out of the factory, he wrote, than cinema

> was taking a trip to the moon and, only a year or two later, a trip in full colour to the devil. The scarlet women were in, and the high falsehood of trickwork and artifice was in, and reality and the first fine careless rapture were out.[1]

Grierson writes about the onset of Georges Méliès and his films of fantasy almost as though Méliès were Satan himself, hurling a wrecking ball at the Garden of Eden. There is a reason for this. Grierson's childhood upbringing was among Presbyterians, who took the strong Calvinist view that play-acting was a sinful activity. Imagine the shudder, then, when instead of documenting places, people and their workaday lives, cinema took off to visit the devil's lair itself.

In Britain, cinema began in the same way as in France. It observed the world. In 1895 Birt Acres used his camera to record actual sporting events, the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race on 30 March, the Derby on 29 May, or natural spectacles like *Rough Sea at Dover*. Once again the devil's work – trick shots and fantasy – soon appeared. Robert Paul, who collaborated on the camera used in Acres's early films, proved particularly adept at exploring slow-motion, superimpositions, and other simple ways of moving beyond what Grierson called 'the recording of the real world'.

Grierson's commitment to the realist cause did not blind him to other aesthetics: this was the man who had a passion for marionettes, and supervised some film shorts in 1928 featuring puppet burlesques of Hollywood stars. But through word and deed he proselytised so hard for what he termed 'the documentary idea' that when serious film criticism developed in Britain (from the late 20s onwards) realism quickly became accepted as our cinema's worthiest goal and greatest strength. The talents drawn into the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit, the GPO Film Unit and other documentary outfits of the 1930s were also the country's brightest critics: in articles and reviews for *Cinema Quarterly*, *World Film News* and other organs, Grierson himself, Paul Rotha, Basil Wright and Edgar Anstey proved passionate champions of realist films and skilled debunkers of whatever pap poured from Hollywood or Denham.

'The British film lacks honest conception,' Paul Rotha thundered in his seminal book *The Film till Now*,

first published in 1930. In Rotha's eyes it also lacked a British nationality: we were either aping American models or groping vaguely for the stylistic and psychological habits of the German school. The world beyond the studio doors was being ignored: 'Our railways, our industries, our towns, and our countryside,' he wrote, 'are waiting for incorporation into narrative films.'[2]

At the time, Rotha only had Grierson's own herring-fleet epic *Drifters*, completed in 1929, to place on a pedestal as 'a suggestion of that which waits to be accomplished'. As the 1930s developed, there were occasional film documents for the realist propagandists to praise – like Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934), or Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934) – but they found slim pickings in a fictional cinema dominated by the extravaganzas of Korda or the vocal twirlings and high kicks of Jessie Matthews. The railways, the industries, the whole realist aesthetic, were waiting still. Only in World War II, when Britain's feature film-makers received new blood from the documentary field, did mainstream cinema begin to win critical favour for reflecting life beyond the studio gates.

The success of the British wartime product, from *'Fires Were Started –'* (1943) to *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *The Way Ahead* (1944), further cemented the realist aesthetic as the critics' preferred mode for British films. Few later writers quite shared Grierson's preacher's zeal, but you can certainly feel an echo of the Calvinist distaste for fiction coursing through the influential pages of the *Penguin Film Review* in the 1940s. To Roger Manvell and the other earnest evangelicals of the *Review*, it was far better to stare soberly at fishermen's nets or Bren guns than to gaze in delight at Betty Grable. From their perspective, the national ideal remained *In Which We Serve* (1942) or some other wartime epic of quiet heroism, shot in various shades of battleship grey. The national disgrace was the dingy sensationalism of *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (1948), or *They Made Me a Fugitive* (1947) and its fellow spiv dramas.[3]

The British cinema revival of the late 1950s only strengthened the critical orthodoxy that enthroned the realist aesthetic. The British New Wave of Richardson, Anderson, Reisz and Schlesinger was greeted with fanfares because the films faced people's emotions head-on and swept away what had grown to be regarded as dull studio artifice. Cameras went out and about, especially up North, far from the Rank Organisation's domain in Pinewood, where Dirk Bogarde preened in pretty pullovers, or the theatre's stronghold in Shaftesbury Avenue, which had stocked our cinema with so many actors and so much material. Characters were not cosy couples in Mayfair or the shires, but working-class people, tart and passionate. The same value was found in Ken Loach's focus on social problems and the underprivileged in *Poor Cow* (1967) and *Kes* (1969); though for some the suspicion was growing that in abandoning the drawing room for the kitchen sink, British cinema had substituted one easy formula for another. Reviewing *Poor Cow* appreciatively in the *Sunday Times*, Dilys Powell still observed that 'the cinema, in fact is as class-ridden as ever, and a new snobbery has been substituted for the old'.[4]

Only in the 70s and 80s did the pendulum decisively swing the other way, against realism. Critical and popular appreciation grew for what you might almost term Satan's cinema: the adventurous work of Derek Jarman or Peter Greenaway, or, reclaimed from the past, the films of Powell and Pressburger, Hammer horrors and Gainsborough melodramas. At the same time, in the journal *Screen* and numerous academic havens the very mechanics of cinema were being investigated; films and their meanings were deconstructed into codes, signifiers and modes of representation. This put the entire notion of realism under threat in a different way: if what we saw on the screen is a mere chimera, an illusion manufactured through symbols, and audience expectations, how could we ever believe again in the reality of Grierson's herrings, Humphrey Jennings's firemen, or the other touchstones of British realism?

The increasing technical sophistication of the films audiences see has brought its own damage to the realist aesthetic. Our gaze now is not so trusting or innocent. But the history of British screen realism remains: a persistent, convoluted history stretching from the fishermen of *Drifters* and the down-and-outs of John Baxter's *Doss House* (1932) to the flyers, gunners and factory workers of World War II, the Northern lads of *Room at the Top* (1958) and its New Wave successors, right up to the urban flotsam of Andrea Arnold's *Red Road* (2006) or Shane Meadows's *This Is England* (2006). The history includes an iconography, too. Think British realism, and you think inevitably of kitchen sinks, tall chimneys, cobblestones, railway arches, bleak stretches of moor or beach, graffiti-lined council estates, people and landscapes placed in spare and striking juxtaposition. You also tend to think black-and-white: the perfect colour scheme for gloomy skies, smokestacks and poetic melancholy.

The same history teaches us that one decade's notion of what constitutes realism rarely matches another's. Eyes that have become used to the raw dialogue exchanges and lurching camerawork of contemporary fly-on-the-wall TV and the voyeurs' paradise of *Big Brother* will always find fault with most vintage films that carry the realist label. Looking now at Laurence Harvey's portrayal of Joe Lampton in *Room at the Top*, we tend to see Harvey the glamorous and pushy film star, strutting about with his porcupine brush of hair, self-assurance and carefully applied Northern accent, rather than John Braine's original character of the vulgar opportunist desperate to escape the mean streets of his small Yorkshire town. In some ways Harvey's characterisation is not much of an advance on the Yorkshire fisherfolk depicted in J. Arthur Rank's first venture into feature film-making, *Turn of the Tide* (1935), an important realist milestone in its day, but now rendered quaint by, among other things, the number of times that Irish-born actor Niall MacGinnis keeps trying to prove his new nationality by saying 'Champion'. Similarly, in *San Demetrio London* (1943), one of Ealing's main contributions to realist cinema, admiration for the script's expression of homely heroics as the crew of a burnt-out tanker struggle home across the Atlantic is compromised, however slightly, by the knowledge that their life-and-death battle with the elements takes place in the studio tank.

Film history also demonstrates that realism in British cinema has marked class boundaries. The notion that realist films could embrace characters of the upper middle-class and beyond has rarely been considered. Realistic characters in British films wear cloth caps, not top hats, though most of the top industry personnel would have been far more at home in the Mayfair night clubs and hotels that haunt British films, of the 30s and 50s especially, than any eel-and-pie shop. Should the accepted iconography of British realism be extended, then, to include the padded armchairs of gentlemen's clubs, complete with monocled twit slumbering over *The Times*, or a butler holding out cocktails on a silver tray, or the marbled halls that were home to Anna Neagle and Michael Wilding in escapist frolics like *Spring in Park Lane* (1948)? It is worth a thought.

Communist, zoologist and intermittent film-maker Ivor Montagu certainly realised the camera's ability to record the aristocracy, follies and all. Entrusted by Gaumont-British with filming linking sequences for *Wings over Everest*, an account of a 1933 flying expedition financed by the flamboyantly patriotic Lady Houston and led in the air by the Marquess of Clydesdale, he found he had inadvertently made what he later described as 'the most perfect picture of the English governing class that has ever been seen'.[5] There is realism of a sort, too, in the parade of stilted officers who appear as themselves in propaganda shorts of World War II, answering phone calls from Whitehall, briefing pilots, pointing at targets on maps, sometimes venturing to speak words of uplift straight to the camera. Vowels, moustaches, body language: all now belong to a vanished world, preserved by the camera like a fly in amber.

Realism versus Artifice: Feature Films in the 1930s

During the 30s, boom years alike for British commercial production and the documentary movement, you can clearly see the tussle in films between the gospels of realism and artifice. It was not only Grierson, Rotha and their colleagues who proselytised for a greater reflection of real life in British films; film-company executives, mindful of the prevailing critical temper, also emerged with ringing declarations of patriotic intent. Here is Michael Balcon, two years before he established himself at Ealing, writing in the London *Evening News* in October 1936:

> We see the dramatic entertainment in the life of the farmer on the fells of the North, of the industrial worker in the Midlands, of the factory girls of London's new industrial areas, of the quiet shepherds of Sussex. I believe that the sweep of the Sussex Downs against the sky makes as fine a background to a film as the hills of California; that Kentish and Worcestershire orchards and farms are as picturesque as the farmlands of Virginia; that the slow talk of labourers round an English village pub fire makes as good dialogue as the wise-cracks of 'City Slickers' in New York.[6]

Balcon, however, was writing after five years as head of production at the Gaumont-British studios of Shepherd's Bush, where you would more likely find Ruritanian royalty, American gangsters or music-hall Cockneys than slow-talking farm labourers supping pints. Only once had Gaumont-British allowed something approaching the realism that Grierson favoured through its portals; and that was Flaherty's *Man of Aran*, a somewhat romantic account of the Aran islanders'

daily battles with sea and seaweed, potatoes and sharks, off the Galway coast, for which Flaherty began preliminary investigations in 1931.

For Gaumont-British the project meant cultural prestige, and a way of fending off increasing criticism that British films, theirs included, neglected real life. With *Man of Aran* finally completed in 1934, every possible publicity angle was utilised to bring home the film's exotic appeal. Maggie Dirrane, the islander who played the wife of the nameless Aran man whose travails provided the slender story, was paraded in Selfridges by the *Daily Express* and asked for her opinion of silk stockings. A stuffed basking shark was put on display in the window of Gaumont-British's Wardour Street offices. Since the shark was too large for the available space, a chunk was removed from its middle, to Flaherty's fury: a choice symbol for the way market forces squeezed realism out of mainstream British cinema.[7]

Ballyhoo and the lure of Flaherty's images made the film a modest commercial success. But it scarcely paved the way for regular doses of realism, even of Flaherty's highly scented variety. Like *Man of Aran*, Rank's *Turn of the Tide*, directed by Norman Walker, won a prize for Britain at the Venice Film Festival, but no ballyhoo was whipped up by the distributors – Gaumont-British again – and lack of promotion ensured a quiet death at the box office.

Up until the months before World War II, when two adaptations of novels by A. J. Cronin, *The Citadel* (1938) and *The Stars Look Down* (1939), caught some aspects of working-class conditions, realism had led an almost subterranean life in British feature films. Efforts to reach down into society were relegated to low-budget, second-feature ventures like John Baxter's *Doss House*, a brave excursion into the lower depths of a London lodging-house, an exercise repeated in several later Baxter films like *Hearts of Humanity* (1936), *The Common Touch* (1941) and *Judgment Deferred* (1951). From today's perspective it is easy to smile at the sentimental colouring Baxter gives to his down-and-outs, and his naive belief that kindness alone will make the world a better place. Easy, too, to grate the teeth at the amount of cap-doffing and the acquiescent talk about 'people like us'. But Baxter still showed a keen eye and ear for the detail of working-class life. Even John Grierson recognised the value of Baxter's approach: his films, Grierson, wrote, were 'sentimental to the point of embarrassment; but at least about real people's sentimentalities'.[8]

The Common Touch (John Baxter, 1941): a keen eye for the detail of working-class life

Realism Goes to War

With the onset of war, Baxter contributed much simple, morale-boosting entertainment. He also made a film from Walter Greenwood's novel about a Lancashire family in the teeth of the Depression, *Love on the Dole* (1941), a project that had only recently emerged from the British Board of Film Censors' ban on prospective film versions. The BBFC had objected to bad language, the conflict between unemployed workers and the police, and the fate of the heroine, Sally Hardcastle, who escapes from poverty only by becoming a bookmaker's mistress. War changed the climate; and the film duly arrived, hampered occasionally by studio artifice and the theatrical poise of Deborah Kerr (Sally) and Clifford Evans (her agitator fiancé), but carried through to victory by pungent dialogue and depth of feeling.

Not everyone was gratified. 'Why *Love on the Dole* now when *Love in a Shelter* would perhaps be more apt?', Paul Rotha commented in November 1940 when Baxter's film was in production.[9] In time British cinema got to grips with shelters, dug-outs, cockpits, factory canteens and the other arenas of war on the home front and abroad. Only now did expectant talk about 'putting the real Britain on the screen' produce concrete results: after years of uncertainty and a good deal of trailing in America's shadow, the war finally gave British films a distinctive subject to pursue, and a moral reason for doing so. For their escapist entertainment, audiences would now turn mostly to America: aside from our comedies and thrillers, where some old habits still persisted, British films began to be peopled by men in uniform, women at the work bench, girls in the ATS or the old faithfuls in the Home Guard.

Wartime realism did not arrive overnight. When Balcon mounted *Convoy*, his first fictional war feature, in the spring of 1940, the extensive location material shot in the North Sea had to fight it out with Clive Brook festooned with gold braid and decorations viewing the war through binoculars, a dull romantic triangle, and a U-boat crew who talk about firing 'torpedo number Zwei'. Even though Balcon's ranks at Ealing were swelled with recruits from the documentary field, like the cinema virtuoso Cavalcanti and Harry Watt, the director of *London Can Take It* (1940) and *Target for Tonight* (1941), artifice ran rampant one year later through *Ships with Wings* (1941), a drama about the Fleet Air Arm containing puppet characters and unusually bad model work. Asked for his opinion after a private screening, Noël Coward, appalled at its artificiality, uttered only one word, 'Gamages', the name of the London toy store.[10]

At the time Coward, helped by co-director David Lean, was preparing his own naval war drama, *In Which We Serve*, one of the films that helped established the parameters for feature-film realism not just during the war but throughout the 50s, when British cinema fought the war all over again with Kenneth More or Jack Hawkins. In this drama inspired by the fortunes of Mountbatten's ship, HMS *Kelly*, the classes were clearly defined: working, middle and upper; the dialogue crisp, a touch theatrical, especially when Coward himself (as the Mountbatten surrogate, Captain Kinross) was talking. Once talk stopped, however, and action took over, sharply paced editing and sober, documentary-style photography lifted the film away from theatre to present a convincing cinema reflection of the prevailing mood of all classes pulling together for Britain.

Post-war: The Fall from Paradise and the British New Wave

The success of *In Which We Serve* and others enthroned realism as the preferred national style. It 'set a new standard in the English cinema', Dilys Powell wrote in 1947.[11] Without the urgent necessity of war, however, British cinema began slipping from paradise. The post-war years saw the Technicolor follies of Powell and Pressburger, the Expressionist angles and dark shadows of *Odd Man Out* (1946) and *They Made Me a Fugitive*. The realistic approach persisted but atrophied as the range of fresh material tackled by British movies shrunk, and location material was wrapped around dim, anodyne family comedies or dramas.

Searching for moments of piercing realism or contemporary relevance in British films of the early and middle 50s is a doleful task. Surveying the scene from 1945 onwards in his 1957 essay 'Get Out and Push!', Lindsay Anderson penned a litany echoing the lists of British cinema's missing ingredients drawn up by Rotha and others decades earlier:

> The nationalisation of the coal fields; the Health Service; nationalised railways; compulsory secondary education – events like these, which cry out to be interpreted in human terms, have produced no films. Nor have many of the problems which have bothered us in the last ten years: strikes; Teddy Boys; nuclear tests; the loyalties of scientists; the insolence of bureaucracy . . .[12]

Though staring at much British cinema in the 50s is indeed like staring into a void, the realistic surface of the films never entirely disappears. A negative brand of realism exists in the *Scotland Yard* series of low-budget crime shorts hosted by Edgar Lustgarten, where inspectors sit in dingy offices surrounded by Eastlight box files and track down criminals at 30 mph in their Wolseley cars. Livelier examples bubble to the surface in a stage comedy on film like *Sailor Beware* (1956), directed by Gordon Parry, which taps into the humorous vernacular that sustained British music-hall, and demonstrates a sharp nose for lowly detail. In the home of Ma Hornett, the dragon whose daughter is getting married, the camera cuts to a teapot stain on a newly polished sideboard. Cigarette ash is tapped, perforce, into a cast-off shoe. A seedy church organist pedals away in his socks. Such details may not be what Grierson had in mind when he wrote in 'The Course of Realism' about the cinema being able to 'view reality with a new intimacy', but they linger in the mind and their force should be not denied.

Ironically, it was the producers of *Sailor Beware*, Jack Clayton, James Woolf and the Romulus–Remus outfit, who proceeded to *Room at the Top*, one of the films that gave British cinema its much needed kick in the pants in the late 50s. Laurence Harvey's impersonation of a Northerner may have been a sop to the old star system, just as Simone Signoret's casting in a role conceived in John Braine's novel as a local character reinforced the old-fashioned notion that loose, dangerous women were usually foreign, and generally French. But future films called on the services of a new breed of actors, mostly from the North, trained in the theatre, whose

faces, accents and rebellious spirit helped immeasurably in strengthening the new brand of realism. There was Albert Finney in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960); Tom Courtenay in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) and *Billy Liar* (1963); Richard Harris in *This Sporting Life* (1963); Rita Tushingham in *A Taste of Honey* (1961).

To many British audiences and film-makers, the industrial landscapes and bleak Northern skies shown in these films had an almost exotic lure. 'Directors certainly were enchanted with the North,' Keith Waterhouse, the co-author of *Billy Liar*, recalled in 1993; 'At one time you couldn't walk around the slag heaps without tripping over a light cable. They were roaming all over the place.'[13] Slag heaps, smoking chimneys, canals: the black-and-white photography of Denys Coop and Walter Lassally revelled in them all.

However, the new urge to rush out on location and probe neglected areas of Britain did not derive directly from the realist tradition of Grierson. The impetus to look and think afresh came partly from the spate of new writing and theatre in the mid-50s: the era of the Angry Young Man, personified most memorably by John Osborne's creation Jimmy Porter, who sprawled among Sunday newspapers in a dingy Midlands flat in *Look Back in Anger*, spewing out vitriol. Encouragement also came from the films of the French *nouvelle vague*: those of Godard and Truffaut gloried especially in the hand-held camera's giddy freedom as it sped along streets catching passers-by unaware.

Any documentary allegiances that the new breed of British directors claimed were rather to the brief phenomenon of Free Cinema, a label originally attached to six programmes of shorts and documentaries presented at the National Film Theatre between 1956 and 1959, including Lindsay Anderson's portrait of the Covent Garden market, *Every Day except Christmas* (1957) and Karel Reisz's *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1959). Their surrounding publicity emphasised the importance of artistic freedom and a commitment to portraying contemporary society; the films' styles combined documentary reportage with the cinema tools of montage and the poetic image.

In the event the British New Wave proved more of a ripple. As the 60s advanced and naturalism's novelty waned, so did the cinema audience's taste for the bleaker side of life. Directors like Anderson, Richardson and Schlesinger shifted their ground, back to theatre, or forwards to Hollywood. Anderson's *This Sporting Life*, the most uncompromising of all the New Wave features, fared badly at the box office in 1963; *Billy Liar*, where realism and fantasy jostled in the hero's larkish mind, was more to the public taste. At the end of the film Billy was supposed to flee the parochial North and take a train to London. At the last minute he ducks the challenge, leaving his girlfriend (Julie Christie) to go alone. British cinema duly followed, discovering – indeed, half-inventing – Swinging London. Realism was edged out; caricature and parody moved in.

Realist Television and Ken Loach

By the mid-60s, images of direct social observation were far more likely to be found on television, not in the cinemas. No British cinema film of 1966 had a fraction of the force of *Cathy Come Home*, Jeremy Sandford's play about a homeless mother, filmed by Ken Loach for the *Wednesday Play* slot on BBC2. The camerawork was unadorned, the tone unrelenting, almost belligerent. *Wednesday Play* dramas ripped stories from headlines, and made television seem the natural place for the airing of social issues.

The situation continued for much of the intervening forty years, for all the tension between broadcasters and government that developed during the Thatcher years. Film-makers will follow the funding, and for many with a naturalistic bent this led them to the BBC, and, after 1982, to Channel 4. Even now, when economic, commercial and technological considerations have diluted and diminished serious TV programming, the continuing history of British cinema realism remains linked to the box in the living-room corner.

The continuing history of British realism is also inextricably linked to Ken Loach, who has shown remarkable steadfastness to socialist beliefs and a realistic aesthetic during years of upheaval among unsympathetic governments and the changing priorities of film and television executives. All the concern Loach shows for Sandford's homeless mother in *Cathy Come Home* is lavished almost three decades later on the prickly heroine of *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1993), a single mother with a violent streak who runs foul of the social services.

Not that Loach's brand of realism has been set in concrete. *Poor Cow*, his first cinema feature, adopts a naturalistic mode for the acting, but punctuates and cradles scenes with title cards and other distancing devices. The later Loach forgoes embellishments and stylistic disruption. He appreciates the telling image, like the rat caught in the opening shots of *Riff-Raff* (1991) scurrying by a crumpled NHS prescription form; but his message is mostly conveyed by an unfussy camera usually