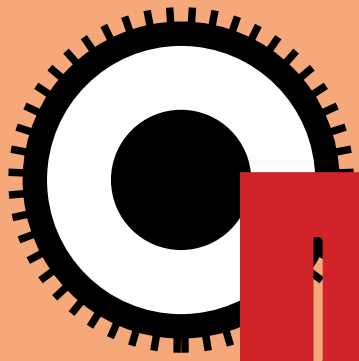

EDITED BY
PAUL NEWLAND

# DON'T LOOK NOW

## BRITISH CINEMA IN THE 1970s

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# Introduction: Don’t Look Now

Paul Newland

*When the Lights Go Out* is the title of Andy Beckett's excellent book, published in 2009, on the political landscape in Britain in the 1970s. It is a title that manages to evoke a widely shared understanding of what occurred during this seemingly troubled decade of British history. Looking back from the vantage point of the new millennium, the 1970s might appear to be a distant, dismal memory: a period of strikes and powercuts, best left in the dark. But it should also be pointed out that things in Britain didn't always feel particularly good at the time. Tom Nairn, writing in a book entitled *The Break-Up of Britain* published in 1977 (the year of both Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee and the Sex Pistols' 'God Save the Queen'), looked at the country and saw it to be marked by 'rapidly accelerating backwardness, economic stagnation, social decay and cultural despair' (1977: 51).

If this type of dystopian negativity still informs views of 1970s Britain, then views of the 1960s could not be more different. In comparison to the troubled times that followed, this was a decade that saw 'first steady, then accelerating growth in both the cultural and leisure market' (Laing 1994: 29). Indeed, try to picture the 1960s and the following, now-mythical images might spring to mind: mop-topped Beatles being chased by screaming girls; Sean Connery introducing himself as 'Bond, James Bond'; Julie Christie walking playfully down a London street, swinging her handbag; Michael Caine expertly cooking omlettes; and Terence Stamp, in red, out with the Dragoons in the Dorset countyside. You might also be reminded of Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies gracing the front pages of the *Daily Mirror*, and this story – bringing about the end of the career of the Tory politician John Profumo – being mirrored in the cinema by the seduction of upper-class Tony (James Fox) by northern, working-class Vera (Sarah Miles) in Joseph Losey's *The Servant* (1963). The 1960s sexual revolution, then, brought about profound socio-cultural changes in the country. Meanwhile, the British working classes became less deferential and more affluent, and more able to enjoy a kind of consumer lifestyle their parents could only have dreamed of. It seemed, then, that this was a period during which dreams might come true. But darker, more depressing times evidently lay ahead.

According to Stuart Laing, the momentum of the 1960s revolution was effectively halted in the 1970s as two kinds of crisis 'threatened, deflected and finally fundamentally altered its character' (Laing 1994: 30). The first crisis was a new, more troubled economic situation in Britain. The second was the fundamental change that occurred to the 'character and composition of the nation' (Laing 1994: 30). In other words, this was a period which came to be exemplified by wide-ranging economic problems that fuelled the sense of a fragmenting

socio-cultural landscape (Moore-Gilbert 1994: 2–6). Allied to this, Laing highlights the impact on British national identity, from about 1968, of immigration and the concomitant emergence of inner-city racial tensions, but also the Ulster crisis, the development of the Women's Movement (and general shifts in gender politics), major industrial conflicts, the rise of nationalism in Wales and Scotland, and the reappearance of the North-South split in England. All of these things 'visibly refused that idea of a singular consensual national culture based on a white male middle-class London which had characterized commercial marketing, the high cultural elite and the underground scene alike at the end of the 1960s' (Laing 1994: 30). Moreover, Stuart Hall argues that while the early 1970s saw the dis-articulation of the post-war consensus, by the mid-1970s elements of Thatcherism were establishing themselves within public discourse (Hall 1983, cited in Whannel 1994: 177). So, if this was a troubled, dark period – a period of socio-cultural fragmentation – it was also a period of immense change. And that makes it worthy of study.

But how exactly did these socio-cultural, economic and political changes impact upon British cinema? And how were these changes specifically reflected by or displayed in British films? Indeed, what was going on in the British film industry at this time? We currently know much more about what was going on in other countries. For example, the 1970s saw the development of a post-classical 'New' Hollywood, ostensibly driven by energetic so-called 'movie brats' such as Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Altman, Arthur Penn and Steven Spielberg. New German cinema flourished too, through the work of Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, among others. Other European countries such as France and Spain continued to produce films that were critically and/or commercially successful. However, relatively little remains known about British filmmaking during this period, other than the widely held belief that most of it was laughably bad. It is this view of the period that this collection largely seeks to challenge.

Very few critical studies of 1970s British cinema have emerged to date. Until the publication of Robert Shail's recent edited collection of essays, *Seventies British Cinema* (British Film Institute/Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), only two books on the subject had seen the light of day. These were Alexander Walker's *National Heroes* (1985) and John Walker's *The Once and Future Film* (1985). Single volume histories of British cinema have tended to overlook the 1970s, perhaps because, as Shail explains, 'The 1970s has invariably been seen as an era of decline for British cinema.' (Shail 2008: xviii) Having said that, Amy Sargeant does offer a useful chapter on the period in her book, *British Cinema: A Critical History* (BFI, 2005), which is divided into three sections – the titles of which neatly sum up the ways in which the subject might be conceptualized: 'Shlock and Dross', 'Dissatisfaction and Dissent', and 'Alternative Strategies'.

1960s British cinema, however, has received a relatively consistent, high level of critical attention. One of the reasons for this is that British films proved very popular in Britain, the United States and elsewhere during the 1960s, especially the James Bond series of films, the 'New Wave' films and the Beatles films (Street 1997: 20. See also Bennett and Woollacott 1987; Black 2005; Chapman 1999; Hill 1986; Taylor 2006; Reiter 2008). Witnessing this

success (and in some cases clearly facilitating it), American companies soon set up offices in London, hoping to back the next big British film. The key companies operating production programmes in Britain during this period were United Artists, Paramount, Warner Bros, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Twentieth Century Fox, Columbia, Universal and Disney. But American films were made in Britain, too. The increased levels of American finance that flooded into filmmaking in Britain during the 1960s can at least in part be put down to the quality and availability of British studios and the relatively cheap labour. American monies imported to finance filmmaking in Britain through subsidiaries reached a peak of £31.3 million in 1968 (Dickinson and Street 1985: 240).

However, the British film industry suffered immensely from the withdrawal of this finance by US companies in the early 1970s. Indeed, by 1974, the sum imported by these companies had fallen to £2.9 million (Dickinson and Street 1985: 240). Funds available from the British government-backed National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC) also dropped – between 1973 and 1981 it contributed only £4 million towards 31 feature films and six shorts (Dickinson and Street 1985: 241; Street 1997: 20), although, because of his efforts to get important films made during this period, NFFC boss Mamoun Hassan should be regarded as one of the key figures in British cinema. But even his considerable efforts, and the energies of other determined and talented individuals, could not change this statistical tide. Overall, the total number of British films registered fell from 98 in 1971 to 36 in 1981 (Wood 1983: 143).

Of course, these statistics make things appear very bad indeed. But, against very tough odds, interesting, arresting and often unusual films were made in Britain in the 1970s. Indeed, this writer would argue that in terms of their quality, many of these films stand up to anything made in Britain at any time. Many remain relatively unknown. Some of them are explored by contributors to this book. But there are many other intriguing but often overlooked 1970s British films. These might include *Death Line* (Gary Sherman, 1972), *Zardoz* (John Boorman, 1972), *Akenfield* (Peter Hall, 1974), *Winstanley* (Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo, 1975), *The Song of the Shirt* (Sue Clayton and Jonathan Curling, 1979), *Radio On* (Chris Petit, 1979), and two films directed by Stuart Cooper, *Little Malcolm* (1972) and *Overlord* (1975). Furthermore, Europeans also made films in Britain during the 1970s, some of which are now be regarded as minor classics (or at least cult classics). Two examples might be the Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski's extraordinary films *Deep End* (1970) and *The Shout* (1978), both of which say very interesting things about aspects of British culture of the period.

Writing about the 1970s in a very useful article published in the 1990s, Andrew Higson reflects upon the conventional wisdom that saw (and indeed still sees) British cinema of the 1970s 'shying away from innovation, lacking in confidence and generally of little interest apart from a few isolated films' (Higson 1994: 217). He also notices the extraordinary complexities of the British film industry during this period, and acknowledges that any future histories should take account of positive as well as negative developments, arguing that 'In many ways, the 1970s can be regarded as a transitional period for cinema, caught between two more significant

moments.' (Higson 1994: 217) This was a period, then, which was often conceptualized as a disappointingly thin 'filling' sandwiched between the critical and commercial successes of the 1960s and the mid-1980s, the latter period characterized by the aftermath of the Oscar haul and international recognition of *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981). But Higson, to his credit, acknowledges that this historical view of the 1970s as an 'in-between' period of stagnation does not fully engage with the complexities of the industry at the time, or really begin to understand the key changes that impacted upon this industry.

The social and cultural changes that had occurred in the 1960s 'meant that the film industry could no longer rely on what they conceived of as the "mass" audience in marketing their films' (Higson 1994: 217). As we have seen, many sources of finance for production in Britain dried up, including British sources: 'State support for the commercial film industry in the 1970s was thus minimal and ineffective.' (Higson 1994: 226) This meant that often the films that did get made during the 1970s tended to be of a particular type – low budget, and guaranteed an audience in Britain, at least. Indeed, when we think of 1970s British cinema we might still think of cheap, poor quality horror films, ludicrously unsexy sex comedies, shoddy farces or tedious television spin-offs. But, as Robert Shail rightly points out, during the 1970s 'British cinema was driven to extremes, sometimes in an attempt to attract new audiences, any audiences, but just as often to give expression to voices that had often been previously marginalized' (Shail 2008: xviii). As such, many very interesting films did get made by individuals working on the periphery of the industry.

As a number of the contributors to this book show, key figures managed to spot opportunities for filmmaking. Indeed, in 1970s Britain, independent filmmaking was often very successful. David Puttnam, for example, putting films into production such as *That'll Be the Day* (Claude Whatham, 1973), *Stardust* (Michael Apted, 1974) and *Flame* (Richard Loncraine, 1975), recognized the possibilities that existed for producers to pioneer complex film packages that might exploit diversification through tie-ins to other media. As he acknowledges:

> what happened throughout the 1970s was a series of props. Prop one for me anyway was TV advertising and the albums. Prop two then became so-called international co-production. Prop three was joint-ventures…so we began to get some money out of the Americans for our movies. And it was a make-do-and-mend diet.[1]

Puttnam noticed the ways in which successful films might be organized around successful popular music artists. *That'll Be the Day* (Claude Whatham, 1973) 'was funded effectively by its album,'[2] a TV-advertised collection of songs released as a double LP by Ronco (for more on Puttnam's career see Yule 1989). As Higson puts it, then, 'Cinema was thus able to renew itself partly by strategically aligning itself within the multi-media entertainment market.' (Higson 1994: 221–222)

Other producers were perhaps more ambitious, effectively trying to beat the US majors at their own game. Mainstream cinema in 1970s Britain was thus primarily characterized by

its relationship to Hollywood. Indeed, a number of British films mimicked the US approach. They were made with large budgets and aimed squarely at international and American markets. International cast big-budget extravaganzas of this type included *Death on the Nile* (John Guillermin, 1978) and *The Boys from Brazil* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1978). But, at other times, this ambition to beat the Americans at their own game led to disastrous results, as Sarah Street points out: 'Overall, the 1970s were interesting years when producers either reacted defensively to the difficult economic context in which they were forced to operate, or they thought big, gambling recklessly against the odds.' (Street 1997: 93)

But the 1970s saw significant work being made in Britain under the auspices of art cinema and avant-garde filmmaking. The Department of Education and Science provided funds to the British Film Institute, the Arts Council of Great Britain and Regional Arts Associations. As this aptly demonstrates, the 1970s might have seen the steady decline of classical cinema (with its foundations in the studio system), but it also saw 'the emergence and consolidation of alternatives to it' (Higson 1994: 227). Indeed, the margins of the industry provided spaces for innovative and unconventional work. After all, the British Film Institute Production Board funded early films by significant artists such as Bill Douglas, Terence Davies and Horace Ové (Andrews 1979). As the pioneering Ové demonstrated with *Pressure* (1975), black filmmakers could, with determination, begin to get films made in 1970s Britain. And white filmmakers could employ black actors to tell essentially black stories, as was the case with *Black Joy* (Anthony Simmons, 1977), discussed in this book by Josie Dolan and Andrew Spicer, and *Babylon* (Franco Rosso, 1980), discussed by Paul Newland.

As William Fowler demonstrates, a rich vein in experimental filmmaking developed in Britain through the 1970s, particularly evident in the output of the London Filmmakers Co-operative, and, specifically, the work of artists such as Malcolm Le Grice, William Raban, Steve Dwoskin, Peter Gidal and Gill Eatherly. Other important groups working successfully during the 1970s included the Berwick Film Collective, the London Women's Film Group, Cinema Action and Liberation Films (see also Harvey 1986; Dupin 2008).

Better-known filmmakers also managed to navigate the often treacherous waters of filmmaking in 1970s Britain with varying degrees of success. The well-respected Americans Stanley Kubrick and Joseph Losey produced some of their most challenging and influential work in Britain during this period. Kubrick made the notorious *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and the artful *Barry Lyndon* (1975), for example, while Losey directed the *Palme d'Or*-winning *The Go-Between* (1971), once again working successfully with his British collaborator, the screenwriter and dramatist Harold Pinter. Key British directors such as Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, John Schlesinger, Tony Richardson and Bryan Forbes 'went into the 1970s with high reputations' (Higson 1994: 216), even if some of them were driven to the United States to make films. And relatively new directors working in British cinema at the time included Richard Attenborough, Nicolas Roeg, Ken Russell, Stephen Frears and Ken Loach – names now synonymous with quality British filmmaking.

So, this book, I hope, might go some way towards challenging the assumption that British cinema of the 1970s remains unworthy of our attention. The aim of this collection, then, is to

help to begin to reshape our understanding of the filmmaking climate in Britain during the 1970s. As the contributors to this collection often show, filmmaking in Britain diversified in rich and interesting ways. We know that the 1970s saw the release of a number of well-loved, cult British films such as *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973) (discussed by E. Anna Claydon in her chapter) and *Get Carter* (Mike Hodges, 1971) (see also Catterall and Wells 2002). But it could be argued that a number of other extraordinary films were made that in many ways rival anything produced in the United States, Germany, France or Spain during this decade in terms of their formal or aesthetic qualities, or the originality of their subject matter. Just one example might be Peter Medak's *The Ruling Class* (1972), analysed here in detail by Mark Broughton. British filmmakers and artists also increasingly worked across national boundaries – witness Nicolas Roeg's 1970s work, for example, which is discussed by Andy Patch. The international success of British popular music also offered opportunities for a number of filmmakers, especially Ken Russell (*Tommy*, for example, is discussed here in chapters by Justin Smith and E. Anna Claydon). Some genre filmmaking remained relatively successful in the 1970s. Studios such as Hammer, Amicus and Tigon made a large number of horror films, especially during the earlier part of the decade (see Pirie 1974; Hutchings 1993). And even the large number of what many consider to be worthless, terrible films (such as the *Confessions* series and the later 'Carry Ons') now operate as rich historical documents which can tell us much about the shape of the country and its people during this decade (see Hunt 1998; Jordan 1983; Medhurst 1992; Sheridan 2001). Indeed, if we are to start to comprehend British national identity in the 1970s we might find as many clues in *No Sex Please – We're British* (Cliff Owen, 1973) as in *Nighthawks* (Ron Peck, 1978).

As Andrew Higson notes, many individuals who had made (or were making) names for themselves as purveyors of intelligent films in Britain did not see their careers blossom within the confines of British cinema during the period (Higson 1994: 216–217). For example, filmmakers such as Ken Loach and Alan Clarke worked across and outside cinema, producing very powerful work for television, as Dave Rolinson explains in his chapter. It is certainly true to say that British production companies had extensive interests in commercial television. And, as Adrian Garvey argues, one of the most successful areas of British film production during the 1970s was television spin-offs, such as film versions of situation comedies (Paul Williams examines one of many examples, *The Likely Lads*), and the Monty Python films. These films managed to be recognizably British, and thus generally appealed to British audiences (if, not always, to audiences abroad). Another successful area of filmmaking in 1970s Britain was pornography. And a large number of films were made during the period that were driven by the spectacle of sexual display, such as the notorious sex comedies *Eskimo Nell* (Martin Campbell, 1974) and *I'm Not Feeling Myself Tonight* (Joe McGrath, 1975) (see Hunter 2008). The success of this market of course can be at least in part put down to the new culture of permissiveness that was creeping into British society during the period.

The chapters in this book demonstrate that British cinema of the 1970s might be characterized by two things – fragmentation and transformation. Film-watching gradually

shifted from the cinema to the home, as the impact of television and then video were increasingly felt. Changes in patterns of leisure activity during the 1970s led to the dissipation of a 'mass audience' for films in Britain, which in turn led to a diversification 'at the point of exhibition' (Higson 1994: 220). In addition to this, the post-war consensus began to fragment, as did the family audience. So, British cinemas suddenly found themselves entertaining not only smaller audiences, but also audiences in smaller groups, including those eager to see 'X' certificate flicks (this begins to account for the boom in the production of horror films and sexploitation films). Old cinema palaces were converted to three-screen complexes, which further encouraged diversification. And, on the whole, cinema audiences were now primarily young and adolescent (see Docherty, Morrison and Tracey 1987). So, in the 1970s, as Higson advocates, 'Cinema itself was not in decline, but was going through a complex process of diversification and renewal.' (Higson 1994: 237)

The vast majority of the chapters in the collection have their origins in the 'Don't Look Now: British Cinema in the 1970s' conference (hosted by the University of Exeter in July 2007). The book begins with Sue Harper's terrain-mapping keynote lecture, published here in full. Harper makes a series of very insightful points concerning the problem of how to periodize the 1970s, and considers a number of possible methodological approaches to the period. The chapters which follow begin, I hope, to engage with some of these rich ideas. But this book does not pretend to offer an all-encompassing or totalizing account of what occurred in the British film industry during the 1970s. It does instead offer a picture of the period which reflects both its fragmentary nature and helps to highlight the richness, diversity and peculiarity of 1970s film culture in Britain.

Section I of the book begins with chapters by Robert Shail and Melanie Williams on two very intriguing individuals working within the British film industry during the 1970s, Stanley Baker and Glenda Jackson. Section II features chapters by Vincent Porter, William Fowler, Josie Dolan and Andrew Spicer, and Paul Newland, which discuss, in different ways, some of the rich goings-on on margins of 1970s British filmmaking. Peter Hutchings, Justin Smith, Peri Bradley and E. Anna Claydon offer chapters for Section III which examine the ways in which specific films reflect the anxieties of the period; charting, for example, representations of deviant sexuality, psychological trauma, horror, and catastrophe. In Section IV of the book, the complex but rich relationship between British cinema and television is explored. Chapters by Dave Rolinson, Adrian Garvey and Paul Williams carefully navigate this fertile territory. Following on from this, Amy Sargeant's chapter gives an account of the work of key filmmakers in the advertising industry. The book concludes with Section V, which features studies of key individual directors and their work. John Izod, Karl Magee, Kathryn Mackenzie and Isabelle Gourdin offer an examination of Lindsay Anderson's ambitious, epic film, *O Lucky Man!* (1973). James Leggott writes about the powerful social realism of Barney Platts-Mills. Mark Broughton's chapter looks at the intriguing employment of landscape in Peter Medak's extraordinary *The Ruling Class* (1972). And in the final chapter of the book, Andrew Patch offers a reading of Nicolas Roeg's masterpiece, *Don't Look Now* (1973).

## Notes

1. Lord Puttnam interviewed by Paul Newland, 4 December 2007
2. Ibid.

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# Chapter 1

Keynote Lecture, Don't Look Now: British Cinema in the 1970s Conference, University of Exeter, July 2007

Sue Harper

This is a cinema which it is easy to parody. It could be characterized as a set of tasteless films made by and for men in safari suits – or as the terminal illness of a hitherto quality cinema – or as a collection of tacky films leavened by the occasional masterpiece – or as the apotheosis of an avant-garde fuelled by elitist bile. Of course, all these definitions are silly in their different ways, but these are the kind of comments you have to parry whenever you announce that you are working on the 1970s. To be sure, the 1970s is no longer the undiscovered country, but it is I think the case that the drawing of a map of the British film culture of the period, and the sketching out of the methodological problems involved in studying it, has not yet been attempted. I can't hope to do all that in a short keynote lecture, but I can, I hope, indicate some useful paths we might follow, some cul-de-sacs which are not worth going down, and some metaphors which might help us to conceptualize a period in culture which is extraordinarily rich and suggestive.

The key words, of course, are CAPITAL and CULTURE (when are they not?) In every period, the economic base partially (but only partially) determines the cultural/cinematic superstructure. That sounds unduly deterministic, perhaps; but what I mean is that cinema, like all the popular arts, is in thrall to the marketplace. In the 1970s film industry, as in certain other periods such as the 1950s, the forces of capital affected artistic creativity in a very uneven manner. Everything depended on the *type* and *intensity* of capital investment, and the degree to which those with financial power were prepared to accord visual artists a degree of autonomy. Or not. As I shall suggest in a moment, the politics and funding of the film industry were connected to the cycles of economic crisis in the 1970s, though not in an obvious way. One could, I suppose, conceptualize the 1970s industry in terms of conflicting fields of energy – with a moribund and underfunded mainstream industry in dialectical conflict with a range of avant-garde practices, some of which vital and were financially secure. That would be tempting, but it is an oversimplification, since the 'fields of energy' metaphor does not allow us to differentiate between the historical roots of cultural texts. And that is what we need to do.

Let us turn for a moment to the issue of periodization. We know that history does not naturally organize itself in neat decades. To a certain extent, 'the 1970s' is a sort of fiction. But let us define an historical period by the sense that there is a new (and shared) way of seeing, a different set of political arrangements and economic conditions slightly different from what obtained before or after. If we take that definition, we can chart 'the 1970s' from 1968 – that *annus mirabilis* when there seemed to be a break in structures of feeling – to 1979, the year of Thatcher's election.

An attractive way of thinking about the 1970s is that it was a period when the innovations of the 1960s – experienced by a few – were assimilated by the many. The popular press doubtless had a lot to do with this mediation. The major transformation of personal life which was set in motion by the 1960s was materially aided by the development of efficient contraception which made it possible to separate sexual pleasure from procreation. This, together with second-wave feminism (which could be seen as an offshoot from it) transformed attitudes to female autonomy and family structures. And the legalisation of homosexual acts was of course a key aspect of the whole rethinking of sexual probity and desire in the period.

On the economic side, it's important to recognize that the 1970s was a period of extreme economic uncertainty in Britain – as opposed to the United States, where the economy was slightly more able to weather the OPEC crisis. Corporatism came unstuck in Britain more acutely than elsewhere, yet Keynesian welfarism was under extreme pressure. The coal dispute of 1972, high inflation rates, wild-cat strikes, swift changes of government, the Irish crisis, the splintering of the left into a range of sub-groups – all these were accompanied by an increased commodification, the flourishing of consumerism and domesticated leisure, and the development of what might be called a gift-economy.

What is certain is that the older, stable definitions of class ascription were transformed in the 1970s. The culture of deference was in terminal decline. Moreover, as I have suggested, the older sexual order was transformed too. Modernism – that cultural form which called into question 'the old stable ego of the personality' was thoroughly assimilated. These, combined with acute economic instability, produced a society where little could be taken for granted.

So far so good. How did the cinema relate to these social transformations? The problem is, of course, that the cycles of cultural production cannot be straightforwardly placed onto economic or political cycles, like a tracing on top of a map. It comes as no surprise that the economic situation in the British film industry was dire throughout the decade, but this was not as a direct consequence of the broader fiscal crisis. It was because of the withdrawal of American capital after 1968, when 85 per cent of British film production had been fuelled by American capital. This withdrawal was affected with indecent haste, and left a production vacuum for the British industry. What inhibited any economic recovery for the industry was the fact that the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC – the government sponsoring body) was institutionally weak and at the mercy of changing government policy. I have no time here to describe the complexity of the economic structures of the industry (others are going to do that), but it seems clear that extreme risk-taking behaviour was the only way to produce innovatory work. There was an influx of capital from sources outside the film industry and from television – Lew Grade, John Woolf, Euston Films – which may have had a destabilizing effect. The 1970s industry was one which specialized in customized, *ad hoc* arrangements to back individual films – sometimes to the extent of individual directors mortgaging themselves (Ken Russell did this to finance *Savage Messiah*), or setting up a private conglomerate (such as Jarman did with the *Marquis of*

*Dufferin* and Ava and David Hockney for *Sebastiane*). Those outfits with less imaginative financial arrangements often contented themselves with TV spin-offs which could ensure a modest but certain return. It might be possible to present the remakes of *On the Buses* and *Love Thy Neighbour* as a sort of equivalent to the industrial product in high capitalism – with interchangeable components, predictable outcomes and long historical roots. Such products are of course profoundly residual in their origins and operation, and represent an introverted and insular sensibility.

What responses can we detect in 1970s British cinema to the social and sexual transformations I have outlined earlier? On the whole, it looks as though the crisis in modernity (or indeed, its apotheosis and decline) stimulated many British filmmakers to take a conservative position. Very many films express extreme anxiety about female autonomy, particularly in the sexual area. To be sure, the commodification of sexuality so prevalent in films like *Come Play with Me* (and to a certain extent facilitated by the liberals now in place at the British Board of Film Censorship) was well in evidence. But film after film, in a range of genres, rehearsed the dangers inherent in female power. On the class front, many formulaic films buffed up the old social order and presented it as fit for service, albeit with a cheeky gloss; that is how we should understand the *Confessions* films. They are a sort of extension of the *Carry On* cycle, only with balls. In addition, very many films of the period display a sort of wry cynicism about institutions and social structures, while being dolefully in love with the surface world of goods. Often, it seems as though the objects of the new consumerism function in film texts like a sort of cargo cult.

In general, 1970s British cinema seems to be one which displays a mix of irony and deliberate awkwardness at the level of script, *mise-en-scène* and acting style. I am thinking about *Tommy*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Zardoz*, *Royal Flash* and many others. An awareness of contingency and fragility suffuses these films. It seems to me that there is a retreat from confidence in public realities in many films of the period, and a retreat into fantasy, the private and the subjective. It also seems that their makers seem to want the films to function as a form of social play. Or to put it another way, it is a ludic cinema which foregrounds irony – that state of mind which evinces both belief and denial, and which simultaneously yearns and mocks. Irony is a *fort/da* game which encourages players to imagine two contradictory things at once, and it is tempting to see the ironic as a precursor to the postmodernist impulse. Many 1970s films exhibit chronic disavowal in their manner, and I would say this is one of the characteristic structures of feeling of the visual culture of the period.

This is all OK, as far as it goes, but it remains on a descriptive rather than analytical level. We need to up the ante on the methodological front if we want to raise our game, to distinguish between authors and between film types, or – most important of all – to establish those fault-lines in the established cinematic order which would make innovation possible. Or, to put it another way, those moments of crisis which forced artists and entrepreneurs to recognize that the old conceptual models needed refurbishment, and that the sexual and social utopias under debate might be worth engaging with after all.

What methods of analysis will help us move from the descriptive to the analytical level, and map the field of 1970s film culture in a discriminating way? The older kinds of film history methodology are not really appropriate for this case. In studying the structure of 1930s British cinema, for example, it was entirely feasible to see it as a producers' cinema, and to study the output and cultural capital of Korda and Balcon. The structure of the 1940s industry could easily be studied through an analysis of studios – Ealing, Gainsborough. For the 1950s, Vincent Porter and I suggested in *The Decline of Deference* that, due to legislative changes, all the organizational power shifted to the distribution companies, who all had production outfits. This means that it was feasible to categorize film output by looking at bodies like the Rank Organisation, British Lion or ABPC. The clarity of such methods of analysis is not possible for the 1970s, alas, for the simple reason that the link between distribution, production and exhibition was fractured. In addition, exhibition was in crisis, and the independent exhibitor was in decline once and for all. So the older models of agency will have to be radically revised.

Another stalwart of the analysis of earlier periods has been that of genre – the costume film, the melodrama, the social problem film. Such generic ascription does not obtain in 1970s British cinema. Instead of having clear-cut boundaries, films seem to have permeable membranes, and to segue between horror/sex films/history or comedy/realism/sex, for example. This tentativeness about genre, and the range of cross-generic type, suggests that filmmakers were uncertain about public taste. So another tried-and-tested method of analysis – genre – goes west. Of course, a lack of confidence in old models will give rise to a concentration on purely personal and idiosyncratic visions.

Tentatively, I want to suggest a number of methods film historian might use to distinguish between films of the 1970s, and to establish their social and artistic meaning. I'll offer these as a series of questions. The list is not definitive, of course.

1. What types of authorship obtained in a film or group of films? An analysis of the period would have to include producers like Don Boyd, Lord Brabourne, David Puttnam, John Woolf, Nat Cohen and Deeley and Spikings. Such enterprising figures were in a position, in a period where no-one was king, to bring together a range of funding for individual projects. But also, the 1970s seems to be a period of the heroic auteur-director so beloved of orthodox critics (Ken Russell, John Boorman, Derek Jarman, Nic Roeg, Ridley Scott). Other older directors (David Lean, Joseph Losey) developed in a qualitatively new way. Others, such as John Schlesinger and Tony Richardson, went to Hollywood. We need of course to extend 'authorship' to scriptwriters and designers, and to ask what it was about a film's progenitor(s) which enabled him or them to manoeuvre their way round funding constraints. Was it guile, *nous* or just plain luck which enabled them to strike a deal?
2. What is the range of visual styles current in 1970s cinema? On the face of it, it is enormous – from the abstract swirlings of Le Grice to the pedestrian utilitarianism of the *Confessions* films. But the question we need to ask is whether there is any common

practice in the management of social space in film, whether the design practices are *ad hoc* or structured and what effect technological advances had on the 'look' of films of the period. Is there mileage in the notion of the flatness of the picture plane in the period? There certainly is a marked decline in the use of depth-of-field cinematography. Should this be attributed to technological fashion, or should we see it as a shared preoccupation with the world of surfaces?

3. Is it possible to trace a consistent narrative of the body in 1970s films? If there is one, is it gender-specific? Or does it differ according to the production context of films? The place to start might be in the horror film, where there is what might be called 'textual overload', in that the films of Hammer, Tigon, Amicus and Pete Walker move way beyond the comfort zone. The symbol of the 'bloody parcel' in these films can be read as an indirect means of addressing taboo topics like abortion and menstruation. But such thematically based analyses would need to be firmly rooted in a sense of what was historically possible in censorship terms, and the dates of important 'breaks' in practice – the first full-frontal scenes, for example.
4. If there are artists who are able to effect a cross-over between the mutually exclusive worlds of mainstream and avant-garde (first, Jarman and later, Greenaway), why was this? What sorts of filters, gatekeepers or negotiators made this possible? Is the 'bleeding' of influence from the avant-garde into the mainstream (it is never the other way round) because there is not a stable economic and aesthetic base?
5. Do groups of texts (divided by period, or by author, or by type) share a definition of the difference between the sacred and the profane? Does mess, dirt and the visceral play a different role in 1970s cinema, as opposed to (say) in the 1950s?
6. Is Raymond Williams' division of cultural texts into three types (dominant, emergent, residual) still a useful tool for thinking through this period? How would it be best used?
7. Which types of film texts have the longest cultural roots in the 1970s? Do popular films have long or short roots in the period? How does innovatory film – which breaks with established practice in some way – deal with the cultural capital of the audience?
8. Should film not be studied in tandem with the television of the period? In what way do they differ in terms of scale, intimacy, fantasy and social geography? Are there any stylistic cross-overs between film and television? The television of the period threw up important innovations – *The Family*, for example. Does it manifest the same irony and disavowal as the cinema? If not, then why not?
9. What are the problems involved in the analysis of audience taste in this period? If the rich material of earlier periods is not extant, does that inhibit the development of an argument about the consumption aspect of the cinematic process?
10. Is the most suggestive issue really not the way in which 1970s films respond to the present and its discontents, but the way they deploy the past? The flavour of 1970s nostalgia is like no other, but it differs markedly from one film to another. I suggested in my essay in *The New Film History* (edited by James Chapman, Mark Glancy and myself)

> that it was possible to divide historical representation in 1970s film into a range of types, each with its own funding patterns, narrative structures and deployment of the past – American histories, auteur histories, low-status schlockers and marginal histories. That might be a productive way to go, always with the proviso that the past is the most fluid, the most nebulous and most fleeting category of all.

Of course, after the methodological ground has been cleared, historians of film have to imagine themselves going out to meet the denizens of the past – the people who made or saw the films they study. For some of us, this meeting is tricky, because the history we study is also our own. Besides those others, it is our young selves that we go out to meet, albeit in a shadowy form. And actually, those very areas which we think are safest from the depredations of historical discourse are those most drenched in it. But that's a story for another day.

## Section I

Individuals and the Industry

## Chapter 2

# Stanley Baker and British Lion: A Cautionary Tale

Robert Shail

During 2007, in her keynote lecture to the conference on 1970s British cinema held at the University of Exeter (the same conference from which this collection of essays grew), Sue Harper mapped out some of the difficulties facing the film historian in addressing this period and suggested a number of methodological strategies for unpicking its complexities. Under the heading of questions of authorship, she argued that due consideration would need to be given to the new breed of creative producers who had emerged during the decade. What is also apparent from this initial examination of the period is a sense of its fragmentary, dislocated nature. This is not a period with anything like a dominant historical narrative, but one instead marked by a wide diversity of competing 'stories', each one tending to illustrate the fractured nature of its cinematic landscape. In commencing the process of trying to understand a period of British cinema which still remains substantially neglected, one narrative thread clearly in need of unravelling is that of the new modes of production which began to appear. This essay offers one such story from within that chapter, and one which the author offers as a predominantly cautionary tale. The changed production context of the 1970s opened up opportunities for a new kind of producer, but at the same effectively closed the door on another, older approach to filmmaking. What was gained in one area was lost in another. This essay recounts the story of the ill-fated takeover of British Lion led by a team which had grown up around the Welsh star and producer Stanley Baker. Baker is, in a sense, both its hero and victim. It is offered as illustration of a number of key trends which were to mark British film production in the period, and subsequently.

Our protagonist, Stanley Baker, was born in Ferndale, a small mining village in the industrial valleys of South Wales in 1928. An impoverished but loving childhood instilled in him both the ambition to escape the limitations of his upbringing and a lifelong appreciation for the values of community and family with which he had been raised; he was to become a lifelong socialist and supporter of the Labour Party. Under the tutelage of a supportive teacher, Glynne Morse, he began to develop as a budding actor making his first film appearance as a teenager in the Ealing wartime propaganda film *Undercover* (Sergei Nolbandov, 1943). Shortly afterwards he made his theatrical debut as understudy to another talented Welsh youngster whose background was strikingly similar to his own and who was to become his close friend, Richard Burton. A spell at Birmingham Rep followed and after National Service he found himself working as a jobbing actor on stage, in television and in various walk-on parts in largely undistinguished British films of the late 1940s and early 1950s.[1] A major breakthrough came with a key supporting role in another Ealing World War

Two drama, *The Cruel Sea* (Charles Frend, 1953), where he plays Bennett, the belligerent working-class officer who stands out like a sore thumb from his more genteel, middle-class fellow officers. Regular employment followed for the rest of the decade, although he was frequently typecast as the heavy-browed villain in a number of American-backed period or costume dramas shot in Europe, e.g. *Knights of the Round Table* (Richard Thorpe, 1954), *Alexander the Great* (Robert Rossen, 1956).

The next significant step in his career came when he bought himself out of his stifling Rank contract and went independent (still an unusual course of action for a British actor of the time), appearing in the testosterone-driven action thriller *Hell Drivers* (Cy Endfield, 1957). The film's success at the British box office was followed by a series of leading roles in low-budget crime films with Baker switching between playing sympathetic criminals and flawed policemen. His box-office status in the UK soared and, as Andrew Spicer has recorded, he rapidly became the quintessential British tough guy, tapping into the fantasies and aspirations of a new generation of young, working-class filmgoers (Spicer 1999). In films such as *Violent Playground* (Basil Dearden, 1958), *Blind Date* (Joseph Losey, 1959), *Hell is a City* (Val Guest, 1960) and *The Criminal* (Joseph Losey, 1960) he both became one of the most popular British stars with domestic audiences and helped pave the way for a new breed of working-class actors. His work with Joseph Losey also raised his aspirations as an actor, reaching its summation with his complex performance in *Accident* (Joseph Losey, 1967) where he proved a match for his more feted co-star, Dirk Bogarde.

Baker's gradual move into production began with *Zulu* (Cy Endfield, 1964). In order to make the film he established a production company, Diamond Films, with the support of the maverick American producer Joseph E. Levine, who in turn secured financial backing from the American major Paramount. Baker's skill in handling such an ambitious project, which has been meticulously described by Sheldon Hall (Hall 2005), along with the film's enormous commercial success, enabled him to seal a longer term deal with Levine and Paramount. A new production company, Oakhurst, was formed and further box-office success followed with *Robbery* (Peter Yates, 1967), featuring Baker in the lead, and *The Italian Job* (Peter Collinson, 1969). Oakhurst was set up by Baker in partnership with his long-time friend and collaborator Bob Porter and a new business partner, Michael Deeley. Deeley, who was born in 1932, had started in television as an editor in the mid-1950s and was co-producer of *The Mukkinese Battlehorn* (1955), a short film made by The Goons. By the early 1960s he had become general manager of Woodfall Films, the company created by Tony Richardson, John Osborne and Harry Saltzman which had been responsible for making the bulk of the New Wave 'kitchen sink' films. He went on to make a modest name for himself during the 1960s as a producer with a taste for unconventional material, such as Lindsay Anderson's experimental short *The White Bus* (1966). He also had an eye for more fashionable commercial properties like Richard Lester's *The Knack* (1965). Deeley and Baker took a joint producer credit on *Robbery*, with Deeley working alone on *The Italian Job*.

Baker and Deeley were certainly cut from different cloth; although both were highly ambitious, their aspirations for cinema derived from contrasting views of what the medium

could achieve. For Bob Porter, who had known Baker since the 1950s when he was still a supporting player and Porter was working as a stuntman, Baker's motivations were intrinsically idealistic: 'He loved movies and wanted to make films that people would enjoy, but also ones that would get across a positive social message.' His childhood experiences of intense deprivation in the depression-hit Rhondda Valley had made him an ardent socialist and as an active supporter of the Labour Party he took a central role in shaping their Party Political Broadcasts of the 1970s for television, adding a greater technical polish and providing voice-overs. He spoke at rallies in South Wales during the 1974 election campaign that subsequently saw the return of a Labour government with Harold Wilson restored as prime minister. He passionately believed that the financial imperatives of commercial filmmaking could be combined with a cinema which conveyed a broadly liberal political agenda, as had been his intentions with *Zulu*. Responding to the declining fortunes of the British film industry, he gave a number of interviews in the early 1970s where he talked about his hopes for the renewal of British filmmaking. In a press release issued by Oakhurst in 1969 he rails at the timidity of UK financiers:

> It's often so difficult to get a good picture, a picture that really means something, on the studio floor and actually start shooting it. I may be rather idealistic and optimistic, but I think that any picture *can* be set up and made; the distributors are there to be convinced. That's what is so fascinating about this business. So it's possible for anyone with enough guts to go to a big distributor and say 'Look, this picture is so bloody marvelous that it will make you a fortune.' If you can convince them, then you can go ahead and make your picture. (Baker 1969)

His vision is of a company making entertainment films for a mass audience that nonetheless have something worthwhile and socially progressive to say. The example he quotes, perhaps a little surprisingly, is that of producer Betty Box, who he had worked with in the late 1950s when contracted to Rank.

Michael Deeley, by contrast, was a forward-looking, entrepreneurial producer who clearly loved the cut-and-thrust of deal-making for its own sake and thrived on the high risk financial excitements offered by international film production. In his memoirs he discusses his working relationship with the writer of *The Italian Job*, Troy Kennedy Martin:

> One of my concerns was the style of Troy's script as it stood. The first draft had a political emphasis and was somewhat 'complicated'. I thought that the picture should be a light-hearted caper and nothing more. A movie is a motion picture, so it has to have motion, it has to be visual and it doesn't often allow room for political discussion. (Deeley 2008: 47)

These differences of approach are apparent in the contrasting styles adopted by *Robbery* and *The Italian Job*. The latter favours stylized car chases and spectacular stunts, Swinging London trappings, and a patriotism fueled by England's relatively recent victory in the

football World Cup. The former opts for low-key realism, authentic-looking locations and an attitude which clearly views its robbers as something akin to class heroes taking on vested interests and social authority.

By the end of the 1960s Stanley Baker had progressed from supporting actor to star to producer, and then to running his own independent film production company, as well as being a key figure on the board of a television consortium (HTV). The next logical step, or so it seemed to him, was to move into the major league of British film producers as a company executive, but this was a high-risk venture. As Justin Smith has shown, the 1970s were to be 'a decade of stagnation and decline in the fortunes of the British film industry' (Smith 2008: 67). Declining audience attendance figures, combined with the wholesale withdrawal of American finance, had left the industry in a state of considerable turmoil and depression. Major producers like Rank increasingly found filmmaking too risky a venture and diversified into other areas. Production was increasingly left in the hands of small independents who were more inclined to venture into areas such as exploitation in order to draw in what remained of the British audience. Another factor was the sheer volatility of the industry in this period, a time when 'the fortunes of a producer or distributor could alter radically overnight, and where institutional policies were barely more stable' (Shail 2008: xviii). Amid this increasingly unpredictable context, the focus for Baker's ambitions came to rest on the ailing production company British Lion.

British Lion was founded in 1927 and went on to achieve moderate success during the 1930s and early 1940s. In 1945 Alexander Korda took a controlling share in the company, expanding its facilities to include the studio complex at Shepperton. However, the company subsequently went into a steep decline following a number of expensive box-office failures and in 1948 it had to be rescued from collapse with loans from the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC).[2] Despite this, it again ran into difficulties and by 1954 had gone into receivership, having to be revived once more by further loans from the NFFC, effectively making it a nationalized film company. In 1957 it was put under the management of a board comprised of a number of distinguished British filmmakers including the Boulting Brothers and Launder and Gilliat. As well as producing its own films, it frequently acted as a distributor for smaller independent companies and in the early 1960s had the foresight to back some of the most notable New Wave films including *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960). Having become a profitable concern, it was then sold off by the NFFC in 1964 to a consortium of the filmmakers it had supported (among them directors Tony Richardson and John Schlesinger) with the veteran Michael Balcon in charge. They could not prevent the company from sharing in the general decline which was beginning to beset the whole industry by the late 1960s and early 1970s. By 1972 it was back deeply in the red, with the Shepperton facility running at a considerable loss. It was subsequently taken over by the firm Barclay Securities who seemed more interested in trying to develop Shepperton for housing than for filmmaking.

It was at this point that Baker and his two principle business partners, Michael Deeley and Barry Spikings, became interested in acquiring the company. Barry Spikings' background

was in journalism and publishing where he had established himself during the 1960s as a rising star. While with the International Publishing Corporation (IPC) he had lead their strategy to move into other areas of entertainment such as cinema. After leaving IPC, Spikings was looking for another way to develop this ambition and found it by buying into the partnership which Baker had already established at Oakhurst with Michael Deeley. He also put his money, along with Baker and Deeley, into the purchase of Alembic House, a tower block on Albert Embankment where Baker had installed his family and various friends (Richard Harris had the twelfth floor and *Zulu* composer John Barry lived with his partner Jane Birkin on the tenth floor). From Baker's office on the eleventh floor he could survey the Thames and enjoy uninterrupted, panoramic views of the Houses of Parliament. His wife, Ellen, vividly recalls how he discovered the disused building while he was shooting on location for *Robbery*. Somewhat ironically, the penthouse apartment subsequently became the home of the disgraced Tory politician Jeffrey Archer. Baker, Deeley and Spikings founded a new company, Great Western Enterprises, with Baker managing to secure Lord Harlech (who had been one of his partners in the creation of HTV) as another contributor to this new venture.

Their initial interest was in the lucrative area of pop music, both making concert films and in backing festivals, but after an event at Lincoln was washed out by bad weather, with the loss of £200,000, they turned their attention to acquiring British Lion. This was to be achieved by becoming partners in Barclay Securities, with Alembic House used as the means to secure this end. The building was eventually sold, raising sufficient capital to buy a 23 per cent shareholding in Barclay Securities. Deeley and Spikings joined the board of British Lion, effectively taking over management of the studio. In Michael Deeley's terms, as he reported it to Alexander Walker, Stanley Baker was 'primarily an actor-producer rather than a businessman, and lacking the rigorous discipline that Barry and I had decided was necessary to run British Lion, he wasn't involved in the day-to-day decision-making' (Walker 2005: 122). Baker always harboured serious doubts about risking the solid, bricks and mortar investment represented by Alembic House, but was seemingly persuaded by Barry Spikings to take the risk. These anxieties were shared by Baker's wife, Ellen, who was opposed to the sale.

Things began well enough, with the revamped British Lion releasing a series of adventurous and innovative films including *Don't Look Know* (Nicolas Roeg, 1973), *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973) and *The Internecine Project* (Ken Hughes, 1974), as well as a version of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (Joseph Losey, 1973) starring Jane Fonda. Admittedly, both *Don't Look Know* and *The Wicker Man* had been commissioned by British Lion's previous management team and Michael Deeley was not keen on either film, insisting on cuts for *The Wicker Man* and releasing the two films as a cut-price double bill (Brown 2000). However, things rapidly took a bleaker turn when early in 1974 the British Stock Market suffered a collapse. British Lion's new parent company, J.H. Vavasseur (who had taken over from Barclay Securities), saw their share value plummet from 254p to 24p. Deeley and Spikings clung onto the wreckage as British Lion sunk into near oblivion, but poor Stanley Baker was washed away in the

deluge. Barry Spikings initially became manager of a massively slimmed-down Shepperton operation, then he and Michael Deeley wrested control of British Lion's production wing away from Vavasseur and operated it briefly as an independent concern, making the films *Conduct Unbecoming* (Michael Anderson, 1975) and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Nicolas Roeg, 1976), the latter starring David Bowie. When EMI eventually took over in 1976, both Deeley and Spikings joined the board there. They were clearly hardened survivors in what had proved to be a pretty vicious business jungle. For Baker, the venture had been little short of a disaster. Apart from seeing his dreams for the British film industry in dust, it had cost him Alembic House, nearly bankrupted him personally and derailed his acting career. Alexander Walker reported Michael Deeley as saying: 'Stanley Baker was furious and never forgave Barry and me for the whole "adventure". Every time I saw him, I could see him thinking, "Why didn't we keep our lovely safe building on the Embankment?"' (Walker 2005: 127).

Ellen Baker's fears about the nature of film producing in the 1970s had been proved all too correct:

> Stanley met an awful lot of corrupt people when he went into producing. It was rife. There was the opportunity for all sorts of backhanders, if a producer was willing to hand out contracts for catering or cars to the right people. Stanley was absolutely straight. He had no time for anything underhand or dishonest, which didn't always make him the best person to work in that world.

Bob Porter similarly had the greatest respect for Baker's integrity; they shared a no-nonsense, honest approach which had brought them together as friends, as well as business partners, but Porter took no part in the abortive British Lion takeover. For him, there was a fundamental difference between Stanley's approach to the film business and that of some in the industry: 'Stanley was interested in films. He was idealistic, but there were others who were more concerned with the financial side of things. They saw it just as a means of making money.' He remembered how Baker had helped Michael Deeley in the early days of Oakhurst when he had little money of his own, paying off the mortgage on his Earls Court house. Such actions were indicative of his approach to business. By contrast, according to Bob Porter, Baker's erstwhile partner had been saddled with the unfortunate nickname of 'Devious Deeley'.

From the beginning Michael Deeley appears to have been enamoured of the Hollywood model of filmmaking. In his memoirs he writes:

> The Hollywood majors are the worldwide film business and their marketing skills are famously effective – not only because their home market is half the world (and financially eight times the size of any other single film market) but because they have been doing it for a hundred years and have (mostly) got it right. (Deeley 2008: 38)

Revealingly, Deeley's terminology here is very much that of the businessman rather than the filmmaker. For him business seems to have offered plentiful attractions in its own right, whereas for Baker it was largely a means to an end. Deeley's account of the lead-up to the British Lion venture differs in some of its details from that given by Baker's family and friends, but in its broad thrust it is essentially the same. It's clear that Baker and his aspirations for the company were fairly insignificant to Deeley as the takeover is largely presented as something that was his sole project. However, he completely skates over the reasons for the company's financial difficulties and presents its subsequent dismantling and merger with EMI as part of an overall strategy plan devised to secure the company's future (and his as an independent producer). The time scheme of events is peculiarly skewed in his version of the story so that Baker appears to have already died when the core of these events took place. Baker's death occurred at roughly the same time that the final takeover by EMI took place (1976), but he had long been shouldered out of proceedings by then. Despite these omissions, it is clear that Deeley relished the intricacies involved in establishing the financial and managerial arrangements of the new company, responding with determination and focus to an often confusing, rapidly shifting commercial environment.

In contrast, Baker's film career never fully recovered. While pursuing the British Lion takeover his acting had gone onto the backburner, with the result that he appeared in a number of inferior films including *The Twenty-Carat Snatch* (Jean Herman, 1971) and *Innocent Bystanders* (Peter Collinson, 1972). He found it difficult to re-establish his film star status and the best of his 1970s acting work was done for television. Appropriately, his final performance was in an acclaimed BBC Wales adaptation of Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley* (1975–1976) playing the patriarch of a mining family not unlike his own. He died tragically young on 28 June 1976 of cancer. Michael Deeley came through the wreckage of British Lion and went on to a successful career as a producer and senior executive in Hollywood, winning an Academy Award for *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) and working with Ridley Scott on the acclaimed *Blade Runner* (1982). His entrepreneurial skills and enjoyment of the free market ethos of the American scene were often combined for a taste for maverick productions which he seemed to carry over from his days at the centre of Britain's innovative 1960s cultural environment.

In Baker and Deeley's short-lived takeover of British Lion we see the demise of one production model and the rise of another, occurring at a time when this shift in the dynamics of the industry was being replicated many times over. The events were largely catastrophic for Baker's career as a producer and star, while they actually formed a platform for Deeley's continued success. It would be easy to attribute this simply to differing ethical and political stances between the two men, but this does not entirely explain what occurred. Baker had been schooled in the industry during the 1950s, firstly as a contract actor with Alexander Korda and then with the Rank Organisation. Although he railed against the restrictive production policies of the latter, what both companies offered Baker was relative stability and a clearly defined organizational structure. Baker was used to knowing precisely what his position within these structures was. If this can be described as a game, it was one

whose rules he understood. The context of the British film production in the 1970s was very different, and certainly didn't contain much that could be described as 'rules'. Here the formal structures he knew so well had largely vanished. Instead the industry was in a state of almost constant reconfiguration, as companies merged, collapsed, reappeared and merged again. Funding suddenly appeared from unlikely sources and then just as abruptly vanished (Smith 2008: 73–74). Such a commercial context required producers who had little in the way of a fixed agenda or strategy, but who could realign themselves just as quickly. It favoured the nimble businessman over the studio-orientated filmmaker. It was a landscape in which Michael Deeley could flourish. It was also one which mimicked patterns already occurring in America; little surprise that he found that he could function successfully there. Such adaptability might smack of commercial expediency but, as Deeley's output shows, could be a basis for innovative, original filmmaking. The variance in the fortunes of Baker and Deeley proved sharply prophetic for the more recent structures of filmmaking in the United Kingdom, with medium-sized commercial producers increasingly dependent on American finance and production models. Perversely, Deeley's example helped to formulate a dominant corporate production mode which might now find it hard to accommodate his more maverick tendencies.

*Elements of this chapter were published as part of my book on Stanley Baker and are reprinted with the permission of the University of Wales Press.*

## Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of Baker's life and career see Shail, R. (2008), *Stanley Baker: A Life in Film*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
2. A concise outline of British Lion's history is provided by Vincent Porter's entry on them in McFarlane, B. (2003), *The Encyclopedia of British Film*. London: Methuen.

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The quotations from Bob Porter and Lady Ellen Baker are from interviews carried out by the author on 19 October 2006 and 14 March 2006 respectively.

## Chapter 3

# Staccato and Wrenchingly Modern: Reflections on the 1970s Stardom of Glenda Jackson

Melanie Williams

A scene of marital discord: the novelist's wife enters her husband's study, wondering how his latest work is progressing, and he explains that the book will be about 'an ungrateful woman' who leaves home on a journey of self-discovery, only to return to her husband when 'she realizes he's really a wonderful chap', an autobiographical novel about their own situation and his desired resolution. The wife reacts with cool good humour to his sardonic commentary before launching into her side of the story:

> Maybe I am who you think I am. So what the hell. David's [their son] fine. Your books sell 10,000 hard, 100,000 soft, the roof doesn't leak, the house is painted, the deep freeze is full to overflowing and there is fruit on the sideboard. I have 28 pairs of shoes in my wardrobe, 11 long dresses and no knickers. I haven't been on a bus since 1959, I have an account at Harrods, a standing order to Oxfam, so what the bloody hell…

Accumulated images of material comfort, sexual liberation and liberal compassion only throw into relief the overwhelming spiritual lack at the heart of the heroine's bourgeois life. The film in which this scene features is *The Romantic Englishwoman* (Joseph Losey, 1975), a commercial failure later dismissed by its director as 'a piece of junk' (Caute 1994: 375). The novelist is played by Michael Caine and his wife by Glenda Jackson, and that latter aspect of its casting may lie at the root of some of the film's difficulties. Whereas the wife's role is written in terms of confusion and bafflement at her own discontent and inchoate longings, Glenda Jackson's performance is anything but baffled and confused. She enunciates her lines with exceptional clarity and forcefulness, and takes time to linger over the approach to the word 'fruit', dwelling on it with ironic mock-surprise. As she speaks, she is busy defacing a series of photographic images of her on the wall of the study, doodling on uglifying moustaches, wrinkles and devil's horns. Jackson is supremely self-possessed throughout and as such, actress and character refused to coalesce, as Pauline Kael argued in her review of the film:

> Glenda Jackson is a coiled-tight actress, who articulates each shade of emotion with such exactness that she has no fluidity and no ease. She carries no-nonsense precision to the point of brutality; she doesn't just speak her lines – she flicks them out, disgustedly. And Joseph Losey casts her as a housewife who has nothing to do except complain about the rigors of shopping, a woman who's unaware of her own emotions and has never had a clear thought in her life. (Kael 1980: 94)

Instead, Jackson's un-romantic forthrightness works against the grain of *The Romantic Englishwoman*, implicitly critiquing its vision of women and their vicissitudes; indeed, Jackson later reflected that she did not enjoy working with Losey who she found 'very much anti-female [with] something very misogynistic about him' (McFarlane 1997: 317).

Her performance in the film tallies with what Sue Harper describes as the hallmark of female film performance in 1970s British cinema: a quality of disavowal, refusing to play things straight and sincere and instead deploying devices such as irony, detachment or parody to put up a boundary between performer and role (Harper 2009). Harper suggests that this may represent a form of feminist commentary upon the circumscribed roles allotted to women, just as Jackson's impromptu graffiti problematizes the fixed images of femininity that adorn her husband's wall. However, Glenda Jackson carried disavowal further, beyond her onscreen performances. Prior to the release of *A Bequest to the Nation* (James Cellan-Jones, 1973), she broke a taboo by admitting publicly that she thought she was terrible in the film, incurring the wrath of her producer, director and co-star in the process. Not only did she disavow the quality of her individual performances, she even queried the usefulness of her entire profession, frequently stating her desire to do something more socially useful; a 'fetishistic disowning of her own fame' (Walker 2005: 245) which prefigured her eventual departure for a career in politics, as Labour Member of Parliament for Hampstead and Highgate from 1992 to the present day.

The tensions apparent in *The Romantic Englishwoman* are very instructive about Glenda Jackson and her place in British cinema of the 1970s. Even in a role which demanded blurry indecisiveness, Jackson could not help but offer gimlet-eyed acerbity. Her femininity was a thing apart from the 'dolly bird' type which dominated the contemporary media landscape, a distinctiveness recognized when she first rose to film stardom after *Women in Love* (Ken Russell, 1969): she was 'no starlet doing a handstand in her mini' but 'a worn-looking mother of an eight-month-old son'(Davis 1969). That film was to win her the first of her two Academy Awards for Best Actress, the second being for *A Touch of Class* (Melvin Frank, 1972). Her Oscars were complemented by two Emmys for the television series *Elizabeth R* (1971), the Variety Club Best Film Actress award for the trio of *House Calls* (Howard Zieff, 1978), *The Class of Miss MacMichael* (Silvio Narizzano, 1978) and *Stevie* (Robert Enders, 1978), not to mention a brace of Golden Globes, BAFTAs and many other awards and nominations besides. In that respect, Jackson can be easily bracketed in that subspecies of British female stardom identifiable as 'the actress dame' (akin to the actor knight) that has proved such a popular cinematic export, especially in the acquisition of American awards, from the Oscar victories of Maggie Smith in 1969 to Helen Mirren in 2007. However, the theatrical dimensions of Jackson's star persona are somewhat sharpened by her association with Peter Brook's experiments in the 'theatre of cruelty', most notably her roles as asylum inmate in the *Marat/Sade* and in the anti-Vietnam production *US*, in which she is entrusted with the apocalyptic closing monologue.

Her earlier review work for Brook was also, David Nathan notes, 'the first time a serious actress had fully disrobed in a serious cause in public' (Nathan 1984: 28), and her willingness

to do nude scenes would later be one of the most commented-upon aspects of her film career. It not only earned her the title 'Britain's first lady of flesh' (Hall 1971) but also made her into a sex symbol, albeit one who greeted the news of her erotic appeal with a disbelieving 'How lovely! How bloody weird!' (Norman 1970). If her body exerted fascination, so did her face, described by one writer as 'so erotically explicit it could almost be a diagram for an advanced sex education class' (Evans 1970). Her appearance was protean, as the director Ken Russell suggests: 'Sometimes she looks plain ugly, sometimes just plain and then sometimes the most beautiful creature one has ever seen' (Woodward 1986: 291). Although her face was ungallantly deemed more likely to launch 'a couple of Gravesend dredgers' than a thousand ships by one journalist (Zec 1970), Jackson was simultaneously considered for inclusion in *Harpers* magazine's list of the most beautiful women (Norman 1970), demonstrating how she evaded conventional categorization, being 'neither glamour symbol, not yet strident drudge' (Walker 2005: 19). No wonder her most famous line relating to her personal attractiveness – 'beauty like what I have got' – came in hilariously ungrammatical form in the parodic context of her appearance as Cleopatra with Morecambe and Wise.

Despite seeing herself as unlikely star material, with 'nothing so personally intriguing about me that someone would drag themselves out on a rainy night to see my movies' (Woodward 1986: 12), Glenda Jackson managed to maintain a prominent and prolific film career throughout the 1970s, with Alexander Walker noting that from her breakthrough role in *Women in Love* onwards 'there was seldom a time in the years ahead when [she] was not in demand', achieving the rare accolade of bankability: 'almost the only female British star with that rating on either side of the Atlantic' (Walker 2005: 19). She recognized that she possessed the kind of commercial clout to get films (albeit modest ones) off the ground: 'I'm certainly not bankable in the way that, say, Barbra Streisand is. But your name can help a small project like *Stevie*. When I said I would commit to it, the money was forthcoming' (Castell 1979: 260). This success is all the more remarkable for taking place during one of the most financially unstable periods in British filmmaking history, which saw declining audience numbers, falling production levels and the withdrawal of American funding from a national industry which had become reliant upon it; a situation which was to have particularly 'dire consequences for the representation of women', according to Sue Harper, with actresses generally having 'to be content with slim pickings' (Harper 2000: 137–138).

However Glenda Jackson seems to confound the general rule by being very much a British female star of the 1970s whose film career took off on the cusp of that beleaguered decade and whose greatest success would take place within it. During that period she carved out a distinctive persona as a sharp contemporary woman – 'the staccato, wrenchingly modern Glenda Jackson' in the words of Pauline Kael (Kael 1980: 205) – and was hailed as 'the face of the 70s' by one American studio executive (Norman 1970). Such zeitgeist-harnessing qualities were also noted by Alexander Walker who argued that 'just as Julie Christie's "Golden Girl" had given a characteristic burnish to the sixties, Jackson's articulate, pragmatic, rebarbative nature seemed in tune with the raw new decade' (Walker 2005: 18). One way in which her persona had clear contemporary relevance was in its kinship with

women's liberation. Although it was never a mainstream social movement, and indeed was the object of frequent mockery, women's lib arguably still made an important impact on the gender politics of the 1970s, helping to effect 'real changes in women's expectations at work, in their personal lives, that can't really be recorded and measured statistically' according to feminist writer Beatrix Campbell (Whitehead 1985: 321). If sea changes in the social climate cannot always be measured in empirical terms, they may sometimes be gauged tentatively through the invaluable barometer of popular culture, including cinema. Film stars especially, as Richard Dyer has stated, embody and 'live out contradictions' in their societies (Dyer 1991: 187), and just like her American contemporary Jane Fonda, Glenda Jackson offers an intriguing case study of some of the contradictions that constituted and complicated female identity in the 1970s, the decade of resurgent but embattled feminism.

## A touch of class discourse, and *that* familiar voice

Her film roles as monarchs or soignée jet-setters belied Jackson's rather more humble origins in working-class Merseyside, eldest daughter of a bricklayer and a cleaner. However, her class identity makes a significant appearance in the many articles written about her in the 1970s and is often linked to her physiognomy, as though her background is written indelibly on her body. Alexander Walker describes her looks as more indebted to 'elbow-grease than facials', indirectly alluding to her mother's job, and discerns the inheritance of her father in her large strong hands (Walker 1978) while Peter Evans links looks and class even more decisively:

> At first sight, it is a factory face, more gargoyle than coquette. The sort of face you once saw travelling third-class in northern towns. A face worn like a pale battle scar from the old days of class warfare. (Evans 1970)

Particularly intriguing is a mention of her 'thin, apprehensive, Northern, white face [looking] like Tom Courtenay in drag' (Eastaugh 1970). Jackson made her fleeting screen debut in *This Sporting Life* (Lindsay Anderson, 1963), the zenith of the British New Wave, and one might read her as a female analogue of its ground-breaking working-class male stars such as Courtenay and Albert Finney. Graduating from RADA in the late 1950s, she was warned to expect unemployment since she was 'too young for the sort of parts they thought would suit me – like 43-year-old chars' (Norman 1970), suggesting how, like her male peers, Jackson escaped from the kind of class-based casting that would have been her lot a few years before, benefiting from the increased social mobility of the 1960s, but still treated ambivalently as a female film star with a 'factory face'.

However, if one thing undercuts any straightforward identification of Jackson as working class, it is the way she sounds, described as '*that* familiar voice' by her biographer (Woodward 1986: 17). Her voice is low-pitched, clearly enunciated and rather patrician-sounding, the absence of a regional accent suggesting an altogether different class background or at least

its alteration through careful training; although an amateur dramatic group colleague remembers it already being 'very loud, very deep, very strong and resonant' when she was a teenager (Woodward 1986: 37). Unchanging from role to role (no Streep-esque mastery of accents for her), Jackson's voice is instantly identifiable and for Kael 'as easy to imitate as Bette Davis' (Kael 1977: 300) – a telling comparison I will return to later. Its lack of versatility might be regarded as a flaw but could also be seen as a strength when it comes to the creation of a forceful and unmistakable star persona. As suggested in the discussion of *The Romantic Englishwoman* above, it cannot do feminine guilelessness, but when it is matched with the right role – such as Queen Elizabeth I – its dry clarity goes a long way in suggesting the gravity of a character. It can also be used to great comic effect; think of her rolling elongation of the work 'struck' when she is upbraiding George Segal's crass American sexual slang 'struck out' in *A Touch of Class*. Slightly modulated, its resolve imbues Stevie Smith's statement 'I loved my aunt' in *Stevie* not only with warmth but substance.

## The man within oneself and the knife-wielding woman

As Andrew Higson suggests, 'a fascination with sexuality and with the body…pervaded most aspects of 1970s cinema' (Higson 1994: 233), with Glenda Jackson's participation in that milieu heralded by Gudrun's announcement in *Women in Love* that she wanted to drown in 'hot, naked, physical flesh'. The obsessive corporeal focus of cinema of this period can be seen as symptomatic of gender crisis, expressed as a continual need for reassuring affirmation of clear anatomical difference. However, reassurance is not the keynote of Jackson's nude scenes which, as Sue Harper points out, are usually 'the reverse of erotic' (Harper 2009), exemplified by the male-gaze-confounding display of the orgasmic female body in *The Music Lovers* (Ken Russell, 1970). As if to underline her putative anti-eroticism, the press were quick to seize upon Jackson's previous job working for Boots the Chemist on the 'bilious attack and laxatives counter' (Zec 1970) as indicative of her no-nonsense approach to the body and its manifold embarrassments.

An important aspect of 1970s 'gender trouble' was the growth in images of androgyny and bisexuality in popular culture, represented in music by artists such as Marc Bolan and David Bowie, but also in cinema by the likes of *Performance* (Donald Cammell/Nicolas Roeg, 1970). However, Glenda Jackson is unusual in presenting an instance of female-embodied sexual ambiguity. Alexander Walker suggested how men were disquieted by her, 'for they sense the male spirit inside the undoubtedly female container' (Walker 1978), and Jackson herself spoke up for finding 'the man within oneself': 'Most women need to develop their own "masculine" qualities of independence, pride, courage' (Woodward 1986: 225). She played archetypal feminine stage roles such as Hedda Gabler and Cleopatra not 'doused in femininity' but as a 'cross, barking person' and a 'tough, crop-haired' woman respectively (Colvin 1986: 12), and her emphatically un-swoony Ophelia in the RSC's 1965 *Hamlet* was hailed by Penelope Gilliat as 'Ophelia, Prince of Stratford' for managing to effect 'a modern blurring of the

sexual boundaries' (Nathan 1984: 38), and totally outshining David Warner's Dane. This displacement of the male lead is something she achieves several times in her films, revolting against potential marginalization as muse or helpmeet in *The Music Lovers* and *A Bequest to the Nation* to become the dominant figure in each film. A close-up of *her* emotionally hollow face, not Tchaikovsky's, provides the former film's harrowing final image.

Jackson also has the unusual distinction of playing the sole woman in two films centred on a bisexual love triangle. The first is the acclaimed *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (John Schlesinger, 1971), the second is the less well-known World War Two drama *The Triple Echo* (Michael Apted, 1972) in which Jackson's stoical countrywoman harbours an army deserter who becomes her lover. He disguises himself as her sister to avoid capture but unfortunately both 'women' come to the attention of a saturnine sergeant played by Oliver Reed. While the development of the relationship between the two men offers the film's central gender unorthodoxy, Pauline Kael also noticed how Jackson's 'androgynous performance gives the movie an extra dimension of sexual ambiguity' (Kael 1977: 299). Many of her films partake in scenes of performativity that could be read in terms of queerness: Gudrun's campy pantomime of Tchaikovsky's wife at the behest of the gay artist Loerke in *Women in Love* (the role would essay properly in *The Music Lovers*); the monarch's transformation of herself into living icon in *Elizabeth R*; the obsessive role-playing of the sister servants in Jean Genet's *The Maids* (Christopher Miles, 1974), a play originally intended for male actors in drag; acting as Sarah Bernhardt in *The Incredible Sarah* (Richard Fleischer, 1976) culminating in her triumphant performance in male apparel as Joan of Arc; playing an anti-commercial campaigner rumoured to be transsexual in *Health* (Robert Altman, 1980).

Gender uncertainty and performativity in Jackson's persona is matched by intimations of sexual threat, usually expressed in terms of her 'ballbreaking' (Walker 1978) or a more extreme genital attack: 'I've heard it said of her: "she can castrate you with her eyes"' (Zec 1979) – quite a trick. Suggestions of *vagina dentata* are prominent in her first two films with Ken Russell, with *Women in Love* replete with shots foregrounding Jackson's mouth, either bearing sharp gritted teeth – described in the press as 'designed for crunching up bones' (Norman 1970) – or wide open in mocking laughter or strange rapture, as with the disorienting sequence after frightening away Gerald's cattle, in which her accusation of non-ownership is markedly oral: 'They're not yours, you haven't swallowed them'. The threat of all-engulfing orifices continues in *The Music Lovers* with the same focus on Jackson's mouth: eating; swigging champagne; bloody and shot in extreme close-up after a violent sexual encounter; laughing hysterically as she succumbs to madness. But the ultimate expression of castration anxiety comes in the honeymoon sequence on the train, in which the sexually frustrated Nina attempts to seduce a revolted Tchaikovsky, with the feverishly rocking camera drawn inexorably up into the ensnaring hoops of her crinoline skirt.

Such representations are not limited to Jackson's films with Russell either. They also find expression in her comedies, with George Segal suffering the figurative emasculation of a paralysing back spasm on the brink of making love to her in *A Touch of Class*. A widely used publicity still for the film shows her brandishing a large knife, ostensibly chopping

vegetables but the symbolism is vivid. One of the most quoted comments about the actress came from her husband Roy Hodges, who said (with retrospective irony) 'If she'd gone into politics she'd be Prime Minister, if she'd gone into crime, she'd be Jack the Ripper' (Walker 2005: 19), aligning his soon-to-be-ex-wife not only with female eminence in traditionally male preserves but also with one of the world's most infamous knife-wielders.

## Playing women antique and modern

Despite being 'wrenchingly modern', a great many of Jackson's 1970s roles came in period drama, a generic field with the high cultural capital suitable for a 'dame-in-waiting', as well as one of the most productive arenas for British filmmaking at the time. Her eminence in historical roles sometimes overlapped with her work in the biopic, with a run which almost rivalled Anna Neagle's heyday in the same genre, in *Elizabeth R* and *Mary, Queen of Scots* (Charles Jarrott, 1971), *The Music Lovers*, *A Bequest to the Nation*, and *The Incredible Sarah*. A more contemporary biopic role came with her performance as the poet Stevie Smith in *Stevie*, which exemplifies another of her most frequently inhabited genres, film versions of stage plays, as with *The Maids* and *Hedda* (Trevor Nunn, 1975). However, the success of her performance of historical and biographical roles seems to rely entirely on how well they mesh with the pre-existing Jackson persona: very well in the case of *Women in Love*'s Gudrun and Elizabeth I and perhaps not so well with Sarah Bernhardt or Emma Hamilton in *A Bequest to the Nation*, although the spiky vulgarity of the latter performance, seemingly conceived as the 'anti-Vivien Leigh', is bracingly iconoclastic.

Back in modern times, and wearing a wig to cover up her residual baldness from shaving her hair for *Elizabeth R*, Jackson's Alex Greville in *Sunday Bloody Sunday* is the definitive single woman of the early 1970s – gulping down instant coffee made hastily from the hot tap, trying to break free from bourgeois proprieties and monogamous commitment but feeling the lure of them nonetheless, haunted by visions of her wartime childhood – whose personal uncertainties are echoed by the public anxieties of a nation whose monetary 'virility symbol' (Whitehead 1985: 3), Sterling, is on its knees. Other contemporary roles came in the aforementioned *The Romantic Englishwoman* and in *The Class of Miss MacMichael* (Silvio Narizzano, 1978), playing an inner-city teacher trying to balance compassion with rigour, and clashing with her inflexible headmaster, played by Oliver Reed in their third teaming. This was a more modest, unassuming Jackson role, possibly closest to her own leftist politics, although its dramatic climax – a moment of cathartic violence as she trashes the headmaster's office completely, while he is still in it – resembled the volatile outbursts of her performance as Sarah Bernhardt, another great room-wrecker.

Jackson stated that her fantasy film assignments were a musical and a western (Woodward 1986: 181) but neither dream would be fulfilled, with the closest to a musical being her Fred and Ginger routine with Morecambe and Wise or her cameo appearance incapacitated by a broken leg in *The Boy Friend* (Ken Russell, 1971). However, her desire

to work in two of the most archetypal American film genres is telling, suggestive of her wish to escape from perpetually 'playing neurotic, frustrated ladies' that left her 'so *tired*' (Castell 1979: 260). It is interesting that when she finally does get herself to a nunnery it is for the crisp Watergate satire *Nasty Habits* (Michael Lindsay-Hogg, 1976) rather than the hysterical exigencies of *The Devils* (Ken Russell, 1971) which she turned down. Musicals and westerns may have eluded her but she was triumphant in another typically Hollywood genre, the romantic comedy, teamed with George Segal for *A Touch of Class*, a double act repeated in *Lost and Found* (Melvin Frank, 1979). Similarly, *House Calls* featured her enjoying a sparring romance with widowed doctor Walter Matthau, casting repeated for espionage comedy *Hopscotch* (Ronald Neame, 1980). In both cases, Jackson is placed opposite a strongly contrasting male type who plays American wiseguy to her waspish Englishwoman. The films feature both the verbal badinage and physical rough-and-tumble typical of screwball, with farcical situations involving lumbar seizures (*A Touch of Class*), medical jaw restraints and physical contortions to keep one foot on the floor (*House Calls*) and repeatedly broken limbs (*Lost and Found*). They inevitably recall – and deliberately mimic – the combative romances starring Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn in which two very different but equally matched protagonists enact the battle of the sexes and reach a loving rapprochement.

## Glenda Jackson and vernacular film feminism: A conclusion

Even as far back as *Women in Love*, critics drew comparisons between Jackson and Katharine Hepburn with one review describing her 'burst[ing] upon the screen like a young, sturdier version' of the Hollywood star, 'with all of her animal magnetism' (Woodward 1986: 100). The similarities are undeniable: both unconventional looking stars, with russet hair and angular features, potentially androgynous, similarly sharp and self-possessed, each with distinctive voices. However, Jackson's most important Hollywood inspiration may well be Bette Davis instead, another 'staccato' and 'wrenchingly modern' actress who had also played Queen Elizabeth twice, and shaved her hair to do it. Even by 1979 as a well-established actress, Jackson still regarded Davis as a benchmark of female film achievement; not only in terms of her acting skill but also in the kind of roles she took:

> If women are ever shown to have problems in a film, they are always *emotional* problems. What about the other problems, the other issues that women face every day of their lives? I haven't seen a woman take a stand on a moral issue in a film for about twenty years, not since Bette Davis played that librarian in *Storm Centre*. (Castell 1979: 262)

I would suggest that just as the commanding female presences of Hepburn and Davis reflected woman's nascent independence or dreams thereof in classic Hollywood cinema, so Jackson fulfilled a similar function for her era, the vastly more patchy piecemeal production

context of post-studio filmmaking. Indeed, given this context, what is remarkable is how Jackson manages to construct a career of any cogency or continuity at all.

Although the avant-garde experimental work of Sally Potter or Laura Mulvey may be more obvious reference points when considering feminism's relationship to British film of the 1970s, Glenda Jackson's sustained image of a powerful autonomous woman, both on and offscreen, and sometimes in spite of the roles in which she was cast, represents a more vernacular form of film feminism that also deserves recognition. She may not have become the first female prime minister of Britain as her husband predicted but there was one in place by the end of the decade – who sometimes seemed to operate in a manner indebted to Jackson's Gloriana.

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## Section II

On the Margins of British Cinema

## Chapter 4

# Alternative Film Exhibition in the English Regions during the 1970s

Vincent Porter

## Introduction

During the 1970s, Britain tried to continue the policy, which was launched in 1965 by Harold Wilson's Labour Administration, of promoting venues for alternative film exhibition in 'regional film theatres'. But it foundered from overexpansion, and from its failures to understand both public taste and the precarious economics of exhibiting and distributing specialist films. In 1974, when the Labour Party returned to office, it reallocated resources from the Arts Council to the recently formed Regional Arts Associations, which meant that by the end of the decade, it was only possible to sustain alternative film exhibition by distributing most of the nation's subsidies to film centres in a few major metropolitan conurbations.

## Progressive politics and popular taste

Two beliefs underpinned Labour's cultural policy. The first was that cinema was an art as well as an industry; and the second was that, given a proper education and a choice, the British people would opt to watch quality films. Unfortunately neither assumption was true. For in the long term, the British people demonstrated that they were socially conservative, preferred to live in semi-detached housing, to buy the latest consumer goods and were suspicious of comprehensive education (Kynaston 2007: 17). By 1970, audiences were spending an average of fourteen hours a week in front of the TV set, compared with fifteen minutes a week at the cinema (Pratten 1970: Tables 1.1 and 3.1). During the ensuing decade, boosted by the arrival of colour TV, the ownership of TV sets rose by 15 per cent, from 15.9 to 18.3 million, whereas cinema attendances halved, falling from 193 to 96 million per year (Perilli 1983: Table 1).

In the mid-1960s, when Jennie Lee, Labour's minister for the arts, launched her White Paper on the Arts (Great Britain, 1964), a third of cinema audiences had claimed to be interested in the technical side of filmmaking. That third were generally better educated than other filmgoers, and two-thirds of them read film magazines. Only 15 per cent of that third were members of a film society, however (Silvey and Kenyon 1965: 36). Moreover, over half the societies which hired films from the British Film Institute's Central Booking Agency were educational institutions (Quinn 1965: 38–44). It was therefore those Britons with cultural capital who would benefit most from Labour's arts policy.

Lee selected the British Film Institute (BFI) to establish what were termed 'regional film theatres'. The government's increased grant for regional activities would enable the BFI to leverage further investments from local councils in England and Wales. The Institute also hoped that the voluntarily run film societies would regard a local offshoot of the BFI's National Film Theatre 'as an extension of their own activities rather than as a substitute for them' (Quinn 1965: 35).

## A buccaneering start

By 1970, the BFI had launched some 31 regional projects, but as the BFI's head of regions recalled, 'in those first halcyon days…there was too much direct political pressure'; 'too many schemes were launched in highly unsuitable multi-purpose halls; [and] deals [with local authorities] were done without sufficient guarantees that Film would have its proper role in the scheme of things' (Huntley 1982: 308). The regional theatres in Canterbury, Cardiff, Exeter and York, were all sited on the campus of the local university. Indeed, in York, which barely fulfilled the BFI's criteria for local financial support as the university campus lay outside the city, the vice-chancellor virtually had to railroad his commitment for the university to pay the start-up costs of the York Film Theatre through a meeting of apathetic academic staff (Harding 1993: 7–12).

Precise details of deals with local councils are harder to come by, but the latter frequently made very large investments. In Swenson, for example, the corporation spent more than £750,000 on the local Wyvern Film Theatre, which was over eleven times the BFI's capital grants budget for the whole country (*The Times* 1970: 24; BFI 1972: 18). The greater problem for the BFI, however, was how to ensure that these new regional theatres would pay their way. To this end, the Institute adopted a number of strategies.

## Programming: Mini-festivals

Initially, the BFI encouraged regional theatres to programme mini-festivals of old films: Garbo in Brighton and Nottingham, pop films in Tyneside, and comedy in Aldeburgh and Birmingham (BFI 1970: 7). Next year, it repeated the formula with Buster Keaton festivals in Brighton and Tyneside (BFI 1971: 5–6). Brighton then opted for Mary Pickford, Aldeburgh for a René Clair season and Tyneside for a 'Best of Pop' season (BFI 1972: 10). The BFI then switched its focus to living celebrities. In August, the John Player Tobacco Company sponsored talks by Peter Cushing in Brighton and Hull about his film career. But in October, John Player terminated its sponsorship deal with the BFI, and special effects maestro Ray Harryhausen gave the last, and well-attended, celebrity lecture in Brighton. Nevertheless, despite the loss of commercial sponsorship, the BFI persuaded celebrities such as Hildegard Neil, Janet Suzman and Harold Pinter to draw in the local crowds (Dalton 1973a: 16; Dalton 1974a: 8).

In Leatherhead, and in Grays, both film theatres sought to mount cross-over screenings illustrating Ray Harryhausen's contribution to the special effects scenes in producer Charles Schneer's popular fantasy films. Leatherhead screened *The Three Worlds of Gulliver* (Jack Sher, 1959), which Schneer produced for Columbia, while Grays screened his *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963), for six successive matinees. Similarly, Brighton and Whitehaven sought to give an educational spin to two large-budget, star-studded historical ventures: Whitehaven screened *Pope Joan* (Liv Ullmann, 1972) for four days, and Brighton screened *The Lion in Winter* (Katherine Hepburn and Peter O'Toole, 1968) for a week. In Newcastle, the Tyneside Film Theatre relied on comedy, with a double bill of two films directed by Dick Lester: *The Bed Sitting Room* and *Adolf Hitler – My Part in his Downfall*, followed a month later by Stanley Kramer's *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (Dalton 1973a).

Ken Russell's films were another staple choice. During the autumn of 1973, *The Savage Messiah* (1972) was successively shown in Plymouth, Bristol, Luton, Doncaster and Horsham; and during August and September 1974, Brighton devoted more or less all of its screenings to Russell's films (Dalton 1973b: 14; Dalton 1974f: 23).

## Regional premieres

In the autumn of 1973, the theatres started to mount 'regional premieres' of films which had recently opened in London. Two, *Deep End* (Jerzy Skolimowski, 1970) and *Wanda* (Barbara Loden, 1970) were independent English-language films, while another two, *Le boucher* (Claude Chabrol, 1969) and *Il conformista* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1969), were subtitled. Walerian Borowcyk's *Blanche* (1971) and Yves Boisset's polished political thriller, *L'Attentat* [*The Plot*] (1972) were also popular (Dalton 1973b: 14). Other subtitled films, which were given 'regional premieres', included, *the Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (Luis Buñuel, 1972), *Themroc* (Claude Faraldo, 1973), *The Salamander* (Alain Tanner, 1971), *Garden of the Fitzi Continis* (Vittorio De Sica, 1970), *The Decameron* (Pier Paolo Passolini, 1970) and *Fellini Roma* (Federico Fellini, 1972) (BFI 1974: 16). By 1974, the BFI clearly hoped to convert all the regional film theatres into a nationwide art-house circuit; and it acquired a new 35mm print of Claude Chabrol's *Red Wedding* (1971), together with the exclusive distribution rights for those towns in which there was a regional film theatre (BFI 1974: 16). It also hoped to attract audiences with film such as Rudolf Nureyev's *I Am a Dancer* (1972), Fellini's *The Clowns* (1972), Chabrol's *Le boucher* and his *Ten Days Wonder* (1972) (Dalton 1974c: 17).

## Reviving the German and Russian classics

Towards the end of 1973, the BFI renewed the rights to four German films produced at UFA by Erich Pommer: *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Weine, 1922), *The Last Laugh* (F.W. Murnau, 1925), *The Blue Angel* (Josef von Sternberg, 1930) and *Congress Dances* (Erik

Charell, 1931) – together with another four directed by Fritz Lang: *Der Mude Tod* (1921), *Dr Mabuse, Der Spieler* (1922) and parts I and II of *Die Niebelungen* (1924). It promoted the package as 'Classics of the German Cinema', and after a London opening at the Everyman Cinema in January 1974, the whole package was subsequently screened in Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol and Tyneside (Dalton 1974b: 34).

Other theatres looked eastwards for their programmes. Several programmed other Russian films around *Solaris* (1972), Tarkovsky's latest epic. In January, Belfast followed it with Tarkovsky's earlier *Andrei Rublev* (1966), while Tyneside opted for *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1971) (Dalton 1974a: 8). During June, *Solaris* was also screened in Leeds, Plymouth and Norwich (Dalton 1974c: 17). In January of the same year, Norwich looked even further east, offering its patrons a short season of Japanese films consisting of *Sansho Dayu* (Kenji Mizoguchi, 1954), *Sanjuro* (Akira Kurosawa, 1962) and *Tokyo Story* (Yasujiro Ozo, 1953), backed up a contextualizing lecture from John Gillett from the BFI's lecturing panel (Dalton 1974a: 8).

By June, science fiction films were all the rage. Brighton offered its patrons a double bill of *The Andromeda Strain* (Robert Wise, 1970) and *The Forbin Project* (Joseph Sargent, 1969). Edinburgh, on the other hand, also looked to 1920s France for its SF films, by preceding its screening of *The Andromeda Strain* with showings of *L'Atlantide* (Jacques Feyder, (1921) and *Paris Qui Dort* (René Clair, 1923). In the subsequent week, it programmed *The Lost World* (Irwin Allen, 1960), followed by late night screenings of *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (Byron Haskin, 1964) and *Seconds* (John Frankenheimer, 1966) (Dalton 1974c: 17).

Elsewhere, Peterborough mounted successive screenings of two very popular westerns: *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Sergio Leone, 1968), while Leatherhead treated its patrons from the Surrey commuter belt to six wholesome British family films: *The Amazing Mr Blunden* (Lionel Jeffries, 1972), *The Belstone Fox* (James Hill, 1973), *The Railway Children* (Lionel Jeffries, 1970), *Tales of Beatrix Potter* (Reginald Mills, 1971) and *Dr Doolittle* (Richard Fleischer, 1967), followed somewhat surprisingly by the salutary Billie Holiday biopic, *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie, 1972) (Dalton 1974f: 23).

But by the middle of 1974, the BFI's programmers were clearly running out of ideas. 'Compare and contrast' became a recurrent programming theme. In July and August, it was the rationale for the BFI-supported Leatherhead International Film Festival. This allowed them to screen Parts I and II of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1942 and 1946) alongside Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972); and to programme Pabst's *Der Dreigroschenoper* (1931) with Peter Brook's highly stylized *The Beggar's Opera* (1952) (Dalton 1974e: 9). During August, the 'compare and contrast' double bill became a staple element of Bristol's regional programming. Its audiences were invited to compare and contrast the New York humour of Elaine May's *A New Leaf* (1971), starring Walter Matthau with another comedy called *They Might Be Giants* (Anthony Harvey, 1971); and a fortnight later they were asked to compare the indoor spaces in *Alice's Restaurant* (Arthur Penn, 1969) and *The Bed Sitting Room* (Richard Lester, 1969) (Dalton 1974f: 23).

## Retrenchment and refocus

By the middle of the 1970s, the BFI had opened over 48 regional film theatres. In many towns, the local film society suffered badly. In Doncaster and Horsham, where regional film theatres opened in 1972, both societies soon closed (Martland 2000: 25; Horsham Museum, n.d.). In Harlow, where the Playhouse screened only twelve films a year and the Harlow Co-operative Film Society had a seat on the theatre's programming committee, the society was pressed to subsume its activities with those of the Playhouse. It only survived as an independent organization with a reduced membership thanks to a massive publicity drive, a ridiculously low membership fee, sponsorship from the London Co-operative Society and a subsidy from the local council (Bill 1999: 5–8).

The BFI's capital grants had quadrupled between 1970 and 1974, but when the newly elected Labour Government came into office, it discovered that the Treasury suspected that the BFI had been trying to buck the government's accounting system by paying out money before it was needed. Accordingly, in the following year, when the Treasury closely examined the Institute's application for its unclaimed grant of £650,000, it held back £250,000, although it later agreed to release another £100,000 (Jenkins 1979: 127–128). The government also held the Institute's 'Housing the Cinema' fund at broadly the same level until the end of the decade, although between 1975 and 1980, its funds for deficit guarantees would almost triple, from £467,000 to £1,222,000 (BFI 1975–1980).

Disenchantment within the specialist film trade also meant that the BFI had to rethink its regional policies. George Hoellering, the managing director of the Academy Cinema in London and a former governor of the BFI, concluded that the net result of extensive public subsidy had been to subsidise empty seats. Worse still, the consequential closure of the local film society often had the perverse effect of reducing the income of distributors of specialized films. This was because regional film theatres booked fewer of those films than the distributor could reasonably have expected from the same number of film societies (Hoellering 1975: 53).

Aware of Arts Minister Hugh Jenkins' plans to redistribute the Arts Council's funds to the Regional Arts Associations, the BFI drastically revised its own regional strategy. In June 1974, it proposed a new hierarchy of priorities which would enable it 'to provide nationally the services which had hitherto only been available in London'. Top priority would be given to 'film centres in major conurbations, through full-time Film Theatres in cities down to community cinemas in areas where no cinema exists'. There would be no more than eight film centres, each of which would provide a range of facilities including book libraries, filmmaking equipment and viewing tables as well as an auditorium. Importantly, they would also develop film workshops, archives of local material and regional publications. Crucially, the Institute would also devolve some of its direct responsibilities to the recently established Regional Arts Associations (BFI 1975: 13).

Under the new scheme, the smaller towns became the losers. The BFI rejected an application from Harwich to save their Grade II listed Electric Palace cinema, on the grounds that there were no regional film theatres 'in such cities as Birmingham, Manchester

or Liverpool' (Robinson 1975a: 7 and 1975b: 12). During the following year, the Institute also conducted a review, in close collaboration with the Regional Arts Associations, of its relations with the regional film theatres. The first fallout was that the local authorities in Basildon, Elstree, Grays, Horsham, Leatherhead, Torrington, Welwyn Garden City, Weston-super-Mare and Whitehaven, all severed their links with the BFI (BFI 1977: 16).

Financially, the winners were the Regional Arts Associations, as their grants from the BFI increased thirteen-fold, from £30,000 in 1974 to £400,000 in 1980. The bulk of the money went to the Labour heartlands. The Northern Arts Association was the biggest beneficiary, partly because it undertook to pay the deficit guarantee for the Tyneside Film Theatre. Other major beneficiaries were the Regional Arts Associations in Yorkshire, the West Midlands and the North-West, and the Welsh Arts Council, some of whom also undertook to guarantee the deficits of the film theatres in their region (BFI 1978: 16). The least favoured region was the South-East, partly because the BFI also insisted that any beneficiary should employ a films officer who would continue to maintain informal contact with the Institute.

The priority which the BFI gave to establishing film centres in the major conurbations ultimately favoured a few small groups of radical filmmakers. In 1976, the government agreed that the Institute could use the 'Housing the Cinema' fund to pay for production equipment in nascent film centres, as well as for film exhibition (BFI 1976: 16). During the next five years, the Institute allocated substantial capital grants to the Amber Film Collective in Newcastle, the Birmingham Arts Laboratory; the London Filmmakers Co-operative, Four Corner Films, London and Cinema Action, London (BFI 1975–1980).

Despite hiving off deficit guarantees for some regional film theatres to the Regional Arts Associations, the BFI's grants to cover operating costs in the regions doubled between 1976 and 1980. But in addition, the Regional Department also allocated over 15 per cent of its regional funds annually to the London Filmmakers Co-operative (BFI 1976–1980). By 1980, the BFI's subsidies for the new film centres and for avant-garde film production had become almost as large as those for the original film theatres.

## 'Opening up film culture'

The change in the BFI's regional priorities was mirrored in the policies of its newly formed Film Availability Services (FAS), which sought to rationalize the sprawling, and often contradictory, activities of the BFI's non-archival film acquisitions, film booking and regional exhibition activities. They were also determined by a commitment 'to open up certain questions in film culture to a wider debate than previously they have enjoyed, and to provide materials relevant to the opening up of such questions' (BFI 1976: 13).

The practical implications for film programming of this change in direction were hammered out at a conference of regional film theatres. Far from being separate autonomous units, the FAS argued, the BFI and the regional theatres should agree common aims and policies in four key areas:

- Programming in regional film theatres should be based on the notion of 'key debates'.
- Regional film theatres had an educative role, in order to further and deepen their audiences' experience of film. They would do this by providing a series of specific interventions which catered for those sections of the established audience who wished to pursue their interests more formally. They should also try to respond positively to any approaches from local institutions involved in film education to provide them with 35mm screening facilities.
- Regional film theatres were responsible for fostering the study and appreciation of television as well as film.
- There should be greater co-ordination and co-operation between the activities of the National Film Theatre and the regional film theatres (BFI 1976: 13–14).

This was easier said than done. Although FAS argued that its role was 'to contribute, to the limits of our ability, to the stimulation, dissemination and self-definition of contemporary British film and television work' (BFI 1977: 12–13), the regional film theatres were autonomous institutions, which would not allow the BFI to dictate their programming. 'The phrase "to the limits of our ability"', the BFI carefully explained,

> requires comment since it may not be generally understood what these limits are, particularly with regard to our programming relationship with the thirty-plus Regional Film Theatres. By the nature of the contractual, or in certain cases, time-honoured relationship, the Institute has with the theatres, they receive a booking service and programme suggestions from FAS, but are in the last analysis effectively autonomous in their programming. The policy outlined above will therefore form the core of our programming *advice* to the theatres. (BFI 1977: 13) [Emphasis in the original]

The stage was set for a potentially explosive relationship between the regional film theatres and the BFI. While many of the theatres cherished their independence, they still required an annual deficit guarantee from the BFI's Regional Department. At the same time, however, the Institute's Film Advisory Service was hell-bent on persuading them to promote 'key debates' about film authorship, genre conventions and both historic and contemporary debates about representations of realism. By 1980, eight regional film theatres in Bolton, Guildford, Kings Lynn, Leamington Spa, Middlesbrough, Plymouth, St Austell and Stoke-on-Trent, had all foregone their deficit guarantees. The remainder all continued to take the BFI's shilling. They were those situated in Bangor, Bradford, Bristol, Canterbury, Cardiff, Dartington, Derby, Doncaster, Edinburgh, Grimsby, Harlow, Ipswich, Lancaster, Leeds, Luton, Mold, Norwich, Nottingham, Peterborough, Reading, Scunthorpe, Sheffield, Southampton, St Albans, Street, Swindon and York.

## Programming for York Film Theatre

The programming battles inside the York Film Theatre (YFT) were especially intense. The Chairman, Harold Liversedge, who wanted programming autonomy, resisted every attempt by the BFI to 'impose' its view from London. He had been particularly annoyed by the massive financial loss incurred in October 1974, which was caused by the theatre's agreement to put on a 'Soviet Film Day' of five new Russian films, which had been financially supported by Yorkshire Arts, as part of a mini-tour to Bradford, Grimsby, Hull and Sheffield. He decided that the YFT must generate a financial surplus, in order to prevent the BFI from interfering with its programming. He therefore began to screen a series of double bills in which he coupled a mainstream film with a minority interest film: for example, Andy Warhol's *Heat* (1972) with Cammell and Roeg's *Performance* (1970), and Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* (1971) with Makavejev's *Innocence Unprotected* (1968). However, this view was opposed by John Hill, the outspoken secretary of the student film society, and there were regular clashes at programming meetings. At one point, it seemed as though a student take-over was in the offing, but long-standing members felt that it would be unacceptable for the YFT to be dominated by regularly changing student personnel (Harding 1993: 22–26).

In 1978, the YFT's new chairman, film sociologist Andrew Tudor, introduced a more dialectical approach, which both recognized the diverse nature of the YFT's audience, and paid detailed attention to historical American cinema. For instance, he programmed Howard Hawks' *Bringing up Baby* (1938) with Makavejev's *W.R. Mysteries of the Organism* (1971). But he also mounted, and shared the cost of documentation, of a joint season of Japanese films in association with the University Film Society. He programmed a series of double bills from the French Nouvelle Vague, and an extended season of political films from Latin America, the United States and Europe. In October 1979, Tudor introduced a fully documented, eight month season of 'Modern Action Movies' alongside a season of James Ivory pictures, while, in association with the University Film Society, he also mounted an Oshima season, including the controversial and un-certificated *Ai No Corrida* (1976) (Harding 1993: 22–26). In the following year, he swung the YFT into a season of 'Modern American Comedies', complemented by screenings of Pasolini films, including the un-certificated *Salo* (1975) (Harding 1993: 28–29). Tudor's eclectic mix of mainstream American cinema and controversial continental pictures therefore provided one solution to the aesthetic and commercial challenges faced by the programmers for the regional film theatres.

## Film societies

Beyond the regional film theatres, many of Britain's 700 film societies struggled to survive. Between 1973 and 1980, the BFI gave the British Federation of Film Societies (BFFS) an average annual grant of about £36,000 per annum, although each society had to pay its own

way. Inflation and a lack of good films soon began to take their toll on regional activities. In Spring 1973, attendances at the federation's Spring Viewing Sessions had also declined, largely because of the inflationary rises in the costs of travel and accommodation, and the difficulty of finding films of sufficient quality that were worth watching (Vernon 1973: 14). In January 1974, only twenty people managed to attend the 25th anniversary meeting of the London Regional Group because of rail strikes and petrol shortages. Although independent distributor Charles Cooper, and former BFI Director Stanley Reed wanted the film societies to fill the gaps left by the closure of commercial cinemas, BFFS chairman John Chittock pointed out that there was a danger that, as sources of entertainment films dried up, film societies might disappear altogether (Darvell 1974: 28).

The regional structure of the federation also became a problem. In October 1973, the BFFS encouraged its members to get in touch with the films officer of their Regional Arts Association for 'valuable advice, assistance and publicity' (Anon 1973c: 3). In the following June, Hugh Jenkins, the government's new minister for the arts, informed the federation that he was delighted it had established links with the Regional Arts Associations. 'Such connections', he averred, 'can be very valuable in bringing a society's activities to the notice of a wider public and can be mutually strengthening' (Jenkins 1974: 3). The trouble for the BFFS, however, was that the Regional Arts Associations had a different regional structure to that of the BFFS. Moreover, as a result of the changes to county boundaries, local authorities would soon be merged into enlarged county associations (Anon 1974: 1). The BFFS therefore had to change its regional structure to mirror that of the Regional Arts Associations.

Meanwhile, the societies themselves suffered from a shortage of new films and inflationary increases in hire costs. In June 1973, the Bournemouth and Poole Film Society reported that 16mm prints were available for only four of the sixteen recently released films that they wanted for their 1972/73 season. Moreover none of the twelve films that had been unavailable in 1972 had subsequently become available for their 1973/74 programme (Anon 1973a: 3). In September, fifteen smaller film distributors established the Independent Film Distributors Association (IFDA), and invited Sid Brooks, a well-known figure in film society circles, to help them in improving the quantity, quality and accessibility of all types of film in the United Kingdom (Anon 1973b: 14). But in January 1976, raging inflation forced the IFDA to increase its rental prices, although in an attempt to keep the smaller film societies afloat, it moved from a flat-rate rental system towards the variable pricing structure deployed by the major commercial distributors. It would charge an additional 25 per cent of the licence fee for every hundred persons above 200 (Anon 1976a: 10). In the following year, the treasurer of the Scottish Office Film Society revealed that between 1967 and 1977, the costs of film hire in his society had risen ten-fold, jumping from £67.75 to over £700 (Mackenzie 1977: 8).

In 1976, Lord Redcliffe-Maud's report *Support for the Arts in England and Wales*, which had been commissioned by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, discovered that over 59 district councils were also providing community film shows of one kind or another, without any help or support from the BFI. Moreover, the BFI had taken no steps at all to

encourage these developments. Furthermore, the best film societies needed more backing from the Regional Arts Associations in the search for local authority support (Redcliffe-Maud 1976; Anon 1976b: 1–2). However, any attempt by the film society movement to diversify into community film schemes was still restricted by the rigorous nationwide restrictions, which were imposed by the film trade on their membership, publicity activities and proximity to a local cinema. The only section of the film society movement which seemed to be able to square this circle was the student union film societies in the universities and the polytechnics. In their case, their local community was identical to the educational institution in which they were studying. The LSE Film Society, for example, offered its members 'a major season of essentially British and American movies which will try to highlight and show the recent development of certain modern genres seen in the Anglo-American movie scene of the mid-70s' (Anon 1976c: 4). While the Manchester Union Polytechnic Film Society provided its 400 members with a mixture of 'high quality recent English language films which have been successful commercially' alongside 'a series of older films as second features which provide an opportunity to see the great stars of the past in some of their finest roles' (Bruce 1976: 4).

In October 1978, the BFFS followed up the Redcliffe-Maud Report by inviting the films officer from each of the Regional Arts Associations to articulate its region's policy towards film societies. After fourteen months of delay and obfuscation, the fifteen associations produced a single, collectively drafted document. Their first priority was the development and maintenance of 'professional activities' of all kinds, but shortage of funds meant that on the whole amateurs would miss out. Film societies could have programming advice, technical assistance and publicity help in abundance, because they cost them very little. But they were more likely to support a full-time professionally run film theatre or arts centre cinema than an amateur run film society. Beyond that, it was essential for the BFFS to realize that the Regional Arts Associations had a regional obligation, and they were required 'to draw up a coherent approach to the development of each art form in the region'. To fulfil this responsibility honestly and accurately 'was a massive undertaking involving a vast amount of research'. Furthermore, each films officer was responsible to his advisory panel, and it was important for each body to establish continuity in its decisions. Finally, if the film societies did not like the policies which underpinned these practices, it was open to them to lobby the representatives of their local council for a change in the policy (Altshul 1979: 8–9). It was clear that the Regional Arts Associations had no time for film societies, and that they had decided to bureaucratize the exhibition of alternative films.

The film societies may have been down, but they were not out. The societies in Doncaster and Horsham both re-opened in 1981 when their local film theatres closed down (Horsham Museum, n.d.; Martland 2000: 25–26; Doncaster Film Society 1981–1987).

Despite the loss of its base in the Harlow Playhouse as a result of the rate cap imposed by the Thatcher Administration, the Harlow Co-operative Film Society limped on until 1993 (Bill 1999: 8–9).

## Conclusion

During the 1970s, therefore, the regional exhibition of films was progressively shaped by changes in the socialist politics of the arts, and the by the BFI's determination to 'open up film culture'. As television flourished and commercial cinema exhibition declined, the mix became ever more unviable, so that survival only became possible in the principal regional cities. The original film theatres, which had been designed to export the cultural developments of the National Film Theatre and the British Film Institute to the regions, ran out of films, and of programming ideas. They were gradually slimmed down and honed into 'film centres' with a profoundly political and educational bias. The principal beneficiaries of this bureaucratic and heavily subsidised mix were the political and avant-garde activists who lobbied the regional arts associations, and the cultural bureaucrats who inhabited the city halls of the major metropolitan conurbations. The losers were the inhabitants of the smaller provincial towns and – for a while at least – many volunteers who worked for their local film society. The exhibition of alternative films had become bureaucratized.

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## Chapter 5

# Multiple Voices: *The Silent Cry* and Artists' Moving Image in the 1970s

William Fowler

The 1970s marked a period of considerable development in the production of experimental film and its associated fields. The British counter-culture of the 1960s had encouraged artists to collaborate and blur the distinctions of their respective fields[1] but now artists wanted to focus and consolidate their practice. They sought more structured contexts in which to produce their work. And broader cultural changes and more organized modes of exhibition and distribution both assisted and encouraged this focus.

Art spaces and interest in European New Wave cinema had, by the 1970s, established the terrain for a variety of alternative film production and distribution groups. Some of these organizations, which among the distributors included The Other Cinema, Polit Kino, Cine Gate, 24 Frames and the Short Film Service, also sprang from the frustration felt following the protests of May 1968. If the system could not be changed directly then the creation of a parallel, independent system presented another option and, in the context of film, a platform for alternative views that might create change in the future. Several film production collectives gave voice to and were structured around left-wing, non-hierarchical principles, most notably Cinema Action and the Amber Film Collective. The London Filmmakers Co-operative, founded in 1966, was also organized on non-hierarchal lines but the films its members produced rarely addressed explicitly political subjects. The LFMC had initially focused on exhibition, primarily of American experimental films, but as it entered the 1970s a growing group of filmmakers worked with the co-op's new production facilities and with it developed ideologies that focused on the very materiality of film. This new direction, called structural materialist film was, however, placed in a political context by filmmaker Peter Gidal (Gidal 1976).

The movement from the 1960s to the 1970s and from the underground scene to a more structured and supported culture was effectively crowned by the BFI (with some irony) when it hosted the First International Festival of Underground Film at the National Film Theatre in 1970. The Arts Council of Great Britain also awarded its first ever grants for artist filmmaking at the turn of the decade. The first two awards enabled the production of *Vertical* (1969) by the sculptor David Hall, and *Link* (1970) by pop artist, Derek Boshier.[2] As the decade progressed both the Arts Council and the BFI increasingly acknowledged the expanding field of experimental and artist film and funded works by Malcolm Le Grice, Stuart Pound, Tony Sinden and the aforementioned Peter Gidal, among others. The 1970s also gave increasing recognition to expanded cinema – essentially films that exceeded the manners and restrictions of usual cinematic exhibition – through the explorations of the group Film Action[3] plus the ICA's Festival of Expanded Cinema in 1976. 1976 also saw *The*

*Video Show* at the Serpentine Gallery, an exhibition that gave platform to a relatively new moving image medium. There were in fact several important festivals and exhibitions in the 1970s that were, in turn, reported in a variety of art and film magazines.[4]

Stephen Dwoskin, the director of *The Silent Cry* (1977) and many other short and feature length films, played an important part in many of these proceedings. He, with others, worked hard to help build and foster an independent film culture. His first feature, *Times For* (1970) was funded by the alternative philanthropist, Alan Power;[5] he knew, however, that such opportunities would not always be available and that others wouldn't be so lucky.

Dwoskin was raised in the United States, and having initially worked as a graphic designer, began making films in 1961 in the 'underground' film scene in New York.[6] He moved to London in 1964 as part of a Fulbright Fellowship and stayed there, helping to establish the London Filmmakers Co-operative in October 1966. He was one of the few early members to have already made films and took a particular side when the co-op experienced a split in 1967. The division was prompted by an enforced move from their regular meeting place, Better Books on Charing Cross Road. One group moved to the Arts Lab on Drury Lane and with it sought to locate its practice within a specific art context. They centred on Le Grice, Gidal and David Curtis, the future film officer at the Arts Council. The other group included Stephen Dwoskin, Simon Hartog and Ray Durgant and their focus lay with establishing an independent film network. While some of them had art backgrounds – most notably Dwoskin – this group was more interested and engaged in cinema. The former group, however, would ultimately dominate and Dwoskin and an evolving set of others would have to take their plans elsewhere (see Reekie 2007; Curtis 1971).

Dwoskin's films had been available for booking through the LFMC even after the move but Dwoskin soon realized the co-op was not suited to promoting features. Looking for more active distribution, Dwoskin placed his films with The Other Cinema. Dwoskin had in fact been involved with the establishment of The Other Cinema in the mid-1970s. He was one of a limited management committee that also included Marc Karlin and Laura Mulvey. It was from this basis that he went on to become a long-term member of the Independent Film Association. Founded in 1974, the IFA was a pressure group that supported independent filmmakers, organizing festivals and conferences and later gave input into Channel 4.

## *The Silent Cry*

It is useful to approach the tropes of Dwoskin's films through the writings of film editor Walter Murch. He has said that the blink of an eye provides an emotional cue for when to make a cut in a film; the blink and the cut both allowing a momentary break in the action and a chance to change perspective (Murch 2001). Stephen Dwoskin constructs his engaging and visually rich films with a similar sensitivity to human response but with different results in mind. Often involving long takes and starring people, usually women, who look back

at his static or slow-moving insistent camera, his films resist the personal detachment that comes from the changing perspectives employed in traditional filmmaking.

Paradoxically, his films highlight the presence of the film camera while calling on us as living, breathing human beings to become more involved in 'the action', be it stories about sexuality or elements of personal biography. Our reactions are heightened but also made more conscious. In this moment the viewer's gaze appears to be challenged and even returned by the person being filmed. He or she feels implicated. Paul Willeman has discussed this aspect of Dwoskin's work in his essay 'The Fourth Look' (Willeman 1994).

The subjective view of the camera in *The Silent Cry* does not represent Dwoskin or an unspecified person but the viewpoint of an anorexic woman. There is, however, still some ambiguity. The shots are not always cut with the appropriate matching reverse shot. This ambiguity is heightened if the viewer is aware that when the camera is addressed with dialogue in his other films, Dwoskin is usually the intended recipient. Furthermore, Dwoskin has said that, having contracted polio as a child, he knows what it is to be looked at from a distance, like a woman is sometimes looked at. The empathy between the woman and Dwoskin here extends then to the point where they conflate.[7] This reflects the sense of fracture that runs through this film and many others by Stephen Dwoskin. He himself speaks of his interest in contradiction. The anorexic woman, for example, exercises her power through the act of self-deprivation. The need for this arises from the attention the men in her life give her – her husband and father – and the power they take from her. They tell her what to do and how to behave. They love but they take away. *The Silent Cry* is essentially concerned with the series of contradictions that emerge from this situation and the environment that creates it.[8] The title itself, *The Silent Cry*, reflects these contradictions, as does an inclusion of a children's play of 'Alice in Wonderland'. Dwoskin describes it as a 'very British story and a very nasty story'.[9] Alice is presented with a world of wonder but the various obstacles that she encounters prevents her from pursuing her desires.

This interest in contradiction and restriction comes from a surrealist impulse on Dwoskin's part – a desire to access internal feeling through the application of a creative strategy – and goes back as far as his 1964 film, *Alone*. Here a woman sits and squirms slightly, uncomfortable with being by herself. We seem her pick her nose. We know, however, that Dwoskin filmed the event – the camera moves slightly – so therefore she is not alone at all. The act of watching this feels uncomfortable and the viewer takes on an emotional relationship to the woman and the film. Perversely, the viewer feels isolated and exposed – a voyeur – and therefore receives a feeling of loneliness too.

*The Silent Cry* presents an experimental aesthetic. It includes jump cuts, unusual framing and a lack of clear narrative, but interestingly the situation it presents is not inaccessible. The situation is very familiar to a British audience and the subjective point of view occasionally looks like a home movie. Stephen Dwoskin had used the woman's diaries and also watched the films of her family. This film is, with some slight contradiction, a real story where the woman, Bobby Gill, plays herself and other parts are played by actors and friends.

It is possible to discuss *The Silent Cry* and other films by Stephen Dwoskin from a relatively theoretical perspective but such theories emerge from and articulate a visual experience of profound immediacy. His films are expressive and emotional and ask the viewer to become involved with the action onscreen – and the drama they feel internally. It means that they are not always easy films to watch, but not for the reasons often associated with experimental cinema. The visual language that was developing at the LFMC in the 1970s, in contrast, sought to fracture the emotional relationship between image and viewer.

Dwoskin's emphasis on the visual has arguably helped the reception of his films abroad. Several of his features in the 1970s were funded by German television and thus received relatively mainstream exposure. *Behindert* from 1974 was voted one of the twelve best films shown on television that year by the German Protestant Church. Again, these films have an experimental edge to them but because they are about and address human emotion are far from inaccessible. *The Silent Cry* was funded by ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) in Germany, the Institute de l'Audio Visual in France and a conglomerate of investment in Britain. *The Silent Cry*, however, is an unusual film within Dwoskin's *oeuvre*. The scene it depicts is profoundly middle class and British, and in reflection moves beyond the universal language of humanity and emotion displayed in his other work. It also has far more dialogue. It is perhaps not surprising then that the audience response was considerably more positive in Britain than in Europe, despite its variety of funding sources.

This success was unusual. Dwoskin's films have screened more on the continent; a fact that says much about the reception of experimental film is the United Kingdom. The 1970s saw a period of growth and development in the field but also a concentration. Work was shown in the LFMC, galleries and festivals but anything that did not sit clearly within these particular structures in the United Kingdom often struggled to find an audience. Dwoskin's contribution to the development of an independent film sector – as a director, member of the Independent Film Association and writer about the field (Dwoskin 1975) – had some success in terms of the increase in production and the arrival of independent distributors[10] but the struggle was ongoing.

If we are to more fully qualify the success of *The Silent Cry*, we need to enter the 1980s. The film was shown twice on the new Channel 4 and received a positive response. Channel 4 created new opportunities for independent filmmakers but that is another story.

## Notes

1. For example, artist Mark Boyle provided projections for psychedelic jazz rock band, Soft Machine, Peter Whitehead made mature pop films for the psychedelic bands of the day and Paul McCartney made experimental films.
2. The BFI also provided some basic facility support to these films.
3. Members of Film Action include Malcolm Le Grice, William Raban, Gil Eatherly and Marilyn Halford.

4. *Studio International* devoted special issues to 'Avant-Garde Film in England and Europe' (190: 978) in 1975 and 'Video Art' (191: 981) in 1976. The former included Peter Wollen's influential article 'The Two Avant Gardes'. The journal, *Screen*, also often covered exhibitions and debates in the field.
5. Power also supported filmmaker, David Larcher, during this period.
6. Stephen Dwoskin's films are often compared to Andy Warhol. Dwoskin, however, made his first film, *Asleep*, in 1961 and Warhol made his first films in 1963.
7. This view is not exclusive and we often see her in front of the camera too.
8. *The Silent Cry* was made with Bobby Gill, the woman in the film. Stephen Dwoskin, however, was the director. Does this relationship perpetuate that which is explored in the film? The woman in the film is supported but a man is still directing the camera, a camera that represents her position.
9. Interview with author
10. The end of the decade saw the arrival of a new distributor. The structural materialist film exhibition, *Film as Film*, was shown in Germany in 1978 and in the following year came to the Hayward Gallery in London. The exhibition was notable in that in featured no female artists at all. The women filmmakers at the London Filmmakers Co-operative reacted by pulling their films from co-op distribution and starting a woman only distribution group called 'Circles'.

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## Chapter 6

# On the Margins: Anthony Simmons, *The Optimists of Nine Elms* and *Black Joy*

Josie Dolan and Andrew Spicer

'I make European films…I came into the industry as an outsider who never quite fitted into the slots of the British film industry…I never quite fitted into a niche.' (Anthony Simmons in Geisler 1997)

As this epigraph quotation indicates, writer-director Anthony Simmons is conscious of his own commercial and critical marginality within the dominant preoccupations and structures of the British film industry. Simmons' inability to find a commercial 'niche' illuminates many of the systematic problems of the British film industry, problems that were exacerbated by the intense instability and volatility of the industry in the 1970s. The reasons for Simmons' cultural marginality are more elusive but no less important. His aesthetic style, poetic realism and his optimistic, inclusive socialism became deeply unfashionable, but were the foundations of a remarkable consistency throughout his slender *oeuvre*, an intense career-long concern with social and cultural identities that were themselves regarded as peripheral.

In elucidating Simmons' preoccupations, as they expressed themselves in his film and television works in the 1970s, we also have to overcome his critical marginality. This marginality is shaped by a peculiar contradiction. On the one hand, Simmons has become one of the extensive legions of the lost in British film scholarship. Not only has there been no extended study, his work has not generated a single critical essay.[1] In three recent overviews of British cinema – by Jim Leach (2004), Amy Sergeant (2005) and Sarah Street (2008) – he is not even mentioned. At the same time, his 1977 film *Black Joy* (1977) has accrued a degree of notoriety since it is included in Lola Young's highly influential critique of race and gender in British cinema, *Fear of the Dark* (1996). And yet the film is also frequently ignored in accounts of black British cinema, such as Pines (2001) because Simmons does not quite fit the critical framework that traces a trajectory from problematic and stereotypical inter-war films of Empire, through equally problematic and stereotypical post-war problem films to the moment of resistant black film directors in the 1970s and 1980s. This mix of critical neglect and particular attention leaves Simmons in a strange limbo within understandings of British cinema in the 1970s – at the margin of the margins. Any understanding of this marginality needs to be framed by an account of Simmons' earlier career in order to demonstrate how his sensibility was formed and how this resonates with both the industrial formations of the 1970s and subsequent critical legacies.

## Early career

Simmons was born into an East End Jewish family of market traders, part of a vibrant, close-knit working-class, immigrant culture that was an abiding influence on his filmmaking. His commitment to socialism developed throughout his time at the London School of Economics where Harold Lasky was a seminal influence, and during his Army service where he also wrote plays and pantomimes, ran wartime newspapers and participated in the Army Bureau of Current Affairs' discussion groups. Simmons' socialism can thus be understood as a broadly based desire to see progressive change realized in the post-war reconstruction, aligned to a Popular Front ethos rather than to a dogmatic communism and the belief that working people would be able to take control of their lives and forge a 'better tomorrow'. After the war student politics – Simmons became vice-president of the National Union of Students – provided the forum for acquiring and expressing left-wing ideas, culminating in a UNESCO-funded trip to Bulgaria in 1947. There he wrote and directed his first film, *Balkan Village* – completed but unfortunately never shown (see Geisler 1997) – which celebrated the creation of a progressive society: 'the people are changing the land'.

It was in this European arena that Simmons' aesthetic practices were also forged. While in Rome attempting to finish editing *Balkan Village*, Simmons was profoundly affected by Italian neo-realism, which provided his cinematic education. Witnessing neo-realist filmmakers at work engendered a commitment to filming ordinary people on the streets, starting with an idea rather than a finished script and finding the precise subject by getting out and about. In Simmons' view, this mode of production allowed filmmakers to eschew studio artifice and create an authentic 'reality' – 'You can smell it and touch it' – that was closely in contact with people's everyday lives, their hopes and fears. Although European-influenced, Simmons' sensibility was also deeply informed by British models, the work of the Documentary Movement, particularly as it was realized in the films of Humphrey Jennings, notably *Listen to Britain* (1942), where everyday lives are rendered in ways that are also evocative and poetic. Returning to England, Simmons met Leon Clore, a producer, and another writer-director, Jack Arnold, the trio forming a company, Harlequin Productions, whose ethic was to make poetic realist films that were critical, if only by implication, of the dominant middle-class culture of British cinema. The initial result was two documentaries – *Sunday by the Sea* (1951) set in Southend and which won the Grand Prix at Venice, and *Bow Bells* (1953) – that celebrated working-class culture using location images filmed silently and then cut to music hall songs. Each is beautifully composed, both visually and aurally, and offer almost painterly films that suture sound and vision into a choreographed whole. Working closely with cinematographer Walter Lassally, Simmons creates a strong sense of place, and poetically registers the detailed texture and rhythms of working-class lives. Although Clore and Lassally became part of Free Cinema, Simmons remained outside a 'group' that he judged to be dominated by Lindsay Anderson, whose *O Dreamland* (1953) about a day at Margate, Simmons regarded as a rather sour and hostile depiction of its subject, the opposite of his own affectionate (but not sentimental) portraits.

Thus Simmons remained outside the movement that was one of the key elements in the British New Wave cinema, and as a consequence, outside the canon of British cinema. Regardless of this marginal position, through Harlequin he co-produced two crime thrillers, *The Passing Stranger* (1954) – which he also co-wrote – and *Time without Pity* (1957), the latter directed by Joseph Losey. But 1950s British cinema was fairly hostile terrain for innovative filmmakers, dominated by companies intent on struggling to maintain profitability by concentrating on genre films. Britain lacked a cultural climate (and a cinematically educated audience) that could nurture and sustain the poetic realist cinema that Simmons was committed to producing. The one significant film he made during this period was *Four in the Morning* (1965) for which Simmons had managed to obtain limited financing from the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC).[2] Simmons intercuts the original documentary story, *People of the River* that centred on the river police fishing a young woman's body out of the Thames, with two fictional stories about young couples whose relationships are in crisis. *Four in the Morning* is a major work, combining hauntingly beautiful compositions of the environs of the Thames (photographed by Larry Pizer) with two sharply delineated stories that express the bleak poetry of the location and which recall the darker side of neo-realism, notably Antonioni's *Il Grido* [The Cry] (1957) that Simmons so admired (Dolan and Spicer 2008: 135). Despite winning awards at Locarno and Cannes (the *Prix d'Art et Essai*), *Four in the Morning* was poorly promoted by the Rank Organisation whose marketing department lacked the intelligence to handle such a distinctive film, one which was too late to be attached to the British New Wave. Thus it became a *succès d'estime* rather than commercially profitable and Simmons had to earn his living as a radio scriptwriter and as a (highly successful) maker of commercials.

## *The Optimists of Nine Elms* (1973)

The 1970s was a peculiarly difficult decade in which to make feature films in Britain. The rapidly shrinking domestic audience created a mood of retrenchment and hostility to experimentation with several of the large companies (notably Rank) diversifying into multi-media conglomerates in which film production was a low priority (Higson 1994: 219–220). Domestic production was concentrated in a limited series of indigenous production cycles – sex comedies, horror and television spin-offs – while the most important British producers (EMI and ITC) concentrated on big-budget action spectaculars with a roster of stars aimed primarily at the American market. The traditional mainstay of the British cinema, the medium-budgeted, modest first feature for the domestic market, was thus squeezed out, creating the lack of a middle ground (Wood 1983: 5). Overall, there were chronic problems of raising production finance that severely restricted the opportunities for independent filmmakers. Each film became a one-off event with little or no continuity of production or the opportunity to build a body of films and thus establish the necessary collateral to obtain further finance.

Within this hostile terrain, Simmons managed to obtain finance for *The Optimists of Nine Elms* (1973) from Paramount, one of the last of a succession of deals that had sustained the British film industry since the mid-1960s in which American majors had been prepared to finance distinctively, even quirkily, British films and to give production teams a large measure of creative freedom (Walker 1976). Paramount's decision was based not on Simmons' reputation, but that of his star, Peter Sellers, who plays Sam, an ageing music hall entertainer turned busker, befriended by two children, brother and sister Liz Ellis (Donna Mullane) and Mark Ellis (John Chaffey). However, this was very much Simmons' film, its genesis going right back to an idea formed during filming of *Bow Bells* (1953). It started life as a three-page story, 'Hyde Park', in the early 1950s and became a full treatment told from Liz's point of view that was soft-edged, even rather sentimental (Dolan and Spicer 2008: 138).[3] After a number of aborted attempts to film with various stars – Buster Keaton, John Mills and Danny Kaye – and publication (1964) as a children's book, it was entirely rewritten by Simmons, in collaboration with Tudor Gates, as a much tougher piece whose inspiration was the great music hall comedian Dan Leno (1860–1904).

Sellers became deeply attracted by the opportunity to perform the old-time routines of a distinctive star whose surreal patter he felt had been ahead of its time – 'This morning I was in such a state I washed my breakfast and swallowed myself' – and had strong links with Sellers' own routines in the Goons.[4] Simmons became an expert in writing Lenoesque dialogue and worked closely with a notoriously difficult star in order to achieve a highly disciplined performance. Sam's dress, the tatterdemalion long brown overcoat and Union Jack lining, battered panama, bow tie, wing collar, spats and dickey, and his make-up – Sellers wore special shoes with a hump in the soles to create the funny rolling walk, with false teeth and a putty nose (Lewis 1995: 425) – 'follows that of a clown, but not so pronounced'.[5] When combined with the battered and customized pram that stages his busking performances, this careful delineation creates a character at once realistic and fantastical, a potent combination of the bizarre, the marginal and the magical. In Sellers' absorbing incarnation, Sam becomes a complex figure of loneliness and sadness – looking back to a vanished tradition – but retaining his dignity and sense of self-worth, embodying Simmons' belief in the capacity of humans to adapt and survive in difficult conditions.

In true neo-realist style, *The Optimists of Nine Elms* was shot entirely on location for nine weeks in Nine Elms, a slum district on the south of the Thames between Battersea and Vauxhall, using local children discovered in that area (Dolan and Spicer 2000: 139–140). Collaborating again with Pizer, Simmons creates a run-down landscape of fetid canals, goods trains, mud flats, rubbish tips, teetering bridges and dilapidated buildings – Sam's home is in a disused building – dominated by the gasworks and the power station. Sam ekes out his marginal existence in a topography at once insistently real and Dickensian. As a *Time Out* review suggests, 'Simmons sketches a suitably hard edged and realistic portrait of a drab existence south of the river. Father is aggressive and mother run-down, reduced to having a quick one Sunday mornings when the children are out'.[6] Crucially, it is Sam who introduces the Ellis children to the magical 'world across the river' beyond the

narrow confines of their own lives. They accompany him as he performs his routines outside Fulham Football Ground on match day, the spectators looking on as they queue, to the West End where his performance is intercut with that of an actual entertainer, Don Crown and his busking budgies, and to the pet cemetery in Hyde Park. All the actors, including Sellers, worked on scenes during rehearsal on location, and Simmons captures a number of incidental dramas – as when an elderly woman is being loaded onto an ambulance – that lend his story authenticity, the 'smell and feel' of real life that he inherited from the neo-realists. Although the story centres on Sam and the children, it is within the context of their parents' desire to move out of their tenement and into one of the flats in the new council estate over the river. Throughout the film Simmons is careful to endorse this aspiration because he felt the unions were indifferent to urban renewal and the housing movement that he thought created opportunities for working-class people to better themselves (Geisler 1997).

Paramount's financing also guaranteed distribution. But, like Rank with *Four in the Morning*, Paramount was unsure how to promote such a singular film. *The Optimists* (as it was entitled for American distribution) opened October 1973 at the vast Radio City Music Hall in New York with a huge fanfare that was entirely wrong for this 'intimate', Bergmanesque film. And, because it did not take off in America, Paramount provided very little publicity for its British release six months later in April 1974. British reviewers were generally enthusiastic about the film which they recognized as different from the usual genre fare: 'not just another TV spin-off, nor a clichéd version of Dracula or Frankenstein, but something thoughtful, uncynical and fresh'.[7] Richard Combs identified it as part of an intermittent 'school of poetic realism', in British cinema, and David Robinson eloquently argued that Simmons was 'one of the rare individualists that the British cinema should cherish', linking the 'slightness of his output' with 'his refusal to compromise his taste for unfashionably genial and human and unsensational themes…the survival of older community values' and 'the optimistic belief that people will come right in the end'.[8] However, their notices could not create a word-of-mouth success – for a film that was competing against *The Exorcist*. Subsequently, Paramount sold the negative to Viacom and therefore *The Optimists* has very rarely been shown, even on television.[9] This is a pity since rare screenings at National Film Theatre events offer testimony to a haunting aesthetic that is distinctly 'Simmons': an aesthetic which resonates with 'Jenningsesque' British documentary traditions as much as neo-realist influences. Consequently, despite the authentic 'smell and feel' of its working-class location, and the exposition of urban decay that prompts the Ellis's desire to move out of Nine Elms, *The Optimists* could never be described as 'gritty'. Meticulously composed shots capture the ethereal light of Thames-side tidal reaches, while the rotting timbers of decaying buildings are framed as urban sculptures. Indeed, some shots of river mist framed by the arches of bridges are highly evocative of Whistler's paintings of the Thames. But this spectacle is not allowed to dominate the narrative or overshadow character development. The marginal topography of the riverbank registers the social and cultural locations and dislocations of Sam and the children who are variously neglected and marginalized by the discriminations of age or youth as they overlap with working-class limitations. At the same time, the strange

beauty of location impressionistically infuses the narrative with a complex emotional register that positions decline and regeneration as inextricably linked stages of an organic cycle, rather than as mutually repellent, discrete oppositions. This destabilization of oppositions is reproduced in the alignment of youth and age forged in the bond between the Ellis children and Sam in which youthful energy is exchanged for hard-earned experience and wisdom. In this dynamic, the emotional economy of optimism is redeemed from the instrumentalist interventions of economists and planners and restored as an unpredictable, uncontrollable and ultimately life-affirming human trait.

Like most filmmakers of his generation, Simmons survived artistically and economically by moving between film and TV work and the optimism of the marginalized became something of a hallmark here too. For purposes of comparison, it is worth breaking with the chronology of Simmons' career to mention briefly *On Giant's Shoulders*, because it also equates topographical marginality with that of the social. Adapted from the Marjorie Wallace and Michael Robson book of the same name, and broadcast on 29 March 1979, this critically acclaimed BBC 'Play of the Week' was BAFTA nominated and went on to be an Emmy-award winner in 1980. *On Giant's Shoulders* tells the story of Terry Wiles, a black, half-blind, armless and virtually legless victim of thalidomide. With Wiles played by himself, and Bryan Pringle and Judi Dench cast as Len and Hazel Wiles, the white couple who adopt him, *On Giant's Shoulders* also uses river locations as a metaphor for social marginalization. Yet, as established in the play's opening sequence in which an exuberant Terry steers a boat centre stream, the drama refutes the negative connotations of the terms 'victim' and 'disability'. Indeed, the play can be located in relation to subsequent cultural theories that shift conceptions of disability from the biological to the discursively and socially produced (see Shildrick 1997). Inevitably with televisual productions of this period, the spontaneous techniques of neo-realist cinema are abandoned – but not at the cost of poetic expression. Tight domestic interiors register the physical and social confinement experienced by people with disability – and their families – while sudden cuts to breathtaking views of misty exteriors metaphorically express the potential and ambition to transcend the conventional ideas that frame the meaning of disability. Because Len Wiles dedicates his innovative engineering expertise to solving his son's mobility problems, this reframing comes in the guise of motorized aids designed by the father for the son. Once again, Simmons offers another life-affirming statement through a moving account of marginalized lives.

## ***Black Joy*** **(1977)**

*On Giant's Shoulders* is also of interest because it represents an inter-racial family, although questions of racial marginality are subsumed within the dynamics of disability. However, two years earlier, with *Black Joy* (1977) Simmons had made race the central concern of a film. Following the box-office failure of *The Optimists of Nine Elms*, it had taken Simmons three years to secure finance for this adaptation of the 1975 play *Dark Days, Light Nights* by

Jamal Ali. Simmons considered Ali to be the 'Damon Runyon of Brixton', and the location had considerable appeal since it was set in one of the few districts of London that retained the type of vibrant working-class, immigrant culture Simmons remembered from his youth (Hodgson n.d.), albeit Afro-Caribbean rather than Jewish. Finance was provided by West One, an independent production company run by the successful American agent-turned-producer Elliott Kastner. Although Kastner usually looked to action films and top-star casting to ensure profits, in this case he was prepared to ignore the dominant market trends by making a low-budget 'quality' film with high cultural capital that would be ready to show at Cannes, and in which the NFFC could be persuaded to take a half stake. Producer Martin Campbell was on hand to ensure that *Black Joy* did not go over its very modest budget of £300,000 (Walker 1985: 242). Simmons, having co-written the screenplay with Ali, filmed on the Brixton streets in over 70 locations, using his characteristic mode of rehearsed action in the context of real life going on around it, the actors adjusting to playing scenes in actual locations.[10]

Made just two years after British cinema's first black-directed and cast feature film *Pressure* (Horace Ové, 1975), *Black Joy* was also notable for its all black cast. The film tells the story of country boy Ben (Trevor Thomas) who arrives at Heathrow from Guyana, encounters institutional racism at immigration and then, unable to find his relatives in Brixton, falls prey to local hustlers Devon (Paul Melford) and Dave (Norman Beaton) before eventually adjusting to city life in Britain. From the outset, *Black Joy* had something of an ambivalent reception. Akua Rugg writing for *Race Today* (January 1978) was representative:

> Much has been made of the fact that the film is not political, and merely provides an hour of good dirty fun. The residents of Brixton are shown cussing, fighting, bedding down and messing each other over with monotonous regularity. Reggae and soul music provide a contrast to the drab physical environment of a decaying inner city area…A film which in the main, depicts blacks as making the best of a bad job, rather than seeking alternatives, is a political statement in itself. (Bourne 1998: 230)

But by 1984, Rugg was arguing that the film does no more than pander to 'white society's prurient interest in certain aspects of black social life' (1984: 28). Equally though, there is evidence of unequivocal critical acclaim, not least for the performance of Norman Beaton as Dave who became the first black British actor to receive a British film award when the Variety Club of Great Britain pronounced him best actor of 1977. As he says, '…it was the most wonderful moment of my life. I had disproved the claim "They can't act. There are no black actors"' (Pines 1992: 114).

Despite the strength of Beaton's claims for *Black Joy*'s significance within the racial politics of British film production, the film is frequently excised from accounts of black representation in British film. For instance, Jim Pines (2001) traces white- produced stereotypes embedded in both the inter-war genre of Empire and the post-war social problem film before making a seamless move to a celebration of the work of black film directors that chronologically frame

*Black Joy*: *Pressure* to *Burning an Illusion* (Shabazz, 1981). This omission is symptomatic of *Black Joy*'s marginal position within existing interpretative frameworks that are split between 'white misrepresentation' and 'resistant black representations'. Quite simply, *Black Joy* does not lend itself to conventional critiques suggesting that white directors reproduce the imperial gaze through a reliance on stereotypical characters or generic verisimilitude. On the contrary, *Black Joy* is interspersed with scenes that interrogate the white gaze and which expose institutionalized racist strategies. For instance, in the opening immigration hall sequence, a hostile and officious immigration officer registers the 'common sense' suspicion of black immigrants that underpins racist ideologies and prefigures those 'stop and search policies' that subsequently inflamed black communities to the point of street riots in the early 1980s. This establishing sequence also includes an excruciating scene in which Ben is subjected to rectal examination that illuminates the extent to which the black body is constituted as a site of the colonizing white gaze and white regulatory regimes. Effectively, the film produces a marginal gaze that is neither white and colonizing nor black and resistant. With this gaze in place, later scenes that juxtapose London tourist sites with the wasteland of Brixton's demolished streets register the racialized distribution of economic and cultural capital in 1970s Britain. Consequently, Lola Young places *Black Joy* alongside films such as *Pressure* (1975) and *Burning an Illusion* (1981) in which,

> the imperial eye is denied its narcissistic concentration on white subjectivity as the look is not turned on white people but through them. They are not the focal point but a means through which to view both intercultural and intracultural relations. (Young 1996: 152)

Moreover, as Pines (1991: 7) observes, *Black Joy* echoes the iconography and milieu of 1970s US blaxploitation films such as *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971)which unsettle stereotypes of black passivity through the high degrees of social agency accorded to its characters, although he also argues that this produces a romanticized view of the ghetto. Thus, as Young elaborates, the political import of *Black Joy*'s representation of 'the rough world of the urban black male's attempts to survive in a hostile environment' (151) is undercut by the generic conventions that articulate the film's comedy of manners. Young is even more concerned about *Black Joy*'s reproduction of black female stereotypes. Firstly, the sexual dynamics of the film make no gesture towards commitment to conventional coupledom or family life. Where this might spell 'sexual liberation' for white female characters, for the black woman they reiterate dominant ideas of black female hypersexuality that are shaped by the nineteenth-century imperial gaze. Additionally, *Black Joy* was produced at a time when the black male was both criminalized and then constituted by the popular press as the source of racial tensions.[11] In this context black women – as mothers or wives or girlfriends – were then burdened with regulatory responsibilities; that is black women were pathologized as bad mothers, bad wives or bad girlfriends because of their assumed failure to properly control their sons, husbands, boyfriends. Thus, where representations of the white working mother are most likely to be seen as either representing the successes of feminism or as objects

of sympathy for the difficulties of multi-tasking, representations of black working mothers such as Miriam (Floella Benjamin) are held up as examples of neglectful motherhood.

Young's argument about the gender politics of *Black Joy* is beyond reproach. But this should not overshadow the positive aspects of the film. Simmons use of neo-realist/documentary aesthetics infuses the narrative with a highly political cultural verisimilitude that is amplified through the soul-reggae soundtrack. As with other Simmons' films such as *Bow Bells*, *Black Joy* has a vernacular musical score that synchronizes sound and image and thus makes a significant contribution to the narrative. Where *Bow Bells* employs a cockney music hall genre to choreograph the fast disappearing street life of London's East End, *Black Joy* uses soul-reggae songs from black performers – such as Aretha Franklin, Johnny Nash and Billy Paul – to articulate Britain's emerging multi-culturalism. With a keen eye to maximizing both publicity and profits, the soundtrack was released as an LP which rapidly made its way to chart success, going platinum within two weeks.[12] Initially, the film also found favour with audiences and was well on the way to becoming a commercial success. However, *Black Joy* had to be taken out of circulation when it was realized that performing rights had not been obtained. It was fully four years later when the legal wrangle was finally resolved and the film was again in circulation. By that time it was out of date and the opportunity to make money had evaporated.

However, despite these contingencies, the political import of reggae music is not lost and it is impossible to overestimate the significance of its emergence within 1970s British popular culture. Reggae fuses the distinctive rhythms of Afro-Caribbean culture with an emergent language of political protest and it was the first indigenous form of black British music. Moreover, its popularity cuts across both white and black identities. Diane Jeater (1992) suggests that in 1970s Britain reggae provided one of the sites where liberal white Britons who refused to wear the mantle of racism could display their anti-racist sensibilities, could express their appreciation of black British culture and talent and could celebrate the enrichment of British culture made in both pre- and post-Windrush eras by its non-white citizens. Most importantly, it provided a space where black communities could be configured as a cultural and financial resource rather than simply a drain on the economy. Jeater's argument is clearly located within 'hybridity' debates where reggae signals a point of cultural exchange and transformation. Crucially, Stuart Hall (1997) observes that 'hybridity' should never be reduced to an interface between white and black cultures; rather, in the manner of reggae music, black culture should itself be seen as a hybrid fusion composed of shifting and multiple global antecedents. Hall argues that since black culture is itself multiply constituted it should not be reduced to a singular monolithic formation around which a uniform and fixed black identity can be organized. From this perspective, *Black Joy*, with its highly individuated characters, its representation of a diverse community, and its use of hybridized reggae music can be seen as a celebration of a rich, black, hybrid culture that is only marginal when viewed through the lens of white privilege.

Simmons' slender output in the 1970s was partly a product of a narrowly focused British film industry that was hostile to innovation, but also of a distinctive sensibility that never

found a niche in an unsupportive British film culture; in this regard the 1970s was only the intensification of more deep-seated and long-term problems. However, *The Optimists of Nine Elms* and *Black Joy* are entirely consistent with Simmons' fundamental belief in the ability of working-class communities not only to survive but to progress by taking the opportunities that are offered. Both, as we have argued, focus on apparently marginal figures in order to suggest the limitations of mainstream British culture and to locate an authentic and vibrant culture elsewhere. And both, we wish to argue, are major works that deserve far wider recognition than they have enjoyed. Thus to 'rescue' Simmons from his undeserved critical neglect is also to remap British film culture of the 1970s, which needs to be understood as possessing many divergent and disparate energies that have not been recognized hitherto, ones that characteristically inhabit the margins rather than the centre.

## Notes

1. There is an appreciative and perceptive entry on Simmons by Geoff Brown in Robert Murphy (ed.), *Directors in British and Irish Cinema*, pp. 553–554. Michael Chanan's *The Politics of Documentary*, includes a thoughtful analysis of Simmons' early documentaries.
2. See *Sight and Sound*, 34: 3 (Summer 1965), p. 140; *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 33: 385 (February 1966), p. 15.
3. It was published as a novel by Heinemann, 1964, and reissued by Methuen in 1974, complete with numerous stills from the film.
4. 'Shades of Dan Leno', *Sunday Times*, 18 February 1973.
5. Ibid.
6. http://www.google.ie/search?hl=en&q=optimists+of+nine+elms&start=10&sa=N.
7. Richard Berkley, *Sunday Express*, 28 April 1974.
8. *Financial Times*, 27 April 1974; *The Times*, 26 April 1974.
9. A poor quality print was available on VHS. The situation has now improved after the BFI rescued the negative from Viacom and screened it at the BFI South Bank in April 2007. It is now available on DVD in America and clips are starting to appear on YouTube.
10. West One Studio Notes; included on the BFI microfiche for *Black Joy*.
11. See Stuart Hall et al. (1978), *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
12. Popular memory of the soundtrack exceeds that of the film and copies of the original LP are highly collectible.

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## Chapter 7

# We Know Where We're Going, We Know Where We're From: *Babylon*

Paul Newland

'When I heard of your coming here I was moved. A journey like yours does not take place without good reason'. Colonel Marcus Lipton, Labour MP for Brixton, 3 June 1948 (spoken to a small group of Jamaican immigrants in a room over the Astoria Cinema, Brixton).[1]

On 11 April 1981, one of the most serious riots in the history of London took place in Brixton, an area south of the River Thames which has since become a synonym for marginalized black urban culture. On 10 April, a crowd rescued a black youth from a police car and forced police reinforcements to withdraw. This prompted an explosion of violence the next day. In the six-day period before the riot, police in Brixton had launched 'Operation Swamp 81', during which 120 plain-clothes officers stopped 943 people, arresting 118 of them (Fryer 1984: 398). Bricks and petrol bombs thrown, cars burned, windows smashed and shops looted. There were dozens of serious injuries. Later that same year, further unrest occurred in Handsworth, Birmingham; St Pauls, Bristol; Moss Side, Manchester and Toxteth, Liverpool. The public enquiry into the Brixton riot was headed by Lord Scarman, who published a report on 25 November 1981 which found that 'racial disadvantage is a fact of current British life' (Hiro 1991: 81–96).

By the late 1960s, ten years after the arrival of the Empire Windrush at Tilbury on 22 June 1948, up to 125,000 West Indians had settled in Britain (Fryer 1984: 372). Although the British government began to greatly restrict immigration, approximately 83,000 people from the Commonwealth settled in the UK between 1968 and 1975. Many blacks lived in run-down inner-city areas. Franco Rosso's film *Babylon* (1980) presciently captured the type of tensions that were developing in London between the black community, local whites and the police during the late 1970s. Indeed, filmed entirely on location in a realist style (Bakari 2000: 230), the film now stands as a document of the type of racial conflict that blighted English cities during the period that saw Margaret Thatcher come to office. Taking account of its socio-cultural contexts, this chapter tells the story of the production of the film, and considers possible reasons for its mixed critical and public reception.

*Babylon* attempts to provide a realistic representation of young men living in South London in the 1970s, who seek to forge an identity for themselves within the toasting (rapping) musical culture of sound systems. Blue (Brinsley Forde) is a toaster with Ital Lion, a sound system preparing to enter a competition. By the early 1980s sound systems could be seen operating in all the areas of London in which blacks had settled. They celebrated a politically engaged form of Rastafari, and thus offered black youths a chance to share collective sensibilities (Back 1996: 187). Pre-recorded music (often imported from the West

Indies) was toasted over by a rapper, who in effect seized his opportunity to momentarily rewrite black history (Back 1996: 193). We see Blue doing this during an opening sequence in the film, as well as in the powerful climactic sequence (which sees the police raid the competition). But, above all, the young men in the film specifically draw strength and a common sense of identity from Rastafarianism, which developed in black communities during the early 1970s. This was, then, a period during which many young West Indians came to identify with Africa as the continent of their origin, and, in particular, the mythical Ethiopia of Haile Selassie (Hiro 1991: 67; also Gilroy 1982: 276–314).

But *Babylon* might also be considered one of a number of key subcultural music films of the late 1970s and early 1980s. As such, it might be considered alongside films such as *The Music Machine* (Ian Sharp, 1979), *Quadrophenia* (Franc Roddam, 1979), *Rude Boy* (Jack Hazan and David Mingay, 1980), *Breaking Glass* (Brian Gibson, 1980), *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* (Julien Temple, 1980) and *Take It or Leave It* (Dave Robinson, 1981). These were all, after all, state-of-the-nation films that captured Britain in decline, while relating popular music and subcultures to a period of social and economic crisis (Savage 2008).

## Antecedents

Black British culture had been shown on the cinema screen before *Babylon*. *Black Joy* (1977), for example (a film discussed in the chapter in this book by Josie Dolan and Andrew Spicer), features an all-black cast, and was filmed on the streets of Brixton. But, like *Babylon*, it was the work of a white director, Anthony Simmons. Probably the most important filmmaker to lead the way in depicting black culture on screen in the 1970s was the Trinidadian-born Horace Ové. Ové's film *Pressure* (1975), funded by the British Film Institute Production Board and produced by Robert Buckler, stars Herbert Norville as a black teenager, Tony, torn between the Trinidadian roots of his immigrant family and his British identity. Before this first feature, Ové had already made a number of films including *The Art of the Needle* (1966) and *Baldwin's Nigger* (1969) (Ogidi 2007). Like *Babylon, Pressure* draws on the formal strategies of British social realism in order to interrogate the controversial 'sus' (suspicion) laws which allowed the police to harass innocent young blacks, and to highlight the casual racism of much of the white community in London. *Pressure* greatly influenced director Franco Rosso and scriptwriter Martin Stellman. And *Babylon* also distinctly echoes Ové's *A Hole in Babylon*, which was co-written by Ové and Jim Hawkins and broadcast on BBC Television as part of its *Play for Today* series in 1979 (Bourne 2001: 201). This drama was based on events leading up to the Spaghetti House siege in London in September 1975, and featured actors who would go on to appear in *Babylon*, including T-Bone Wilson and Archie Pool.

## Key players

Franco Rosso was educated at the Camberwell Art School and the Royal College of Art. He worked on Ken Loach's *Kes* (1969) as assistant editor, and went on to direct a number of pop promos for John Lennon, a film on Stephen Stills (best known as one quarter of Crosby, Stills Nash and Young), the banned ATV documentary *House on the Hill* (1974), the highly regarded VPS documentary *Mangrove Nine* and *History of Black Music* (1975), also for VPS. But Rosso also worked with Horace Ové, editing *Reggae* (1970), a record of the first concert at Wembley of reggae artists including Toots and the Maytals and Millie Small. Rosso also went to Trinidad with Ové to operate second camera and edit his documentary *King Carnival* for the BBC, and edited a number of short films for him. A number of years later Rosso and Ové both directed two parts of a dramas series for Peter Ansorge at BBC Birmingham, *East End at Your Feet*, based on the book by Farrukh Dhondy.

The *Babylon* scriptwriter Martin Stellman came from theatre. He read drama and English at the University of Bristol, and was co-director, performer and writer with the multi-media experimental rock theatre group, Principal Edwards Magic Theatre between 1969 and 1972. He worked as an actor and writer with The Combination Theatre Company (1972), and wrote a number of other plays for children, and co-wrote the screenplays for *Quadrophenia* (Franc Roddam, 1979) and *McVicar* (Tom Clegg, 1980).

Gavrik Losey produced *Babylon* independently (Newland 2009). The son of the blacklisted American director Joseph Losey, Gavrik had managed to carve out a successful career in British cinema through the late 1960s and 1970s, working in various capacities for Woodfall, Apple, Goodtimes and EMI on films such as *The Magical Mystery Tour* (Bernard Knowles and the Beatles, 1967), *If…* (Lindsay Anderson, 1968), *Villain* (Michael Tuchner, 1971), *Little Malcolm* (Stuart Cooper, 1972), *That'll Be the Day* (Claude Whatham, 1973), *Stardust* (Michael Apted, 1974), *Slade in Flame* (Richard Loncraine, 1975) and *Agatha* (Michael Apted, 1979) (see Newland 2009). The highly regarded cinematographer Chris Menges, whose innovations effectively lent *Babylon* its social realist quality, has gained considerable critical acclaim for his work on *Kes* (Ken Loach, 1969), as well as *Gumshoe* (Stephen Frears, 1971), *Bloody Kids* (Stephen Frears, 1979) and Loach's *Black Jack* (1979).

Although *Babylon* set out to accurately tell the story of South London black youth culture, the filmmakers were, of course, not black. This fact makes it difficult to talk about the film in terms of black British cinema. But the filmmakers clearly felt that they shared the views of the immigrant in the city. Losey feels that the immigrant status of the collaborators on the film helped them to be accepted by the black community in south London:

> I think the black community understood from Franco and Martin that the people who were involved in making this film were genuine people – they weren't there to actually send up the blacks or to create a problem with this section of that section of the community.[2]

The original *Babylon* script, by Martin Stellman and Franco Rosso, was commissioned as a BBC Television *Play for Today* (French 1980), 'which the public broadcaster then refrained from producing, reportedly on the grounds that the treatment of the subject was potentially inflammatory' (Anon 1980a). Gavrik Losey saw the script, was impressed, and offered to help get the film made for a cinema release. It was financed by a complex set of arrangements, but was primarily backed by Mamoun Hassan at the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC), who gave the filmmakers £297,525, with a maximum additional contribution of £16,537.50. Losey brokered a deal with Chrysalis Records to front some money in exchange for the rights to the potentially lucrative soundtrack LP. For this the company would take an 8.5 per cent stake in the equity of the film. They agreed to front £30,000 with a maximum additional contribution of £1,650. John and Benny Lee, trading as Lee Electric (Lighting) Ltd, agreed to offer £27,760 with a maximum additional contribution of £1,527.50. As part of their investment in the film, Lee Electric (Lighting) Ltd agreed to advance facilities and equipment. The total budget was set at £375,000, with *Babylon* turning out to be the only film financed by the NFFC that year.

The casting was managed by Sheila Trezise and Martin Stellman, and the film utilized a huge number of extras; people drawn from the estates in the South London areas Deptford, Lewisham, Peckham and Croydon. It also stars Trevor Laird as Beefy, Brian Bovell as Spark, Victor Romero Evans as Lover, David N. Haynes as Errol, Archie Pool as Dreadhead, T. Bone Wilson as Wesley. Blue's racist garage-owner boss is played by BBC comedy series *Not the Nine O'Clock News* regular Mel Smith. Karl Howman plays Ronnie, Blue's white working-class friend, who feels drawn to the Rastafarian culture celebrated by the sound system. Indeed, the relationship between these two young men sits at the centre of the narrative. The first shot in the film sees them running together through the heavy traffic on New Cross High Street. And much of the drama in the film develops out of the ways in which they try to come to terms with their perceived similarities and differences.

Music, of course, is central to *Babylon*. Losey has pointed out that 'The band Aswad came complete. Brinsley Forde was a child actor. He was on TV, in a number of BBC children's programmes and played in those until he joined the group, and is an excellent actor.'[3] The sound systems that appear in the film are Jah Shaka, Mighty Observer and Rootsman Hi Fi (who play Ital Lion). The Ital Lion dubs performed by Aswad are 'Warrior Charge' and 'Hey Jah Children'. The film also features performances of 'Deliver Me from My Enemies' by Yabba U, 'Babylon' by Jah Shaka, 'You Did' by Cassandra, 'Can't Give It Up' by Janey Kay and 'Turn Me Loose' by Michael Profit.

*Babylon* is also a key London film (Newland 2009), capturing as it does the general malaise of life in the poorer areas of the capital during the late 1970s. Gavrik Losey remembers how important the locations were in the production of the film, and that the filmmakers took over the second floor of the Methodist Mission in Deptford High Street as a production base.[4] Furthermore, Franco Rosso has admitted that the presence of celebrated cinematographer Chris Menges on location set was 'very, very, very important' (especially his work on location), and that the finished film owes much to his vision. The director

remembers Menges coming up with innovative ways of lighting scenes that were being performed in dark locations:

> …he had to come up with a way of making it feel as if it was pitch black, but of course be visual enough to see what was happening, to keep that atmosphere. And he was very good at it. I mean, he was terrific really. I couldn't have done it without him.[5]

## Exhibition

*Babylon* was shown in the Critic's Week at the Cannes Film Festival in May 1980, and was also shown at the Toronto Festival of Festivals, where it gained a favourable response. Back home, a reporter for the *New Standard*, Guy Pierce, accompanied three black youths (all under 18) to a preview. They found the film to be authentic: 'It's very true to life. That's exactly the way it happens', said Peter. They thought, moreover, that the film was 'a little toned down' (Pierce 1980). Indeed, of the scene in which Blue is followed and picked up on a 'sus' by plain-clothes policemen, who gives him a severe beating, Peter said 'He was lucky they didn't plant anything on him. If you run from a policeman you've got to make sure you're not caught' (Pierce 1980). Further remarks made by these viewers now sound particularly prescient. Brian said 'It's a very fair reflection on the way things are.' Peter added 'It should go down well in Brixton and Tooting.' Overall they thought that the film was 'wicked' (Pierce 1980).

But, in Britain, people of this age were not allowed to see the film on its release, because *Babylon* was awarded an 'X' certificate by the censor, James Ferman, who argued that young blacks who saw the film might become 'confused and troubled'; they might come to see violence against whites was their only option. Ferman also worried about the obscene language. He called in seven members of the Commission for Racial Equality to see the film (six of whom were black). Five of these individuals initially favoured letting over-14s see the film until they listened to Ferman's concerns. Then they voted five to two to confirm the 'X' certificate (Walker 1980). Gavrik Losey sent a letter to Ferman in June 1980 stating his case against an 'X' certificate, enclosing copies of the favourable reviews of the conservative press (including David Robinson's in *The Times*, and David Castell's piece in the the *Sunday Telegraph*). But this was to no avail. In hindsight, Alexander Walker felt that the 'X' certificate effectively barred the film from a great many members of the black community who might have been interested in seeing it (Walker 2005: 243).

Most reviews of the film were positive. Walker wrote in the *Evening Standard* that 'the thoughts, words and lifestyles of Blue and his Brixton street gang (all played by realistic unknowns) have the premonitory explosiveness of distant thunder' (Walker 1980). According to David Robinson, the black life depicted in the film was 'lively and resilient' (Robinson 1980). He also advocated that '*Babylon* is not an "art" film. It instead gives a wholly believable, unsentimentalized, unglamorized feeling of what it is like to belong to

a black community in London' (Robinson 1980). Derek Malcolm found *Babylon* to be a 'genuinely good film in a year when we are much in need of something that isn't put together simply and solely to make a box-office killing'. He thought it 'a good, old-fashioned, liberal film' (Malcolm 1980). Writing in the *New Statesman*, John Coleman found *Babylon* 'a good, disturbing movie, at once raw and accomplished, about a bad, disturbed area of our national life' (Coleman 1980). Though he did not write a glowing review, he urged his readers to go and see a film which felt 'vibrant, busy, painful, provocative and *there*' (Coleman 1980). After reviewing the horror films released in London during the same week as *Babylon*, such as *He Knows You're Alone* (Armand Mastroianni), *When a Stranger Calls* (Fred Walton), *Terror Train* (Roger Spottiswoode), *The Fog* (John Carpenter) and *The Changeling* (Peter Medak), Alan Brien wrote that it was 'one of the best British-made films for years' with 'more shock potential than all five put together' (Brien 1980). In the *Daily Telegraph*, David Castell pointed out that 'It has taken an American-born producer, Gavrik Losey, and an Italian-born director – each brought up in Britain but owning national allegiance elsewhere – to shake a stick at our complacency' (Castell 1980). Meanwhile, in the *Observer*, Philip French wrote 'this is a thoughtful and sophisticated entertainment that takes us into intriguing exotic terrain' (French 1980). The *Sunday Times* called the film 'one of the best British-made films for years' (Anon 1980b). The *Daily Telegraph* argued that the film gives 'an insight into black culture and social attitudes that is quite alien to white audiences' (Anon 1980c). The reviewer in the *Daily Mail* argued 'My feelings about the film are mixed. I don't doubt its integrity. The sense of seething frustration waiting to explode is alarming. But the treatment is subjective' (Anon 1980d).

In the United States, *Variety* called the film a 'Fiery, first rate debut feature on an inflammable theme;'

> a British film with more heart and soul than any home-produced feature of the last 20 years. Like the reggae music that pulses through it, *Babylon* is rich, rough and real. And like the streetlife of the young black Londoners it portrays, it's threatening, touching, violent and funny.

The *Variety* reviewer also argued that 'Though blacks aren't the only likely audience, cautious handling would seem advisable in markets where to depict a bunch of young rebellious immigrants as ostensible "heroes" could be read as provocative' and that:

> One key to the film's success is its lack of an overt social or political message. It presents a hard-edged narrative centred on three-dimensional characters, most of whom are black – and the chain of events appears to develop its own momentum, rather than one imposed by script or direction. (Anon 1980a)

So a healthy buzz initially grew up around the film. In Britain, the principle actors in *Babylon*, Trevor Laird and Brinsley Forde, made the front cover of the weekly London magazine *Time*

*Out* (551, November 7–13 1980), under the headline 'Great Black Hope'. This helped the initial box office figures. *Screen International* on 10 January 1981 showed that *Babylon* had taken £18,966 (net) after nine weeks at the Classic 2, Chelsea, a 227-seat theatre. The critical reputation of the film continued to build into the following year, as Franco Rosso stepped up to receive the 1981 *Evening Standard* British Film Award for Most Promising Filmmaker (Bourne 2001: 202)

However, there were voices that were critical of *Babylon*. Writing in *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Steve Jenkins suggested that 'What is crucially lacking is any space for analysis of the problems which the film so effortlessly and relentlessly sketches out.' He argued that 'The film's inability to present its characters as other than likeable rogues, villains or victims limits it to being merely another depressing, but easily consumable, slice of life' (Jenkins 1980: 209).

The film unfortunately encountered distribution problems. It was originally distributed by Osiris. When this company folded, Monitor Films Limited took over distribution. From 1983, distribution was handled by Blue Dolphin Film Distributors. This contract was to last for five years. A Television License Agreement was reached between Diversity Music and Channel 4 on 1 September 1981. Channel 4 paid £50,000 to screen *Babylon* three times between 7 November 1983 and 6 November 1990. But the film was made before Channel 4 became directly involved in film production. During 1984, Gavrik Losey had problematic negotiations with Oakwood Distributors in the United States, who thought they had agreed to distribute the film on the basis that they retained all rights to diversify the risk.[6] Oakwood thought the film was 'difficult'. So, after appearing like it might be fairly successful, the film gradually faded from view. In Losey's file (now in the Bill Douglas Centre at the University of Exeter), the National Film Trustee Company list the allocation of revenues received for *Babylon* to 30 September 1986 as United Kingdom: £70,347.81, overseas: £20,856.35, making a total of £91,204.16 (against the £375,000 budget). Diversity Music was dissolved by Losey in March 1983.

## Conclusion

Other than the 'X' certificate, there were a number of other reasons why a film that had been so well received by the critics did not perform well at the box office. Gavrik Losey has pointed out that the patois dialogue might have made it inaccessible to a wider audience.[7] Indeed, at the time that the film was first exhibited, the critic Derek Malcolm also felt that the use of subtitles might militate against the potential popularity of the film (Malcolm 1980). Losey also feels that the film was released just too late to be really successful. If it had been released earlier, it might have had an impact on the troubled social life of black South London:

> I suppose that maybe if it had not been done in patois, maybe if it had been done a little earlier and released a little earlier it might have had some impact in trying to prevent or ameliorating the thing which finally caused the riots which was I believe fundamentally suppression and misunderstanding of the communities that were there.

But the film has polarized opinion among black critics. For example, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's argument, set out in the *Guardian* on 7 January 1981, was powerfully made:

> If there are funds for the making of such films as *Babylon*, should they not be awarded to black filmmakers? Or, could non-black filmmakers work more closely at the conceptual level with black artists and intellectuals who know their people better and who can define their own reality more truthfully? This is not to argue that culture runs in genes but to say that it is necessary to know a people's emotional life from within to produce authentic works of art about such people. And the barriers are not racial: they are cultural, psychological and emotional. (Ogundipe-Leslie 1981)

Other voices have more recently recognized the achievement of the film. Historian Stephen Bourne included *Babylon* in his 1997 'hot ten' of the best films about black British life which he complied in the *Black Film Bulletin* to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the African-Caribbean presence in Britain (Bourne 1997: 9). Interviewed by Chris Salewicz in the *New Musical Express* in 1980, Brinsley Forde said that he thought that '*Babylon* is as accurate as you can go in a film' (2008). And Ann Ogidi (2006) recently argued that *Babylon* is 'a superb, truthful film that stands up more than twenty years later'. *Babylon* was released on DVD by Icon Films in 2008, almost 30 years after word of the 'Great Black Hope' hit the London streets.

## Notes

1. Ramdin (1999: 169).
2. Gavrik Losey interviewed by Paul Newland, 30 January 2007.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Franco Rosso interviewed by Paul Newland, 18 March 2008.
6. Telex from Harry Abramson, Oakwood, to Gavrik Losey, 18 October 1984. BDC6.
7. Gavrik Losey interviewed by Paul Newland, 30 January 2007.

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## Section III

Anxiety and Alienation, Deviance and Desire

## Chapter 8

# The Power to Create Catastrophe: The Idea of Apocalypse in 1970s British Cinema

Peter Hutchings

## Whose apocalypse?

It is not difficult to find narratives involving disaster, catastrophe and apocalypse in 1970s British popular culture. Films that spring to mind include the ecological disaster story *No Blade of Grass* (Cornel Wilde, 1970), the satanic thriller *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976) and the telekinetic thriller *The Medusa Touch* (Jack Gold, 1978). One can add to the list James Herbert's early horror novels *The Rats* (1974) and *The Fog* (1975), which lay waste to, respectively, London and southern England. Television offers *Doomwatch* (BBC, 1970–1972), in which a team of scientists protect the world from a series of environmental threats (remade for the cinema by Peter Sasdy for Tigon and released in 1972), while in *Survivors* (BBC, 1975–1977) virtually everyone is wiped out by plague, and *Quatermass* (ITV, 1979) conjures up a scenario in which civil society has almost completely collapsed as a result of alien intervention. Even the children's television series *Timeslip* (ITV, 1970–1971) features a prescient story entitled 'The Year of the Burn Up' in which scientific experiments have resulted in disastrous climate change that threatens life on earth, and *The Changes* (BBC, 1975), another children's series, depicts a world reverting to a primitive state as its inhabitants turn violently against all forms of technology. Meanwhile the Ray Galton-Alan Simpson scripted *Comedy Playhouse* episode 'The Last Man on Earth' (BBC, 1974) – in which Ronald Fraser finds himself in an inexplicably deserted Britain with only his mum for company – offers what in effect is a comic reworking of Richard Matheson's ground-breaking 1954 apocalyptic horror novel *I Am Legend* (the 1964 screen adaptation of which was entitled *The Last Man on Earth*), one that also anticipates the 'deserted Earth' New Zealand-based production *The Quiet Earth* (Geoff Murphy, 1985). In comics, the popular character Judge Dredd, who debuts in the British comic book *2000 AD* in 1977, inhabits a landscape scarred by nuclear war, while by contrast Jeff Wayne's 1978 concept album *The War of the Worlds* creates a more nostalgic scenario of an alien invasion eventually overcome by the power of nature itself.

Having noted this veritable plethora of destruction, it is hard to identify a set of shared attitudes towards or even common definition of the disastrous or apocalyptic operating across these popular-cultural texts. They might all share a sense of an escalating threat that either has already led to the collapse of social order or has the potential to do so, but the ways in which they present and interpret this vary widely, both in content and in tone. In part, this entails a set of generic inflections. Stories that deal with literal end-of-the-world scenarios can usually be aligned with science fiction while those stories concerned with

catastrophe or social breakdown on a localized level appear closer to the horror genre. But even these generic designations fail to capture the variety of tone and approaches as well as the way in which certain narratives seem to hover between genres. How then to place and make sense of these stories? Do they actually belong together, or is their apparent dispersal a sign that they are better viewed separately? In other words, is there a meaningful apocalyptic theme running through 1970s British culture?

One possible way of connecting these stories of disaster is to place them within a distinctively British school of disaster fiction that stretches back to H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and which also includes John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) and *The Kraken Wakes* (1953) as well as Nigel Kneale's 1950s Quatermass stories, *The Quatermass Experiment* (BBC television version 1953; film 1955) *Quatermass II* (BBC television version 1955; film 1957) and *Quatermass and the Pit* (BBC television version 1958–1959; film 1967). All of these combine scenes of disaster and destruction with close observation of British social mores in a manner that does resonate with some of the 1970s disaster stories. For example, James Herbert has invoked Wells, Wyndham and Kneale as influences on *The Fog*, and, as already noted, Kneale himself produced a fourth Quatermass story during the 1970s while *The War of the Worlds* was transformed into a popular music album (Herbert 1999).

The problem with this approach is that it tends to assume a greater degree of cultural or thematic cohesion to British disaster fiction than is actually the case on the ground. The difference between the various 1970s stories has already been noted. However, it is also worth pointing out in this respect that from Wells' *The War of the Worlds* onwards, production of British disaster stories has been sporadic to the extent that it is hard to see this as a cohesive, constant and established tradition against which later variants can be defined and judged. Instead this 'tradition' is arguably best seen as a gradual, and not particularly organized, accumulation of disaster-fixated stories from which later fictions sometimes draw ideas but only in a manner that makes sense in the immediate context of production. In the case of British disaster stories of the 1950s and early 1960s, for example, there are often references to the London Blitz, unsurprisingly so given that it was the most recent disaster to befall Britain (for relevant discussions, see Conrich 1999 and Hutchings 1999). However, memories of the Blitz had faded by the 1970s and it was no longer such a significant element in disaster fictions of the period. Instead a timely new element was an emphasis on environmental issues and anxieties about technological developments (in the likes of *The Changes*, *Doomwatch*, *No Blade of Grass* and *Timeslip*). In addition, other 1970s fictions seem more interested in drawing upon new codes of explicitness associated with American horror cinema of the period. It is interesting in this respect that in an account of the creation of his horror novel *The Fog*, author James Herbert invokes *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) alongside references to Wells, Wyndham and Kneale, with his novel reflecting for him a moment of transition in British horror from a set of old-fashioned British cultural references to something that is more modern and also more American-orientated (Herbert 1999).

This leads to another issue, namely the extent to which British disaster fiction is actually rooted in a distinctively British culture. This is particularly significant for any account of 1970s films given that this decade has often been seen by cultural historians as a period especially preoccupied with apocalyptic themes, with this most notably the case so far as American cinema is concerned. Indeed, it might be argued that during the 1970s American filmmakers managed to corner the market in images of apocalyptic destruction. This is the period in which American disaster films such as *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972), *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974) and *Earthquake* (Mark Robson, 1974) became a significant feature of popular cinema, as did a series of dystopic science fiction movies, among them *The Omega Man* (Boris Sagal, 1971), *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973) and *Logan's Run* (Michael Anderson, 1976). (Given that this chapter makes some claims for *The Omen* as a British film, it is also worth noting that some of these disaster and SF films also had British input. *The Poseidon Adventure*, *The Towering Inferno* and *Logan's Run* were all directed by British filmmakers, with *Logan's Run* also featuring two British stars, Michael York and Jenny Agutter.) A new type of American horror film also flourished during the 1970s, one that often concluded with images of insanity, evil triumphant and a general collapse of all that a society was meant to hold dear, with notable examples including *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), *It's Alive* (Larry Cohen, 1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977).

Film historians have often rendered these films as expressions of or responses to a set of social traumas, including the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal and the oil crisis of 1973, along with the social protests provoked by these events. In such a context, the term 'apocalyptic' can become intensely politicized, denoting as it does a cultural recognition of the collapse of a particular ideology. In this vein, Robin Wood writes of the American apocalyptic horror film that it

> expresses, obviously, despair and negativity, yet its very negation can be claimed as progressive: the 'apocalypse', even when presented in metaphysical terms (the end of the world) is generally reinterpretable in social/political ones (the end of the highly specific world of patriarchal capitalism). (Wood 1984: 192)

Potentially this puts 1970s British disaster fictions in an uncertain position. Is it best to see them not simply as an extension of a pre-existing local cultural tradition but instead as a parochial version of this American apocalypse, with the kind of ideological analysis offered up by Wood the most appropriate way of engaging with and judging them? Certainly Britain experienced its own social challenges and disruptions during the 1970s, some of them shared with the United States, others more localized – for example (and there are considerably more possible examples than the ones listed here), the violence associated with the Northern Ireland troubles, intense economic difficulties and a series of industrial disputes culminating in the Winter of Discontent in 1978–1979. While not in any noticeable way engaging with these issues or events directly and explicitly, it is not unthinkable that

British disaster fictions from the 1970s might in some instances be articulating in a covert or unconscious manner a socially and historically specific sense of despair and negativity. At the same time, such an approach begs important questions about how one conceptualizes the relation between specific texts and social events or trends. In the case of critical writing about the 1970s, the terms of the relation often appear decidedly vague and imprecise, with the films, novels and television programmes in question seen simultaneously as an effect of, response to and a constituent part of a broader, hard-to-define or pin down, social trouble. Nick Roddick sums up the application of this kind of approach to the American disaster film thus:

> A sort of post-Watergate depression, a national inferiority complex after the Vietnam debacle, or even a 'bread and circuses' attitude caused by 'the erosion of democracy and the Western materialist way of living' – all of which are both a little too convenient and wholly impossible to substantiate. (Roddick 1980: 244)

Yet this invoking of the American model of disaster is still useful for it also draws our attention to the international commercial currency of images of disaster in this period. Clearly some of the British disaster material – particularly those television shows shot partly or mainly on video – was destined primarily for domestic consumption. However, it is striking how many of the British disaster stories of the 1970s have international funding, aspirations to success in international markets or in other ways bear the marks of international influence. This is usually associated with scenes of destructive spectacle that, while often quite modest in scope when compared with the likes of *The Towering Inferno* or *Earthquake*, do represent an ambition to go beyond the local.

Despair at the state of the country; a desire to cash in on popular box-office trends. These two impulses are not necessarily as contradictory as they might seem, and in the case of British disaster fictions they are often associated with each other in a manner that produces interesting, if idiosyncratic, results. Indeed the sheer variety of disasters evident in 1970s British popular culture arguably speaks as much of nuances in markets as it does of generic inflections or ideological positions, and it is the articulation of these elements that can be seen to define not just the character of individual stories but also the identity of the field as a whole. It follows that the most productive way of approaching this area is precisely in terms of its heterogeneity, focusing on specific instances and exploring the ways they negotiate with commercial and cultural imperatives.

## John Morlar and the antichrist versus the establishment

Presenting *The Omen* and *The Medusa Touch* as examples of British cinema might raise a few eyebrows. *The Omen* in particular is usually thought of as an American horror film, understandably so given that it was a Twentieth Century Fox production produced, directed

and written by Americans, with American actors Gregory Peck and Lee Remick in lead roles. However, it was filmed and set mainly in Britain (with a few scenes shot in Italy and Israel), featured numerous British actors in supporting roles, and, as we will see, was heavily reliant on a sense of Britishness for its drama. *The Medusa Touch* was also filmed and set in Britain, but as a British–French co-production it falls into a category of production usually viewed as at best marginal and at worst embarrassing when it comes to discussions of what makes a national cinema national. That *The Medusa Touch*'s international qualities are especially prominent – with its narrative featuring a French cop played by an Italian-born actor working rather improbably for Scotland Yard and investigating a crime for which an American just happens to be one of the suspects – does not help in this respect.

What links these films together, other than the presence in both of the British-based American actor Lee Remick, is a reliance on notions of the apocalyptic and the disastrous. In the case of *The Omen*, this derives from the birth of the antichrist, the son of the devil, and the coming to pass of various biblical prophecies concerning armageddon. For *The Medusa Touch*, the cause of disaster is a writer (played by Richard Burton) who discovers that he has the ability to will disaster and sets about destroying a world that he despises. In so doing, he pulls a jumbo jet from the sky and levels a cathedral packed full with VIPs, and at the end of the film he seems to be working up to the destruction of the Windscale nuclear reprocessing plant (since renamed, possibly coincidentally, Sellafield).

Both *The Omen* and *The Medusa Touch* offer sustained attacks on social institutions, not least the family, with the antichrist's adoptive parents killed and John Morlar responsible for the deaths not just of his mother and father but of his wife and his nanny to boot. Moreover, a world-threatening escalation of disaster is suggested by the conclusion of each film, with the antichrist and Morlar still alive and dangerous as the end credits roll. One can see how these anti-social and assaultive qualities make sense within the ideological analysis developed by Wood in relation to 1970s American horror cinema. The presence of such material in a non-American film such as *The Medusa Touch* and what I want to suggest is at least a partially British film such as *The Omen* suggests that certain ideological preoccupations could well have a transnational character in this period. Indeed, if one looks further, one finds a range of British horror films from the first half of the 1970s that deconstruct the family unit in a manner involving anxiety about and sometimes overt criticism of the normative social identities embodied in that institution (Hutchings 1999: 159–185). Yet at the same time, *The Medusa Touch* and to a certain extent *The Omen* as well are distinctive, engaging with apocalyptic themes in a way that might not be 'essentially' British but which articulates itself in relation to what can reasonably be viewed as an Anglo-centric notion of spectacle, where that spectacle is associated as much with British settings as it is with scenes of destruction.

Clearly such spectacle can be thrilling and a source of pleasure for a receptive audience, and its overwhelming power can also be a viable vehicle for the sense of helplessness that such disaster-based films often seek to impart. At the same time, spectacle of this kind can involve a positioning in the market. This is particularly the case for *The Medusa Touch*, which, as has already been noted, manifests its international aspirations through the display

of relatively expensive spectacle. However, there is a certain idiosyncrasy about the ways in which the film seeks to do this. Julian Grainger's brief account of the film picks up on this in a rather disparaging manner:

> What this film suffers from is the curse of the set piece: five or six scenes spread across 90 minutes which were so vastly expensive that they sucked the life out of the rest of the film like a vampire emptying a body of blood. Instead of the story moving forwards with steadily increasing pace and excitement, the film lurches from big scene to big scene and this affects what the characters can do within the story: one or two know that something awful is about to happen but can only struggle helplessly against the inevitable death and destruction which provides the film with its *raison d'ëtre*. (Grainger 2001: 296)

In the face of this, one can argue that *The Medusa Touch* offers a surprising level of complexity in its generic affiliations and in its narrative structure, with these together betraying a sense, the film's sense, that spectacle in itself is probably not enough to generate interest in the market. It follows that the film's non-spectacular moments are not just far from straightforward in themselves but also that they frame and help to define the significance of the disaster scenes. Generically, *The Medusa Touch* combines elements of the detective thriller and the political thriller – with the narrative structured around an investigation of a near-fatal assault on Morlar, who turns out to have some mysterious connections with the British establishment – with elements from horror but does this in a way that makes it hard to pin the film down so far as its overall generic identity is concerned. The presence of Lino Ventura as the cop investigating a crime with political overtones is reminiscent of the role he played in his previous film, the Italian political conspiracy thriller *Cadaveri eccellenti* [Illustrious Corpses] (Francesco Rosi, 1976) but no political conspiracy ever emerges in *The Medusa Touch* despite a few tantalizing references to the possibility of there being one. So far as its horror-like qualities are concerned, the film invokes the idea of telekinesis that had been popularized as a generic theme by the American high-school horror *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976) two years previously but again does not develop this as a definitive explanation for Morlar's power and is wholly devoid of the teenage-centred drama evident in *Carrie*. As if to underline what might be viewed as its ungainliness, the film's narrative also proceeds in a complicated, non-linear fashion, with a heavy reliance not just on flashbacks but on flashbacks within flashbacks as well.

Importantly, these qualities, formal and generic, help to position and modulate the spectacular disaster scenes themselves, which do not underpin or define the whole story in the manner of an American disaster film (where the characters are usually trapped within a disaster) but instead punctuate it in a manner that renders them distant from the main characters. For example, the scene in which a jumbo jet crashes into a London tower block interrupts a conversation between Morlar and his psychiatrist (played by Lee Remick) in Morlar's flat, and once the crash is over the film immediately returns to that intimate scene. This could be driven by budgetary factors – was there enough money to create a

convincing aftermath to the crash? – but it is true that at no point in the film are any of the key characters directly threatened by the disasters caused by Morlar; instead they watch them from a distance or on television.

Another of the main themes in the film that impacts upon, and helps to form an attitude, to the scenes of death and destruction, is Morlar's fierce anti-establishment beliefs, which are often expressed via monologues delivered by Burton in a manner reminiscent of his earlier performance as Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger* (Tony Richardson, 1958). But this angry middle-aged man is far more destructive, and his targets are often defined in class-specific terms. Of Morlar's numerous victims, his own parents and his next-door neighbour, whom he wills out of an upstairs window, are defined through their vulgarity, while Morlar's wife, her lover and a high court judge (all of whom Morlar sees off as well) are by contrast supercilious, superior and utterly disrespectful of Morlar himself. One might indeed argue that the film speaks of the insecurity of a particular stratum of the middle class as it attacks that which it perceives to be above and below it, with this operating in a manner that is comparable, in some respects at least, with the work of Mike Leigh. Here, however, the results are rather more disturbing, with this most evident in the film's climactic disaster, the destruction of a cathedral packed full of members of the establishment. The building itself becomes an image of everything that Morlar despises, and accordingly he brings it down in what can be seen as an act of class-based rage.

In comparison, *The Omen* seems tidier and more straightforward, with its linear narrative offering a set of absolute distinctions between the forces of good and evil. It might also be seen as presenting what is essentially a touristic view of a picturesque Britain against which its drama of apocalyptic doom is played out, and in this it could be contrasted with more 'authentic' British productions. However, *The Medusa Touch* too relies on a certain picturesque quality in its presentation of London, with its attention to various London's monuments providing both local colour and a sense of the British establishment against which Morlar rails. So, for all the difference in the funding behind each film, it is hard to establish a clear-cut division between them based on the idea that *The Omen* is less engaged, if engaged at all, with its British settings.

In fact, the Britishness of *The Omen* turns out to be crucial to its presentation of its apocalypse. In the context of a drama structured entirely around the confrontation between ancient prophecies and modern rationality, British settings, along with settings in Italy and Israel, are used to signify the 'old world' from which supernatural evil springs, with most of the locations and buildings we see in the film appropriately aged and venerable. This extends to some of the British character actors who feature extensively in the film, most notably Billie Whitelaw as a satanic nanny and Patrick Troughton as a disgraced priest, both of whom are in the habit of speaking in an archaic and decidedly cryptic way, using 'thee' instead of 'you' and quoting mysterious old verse. This is juxtaposed against the modern Americans portrayed by Gregory Peck and Lee Remick, who end up completely overwhelmed by the forces of tradition and reaction. As for the antichrist himself, he might have been born of a jackal in Italy and been adopted by American parents but nevertheless he sports an

impeccable English accent throughout, and this in itself helps to confirm Britain as a site of powerful otherness.

The first time we see Britain in *The Omen*, it is in the context of an effortless American passage through it as the ambassadorial car bearing Gregory Peck – and also bearing the licence number USA1 – drives past Parliament. The rest of the film works to dispel that complacency in a manner that aligns it with a wide range of American horrors from this period, all of them concerned to shake the old certainties. What is interesting is how effectively the British settings in *The Omen* underline and focus the film's theme of insurrection, with the forces behind the antichrist clearly presented as anti-modern, anti-democratic, anti-republican and ultimately anti-American. In a curious way, this leads us back to *The Medusa Touch*, which also features an insurrectionary theme, with its apocalyptic elements too associated with the destruction of a political establishment defined via its association with privilege and tradition, although *The Omen* conceptualizes this through an opposition between the United States and Great Britain rather than via internal class divisions. Appropriately, the film concludes with Damien, the 5-year-old English-accented antichrist, in the company of the American president. He turns to the camera and smiles; the devil has won, it seems, with this victory presented as a kind of counter-revolution by which something associated with the old world is about to be introduced into the new world.

This insurrectionary theme returns us, to a certain extent, to Wood's ideological notion of apocalypse, with political structures thrown into disarray by the actions of Morlar and the antichrist and with an audience being invited to take some pleasure from the destruction of that which we should ostensibly value. However, the notion of apocalypse is nuanced very differently in each, from the urbane rationality giving way to supernatural panic in *The Omen* to the middle-class rants of John Morlar in *The Medusa Touch*.

These films might not be typical of British disaster fiction of the 1970s – it is hard to think of any story that fulfils that function – but they can be seen as emblematic of it, not only in their shared conviction that the current social order is fragile and susceptible to collapse but also in the fact that, for all the thematic overlaps, they are quite different from each other. The idea that the end of the world is nigh might appear particularly potent during the 1970s, but that does not mean that the significance and meaning of the idea is expressed uniformly across different texts and media. From this perspective, it is better to view the 1970s British apocalypse as a site for a series of transactions organized around both cultural and commercial factors. Indeed it is the associations with other areas of culture that this produces which renders this such an interesting, if fractured and dispersed theme, and indeed interesting precisely because it is fractured and dispersed. When John Morlar talks about 'the power to create catastrophe', he poses it as a question. He knows that he has the power to will disaster but does not know what the source of that power is or why it has been bestowed on him. A similar questioning attitude seems appropriate when it comes to making sense of British disaster fictions of the 1970s for if this type of fiction tells us anything it is that complacency inevitably leads to catastrophe.

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## Chapter 9

# Hideous Sexy: The Eroticized Body and Deformity in 1970s British Horror Films

Peri Bradley

British filmmakers of the 1970s challenged audiences with representations of fetishized and eroticized, deformed and transgressive bodies in the context of the horror genre, in a new and disturbing way. The horror genre itself has been regarded as second rate and exploitative, aiming for visceral reactions to the explicit spectacle of the abject. When placed in the milieu of the 'tasteless' era of the 1970s and faced with the fact that they are also British, these films struggle to maintain any vestige of critical sanction or approval that renders them worthy of academic scrutiny. However a compulsive and compelling pleasure experienced when viewing these films, coupled with a sense of underlying significance attached to the various images of disfigured and deformed, fragmented and dismembered, hairy and bestial bodies, bestows a substance and meaning that demands investigation.

The horror genre in general has altered little over time, focusing on and eloquently expressing the fears and anxieties of the era it was created in; *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) displayed a dread of modernity and its technological advances; *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Victor Fleming, 1941) explored a post-war concern with criminal pathology and the relationship between madness and violence; *The Thing from Another World* (Christian Nyby, 1951) dealt with phobic tendencies surrounding the splitting of the atom and the Cold War; *The Masque of the Red Death* (Roger Corman, 1964) examined the erosion of class barriers and the moral duty of those who rule. All of these films have at their centre the physical body expressing the social body: the mechanized female body deconstructed humanity; Dr Jekyll's dual physicality revealed the destructiveness of the human psyche; the alien body signified fear of the unknown and unknowable and the diseased body demonstrated the human condition that binds us all sweeping away all socially constructed barriers. It is clear then that, as stated by Philip Hancock in *The Body, Culture and Society*,

> By the close of the twentieth century the body had become the key site of political, social, cultural and economic intervention in relation, for example, to medicine, disability, work, consumption, old age and ethics…the body has to be recognised as a contested terrain on which struggles over control and resistance are fought out in contemporary societies. (Hancock 2000: 1)

These sites of contestation can be recognized in the films cited and each film serves to emphasize a specific area of unease for that particular decade. However the 1970s can be identified as a pivotal era when the horror film began to develop in a particularly challenging manner that was a direct reaction to the political and social environment of the time.

This was a decade of massive social change but also social tension and upheaval. Oil shortages, rampant inflation, electricity black-outs, industrial unrest, a three-day week, the miners' strike and high unemployment all put massive strains on the societal structure and the economy. This was also the era when the effects of women's lib and the feminist movement were starting to be most strongly experienced in the United Kingdom after its beginnings in the 1960s. Various laws designed to initiate equality between men and women were passed in the 1970s and some key moments in feminist history also took place, which were to change the economic and political face of Britain forever:

- 1970: The Equal Pay Act became law but did not come into force until 1975.
- 1971: Over 4,000 took part in the first women's liberation march in London.
- 1972: Spare Rib, Britain's first feminist magazine was launched.
- 1974: Contraception became free to women in the United Kingdom. The Women's Aid Federation was set up to bring together refuges for battered women.
- 1975: The Sex Discrimination Act made it illegal to discriminate against women in education, recruitment and advertising. The Employment Protection Act introduced statutory maternity provision and made it illegal to sack a woman because she was pregnant. The Equal Pay Act took effect. Margaret Thatcher became the first women to lead a major UK political party.
- 1976: The Sexual Offences Amendment Act was passed, giving anonymity to rape victims and aiming to stop humiliation of complainants in court. The Domestic Violence Act in 1976 allowed a married or co-habiting woman to get a court order aimed at preventing further violence and to exclude her violent partner from the shared home. The Equal Opportunities Commission came into effect to oversee the Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay Acts. The Domestic Violence Act enabled women to obtain a court order against their violent husband or partner.
- 1977: International Women's Day was formalized as an annual event by the UN General Assembly.
- 1979: Margaret Thatcher became Britain's first woman prime minister. (Fawcett Society 2006: 20)

The result of this legislation and the heightened public profile of feminism was a fundamental revolution in attitude by the younger generation towards work, marriage, sex and children. The existing patriarchal, capitalist system came under direct attack, as its basic foundation, the familial unit, and its reliance on both sexes fulfilling their prescribed roles, began to lose cohesion. Popular culture had pervaded society at all levels, producing a 'knowing' generation, capable of a sophisticated deconstruction and understanding of the socio-political systems that impose order. The 1970s was arguably the decade that directly confronted the concept of 'high modernity', and initiated the installation of the postmodern in its place. Arthur Frank attempts to map a history of the sociological context of the body and he states that, 'The modernist conflict between the body as constant in a world of flux, and the body as

the epitome of that flux, is carried forward in the *postmodern*…' (Frank 1991: 40), thus connecting the physical body with the social body; as in its material condition expressing or embodying the fundamental character of society. In the 1970s this was an accelerated state of constant and continual change that is an indicator of the postmodern condition.

The angst and anguish that reverberated through a society that found itself in a state of such flux and uncertainty, yet was unable to fully articulate this in a politically correct manner, found an outlet for expression in the most politically incorrect of forms, the horror film. The conventions of the genre allows the most shocking and taboo subjects to be dealt with; sex and death have always been the fodder of horror films, however, with a change in prevailing attitudes around censorship, the 1970s saw an acceleration and intensification in subject and form. The British Board of Film Censorship (BBFC) record on their website that during the 1970s particular changes in the category system took place that reflected recognition of the need to differentiate between films in order to allow for material of a more adult nature to be released:

> During the sixties it was recognised that teenagers had specific concerns of their own which ought to be reflected in the category system. The introduction of the 'AA' was finally approved by local authorities and the industry in 1970. The principal changes to the category system were the raising of the minimum age for 'X' certificate films from 16 to 18. The idea was that this would protect adolescents from material of a specifically adult nature and would permit more adult films to be passed uncut for an older, more mature audience. (BBFC 2009)

This led to formerly forbidden subjects such as incest, rape, promiscuity and cannibalism being investigated in close and gory detail, with very little being left to the imagination. Because of its conventions, its lack of respectability and the fact that the emotion and excitement associated with fear and death is closely allied to sexual stimulation and orgasm, the horror film was the ideal arena in which to confront the imposed restrictions on sexuality and its representations. As Linda Williams postulates in *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess*, the horror genre is one of the 'gross body genres' along with pornography, where the body is shown in the grip of uncontrollable spasms and involuntary 'bodily ecstasies', such as weeping, suffering and orgasm (Williams 1991: 4). Contemplation of this implied lack of control of bodily responses to pain and the observation of inflicted pain connects the horror genre ever more closely to sex and the perversion of sex.

Suppressed and repressed in the 1950s and a site of contestation in the 1960s, the perception of sex underwent a fundamental shift towards normalization and acceptance in the public arena in the 1970s. It was then that the beginning of the 'decline of perversion' began (Giddens 1992: 33), where the term 'perversion' implies a moral stance that disapproves of and thereby outlaws particular sexual practices. These include homosexuality and fetishism that do not conform to the approved 'normal' practices that underpin the family unit and thereby patriarchy. Although Freud, in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905,

disapproved of the term perversion (Giddens 1992: 33), it was not until 1986 that Jeffrey Weeks in *Sexuality*, stated that,

> There no longer appears to be a great continent of normality surrounded by small islands of disorder. Instead we can now witness clusters of islands, great and small…New categories and erotic minorities have emerged. Older ones have experienced a process of subdivision as specialized tastes, specific aptitudes and needs become the basis for proliferating sexual identities. (Giddens 1992: 33)

So what was perversion became sexual diversity, and 'moved out of Freud's case-history notebooks into the everyday social world' (Giddens 1992: 33). This change in perception began to emerge in the 1970s, so that what was still publicly considered perversion at the time gradually became available for general consumption. The secret and the forbidden were put on display, and the monstrous, transgressive body was sexualized and eroticized, through its framing, context and relationship with perversion (of nature and normality) and death. As Hogan speculates in *Dark Romance: Sexuality in the Horror Film*,

> Because the genre is predicated upon an awareness of the inevitability of death, its exploration of sexuality has been unavoidable. Sexual behaviour and its ultimate purpose, children, are the antithesis of death. If one is to examine death, then, one must examine sex. (Hogan 1997: xii)

The content of the 1970s horror film became ever more explicit and blatantly began to examine the close and complex relationship between sex and death that in previous eras had only been considered in a more clandestine manner.

## Erotic and bestial bodies

To fully analyse this concept of the relationship between death and sex and its relevancy to the eroticized deviant body in 1970s horror films, it is necessary to examine particularly pertinent case studies from the time, the first being the hairy and bestial transforming body. The first example of this is from *The Beast Must Die* (Paul Annett, 1974). Although not an admired or admirable film, it does demonstrate the gradual shift in social, cultural and political mores that took place over this specific era.

The main protagonist is a wealthy and successful entrepreneur, Tom Newcliffe (Calvin Lockhart), who gathers together a disparate group of people at his large country estate in order to identify which of them is the werewolf that he is hunting. The figure of the werewolf has an immediate association with sexuality, often representing the awakening of sexual desire, as in *The Company of Wolves* (Neil Jordan, 1984) and the liberation from sexual restrictions as in *Wolf* (Mike Nichols, 1994). However in this 1970s British horror film the

werewolf can be seen to represent the 'dangers' inherent in allowing the liberation of female sexuality. What is most pertinent in this film is not only the identity of the werewolf as the wife of the hunter (Marlene Clark), but also the fact that it is her husband who has created her as the werewolf by placing her in close proximity with the original *male* werewolf. Significantly the female werewolf connotes a different threat to that of the male werewolf.

Although still predatory and deadly, the female werewolf represents a shift in power that places her on an equal par with man. Although initially infected and thereby created by a man, the female werewolf successfully hunts down and eliminates all male competition. However her husband is still the ultimate hunter and he intelligently devises a method to trap the werewolf in its human form, by making each person place a silver bullet in their mouth, which according to folklore will initiate an immediate transformation. Each person passes this test until the final examination of his wife. Obviously due to the low budget available to British filmmakers of the time, we do not see a full body transformation. However the beautifully manicured hand of the female werewolf, with its delicate covering of coarse, dark hair, slipping a slim, smooth, phallic silver bullet, between red shining lips is very effective and very erotic. In addition her remark 'Time for my pill' has an obvious link to the contraceptive pill and its promise of promiscuity, so feared by the guardians of 1970s moral rectitude. The moment the bullet touches the inside of her mouth, we see her true shape as the beast. Throughout the film she has been leaping on top of men, ripping their throats out, thereby not only killing them in a moment of orgasmic gore, but also feminizing them by producing a pseudo-vaginal slit in their body. However when she attacks her husband, it is he who penetrates her one last time, forcing a fatal silver bullet deep into her body thereby restoring the 'natural' order of things. There is a clear relationship here between women and the transfer of power that was a preoccupation of 1970s society. Becoming the beast carries implications of sex associated with the devil and sexual rites, so also reminding us of evil and the consequences of evil. The 1970s woman had to be warned not only about her promiscuous/'evil' behaviour, as in the sexual and orgasmic pleasure derived from the multiple killings, but also the assumption of a role of power normally reserved for men. Like the sexually active and predatory femme-fatale of the 1940s film noir before her, sexual liberation and appropriation of phallic power can ultimately lead only to death.

The second instance of the hairy and bestial body is from *The Beast in the Cellar* (James Kelley, 1973) which deals with the deconstruction of man into beast through a gradual process, whereby two sisters (Flora Robson and Beryl Reid) imprison their brother (Dafydd Havard) in the cellar to prevent him going to war. His imprisonment ultimately results in the deterioration of his behaviour to that of an animal. Consequently they are never able to release him, even once the war is over. His is a natural rather than a supernatural process, unlike the transformation of the werewolf, where his male body is feminized through its appropriation of long hair and long nails. His appearance and behaviour becomes bestial, but unlike the werewolf this is not an indication of sexual freedom but rather of sexual repression. This is related to his emasculation by his oldest sister (Flora Robson), who in the absence of the patriarchal figure assumes control over the family depriving the 'natural' heir his role of

power along with his voice. Her obviously incestuous and unnatural love is demonstrated in the film as she visits him in the cellar dressed in her late father's uniform. She speaks to him of her love in a voice trembling with unfulfilled desire, 'You were everything to me…it was you I wanted Steven. That was all'. Her longing for her brother frames him as a fetishized and eroticized body, which is emphasized by the long hair and nails, whereas his loss of power is signified by his inability to vocalize. He is recreated as simultaneously feminized, bestial and sexualized with continual emphasis on his nails, his covering of coarse hair and his nakedness. In this way his transformation into the beast differs to that of the first example, in that he represents, in a prophetic manner, declining masculinity in the face of a rising feminist movement. In a seemingly revenge-driven impetus, he manages to escape from his imprisonment in the cellar, and we follow his slow and painful ascent of the main staircase as he crawls towards his sister's bedroom. She and her sister cower in her bed as they become aware of the scratching noises indicating his approach. As a storm rages outside a roar of thunder announces his arrival in the room. He misrecognizes his sister as his father, as she is wearing his army coat and medals, and lunges towards her with an animal snarl. However, like the werewolf in the first example, he is shot (this time by a patrolling soldier, another representative of patriarchal law) and is again penetrated by a bullet thereby simultaneously disempowering and feminizing him. His loathing of his sister/father is emphasized as he is shown a picture of his father, which he shreds with his long claw-like nails while howling his hate. As he dies his only truly human aspect is expressed by a close-up of his eyes which simply show bewilderment.

As in the first example, he has been created as the beast by a figure of authority (his sister/father) representing the symbolic 'father' and patriarchal law. His death thereby demonstrates an ideological preoccupation with the older, unmarried and menopausal woman. Her sexual repression and inactivity is shown to be abnormal and dangerously destructive when not expressed in the 'natural' processes of reproduction and child-rearing. So the occasion of his death is also the punishment and chastisement of the aberrant sister, whose deviant love destroys the object of her affection. This again reinforces the message that power is always a dangerous thing in the hands of a woman and reveals the underlying anxiety of a society whose very foundation is under attack from the feminist impulse for equality.

## Erotic and fragmented bodies

The other relevant preoccupation in 1970s horror films is the fragmentation of the eroticized body. The first example of this is from *Asylum* (Roy Ward Baker, 1972), a portmanteau film that contains four stories, loosely connected by the fact that they are told by the inmates. The most relevant story is that of an unfaithful husband (Richard Todd) murdering his aging and therefore redundant, but still glamorous wife (Sylvia Syms). He chops her up, wraps her in brown paper and string, much like butchers of the time would have done, and stores her in the freezer he has just bought her as a present. The dismembered body then manages

to dispose of him and attack his young and attractive mistress (Anne Firbank) who has displaced her.

Recounted by the mistress to the psychiatrist, this story further explores the sexuality of the older, menopausal woman in 1970s society. No longer reproductively useful, she is replaced by a younger, fertile woman, while she is rendered 'blind', 'deaf ', 'dumb', faceless and effaced by being embalmed in brown paper and stored in a small domestic space (the freezer). However the 1970s menopausal woman is unwilling to tolerate this, and although rendered into her component parts; head, torso, legs and arms, and treated like 'meat', she is so empowered and powerful she can still wreak revenge. The body is eroticized through its visual relationship with S&M bondage fetishism, and its fragmentation investigates the notion of the Mulveyesque 'look', where each part of the body is objectified and admired for its attractiveness. The torso is still clearly female and sexualized, with breasts and visible nipples and although lacking in bodily cohesion, is still a site of power and fear for the younger woman. The cultural capital possessed by a woman in the 1970s (and still an issue today) diminished as she grew older, and this scene clearly relates to the disruption and loss of power equating to the loss of youth and beauty. The menopausal woman, although dismembered and gagged, fights back, demonstrating the feminist urge for respect that is not aligned with personal appearance. Again this is an examination of power as expressed through the deviant, hideous but sexualized body. The 1970s was the era that demonstrated the effects of the initiation of youth culture begun in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly for women. Signs of age became signs of redundancy rather than knowledge and experience to be respected. However the sexual prowess of the older experienced woman in this film is shown to be a site of anxiety and even fear, not just for men but also younger women. The power possessed by her fragmented body actually goes beyond that of the unified body and could be considered representative of feminism itself having to operate in small covert groups scattered across the world, but still being able to be effective. However, ultimately both women are punished for their behaviour, as one completely disappears and the other is left scarred, ugly and insane; apparently this being the price for women's sexual independence and freedom.

The second example is from *Frightmare* (Pete Walker, 1974), and illustrates the dream/nightmare of the stepdaughter (Deborah Fairfax), whose stepmother is a serial killer and a cannibal. We see the stepmother Dorothy (Sheila Keith), dressed in the manner of a Victorian widow, as the subject of her stepdaughter's nightmare. She is travelling on a train when the stepdaughter notices her stepmother appear, sat opposite her in the far corner of the carriage. Clasped to her chest is a brown paper parcel, evidently from the butchers. She offers this slab of meat to the young woman, with an expression of extreme pleasure and satisfaction. The parcel itself is sexualized as she pushes her finger into the corner of the parcel, forcing entrance into its interior and causing a flow of blood to ooze out and drip into the lap of her stepdaughter. Simultaneously a drool of blood slips out of her mouth and down her chin. The visual reference to menstrual blood is evident and the relationship between cannibalism and the consumption of human flesh with sexual gratification and

pleasure is clear. The actual signification of the bloody parcel is more complex but could be interpreted as the foetal remains of an abortion; the offering up of this gory parcel by the older woman to the younger woman and her terrified and fearful response, indicating the consequences of irresponsible sexual behaviour. The sexual freedom allowed through oral contraception in the 1970s led to widespread promiscuous behaviour and sex without consequences. The bloody parcel and its heavy and palpable presence effectively redresses the balance by reminding women of the 'proper' function of sex; reproduction. By placing the bloody parcel in the context of a dream sequence, it becomes representative of both the shameful aborted foetal remains and the 'absent', unrealized, potential foetus that haunts the sexually active woman.

Women obtaining power over their own reproductive functions was of huge importance to their emancipation and having the right to choose abortion and the right to choose a 'covert' form of contraception, such as the pill, allowed women in the 1970s to move away from their traditionally prescribed roles. The anxiety created by this freedom finds expression in the horror genre where it is displayed as and played out on deformed and fragmented transgressive bodies. As Steve Chibnall states in *Making Mischief: The Cult Films of Pete Walker*,

> Dorothy expresses her own fantasies of matriarchal power by appropriating a frightening range of phallic weaponry – a power drill, a chopper and a red hot poker. It is this sort of camp excess which gives Walker's film its parodic edge and opens it up to metaphorical as well as literal readings. (Chibnall 1998: 145)

Metaphorically speaking, power is not located in Dorothy's body, but in the weapons she uses to create her victims' bodies as both transgressive and eroticized. By drilling them full of holes she composes them as deformed and deviant bodies, but also as sexualized bodies as she penetrates them and then consumes them. Dorothy's cannibalism is equated with and replaces sexual activity throughout the film. Therefore her desire is distorted and finds an outlet that confronts the ultimate 'abject'; that of the dead human body. The film identifies that her only desire for contact with the human body is to kill it and consume it. Sexual frenzy is replaced with violent frenzy and Dorothy's lust is only satiated by the orgasmic thrill of killing and eating her victims. Again she is an older, menopausal woman whose usefulness to society is questionable. Her revenge on a society that marginalizes, disempowers and desexualizes older women, is to pervert and divert female sexual power in order to undermine the status quo. She does this by taking life rather than giving life and consuming bodies rather than producing them.

These films demonstrate that the 1970s was a unique time in the production of British horror films. The shift in focus to exploitative, violent gore and eroticization of the hideous body reflects not just the underlying anxieties of a society in a state of flux between modernity and postmodernity, but also an irreversible change in the regard of sexuality, sexual freedom and sexual behaviours, which can be traced from this specific historical moment. They

explore the human process of 'being' in an uncertain and fluctuating environment such as 1970s society, by identifying and exploring the hideous body as sexual and erotic. As Arthur Frank states, 'The body exists between birth and death. It comes to be in order to cease to be. It is not an entity, but the process of its own being.' (Frank 1991: 96)

The hideous body and its strange attractions, as demonstrated in the horror films of the 1970s, expressed an era that was on the cusp of the postmodern and therefore in a complex state of flux. It was a time of contradiction that embraced the need for a change in the public perception and representation of sex but that simultaneously harboured pressure groups such as The Festival of Light, and Lord Longford's Committee on Pornography. These self-appointed guardians of public morals placed immense pressure on the BBFC regarding the censorship of sex, in a backlash against what was perceived as liberalization having gone too far (BBFC 2009). Although these films now appear somewhat tame and even humorous, the sexualization of the hideous body in its various forms (hairy, bestial and fragmented) reveals a deep-seated anxiety regarding the rise of feminism due to sexual liberation and the corresponding decline in masculinity. The presence of these hideous but erotic bodies is evidence of a specific preoccupation of the time with the potential dangers of allowing and acknowledging the body as a sexual 'being', with the potential ability to alter the fundamental basis of society.

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## Chapter 10

# Masculinity and Deviance in British Cinema of the 1970s: Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll in *The Wicker Man*, *Tommy* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

E. Anna Claydon

In this chapter I explore representations of masculinity in British cinema during the 1970s, developing my earlier work on masculinity and dejection in 1960s British cinema (Claydon 2005) into considering the role of dejection in an era which appears to epitomize social fragmentation. In doing so, I analyse representations from *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973), *Tommy* (Ken Russell, 1975) and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975). There are many other possibilities open for analysis but here I intend to simply open some avenues within their appropriate contexts.

It is useful to begin by summarizing two of my tenets in these analyses. Firstly, my approach to the so-called 'crisis in masculinity'. Unfortunately, the concept has become distorted by pop-psychology because what was a concept specific to an individual identity has been generalized into an experience shared by a generation. The result of this has been that the 'crisis of masculinity' has been used by the popular press against feminists; feminism, so the argument goes, has lead to a crisis for men which makes all men doubt their own identities. But does every man feel he exists in crisis? No. It is more accurate to say it is the ideology of patriarchy which is experiencing a crisis: masculinism (Collier 1995). Accepting that patriarchy is an ideology of imperial power, then, one way in which the crisis of masculinism can be more usefully considered is in terms of a response to the rise of the 'Other'. Who that other is does not particularly matter; they are inherently feminized through the processes of 'othering'.

Consequently, one of the preconditions for the crisis of masculinism is the end of empire and the ways in which imperial cultures deal with the changed situation. The fact that the crisis has been mainly identified to the post-World War Two generations also serves to emphasize the connectivity between the end of Empire and the establishment of the Commonwealth, the changing roles of women in society and the developing emancipation of other 'Others' in British society. As such, the crisis of masculinism is primarily a social entity.

This leads to the second tenet; the movement from and between the abjection of 'aberrant' masculinities and their dejection, drawing on Kristeva's theories (1982; 1989). In my work on the 1960s I tracked the representation of men who just did not 'fit in' in studies of Tony Richardson's 1962 film *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, *The Hill* (Sidney Lumet, 1965), David Lean's 1962 *Lawrence of Arabia* and finally a little-known B-movie of 1966, *The Projected Man,* directed by Ian Curteis, a kind of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* for the generation living in the 'white heat of technology' (Harold Wilson, 1963 in Walden 2006). Across these films, all attempted to answer the question 'What does it mean to be a man?' and held up a mirror to the post-war generation.

While, today, we tend to think of the 1960s as a period of liberation, that does not reflect the experience of the majority and that the version of the 'long sixties', as discussed by Marwick's *The Sixties* (1998), was absolutely grounded in the cultural practices and developments set in motion during the 1950s. Within this context, we can start to think about the men represented in the 1970s as part of a broader cultural framework than simply the evolution of the swinging sixties. Key to the masculinities of the post-war era is a group of social experiences specific to British culture at this time.

Firstly, the importance of the 1944 Education Act which enabled bright working-class pupils to enter further education and higher education, leading to the first significantly socially diverse graduates of higher education from the early 1950s onwards. Typifying this group were some of the mid-century's great British authors who helped shape the concept of the 'Angry Young Man' and the British delinquent such as John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe and David Storey.

Secondly, the failure of Empire throughout this period, meant that immigration to the United Kingdom was at a modern height in the 1950s and 1960s, with families called to work in Britain from former colonies around the world. This is the era in which Sam Selvon, writing of the experience of immigration during the 1970s, described the many Caribbean workers in the capital as the 'lonely Londoners' (Selvon 1979): they were othered and made abject by mainstream society whilst fulfilling the very jobs that society had asked them to do, and so they became dejects, existing on the periphery of society and choosing to continue as such because it was more secure. Yet this is also the same period in which Hanif Kureishi (1986) and Salman Rushdie (1991), Pakistanis and Indians in the United Kingdom, begin to recognize their cultural confusion between what it means to be 'British' and what it means to be 'Pakistani' or 'Indian'…and find that neither status truly encompassed them.

Thirdly, and particularly important in respect to considering the fathers or older brothers of the characters represented in the 1970s films, is the role of National Service, compulsory for young men for two years duration between 1947 and 1960. This meant that the generation who had done National Service, who had fought in Korea or other areas of the world, had more in common with those who fought from 1939 to 1945 and was frequently represented in comedies during the 1950s.

Finally, actions carried out in the 1950s as a result of World War Two meant that those who had previously been othered because of prejudices were slowly being integrated into a more egalitarian society. For example, the Wolfenden Report of 1957 led to a wider discussion of homosexuality as being less of a 'choice' for some men but rather more ontological in their make-up, which in turn finally resulted in the decriminalization of gay sex between men over the age of 25 in 1967. Another example is also the legalisation of abortion in the same year.

Those who were previously abjected by society became figures who abjected themselves, becoming deject (as discussed by Kristeva 1989, particularly in thinking about foreignness). Aberrant masculinities became permissible and not permissible at the same time: there was a dialogue of identity but little acceptance of changing practices and 'types' of deject became

framed within society throughout the 1960s, 1970s and into the 1980s which could be made safe through the stereotype itself. These stereotypes include, and were especially prevalent in 1970s British television (although most are still persist):

- the camp man and drag queen (*The Dick Emery Show*, BBC 1963–1981; *Are You Being Served?*, BBC 1973–1985);
- the political rebel and the punk (*Citizen Smith*, BBC 1977–1980);
- the weak husband (Brian Murphy in *George and Mildred*, Thames for ITV 1976–1979);
- the virgin (which become aberrant because of the assumptions around the 'permissive society', Frank Spencer in *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*, despite the ever-present Betty and the later daughter, Jessica, BBC 1973–1975; 1978; Rigsby in *Rising Damp*, Yorkshire Television for ITV 1974–1978);
- the sophisticated immigrant (Don Warrington's tribal prince, Philip, in *Rising Damp*);
- the immigrant (working class) in service industries (the Indian orderly, Gupta, in *Only When I Laugh*, ITV 1979–1982; the occasional black bus conductors in *On the Buses*, ITV 1969–1973);
- all immigrants with language difficulties (as in *Mind Your Language*, LWT (London Weekend Television) for ITV 1977–1979; 1986.

Once you start to think about the presence of these stereotypes and the ways in which they configured masculinities, examples begin to roar forth, but the range of men being represented as both within and without society, throughout this period, gives lie to the concept that there is a 'normal' masculinity: and even the frustrated father, as in *Bless this House* (ITV, 1971–1976) does not escape a critique of the imperfect patriarch.

The 1960s challenged how people thought about sex and other elements which had 'othered' people. The result of this challenge was that the normal and the deviant became debatable concepts. The impact into the 1970s was that what to the 1950s was 'normal' became in the 1970s, at the very least, questioned. Tied into this progression of social intelligence was a growing comprehension that gender is, and sexuality can be, 'performed' (Butler 1993), and at a time when gay men and women began to feel that they could come out, there was also a social awareness that the implication of 'coming out' is that 'staying in' meant hiding *within* society *from* society. As such, and against a wider context, most modes of social behaviour started to be viewed much more in terms of nurture rather than nature, as being, fundamentally, artificial, hence the interest in people manifest in many 1970s texts from *The Naked Ape* (Desmond Morris, 1967; filmed in 1973) to *The Family* (Franc Roddam, 1974).

One of the useful routes in to examining masculinities and social conventions of normality in a number of films during this period lies in the observation of the growth in the presentation of characters through perspective being emphasized, especially in terms of individualism and a stylistic engagement with first-person narrative in films. Robert Kolker called American film of this era a 'cinema of loneliness' and discussed, in his well-read book

of the same name (the current edition being published in 2000), the way in which films of the era in the United States explored the social isolation of the Vietnam generations; and in UK cinema of the period some general similarities can be traced in the representation of men. These are men struggling with their identities as sons to fathers idolized as war heroes of a just war, they are men coming to terms with the concept that their place in society is uncertain (especially if they do not conform to social expectations of 'the masculine' and perform another identity) and, perhaps most importantly for the 1970s, they are men existing in a society which, throughout the decade, can be argued to be in the process of deconstruction (the rapid political changes throughout the era and the related uncertainty, leading to the three-day week and the energy crisis, a significant rise in the numbers of divorces taking place as the legislation was loosened up, drug-cultures and increased permissiveness and the mass unemployment of the period challenging the patriarchal belief in the father as 'bread winner'). What was 'normal' existed in a state of limbo and it is hardly surprising that what Derek Jarman represented in *Jubilee* in 1978 was an elegiac poem to anarchy and, that other tenet of British late 1970s iconography, punk.

The early 1970s imagery of the counter-establishment and those who disavowed normality, however, was far more dominated by a 'glam-rock' aesthetic. 'Rock 'n' roll' itself we tend to think of primarily as a 1950s marker of rebellion. But while The Beatles were the polite end of 1960s popular music The Rolling Stones (formed as such in 1962) and The Who (formed in 1964) were keeping the chaotic imagery of rock 'n' roll well and truly raw. Another key figure of the early 1970s rock world who is relevant here is Elton John, a performer who epitomized the glam-rock look of the era on stage and who throughout the mid-1970s became a comparative regular on the epitome of mainstream society television *The Morecombe and Wise Show* (at both the BBC and ITV from the 1960s to the 1980s). Consequently, John became the face of 1970s rock, the face of a subculture which was 'outside' the dominant ideologies and made strident 'rock 'n' roll' more acceptable; along with the cheeriness of Slade and the 'middle-classness' of one 1970s rock's other giants, David Bowie, who exuded a wonderful androgyny against the hypermasculinity of other performers.

Rock stars were also part of a small group of people who contributed to the struggling British cinema of the era either behind the scenes or in front of the camera. In 1978, George Harrison responded to the *Monty Python's Flying Circus* team's cry of help amid the financial cold should of EMI and co-created HandMade Films to ensure *Life of Brian* (Terry Jones, 1979) was completed; and both Mick Jagger and David Bowie risked their reputations as actors during the period with Jagger starring in *Performance* (Donald Cammell and Nicholas Roeg, 1968, released 1970) and *Ned Kelly* (Tony Richardson, 1970), while Bowie was rather more successful in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Nicholas Roeg, 1976). It is also worthwhile noting here the importance of The Who as film producers for *Quadrophenia* (Franc Roddam, 1979, based on Pete Townsend's 1973 rock opera), while for *Tommy* they had limited themselves to the creative side of production with a musicians' credit list that reads like a *Who's Who* of 1970s British music.

Rock of the 1970s was also important in shaping other musicals of the period, such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* (released in 1973 and directed by Canadian director, Norman Jewison) but first staged in 1971 after an initial manifestation as what the Really Useful Company website itself calls a 'concept album'. Rock, in a sense, was transforming theatrical genres and making the forms more horizontally integrated, which reflected the changes in the film industries at the time, too.

What was so important about these rock stars, these men, however, was more than just about the finances and style of British films and theatre in the 1970s, it was also about taking a social group which had been marginalized in the 1950s and demonstrating how these men had something to contribute which meant the previously abjected could now be viewed as role models. That this perspective was possible does not mean it was adhered to or agreed with by the still dominant ideologies, but the rock star, in all his masculinities, offered images of masculinity which showed that being a man did not have to mean being part of the establishment, or being part of patriarchy, or believing in masculinism.

## *The Wicker Man*

*The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973) can be understood as offspring of three particular sub-genres in British cinema: the horror movie, the police film and the remote rural film. These influences can be witnessed in the casting of Christopher Lee as Lord Summerisle, the charismatic ruler of the island, the central narrative impetus being the young policeman (Edward Woodward's) searching for a missing girl, and the representation of a community being somehow 'other' to the mainland/mainstream culture. There are echoes of Lee's horror performance and later 1960s horrors, the social problem films of the 1950s with Woodward as a young, Christian, Dixon-like figure, Sergeant Howie, and representations of Scottish isolated cultures. As Howie tries to find the young girl, Rowan, he finds great opposition from within the community, despite having received an anonymous letter which brought him to the island. A devout Christian, Howie becomes increasingly morally outraged by what he finds on Summerisle, a pagan fertility culture which is effectively a last remaining outpost of Celtic beliefs. Each year, the islanders participate in fertility rights but, if no good harvest is forthcoming, a sacrifice must be made. On the walls of the local pub, Howie finds photographs chronicling the demise of the island's annual harvest and begins to believe that Rowan is a sacrificial victim. Meanwhile, the locals trick Howie into being attacked, imprisoned, dressed in a white night-gown and inserted into the belly of a Celtic wicker man placed on the island's headland. The film ends with Howie, the adult virgin whose virginity has been tested and is more valuable, being sacrificed by the pagans of Summerisle for their coming year's fertility.

Unlike many horror films of the 1960s and 1970s, *The Wicker Man* is quite careful to avoid establishing a concept of evil within the film and presents the different beliefs of the film as perspectives. As is typical of many films, the protagonist here functions as a

representative of the dominant ideology within a new environment which is enigmatic. His antithesis (in all senses of the word), Lee's svengali Lord Summerisle, is never villainous but rather controlling, standing up for his people and his beliefs and Lee's performance actually goes to some lengths to emphasize Summerisle as a beneficent but unsteady figure. However, the juxtaposing of the two men is one which accentuates the different masculinities they represent: both are remote men on the fringes of mainstream society physically and psychologically.

Howie, though, enters the action with little expectation of anything happening which is truly beyond the limits of society but his virginity is itself problematic. He is a good Christian role model but he is clearly mocked by his own colleagues and his behaviour is tied repeatedly to his repressed sexual desires. Consequently, Howie represents the straight man who is abjected by those who do not understand him, is dejected because he does not want to be like them until he is a married man, but who is also a 'pillar' of the community. Summerisle, by contrast, is every inch the sexual predator. This is largely due to Lee's presence as one of the few British hypermasculine *actors* of this period. Lee has one of British cinema's most distinctive voices which, because of its depth, is heard as shorthand for 'manliness'. In contrast, Woodward's voice is raised, and the contrast makes Lord Summerisle sound more 'macho' alongside his juxtapositioning with a series of images of naked women.

Yet Howie and Summerisle are both authority figures and, in providing a society into which Howie must fit for the narrative and its actions, the authority of both is deconstructed for the moment of the sacrifice: Howie becomes the 'willing king for a day, virgin and fool' while Summerisle cross-dresses in a flowing white robe and woman's wig. This deconstruction of power is however incredibly pertinent because Summerisle is transformed from patriarchal power to matriarchal priestess. These final actions then, in turning the patriarchal structures 'on their head' are central to how the masculinities of *The Wicker Man* can be read and how both men, dejected from the mainstream and believers in different ideals (although Lord Summerisle is implicated in the island practices primarily for economic gain), are given places of value within alternative social structures. The only problem is that Howie's place requires his death.

## *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

Virginity is also central to the characters in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975), released in the wake of its success as a theatrical production created by Richard O'Brien. Filmed at Bray and Elstree Studios, the film is filled with Anglo-American gothic reference, with the American characters drawn from American cultural iconography beginning which the direct reference to the well-known painting 'American Gothic' (Grant Wood, 1930), and the repeated references to American culture as mediated through Hollywood. 'A hero' (Brad; Barry Bostwick) and 'a heroine' (Janet; Susan Sarandon) provide the narrative motivation for entering into the mock-gothic world of Dr Frank N. Furter (Tim Curry): their car breaks

down in a storm as President Nixon's resignation speech plays on the radio. Entering the mysterious mansion on the hill (an image straight from American horror) Brad and Janet find themselves witnessing a bizarre party of 'deviants', men dressed like women and women dressed like men, all at some stage of undress according to mainstream social tropes. When Furter makes his grand entrance, Brad and Janet, like the other partygoers, find themselves bewitched by his potent charms, ultimately seduced by him in different guises as they spend a long night in the house. Seducing the couple, the virgins, and especially the transgressive seduction of Brad, however, is not good enough for Furter and he awakens his Adonis-like creation, Rocky, for his own pleasure. Rocky, however, despite his tottering, quickly develops other ideas, and Janet is ultimately revealed as the character who takes Rocky's virginity. Furter's house is ruled not by him, though, but by Richard O'Brien's Riff-Raff, who reveals in the film's final part the Transylvanian's alien origins and that Furter has 'gone native' and must return home for his punishment.

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*'s deconstruction of masculinity is based upon a tension between the desire to be part of society and the desire to be liberated from society. The abiding theme of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is 'how to make a man', but the film explores it more widely than purely as a psychological concept, with the literal construction of Rocky by Furter based upon his admiration for the Charles Atlas image of masculinity: 'In just seven days I can make you a man.' Rocky, however, also references Greek myth as the Adonis and is clothed, albeit scantily, as an adult cherub, a version of Eros.

If we, momentarily, consider this psychoanalytically, Rocky is inherently destined to be Furter's downfall as a love he cannot have, or at least has and then loses: he is a fetish made real but, as the god of Love, Apollo, his can also be configured (to recall Deleuze on the work of Sacher von Masoch, see Deleuze 1991) as the masochistic third figure who will always destabilize any relationship. His only problem is that Furter is not so much a masochist than a hedonistic figure whose power is not as much as the film initially presents (it is in fact Riff-Raff who is the controller, the one in charge). If anything, Furter has a child-like quality which echoes the 'polymorphously perverse' that Freud (1905) maintained all children are inherently. This makes Rocky his toy and his rage a temper tantrum. Furter has to have what he desires and when he does not, Curry personifies petulance. Yet there is a kind of joy in Furter as the centre of the film against the forces of repression – his actions free them from social restraint. Until they have sex with Furter, Brad and Janet are represented as idiotic prudes but their libidos (and intelligence) are 'released' by both Furter and Rocky, at which point the performance of their sexual identities is altered, their voices change and their costumes are transformed from small-town America to fetish-wear.

At the beginning of the film, Brad is framed as a dominant straight man, with Janet obeying his every word with the simpering high-pitched voice she is given for the first half of the film. Brad's sexuality is, however, challenged by Furter as a dominant bisexual man. This aspect of the narrative, which is playfully explored as a positive development for Brad and Janet, breaking them free from puritanical sexualities, recalls Butler's assertion that heterosexuality means love of all sexes and, by implication, that to be a complete human

being, we must acknowledge this in our explicit and implicit relationship with sexuality. Thus, in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the 'normal' man is represented as the sexually liberated figure and not the restrained virgin. There are echoes here of *The Wicker Man* but Furter's comparison to Summerisle can only go so far because Furter is ultimately a disempowered, frustrated would-be human and not a powerful, satisfied would-not-be Christian. The last film I shall analyse here however, *Tommy*, does engage with this question: can you be part of and rejected by society?

## *Tommy*

Like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Tommy* (Ken Russell, 1975) enjoyed a previous incarnation as a stage production (as a concert performance) but had begun life as a concept album for The Who in 1969. *Tommy* also explores the idea of setting up one man as an icon and how he can all too easily be crushed. In this sense it can be seen that all three films so far are debating ideas of belief in charismatic leaders and false gods, and being misled.

Tommy (Roger Daltrey) is born into a world at the end of war and grows up with a heroic idealization of his dead father, an RAF pilot. His mother (Ann-Margret), still a young woman, marries a Teddy Boy during the 1950s (played by Oliver Reed), and Tommy gradually retreats into his own fantasy world. This self-isolation from the society of his family is furthered by him becoming a 'deaf, dumb and blind kid' in response to seeing his stepfather kill his father, who returns miraculously, for one night only, and his stepfather (and mother) telling him 'You didn't see nothing, you didn't hear nothing, you don't tell anybody nothing', thus making his disability entirely psychological. Tommy becomes more and more dejected, falling back in on his own imagination as his mother tries a series of 'remedies' to heal him, but as he grows to adulthood, Tommy's teenage identityv(from which point Tommy is Roger Daltrey) becomes ever more mysterious and his family all the less likely to interact with him, leaving him to the ministrations of his sadistic cousin Kevin (Paul Nicholas, who played Jesus in the Lloyd Webber musical) and paedophilic Uncle Ernie (Keith Moon). Finally left to his own devices, however, Tommy finds fame and attention through playing on the pinball machine as 'the pinball wizard'. This fame then turns into something rather more transformative and Tommy increasingly becomes viewed by his fans as being messianic. In this sense, the film is engaging with a critique of stardom itself and drawing on the growth of iconography in analysing popular culture. It was also only a comparatively short time after John Lennon's famously controversial misquoted 1966 'statement' that the Beatles were bigger than Jesus. Ultimately, however, Tommy turns his back on his worshippers and the film ends with an image which is contradictorily one of liberation from society (a man half-naked on a cliff top, the wind in his air, freed from the world) and also one of the richest religious images in any film with Tommy framed within the iconography of the golden Christ, sun blazing in his hair.

A striking feature of *Tommy* for much of the film's duration is the idolization by Tommy of his long-dead father (played by Robert Powell). The film begins by establishing a myth for

the young fully functioning Tommy, that his father was killed in an air battle as a great war hero. This presents Tommy as part of a generation for whom fathers were significantly absent through service during the war itself or absent, later, due to death or illness. In addition to this, because the father is played by Robert Powell, Tommy himself appears as the son of an icon. Admittedly, the reading of Robert Powell by audiences today is dominated by Powell as Christ in Zeffirelli's extravaganza *Jesus of Nazareth*, which was televised in 1977; but the iconography that is used to represent Tommy's father in this film is replete with heavenly and religious symbolism by situating the character within the sky and providing him with halo-effects, making Tommy's perspective clearly one of father as God rather than God the Father.

Religion is a recurring theme throughout the film, which is unsurprising given the destination for Tommy's character, but the most striking deconstruction of worship is seen in the Church of our Lady Marilyn Monroe, to which Tommy's mother takes him. This is one of the key points at which Tommy is played as a child by Roger Daltrey the adult, which problematizes a number of scenes by using adult imagery and knowledge to shape an experience from a child's perspective. These juxtapositionings of Tommy as character and his performance by Daltrey eloquently emphasize the performativity of masculinity within the film. In having an adult man play a child-like role, what makes a man is called into question by the film. Tommy is sexually challenged on a number of fronts, including the explicit presentation of his mother's sexual desires driving their life with Reed's violent spiv stepfather. Yet, ironically, it is only by disavowing all the roles that those around him try to impose upon him (i.e. by rejecting social constructions of identity) and becoming a true individual, that Tommy can achieve manhood. To be 'his own man', he must reject everyone else's model of him. Here, the abjection and dejection that the film frames is encouraged by Tommy himself, because of his own opting out of society. Rejected, then idolized, then disavowed, then dejected, the film oscillates as a tug of war over Tommy's masculinity until he makes the choice himself and controls his rejection of what society, in the film, constructs as masculine.

There are many other stories to tell here but no more time to tell them and so I want to conclude by offering some thoughts about where these examinations of masculinity and deviance can be taken. Firstly, the representation of deviance is only possible when the 'deviance' itself is less deviant and made comprehendible by a sense of 'normality'. Only when the unrepresentable becomes representable can we recognize it for what it is rather than what society says it is not. Secondly, definitions of what is masculine are tied to history: when a long-held belief about history is fragmented so too are ideas of masculinity; and thirdly, in the three films I have analysed briefly here, the taboos of representation, in their use, have permitted a space in which sexuality and gender are freed from their social niceties and afforded debate and growth forward into the 1980s: whether those freedoms persisted is another matter altogether.

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## Chapter 11

# ‘The “lack” and How to Get It’: Reading Male Anxiety in *A Clockwork Orange*, *Tommy* and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*

Justin Smith

From the late 1960s onwards, a number of notable British films constructed the subjective identities of their young, male protagonists through innovatory aesthetic arrangements of psychic space. More recently, child psychologist D.W. Winnicott's theory of 'transitional objects' (Winnicott 1971) has been deployed to explore particular kinds of relationship between film aesthetics, audience response and cultural memory (see Hills 2002 and Kuhn 2005). And elsewhere (see Smith 2005), I have applied Winnicott's ideas to illuminate the cult reception of *Withnail & I* (Bruce Robinson, 1986). Here, I develop an approach to understanding fan responses which is grounded in an analysis of the distinctive arrangements of *mise en scène*. And I make recourse to several relevant theorists, including Winnicott's contemporary John Bowlby, Goffman and Lacan.

In the conclusion to her article referenced above, Kuhn observes 'the capacity of certain types of cinema, through distinctive "language" and expressive potential, to evoke the experiences that are fundamental to some of the processes through which we become human beings' (Kuhn 2005: 414). This chapter considers as 'types' three British films of the 1970s which have subsequently come to be considered cult: *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), *Tommy* (Ken Russell, 1975) and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Nicolas Roeg, 1976). And it focuses especially on the ways in which masculinity is problematized as a thwarted, unresolved 'process of becoming'. It may well be that certain kinds of popular texts continue to function, for successive generations of fans, as sites of displacement, offering vicarious pleasures, stimulation and solace. In this way, I shall argue, new light may be shed on the relations between identity, social change and cultural texts.

## Historical context

Amid the proliferation of images of youth in British popular culture of the 1960s, filmic representations of masculinity became increasingly complex as the decade waned. While secure stereotypes of manhood persisted in the international success of the James Bond series, behind such monoliths lurk other masculinities which are more diverse and less stable. I want to consider how social anxieties about male sexuality are represented in three films of the 1970s, and to explore how popular film functions to address, to explain and to reassure in matters of identity.

From 1967, the rise of a palpable counter-culture, the passing of 'liberation' legislation and a climate of increased permissiveness, opened up a complex renegotiation of sexual

identities in Britain. While there is some truth in the assertion that the effects of such changes frequently reinforced the exploitation of women, it is also possible to contend that they advanced the women's liberation movement, privileged homosexuality and inter-racial relationships, and raised questions (backed by the dislocation of labour relations in the workplace) about the security of traditional male identities. The destabilization of sexual stereotypes had lasting consequences for British culture of the 1970s. The key issue here is how such profound social changes are addressed in certain cultural texts of the period. I shall be focusing on visual style and performances of masculinity in three British films which, in different ways, present radical portraits of the problematic male. Later, I will offer some thoughts, underpinned by relevant theory, about narrative structure and audience response. But to begin with it is important to outline certain similarities in their production conditions which enabled experimentation.

## Production contexts

Innovative filmmaking is often the result of creative space cleared during the production process which fosters a degree of freedom for the key agents involved. The British production climate of the early 1970s was unique in that circumstances conspired to allow such rare freedom. Firstly, many British film projects were the beneficiaries of substantial investment from the US majors (especially Warner Bros and Columbia) whose determination to exploit the youth market for radical entertainment frequently raised some executive eyebrows (see Walker 1986: 416). Secondly, the twilight of John Trevelyan's reign at the British Board of Film Censorship allowed unprecedented license to explicit material so long as its artistic merit and serious intent were made manifest (see Trevelyan 1973). Thirdly, the late 1960s in London saw the emergence of an intimate coterie – the new 'Chelsea set' – of artists, filmmakers, dilettantes, fashion people, actors, musicians, advertising executives, entrepreneurs, pornographers, PR agents and underworld criminals that controlled and produced the cutting-edge cinema of this brief era. Previously secure cultural distinctions became blurred. Finally, with the steady decline in post-war cinema attendance, the fragmented exhibition market sought to exploit the predilections of a range of 'niche' taste-communities. Popular film began to be seen in diverse ways, not least as a significant, radical artform. By the end of the 1960s the varied talents and single-minded visions of Stanley Kubrick, Ken Russell and Nicolas Roeg were ready to exploit such favourable conditions to their own ends. But the particular ways in which they manipulated their advantage are also instructive.

To a degree, by 1970, the re-examination of codes of masculinity had already been prefigured in such British films as Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), Lindsay Anderson's *If…* (1967), Michael Reeves' *Witchfinder General* (1968) and Roeg and Cammell's *Performance* (1970). Each of those films was, in its way, an exploration of male alienation, physicality, sexual ambiguity and violence. The films of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Tommy*

(1975) and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) pursue similar themes, but arguably in ways that are even more stylized and charismatic, analytical and affective, than their precursors.

All three are adaptations, two drawn from literary works and one from a 'rock opera'. While the first was directed by an American, the second funded by an Australian and the third set on location in New Mexico, all are essentially British productions which explore particular crises in British masculinity. In each case, the opportunity arose for the filmmaker to utilize the source material as a springboard, or a point of departure, to enable innovations to be made. Interest in a filmic treatment of Anthony Burgess's satirical novella *A Clockwork Orange* had emerged not long after the book's British publication by William Heinemann in 1962. Kubrick rejected screenwriter Terry Southern's (1966) version and manufactured his own adaptation. Kubrick's was based on the American version of the novel which (shorn of its final, redemptive chapter) offers a bleaker, unrepentant tone. In his search to visualize Pete Townsend's 1969 'rock opera' *Tommy*, Ken Russell incorporated a great deal of original material from several of his own, unrealized film projects, especially *The Angels* which shares a common interest in false religion (Phillips 1979: 158). Nicolas Roeg became interested in Paul Mayerberg's screenplay of Walter Nevis's sci-fi story *The Man Who Fell to Earth* because it eschewed genre convention in favour of a remarkably human dimension. Not only does the script jettison most of the novel's explanatory context, reducing the alien Newton's motivation to a simple, if obscure, plot device; it also marginalizes the elements of detective mystery and political intrigue, in favour, paradoxically, of a greater emotional force and attention to human sensitivity, which Roeg particularly admired (Mayersberg 1975: 230). In each case, such alterations serve to foreground the unresolved, male protagonist as a new kind of 'unaccommodated man'.

Another production practice shared by each filmmaker was the establishment of a small team of trusted personnel for what were, primarily, location shoots. By the end of the 1960s Kubrick's reputation meant he could choose his own projects, work at his own (often very slow) pace and employ an extended family of production assistants, rarely venturing far from his Hertfordshire home where he had installed studio and post-production facilities. 'I am deeply involved in the administration, because it is in this area that many creative and artistic battles are lost', Kubrick told Alexander Walker in an interview during the film's production (Walker 1972: 45). On *A Clockwork Orange*, art director John Barry was deputed to scout futuristic locations in and around London which were carefully adapted in keeping with the overall visual concept.

Ken Russell adores locations and the imaginative success or failure of a film idea often rests upon his early discovery of inspiring places (Baxter 1973: 92). In *Tommy* it is Russell's creation of scenes shot in the Lake District as a narrative framing device for the film's beginning and ending, and the use of the Gaiety Theatre on Southsea Pier (together with other locations in and around Portsmouth) that marry the romantic and elemental with a seaside-postcard, post-war, cartoon-realism. However, as with John Barry's studied dressing of Kubrick's location sets, so for Russell, visual design is crucial. The key personnel here were Shirley Russell (costumes), John Clark (art direction) and Paul Dufficey (set decoration).

Nicolas Roeg took the unprecedented step of employing an entirely British crew on an all-American location shoot, without Hollywood backing or a distribution deal. A first in British screen history, cinematographer Tony Richmond recalls: '*We* were aliens!' (Gregory 2002). Yet one should not underestimate the outsider's perspective afforded by this creative isolation and the crew camaraderie that grew from it. The team took advantage of New Mexico being one of the first states to declare a right-to-work policy permitting the use of imported labour and brought families along for a vacation on location. However, the strangeness of this remote American landscape is palpable in the film itself and alienation is the dominant point of view of its main character.

Of the three pictures, two have rock stars as their central protagonists: The Who's Roger Daltrey reprises his stage role on screen as Tommy, while David Bowie produces a remarkable performance as the alien Thomas Jerome Newton in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. In fact, executive producer Si Litvinoff (in the pre-Kubrick phase of the project) had originally been in negotiation with Sandy Lieberson about casting *Performance* star Mick Jagger and his Rolling Stones in the roles of Alex and his Droogs for *A Clockwork Orange*. While Stanley Kubrick's choice of Malcolm McDowell drew out Alex's 'winning qualities: his total candour, his wit, his intelligence and his energy' as well as his 'very personification of evil', the rock persona and pop style extends across all three films and can be analysed on a number of levels from production contexts, through visual design to performance manner (Strick and Houston 1972: 63). Clearly the intimacy of filmmakers and pop personalities in what was a relatively small London scene even by the late 1960s flower-power days led to cross-pollination of all kinds. And in the new decade film producers realized (somewhat belatedly perhaps) the broader potential of what became known as the cross-over youth market. This straightforward economic projection was a trend some in the movie business were slow to latch onto. As late as 1975 Ray Connolly still complained that:

> Although you and I may have known for years that the people who buy records in large numbers tend to be the very same people who enjoy going to the pictures, it appears to have come as a recent revelation to the film industry…For 20 years, while rock has been establishing itself as the contemporary music form of the second half of this century, film-makers have continued to view it with suspicion and not a little distaste. (Connolly 1975: 10)

This reticence – in the context of the continued decline and fragmentation of cinema markets – opened the way for the intervention of music moguls like Australian Robert Stigwood (*Tommy*) and American Lou Adler (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* [1975]) in musical stage shows and film production. And quickly, financial cross-over found expression in film performance and visual style as pop icons brought a potently charismatic, but dangerously unstable masculine presence to the screen. Now, perhaps as never before, the pop star promised a utopian escape or quasi-religious salvation from generational strife, social divisions, endless tedium or the very ravages of his own hedonistic excesses.

## Pop art and pop icons

Both *A Clockwork Orange* and *Tommy* share a flamboyant visual style redolent of the fashionable cartoon-strip acrylics of Roy Lichtenstein and the garish, pneumatic plastics of Claes Oldenburg. Transatlantic pop art was ubiquitous in the late 1960s from Andy Warhol's factory screen-prints to Peter Blake's iconic design for The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album (and its psychedelic derivatives) and George Dunning's animated feature *Yellow Submarine* (1968). Yet the early 1970s witnessed a media-inflected cynicism in what had been perhaps a modish, naïve celebration of primary colours and comic-book play. The synthetic and the saccharine, the mass-produced and the relentlessly promoted washed over the public consciousness like a wave of collective nausea. By mid-decade, glam-rock had reached new heights of space-age hyperbole, adopting images of variously feminized masculinity.[1]

Yet in the hands of Kubrick's and Russell's art directors, the pop art influence is more than a chic inflexion, or an assumed manner. It establishes a visual iconography which, in each case, is both seductive and dangerous, promising plenitude yet proving to be hollow. This motif can be traced from Liz Moore's Allen Jones-derived, white female nudes, arched into impossibly extravagant crabs for tables in the Korova Milk Bar, to the gargantuan silver pinballs of Tommy's industrial wasteland. They are what Robert Hughes defined in a 1971 article for *Time* magazine on *A Clockwork Orange* as 'cultural objects cut loose from any power to communicate' (Hughes 1996: 185–186). They are eternal signifiers, full of noise yet signifying nothing; rather, stuck in the loop of endless iteration. The plastic and the spherical, with their smooth, impermeable surfaces without edge or opening, are space-age objects of a kind of infinite, sterile doom. This is a feature also of the strange, arid snowscapes of the alien planet Anthea in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. It is infused with a melancholy and nostalgic longing beyond the subjectivity of the alien's memory: an idealized, pre-lapsarian state of reproduction without intercourse, pleasure without penetration.

In these films it is not merely a matter of choice objects carefully arranged; scale and dimension are critical too. Witness Tommy and his mother (Ann-Margret) beneath the towering colossus of the open-legged Marilyn Monroe madonna, and the great bovver-boots of the diminutive Elton John raising him to the level of the giant pin-table. Or consider Alex (Malcolm McDowell) battering the Cat Lady (Miriam Karlin) with a giant ceramic phallus or racing at impossible speed through the country night in the 'toy' sports car. Such objects have the power to distort our perceptions of reality, to loom as potent profane icons, dangerously alluring to our impressionable consciousness. These treatments exemplify a radical new attitude to the world of objects liberated disarmingly from their familiar ideological constraints. I call this effect *hypersignification*. It works to free objects from their purely symbolic place within the signifying system and according them a greater, if less definable, power. Furthermore, this operates not only through visual iconography but through performance style as well.

The sublime effect of casting stars from the world of popular music to charismatic screen roles invites identification and mistrust in equal measure. Daltrey in all his stiff,

awkward vulnerability both is and isn't Tommy. The film pities its protagonist and draws our sympathy. Then, it cynically transforms him into the money-grabbing shaman of a fake religious cult. He remains untouchable, sealed in his private (rock star's) world, as if autistic, out of reach. Similarly, Malcolm McDowell's 'seductive charm' is rooted in the juxtaposition of Alex's verbal dexterity, his knowing eloquence and his physical poise (French 1990: 84). His vulnerability itself is a coquettish mannerism drawn from his unique style-vocabulary. He keeps himself clean and he knows how to behave, to say and do the right things in order to keep the world at one remove, to preserve his own creative-imaginative space, to keep his subjective world of sensation pristine. As such he is a curiously impervious and impermeable figure. Yet Kubrick suggests:

> You can regard Alex as a creature of the id. He is within all of us. In most cases, this recognition seems to bring a kind of empathy from the audience, but it makes some people very angry and uncomfortable. (Strick and Houston 1972: 63)

And David Bowie's alien in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* evinces a comparable, hermeneutic charm – a studied fragility, derived from his stage alter egos, at once endearing and remote. And yet there is more to these screen performances than coquettish ambiguity or an easy pop image trade-off. For example, in casting Bowie Roeg later remarked:

> I didn't just want an actor…I think sometimes there's too much acting going on. It's terribly difficult not to…Actors play alien people, alien from themselves. It's a very highly skilled and brilliant actor that can get rid of that performance. (Gregory 2002)

It is not merely here a question of conscious artifice. Because – in the cases of Daltrey and Bowie – these are amateur performances, there is also a conspicuous excess in the repertoire of physical gesture and mannerism. There is what we might call a high level of redundancy or slippage. This notion requires further explication.

## Freudian slippage

In trained screen or theatrical acting styles there is an economy of gesture. It is a truism, indeed, that the most celebrated screen actors have developed an almost minimal repertoire of key looks, expressions and physical mannerisms. There is no wastage; everything is orchestrated in keeping with character, nothing is unmotivated. It is an arrangement of highly conscious effort in the deployment of certain physical traits and the suppression of all that is superfluous to the part. And it is a code less visible in women (traditional bearers of the gaze) than men. Such semblances of control are not confined to actors of course, but are demanded of traditional male *social* performances as well. It is at best a form of containment, which Goffman has elaborated in his work on interactionism, where he

establishes how social performances tend to be routinized, context-specific and reduced to their minimal necessary constituents.

In discussing the way in which social performances are (by mutual acknowledgement of actor and audience) necessarily idealized, or restricted to their summary meaning, Goffman indicates that on occasion gestural signals or other peripheral signs which are intended to corroborate and anchor the communicated essence of the main performance can, conversely, disrupt, negate or undermine this essential presentation. This will sometimes have humorous, sometimes embarrassing or shocking effects. Such situations may, he argues, be either the result of poor, unorchestrated performance, or inaccurate audience interpretation, or both. Either way:

> As students of social life we have been less ready to appreciate that even sympathetic audiences can be momentarily disturbed, shocked and weakened in their faith by the discovery of a picayune discrepancy in the impressions presented to them. Some of these minor accidents and 'unmeant gestures' happen to be so aptly designed to give an impression that contradicts the one fostered by the performer that the audience cannot help but be startled from a proper degree of involvement in the interaction, even though the audience may realise that in the last analysis the discordant event is really meaningless and ought to be completely overlooked. The crucial point is not that the fleeting definition of the situation caused by an unmeant gesture is itself so blameworthy but rather merely that it is *different* from the definition officially projected. (Goffman 1971: 59–60)

This unintended element is, in screen performance, redundant to the essential meaning. In its accidental nature it must also be seen as a betrayal of an unconscious motive. I agree with Goffman's suggestion that it is not what the unmeant gesture might mean that is of interest, so much as the fact and preponderance of its occurrence, the scale of its superfluity. I contend that this is a sort of slippage that draws attention (perhaps with charismatic effect) to the performance act itself, whereas professional convention tends to render it invisible. I would argue further that such innocent self-disclosure contributes to a quality of vulnerability that is traditionally un-masculine; for it displays a certain ambiguity in sexual identity which remains unresolved. It affords, if only fleetingly, a glimpse of the unconscious. Where this tendency in a screen actor of the calibre of Malcolm McDowell is quite knowingly deployed with a barely disguised, naughty-boyish glee, in Daltrey it has the effect of a charming, almost pre-pubescent, innocence and in Bowie of an unsettling, androgynous mystique. May Routh, costume designer on *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, revealed that because Bowie was so thin many of the clothes she dressed him in were boy's sizes: 'I wanted to have a feeling like a sort of school uniform' (Gregory 2002). These performances of masculine ambiguity are thrown into sharper contrast in respect of their relations to the female and, specifically, with regard to the maternal body.

## The maternal body

Violence against women in *A Clockwork Orange* is as stylized, choreographed and cartoon-brutal as it is throughout, but varies in one important aspect: prurient fascination for the female form as *other*. In each instance, the camera dwells upon the female body with a novice's raw mixture of abhorrence and lust. Note the way in which the gang-rape of the woman in the old casino at the hands of Billy Boy's bikers is lit and choreographed as a performance on stage, exposing her full frontal to an invisible audience (the viewer); consider also, the rape of the writer's wife (Adrienne Corri) where Alex cuts breast holes in her dress with scissors – an act of misogynistic humiliation certainly, but also one of adolescent play. Similarly, when forced to demonstrate, before an invited audience of society dignitaries, the success of the Ludovico reform technique, we share Alex's prostrate view of the overwhelming breasts of the naked model looming above, tantalizing, half-desirable but repugnant and beyond reach. This unresolved horror/fascination for the anatomy of female difference is the regressive trait throughout.

The attitude is totally new in British cinema. We are not concerned here merely with the screen exposure of what was previously taboo – full-frontal nudity, sexual violence, rape. Doubtless all that was already available to those who sought it in Soho. It is rather the *resistance* of this material to erotic incorporation and its demonstration of a new problematic. Hitherto, sexual difference in bodily display had been repressed, policed as a matter of public and private morality; in these films it becomes politically inscribed, volatile; a site of visible struggle.

Tommy's troubled rite of passage is punctuated by not dissimilar images of female domination: the lurid, seductive Acid Queen (Tina Turner) and the traumatic relationship with his self-indulgent, hedonistic mother. Nora Walker's physical performance is plastic, tactile and fluid; Tommy's is dry, hermetically sealed, remote. Her eyes are moist, expressive, fulsome; his are fixed, unblinking, in a glassy stare. She is sensual, open; he is impermeable, closed. She is lurid, gaudy, voluptuous, all woman; he is clean, white, innocent, androgynous. Nowhere is this set of contrasts more apparent than in the climactic white boudoir scenes: first with the grotesque bathing in champagne, soap-suds, baked beans and chocolate (all pure Russell) and later, after a futile visit to a seductive specialist (Jack Nicholson), the 'Tommy Can You Hear Me?' and 'Smash the Mirror' sequences. Mirrors and reflections (Lacanian or otherwise) abound in the film's infinite lexicon of pseudo-Freudian hypersignification. But here, in a drunken maternal initiation rite, she performs a frustrated, erotic dance before his heedless gaze, whips her hair across his face and finally flings him through the round-mirrored wall, through which he bursts in a climax that is at once the breaking of a virginity, an emotional release from the claustrophobia of their possessive/dependent relationship and a transformative awakening of his senses ('I'm Free'). Ann-Margret's sensual, physical abandonment is the perfect foil for Roger Daltrey's (thoroughly appropriate) catatonic woodenness. Their troubled, oedipal relationship is resolved only after his miracle cure when he tears off her gaudy jewellery and symbolically baptizes her anew.

In *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, Candy Clark's Mary-Lou performs the whole range of female role-models from mother to lover, whore and wife. She is an evolution of these circumscribed, male stereotypes of woman. At their first meeting in the hotel she has to physically carry Newton from the lift (after the vertical motion disturbs his sensitive bodily equilibrium) in an extraordinary scene in which she handles him in girlish, breathless panic as if he were a broken doll. Here Bowie's emaciated, bony fragility is markedly evident; it seems as if he will break in her hands. His immediate recovery from this trauma and Mary Lou's faithful attention is intercut with repetitive, repulsive scenes of Bryce's (Rip Torn) student conquests; Newton and Mary Lou's discovery of one another is altogether more innocent, almost pre-lapsarian, certainly adolescent.

They drive out to the aptly named Land of Enchantment, where earlier Newton's space capsule landed in the lake. It is here they build their home and arrive at their first intimacy. Sitting topless on the bed, she lights candles. 'I can't seem to get dry', Newton says, removing his robe, 'I'm still wet'. Liquid is a leitmotif throughout the film. But this is a boy's plea to his mother to help manage his body. Their gentle love-making is adolescent, touching, exploratory, as if mutually fascinated only with the surfaces of each other's bodies, their plasticity, contours and ability to tessellate. But he is unable to sustain interest in her homespun domesticity (managing his clothes, the house, home-baking), and they fall out.

Newton's rejection of the faithful, uncomprehending Mary Lou seems heartless and cruel. He announces he is leaving, providing for her needs. Interestingly, she has donned a straight, black, bob-cut wig, echoing the oriental décor of their house and adopting her own kind of alien disguise. Without realizing her own *double-entendre* she rounds on him: 'You're an alien! You know what will happen if they find your visa has expired?' She pleads with him, whispers sweet nothings, fingers his crotch trying to seduce him, and he is repulsed as only someone who is sexually alien could be. She attacks him, tearing the shirt off his shoulder and he stands, cowering, palms against the wall, bony, feminine shoulder and V of throat exposed, vulnerable yet reclusive. We never think him capable of genuine male aggression. Their row is interrupted by the oven-timer for the cookies she's baked. In what is a fit of pique rather than a temper tantrum, he knocks the baking sheet out of her hand propelling cookies into an azure sky like flying saucers. Then, locking himself in the bathroom he studies his own reflection, the fake nipples and stick-on human lenses. Worn down by her persistence he unlocks the door and at last his reveals his alien self to her in one of the most memorable science-fiction moments in screen history. Their night of genuine discovery is intercut with scenes of Anthean erotic pleasure, sealed in weightless, amniotic fluid, their bodies mingle, smothered in a kind of viscous milk. It is as if an impermeable membrane has been breached. 'I lifted you up once', Mary Lou remembers, as if her maternal nurturing were the only kind of explanatory knowledge she can bring to bear. 'You must believe me, Mary Lou', he responds in earnest. Her tentative, fearful caresses of his fine, dry surface are juxtaposed with the lubricated embraces of his Anthean memory/imagination. In what appears to be an unassisted orgasm, Mary Lou shrieks and runs naked to the kitchen where we see her, distorted, through his alien cat's eyes, crying 'Why, why, why?'

On his departure she ventures: 'You must hate me?' 'No', he replies, 'I don't hate anyone, I can't'. Presumably he cannot love either. Theirs is the fate of two people who never should have met, but did – a curiously human dilemma, within an alien explanatory system. But, as with other futuristic elements in this film, it is visiting the human dimension from an alien perspective that illuminates the everyday anew. And this familiar story of unrealized sexuality, of thwarted intimacy, of an unlikely, freakish alliance that was never meant to be, is confirmed by the curious old-flame, one-night-stand encounter of their reunion and the corresponding playful, drunken abandon of their aggressive passion. The alienation of the sexes is such that only by artificial means can intimate pleasure be achieved.

For a youth audience, such role-play is both stimulating and reassuring. Intimacy involving role-models offers an intense, vicarious pleasure; while the safety-net of artifice offers protection from self-exposure. It is clear in each film that the central performance combines a physical vulnerability with considerable charismatic appeal. A female David Bowie fan wrote the following personal response to his screen role:

> Eventually, when I saw him in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, taking off his clothes and seeing him in the nude, I began to realise I fancied him even more.
>
> And then it actually became a little more normal and channelled itself into something more erotic, because I was kinky about the fact that he was so thin and he was like a woman. He seemed the perfect vehicle for my sexual needs and fulfilment.
>
> …When I saw *The Man Who Fell to Earth* I got influenced by the idea of skins peeling and the fact that skin can be taken away and produce juices of a kind that can reveal themselves at the height of sexuality.
>
> So that when you make love you actually destroy certain layers of skin and form a liquid mass together.
>
> It was incredibly sensuous and very wild at the same time. (Kureishi and Savage 1995: 458–459)

It may well be that popular cultural icons perform a kind of decathexis function – similar to that of Winnicott's transitional phenomena – in the rehearsal of attachment transition (see Winnicott 1971: 14 and Hills 2002: 106). They may combine some of the qualities of parental authority with a mystical otherworldliness and sexual charisma in a 'relationship' to the fan which normally exists in the realm of make-believe, but which has real pay-offs in the dividends of cultural competence, social acceptance, fashion, grooming and self-image development. Certainly filmic renditions of their emotional vulnerability and physical dependency must act as reassuring symbols of identification revealed beneath their idealized star personae.

Child psychologist John Bowlby's work on mother–child attachment behaviours is illuminating here. He establishes how dependency rooted in physiological needs (food, warmth and protection) and social education (observational learning) exists in changing form throughout childhood, but that sexual behaviours (certain aspects of which

attachment behaviour shares) are directed outwards from adolescence towards new kinds of attachment:

> As a result individual variation, already great, becomes even greater. At one extreme are adolescents who cut themselves off from parents; at the other are those who remain intensely attached and are unable or unwilling to direct their attachment behaviour to others. (Bowlby 1975: 207).

But Bowlby also considers circumstances where:

> A school or college, a work group, a religious group or political group can come to constitute for many people a subordinate attachment 'figure', and for some people a principal attachment-'figure'. In such cases, it seems probable, the development of attachment to a group is mediated, at least initially, by attachment to a person holding a prominent position within that group. (Bowlby 1975: 207)

Though Bowlby doesn't discuss this directly, it is worth considering here also the role of the pop group or football team and that of charismatic pop idols or sports stars in teenage fandom as forms of 'attachment figures' which also permit the public display of certain sexual fantasies to be projected onto them. And at the centre of such fictive relationships is the ambiguity between intimacy and strangeness, between serious commitment and playful disregard – the intense preoccupation which is also just a passing phase. To employ a Freudian concept, this is a *fort/da* game of emergent self-recognition. It is just this kind of play that the performances of David Bowie, Roger Daltrey and Malcolm McDowell provoke in these films. Their charismatic vulnerability acts as both an erotic stimulus and a reassuring displacement for an audience's own sexual anxieties.

I want next to develop this notion of spectatorship, speculatively, in two directions. Firstly I want to consider more fully the distinctive model of cult reception this scenario implies. And secondly, I want then to try to locate this model, provisionally, within a broader social perspective that might be considered one of post-1968 phallic crisis. Lacanian theory, in particular, may assist us in this purpose.

## The phallic order

The ambivalent subject positions constructed across such cultish narratives suggest spectatorial relations of a particularly fluid nature. The strange narrative unevenness and lacunae, and the visual density and signifying abundance of the cult film text both entices and distances the viewer. And the charismatic performance at its centre is frequently both seductively open and frustratingly remote (Bowie and Daltrey). Or else it is disturbingly attractive and alluring in its very malevolence and violence (McDowell).

Internet fan responses to *A Clockwork Orange* typically wax lyrical about the 'fabulous style and design in many of the film's scenes…and malcolm was gorgeous when he was young…' (female) (Anon 2005a). Or they incorporate aspects of the film's iconic style into their own creative environments:

> The imagery, the irony, the evilness, the contradictions,
> the entire mood and visuals represented in this entire film
> is something I tried to incorporate into my current website
> and life (LABYRINTH) – it's what inspires me, the
> eccentric, the strange…the utterly brilliant (male) (Anon 2005a).

An email newsgroup on The Who's *Tommy* evinces similar kinds of engagement with the band and film text, and the pleasures of shared personal response (Anon 2005b):

10 **From: <liszka_pet>**
**Date: Tue Mar 21, 2000 3:22am**
**Subject: Stuff about me**

Well, if no one else is going to do this besides you, then I will too! ^_^ I don't know when exactly I got into the Who. Maybe it was during my trip to LA when a girl friend and I heard 'Squeezebox' for the first time. All we could remember was the chorus 'in and out and in and out…' So our friends who didn't hear it thought it was a pretty dirty song. ^_^ Not long after that I saw a behind the scenes/making of Tommy. After that I just HAD to see it so I looked long and hard for a copy of it and just loved it! It was sort of before my time, what with me not quite 21 here, but I've always been an individual.

11 **From: <docbb_4469>**
**Date: Wed Mar 22, 2000 6:32pm**
**Subject: Re: Stuff about me**

That's good, one should always strive to be an individual. I didn't quite fit in with my age group either when I was younger. The Who cross boundaries, I think, of age, gender, class, etc. I have lots of favorite Who songs, not just from 'Tommy,' but other albums as well. Have you ever heard of the albums 'The Who Live at Leeds,' or 'The Who Sell Out?' Way before your time, but interesting, non-the-less. And of course I like 'Quadraphenia,' and 'Who's Next.'

Key here in the expression of cult allegiance is the identification of the taboo ('a pretty dirty song'), nostalgic appropriation ('it was sort of before my time') and marginality ('being an individual', 'crossing boundaries' and 'not quite fitting in'). Significant too, is the fact that both contributors here are female. So how are we to reconcile these retrospective responses with what I have identified as narratives of male anxiety?

I have argued elsewhere (see Smith 2005 and Smith 2007) that cult films are peculiarly open texts, prompting a dialectical mode of spectatorship, offering stimulus and reassurance, pain and consolation, in equal measure. One recent male response to *A Clockwork Orange* captures the ambivalence of his own obsession rather well:

> my favorite quote was i've suffered and suffered and everyone wants me to keep on suffering. i never read the book, but it looks like i'll have to. I totally got the message of the movie though. you know how people can do the rocky horror picture show thats how I am with a clockwork orange. ever since i was 14 the movie is something i need to watch at least once a month. i get so much from it everytime i see it! (Anon 2004)

One wonders whether his habitual re-viewing is about the identification with teenage suffering as much as it concerns its relief.

For male and female fans alike, the common denominator seems to be the ways in which each of the films under consideration here deny the symbolic reassurance of the phallic order in their manifest disinterest in, or rejection of, traditional sites of male authority. In matters of visual style and performance they all parade camp experimentation with self-identity and image, and flaunt ambiguous sexual excess. They refuse to anchor masculinity according to psycho-sexual and social convention. In this way each resists entry into the phallic order. Their narratives offer instead both temporary solace and endless stimulus; yet their pleasures, like those of the fetishist, are contradictory, perversely unresolved. This is because each film is densely constructed upon patterns of reiterated signification (in visual codes and performance styles) in which the signifiers are never able to rest, in the Lacanian sense, around loci of *points de capiton*.

This idea must be explained more precisely. According to Lacan: 'While there are no fixed signifieds in language, signification within the symbolic order is made possible by the privileging of certain key signifiers to which the drives, organised around non-incestuous, heterosexual sexuality, become attached' (quoted in Weedon, Tolson and Mort 1980: 205). These *points de capiton*:

> act as nodal points which link signifying chains to one another and prevent an indefinite sliding of meaning. Via their attachment to the drives, which have been organised in a culturally acceptable way, these nodal points structure the unconscious in terms of the positions from which an individual can speak. These positions are organised in terms of gender. (quoted in Weedon, Tolson and Mort 1980: 206)

Such positions are also culturally inscribed within texts in a structured manner which secures their ideological function and ensures their subjective pleasure. Cult films, uneven in their structure, hypersignifying, offer no such security. Rather, their signifying loops seem to fetishize what Lacan called *petit objets autre* – nostalgic yearnings for those first objects of the imaginary register 'which are not clearly distinguished from the self and which are not fully grasped as other (*autre*)'. Like Winnicott's transitional objects, these derive their 'value from…identification with some missing component of the subject's self, whether that loss is seen as primordial, as the result of a bodily organisation, or as the consequence of some other division' (quoted in Silverman 1999: 343).

What is the reason for this nostalgic lapse and such patterns of regression in these particular film texts? In terms of Lacanian theory they point towards an unresolved entry into the symbolic order of language – an oedipal crisis. But at once we must acknowledge the social constitution of language and the cultural basis of texts too. An inability to enter fully the symbolic order as a social subject depends upon a rift in what Volosinov identifies as the 'dialectical interplay' between the psychic and the ideological (quoted in Vermorel 1995: 39). Volosinov reminds us of the *multi-accentual* nature of the sign: how ideology constantly fails to reduce linguistic constructions to dominant meanings, and how the self and its social performance is continually compromised and alienated in language.

How do such rifts come about, historically? It could be argued that the social changes and cultural upheavals of the late 1960s effected a slippage in the ideological purchase upon language. This was manifested in a variety of ways: for example, the passing of 'liberation' legislation, the rise of second-wave feminism and gay rights, the counter-culture's rejection of traditional institutions and their specific discourses, the overthrow of conventional cultural forms and the blurring of distinctions between high and popular art. These were supplanted with a diverse range of new experiments in self-realization through language, many of which were attitudinal, some destructive, most ephemeral. Popular culture itself issued a plethora of conflicting signifiers challenging ideological consensus. In particular, cult texts of the 1970s are object lessons in hypersignification, resisting settlement around ideological consensus (*points de capiton*).

Cult films, I suggest, were but one manifestation of a fundamental anxiety attendant upon these social and cultural shifts. And this crisis of identity, of 'lack' if you will, is addressed in such films in the pleasurable effects of both stimulation and solace. Yet, their resolution is never finally achieved. Rather, it is as if these films project fantasy worlds where the dominant sexual divisions of the phallic order temporarily don't exist, or wherein the risks attendant on reconciling their pleasures and pains can be imaginatively averted or sympathetically displaced. In this sense, cult texts may be considered at once radical and reactionary. They furnish audiences with alternative subject positions that provide reassurance and identification with models of essential difference. But the solace they afford is that of a shared nostalgia for a lost order and perhaps a failed revolution; certainly consolation for those outsiders who long to belong.

## Notes

1. In British popular music where the nuances of this glam parade were perhaps most conspicuous, icons ranged from the more traditionally masculine Gary Glitter, Alvin Stardust and Slade's Noddy Holder, through the 'middle-of-the-road' androgyny of Sweet, T-Rex and The Bay City Rollers, to the costumed extremes and attendant ambiguity of Elton John, David Bowie and Detroit rocker Suzy Quatro (the latter offering an interestingly butch rendition of the 'girl rocker'). The glam presence and sexual flamboyance was equally visible in stage shows like *Hair*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Rocky Horror Show* (the latter itself becoming a cult film in 1975).

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## Section IV

British Cinema and Television

## Chapter 12

# The Last Studio System: A Case for British Television Films

Dave Rolinson

During British cinema's difficulties in the 1970s, television drama became almost an alternative national cinema: as Mike Leigh argued, 'the British film industry was alive and well and hiding out in television' (Movshovitz 2000: 49). Producer Kenith Trodd (1983: 53) saw in the period's television films 'the most healthy, thriving and varied incidence of fiction film-making in British history', which surpassed cinema by virtue of 'overall quality, audience pleasure, the development of talented artists and technicians, and the honest reflection of contemporary life and crises'. However, film critics have neglected these pieces so consistently that Ian Christie (2009: 93) described a recent 1970s study's tendency of 'ignoring television-film production' as a 'familiar convention'.

Television has been portrayed as cinema's rival, a funding mechanism for cinema, the source of sitcoms that spawned depressing spin-offs or a training ground for cinema directors such as Michael Apted, Stephen Frears, Jack Gold, Roland Joffe, Mike Leigh, Ken Loach, John MacKenzie, Mike Newell and Alan Parker.[1] However, single play-strands, with rationed slots for all-filmed productions, have been neglected as a culture of indigenous *film*making. It was a space for directors to learn via varied commissions compared by director Alan Clarke to the 1930s and 1940s Hollywood studio system (Kelly 1998: 67) and by Andrew Clifford (1991: 30) to the American system which produced Martin Scorsese or Francis Ford Coppola. Some directors developed a personal voice, and many films demonstrate thematic and aesthetic continuities which are suggestive of a cinema movement.

This chapter attends to these issues, contextualized by discussion of the industrial frameworks which financed and 'distributed' these films, the cultural frameworks which energized them and the critical methodology which has problematized their use in film studies. Responding to those frameworks, selected case studies demonstrate the benefits of not 'ignoring television-film production'.

## Frameworks

1970s drama benefited from the interlinked industrial and cultural frameworks of the television industry before deregulation: financial stability combined with social and artistic imperatives. Mike Leigh's point that he 'can't bear to think what would have happened' to him and other directors without television (Whitehead 2007: 34) reflects the stark contrast between cinema's financial instability and the BBC/ITV duopoly that, funded by guaranteed revenue streams and charters that provided long-term security, was able to take more risks.

The BBC (funded by the licence fee) and ITV (monopolizing advertising income as the only commercial broadcaster) drew on contracted staff expertise and in-house facilities, and its financial security was matched by shared cultural values. Reflecting the nation through public service broadcasting was underlined in legislation, from the BBC's early Royal Charter with its Reithian mission to 'inform, educate and entertain', and the Hoggartian anti-commercialist tenor of the Pilkington Committee report of 1962, through to the Annan Committee report of 1974 (see Cooke 2003).

Indeed, debates on British cinema often aspired to cultural functions and financial structures comparable with television: as John Hill (1999: 32–33) noted, the Terry report of 1976 and an Interim Action Committee report in 1978 tried to balance 'economic' factors and 'considerations of commercial profitability' with 'the benefits to be derived by the community' of an 'art form' which could 'reflect British life'. 1970s debates informed Channel 4 from its opening in 1982, notably the desire 'to make, or help make, films of feature length for television here, for the cinema abroad', which Jeremy Isaacs (1989: 25) identified, before becoming its first chief executive, as part of aims to 'encourage innovation' and represent the 'widest possible range of opinion'. Notably, recent concerns over Film on Four (now Film4)'s funding have been phrased in terms of regressing to the 1970s: although Film4 supported *This is England* (Shane Meadows, 2007), *Brick Lane* (Sarah Gavron, 2007), *In Bruges* (Martin McDonagh, 2008), *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, 2008), Kevin Macdonald feared, due to Channel 4's funding shortfall, returning to 'the crisis' before its existence, when 'effectively you couldn't get anything made unless you managed to get Hollywood studio money' or co-production deals, and hoped Channel 4 'realise the enormous value culturally' (Smith 2009: 21). 1970s television filmmakers enjoyed freedom from those pressures.

Financial and cultural confidence supported guaranteed slots – hundreds per year – in many strands (including *Play for Today*), structures which gave producers (including Margaret Matheson, David Rose and Kenith Trodd) strong positions to protect and encourage writers and directors. Institutional protection can be overstated, given ITV's reduction in play strands during the 1970s and the BBC's banning of *Brimstone and Treacle* and *Scum* in the late 1970s, which accompanied government vetting of appointments and a purge of left-wing elements (see Cook 1998; Cooke 2003; Rolinson 2005). However, in general terms single drama strands 'came to function as some kind of "cutting edge" for television', extending 'boundaries' and functioning as 'a special place for the expression of the individual, dissident or questioning voice' (Cook 1998: 6). But was that a cinematic voice?

## Critical methodology

To differentiate cinema from television is to engage with debates that range from constructive specificity to obstructive essentialism. Is a film uncinematic if it is shown first, or only, by television? (In which case, what of the cinema films that viewers see first, or only, on

television)? Even when audiences for 'minority' plays surpassed cinema audiences, the lack of an afterlife – because of industrial agreements on cinema exhibition and repeats – frustrated Mike Leigh in that 'nobody out there in the world knew about them. They'd be shown once and that was it. I went mad for 17 years' (Movshovitz 2000: 21). Therefore, when Leigh called this period 'a long time in the womb', his comment was 'double-edged' according to Tony Whitehead (2007: 33), because although Leigh was 'protected' he was also 'waiting to be "fully born" as a filmmaker', where his work would be 'seen more than just once or twice…in more places…on the big screen'. Garry Watson (2004: 8) found 'unacceptable' the categorization of *Meantime* (Mike Leigh, 1983) as a TV drama on the grounds of not being '*commercially* released' despite appearing at retrospectives.

However, this is problematized by the fact that, in the 1980s, Film on Four productions that were devised for, and shown in, cinemas were still dismissed as uncinematic. In *Sight and Sound*, Penelope Houston (1984: 115) argued that 'the movie movie, as opposed to the TV movie, enjoys not only a wider vitality, but the power to probe more deeply'. Regardless of being shot on film, often by noted cinema directors, there was still a critical wariness of televisual origins. Often this related to scale: an essentialist concept of television's small screen versus the kinaesthetic experience of large cinema screens. For example, Martin McLoone's examination of debates on the aesthetics of film and television reproduced an Alan Parker sketch about Film on Four showing a small television-sized image lost on a large cinema screen (McLoone 1996: 77).

For critics, a problem with television films (including Film on Four) was the fact that they were mostly shot on 16mm film, rather than 35mm, the barometer of cinema from Hollywood to the Dogme manifesto's Vow of Chastity. Tony Garnett recalled the opposition he and Ken Loach faced, in increasing location filming for *Up the Junction* (1965), when the BBC's film department insisted that '16mm was for news, current affairs and documentaries, while 35mm was for drama, and they would not compromise their quality': furthermore, BBC1's controller wanted 'A-list drama, not B-movies' (Hayward 2004: 58–60). Jamie Sexton (2003) explores the aesthetic developed via drama's incorporation of 16mm, although there was, as Christophe Dupin (2008: 164; 168) noted of British Film Institute shorts, great 'difficulty…distributing 16mm films in commercial cinemas' or expensively transferring them to 35mm. Mike Leigh felt that his recommendation of 35mm 'sounded like adolescent fantasizing' to the BBC (Movshovitz 2000: 87).

Television plays were capable of innovative, provocative drama, but then so was theatre, whose influence persisted beyond television's formative years in discourse and practice (for instance, the three-walled studio play) when recording made it less necessary: 'theatrical' became as double-edged a description of television as 'literary' was of British cinema. Many dramas used the television studio in ways that transferred 'the experiments and discoveries of contemporary, anti-naturalist theatre' to television (Bignell et al. 2000: 38), or transferred theatre pieces like David Edgar's *Destiny* (1978) or Leigh's *Abigail's Party* (1977), which are outside this study, but which remind us that identifying dramas that are *as important* as many British films from the period is not the same as identifying important *films*.

Perhaps, therefore, the most difficult specificity to negotiate is methodological specificity, a concern with finding an appropriate discourse to discuss television films, as opposed to television plays or cinema films. Could critics import film studies terms when, as John Caughie (2000: 16–18) summarized, film studies has a 'global' shared language whereas television has been rooted in the 'national'? Sarah Cardwell (2005) documented how television studies emerged during a period of academic discourse when English literature and film studies wrestled with the 'death of the author', with the result that, unlike those disciplines, television studies never had the auteur phase, uncovering key artists, that 'validated' cinema as 'art'. Television was rendered textless in the media theory culture which, around this period, rooted television in reductively essentialist concepts of 'flow', ephemerality and contrasting distracted domestic audiences with engaged cinema audiences.

Textlessness and national traditions coalesced in definitions of the 'TV movie' via American 'Disease-of-the-Week weepies', which Richard Kelly (1998: xxi) contrasted with the 'more robust' British tradition, which in directors like Alan Clarke disproved Paul Schrader's biting discussion of 'luckless' film scholars reduced to finding 'TV auteurs' in 'TV movies'. However, during the 1970s critics and practitioners still saw television as a 'writer's medium' in which a director was a *metteur-en-scène* because of stage-set production practices and theatrical backgrounds which valued 'serving' the written text. Dennis Potter was an auteur writer whose profiles and talk show appearances generated audience recognition, and although directors were profiled, collaboration was highlighted: a Stephen Frears profile, titled 'Frears and Company', included Alan Bennett and influential directors of photography Chris Menges and Brian Tufano (Badder 1978). But Potter thought television plays were only 'an author's medium at the moment because of British anachronisms', predicting that 'the days of the television play are numbered; it will soon all be done on film, and it'll be a director's medium like the cinema' (Cushman 1976: 62), because film 'gave new power to the director, who, as in the cinema, could assume greater authorial control over the eventual product' (Lacey 2007: 47).[2]

This chapter will now respond to these critical positions through case studies attesting to drama's representational scope, genres and aesthetics.

## *National* cinema?

1970s television films challenge the decade's cinema for diversity, ranging from art cinema to comedy, social realism to fantasy, regional films to thrillers, horror to Brechtian experimentation. This chapter's length precludes an exhaustive study, but selects examples for their relevance to aforementioned debates – specialists should seek other compelling films in their fields.[3] This is particularly important for genre studies, since focusing on 'radical' drama presents an unfair comparison with a British cinema that produced both *The Devils* (Ken Russell, 1971) and *Can You Keep it Up for a Week?* (Jim Atkinson, 1974). Jonathan Rigby (2004: 301–306) discussed classics within variable horror anthology series,

and celebrated the 'beautiful photography and literate scripts' (302) in *A Ghost Story for Christmas*'s short adaptations of M.R. James stories and Andrew Davies's masterclass in Dickens adaptation, *The Signalman* (Lawrence Gordon Clark, 1976).[4]

Single drama operated like a national cinema by combining diverse styles and genres with a desire to reflect contemporary British life. Although *Play for Today* included dramas which suggested or evoked the aesthetics of art cinema and political realism, an audience research report querying whether viewers saw 'common features' in its plays and whether 'the title has acquired an unintended image' (Anon 1977: 13) underlined that it was an umbrella title housing a variety of approaches. John Mortimer's *Rumpole of the Bailey* began as a 1975 (part-video) *Play for Today* directed by John Gorrie; and the strand contained science fiction and fantasy, such as an adaptation of Alan Garner's *Red Shift* (John MacKenzie, 1978).

Philip Martin's *Gangsters* (Philip Saville, 1975) demonstrated that thrillers could address social issues such as immigration and people-smuggling with toughness and playfulness, and spawned a challenging, postmodern series. Michael Apted's polished production of Stephen Poliakoff's nuclear power thriller *Stronger than the Sun* (1977) showed television attaining qualities that Ruth Barton (2008: 46–48) listed in the period's film thrillers: national decline, suspicions regarding government, nuclear power and paranoia. These examples inform debates on authorship, since writers are 'served' by distinguished directors such as Saville and Apted, but studying away from *Play for Today* unearths historical thriller *Rogue Male* (Clive Donner, 1976) which Peter O' Toole has cited as his best role, dedicated genre strands like *Armchair Thriller*, or ground-breaking G.F. Newman police serial *Law and Order* (Les Blair, 1978).

*Double Dare* (1976) informs authorship debates, since Graham Fuller (1993: 105) claimed author Dennis Potter was, at this stage, 'well served' by directors 'not noticeable for their use of filmic technique'. A *Radio Times* preview (Cushman 1976) listed key works and themes across Potter's *oeuvre* and noted its loose thematic connections with Potter's contemporaneous *Brimstone and Treacle* (1976, untransmitted until 1987) and *Where Adam Stood* (1976), irrespective of their three respective directors. Although *Double Dare*'s promotion underplayed the director, John MacKenzie contributed strongly. It features typical Potter themes of sexual politics and 'the border-lines between reality and fantasy' (Cook 1998: 90), as Potter's real-life hotel meeting with actress Kika Markham, to discuss an as-yet unwritten play during his writer's block, becomes blocked TV writer Martin Ellis (Alan Dobie)'s hotel meeting with actress Helen (Kika Markham). Martin wonders how far actresses will go sexually for roles (Helen critiques this actress/whore conflation as the 'logical consequence of the way our society looks at… women'), while observing a prostitute (Helen's double) in the hotel with her client (mirroring Martin). Simultaneously, Potter questions how far a writer 'will go in blurring the distinctions between his fictions and his own life' and asks 'how true are invented things?' (Cook 1998: 90), as Martin's fearful imagining of the prostitute's sex-murder is unmasked as realization that Martin has murdered Helen. Although writers' words bleeding into reality is characteristic Potter, MacKenzie – told by Potter to 'do it your way' – incorporated 'a strong thriller element' which would 'build up' the 'tension' in a script that MacKenzie partly reworked (Gilbert 1995: 210). MacKenzie, experienced at street-based 'wobblyscope', enjoyed the opportunity

to do 'something more formal', with interiors, unusually, shot on film at Ealing (MacKenzie remembered it as 'the first time an entire film got made there since the Ealing Studios days'), enabling textural and tonal resonances that exploited the Hitchcockian resonances in Potter's concern with doubles, 'guilt and its transference', memory and redressing women (Gilbert 1995: 210–211).[5]

A variety of British life was reflected. Jack Rosenthal's witty scripts sympathized with a harassed amateur football referee (*Another Sunday and Sweet F.A.*, Michael Apted, 1972) and TV extra (beautifully observed filmmaking satire *Ready When You Are, Mr. McGill*, Mike Newell, 1976). Furthermore, Rosenthal's coming-of-age drama *Bar Mitzvah Boy* (Michael Tuchner, 1976) and *The Evacuees* (Alan Parker, 1975), about Jewish boys evacuated during World War Two, provided 'dramatic and televisual techniques' that were 'unprecedented' as 'British-Jewish' depictions (Vice 2009: 167). Black British experience was reflected in rare but powerful productions: Horace Ové's *A Hole in Babylon* (1979), a structurally complex drama documentary about the 1975 Spaghetti House siege which builds fascinatingly on Ovés justly studied *Pressure* (1975), and notable black writers included Michael Abbensetts, whose plays included *Black Christmas* (Stephen Frears, 1977), and female Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta, whose first credits in 1976 were for daytime drama *Crown Court* (1972–1984) and Centre Play script *Nigeria: A Kind of Marriage* (Mary Ridge, 1976).

The ITV regional network and the BBC – particularly BBC English Regions Drama (based at BBC Birmingham under David Rose) – gave national slots to dramas depicting the regions. (BBC Birmingham's *Land of Green Ginger* and *Penda's Fen* are discussed later.) Landmarks in Scottish cinema included John McGrath and 7:84 Theatre Company's piece on the exploitation of the Highlands, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (John MacKenzie, 1974), a 'unique amalgam' of 'theatre performance' (the original agit-prop *ceilidh* performance for descendants of the Highland Clearances), 'historical reconstruction' (including the Clearances) and 'documentary footage' (around modern oil company exploitation) all 'brought together in a dialectical montage' that is Brechtian in its politicized questioning of audience positioning (Cooke 2003: 103). *Just Another Saturday* (1975), about the day of an Orange march in Glasgow, is one example of writer Peter McDougall's Scottish-based work. Duncan Petrie (2000: 136–137) noted how John MacKenzie's 'dynamic direction', 'fluid camerawork' and 'cinematic sensibility', heightened the sectarian parade, the 'complex geographical and social meanings' and the characteristic McDougall exploration of Scottish masculinity via 'homosocial' pub environments.

Trevor Griffiths, David Hare and Dennis Potter, among others, have spoken of television's appeal as a platform to address mass audiences. Ken Loach, writer Jim Allen and producer Tony Garnett are obvious examples evoked by Kenith Trodd's observation that some practitioners felt they 'could maybe start a walkout around the country' (Trodd 1999: 16), given strike dramas like Loach and Allen's *The Rank and File* (1971), but that passion applies equally to the systemic failings identified by Allen and Garnett's *The Spongers* (Roland Joffe, 1978). Loach's television work is clearly relevant for film critics, given that their cinematic achievements – a critical realist style in the service of social criticism and the political, humane, often

humorous depiction of everyday life – make him an internationally acclaimed director today. Also, television pieces like *Days of Hope* (1975), the Allen–Loach–Garnett four-part history of the Labour movement from World War One to the 1926 General Strike – were central to *film* theory debates on 'progressive' form by Colin MacCabe, Colin McArthur, Raymond Williams and others in *Screen* and BFI monographs. However, negative comments about the realist tradition demonstrate how the period's aim to reflect British life motivated attacks on filmmakers' 'parochialism', which producer Don Boyd associated with 'reverence' to the British New Wave 'naturalistic and realistic style of film-making', although the fact that Boyd then produced the cinema remake of *Scum* (Alan Clarke, 1979) shows that some realist forms matched his desire to 'appeal in content and style to international audiences' (North 2008: 142). Similarly, Mike Leigh was told, during his television years, that 'Your films of all films will not travel, and they especially will not travel to the United States' (Movshovitz 2000: 87).

Television films most interestingly evoke a national cinema when their cultural and industrial frameworks facilitate a focus on capturing the idioms of British culture that is not enslaved to the Hollywood success which is British cinema's most self-destructive barometer. When Justin Smith (2008: 76) discussed the 'inward-looking, nationalistic flavour of British cinema' or 'introspective and residual cultural forms', the meaning is largely valid criticism of the reliance on cinema spin-offs 'inferior to their small-screen originals' such as *Steptoe and Son* (Cliff Owen, 1972). However, there is clearly a need for closer aesthetic scrutiny of television films when 'Loach and Leigh's politically committed social naturalism' was said to share 'cultural and aesthetic similarities' with *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* (Val Guest, 1974). This comparison – valid to virtually anything if location shooting and grubby 16mm prints count as aesthetic similarities irrespective of technique – does not so much condemn cinema's small-screen-ness as validate the cinematic value of 1970s television dramas which demonstrate genuine 'cultural and aesthetic similarities'.

## National *cinema*?

Close analysis helps to refute aesthetic dismissals of television films, such as the issue of visual complexity related to screen size made in an otherwise very positive piece by Andrew Clifford (1991: 30), a comment that TV's 'textuality' forced a focus on 'quotidian realities of plot and dialogue' so that even filmed pieces like Colin Welland's *The Hallelujah Handshake* (Alan Clarke, 1970) 'could not and did not centre its meaning around its *mise-en-scène* like a cinema movie, because the TV screen visuals would not carry the required dramatic weight'. Just one shot which problematizes this comes from Alan Plater's *Land of Green Ginger* (Brian Parker, 1973). Visiting Hull, her hometown, Sally (Gwen Taylor) considers a job offer abroad. Her mother is isolated, recently relocated from the traditional community of Hessle Road to the new council estate of Bransholme, while her husband works in the Gulf. A multi-layered shot of Sally and her mother in the flat explores unspoken tensions. Sally's mother looks ahead towards Sally, who is out of frame, but a mirror next to Sally's mother reflects

Sally's back. This slightly disorienting shot plays with ideas of space, looking forwards and backwards (enhancing the yearning quality of the mother's gaze) and a character turning her back on her mother. In the bottom corner of the mirror is a postcard from the Gulf, a rectangular portrait echoing the mirror frame in which are reflected an image of Bransholme and Sally, who works away like her father does (see Rolinson 2007).

*Sunset across the Bay* (1975) provides another unflashy but persuasive example of compositional complexity on the 'small screen', in a drama whose director (Stephen Frears) sought to 'serve' an auteur writer (Alan Bennett). Another regional film about enforced relocation, it follows Dad and Mam's move from Leeds to Morecambe after his retirement. His last walk home from work is accompanied by his voice-over about 'war work' (a time when his working life had an overt purpose). Highly formal in composition, several extreme long shots, which are often static or employ minimal panning, capture Dad walking through actual industrial landscapes but whose melancholy nature contrasts with Arthur Seaton's swaggering assertion of masculinity in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960). Often Dad enters these static shots and crosses the frame (generally right to left), then leaves or nears its edge before a cut to a shot of the same type. Dad is small in the bottom section of frames that are composed in horizontal quarters or thirds: sky; buildings/roads/canals; paths or wasteland on which Dad remains. These compositions establish a contrast with Morecambe, in which Dad and/or Mam are similarly framed but with buildings replaced by cloudy skies and beaches, with the result, noted by Kara McKechnie (2007: 60), that 'open, sparse frames dominate the style' as retirement 'destabilises…comfortable routine'. This is powerfully achieved in the final shot, when Mam walks the beach alone. The composition, and Mam's emptying of the frame, ambiguously echoes earlier shots of Dad: is the frame's space symbolic of emptiness or a new lease of life? Alan Parker's direction of *The Evacuees* also yielded evocative framing of characters in seaside locations.

Those 'writer-led' examples were chosen as characteristic examples, but more celebrated films complete the refutation of aesthetic arguments. *Licking Hitler* (1978) made its World War Two propaganda unit a 'metaphor for post-war lying' in what Julian Petley (1984: 233) described as a 'certainly filmic' production whose writer-director David Hare's 'direction… emphasises' its themes through '*mise-en-scène* [which] succinctly sets out the major sets of oppositions (of class, sex and nationality) on which the narrative hinges', through creating a vital 'sense of dislocation' with 'discordant elements – the lurid, stylised language, the seemingly "unmotivated" camera movement', and suggesting a dark, 'ambiguous play of fascination/repulsion' through 'a complex system of visual equations'. Meanwhile, directors whose television work develops personal signatures provide evidence of aesthetic complexity: compare *Sunset across the Bay*'s quartered frames with those of Alan Clarke, which connote readings of institutionalization in pieces like the harrowing Borstal exposé *Scum* (1977; untransmitted until 1991 – see Rolinson 2005). Stylistically different from his Steadicam-driven 1980s work, Clarke's 1970s work employs stillness, static framing, elliptical narratives downplaying causality and understated performances (a style which has borne comparisons with Robert Bresson) in pursuit of themes of alienation, individuality,

repetition, state discourses and institutionalization. These themes (which are maintained even in videotaped plays) run through the compelling study of constructed masculinity at Sandhurst in *Sovereign's Company* (wr. Don Shaw, 1970), emotional dissident study *Nina* (wr. Jehane Markham, 1978) and mythic fantasy *Penda's Fen* (discussed later).

Reading these films aesthetically reveals continuities across this decade's body of work, suggestive of a cinema movement. Observation and aestheticism combine, akin less to the British documentary film movement than Czech and Italian neo-realist cinema, which inspire composition and lenses that produce what Loach described as a placid, 'reflective, observed, sympathetically lit style of photography' (Fuller 1998: 38–41). Static frames in which characters move, often from extreme background to foreground, confining frames isolating hands and feet at repetitive tasks, and de-dramatized performances indicative of submerged articulacy, are most suggestive of rigorous art directors like Robert Bresson or Yasujiro Ozu in the stark beauty of Alan Clarke's incest drama *Diane* (1975) or Mike Leigh's first television piece *Hard Labour* (1973) on Mrs Thornley (Liz Smith)'s unceasing domestic duties as a char, mother and wife. Garry Watson (2004: 19) related Leigh's early work to Andrew Klevan's readings of Bresson, Milos Forman, Ozu and Eric Rohmer as filmmakers who 'disclose' rather than 'transform' the 'everyday' and depict 'a range of life experiences unavailable to the melodramatic mode as it has developed in world cinema – life experiences based around the routine or repetitive, the apparently banal or mundane, and the uneventful'.

Indeed, these were recurring features of narrative, which echoed André Bazin and Cesare Zavattini (screenwriter of Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di Biciclette* [Bicycle Thieves], 1948)'s desire for cinema to capture the 'dailiness' of everyday life via narrative that 'unfolds on the level of pure accident', respecting the 'phenomenological integrity' of events rather than using characters as functionaries of plot (Bazin: 58–59; 52). For instance, Alan Plater resisted 'conventional narrative' by prioritizing 'people being' over 'people doing' or 'inventing stuff to happen to people' (Rolinson 2007: 301). The 'disappearance of a story' which Bazin observed in *Bicycle Thieves* – less the absence of a story than the loosening of causal connection – is present in plays discussed throughout this chapter – Dad's journey in *Sunset across the Bay*, Sally and Mike wandering Hull's Old Town in *Land of Green Ginger* and the episodic walking in Roy Minton's *Horace* (Alan Clarke, 1972), an often comic distant northern cousin of *Bicycle Thieves*. These elements are underscored by performance which rejects the star concept via the search for unadorned performances (Clarke's approach is demonstrably Bressonian) or the casting of locals in *Land of Green Ginger* or throughout the work of Loach and others.

The phrase 'Loach and others' obscures the extent to which Loach and the strands themselves became influential. Although he called *Hard Labour* 'very personal', Leigh noted 'improvised footage' and 'things that you wouldn't find in a film of mine' as evidence of being 'part of this *Play for Today* style' under producer Tony Garnett, although he was 'happy' and 'honoured' to be so (Movshovitz 2000: 75). Underlining continuities, such different plays as *Penda's Fen* and *Hard Labour* share exquisite montages of formal establishing shots. Also, I have discussed (Rolinson 2005; 2007) how BBC Birmingham's distinctive stylistic and thematic preoccupations, and its relatively autonomous position, were manifested in

the aesthetics of *Land of Green Ginger* and *Penda's Fen*, not simply in staff rotation (although they share the same director of photography). The fact that David Rose became the first commissioning editor for Film on Four made those films in part a continuation of his 1970s television dramas (see Saynor 1992: 30), which should not be used to criticise Film on Four but to generate studies of his contribution to 1970s filmmaking.

*Penda's Fen* (1974), which Rose described as the milestone of his career, is an appropriate example on which to finish. Written by David Rudkin and directed by Alan Clarke, *Penda's Fen* is an evocation of adolescence rooted in fantasy imagery, centring on teenager Stephen Franklin (Spencer Banks). It explores parentage, patriotism and faith via interlinked characters and themes: Manichean visions of angels and demons, a militaristic school, a parson writing about 'The Buried Jesus', the querying of forces beneath the fen (secret nuclear society and ancient King Penda, another 'buried' figure), a discourse-challenging television playwright, the ghost of Sir Edward Elgar and the exploration of his *Dream of Gerontious* and modern machine life juxtaposed with 'the village'. It is packed with memorable cinematic sequences such as a church aisle splitting open, a Mary Whitehouse figure burning a photograph of a character who consequently catches fire, dream imagery which reveals Stephen's homosexuality to himself (he is told elsewhere that dreams are true, telling 'a truth you hide from yourself for your well-being') and disturbing unconscious visions such as Stephen's discovery of an emasculation ritual in which parents and children happily have their hands chopped off, rendered even more disturbing by the sleepy logic of its compositions and editing (spatial jumps triggered by the sound of the axe chopping) and, as David Rose noted, Alan Clarke's unadorned approach to the fantastic. Rob Young (2009: 84) identified the critical rehabilitation of *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973) as evidence of 'an alternative, even occult canon of "forgotten" work from the 1960s and 1970s that bucked the abiding view of British cinema as parochial, "literary" rather than cinematic, and sentimental', but justifiably included *Penda's Fen*.

This is an extraordinary, visionary piece, complex in theme and structure, rich in composition and visual style, a conflation of realist style and fantasy iconography superior to *The Wicker Man* and comparable with Powell and Pressburger. Given its (at time of writing) commercial unavailability and its absence from so many film textbooks, repeating my long-held belief that *Penda's Fen* is one of the greatest British films might read as empty provocation or indulgent subjectivity: but all these problems stem from the fact that it was made for television. 'Made-for-television' has become an easy shorthand – Ruth Barton (2008: 48) uses it to explain the lumpenness of remakes such as *The Lady Vanishes* (1979) – but must be subject to greater examination.

Indeed, as John Hill (1999: 64) argued, citing McLoone, criticisms say less about 'essential' differences between film and television than about 'critical preferences for particular kinds of cinema' which prioritize 'cinema in its big picture, 'event' mode' over '"smaller" non-Hollywood cinemas'. Is this why Smith (2008: 76) argued that cinema's 'aesthetic distinction' required 'bold financial enterprise'? But if 1970s television films are uncinematic because of television origins, what of Bernardo Bertolucci's 1970 *Strategia del Ragno* [The Spider's

Stratagem]? If they are uncinematic because of their national focus, limited equipment and (not always) small scale, what of neo-realism? What of most non-Hollywood national cinemas, or the New Waves? These questions sound silly, but that is the result of such essentialist criticisms. I have barely scratched the surface of 1970s television films in this chapter, but have indicated that they qualify as a source of indigenous film production that is worthy of greater study.

## Notes

1. This summary proves it is misleading to ignore other genres: Apted, Frears and others also gained experience directing filmed children's series like *Follyfoot* (1971–1973).
2. But writers are still prioritized in television scholarship: Manchester University Press's 'Television Series' had, by 2009, produced eight writer monographs as opposed to one on a producer and one on a director (Alan Clarke).
3. My emphasis here is necessarily on film studies, omitting vital areas for television specialists – for instance, radical work that explores the specific potential of televisual practices such as multi-camera studios. I do not mean to accept the progressivist, evolutionary rhetoric sometimes used to describe television's shift from theatrical to cinematic practices. See Rolinson (2005).
4. Horror studies should include pieces omitted here because not on film, particularly Nigel Kneale's conceptual chiller *The Stone Tape* (Peter Sasdy, 1971) and a satire of Hammer's excesses in 'The Dummy' (Don Leaver, 1976) episode of his *Beasts* anthology. For a gendered reading of *The Stone Tape*, see Dave Rolinson and Karen Devlin (2008) 'A New Wilderness: Language and Memory in the Television Science Fiction of Nigel Kneale', *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 1: 1, pp. 45–65.
5. The combination of thriller style, directorial reworking and writer-creator conflations of reality and fantasy, occur more satisfyingly in *The Singing Detective* (1986), which was more critically respected – particularly after an acclaimed cinema run in New York – and led to analysis of the vital contribution of director Jon Amiel. Potter's devices intriguingly parallel Nicolas Roeg's, leading to film critics' interest when Roeg directed *Track 29* (1987), Potter's revisioning of his own TV play *Schmoedipus* (1974). See Cook (1998).

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## Chapter 13

# ‘Pre-sold to Millions’: The Sitcom Films of the 1970s

Adrian Garvey

In March 1971, the *Spectator*'s review of two new cinema releases, *Up Pompeii* (Bob Kellett, 1971) and *Dad's Army* (Norman Cohen, 1971), advised that 'it would be fair to say that if you have a television set you might as well stay at home' (Hudson 1971). Both films were adaptations of television situation comedies, and therefore early examples of a significant trend that was to develop over the course of the decade. The emergence of this cycle raises a number of issues: about the state of the national film industry in the period; the commercial and aesthetic relationship between film and television; and popular audience tastes. This chapter will examine this group of films, considering the institutional context in which they emerged, then mapping out the cycle itself, and finally analysing the formal and aesthetic qualities of some key examples.

For Alexander Walker, British cinema in the early 1970s 'looked like the country itself: it had a residual energy, but in the main was feeling dull, drained, debilitated, infected by a run-down feeling becoming characteristic of British life' (Walker 1985: 15). The 1960s boom in British cinema had relied heavily on American investment, which was rapidly reduced by the early years of the following decade; Paramount and Universal, for example, had closed their UK production offices and MGM left Borehamwood Studios in 1969. Sarah Street and Margaret Dickinson identify a peak figure of US investment of £31.3 million in 1969, which by 1974 had declined to £2.9 million (Street and Dickinson 1985: 240). British production companies also regrouped and declined, as, for example, in January 1969, when EMI took over ABPC. In 1971, Bryan Forbes resigned after two years as the company's head of production, where he had attempted a 'quality'-accented programme with films such as *Tales of Beatrix Potter* (Reginald Mills, 1971) and *The Go-Between* (Joseph Losey, 1971). His colleague, Nat Cohen, who had first established himself in the 1940s with Anglo-Amalgamated Films, then took full control of production. He unambiguously established his more populist aims, saying 'I have no desire to get across or convey any thoughts in any of my films. I believe in good, sound quality entertainments' (Cohen 1971). In the face of dwindling production and declining attendance, the industry retrenched, and there was a new emphasis on low-budget films aimed at the domestic audience. Out of this climate came a cycle of adaptations from television, a significant number of which achieved considerable commercial success, notably in the early years of the decade. This group of films, little discussed in most surveys of the period, represents a notable element of British film production in the 1970s, totalling around 30 films of television origin during the decade.

The films raise a number of issues about the changing relationship between film and television in this period. Historically of course, television had been viewed with suspicion and

hostility by the film industry. The British film majors had invested in commercial television since the 1950s: ABC was the co-owner of Thames Television, and Rank was a significant shareholder in Southern Television. However, in general, the industry was highly cautious over its involvement with the rival medium. Hollywood studios, by contrast, produced some 40 per cent of US network programming by 1960. However, television was recognized in some quarters in the 1970s as a much-needed outlet for cinema product, and there were moves to relax the five-year rule on showing new films.

Since the 1950s, the film industry's prevailing wisdom had been to counter television in its provision of difference, whether by spectacle, technology, production values or by adult content. However, sitcom films generally aimed to reproduce television originals, with little recourse to visual or narrative differentiation, and there were few attempts significantly to open up the material. However, the lure of large-screen and colour incarnations of television favourites was a major element in publicity and promotional material for the films, especially as in 1970 only 2 per cent of the viewing public owned colour sets. It seems relevant also that the cycle coincided with a scaling down of the viewing experience in British cinemas, as many theatres were converted into two- or three-screen auditoriums, and this more intimate, small-scale cinema environment seemed more conducive to films of television origin. More generally, these adaptations from one medium to another highlight issues of cultural status and quality, as television was seen as challenged by its aspiration to a higher form. Many reviewers emphasized television's perceived inferiority, noting a lack of fit, and suggested that the source material was inadequate to the task of transfer.

Film adaptations from television were not just a phenomenon of the 1970s. During the early years of television in the 1930s and 1940s, cinema had adapted some comedy shows from radio, then in its heyday as a popular entertainment medium, including the Arthur Askey vehicle *Band Waggon* (Marcel Varnel, 1940) and *It's That Man Again* (Walter Forde, 1943). The various incarnations of *Life with the Lyons* during the 1950s indicates the transitional nature of the period: this was a long-running and highly popular radio show which produced two films in 1954, *Life with the Lyons* (Val Guest, 1954) and *The Lyons in Paris* (Val Guest, 1954), before moving to BBC television the following year, and then the new ITV network in 1957. Drama series also transferred during the decade, with *Life in Emergency Ward 10* (Robert Day, 1958), *Sword of Sherwood Forest* (Terence Fisher, 1960), from the Richard Greene Robin Hood series, as well as *The Quatermass Xperiment* (1955, Val Guest), *Quatermass 2* (Val Guest, 1957) and *1984* (Michael Anderson, 1956), which all drew on television originals. The first real sitcom adaptations then appeared at the turn of the decade, with *I Only Arsked* (Montgomery Tully, 1958) a version of *The Army Game*, *Inn for Trouble* (C.M. Pennington-Richards, 1960), from *The Larkins* and *Bottoms Up!* (Mario Zampi, 1960), a Jimmy Edwards vehicle which originated in *Wack-O*! Hammer Studios, skilled in low-cost productions geared to current popular tastes, produced a number of these films, and would later profitably return to television comedy source material in the 1970s. Val Guest, director of several early examples, would be responsible for one of the final films, *The Boys in Blue* (Val Guest, 1983), with Cannon and Ball. This transfer of a television

comedy act, rather than a series, reworked *Ask a Policeman* (Marcel Varnel, 1939), which Guest had co-scripted. Situation comedies were the dominant source for the 1970s cycle, but some television dramas were also transferred to cinema in this period as well, notably *Sweeney!* (David Wickes, 1977), which out-performed *Rocky* (John G. Avilsden, 1976) at the British box office and produced a sequel, as well as film versions of *Man at the Top, Callan* and *Doomwatch*.

The sitcom was central to prime-time scheduling on both major channels in the 1970s; some drew regular audiences of 8 and 9 million homes (viewing figures counted homes rather than individual viewers in this period), while shows such as *On the Buses*, *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Love Thy Neighbour* featured regularly among the top-rated programmes of the year. Spin-off films were only one of the ways in which these television shows extended beyond the confines of the half-hour formula and series format. Compendiums of special short sitcom episodes were an integral part of Christmas scheduling in the early 1970s on both main channels. Theatrical versions of a number of these shows were also produced, on the West End stage in the case of *Dad's Army* in 1976, and, more typically, in seaside summer seasons, as with the Blackpool production of *Are You Being Served?* in the same year. The central aim of the films' producers was, of course, to capture the mass audience that the television shows commanded. Trade pre-publicity for *Bless This House* (Peter Rogers, 1972) in June 1973, was headlined 'Pre-sold to millions – yes millions', and reprinted television viewing figures which showed the series to be the most popular programme in several regions during the previous month: 'Over 15,000,000 people in one week alone watched *"Bless This House"…Millions will want to see the BIG SCREEN version – cash in on the SUMMER RELEASE!*' The family audience was seen as crucial: trade critic Marjorie Bilbow described the same film as 'very good as a school holiday attraction and at popular cinemas in holiday resorts' (Bilbow 1973), and writer/producer Ronald Wolfe has credited the success of the first *On the Buses* film to the wet summer of 1971 when 'everyone wanted somewhere to take their kids at the seaside' (Wolfe 2007). There was considerable debate in the trade press at the time about the need for family entertainment in a period when adult material dominated popular cinema (in 1969, for the first time, more 'X' certificates were awarded than 'U' and 'A' certificates combined). Promotional copy for *Bless This House* (Gerald Thomas, 1972) advised that 'like the television show it is geared for all-family entertainment and comes at a time when the industry has been criticised by many members of the public for "flooding" the cinema with "X" Certificate films' (Wells 1972). The adjustments to film classification in 1970 had given children access to 'A' certificate films without an accompanying adult, and publicity for *Love Thy Neighbour* (John Robins, 1973) and other films stressed that 'this is a film for the whole family – if you are under 14 you can still come on your own – *but ask your parents first!*' (Anon 1973).

The extended 1970s cycle was really launched by the great success of British Lion's *Till Death Us Do Part* (Norman Cohen, 1969), a film which was itself trimmed for general release to qualify for an 'A' certificate. Beryl Vertue, the executive producer, and a significant figure in British comedy since the 1950s, credited the production to the support of Roy Boulting,

then British Lion's managing director. The film was a considerable critical and commercial success, eventually the most successful of the year, followed by *Carry On Camping* (Gerald Thomas, 1969). A sequel, *The Garnett Saga* (Bob Kellett, 1972), was also profitable, if less spectacularly so. However, in its partial departure from the established setting of the original show it is highly uncharacteristic of the films that were to follow. The first half of the feature offered a kind of prequel to the series, and showed the Garnetts' early married life during World War Two. This element in particular was favourably commented on by a number of contemporary reviews, with 'an astonishing sense of period' noted by the *Sunday Express* (Hirschhorn 1968), and *New Society* identified it as 'one of the best accounts of the war at home that the cinema has given us' (Anon 1968).

While *The Times* criticized the film as 'a series of snippets from the television cutting room floor' (Taylor 1968), the overall reception was highly positive, the *Morning Star* even claimed the film as 'the best British comedy of the year' (Hibbin 1968). The critics' particular enthusiasm for the wartime section can perhaps be explained by the corrective that these scenes offered to the traditional consensus view of the plucky and upstanding British working class in wartime. Alf Garnett is as much a baleful, contradictory, antagonistic presence during the Finest Hour as he would later be in the liberal era of the 1960s. The film flashes forward to the 1960s after a victory street party, to show the courtship and wedding of the Garnetts' daughter Rita, and includes an extended sequence that covers the 1966 World Cup final, before detailing the demolition of the street and the family's move to the tower block flat which is their home for the TV series.

This project's considerable success initiated a rush of adaptations with, as noted, *Up Pompeii* and *Dad's Army* released in March 1971, followed by *On the Buses* (Harry Booth, 1971) in June of that year. All three were highly successful, and featured among the top ten moneymakers of the year. Although a proposed follow-up to *Dad's Army* did not appear, the others each spawned two sequels. Also in 1971, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, another successful comedy programme, though not a sitcom, was transferred to film as *And Now for Something Completely Different* (Ian MacNaughton, 1971), which was designed to introduce the programme to American audiences. Further successes the following year, with *Steptoe and Son* (Cliff Owen, 1972) and *Please Sir* (Mark Stuart, 1971) respectively the fifth and nineteenth top-grossing films of the year, seemed to confirm a profitable option for low-cost production. The establishment of a trend is perhaps best exemplified by Hammer's film of *That's Your Funeral*, a very minor BBC sitcom which ran for only seven episodes. However, the same studio's relative failure with *Nearest and Dearest* (John Robins, 1972) led to the cancellation of both a proposed sequel and a further project for the film's female star, Hylda Baker: *The Godmother*. Nonetheless, the trend continued, albeit at a reduced level, until 1980. *Porridge* (Dick Clement, 1979) at number seventeen in that year's box-office finalists, provided the last real success.

*On the Buses* was the great commercial triumph among all these adaptations. The 1971 film was made for £89,000, approximately half the budget of a *Carry On* film of the time. It recouped its costs within a few days, grossing over a million pounds, and became Hammer

Studio's most profitable film ever, and the second most successful film in Britain that year after Disney's *The Aristocats* (Wolfgang Reitherman, 1970). It is sometimes anecdotally reported to have outperformed either *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) or *Diamonds are Forever* (Guy Hamilton, 1971), but these films actually appeared in the following year. Two sequels, *Mutiny on the Buses* (Harry Booth, 1972) and *Holiday on the Buses* (Bryan Izzard, 1973) were also highly successful. The television version's seven series were broadcast between 1969 and 1974, and the films therefore appeared in the middle of its extended run. It had been devised by Ronald Wolfe and Ronald Chesney, established sitcom writers at the BBC, whose most successful previous work was *The Rag Trade* (also set for cinema transfer at one stage). However, the BBC rejected the new project, seeing only two real jokes in it according to Wolfe (Wolfe 2007), and it was taken on by Frank Muir, newly installed head of light entertainment at London Weekend Television. This channel initially struggled after its launch in 1968, having misjudged its high cultural ambitions, and the show can be seen to incarnate the subsequent adjustment to populism in the wake of disastrous ratings.

As with the majority of the spin-off sources, the ethos of the show is resolutely working class. The adaptations largely favoured ITV's populist comedies and the BBC's more proletarian shows – *Porridge* rather than *The Good Life* for example.

Assessed alongside such contemporary series as *Steptoe and Son* and *Till Death Us Do Part*, *On the Buses* now appears something of an embarrassment: its gender politics alone render the show irrecuperable. In their survey of television comedy, Crowther and Pinfold found the series 'thin on character, heavy on situation, and filled with noisily unlikable stereotypes' (Crowther and Pinfold 1987: 71). According to Stephen Wagg, 'it made no pretence to social or political realism' (Wagg 1998: 10). Some sitcoms of the period engaged more with the social and cultural changes of the period, explicitly in *Till Death Us Do Part*, while *Steptoe and Son* and *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads*?, in different ways, explored the tensions around working-class mobility and aspiration. Changing sexual mores were explored in more youth-oriented shows such as *The Liver Birds*, *Man about the House* and *The Lovers*. While it did acknowledge aspects of the sexual revolution, *On the Buses* seems more backward-looking, essentially rooted in post-war notions of work and family life.

The *On the Buses* films certainly provided quite a bleak vision of Britain in the 1970s. In contrast to the more buoyant American style, British situation comedy is traditionally associated with a more downbeat realist aesthetic, and with frustrated, trapped characters railing against their situations, who repeatedly fail to transform their lives; all qualities exemplified by the Hancock, Steptoe and Garnett characters in the 1960s. *On the Buses* is nominally more light-hearted than these shows. It is driven by the spirit of what Leon Hunt has identified as 'permissive populism': the working-class male's quest for access to the sexual revolution (Hunt 1998: 2).

In the first film, Stan and Jack, the 'lecherous layabouts', as they are described, are shown in an endless quest for 'crumpet', women who are reduced to a purely sexual function, and who are indiscriminately available to male desires. Scenes of extended ogling of women, and of what would now qualify as harassment – or even assault – suggest a world of

unfettered male sexuality (a recruiting poster in the bus garage is doctored to read 'It's a Randy Life on the Buses'). However, there is an air of desperation about the men's behaviour. Stan especially is shown to be naively in thrall to the exploits of his colleague, and avid for sexual experience, while his desires are always ultimately frustrated. Countering the acquiescence of the sexually available 'clippies' or female bus conductors, is the severity of a newly appointed team of women drivers. In characteristic low-comedy stereotyping, these are represented as severe and mannish gorgons, who go on to symbolically emasculate Stan in an extended comic attack in which an air-pressure hose is repeatedly blasted up his trousers. Stan's austerity-era home life is claustrophobic and oppressive, marked by anxieties about overtime and hire purchase payments, and rows about washing or inedible food. A lesson in the horror of heterosexual union is represented by his sister Olive's marriage to Arthur: she is a drab unconfident figure, presented as a whining grotesque; he is a bitter and depressive character, repulsed by his wife. The comic nightmare of their relationship is aptly demonstrated by the bedroom scene where a pregnant Olive, in hair curlers and cold cream, loudly crunches pickled onions alongside her scornful husband.

The advances of the consumer society seem to have largely bypassed this group. The most spectacular of the trilogy, *Holiday on the Buses* (Bryan Izzard, 1973) takes place mainly in a holiday camp where Stan and Jack, working as coach drivers are joined by Stan's family, and location filming at Pontin's in Prestatyn transforms the drab *mise-en-scène* into a world of sunlit modernity. However, the family soon sets about restoring the 'aesthetic of ugliness' which Hunt rightly identifies as crucial to the series (Hunt 1998: 43). Their chalet is wrecked by Olive's infant son, and an accident with petrol explodes their toilet causing a series of explosions around the camp. The qualities of luxury and plenitude that the holiday setting suggests are antagonistic to the fraught, harsh ethos of the films, embodied by the edginess of Reg Varney's Stan.

Visually the *Buses* films are remarkably plain, indicative of stringent budget conditions and a miniscule four-week shooting schedule. Aesthetically, there is scant adjustment to cinematic conventions of spectacle and an adherence to the mundane visuals of the television original, the only significant visual change is the reduction in close-ups.

These films were developed in the wake of declining foreign investment, and offered a low-cost option for production and exhibition on a purely national scale. Early successes raised industry hopes for a new strand of popular comedy films to join the *Carry On* series and a family-oriented parallel strand to the adult sex comedies which emerged at the time. While box-office performance varied, overall the films were a reliable investment for most of the decade, until increasing production costs rendered them uneconomic. In a period when, in Stuart Laing's words, British cinema was adjusting to 'a new role as a provider of specialist or occasional entertainment for small *and diverse sets of audiences*' (Laing 1994: 34), the films achieved a remarkable success, attracting a mass cinema audience with the simple promise of television writ large.

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## Chapter 14

# Class, Nostalgia and Newcastle: Contested Space in *The Likely Lads*

Paul Williams

When the BBC situation comedy *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* ran on British television between 1973 and 1974, it attracted large audiences, public affection and praising reviews from journalists. Written by Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais, *Whatever…* was the successor to *The Likely Lads* (1964–1966), a series set in industrial, working-class Newcastle following the drinking and courtship practices of factory workers Bob Ferris and Terry Collier. In *Whatever…* Terry returns from the Army to find Bob on the verge of marrying middle-class Thelma Chambers, a social contract which will see Bob leave his working-class past decisively behind him. However, before and after Bob and Thelma's wedding, their suburban home and social rituals are constantly disrupted by Terry's seductive world of irresponsible drinking, gambling and coarseness. If the situation comedy invests in the 'bourgeois nuclear family as a model of stability' (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 239), *Whatever…* exploits Terry's self-consciously anti-bourgeois excursions as a source of comic pleasure as he repeatedly interrupts Bob and Thelma's stable home. The series associates the domestic space of semi-detached housing with new-middle-class Bob, and terraced homes with working-class Terry, and accentuates how these two spaces demarcate different stages in the life narratives of the male protagonists and the city they live in. The EMI film *The Likely Lads* (Michael Tuchner, 1976) alters the characters' relationship to the terraces and the suburban homes, and invites audiences to rethink the series' nostalgia for the vanishing working-class urban space of Newcastle.

After two series and a 1974 Christmas special, *The Likely Lads* film was the last appearance of Bob and Terry; it performed adequately at the box office and received lukewarm reviews. Eric Shorter's review in the *Daily Telegraph* from April 1976 criticized its lack of cohesion: 'The script… is uneven – rich comedy here, sheer farce there, and mere nonsense somewhere else. The naturalistic lower-middle class setting is fine but it won't fit fantasy, and from time to time it seems as if the film, for want of stricter writing, splashes aimlessly about in both camps' (quoted in Webber 1999: 152). *Screen International* commented on the 'slimness of the storyline', its 'episodic' nature and stated that 'Efforts to widen the canvas are not consistently successful.' Nonetheless, fondness was expressed for the characters, and the following prediction was made: 'Good to very good in popular cinemas, varying according to the appeal of the series, area by area' (Bilbow 1976: 14). The varying regional appeal of the film was well judged: *The Likely Lads* performed well in the North East, making £5,000 in the ABC cinema in Newcastle in its first few weeks, but not in the capital, making £820 in the ABC Bloomsbury, £1,652 in the ABC Edgware Road and £1,659 in the ABC Fulham Road (Thomas 1976a: 2; Thomas 1976b: 2). Roughly speaking, these takings were all in the

bottom half of the box-office spectrum in this period. Nonetheless, drawing on archival sources, *Likely Lads* scholar Phil Wickham interprets the film as a relative success for EMI (Wickham 2008: 18).

Stepping out of the 1960s *Likely Lads* sitcom and into the 1970s, Terry offers a resilient working-class foil to Bob's new-middle-class aspirations. Terry sneers at suburbia, and through their class tensions *Whatever…* satirizes Bob's homogeneous new-middle-class identity. Bob and Terry occupy very different domestic spaces in the film, changing their relation to the working-class terraces of their youth and modulating Terry's role as a critic of middle-class homes and lifestyles. Exploring the overlap of space (the location shots used in the series and film), place (the identity of Newcastle's built environment in the post-war period) and class (the dynamic of Terry and Bob's relative class positions), this chapter tracks the realignment of the television series' class-based wit. I argue prevalent post-war attitudes towards social housing, the cinematic tradition of northern 'kitchen sink' realism and the ideological employment of nostalgia all re-signify Newcastle's redevelopment since the late 1950s in the film, and the lads' relationship to the changing city they inhabit. As a result, while the built environment remains the subject of intense debate about the location of 'class', the current of social criticism that Terry represents in the sitcom is diffused and turned, via Bob, into a straightforward mode of nostalgic romanticizing with distinct political implications.

## *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* and social criticism

When the pair returns in 1973, Terry has just finished five years in the army and Bob is becoming part of the 'new middle class', a demographic group moving away from declining manual labour industries and into the professional and service classes. This group '*subjectively* identify themselves as middle class' in order to differentiate themselves from the lower classes (Lee and Newby 1981: 148), and Bob fits this pattern, belonging to a tennis club, owning a car and smoking cigars. Crucially, Bob is about to marry his lower-middle-class fiancée Thelma and move into a semi-detached house on the Elm Lodge housing estate. In 'Home is the Hero', the second episode of *Whatever…* Bob shows Terry around his new home, and Terry launches an attack on Bob's new life:

Bob: Have you noticed the windows? Bags of light. It's a feature of these houses.
Terry: Huh, it makes you overlooked, doesn't it? I mean, being so cramped. There's not much privacy, is there?
Bob: Privacy? Compared to what we were brought up in this is Woburn Abbey! If you think, the houses we lived in as kids, if you sneezed they said 'bless you' next door.
Terry: Ah but them houses had some character about them! There's just something depressing about these estates, it's the thought of you all, all getting up at the same

> time, all eating the same sort of low-calorie breakfast cereal, all coming home at half past six, switching on the same programme at the same time, and having it off the same two nights of the week…it just seems sad to me when you realize the only way people can tell the difference between you and anybody else is by the colour of your curtains.

For Terry, 'low-calorie breakfast cereal' symbolizes safe and tasteless life in a semi, with no privacy and no individuality. In the episode 'The Ant and the Grasshopper', Bob and Thelma rush to work in the morning, and their street is gridlocked by cars reversing out of their driveways simultaneously. Like the television shows these couples watch, they can be found in the same place at the same time, week after week. In 'Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?' Bob connects himself to an adulthood of regularized social consumption practices taking place in middle-class public spaces: 'Tonight Thelma and I are playing badminton with Hugh and Janie…Tomorrow we're going out to supper with Mike and Linda, at Frank and Chris's. [On Wednesday] we're going to a barbeque at the rugby club with the McShanes.' Terry continues to argue that domestic space is a signifier of class by refusing to enter the semi-detached homes of his old friends, proposing instead a 'real Saturday night out' with the lads. Arguing that Bob's new-middle-class social habits are as lifeless and standardized as the 'snooty little semis' they take place in, Terry asserts 'I am proud of my home and my class.' Bob insists that Terry has little choice but to join him and Thelma at a dinner party held by one of their old school friends:

> Bob: You won't find any of the lads. Not on a Saturday night, you won't. They're all out with their wives or their fiancées, at some steak house or trattoria, or else they'll be stopping in, having friends round…It's all very much a ritual, and unless you accept my invitation, you won't be part of it. You'll be a man alone, a sort of Shane of the Elm Lodge housing estate, walking the empty streets, hearing the sound of laughter and merriment behind warmly lit windows.

For Bob, Terry represents youthful, working-class leisure interests and spaces: 'birds, booze and the dancehall'. The options he presents Terry returning from the army are as follows: slot yourself into the 'ritual' of new-middle-class routines and environments or face social exclusion. Bob associates the locations of his social week with a wider narrative of working-class social betterment: 'I want you to smarten yourself up and come out with me. I don't think you realize how things have changed around here. But if you want to sit there, behind you class barrier, fine.' Making Terry's invitation to Alan and Brenda's dinner party analogous to a choice between young and adult lifestyles is one way Bob's frames his regulated weekly timetable as normal, desirable and inevitable, and Terry's preferences as aberrant, unnatural and regressive.

Reciprocally, Terry uses nostalgia for Newcastle's vanishing urban working-class communities and leisure environments as part of his class critique. Bob points out the areas

of Newcastle's redevelopment in the episode 'Moving On': the market is a wasteland, rows of terraces are scheduled for clearance, the Go Go Rock Club lies underneath a car park and the beloved Roxy Ballroom has made way for the new Civic Centre. Shot on location, the disappearing locales of Terry's past overlap with the actual urban transformation of Tyneside since 1958. In that year Newcastle-upon-Tyne Councillor T. Dan Smith began the clearance of the slums and the construction of multi-storey social housing as part of the wider 'renewal' of the city's economy and its status as regional centre (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994: 259–260). One of the historical contexts Wickham places the first *The Likely Lads* series in is Tyneside's early 1960s regional identity as the site of underdevelopment and poverty on the cusp of modernization (Wickham 2008: 33). In 1973, the lads' favourite coffee bar has supposedly made way for the Cruddas Park Neighbourhood Centre, Smith's 'showpiece' development of tower blocks and shopping centre, built in 1966, the final year the original *Likely Lads* television series aired (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994: 259–260). Bob defends the economic necessity of the changes: 'It's a good thing, progress, expansion, plenty of opportunities round here now.' Terry's response suggests that redevelopment has entailed the steady disappearance of skilled employment in Newcastle: 'You wouldn't think that if you went down the labour exchange.' Protesting about the demolition of the factory where he and Bob used to work, he complains 'Is there anything left standing in this town?…The ordinary working man doesn't come into it! It's all about town planners, and environments, and landscapers, and people like me are just bulldozed aside in the name of progress.' Commenting on the lads' respective relationship to these transformations, Ian La Frenais observes 'Terry was coming back as a displaced person, they had bypassed him, these changes – which was great for us because Bob had embraced them and was influenced by everything that was changing socially.' (quoted in Wickham 2008: 27) Newcastle's urban restructuring becomes an axis around which Bob defends his social mobility as part of the city's larger narrative of economic uplift – as 'progress' – and which Terry seizes upon as further evidence of the betrayal of working-class communities and Bob's complicity with their disappearance. Relocating Terry's home as a result of the redevelopment he bemoans in 'Moving On', the film mutes and reverses Terry's nostalgia and this social criticism it propels.

## *The Likely Lads* on location

Rodney Bewes and James Bolam had previously appeared in the New Wave films *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962) respectively, and the New Wave's characteristic 'kitchen sink' realism and industrial, working-class North-(East) settings were manifest in the 1960s *Likely Lads* sitcom and the 1976 film (this context is explored in Wickham 2008: 13–14). After introducing the scenario of the lads' wartime conception, the first scene in the film set in the 1970s features Bob and Terry playing football against some boys on a patch of wasteland bordered by disused

factories. The Tyne Bridge is distinctly visible in the background: immediately the specific urban identity of Newcastle is established in the contexts of deindustrialization, urban decay and economic morbidity. The film continues with the terraces of Terry and Bob's childhood and their local public house, the Fat Ox, being razed to the ground. Their destruction is essential to the film's narrative structure, as it makes Bob uneasy about his increasing distance from their working-class youth and its associated freedoms. Feeling constrained by the responsibilities of married life, he tells Terry 'that street coming down really upset me, because it just reminded me how much of the past is gone'. This is compounded by Bob's perception that a period of youthful sexual adventurism has been missed, going 'straight from living with my Mum to living with my wife', bypassing 'that period of sexual excess' which Terry is enjoying. A series of comic events follow Bob's 'identity crisis' as he questions 'the entire validity' of his life, culminating in Bob and Terry prowling a coastal resort for female company.

The film's escalating humorous situations almost exclusively use location shooting, which is one reason why northern realist drama is a valid context to invoke, but the *kind* of locations must be stressed, as many scenes in *Whatever…* were also shot on location in the North East. The exterior location shots used in the series are usually demanded by the narrative of Terry's return and Bob's marriage: railway stations, the outside of the church and the airport or the Corporation tip, usually filmed using medium shots. Slightly longer shots are used for other exterior locations, but these are brief and prefigure interior scenes: the yard at Bob's workplace, Studleigh Mount residential home in 'The Shape of Things to Come' or the inn in 'Affairs and Relations' and 'The Expert'. Unlike other episodes of *Whatever…* exterior locations predominate in 'The Great Race', which presents urban wasteland and the country roads of the North East. Nonetheless, these shots are composed so the characters are not competing for space on the screen with the background.

The action of the film largely takes place against a backdrop of multi-storey dwellings, slum clearances, the Northumbria countryside, Newcastle's docks and the North Sea coast. The horizontal residences of the sitcom are now replaced by a vertical city of tower blocks, bridges and cargo ships, all of which dwarf the characters. Newcastle's identity in the film is more modern, urban and menacing than in the sitcom; Bob and Terry appear, in Wickham's evocative terms, 'figures in a ruined landscape' (Wickham 2008: 37). For the cinema screen the city has been stretched outwards and upwards, leaving the characters literally diminished on the screen, such as when Bob's tiny form and voice are seen from the back of a ship departing for Bahrain at the film's end. Conversely, in the only location scene in *Whatever…* set at the docks, after a swift long-distance shot establishing where Terry and Susan are walking, the rest of this scene films the characters from the knees up and the ships distant in the background. Whether the juxtaposition is of hikers marching up Hadrian's Wall, Terry fishing with the sea behind him or the lads walking along the streets where their childhood homes once were, the dichotomy of shrunken characters and expansive locations is stressed by their presentation in long-distance shots. Most importantly, the tower block's size is emphasized by being repeatedly shot from below.

## Tower blocks and terrace clearances: Newcastle's post-war urban redevelopment

Terry's new home is in one of the high-rise blocks, and the film's representation of these multi-storey buildings is intertwined with the history of urban planning in post-war Britain. Like many high-density social housing projects undertaken by the ministry of housing and local government, Terry's tower block is intended to replace the slums of residential urban areas (Anon 1970: 1). The book *Modern Flats* (1958) claimed that the hesitance felt towards flats in the 1930s had been largely overcome by the late 1950s (Yorke and Gibberd 1958: 7). Retrospectively, this verdict seems premature. Between the 1940s and 1960s Britain was terrorized by hysterical positions on dying, diseased and rotting cities (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994: 2). The influential architectural critic Charles Jencks commented that by the early 1960s it was obvious that attempts by town planners to heal the city were as virulent as the perceived disease of urban decay (Jencks 1973: 300). Sociologists attacked post-war urban planning for constructing anonymous lives, and for emphasizing an architectural functionalism blithely ignoring the history and identity of communities, bulldozing the cultural specificities of local place and offering bland, undifferentiated space in its stead (Jencks 1973: 302). In 1968 four were killed and seventeen injured when a gas explosion on the eighteenth floor of the Ronan Point tower block in East London caused the collapse of the south-east corner of the building. A government inquiry attributed the scale of the disaster to a weakness in the tower block's design and concluded that 'other system-built blocks of flats might be liable to the same type of progressive collapse' (Griffiths, Pugsley and Saunders 1968: 4). Ronan Point was a particularly controversial incident contributing to the increasing contestation of tower blocks as a vehicle of social housing: by the early 1970s the 'broad consensus of the 1940s' that had supported the multi-storey block as a solution to post-war housing demands had fractured, with residents protesting the plans of urban developers to continue their construction (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994: 324).

The ministry of housing and local government study *Families Living at High Density* (1970), surveying families in multi-storey dwellings around England, recorded that around a 'quarter of all the tenants had applied for a transfer or exchange' (Anon 1970: 4). Specific nodes of that disenchantment map closely onto the representation of multi-storey living in *The Likely Lads*, suggesting an interpretation of the film as a depiction of Newcastle's decaying urban environment. In Terry's tower block, teenagers have sex in the lift, just as the 1970 survey reported that dark communal entrances were used 'by courting couples' (Anon 1970: 41). Bob asks 'Does this lift never work?' and the fixation on the lift as a source of resident disgruntlement in *The Likely Lads* reiterates actual complaints about lifts that were used as lavatories or broken down (Anon 1970: 41). Approximately 'half the respondents complained that one or more of the rooms in their dwellings were too small' and with Christina's underwear hung out in his bathroom Terry joins the high percentage of multi-storey residents who resorted to using a room in their dwelling to dry wet clothes (Anon 1970: 64–66). Terry calls his estate 'this dodgy area', something Bob attests to after children

climb over his car when it is parked outside Terry's block of flats; later, the wing-mirrors and finally the wheels are stolen.

Significant for the representation of high-density living in *The Likely Lads*, the Byker Wall scheme in Newcastle (built between 1969 and 1975) was designed in dialogue with future inhabitants to pre-empt charges that it was imposed without discussion on the community. Designed by Ralph Erskine, Byker Wall tried to respond to the local territory and its patterns of life, as this 2001 Newcastle City Council report outlines:

> In 1953 Byker had nearly 1,200 dwellings considered unfit for human habitation. Yet 80% of residents wanted to stay in Byker. The process which the Council embarked upon in order to clear the slums but keep the community was one of the most ambitious and innovative in the country…the principles upon which Erskine's team, the Council and the community would be guided were clearly expressed…to maintain, as far as possible, valued traditions and characteristics of the neighbourhood itself and its relationships with the surrounding areas…to re-house those already resident in Byker, without breaking family ties and other valued associations or patterns of life. (Mills, Wyatt and Wise et al. 2001: 4)

As an alternative to concrete tower blocks – balconies in bright green, blue and orange, shed roofs, interwoven bricks of different colours – Byker has been declared 'one of the most successful [1970s housing schemes] socially and architecturally' (Curtis 1996: 591). Historically apposite in thinking about the rehousing of working-class terraced communities in Newcastle in the mid-1970s, this community-orientated project went unseen in *The Likely Lads*. Instead, the film relocates Terry to a block of flats to emphasize Bob's crisis of identity as the streets of their childhood are replaced by the brutalist high-rise. The film's elision of the Byker Wall project also works to mobilize Bob's understanding of slum clearances as the destruction of communities, ideas particularly contingent at this historical moment. In the wake of Ronan Point and the wider perception of urban decay, the tower block signifies the continuing failure of city redevelopment. The 'strongest of all the new negative images of Modern housing was that which had previously appeared as the most powerful symbol of optimism: the multi-storey block' (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994: 324). The slum clearances, Terry's relocation to a tower block and Bob's loss of 'direction in life' following the razing of the terraces; these contexts render the Byker Wall's nuanced interpretation of high-density social housing invisible. Byker's attempt to obviate the fracturing of community and family ties could only contradict Bob's personal narrative of dislocation from the physical settings of his youth.

## Whatever happened to the social criticism in *The Likely Lads*?

The destruction of the terraced homes where Bob and Terry's families lived throughout the sitcom has profound implications for Terry's class critique of suburbanization and

redevelopment and Bob's defence of the advancement both offer. The polarity of nostalgia in the film switches direction from the sitcom, and new-middle-class Bob parrots familiar criticisms of the tower block:

Bob: Soulless concrete blocks!
Terry: What do you mean? It's got a modern kitchen, a lovely view, and an inside lavatory.
Bob: These things [the terraced housing of their childhood] had poetry.
Terry: There's not much poetry at four in the morning padding down the yard to a freezing outside bog.

Urban redevelopment made modern architecture a target, verbally attacked for 'disregarding human needs, for not blending in, for lacking signs of identity and association, [and] for being an instrument of class oppression' (Curtis 1996: 590). However, Terry sees his new flat providing the amenities and sanitation the terraces lacked. Having recently moved he resists the lure of nostalgia, which he would often use in *Whatever…* as a tool to maintain Bob's friendship and to champion the working-class lifestyle Bob was discarding. Bob appeals that Terry 'must feel some nostalgia', but Terry sneers 'working-class sentiment is an indulgence of working-class people who have cracked it through football or rock and roll. Or people like you, who have moved out to the Elm Lodge housing estate at the earliest opportunity'.

One of the key pleasures *Whatever…* offered audiences was nostalgia, not least audiences' nostalgia for the 1960s *Likely Lads* series, as the series' writers and producers acknowledged (Webber 115). The connection between commodity production and nostalgia films since the 1970s has been famously explored by the Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson, for whom *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) represents the apotheosis of the nostalgia film, although the British film *That'll Be the Day* (Claude Whatham, 1973) constructs a similar image of a recent historical moment. Jameson identifies 'the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past…refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation'. Access to a recent past *experienced as history* is 'effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts'. I understand this argument as follows: the West's sense of history has been transformed by the widely held idea that one belongs to a 'generation'; that in the twentieth century each generation is defined by the commodities it consumes, especially clothing and popular culture; the function of postmodern nostalgia is to offer such commodities as stand-ins for the historical era that produced them. The idea of approaching a moment in history as lived in by participants conscious of moving through time disappears and the 'referent' of the past drains out of the commodity traces that remain behind, leaving those traces as the only means through which the past can be apprehended (Jameson 1991: 18–19).

In *Whatever…* Bob equates semi-detached homes with adulthood and middle-class consumption practices, and Newcastle's disappearing dancehalls and terraces with youth and working-class leisure pursuits. He frames his move to the Elm Lodge housing estate (and

the attendant social rituals) as a natural and desirable transition for himself and Newcastle's working class more generally. The symbolic distance that Bob puts between himself and Terry's domestic space has its corollary in his relation to their shared working-class past. This is amplified by *The Likely Lads*, when Bob is surrounded by a sea of debris where the terraces once stood, clutching the dartboard from the Fat Ox like a floatation device. Bob holds the dartboard so closely because he thinks it represents his past, but that is all it is – a representation, a commodity, a text whose possession is a substitute for a meaningful, genuine historicity. Bob's nostalgia stays true to the meaning of the word as 'homesickness', derived from its roots in the Greek *nostos* (return home) and *algos* (pain); nostalgia is Bob's nausea at being separated from a home that can never be reclaimed. The razing of the terraces is a figuration of the impossibility of Bob returning to his childhood home, and the social practices of his working-class youth that the old neighbourhood symbolized. Terry's defence of the terraces' destruction and the tower blocks replacing them seals the desirability of this irreparable break with the past. As the film progresses Bob tries to recreate the freedom and sexual adventurism of their youth, with the lads' disastrous escapades reinforcing the point that this lifestyle is permanently unliveable by Bob now. Running through *Whatever…* were longing references to the 1950s and 1960s films and popular music that filled the lads' past, references which solidify the sense that they belong a specific 'generation' (approximately speaking, the 'baby boomers') with a generation-specific set of textual co-ordinates that have been superseded by other generations since. Terry's mention of the Roxy Ballroom meets with incomprehension from Bob's younger secretary Wendy. Comprehending history as the escalation of new generations is a further way for *Whatever…* and *The Likely Lads* to restate the inevitability of Bob's class advancement, as inexorable as the succession of one generation by the next, each following their predecessors up the class ladder. The film's destruction of the terraces of Bob's youth is an enactment, through the transformation of urban space, of the supposed impossibility of climbing back down the ladder. The ideological sleight-of-hand here 'attaches the sense of inevitability, a natural part of the process of growing up, to the desire for social mobility. Assuming there is no accident, everyone grows up; not everyone rises within the social system' (Rubey 1997: 6).

*The Likely Lads* offers viewers the nostalgic pleasures of *Whatever…* but not the critical nostalgia Terry employed to critique Bob and the new middle class. In the film Bob monopolizes nostalgia for an irretrievable youth, confusing his discontinuity from the working classes with the personal dilemmas of a married man in his thirties and using the former as the occasion to indulge the latter. Restaging the lads' exploits on cinema screens re-accentuates the series' nostalgia to further embed the loss of the past in the narratives of economic advancement that were central to the relation between the characters of Bob and Terry. The shifts in Newcastle's social housing that figuratively shadow and literally motivate Bob's nostalgia for his working-class youth are acutely depicted in *The Likely Lads*, a compelling filmic witness of the sensibility of urban transformation in the 1970s.

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## Chapter 15

# Hovis, Ovaltine, Mackeson's and the *Days of Hope* Debate

Amy Sargeant

> Do you remember when an evening's entertainment was the family sitting around. Watching…the radio? And when you could get a brand new car for about £100…And when 1/9 bought you more than just two hours of Fred Astaire?…And when a glass of bitter tasted of malt and barley and hops? (Whitbread Trophy Best Bitter advertisement, 1971)

From 1968 to 1972, Raymond Williams was a member of a team of contributors who commented on television for the weekly BBC publication, the *Listener*. He was a conscientious reviewer, watching both BBC channels and programmes on network and regional ITV; sampling major historical series, drama series and single plays; documentary and current affairs broadcasts; sport and 'Hardy Annuals' such as gardening programmes and the antiques show, *Going for a Song*. From his viewing of television in Britain, mainland Europe and America he was well-placed to advance his theory of television as 'flow', first outlined in a March 1971 *Listener* article and subsequently developed in his 1974 *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* and the 1976 edition of *Communications*: 'I have come to feel lately that the kind of analysis we most need is of this general flow: of the organisation, the methods and the values within and through which particular programmes occur' (Williams 1971: 314).

Occasionally, he and his fellow contributors commented on the adverts which subsidized the programmes which they accompanied. Stuart Hood despised advertising per se, urging such moral reformers as Lord Longford and Mary Whitehouse to turn their attention to 'where the true corruptions of television lie' (Hood 1972: 188). Williams found ads generally 'ridiculous and annoying' and an unwelcome intrusion in the 'natural' flow of the particular programmes he preferred (Williams 1972: 251). He noted, for better or worse, the memorability of the jingles routinely employed. Elsewhere, the conspicuous drift of advertising and sponsorship (including by tobacco firms) into the coverage of sports events, even on the BBC, was noted and disparaged. There was discussion of the extension of broadcasting hours, the possibility of breakfast television and a fourth channel, and the concomitant increase in advertising that such changes to the schedule would entail. At no point did these commentators suggest that discriminating audiences might enjoy watching advertisements, however ridiculous, as an entertaining game, nor even that, amid all the repeats of which they persistently complained, the ads might be appreciated as 'the best things on TV' (Price 1978: 1). Meanwhile, in advertising circles, in Britain and abroad, there was a growing confidence (remarked upon by Williams with some alarm) in the British industry's creative and commercial prowess. The 1970s has, in retrospect, been regarded

as a decade of significant achievement for advertising, 'a golden age', despite a frequently inauspicious economic climate – including the stock market collapse of 1973 (Salmon and Ritchie 2000: 79).

Here, I should like to consider various types of 'flow': within schedules, across screen and print media, and between film and television. In the 1970s, some personnel from advertising moved into television (former copywriter Fay Weldon was praised in *The Listener* for her single plays for ATV and YTV), some into film (David Puttnam, Alan Parker and Ridley Scott). There was also movement in the opposite direction, with Karel Reisz directing award-winning ads for Campari, Assheton Gorton designing ads for Benson and Hedges and Ken Russell, who worked for film and television in the 1970s, appearing in ads for Pentax. I am especially concerned here with the contribution of advertising to an early 1970s boom in nostalgia, expressed through its use of children, places and a recorded or reconstructed past. Lionel Jeffries directed Bryan Forbes' 1970 production of *The Railway Children*, following recent BBC TV and ITV adaptations from Edith Nesbit's 1906 novel. 'The appeal to the contemporary audience', said Ena Kendall, interviewing Jeffries for the *Observer*, 'is that of solid land to a man floundering in quicksands. "Perhaps I am searching for this sort of escapism"', replied Jeffries – 'And perhaps a great many others are doing the same', concluded Kendall, referring to the success of BBC TV's *The Forsyte Saga* (Kendall 1920: 20). Nostalgic escapism became, to adopt one of Williams' own key concepts, 'a structure of feeling' informing production and consumption across a wide range of cultural activity (Williams 1982: 56; 99). *The Edwardian Country Lady* franchise, discussed by Raphael Samuel, was another manifestation of this phenomenon, a strategic re-invention of the artist responsible for the original illustrations indiscriminately applied and distributed through all manner of commercial products (Samuel 1984: 298–299). Victorian and Edwardian enamelled signs and other advertising ephemera became collectors' items in the 1960s and 1970s; 1970s advertising has, itself, since become an object of nostalgic affection.

## Ads: Television and 'serious' television

Williams' preferred method in *The Listener* reviews was to use one item from the week's schedule to interrogate another. For instance, in 1972 he paired *Going for a Song* with a BBC programme presenting the work of contemporary craftsmen. Frequently, television's rendition of the distant past was paired with coverage of a more recent, remembered past: for instance, BBC2's dramatization of Emile Zola's *Germinal* was coupled with the following *Yesterday's Witness* 'popular memory' item concerning the Levant mining disaster. Williams dourly observed that the introduction of colour (extended to commercial television in 1969) inaugurated a glut of historical material, both in drama (BBC2's *Six Wives of Henry VIII* and *Elizabeth R*, *The Forsyte Saga*, LWT's *Upstairs Downstairs*) and in major factual series (BBC Television's *The British Empire*):

> What sort of a society is it in which the newest technology carries the oldest messages? I expected the first months of glorious Telecolour to be drenched by the colourful past, but it was still a slight surprise to see Ivanhoe on the cover of *Radio Times* and *Redgauntlet* on the cover of TV Times in the same week…The rate of regression is becoming alarming. (Williams 1970a: 126)

Notwithstanding Williams' comparative method and his advocacy of 'flow' as a characteristic aspect of the medium, in the later 1970s debate in various publications and fora concerning popular memory and the depiction of the past coalesced around the Ken Loach and Tony Garnett collaboration, *Days of Hope*, four 90-minute plays spanning the period 1916–1926, broadcast by BBC TV in 1976. Garnett himself bemoaned the success of *The Forsyte Saga* (Garnett 1970: 70). 'Distinct from the contemporary concern with the past, a concern which is associated with a nostalgic recovery of the past through a recreation of its paraphernalia', claimed Keith Tribe, 'the notion of Popular Memory seeks to fix those films which use history in the construction of their narrative, drawing on the facticity of the past to assure the veracity of their statements' (Tribe 1977: 321–322). Williams, a stalwart champion of previous Loach and Garnett single plays for BBC TV and London Weekend TV, representing both historical and contemporary themes, defended *Days of Hope*, alongside Colin McArthur, against the attacks published in *Screen* (the BFI's Journal of the Society for Education in Film and Television) by Colin MacCabe. Tribe complained that this history is 'recognised as Truth by the viewer not by virtue of the "facts" being correct, but because the image looks right':

> The tonal quality of the pictures at the front, and certain of the sets, draw heavily on photographs that were taken at the time and which over the years have become recognised as images of the First World War. The slight fuzziness of the image in certain scenes, reminiscent of a Hovis or Ovaltine advertisement, further reinforces a visual quality of the past. British television is justly famed for its ability to create such plausible images of the past, down to the smallest detail, in marked contrast to American historical dramas where such realistic conventions are almost totally ignored. (Tribe 1977: 324)

Tribe's passing reference to Hovis and Ovaltine was not intended as a compliment. The indistinguishability of programme content from both archive material and advertising content on a parallel channel was here compounded to the detriment of the particular programme under discussion.

The methods of advertising and the content of ads were the subject of editorial coverage in print and on television. Serious attention was devoted to advertising by Bernard Levin, and Hood reported for *The Listener* on Francis Fuchs' 1972 *Images*. In 1970, BBC TV's current affairs slot *24 Hours*, in competition for viewers with ITV's *News at Ten*, experimentally commissioned the agency Kirkwood Company to produce a promotional sequence advertising the programme. Broadcast on BBC 1, this showed *24 Hours*' world as an onion. The agency was then invited to comment on the experience in *The Listener*. Gordon Medcalf

and Ronald Kirkwood were, they said, initially wary, 'because in our business we have become used to the dog-eat dog nature of the relationship between the different branches of the communications industry':

> It seems not too fanciful to say that we at the advertising end feel as if we represent collectively the radical right wing of the industry. Most of us believe (whatever our personal politics) in the profit motive as a major and in the main beneficial factor in an economic society…In the same very general terms, the BBC has always appeared to us to stand for the reactionary Left – again, not strictly in the political sense…because suspicious of reform, nervous of outside pressures, fastidious about the robust tastes of the mass market, conservative about a whole host of things but especially about money. (Kirkwood and Medcalf 1970: 569–570)

The distrust was born of general, presumed prejudice on both sides. In the event, these admen were hugely relieved by the attitude of the programme makers on this specific occasion, who recognized the usefulness of the agency's methods of research and marketing:

> After all, the doctrine of consumer marketing is fairly stern stuff. It insists that the proper end of television broadcasting is large numbers of satisfied viewers; that the more you advertise to them the quicker they will reject your product if it does not meet their needs; that you have to listen before you shout your wares…in short the criterion for success is the achievement of a measured target. (Kirkwood and Medcalfe 1970: 570)

A publication which mostly communicated the view that the products of admen were meretricious also accommodated the opinion that there were potential merits in the admen's procedures.

Amicably returning the favour, *Campaign*, 'the newspaper of the communications business', concurrently ran a series in which a number of commentators were invited to respond to the title 'What I think about advertising'. Invitees ranged from the Archbishop of Canterbury, through journalists and economists, to the theatre director Charles Marowitz and the former director of the ICA, Michael Kustow. *Guardian* journalist Jill Tweedie (a former copywriter) complained that 'all human life is somewhere else', Mary Whitehouse that ads demeaned women and Philip Purser, television critic of the *Sunday Telegraph*, that men fared no better (Tweedie 1970: 32). Molly Parkin, former fashion editor of the innovative magazine *Nova*, called for more fun and fantasy 'and for my money, a lot more filth' (Parkin 1970: 25). Marowitz admitted to finding ads sometimes entertaining, for their naiveté, but generally odious even when executed brilliantly (as in recent Dick Lester ads for Monarch Acrilan Blankets and Kodak): 'stylistic ingenuity without meaningful content invariably defeats itself' (Marowitz 1970: 23). Virginia Ironside, *Daily Mail* columnist, recalling the Esso jingle, Timex and Mazda, was already nostalgic for the ads of her childhood: 'they were better at the beginning…more of a novelty' (Ironside 1970: 21). However, Raymond

Williams, speaking for the strictly political left, here voiced his opposition to advertising ('commercial propaganda') more trenchantly than in *The Listener*:

> There is a permanent need for the critical inspection of it, and to the extent that one believes in a free and rational society, for the building of critical resistance to it…From the 'mass media' to the 'mass market' system of commercial propaganda based on modern corporate capitalism, has defined its terms. I oppose it and them absolutely (Williams 1970b: 21).

The *Campaign* articles constitute a useful compendium of prevalent attitudes towards advertising in general rather than the relationship of ads to a particular context of screen exhibition.

The fastidious critics at *The Listener* more often confined themselves to disapproval of the obtrusive interruption of their favoured items by ads. Raymond Williams was clear as what sorts of programmes he thought worthy of the medium: 'serious, practical, mobile' (Williams 1979: 97). On independent television his generosity extended beyond Loach and Garnett to Potter, LWT's *Aquarius*, Granada's *The World in Action* and the football. John Berger was concerned by the disconnection in colour magazines between the reality presented in ads (for Aramis, Pimms and Badedas) and the intervening reports of the reality lived in Bangladesh (Berger 1972: 146). Hood made a similar criticism:

> There are whole stretches of television into which the commercials fit unobtrusively, so closely do they approximate in style, content and assumptions to the programmes in which they are embedded. But occasionally the surrounding material shows up in all its obscenity their celebration of the good life with its cornucopia of cigars, toilet soaps, real-meat dog foods, breakfast cereals, fun holidays and happy families held together by fish-fingers. Such an occasion was the screening of Granada's *Year of Killing* in which the soundtrack buzzed with the noise of flies swarming on the mud-drowned corpses of East Bengal. (Hood 1971: 916)

Here, the incompatibility of particular programme content with advertising content was cited to the detriment of the ads.

## Ads: Print and screen

The increasing use of colour and purchase of colour sets in the 1970s was as significant a development in television as the introduction of glossy colour supplements to Sunday newspapers in the 1960s (inaugurated by *The Sunday Times* in 1961) and the introduction of fully registered colour to newspapers in the 1970s. Advertising slots in ITV's Sunday *News at Ten* commanded a comparably high tariff. In 1972, print ads topically quipped Guinness

as 'the black and white supplement'. Alan Parker himself directed an ad for Sony: 'You won't see a picture more life-like.' James Garrett, who had come to advertising from making documentaries for British Transport, claimed that with colour, the cost of a 30-second commercial soared by nearly 75 per cent, but that control of material within agencies shifted from television specialists to writers and art directors accustomed to work in print (Henry 1986: 395–396).

Alan Parker started his career as a print copywriter in 1963, moving to Collett Dickenson Pearce in 1967 before founding his own company with Paul Windsor in 1970. Also in 1970, Parker wrote the copy for an award-winning print ad produced for CDP. This showed an apparently toothless old man in a collarless shirt and hand-knitted fairisle vest sitting at a carpenter's bench surrounded by woodshavings; on one knee was balanced a newspaper, on the other a pile of sandwiches on an open Hovis wrapper. In the background hung a kettle; to the right stood a paraffin heater. The scene was photographed as if overlaid with a thin layer of ochre varnish. The tagline was carried over into a 1972 ad, directed by Ridley Scott for CDP, wistfully voiced-over to the strains of a 'Northern brass band…very soft and lovely'. Dvorak's *New World Symphony* became, for a while, 'the Hovis music' (Salmon and Ritchie 2000: 71):

> We walked down to the shops me mam and me. Just after the war and it was real butter for tea. I got some liquorice, the first I ever had. And mum bought some kippers to take home for dad. It tasted so good that tea after the war. Real butter, real bread, we all asked for more.
>
> VO: Hovis is as good today as it's always been. Make Hovis your daily bread.

A later version referred back further ('Wi' all that wheatgerm bread to build us up, I reckon we'd have knobbled Kaiser three years ago'). Ovaltine, resuscitating 'Ovaltineys' in 1975, featured a newsstand with the notice 'King has abdicated' and the tagline, 'Times have changed, the goodness of Ovaltine hasn't'. Brands such as Guinness, Bovril and Hovis expediently traded on their longevity and their geographical origins; Hovis was distanced from its links with Rank and presented as a local, cottage bakery rather than the massive conglomerate RHM (Olins 1978: 91). Significantly, the admen invoked and fabricated a past which predated the 'admass' disparaged by J.B. Priestley (in the 1930s) and Richard Hoggart (in the 1950s), while managing to identify a specific, singular product as emblematic of that pre-lapsarian past.

Sometimes the past was depicted by way of a rural idyll. Soft-focus 1975 print ads showing children and women in blue floral dresses, check aprons and straw hats amid wicker and willow baskets and hampers, urged the reader to 'Remember with Mateus Rosé'. Suffolk's Greene King showed brewers in leather aprons. In part, loyalty to old labels was encouraged as a response to the growth of supermarket own brands, with Tony Scott producing award-winning ads for Tesco: 'You won't believe what we sell. You won't believe what we sell it for'

(Fletcher 2008: 229–230). On the other hand, under the auspices of the Campaign for Real Ale, small producers were making inroads on major producers' share of the market. The Ploughman's Lunch featured in Guinness ads as an example of an invented tradition noted in 1983 by Eric Hobsbawm and brazenly acknowledged as a marketing tool by the branding guru Wally Olins (Olins 1989: 56).

Furthermore, with the traditional industries of the north increasingly under threat (there was a miners' strike in 1973–1974), ads reminded the viewer of what was worth preserving in northern culture: in 1975, Newcastle and Brown declared 'Drink to the good old days'; 'The last of the great working-class beers'. John Smith's was similarly partisan: 'Yorkshiremen love it because Yorkshiremen brew it'. Brian Glover (a professional Yorkshireman), cast by Loach on film in *Kes* (1969) and on television in Alan Bennett's nostalgic *A Day Out* (BBC, 1972) appeared in 1972 ads for Watney Mann's Wilson's Great Northern Bitter. If as John Berger suggested, 'publicity is for the population at large and so it uses the future tense', the projected ideal future of these ads actually lay reassuringly in the past (Berger 1972: 146). Significantly, Ringan Ledwige's 2008 commemorative version of the Hovis ad, lasting 122 seconds, shows a boy picking up a loaf in 1886 and, on his way home, running past Suffragettes, through the debris of the Blitz, a street party for the Coronation, crowds celebrating the 1966 World Cup, a 1980s stand-off between miners and policemen, on through fireworks heralding the new millennium.

Sometimes Parker romanticized childhood – literally in a 1974 Bird's Eye series starring Ben and Mary, a tale of childhood sweethearts which prompted letters from viewers when Ben's parents took him with them to Australia (Gable 1980: 70). The scenario echoed Parker's script for *Melody*/ *S.W.A.L.K.* (Waris Hussein, 1971), produced by Puttnam and photographed by Peter Suschitzky, a regular cameraman on commercials directed by Parker and Scott, and starring *Oliver!*'s Mark Lester and Jack Wilde competing for the attention of an eleven-year-old girl. The children mimicking adults playing at 1930s Chicago gangsters for Bird's Eye Beefburgers in 1971 'when you've got to make it something fast' are forerunners of Florrie Duggan and Scott Baio in *Bugsy Malone* (1976), written and directed by Parker, co-produced by David Puttnam. Parker brought to the script a deft handling of one-liners: 'Sure as eggs is eggs, Blousey had been scrambled.'

As Sam Delaney has observed, the children of the Bird's Eye ads anticipate Parker's direction of Jack Rosenthal's semi-autobiographical *Evacuees* (ITV, 1974), in which two Jewish brothers are mistreated by their foster parents in Blackpool and want nothing more than to return to Manchester and their mother's chicken soup (Delaney 2008: 134). While she knits them balaclavas, black marketeers trade with one another in the local synagogue. More significant, I think, are the ads where parents are shown using their children's supposed adventures and misadventures as a cue to reminisce about their own childhood. A 1971 ad for Heinz spaghetti, written and directed by Parker, showed a boy in oversized nerdy specs and cub uniform returning home from camp in need of maternal comfort, confronted by an overenthusiastic father. Here, a remembered or imagined past is conveyed by a nostalgic monologue rather than through visual reconstruction:

Father: Tell me how you got on then, son…pitch your tent on high ground like I told you, did you?
Mother: Eggs, bacon, sausages and Heinz spaghetti.
Father: How was the cooking? Porridge isn't half good out of those billies isn't it, and not too many mosquitoes, I hope? Weather all right was it?…not too rainy and the songs – Ging gang goolie watcher, ging gang goo…
Mother: Spaghetti alright, love?
Boy: It's nice to be home, mum.
VO: Is someone you love a spaghetti lover?

The narrative of the ad corresponds to a schematic pattern outlined by Williams in his 1974 analysis, interacting 'through its styles with the kinds of drama – one might also say, the kinds of human simulation – which are common in "programme" material' – such as *Evacuees* (Williams 1992: 63). In other words, for Williams ad scenarios were demonstrably too much, too often, of the same (unserious) thing.

While Ovaltine and Guinness were able to raid their own archives to popular effect (the Guinness toucan was revamped and made a welcome return in the 1970s) other brands drew on wider historical resources. For Mackeson's, Parker appropriated a number of radio stars and formats, including 'Gert and Daisy' and 'Twenty Questions', along with the quaintly old-fashioned supertitle 'It looks good, tastes good and by golly it is good'. Mackeson's had survived two world wars, albeit (by 1975) under Whitbread ownership, and could readily be harnessed to markers of wartime communality. Its dependability was reinforced by way of reference to relics inscribed in popular memory.

David Lean's *Oliver Twist* (1948) and Carol Reed's *Oliver!* (1968) were invoked to launch the introduction of two new flavours of Supermousse: 'If you try one, you have to try the other'. Lean's 1945 *Brief Encounter* and Robert Florey's 1943 *Desert Song* were wittily and purposefully spoofed in 1971 monochrome ads for Bird's Eye Dinners for One, 'especially handy for people who aren't used to being on their own'. From 1975, Whitbread's Heineken ads persistently referred to film and television precedents. Such ads assumed a viewer's ability to recognize the source material – possibly from television screenings, without necessarily feeling a personal nostalgic attachment.

## Ads: Television and film

As a member of the 1974 jury for the Design and Art Direction awards, Hugh Hudson (then an associate of Ridley Scott) complained at the lack of original ideas apparent in the previous year's advertising output:

> The profession conveniently hides behind 'technique'. Perhaps the most depressing of all is the recurrent obsession with the past. This industry, like all branches of entertainment,

> seems to consider that nostalgia makes up for lack of content. New ground must be broken. If that is impossible at least we should look at ourselves as we really are now and not as we were. The only relief during two days' viewing was the outstanding directorial ability of Alan Parker. (D&AD 1974: 296)

Hudson knew whereof he spoke, having directed a hazy scene of French canals and fields drawn from Corot for Dubonnet in 1974 (a brand strikingly revamped and sexed-up in the later 1970s to become modernistically escapist); meanwhile Scott famously continued to contribute to the Hovis series with 'Bike Ride' in 1974. Scott also directed a 1950s retro-style ad for Levis, with a cover version of The Shangri-Las' 'Leader of the Pack' as backing track, coinciding with *The Rocky Horror Show* on stage (1973) and screen, as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975).

Despite these earlier reservations, Hudson is now best known for his 1981 collaboration with Puttnam, *Chariots of Fire*, which does not convey an immediate impression of 'looking at ourselves as we really are'. Scott made his feature debut in 1977 with the Anglo-American adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novella, 'Point of Honour', *The Duellists*, similarly produced by Puttnam. He began moonlighting on ads while working for the BBC, appreciating the opportunity this gave him to work with film. The styling and *mise-en-scène* of *The Duellists*, often dubbed 'too beautiful' by critics on its release, bears witness, I suggest, to Scott's apprenticeship in advertising (Millar 1978: 185). Its costuming stands witness to the meticulous historical research which Tribe assigned to British television. The narrative follows the obsessive pursuit of honour between Lt Gabriel Féraud (Harvey Keitel) and Lt Arman d'Hubert (Keith Carradine), two officers in the Napoleonic Army, as they rise through the ranks. At the opening of the action in Strasbourg in 1800, we are advised that 'honour' is an appetite – it transpires that there is little other explanation for their intermittent duelling, at first with sabres, latterly with pistols. Féraud refuses to release D'Hubert from this senseless pact, but d'Hubert will not allow chance alone to intervene between them to place Féraud at a safe distance – to seize the opportunity of Féraud's arrest would be dishonourable, so, anonymously, d'Hubert secures his adversary's freedom. Finally, d'Hubert refuses Féraud satisfaction, obliging his inveterate opponent to submit to his code by conducting himself henceforth as officially dead.

The intermittent encounters between the opponents gradually descend from the immaculately groomed and choreographed 'fighting on parade' of the regiment, to brawling, to two ageing men stalking one another around a ruin in a wood: even their seconds become shabbier. Appropriately, each separate episode is rendered by Scott and his designer, Peter J. Hampton, as a framed, set-piece tableau, with braziers burning and dawn mists rising, snow gathering or shafts of light penetrating a dingy cellar. However, in addition there are numerous redundant, contrivedly composed, lingering still-life shots (bowls of fruit with and without quill pens) very much in the mood and manner of earlier colour supplement ads. One of a series of 1970 ads for Courvoisier, 'The Brandy of Napoleon' – 'for the young and the bold… and the thirsty' playfully showed a uniformed but less meticulously groomed officer partaking of refreshment after a duel, an adoring woman in a hooded velvet cape clinging to his side.

In addition to the exchange of creative personnel between media and forms, there was also much evidence, in 1970s print and screen advertising, of the use of television and film performers. As Williams observed, they were deployed 'as themselves or in their character parts, to recommend products, or to be shown using them' (Williams 1992: 63). Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, whose BBC2 sketch show, *Not Only…But Also* was taken sufficiently seriously at *The Listener* for transcripts of the scripts to be serialized in 1970, appeared in campaigns for Guinness and Harvey's Bristol Cream. June Whitfield (of television's *Terry and June*) was cast in a long series of ads for Bird's Eye pies, so good that they were as good as home-made: 'They'll make a dishonest woman of you.' Ridley Scott directed a Benson and Hedges Gold ad for cinema (where the promotion of cigarettes was still permitted), starring Eric Sykes as chauffeur to a type-cast Terry-Thomas; Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan were enlisted for a Benson and Hedges ad directed by Peter Medak. Parker directed Leonard Rossiter (from TV's *Rising Damp*) with Joan Collins, for Cinzano; *Monty Python*'s Eric Idle with photographer David Bailey, for Olympus and Morecambe and Wise, with rally driver James Hunt, for Texaco. To be effective, such endorsements called for the shortest of memories on the part of the viewer and a lack of distinction between text and context.

In his 1987 memoirs, Derek Jarman excoriated the self-promotion of admen into other areas of cultural and political activity. 'YOU WERE THE CINEMA: The *press* said so':

> Ad-men false imaging politics /
> Ad-men false-imaging art…
> Ad-men false imaging / The new British Cinema. (Jarman 1987: 102; 110)

Jarman had in mind, specifically, Saatchi & Saatchi (who formed their own agency in 1970), and Hudson and Puttnam. More broadly, the 1970s saw the rise of the radical Right characterized by Kirkwood and Medcalfe in their *Listener* report. However, the exchange of film and advertising personnel was not unique to this period. Isolated individual directors and technicians had previously migrated piecemeal between documentaries, features and ads for some time, sometimes grudgingly, tending to regard work in advertising with some disdain. The 1970s cultivated a brash confidence in advertising as a legitimate activity, which thrived on constructive criticism aired within its own ranks and on the adversarial commentary volunteered by the reactionary Left. In the early 1970s, advertising expediently mimicked nostalgia for a pre-admass society.

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## Section V

British Films and British Filmmakers

## Chapter 16

# ‘What is There to Smile At?’ Lindsay Anderson’s *O Lucky Man!*

John Izod, Karl Magee, Kathryn Mackenzie and Isabelle Gourdin

In the final scene of Lindsay Anderson's 1973 film *O Lucky Man!*, the director steps out from behind the camera and places himself in the centre of the action. The film's young hero Mick Travis (Malcolm McDowell) has been engaged on a futile quest for wealth and success which has ended with him destitute, wandering the streets of London. Enticed by a billboard to audition for a starring role, he is plucked from a drab group of similarly desperate young men by Anderson. Instructed by the director to smile, Travis asks 'What is there to smile at? I can't smile without a reason.' Anderson hits him across the face with the script and Mick smiles, a moment that has been described as the character experiencing a Zen-like revelation (see, for instance, Lambert 2000: 168).

What is Anderson saying about the director's role with this provocative act? Is it a challenge to the traditional boundaries of film, a cinematic joke, or a piece of self-mockery, the brute on the screen reflecting Anderson's bullish public persona? It is not wholly implausible to argue that Anderson was mocking his notoriously volatile temperament to amuse his associates. However an insider joke says nothing to a film's audiences. So something else has to be in play here (though that does not mean it cannot also reveal the director's personal foibles).

Anderson's diaries and correspondence reveal that he invested the project with deeply held personal values and beliefs. Indeed, Lambert's reading of the final scene picked up the association with Zen that Anderson noted in his diary in the hours after shooting it (Anderson, LA 6/1/64/160: 16 June 1972). Not that Lambert would have needed access to Anderson's private writings to know it. In a 1957 review of *Tokyo Story* published in *Sight and Sound* (the journal Lambert edited until 1955), Anderson wrote of the wisdom and acceptance of life that comes with practising the Zen philosophy (1957: 582–583). When promoting *O Lucky Man!*, he expounded this idea to journalists, reflecting on the way the final smile echoed the grin with which Mick had ingratiated himself as a salesman at the start of his epic journey: 'I thought of it more as Zen master and pupil than as director and actor. It's where the film comes full circle, where the smile at the end echoes the smile at the beginning, only it's not the facile smile of compromise, but the hardened smile of acceptance.' (Blume 1973: 16)

Anderson had no doubt that as the film's director he functioned as its key talent. He always referred to *O Lucky Man!* as his – as an auteur production. Intervention in the action would be one way of making the point. However, a dramatic intrusion such as that contrived for the final scene could fatally have ruptured the film's narrative structure had it not in some way been prepared for. In fact, Anderson had been consciously influenced by the dramatic principles and practice of Bertolt Brecht since *Mother Courage* played in London in 1956.

For *O Lucky Man!* (like *The White Bus* and *If…* before it and *The Old Crowd* and *Britannia Hospital* to follow) Anderson adapted those dramatic principles for the screen, and broadly speaking shared their purpose of casting a fresh light on contemporary society. Like Brecht's plays and Sergei Eisenstein's films, these five productions keep the audience aware that they are watching a constructed artefact.

One of the many symptoms of this in *O Lucky Man!* is Malcolm McDowell's presentation of Mick Travis's journey. Mick has a chameleon nature and tries to adapt to fit the frequently changing milieux of his picaresque existence; but McDowell plays him with malfunctions to his camouflage. His performance illustrates Brecht's concept of the 'epic actor' – defined as a player who does not seek to project a single, unchanging character but one that changes all the time by leaps and starts (Gordon 2006: 231). Thus characters no less than plot are constructed in defiance of conventions guiding the creation of naturalistic, invisibly constructed and rounded personalities.

As Robert Gordon notes, Brecht sought to break from nineteenth- and twentieth-century naturalist and expressionist theatre in order to violate the identification of spectator with performer.

> …epic theatre had to use every device of dramaturgy, acting and production to prevent the flow of empathy between spectator and performer. To achieve this, the actor had to avoid becoming identified with the character she was representing, but had to use her own personality as the basis for a dramatic role that involved her as both storyteller and character…
>
> The quality and style of epic performance is succinctly captured in Brecht's injunction to actors to perform 'consciously, suggestively, descriptively.' The epic actor consciously *describes* character and *suggests* salient details to evoke the situation in a style appropriate to a street-singer or stand-up comic rather than a naturalistic actor. (Gordon 2006: 231–232)

In English, the term 'alienation' is usually deployed to summarize Brecht's intention in devising techniques to divest the world of its illusory appearance of being something natural, normal and self-evident. By making it unfamiliar and even unrecognizable, the alienation effect should require audiences to ask questions about the nature of the world so that ultimately it becomes more comprehensible in its underlying rather than its superficial reality (Slater 1977: 131–132). Despite his adoption and development of Brecht's ideas in the cinema, Anderson (as he wrote in the introduction to the published script of *The Old Crowd*) was never happy with the term by which it was known.

> 'Alienation' is the Brechtian term – a translation of his *Verfremdungseffekt* – usually applied to such a style, but I have always thought this a heavy word and not a very accurate one. The real purpose of such devices, which can include songs, titles between scenes, etc., is not to *alienate* the audience from the drama, but rather to focus their attention on its essential – not its superficial or naturalistic – import. (Anderson 1985: 140)

This at first seems little more than a quibble on Anderson's part since on the surface his and Brecht's positions appear very similar. However, their goals differ radically. A marxist, Brecht intended his productions ultimately to contribute to changing the world. Anderson, the Dean Swift of his age, had more limited ambitions, aspiring instead to excoriate the horrors and iniquities barely concealed in every stratum of British society. As he put it,

> People act from the worst of motives and you've got to anticipate that…If you are sentimental, then you are taking an unreal view of life. The whole essence of the film is to suggest we do have to understand the conditions of life, of being human beings. Stupidity must be mocked and laughed at. Wickedness must be mocked and laughed at. We have to accept we are human beings and our lot is not entirely a happy one. (Anderson quoted in Edwards 1973: 28)

Interviewed by Louis Marcorelles (1973: 19), Anderson volunteered that Brecht would not have been in agreement with the conclusion of *O Lucky Man!* because, although it corresponds to the poetic aspect of Brecht's work, it does not embrace the marxist aspect. Instead, its characters function as vehicles for keen satire, exposing the hypocrisies and corruption of rich and poor, powerful and powerless alike. Anderson would (contrary to Brecht's ideals and marxist philosophy in general) have held with Matthew Hodgart that the form should be devoted to showing how things really are and demolishing existing follies rather than advocating a new dispensation.

> The satirist appears in his noblest role when he accepts the challenge of oblivion, by taking on an ephemeral and unpleasant topic…[Politics] offers the greatest risk and the greatest rewards: politics is traditionally considered a dirty business, yet the satirist is most a hero when he enters the forum and joins in the world's debate…What is essential is that he should commit himself boldly to his 'impure' subject, yet retain a purity of attitude, in his aesthetic disengagement from the vulgarities and stupidities of the struggle. (Hodgart 1969: 31–32)

To flag up the satirical element, the characters in *O Lucky Man!* have a cartoon-like quality, noted by Anderson himself (Delson 1973: 30). That quality complements Brechtian principles and is further emphasized by the casting of actors in two or three roles apiece. Not only does each performer play various characters, but his or her roles differ radically from each other. With the exception of Malcolm McDowell, none of these performers – some, like Ralph Richardson, Rachel Roberts, Mona Washington and Arthur Lowe, immensely popular in Britain – commands the screen long enough in any one role to draw the spectator's empathy.

The film's narrative structure is also fragmented in line with Brechtian principles. Episodes connect with each other only loosely in terms of character and plot development, giving priority instead to preserving purposeful thematic links. Shortly before the film's release,

Anderson gave David Robinson, one of the few film critics whom he respected, an interview that set the agenda for many reviewers in the following months. He said that the form of the film was traditional in that the narrative featuring a hero journeying through numerous adventures and encountering lots of characters had stood the test of time. It was found in *Pilgrim's Progress, Gulliver's Travels* and *Tom Jones*, not to mention Voltaire's *Candide*. The people whom the hero meets along the way mostly have the two-dimensional nature of 'humours' – figures in the picaresque tale representing the baseline of certain human characteristics, sometimes in a cartoon-like manner (Anderson 1973: 129).[1]

In reviewing *O Lucky Man!* George Melly wrote that while the Brechtian mode seldom works in cinema, it did so triumphantly in this case. That he thought due in part to a strong screenplay by David Sherwin, excellent multiple performances from the actors at large and particularly Malcolm McDowell's performance as the hero. One of the principal factors supporting the Brechtian mode was Anderson's coherent view of how society works, that had given the narrative its robust scaffolding (Melly 1973: 34). It should be said that more than one critic derided the film because, to cite one, they thought that 'in presenting us with corrupt policemen, power-crazy tycoons, sadomasochistic judges, murderous meths drinkers or suicidal Cockney housewives, Mr Anderson doesn't seem to be in England at all' (Weightman 1973: 48). For Melly, on the contrary, all the incidents (police looting a crash site, the sale of arms to an African despot, scientific experimentation on human beings, etc.) could be paired with reality: '… in the week of the Watergate disclosures, the film's relevance needs no underlining' (1973: 34).

Melly also reported that the music helps avoid the evident looseness of the episodic form. He liked the way the wry edge of the songs links and illuminates the various episodes obliquely (ibid.). Indeed, members of the band participate as characters in the narrative and also comment as if from outside it like an all-knowing Greek chorus. In that role they have two functions – firstly, strengthening the structure, and secondly, providing the moral context that frames the protagonists' self-seeking behaviour.

In his interview with Robinson, Anderson had described the method he and Alan Price had adopted in their collaboration over the lyrics and music. These were written explicitly for the film and its companion album (also released by Warner Bros). Early drafts of the script simply note the themes ('song of luck', 'song of opportunity', 'song of money', etc.) on which Price was to write. In fact, for each point at which music was to be inserted, Anderson wrote a paragraph stating what he thought the song should be about. Price took that and reinterpreted it in terms of his feelings and attitudes, which the director found sufficiently different from his own to provide creative tension, but also sufficiently the same for that tension to be productive (Anderson 1973: 129).

After a production meeting in the month before shooting commenced, Anderson mused in his diary: 'In a sense the final zen-existential feeling of the film corresponds to [Alan's] own feeling about life: be what you are: you are what you are: decisions won't change anything. But of course this is mixed with an instinctive, romantic individualism…' (LA 6/1/64/41, 8 February 1972). Anderson believed (and in our view the film justifies his assertion) that

this mix of the political and the deeply personal made the songs an effective form of chorus. He thought that the songs 'express the ironic attitude of the film quite directly, [and] the persona that Alan presents takes on an air of *knowledgeableness*' (Anderson 1973: 129). As for Price's role as a character, Anderson reckons he remains purposely enigmatic. He stands apart from the action because he has already attained the attitude to life that it takes Mick the whole story to get to. In short, Price's character is a portrayal of someone who knows what life is about (Anderson 1973: 129–130).

Price and the band are the only 'actors' not to appear in multiple roles (in the prologue even McDowell plays another role – that of a peasant). Perhaps this is another device emphasizing his being the complete character who knows what life is about. All in all, while Price fulfilled a purpose on screen similar to the street singer in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, he had a second major function: in the long process of making the film he was to Anderson what Kurt Weill had been to Brecht – an essential musical partner.

During the making of *O Lucky Man!* Anderson suffered recurrent despondency, even despair. His diary reflected on the difficulties that the Anglo-American cinema system posed auteurs such as Kubrick and Peckinpah. He thought it turned them into 'monsters of paranoia' because only thus could they survive professionally. Noting the severe disturbance of his own emotions, he recorded feeling the enormous strain imposed by the attempt to straddle the worlds of personal (auteur) cinema on the one hand, and popular, commercial entertainment on the other (LA 6/1/64/7–8, 3 May 1972).

Anderson's exhaustion and depression continued through the weeks of post-production and he dreaded entering the cutting room to face the 'dolts' working with him (LA 6/1/64/236, 5 September 1972). It seems likely that such scathing remarks about his collaborators (of which this is typical), projected onto them his secret terror of suffering from a creative block. In one entry he diagnosed his own 'critical sureness – after the event – but creative uncertainty: which is what makes editing such agony' (LA 6/1/64/201, 31 July 72, emphasis in the original). Paranoia aside, he had severe doubts over the quality of what he was seeing in the cutting room, thinking that some of it was adequate, but no more. Eventually his mood improved when Tom Priestley agreed to act as supervising editor. Under the latter's guidance the movie began to take its eventual shape (LA 6/1/64/263, 3 October 1972).

When the time came to promote the film, Anderson's paranoid doubts evaporated and gave way to enthusiastic commitment. Prior to its release, he submitted to numerous interviews with journalists and, as mentioned previously, the best of these set the agenda for the majority of newspaper reviewers. With columns needing rapid filling, the latter found it convenient in time-honoured manner to draw on such material. For his part, Anderson seized the opportunity interviews afforded to not only promote the movie but also offer guidance toward what he thought was its proper interpretation.

Authorship was an issue that clearly mattered to him greatly; and in fact from 1948 he adopted a consistent concept of the director's authorship in the cinema (as opposed to the theatre). He always asserted artistic ownership of 'his' films, referring to *O Lucky Man!* both in public and private as if he had controlled both its scripting and direction. This was

not without a measure of truth since by his own admission he had constantly dominated his scriptwriter (and friend) David Sherwin as a means of bludgeoning work from him (Anderson 2004: 149). His relationship with Malcolm McDowell was different, but both enjoyed its intimate father–son quality. So here too he led even though the idea for the film started with 'Coffee Man', a rough script based on McDowell's experiences selling coffee in the north of England (see LA 1/7/1/9–12). Anderson challenged his actor to develop the script and work with Sherwin before he himself introduced the 'epic' dimension.

With Alan Price, despite the age difference between the two men, Anderson achieved (not without minor difficulties at first) a relationship predicated on mutual respect and awareness that each had semi-autonomous command of his respective medium. In the case of his Czech cameraman, however, matters were different. It proved impossible for Anderson to dominate Miroslav Ondricek (Mirek) in the way he ruthlessly coerced Sherwin and others such as his production designer Jocelyn Herbert. A series of entries in Anderson's diaries from March to August 1972 reads like a one-sided history of the two men's contest for authorial control. Anderson saw the nub of the problem as Mirek's insistence on prioritizing composition and lighting. As director, however, Anderson tenaciously held the drama to have prime importance and reckoned that Mirek either did not read or failed to understand the script (not implausible since the Czech had limited command of English). By degrees Anderson convinced himself that he was partnered with an obstructive *prima donna* (see, for example, LA 6/1/64/101, 12 April 1972; LA 6/1/64/108, 19 April 1972; LA 6/1/64/115, 26 April 1972; LA 6/1/67/3–6, 28 August 1972). The unhappy sequence ends with the director enraged after viewing poor rushes. He decides Mirek is a spoiled baby who has lost his respect because 'he has not DELIVERED THE GOODS. FINITO' (LA 6/1/64/226, 25 August 1972, emphasis in the original). This outburst, in the final week of pick-up shooting, can be read as Anderson reclaiming authorship for himself.

Anderson did indeed believe that 'cinema at its best and purest belongs to the director' (1985: 139). He wrote these particular words 35 years after first expounding the same opinion in three articles published in *Sequence* between 1948 and 1950. Well before the *Cahiers du Cinéma* debate launched the *politique* that distinguished the work of *metteur-en-scène* from auteur, Anderson derived a broadly comparable dichotomy that differentiated two ways in which the film director might operate. He did not belittle the importance of contributions made by the principal talent; in particular he identified the scriptwriter and cameraman as indispensable creative members of a team (1948: 198–199). However, he argued that those writers who claim the dominance of their profession's contribution most admire those films 'in which the director's function approximates closely enough to that of a stage director' (1950: 207). For Anderson this view

> puts the film director severely in his place, demanding of him technical capacity, sensibility to the ideas and characters provided for him by his author, but no independent response to his material, no desire to present it in the light of his own imagination, illuminated by it, or transformed (1950: 207).

For Anderson the almost miraculous fusion of the many creative elements that go into a successful film requires a central figure to bring those elements together, and that is the director. Implicit in this is more than the attribution of control alone. The work of the great directors who have made 'rare and treasured works…alone entitles film to its present, indisputable position among the arts' (1948: 199). In the making of those films of highest quality in which the director has a personal input, the authorial role becomes guarantor of the claim that the cinema is an art. Indeed, the director as author is often referred to as an artist. This was a theme to which Anderson returned often – see, for example, 'Stand Up! Stand Up!' (1956), and an unpublished piece 'The Film Artist – Freedom and Responsibility!' (1959). In this, as John Caughie has pointed out, Anderson was one of those who sought to install the individual, expressive and romantic artist in cinema (1981: 10). In his essays for *Sequence* Anderson voices a position close to the idea of authorship that Andrew Sarris, the *Movie* group and others were to develop in elevating certain directors above all others for their artistry. But Anderson was contemptuous of the way these critics evolved that idea into a theory which exalted a bad film by an auteur over a good one by a non-ranking director. Probably for that reason, he preferred in later writing to credit the *Cahiers* writers of the French New Wave with first formulating the idea that a director of a film should be called its author, rather than sharing the credit for something that he (among others) had advocated several years earlier (Anderson 1981: 271–272).

In a 1981 review of recent academic publications, Anderson's contempt for auteur theory became all-engulfing. In part this was motivated by his disdain for 'intellectual' activity, with which term he condemned what he considered to be elitist self-indulgence that evaded the essential function of criticism. That function should be to discover and explore the relevance of art to experience (Anderson 1981: 274), an activity that he equated with the application of intelligence. However, his complacent dismissal of developments in theoretical thinking about authorship cost him the opportunity to understand how audiences inevitably see authorship of films from a different perspective than their directors. To speak of one parameter alone, spectators stimulated by recurrent motifs, themes and unconscious traces that they discover in films directed by the same individual may construct through projective identification with them their own idea of a creative source. They name that source after the director but, as an imaginary construct, it is not identical with that person. To borrow Peter Wollen's formulation: not Lindsay Anderson but the imagined 'Lindsay Anderson'. To adapt an old warning, we should not uncritically trust the teller, but need to consider how the tale was received.

Projective identification shows clearly in some critical responses to *O Lucky Man!* not least because satire is a powerful weapon designed to arouse emotion in the receiver. The vivid contrast between personalized readings of the film by professional reviewers (some of whom clearly felt Anderson had attacked more than merely his lead player with a cinematic slap to the face) demonstrates these cathexes in play. In no review was this more clear than Stanley Kauffmann's verdict that the film was 'twisted by rancor' and pickled in Anderson's bile because he had not been called a genius for his previous movies. Kauffmann thought

it a three-hour effort at self-canonization exuding conceit and pig-headedness and steeped in self-display and self-reference (1973: 24). Less venomously, David Wilson found 'an unappealing sanctimonious edge to this comprehensive spite…' (1973: 128–129). In contrast, Charles Champlin observed that

> films are the man and Anderson – cool, guarded, rigorously unsentimental – finally preserves a certain detachment from his material and consequently from his audience. If we are engrossed by his events and impressed by his characters we are denied some ultimate, easy empathy and moved to thought and admiration rather more than to deep feeling (1973: 22).

There is something *to smile at* (albeit ironically) for anyone reflecting on the respective careers of François Truffaut and Lindsay Anderson. One cannot but note the many striking similarities between them: their absent fathers and distant mothers; their passionate championing of the cinema and their belief in the centrality of the author. Truffaut's *Cahiers* article, 'Une Certaine Tendance du Cinéma Français' is commonly regarded as the manifesto that launched both *la politique des auteurs* and the French New Wave. Anderson, a leading representative of the British New Wave, had financed and co-edited the film magazine *Sequence* until 1952. It is an instructive coincidence that Truffaut's love poem about the near-impossible process of directing a feature film, *La Nuit Américaine* (also 1973), won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1974, whereas *O Lucky Man!*, despite being heavily tipped, had not won the 1973 Cannes *Palme d'Or*.

In 2004 *Cahiers du Cinéma* marked the twentieth anniversary of Truffaut's death (Burdeau 2004: 12–15). Their retrospective commences with a key sequence from *La Nuit Américaine*. Truffaut, playing the director of the film within his film, steals a vase from the hotel where he and the film crew are staying, intending to use it as a prop. The *Cahiers* reading of the episode parallels our interpretation of Lindsay Anderson slapping Mick's face in that both men question the nature of cinematic reality.

> *Que nous dit cet episode? Que le cinéma déborde sans cesse hors de son enclos. Qu'il s'alimente à une source documentaire. Qu'il puise, vandale, dans la réalité. Mieux: qu'entre la vie et les films un partage s'opère – par exemple, celui d'un vase et de son bouquet. Partage dont le cinéma procède tout en le recueillant, puisque* La Nuit Américaine *combine film et film-dans-le-film. Leçon croisée: bien qu'arraché à la vie, le cinéma garde trace, à l'intérieur de lui-même, du rapt qu'il est.* (Burdeau 2004: 12)

> [The cinema ceaselessly outgrows its own limits. It takes advantage of documentary sources to feed off them: in the manner of a robber, it draws upon reality. More precisely, the cinema enables a meeting between life and the films themselves, just as the vase and the bouquet sequence exemplifies. The cinema both partakes in and of the very act of sharing as demonstrated by the film *La Nuit Americaine* which celebrates in its own right

> this ritual by allowing two experiences of the film to meet and merge: the film for the audience and the film within the film. A two-way lesson in short: the cinema has arguably been ripped off from life itself, and as a consequence it retains the trace of this very act of robbery within itself.][2]

Seeing the film as overflowing into the real – feeding off reality as one would gather data from a documentary… The description of film as a '*rapt*', a robbery from life, also sheds light on Anderson's intervention in his own creation. Mick's difficulty in smiling during the audition sequence effectively breaks down the fragile equilibrium that underpins the relation between cinema and reality. This is doubly persuasive in that McDowell found the smile hard to perform and had to repeat the takes for five days (LA 6/1/64/160–162, 16–18 June 1972; LA 6/1/64/169, 25 June 1972; LA 6/1/64/208, 7 August 1972). Meanwhile Mick's initial reluctance to give away part of his real self – his grin – to the fictional world which the mock audition foregrounds, mirrors Truffaut's theft in *La Nuit Américaine*. Anderson makes his actor/ protagonist aware of the exchange with reality that needs to operate within the cinema. For his part, Truffaut gives the flowers from the vase to the script-girl in recompense for stealing. Burdeau reads the flowerless vase as a metaphor for Truffaut's view of the way cinema moulds reality (2004: 13). Truffaut maintains the very equilibrium between life and art that Lindsay Anderson sought to challenge, a key difference between them.

The conscious choice on the part of Anderson and Truffaut to step into the screen as fictional versions of themselves suggests parallels with Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. If Brecht was intent on making the audience aware of the artifice underpinning any artistic representation, Truffaut and Anderson supplement his *technique* with their own variants. As previously noted, Anderson was less interested in alienating his audience than in 'focus[ing] their attention on its essential…import'. Arguably, the definition of this 'essential import' would account for the varying fortunes of Truffaut's and Anderson's films, *O Lucky Man!* being received with reactions much more divergent than Truffaut's very popular movie.

Truffaut chose to show the audience how mainstream cinematic reality is constructed, whereas in *O Lucky Man!* Anderson engaged in visual and thematic deconstruction of cinematic realism. 'Showing things how they really are' implies total commitment to both the message and the medium – which Anderson's film exemplifies better that Truffaut's. Since nothing is 'natural, normal, or self-evident', reflecting upon what is presented on screen requires the degree of acceptance and commitment that Zen philosophy calls for. Revealingly, Truffaut's alter ego in *La Nuit Américaine* never lets the audience know what function the stolen vase will serve in his film. As Burdeau remarks, Truffaut the 'cineaste' withholds as much information as he releases (Burdeau 2004: 12). Anderson bypasses any such ambiguity by stepping into the filmic space and challenging the dynamics operating between life and art.

When all is said and done, *O Lucky Man!* has epic qualities not only in its length, nor merely in observing the Brechtian paradigm (through does that too), but also by its deliberate inversion of the traditional epic framework. Whereas classic epic poetry surveys

the glorious history of an entire nation and celebrates its prospects, Anderson's vision of Britain presents a nation whose glory is a false memory deployed – but failing – to conceal meaner motives: greed, lust and the corrupting appetite for power. Whether a revelatory moment of Zen compensates in the dramatic balance for universal human unkindness and delusory hope is another matter altogether and (as the diverse opinions of the film's critics and Anderson's correspondents reveal) has always varied from one spectator to another.

## Notes

1. When released in France, the film was titled *Le meilleur des mondes possible*, a direct quote from *Candide*.
2. Translated by the authors.

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## Chapter 17

# Dead Ends and Private Roads: The 1970s Films of Barney Platts-Mills

James Leggott

Typically characterized as an underachiever ultimately exiled from British cinema, the director Barney Platts-Mills managed to produce only three feature films between the late 1960s and early 1980s. This rather underwhelming statistic does not make his career particularly distinctive, given that the 1970s was a notoriously fallow period for the British film industry, and that other more famous auteurs such as Ken Loach and Mike Leigh faced similar struggles getting cinematic work done. He may have shared their commitment to naturalistic, observational filmmaking, but unlike these two key figures of British realism, Platts-Mills did not benefit from the industry's renaissance in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, he would only complete one more film – and away from Britain – within the next three decades.

Platts-Mills made his feature films during a transitional phase for British social realist cinema. The influence of free cinema and the New Wave films can be felt in their austere but occasionally poeticized cinematography, their emphasis upon young people railing against domesticity, and also their masculinist bias. But the use of (mostly) non-professional actors dramatizing aspects of their own lives is also typical of the tendency in 1970s cinema for representational extension (Leggott 2008). As with the films made by Platts-Mills, the likes of *Akenfield* (Peter Hall, 1974), *Pressure* (Horace Ové, 1975) and *Nighthawks* (Ron Peck, 1978) derive their authenticity through being made with the close involvement of the respective communities depicted on screen. At the same time, Platts-Mills' sympathetic attitude to characters alienated by the mainstream economy anticipates the tone and subject matter of later youth and 'underclass' films, from *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) to *The Full Monty* (Peter Catteneo, 1997).

Although the Platts-Mills films of the period constitute a bridge between the British social realist cinema of the 1960s and 1980s, the director's career has been that of a progressive drift beyond the mainstream film industry. It began promisingly, when his father – a distinguished but anti-establishment barrister and Labour MP – met the director Lewis Gilbert at a cricket match, and took advice on an appropriate profession for his academically wayward son. Gilbert suggested a career for young Barney behind the camera, and by the early 1960s he was working as a trainee editor on feature films such as *The Greengage Summer* (Lewis Gilbert, 1961) and *A Kind of Loving* (John Schlesinger, 1962), before moving into television documentary programmes. By the late 1960s he had become committed to the idea of a low-budget, accessible cinema about working-class experience. His debut feature, *Bronco Bullfrog* (1969), made by his own production company Maya Films, was quickly followed by *Private Road* (1971), although the latter was embroiled in a complex distribution quarrel,

which seems to be one of the reasons why Platts-Mills exiled himself from the industry for the rest of the decade. There was an ever longer gap between his third film, *Hero* (1982), which was shown on Channel Four on Christmas Day in 1982, and *Zohra: A Moroccan Fairy Tale* (2007). In between, he worked on community training projects for prisoners, teenagers and the long-term unemployed. In the 1990s he became involved with 'Massive Videos', which gave disadvantaged young people in London and Liverpool experiences of filmmaking, and also founded the Portobello Film and Video Festival. At the turn of the century, he relocated to Morocco, where he wrote and filmed *Zohra*.

Blessed with a public school education, a network of wealthy patrons who would help bankroll his ventures, but also an innate sympathy with young people on the cusp of adulthood, Platts-Mills was very much the product of a 'peculiarly 1960s mixture of egalitarianism and privilege' (Sweet 2003: 12). In interviews, he has paid respect to his father, a campaigner for human and union rights who, in his capacity as barrister, also defended the Great Train Robbers and the Kray brothers. However, Platts-Mills has spoken of how of this double legacy of conformity and rebellion made him a 'typically confused English person' (Sweet 2003: 12), which fed into the humanistic outlook of this work. Patrician background aside, having left school as early as legally possible, Platts-Mills found a kinship with the disaffected teenagers he worked with and depicted on screen. He has cited the Labour Party's raising of the school leaving age to sixteen as the root cause of educational decline, breeding generations of resentful, disenfranchised school-leavers (Hanks 2003).

It is tempting to draw a parallel between the director's marginality within British film culture and the stories of youthful disaffection told by *Bronco Bullfrog*, *Private Road* and *Hero*. At first glance, these films, which Platts-Mills wrote and directed, appear to have little in common, other than a vicarious fame, either through an association with other cult films, or through a pioneering choice of setting.

Probably the best known of the three films, *Bronco Bullfrog* describes the experiences of delinquent teenagers in Stratford, East London. Its evocation of 'mod' culture (although some might dispute this) has given the film minor cult status, in spite – or maybe because – of its limited availability. Its inclusion alongside British youth classics such as *Quadrophenia* (Franc Roddam, 1979) in a 'Mods and Rockers' season at the National Film Theatre in 2003, around the time of its release on DVD (through the director's own website), triggered some nostalgic newspaper profiles of the film and its director, and it has been hailed as one of the lost gems of an era frequently regarded as a creative wasteland for the British film industry. In comparison, *Private Road* and *Hero*, which received a mixed critical reception at their time of release, have fallen into obscurity. *Private Road*, a bohemian re-tread of *Bronco Bullfrog*'s story of lovers on the run, is arguably best known for giving a central role to Bruce Robinson, who would draw upon the experience, and certain aspects of the plot (such as a recuperative trek to a remote part of Britain), for his well-loved feature *Withnail and I* (1987). Similarly, *Hero*, a magic realist fable based upon Celtic myth, has greater fame as the first feature length to be made in the Gaelic language, than as an idiosyncratic experiment in community filmmaking.

Despite their differing settings, there are sufficient commonalities of style, narrative and ideology to support the case for Platts-Mills as an auteur committed to a neo-realist ideal of fidelity to the community he depicts. All of his films invite an identification with young people struggling to find their place in the world, and take a non-judgmental stance upon their rebellion against conformity. A recurring thematic trope of films from the New Wave era, as well as those indebted to it, is the protagonist's fleeting escape from the city. Platts-Mills similarly maps his loosely plotted narratives of adolescent rebellion onto a topography of urban and non-urban spaces. In all three films, the romantic couples eventually take flight from the pressures of the home environment – whether familial, economic or tribal – but find their expected haven to be a disappointment. The director's visual style is mostly observational and undemonstrative, giving scope for the improvisations and interactions of non-professional actors. However, in a similar vein to Ken Loach's *Kes* (1969), Platts-Mills often locates a kind of harsh beauty in both the urban and rural landscape. A charming early sequence of *Bronco Bullfrog* showing trained pigeons flying over the gloomy Thames docks is indeed reminiscent of Loach's film in its evocation of the privations as well as pleasures of traditional working-class culture.

Platts-Mills' films are also notable for a tension between the inconsequential and the schematic. Risking tedium, he uses documentary-style scenes of mundane business and banter to sketch out the parameters of his characters' social lives and imaginations. Motorbikes are polished, breakfast cereal is hunted for, cups of tea are offered, visits to the movies are made and adolescents nervously touch their faces during awkward encounters with the opposite sex. This emphasis upon observational detail rather than plotting connects Platts-Mills' work with a more general tendency within British realist cinema, but there are occasions where the editing choices seem counter-intuitive, if not deliberately provocative. For example, *Private Road* contains a number of sequences that begin with seemingly irrelevant action, build towards some sort of revelation or conflict, but then end abruptly. A central section of *Bronco Bullfrog* is devoted to a night-time robbery of a railway depot by a teenage gang. In another film, this could easily have been a dramatic highpoint; here, the customary low-key filming style renders the event as humdrum as the prosaic happenings that precede and follow it.

Platts-Mills is also not afraid of using the long take to emphasize the inarticulacy and listlessness of his characters. There is a keynote scene in *Bronco Bullfrog* where two sets of teenage boys and girls sit down together in a café, in the presumed hope that some sort of courtship ritual will begin. After a minute or so of staring and silence, they get up and go their separate ways. This strangely touching encounter functions here as an index of inertia rather than as the kind of comedy of embarrassment found in, say, Mike Leigh's *Bleak Moments* (1971), which uses *longueurs* to evoke the gulf between the intellect and social skills of its tongue-tied characters. Leigh has often been accused of mockery, just as Ken Loach has been said to hold his characters at a distance, locking them into a grimly fatalistic pattern of consequences and impossible choices. Platts-Mills seems disinterested in social satire or commentary, in the main, and his open endings confirm that narrative is

a lesser priority than the representation of environment and character. At the same time, Platts-Mills' films are not as haphazardly constructed as they might initially seem. Their alternation between dramatically significant and inconsequential sequences not only serves their verisimilitude – in capturing something of the texture of 'real' life – but also subtly conveys the restlessness of the characters.

Although Platts-Mills evidently has a greater loyalty to his subjects and their environment than to more abstract questions of film form and theory, the problem of 'realism' does not go unacknowledged. The teenage gang-members of *Bronco Bullfrog* can be monosyllabic and undemonstrative, but they liven up considerably when discussing their involvement in robberies or street violence. The knowledge that the film was based upon the real experiences of the young actors, who were trained to recreate aspects of their daily lives as part of improvisatory workshops, gives a certain air of authenticity to the proceedings. But this also lends the film an element of self-reflexivity, particularly in the scenes where the teenagers brag, sometimes with a bit of poetic license, about their exploits. *Private Road* takes this further, by having as its central character a struggling novelist forced to compromise his artistic ideals by working as an advertising copywriter (his contribution is an idea for 'chewing gum for dogs'). Again, its creative evolution is foregrounded, not least by using one of the composers of its musical soundtrack to play a guitarist; the film begins with him strumming a song, occasionally acknowledging the camera. Although this Brechtian effect is not as pronounced as in Lindsay Anderson's *O Lucky Man!* (1973), the subsequent songs on the soundtrack do provide a loose commentary on the evolving relationship between the characters. Furthermore, when Peter is told by his publisher that this latest novel needs 'pruning, shaping, disciplining', one detects that the filmmaker is deflecting such inevitable criticisms of his own story-telling techniques.

There are also recurring scenes in which the characters express their playfulness through wearing unfamiliar clothes. In *Bronco Bullfrog*, two pals in hiding from the police wear (stolen) silk dressing gowns around their temporary home, while in *Private Road*, the young city-dweller marooned in the countryside dons the tweedy garb of a country squire in the hope it will improve his chances of shooting a rabbit. Taken together, the films define adolescence itself as a form of performance, in drawing a connection between the young adult's potential for role-play and the liberating improvisatory work of the actor. In *Hero*, the significance of story-telling for cultural and national identity is emphasized, partly through its project of using disadvantaged Glaswegian teenagers to recreate a Gaelic myth, and also through using a bard figure to explain and interact with the story.

If Platts-Mills' feature films make up a coherent body of work, his short documentary *Everybody's an Actor, Shakespeare Said* (1968), made before the release of *Bronco Bullfrog*, and featuring many of the same actors, is a confident and succinct statement of intent. Alternating between footage of Stratford teenagers improvising scenes as part of Joan Littlewood's drama workshop project, and sequences showing them at home, work and at play, the film is – in almost every respect – a manifesto of Platts-Mills' style, working method and creative purpose.

In *Everybody's an Actor*, the teenage boys are shown undertaking improvised scenarios that are either fanciful (such as an encounter between the 'richest man in the world' and one of his servants), satirical (local dignitaries bribing councillors to resolve the 'cark parking' problem in Stratford) or based upon real events in their lives. As one of the participants notes, this latter exercise is 'not really acting, but remembering', and the emphasis is upon boisterous confrontation, whether with parents, employers, the police, school authorities or – a little unsettlingly – a gang of 'coons' who they provoke in a street battle. This tribal battle is acted out with particular gusto, with gleeful use of racist epithets and impersonation of West Indian dialect, and one suspects that other 'realist' filmmakers – such as Ken Loach, whose contemporaneous *Poor Cow* (1967) is referenced through a poster on the studio wall – would have left this sequence on the cutting-room floor, lest it reflect badly on their working-class subjects.

However, it is the scenes of the film in which Platts-Mills captures the everyday texture of the boys' lives, rather than the 'theatrically' re-enacted scenes of confrontation, that anticipate the downbeat tone and observational style of *Bronco Bullfrog* and *Private Road*. The film begins by following the gang as they mooch through town at night, looking in shop windows, swearing and vaguely talking about beating someone up, and it ends with a shot of them wandering purposelessly through a rubbish-strewn area around a train depot. The lingering mood is of a latent aggression generated by boredom, and – for these boys – only kept in check by their temporary theatrical project. One is heard to say: 'We've got to get out Stratford, otherwise we'd go mad', while another – this time, Del Walker, who would go on to take a lead role in *Bronco Bullfrog* – explains to Platts-Mills this is 'better than hanging about the streets', which is all he had ever done before.

With hindsight, *Everybody's an Actor* shows Platts-Mills honing a strategy for dramatising reality that goes beyond Littlewood's workshop methods. These are subtly undermined through a montage sequence set to The Small Faces' song 'Lazy Sunday', which moves between an anarchic improvisatory session in the theatre and footage of the boys playing football outside. An irritated Littlewood is heard to exclaim: 'Can't we do that with a little more sense?' One assumes that she would not have approved of the director's prominent use of pop music, here and in his subsequent films, to generate atmosphere and narrative momentum; the energy of youth, however inarticulately expressed, is given priority over structural coherence.

Following the closure of the Play Barn, its participants approached Platts-Mills with suggestions for a feature. The resulting film, *Bronco Bullfrog*, is the story of a couple of teenage runaways who find refuge with a delinquent also on the run from the law. The performances convey the same mixture of bravado and boredom diagnosed by the earlier documentary. The lingo is authentically impenetrable at times; there is much talk of 'tasty' women, potential 'jobs' (they mean theft, not employment) and playful homophobic banter ('Get off me nuts, ponce!'). Exclamations of boredom are plentiful. 'Boring, ain't it?' Del says to his mate. Elaborating a little, he tells his father that there is 'nothing much to do round here: wish there was somewhere we could go', and his boss that he is 'sick of it, no money,

nothing to do, think I'll get away'. Courtship rituals and pleasantries are stripped to the bare essentials, such as the perfunctory dialogue in one scene between Del and Irene, a girl he has just met. 'Do you wanna come out with us, tomorrow night, come up for you?' he proposes. 'Yeah, alright then', is her reply, to which he briskly concludes proceedings with 'alright, ta da'. Similarly, upon arrival at the hospital where his friend is recovering from an assault, Del gets straight to the point. 'Who dunnit?' he asks, before proffering grapes, 'Do you want me to get him?'

Such surliness would be unsympathetic were it not shown to be tinged with adolescent gaucheness, and also a very English commitment to certain aspects of social etiquette. In a few sequences, we share Del's nervousness as he waits for the right moment to make a proposition or ask a favour of an authority figure. Having brought Irene home to meet his disapproving father, Del waits patiently in the living room while a toilet flushes offscreen. When his father eventually arrives, and says nothing, Del attempts to smooth out the tension with a customary English tactic. 'Do you want a cup of tea?' he asks. 'No? Well, I want one'. Despite eventual squabbles with parents, who label them 'lippy' and 'saucy', Del and Irene are not utterly disrespectful of their elders; Del seems to take pride in his job as a welder's apprentice, and shows an interest in his boss's pigeon loft.

The boys seek respite from their workaday lives through tribal violence and robberies, but as with the (far more loquacious) characters of Gary Oldman's *Nil by Mouth* (1997), one senses that it is the anticipation and re-telling of such incidents that renders them meaningful. Del and pals are at their most animated when contemplating what might bring 'thrills' and 'kicks'. Under the guidance of the legendary Bronco Bullfrog, a free agent fresh out of Borstal, Del's gang progresses from an amateurish robbery of a café to the unloading of electrical goods from a railway depot; 'better than fucking cakes', says Bronco mockingly.

At the same time, the café robbery that begins the film is a metaphor for the filmmaker's own position on the fringes of the industry; Platts-Mills and his subjects are literally 'breaking in'. An early sequence shows Del ushering in a crowd of youngsters through the back door of a cinema. The boys pay little heed to the entertainment (which sounds like a Bond film), instead using it as opportunity to clown about, irritate older filmgoers and get the attention of the opposite sex. The double alienation of the characters, and the film itself, from the cultural mainstream is given further emphasis by a scene in which the young couple find themselves unable to afford tickets for a West End cinema, and decamp to a local burger bar. Life would eventually imitate art, as *Bronco Bullfrog* would in time be pulled from a London cinema to make way for the royal premiere of *The Three Sisters* (Laurence Olivier, 1970). Legend has it that Platts-Mills and members of the *Bronco* cast were on hand to jeer and throw eggs at Princess Anne as she arrived on the red carpet.

Such scenes of forced entry play a part in the film's depiction of young adulthood as imaginatively and geographically limiting. The film's main achievement, much in the same way as Ken Loach's *Kes*, is to use a geography of exclusive or imprisoning spaces to sketch out the social and economic parameters of the characters. Repelled or alienated from places of family, work, courtship and leisure, the runaway couple struggle (and seemingly fail)

to find a place of their own. In a conversation with Irene, Del signals his anxiety about working indoors, where she seems content to be. This suggestion of a gendered topography of exterior and interior spaces is given further emphasis by the unsympathetic depiction of Irene's mother as a controlling single parent, fussing over tidiness, and demanding that Del wipes his boots upon arrival to her home.

Once their respective parents voice their disapproval at their relationship, Del and Irene pursue two escape routes. The countryside home of Del's uncle provides a picturesque escape from the city until it becomes apparent that employment prospects in the area are poor. Nor is it a place of sexual freedom; Del and Irene's passionate roll about in a grassy patch is interrupted by the noise of passing children. The romance of the open road is wittily undermined in a scene describing a stop at a glum motorway service station, a very different place to the café visited by the rebellious heroes of *If…* (Lindsay Anderson, 1968), similarly bound for freedom on their moped. Del's pal Bronco represents the freedom but also the anxieties of the outlaw existence. Staying in his squat for a short time before the police catch up with them, Del and Irene enjoy a brief but unconventional dose of domesticity. They transform a house furnished only by stolen goods into a place of adolescent play, where women can wear men's shirts, working-class boys can wear silken dressing gowns and teenagers can eat Sugar Puffs out of a pan. This motif of fluid gender roles in repeated in *Private Road*, where the romantic couple similarly exchange and wear each other's clothes.

Having taken a leisurely pace throughout much of its running time, *Bronco Bullfrog* accelerates towards its ambiguous ending with incident-rich scenes that remind the viewer of many recurrent tropes of social realist cinema. Having been advised by his boss that his absconding with Irene (technically an abduction since she is fifteen) will bar him from a career for the rest of his life, Del seems ready to take her home. But, as in many a Ken Loach or neo-realist film, the fates conspire against him. His beloved bike – and any likelihood of mobility – is crushed by a lorry, he is beaten up by a rival gang as he walks through a tunnel and he ends up assaulting the policeman sent to find him. The future is bleak, but the film's unresolved ending strands the lovers by the banks of the Thames. The final freeze-frame of the couple at this watery threshold conjures memories of *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (François Truffaut, 1959). However, the image that truly lingers in the mind comes from a few seconds earlier. In another Truffaut *homage*, this time to the joyful bridge scene of *Jules et Jim* (François Truffaut, 1962), the youthful trio of Del, Irene and Bronco run away from their flat, giddy with excitement rather than anxiety at the consequences of their actions.

The film's basic plot – a young couple on the run from a disapproving family – is recapitulated, together with its key themes and structural method, in *Private Road*. Peter and Anne, a budding novelist and a publisher's secretary, may be a few rungs higher on the social ladder, but Anne's patrician, protective family is as damaging as that of Ken Loach's *Family Life* (1971). Platts-Mills' films inescapably invite criticism for their depiction of passive young female characters. The slumped-shouldered Anne – 'little Anne', according to her family – is seen at one point being distracted by a film poster, for *Anne of the Thousand Days* (Charles Jarrott, 1969), appropriately enough, as she carries a bundle of clothing to a laundrette. This

little vignette of drudgery might be interpreted as a satirical swipe at Peter's narcissism, were the film itself not so focused upon his struggle to define and express himself. Peter's circle of acquaintances represents a broad spectrum of possibilities for the young intellectual about town. His playmate Stephen is an affable drug addict who personifies the 'self-indulgent' generation that Anne's father thunders against, but he has little in common with another friend's highly politicized girlfriend. In an expression of the filmmaker's own suspicion of political statements, we see his friend Henry earnestly watching a television report about youth riots whilst Peter and Anne take the opportunity for a smooch in the background.

As with *Bronco Bullfrog*, the mobility of the characters is an indicator of autonomy, or the lack of it. For example, the addled, dependent Stephen talks dreamily of a career in aviation. The docile Anne is mocked by her parents for having failed her driving test, whilst her father's upper-middle-class assumption of entitlement is conveyed when he stops his vehicle in front of a 'no parking' sign. On an early date, Peter and Anne wander on foot through a romantically nocturnal London, but the restrictions of the city later propels them, this time by car, to a rural corner of the country. However, they soon tire of the roles they are forced into – respectively, hunter-gatherer and dutiful wife – and head back to London. The songs heard as part of the film's musical score also project scepticism about the supposed link between travel and transcendence. They include such world-weary lyrics as 'can you tell me when I'm traveling where I do not want to go' and 'I always wanted to be a racing driver, but I never liked the smell of cars'. Ultimately, the 'private road' conjured up by the title is revealed to be interpersonal as much as geographical. Peter is no more emotionally articulate than Del in *Bronco Bullfrog*, and the nature of his relationship becomes unclear when she has an abortion. *Private Road* concludes with Peter's reunion with an apparently 'clean' Stephen, who criticises him for his *bourgeois* aspirations and for treating Anne like a possession. With Anne and domesticity now out of the picture, Stephen attempts to wake Peter from his imaginative slumber by helping him to steal a new type-writer, and asking him 'is there anything else you want?' Peter's reply – a simple 'yes' – brings to the film to an end, but it is unclear whether this a moment of Zen-like enlightenment or something far more mundane.

A similar question of achievement hovers over the director himself. Albeit slender, his body of work is remarkably coherent in method and sensibility, and prescient too of later developments in British realist cinema. It is therefore to be regretted that he completed just one more feature between *Private Road* and the turn of the century. *Hero* is his least convincing film, hampered by a disconnection between the experience of its participants – working-class teenagers from Glasgow – and their recreation of a story from Scottish legend. And yet, the story of its genesis, as glimpsed in the accompanying 'making of' documentary *Building the Well and Robbing the Till: The Boys at Barnakil*, is itself testimony to why Platts-Mills' long exile from feature filmmaking is to be regretted. Just as *Everybody's an Actor* had verified the authenticity of *Bronco Bullfrog*, so *Building the Well* explains the logic behind the *Hero* project. The documentary alternates between scenes of the 'Young Buck' gang causing trouble in Drumchapel – swearing, bragging about what they have shoplifted and stolen, and

arriving too late to sign on the dole – and the same teenagers working peacefully together in Argyll to reconstruct the deserted village of Barnakil, the setting of the film. Unflinching and at times uncomfortable, the film gives a rare window into the lives of a generation rarely humanised on screen. As with all of Platts-Mills' films it gives them purpose, voice and dignity, and confirms that a better advocate for the aspirations of the British social realist tradition could not be hoped for.

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## Chapter 18

# Landscape Gardens in *The Ruling Class*

Mark Broughton

The early 1970s formed a highly significant moment in the history of film landscapes in Britain. Having employed 16mm for a wide range of urban plays in the 1960s, television companies began to apply the gauge to a number of rural dramas. To some extent, this shift from city to country had happened earlier in cinema, when directors Tony Richardson and John Schlesinger moved from urban social realism to period landscape films, with, respectively, *Tom Jones* (1963) and *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967). However, two country house films directed by émigrés were released at the start of the 1970s which represented a more important turning point: American Joseph Losey's *The Go-Between* (1971) and Hungarian Peter Medak's *The Ruling Class* (1972). Both of these films broke new ground in their deployment of country house locations and, in doing so, engaged critically with the history of the English landscape garden. Richardson's and Schlesinger's films marked a renewed emphasis on rural locations; Losey and Medak developed innovative landscape film styles in response to garden form and history.

Both *The Go-Between* and *The Ruling Class* were chosen to represent Britain in the Cannes Festival competition, in 1971 and 1972 respectively (Myro 1971: 15–16; Davis 1972). This suggests that on release they were perceived – at least, in one official quarter – to be similarly representative of British filmmaking at this point. Circumstantial evidence also suggests that Medak's agenda was similar to Losey's. Medak had been employed as director on *Figures in a Landscape* (1970), a film about two political prisoners on the run across a barren landscape in an unidentified dictatorship, with Peter O'Toole contracted to play one of the escaped convicts (Medak 2001). After disagreements with the film's producer, John Kohn, Medak and O'Toole left the production. Losey took over, only to become as disillusioned as Medak (Caute 1994: 233). As Losey then went on to make an aesthetically more satisfying figure-in-a-landscape narrative with *The Go-Between*, so Medak (with O'Toole's backing) came to direct *The Ruling Class*. Both of these films refine *Figures in a Landscape*'s theme of a power struggle between individuals and a dominant ideology: a struggle significantly enacted through, and articulated in, a landscape. Like *The Go-Between*, *The Ruling Class* situates the confrontation in a more concrete generic setting: the English country house. This essay will focus on *The Ruling Class*, the lesser known and more idiosyncratic of the two, but a comparison with *The Go-Between* will help to clarify its significance as a landscape film. Unlike *The Go-Between*, *The Ruling Class* has been unjustifiably neglected: a consideration of its approach to landscape reveals a complex, innovative film that is at least the equal of both its source text and Losey's film.

*The Ruling Class* was adapted from Peter Barnes's play, which was first performed in 1968 at the Nottingham Playhouse (Barnes 1969). The plot is explicitly concerned with landownership. The thirteenth Earl of Gurney dies, bequeathing his estate to his son. The son, Jack is a paranoid schizophrenic, who believes he is J.C., the god of love and that he is betrothed to Marguerite Gautier, Dumas *fils*'s 'Lady of the Camellias'. The family is desperate for J.C. to produce an heir, so that they can gain control of the estate. They employ an actress, Grace Shelley (a cockney, working-class version of Grace Kelly), to play the 'Lady of the Camellias'. J.C. marries her, but, after psychiatric treatment, assumes a new identity: he becomes Jack the Ripper and murders her. The play is divided into two halves. In the first, Jack is J.C., the god of love, and in the second, he is Jack the Ripper.

Barnes's play attacks many traits of the upper class: its repressive sexual mores, its ecclesiastical influence, its artistic tastes and its landed power. This multivalence corresponds to the play's range of cultural references; the dialogue is replete with references, allusions and quotations, and the characters often burst into popular songs.[1] The play's frequent landscape scenes, however, are not referential. The only visible prop is a minimalist device: a metal sun is lowered from the flies and the footlights are lit. The artificiality of the metal sun is rendered more salient by the displacement of its beam onto the footlights, at the exact opposite end of the stage. The evolving mood of the play is signified by the pathetic fallacy, as the story moves from sunlight, to rain and thunder. A conventional landscape trope is thus employed, without any landscape being visible. Like the Brechtian disclosure of the metal thunder sheets in Peter Brook's 1962 production of *King Lear*, the metal sun and footlights make transparent the fallaciousness of the pathetic fallacy. The minimalist scenery is central to the play's theme of landscape as power. The impetus of the whole play is a struggle for possession of a country estate. The insubstantiality of the landscape as presented on stage points to the fragility of the ruling class's landed power. The very materiality of the land as a possession is denied by the play.

The film, on the other hand contains a sizeable quantity and diversity of country estate scenes shot on location. Barnes scripted several new and extended sequences, stretching the play to what many reviewers described as a 'film of inordinate length' (Combs 1972: 145; McGillivray 1972: 8). Most of these are set in, or pertain to, landscapes. If the substitution of location shots for the minimalist landscape of Barnes's play was predictable, the breadth and detail of the location work was anything but conventional. Indeed, *The Ruling Class* combined the new methods Losey had employed on *The Go-Between* with some idiosyncratic devices of its own.

When it was released, *The Go-Between* represented a new form of landscape fiction film. It was shot almost entirely at one country house location, Melton Constable Hall. The interiors and exteriors of the film's fictional estate correspond to those of the location. Rather than building a set, Carmen Dillon redecorated the dilapidated interior of Melton Constable Hall (Taylor 1970: 202). Shots from inside the house, looking through the windows, link interior to exterior. It is this sustained continuity of space that broke new ground in the representation of the country house on film; the *découpage* traces the aesthetic and socio-economic reach

of the estate, from the rooms of the house to an outlying farm. Losey emphasizes that the visible manifestation of the aristocracy's power is the aesthetic system which accompanies it, namely the landscape. While the ostensibly taut social fabric of the estate is unravelled through the characteristic pauses, repetitions and awkwardness of Harold Pinter's dialogue, the estate's power relations are deconstructed by Losey's representation of landscape. The film's historical materialist portrayal of a country house anticipated Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973) and John Barrell's *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (1980), two of the most influential marxist contributions to landscape historiography.

Medak's approach was somewhat different, though with similar political concerns. *The Ruling Class* joins country estate locations 90 miles apart: Harlaxton Manor in Lincolnshire and Cliveden in Buckinghamshire. However, although the film successfully synthesizes disparate locations into an organic fictional whole, the emphasis of *The Ruling Class* remains one of atomism; the individual contribution of each section of the gardens is of more consequence to the film's discourse than the character of any single estate.

Gurney House itself is portrayed by Harlaxton's exteriors and interiors, though most of the scenes set inside Gurney House were filmed in studio sets, designed by Peter Murton, which painstakingly reproduced rooms in Harlaxton. The detail of Murton's sets could be said to have revived the studio artistry of 1940s and early 1950s English films (Christie 2001). However, his reproduction of Harlaxton's interior architecture also exemplifies the film's attention to local detail: the total recreation of an actual country house interior was anything but traditional. This emphasis on the local is indicative of the significance placed on the specific locations utilized for exterior settings. The gardens at Harlaxton were used for the scenes in which J.C. talks to the plants, watches Grace/'Marguerite' with his telescope and presents a bunch of flowers to his wife, as well as some of Jack's horseback adventures. The Long Garden in Cliveden is where J.C. woos Grace: the later picturesque scene when Jack goes hunting on foot was shot in Cliveden's Russian Valley. In actuality, none of these gardens was strictly 'original' when first landscaped; they are all pastiches. None of them dates from the era(s) referenced in its design. As Pamela Tudor-Craig argues, the house and landscapes at Harlaxton epitomize Victorian revivalism:

> The difference between Victorian architecture and other revivals is a double one. The Victorians set about resuscitating everything at once instead of one thing at a time; and they did it, not in the sense of reverent imitation, but of open rivalry. Every aspect of the Victorian ambiance can be demonstrated succinctly at Harlaxton. (Tudor-Craig 1984)

Harlaxton was built and landscaped from 1834–1855 (Murden 1976). Its garden style tends, like parts of the house, to the Baroque (Pevsner and Harris 1963: 565). Cliveden's Long Garden is also a Baroque pastiche, though more broadly inclusive. As the National Trust guides to Cliveden state, the garden was conceived by William Waldorf Astor after he bought Cliveden in 1893 (Marsden and Garnett 2002: 19): his 'inspiration was clearly the Renaissance and seventeenth-century gardens he had known during his years as US

Minister in Italy, with their statuary and formal evergreens' (Boström, Marsden and Wall 2001: 73).

The central beds of the garden were developed in the 1920s by Norah Lindsay, who was influenced by Roman and Florentine garden styles (Marsden and Garnett 2002: 19). The topiary; the box hedges; the masquer statuary, which refers to the *Commedia dell'arte*; the exedra: the combination of these elements produces a wide range of allusions to garden styles, from classical designs to both Italianate and English restoration masques, variously theatrical and all formal. This breadth is characteristic of Cliveden as a whole; since the nineteenth century, Cliveden has had one of the most complex, varied garden designs in the whole of England. The layout of its Russian Valley, for instance, is diametrically opposed in design style to that of the Long Garden. The Russian Valley was 'improved' by the Duke of Westminster and John Fleming from 1869 to 1872 (Pevsner and Williamson 1994: 258). With its serpentine, irregular shape and wooded banks, it encompasses the picturesque tradition, which had been widely popularized in the nineteenth century. Cliveden's unusual variety complements the diversity of the film's non-landscape cultural references.

The gardens in the film are all pastiches and thus consistent with the film's tendency towards references to references. For example, the Ur-text of *La Dame aux Camélias*, the 1848 novel by Dumas *fils*, is absent from the film. Characters mention two well-known adaptations of the novel, Dumas *fils*'s own 1852 play version and Verdi's opera, *La Traviata*, but never the original novel. Similarly, when it is revealed that the 'cured' fourteenth Earl of Gurney has become Jack the Ripper, the *mise-en-scène* and score suggest that he has appropriated his new persona from popular narrativizations of the Ripper murders – a comic strip and a music hall ballad – rather than from empirical documentation of the case.

There is, then, no sense of secure referential anchorage in this film. As Bernard F. Dukemore points out, Barnes's plays' 'exploration of illusion and reality' draws on the work of Pirandello and Brecht (Dukemore 1995: ix); the estrangement produced by references in *The Ruling Class* has a levelling effect, through which the diegesis becomes a self-evident array surfaces. The film's explicit dissection of landownership must be seen in this context. Whereas landscape in *The Go-Between* is deployed to fathom a profound social structure of surface urbanity and underlying violence, the onscreen landscapes in *The Ruling Class* become components in a self-evident referential patchwork of surfaces.

The specific locations and the way they are deployed in the narrative bolster *The Ruling Class*'s anti-naturalism. Reviews of the film argued that its landscape locations introduce an incongruous naturalism to the discourse, which detracts from the play's narrative. A representative article asserted that 'use of this Lincolnshire setting with well-drilled flower beds, grass and trees…add up to a realism which conflicts seriously with the work of a witty playwright whose declared intention was to cock a snook at naturalism' (Goodlad 1972). However, the reviewer erroneously presumes that naturalism in film is the same as naturalism in theatre and that landscape gardens themselves are necessarily naturalistic. 'Naturalism' is a problematic term because of its historical contingency and its cross-disciplinary usage. At any one time 'naturalism' has had different applications to various

forms: garden design and landscapes in paintings, novels, plays or film sets and locations. Barnes's play is anti-naturalistic in two senses. Its minimalistic landscape set contrasts with the conventions of landscape stage design that became pre-eminent from the early nineteenth century: serpentine depth and historically accurate architecture. Its genre hybridity, which encompasses melodrama, the pastoral, popular song, farce and satire, also places it in opposition to the social realism prevalent in 1950s and 1960s British theatre.

In film production, the term 'naturalistic landscape' has frequently been used to mean location footage, but this has never precluded the use of locations for fantasy or alienation effects.[2] Indicatively, two key directors of Brechtian theatre in Britain, Peter Brook and Peter Hall, both made location-rich films: *The Lord of the Flies* (Brook, 1963) and *Akenfield* (Hall, 1974). Likewise, gardens *in situ* or on screen do not always mimetically represent 'nature'. Formal gardens consist of abstract design and artifice. The picturesque landscape, which in English garden history succeeded the formal garden, tends towards a naturalistic arrangement, with artifice all but concealed in the composition. However, picturesque landscapes often contain gothic props, which tip the composition towards self-conscious myth and fantasy.

The film version of *The Ruling Class* depicts both garden modes; the formal and the picturesque are utilized to structure the film. *The Ruling Class* pursues Jack's transformation from J.C. to Jack the Ripper through a landscaped trajectory, from formal garden settings for J.C.'s escapades to a picturesque backdrop for Jack the Ripper's hunting exploits. The halves of the film contrast in pathetic fallacy; J.C.'s happiness is rendered in sunshine, while Jack the Ripper is pictured in gloom. The bipartite structure of the narrative is self-consciously mirrored in the way landscape changes in the film. When, as J.C., O'Toole's character pursues an exuberant courtship and marriage with Grace Shelley, an apposite context is provided by a series of formal landscapes mixing allegorical, theatrical and emblematic elements. Conversely, his hunting exploits as Jack the Ripper are plotted through several expansive picturesque landscapes.

The film mobilizes certain generalized historical associations pertinent to each landscape mode. Thus, after J.C. declares that a 'love isn't just for one season', a ritual of courtly love – or an ironic imitation of it – is depicted next to yew topiaries resembling birds: emblems of mating. Allegorical gardens of love, ubiquitous in the Renaissance, often personified flowers and animals (Hussey 1967: 22); in an earlier scene, J.C. takes this prosopopoeia literally, when he talks to the flowers ('No water in days? Sorry!'). Later he presents flowers to Grace Shelley, reassuring her: 'It's all right. They agreed to be cut.' In the topiary scene, this anthropomorphism is inverted as J.C. and Grace (dressed as Dumas *fils*'s Marguerite Gautier) court each other, behaving as if they were birds.

The allegorical tendency of the scene is coupled with elements from other types of formal gardens, the products of other *zeitgeists*. Topiary was at its most prominent in English gardening during the seventeenth century. J.C.'s religious references, especially his allusion to Eve later in the scene, are incongruous in such a setting: formal elements like topiary, emblems 'that fallen man imposed on nature', were excluded from seventeenth-century

representations of Eden (Hunt 1997: 77). On the other hand, topiary could be found in the garden theatres which became popular in the seventeenth century, with the construction of London's pleasure gardens at Ranelagh and Vauxhall (Hunt 1994: 49–73). The scene opens with J.C. finding 'Marguerite' on an exedra, or conversation seat. Exedras were a recurrent feature of garden theatres. As John Dixon Hunt points out, in their basic form they 'were both vantage points whence to watch other events and stages where visitors themselves were made to feel they constituted the garden dramas' (Hunt 1994: 54). This reflexivity, in which garden encounters are narrativized and players in garden scenes become self-aware, inflects J.C. and Grace's meeting. They are both playing roles, J.C. as the god of love, Grace as Marguerite, even though J.C. has confused his role with his real identity. They pursue each other as birds in a static high-angle crane shot, the set-up of which is repeated after two intervening close-ups. In these high-angle shots, the camera's vantage point is raised as if seated in the gods in a theatre, while the *mise-en-scène* is entirely theatrical; a symmetrical garden is presented, with an arboreal backdrop, a hedge dado and discrete coulisses in the form of topiary, which indicate the sides of the 'stage'. The general impression is of a proscenium arch theatre with tiered seating, while the central, self-consciously theatrical prop on stage is the exedra.

The exedra neatly conflates the two *milieux* of *La Dame aux Camélias*: in Dumas *fils*'s novel and play, Marguerite frequents the theatres of Paris, where she is seen holding a bunch of camellias. With Armand she escapes the excesses of the city, to find a short-lived happiness in the country, at Bougival. The house which they rent there is also memorable for its garden, 'in front of the house, was a green lawn as smooth as velvet, and, behind the building, a small wood full of mysterious hideaways' (Dumas *fils* 2000: 120). The iconographies of Marguerite's two worlds are unified in the theatrical garden device of the exedra. As with the rest of the garden, the comedy derives from the quietly iconoclastic conflation of disparate elements. The tragedy of Marguerite's inexorable return from the restorative gardens of Bougival to the theatrical dissipation of Paris is succinctly and disrespectfully undone when the two distinct spheres of activity are artfully elided in *The Ruling Class*'s exedra.

For all of its popular currency as a melodrama, Dumas *fils*'s original novel has been seen as symptomatic of a trend of literary realism in the mid-nineteenth century (Coward 2000: xvi). *The Ruling Class*'s subversion of *La Dame aux Camelias* is, by extension, also a subversion of a particular mode of popular realism. The reflexive emphasis on theatricality and performance in the scene undermines its own credibility. The garden is unpacked by the film as a mythological space. The garden becomes an exteriorization of J.C.'s psychology. He sutures the landscape into a fantasy of courtly and free love; his fantasies are in dialogue with the landscape's design. However, the *mise-en-scène* seems to collude in the scheme against J.C. He later alludes to Judas in the middle of a symmetrical hedge pattern. A rising crane shot reveals the hedge, emphasizing the sense of entrapment; the shot suggests that J.C. is subjugated to the designs of the aristocracy with the same stringency as the formal garden is cultivated. The film's association of the formal garden with imprisonment is reinforced by

its scenes set in a lunatic asylum, where the inmates stroll through the formal grounds of a converted country house in which they have been incarcerated. The representation of a lunatic asylum as a country house also implies that all country houses are lunatic asylums.

This subversiveness extends to the picturesque landscape. The revelation of Jack's insanity in the shooting scene conveys the failure of his courtly dreams, equating that failure with landed power, as represented by a picturesque landscape. While design in the formal garden ultimately figures the ruthless circumscription of J.C.'s fantasies of courtly love, the picturesque's concealment empowers Jack and poses a threat to his family. The landscape in the shooting scene is naturalistic in that it largely represents 'nature'. However, farce is introduced into the space, thus undermining its naturalism. The distinctive aesthetic feature of the picturesque is usually defined as its pleasing partial concealments. This characteristic is farcically subverted here: a poacher, hidden by the trees, is shot in the buttocks and forced to reveal himself, while Jack's cousin is comically entwined in brambles.

Jack uses the stereotype of the aristocrat hunting to conceal his madness from the others. After Jack's family have left, his madness is revealed. There is a cut across the 180 degree axis to an unexpectedly vertiginous high-angle shot. The camera gradually cranes out, equating his maniacal monologue with the surrounding picturesque space. His lurching posture is paralleled by the tree. This oddly tilting, hollow tree reflects the decline of Jack into the gothic, like the autumnal leaves on the ground. While J.C.'s bird impression in the courting scene mimics the topiary of the formal garden, here his bird-like flapping anticipates the following shot, which entirely undoes any of the picturesque naturalism. We see a clichéd shot of birds in a gothic silhouette, inexplicably abandoning a bare tree. The cut from a tree with falling leaves to a bare tree seems to accelerate autumn unnaturally. The historical relationship between the picturesque and the gothic is thus exaggerated.

While the formal garden frames and contains J.C.'s madness, cultivating his fantasies so that they can be exploited by his family, here Jack's madness is hidden from his relatives. The film parodies both the holistic, open layout of the formal garden and the introversion of picturesque concealment. Neither scene is ultimately naturalistic. They both dramatize a correspondence between garden design and the protagonist's madness. His arc comically straddles the divide between the courtly allegories of the formal garden and the pleasing partial concealments of the picturesque.

None of the landscapes is of any real 'depth', either in terms of narrative complexity or historical authenticity. Instead, the fictional world of landscape constructed by the mixture of Cliveden and Harlaxton's gardens acts as a 'heterotopia of deviation'. Foucault's term 'heterotopia' describes

> real places – places that do exist…which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted…The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. (Foucault 1986: 24–25)

Indicatively, two of Foucault's examples of heterotopias are the cinema and the garden. So, even at a pro-filmic stage, Harlaxton and Cliveden are heterotopias. The sub-category, 'heterotopia of deviation', is where 'individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required norm are placed. Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals' (Foucault 1986: 25). Many of the country houses which were sold by their aristocratic owners in the twentieth century became such heterotopias of deviation. With its parallel between a lunatic asylum and a country house, *The Ruling Class* implies that the country house garden itself is a heterotopia of deviation, where aristocratic eccentrics play out their fantasies; like the landscapes in Ken Russell's *Women in Love* (1969), *The Ruling Class*'s landscapes are spaces of performance, of the gestural and the fantastical. To stretch Foucault's argument slightly, the film is a meta-heterotopia, in that it juxtaposes two historical archetypes of garden heterotopia in a structural relation, by linking gardens at Cliveden and Harlaxton in a fictional whole. This dialectical atavism differentiates *The Ruling Class* from previous landscape films. By introducing a structuralist diagnosis of the country estate, it predates the structural avant-garde landscape films which would appear later in the decade, as well as Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), which also pointedly mismatches shots from disparate country house locations.

Medak's structural diagnosis of a fictive estate is firmly 'grounded': the locations were chosen with meticulous regard to specific associations. The sense of aristocratic lineage is bolstered by the use of Cliveden, as the original estate was built by George Villiers, from whom James Villiers, who plays J.C.'s cousin, is directly descended (Anon 1998). At the same time, Cliveden contributes to the film's aura of topicality and post-1968 subversiveness. John Profumo's brief affair with Christine Keeler in 1961 began in Cliveden's grounds (Crathorne 1995: 184–190). The film's themes of seduction and unwitting self-destruction become all the more politically resonant when placed in the context of Cliveden. Like Keeler, Grace is an objectified woman: a lower-class parvenu, who has been permitted access to the estate for her sexual charms. J.C.'s fear of what he calls 'Kremlin plots' acquires a broader significance when we see Cliveden.

Following Losey's example, Medak's focus is therefore partly local. However, the role of *The Ruling Class*'s landscape in structuring plot is based on general typology. It represents the country estate as a place where aristocratic eccentrics play out their fantasies, with disastrous social consequences. In doing so, it juxtaposes two historical archetypes of garden design. The gardens, like the film's other cultural references, are pastiches detached from their provenance. It is apt that a film which attacks the aristocracy denies the aesthetic pedigree of the ruling class's landscapes.

## Notes

1. Such occasional, parodic shifts into the musical genre are more commonly associated with the work of Dennis Potter from 1978 onwards, but it is important to note that Barnes's use of this technique predated Potter's by a decade (Woolland 2004: 267).
2. Michael Powell uses the term 'naturalistic landscape' to describe both back-projected and Technicolor location footage (Powell 2000: 166; 323).

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## Chapter 19

# Beneath the Surface: Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now*

Andrew Patch

If 1970s British cinema is academically a 'cinematic black hole' (Shail 2008: xii) then currently Nicolas Roeg exists in its event horizon. For in the resurgence of interest in this period of British cinema, Roeg, a filmmaker synonymous with the decade, has been a somewhat peripheral figure. This is exemplified by his near absence from the edited collection *Seventies British Cinema* (Shail 2008).

Roeg's work in the 1970s, that of *Performance* (Cammell and Roeg 1970), *Walkabout* (1971), *Don't Look Now* (1973), *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) and *Bad Timing* (1980) (plus uncompleted projects *Deadly Honeymoon*, *Out of Africa*, *Hammett* and a Debbie Harry-starring *Flash Gordon*) demands further attention. These five films encapsulate a volatile and energized cinema, celluloid mosaics of cultural references, pop bodies, sex, violence, memory and vision, time and space; a complex sculpting through celluloid which Britain (and, it should be acknowledged, Roeg himself) has to its detriment never completely rediscovered.

Roeg's peripheral status, it can be argued, stems from two issues. Firstly film theory's tendency to progress through a preference for rediscovering the overlooked rather than reconsidering that which has become deemed theoretically passé, or that which does not fit into established discourses that demarcate a national cinema. Let us not forget that Lindsay Anderson implied that through Roeg and Ken Russell 'British cinema had lost its way' (Hacker and Price 1991: 55).

A second reason resides in Roeg's directorial persona, one occupying the liminal space between art-house and commercial cinema. Kristi Wilson's comment that Roeg 'has long been recognised as an art-house film director for whom box-office success has proved difficult' (Wilson 1999: 278) illustrates the fiscal negativity that shapes Roeg's cultural presence; economic comments rarely directed at a Jarman, a Greenaway, etc. It is as if, in hindsight, the gradual decline in Roeg's industrial presence and commercial success, as typified by his struggle to secure distribution for his recent feature *Puffball* (2007), has negated his relevance within British cinema.

Therefore the intention of this chapter is to readdress this through a consideration of *Don't Look Now*, a film that critic Charles Champlin described as comprising of 'too much trickery' and 'a lack of the discipline that defines art' (Champlin 1976: 26). In particular the focus of the chapter is inspired by a recent comment made by Graeme Clifford, *Don't Look Now*'s editor, wherein he recounted that Roeg envisaged the film 'as his *exercise in film grammar*' (2002) [italics my emphasis]. Therefore I will consider Roeg's experiment through a discussion of time, space and colour. For what I intend to demonstrate is that rather

than a 'lack of discipline', or what Pauline Kael perceives as 'style without consciousness' (1976: 234), Roeg's filmic lament offers a prime example of the experimental potential of commercial cinema.

## Adaptation

*Don't Look Now* was Roeg's second adaptation from a literary source, Daphne du Maurier's same-titled short story, a familiar mode of production within British cinema. *Walkabout* (1971) had been loosely adapted by Edward Bond from a 1959 book by James Vance Marshall, *The Children*, which became known as *Walkabout*. Inherently defined by discourses of fidelity, Lester D. Friedman argues that the process of adaptation leads to a 'tentative cinema…concerned more with accuracy than with audaciousness' (2006: 6). Brian McFarlane commented that

> British adaptations have exhibited a decorous, dogged fidelity to their sources, content to render through careful attention to their *mise-en-scène* the social values and emotional insight of those sources rather than subjecting them to critical scrutiny or, indeed, to robust exploitation (1986: 120–121).

Though Allan Scott's screenplay (and Roeg's subsequent direction) displays a semblance of 'dogged fidelity', it is less 'tentative' and rather more a 'robust exploitation' that facilitates Roeg's experiment in film grammar; a robustness evident in the alterations that Scott makes from literature to script, a series of gaps or ruptures that accommodate fidelity, while simultaneously providing the space for Roeg to conduct his experiment with narrative and film. In particular Roeg's experiment emerges through Scott's alteration of certain key elements within the du Maurier tale: that of Christine being associated with red rather than blue, her death from drowning not meningitis, and the film's narrative commencing at the Baxter home in England rather than the café in Venice. For these alterations not only imply a sense of non-fidelity, they are also central to Roeg's aesthetic signature, a signature evident in the film's opening sequence.

## Time/space

*Don't Look Now*'s opening sequence 'contains more than one hundred shots but lasts just seven minutes' depicting the film's narrative preoccupations in a 'nutshell' (Sanderson 1996: 33). Through images, ellipses and compression, Roeg eloquently introduces key preoccupations and visual metaphors, drawing space, time, narrative and spectator into a 'mosaic of association' (Milne 1973: 237). From the outset Roeg's innovative manipulation of film grammar is eloquently demonstrated, particularly in the short credit sequence that

ironically implores we ignore the images projected for our entertainment: *That we don't look now!* However, it is the disconnection, reminiscent of Godard's narrative intransitivity (Wollen 1986: 121), between the two images within this sequence, a pond and a shuttered window, that brings to the fore questions of perception, narrative and reception.

The first image is that of a pond, its surface distorted by the impact of rain. The camera zooms closer toward its turbulent surface, the diegetic sound of rain on water accentuating this moment of natural chaos. Slowly we shift spatially and temporally, through a dissolve, to the interiority of a window. The soundtrack simultaneously changes, aurally bridging the spatial divide between the images by maintaining a fluidic referent, shifting from rain to the sound of water lapping. The windowpane, comprised of a repetitive pattern of circles, is illuminated by sunlight filtering through closed wooden shutters. As the camera pans up this dislocated interiority the only indication of there being a connected offscreen space is inferred by the sound of a man humming and a bell tolling. The sequence ends with an abrupt cut to black, an ultimate act of disconnection, before we find ourselves gazing at the Baxters' familial realm.

At one level the materiality of the images (in this case water and glass) imply a preoccupation with surfaces that are connected to both vision and danger. Surfaces either augment or distort our ability to see the still water that reflects our gaze, the unshuttered window that connects interiority with exteriority. However, we encounter disrupted surfaces, and in turn, our vision becomes obscured, negated even. Devoid of context, of meaning, the spectator experiences John Baxter's (Donald Sutherland) own paranormal ability. For like Baxter, who 'sees' but does not always comprehend the meaning behind his visions, we do not clearly understand the meanings between/behind the two images. It is only as the film progresses, that we discover the ruinous significance of the pond, and that the window is part of the Baxter's hotel room in Venice. However, even this knowledge offers no sense of resolution; we are denied any sense of connection either spatial/temporal, or thematic/narrative, between the two images.

Instead, through this act of denial, Roeg and Clifford's elliptical editing style prepares the spectator for a visual strategy that questions our complicit spectatorial passivity in our acceptance of classical narrative structures based around chronology and causality. As Michael Dempsey's description argues, Roeg's montage leads to a sense of uncertainty:

> Roeg joins Eisenstein, Resnais, and Lester in leaning heavily on editing for his effects, but his montage is not quite like anybody else's…Eisenstein's montage creates or demonstrates connections between shots. We can be sure that these connections exist, at least in his mind, and we can almost always grasp them immediately…But Roeg's montage does not say that two shots are connected; it says that they might be. Eisenstein's editing aims for certainty; Roeg's for uncertainty. (Dempsey 1974: 42)

What should be acknowledged is that a preoccupation with Roeg's editing style is nothing new, it is a style well discussed and written about. It is one that challenges our sense of

connective causality, offering instead a realm of disconnection that we as spectators, along with the characters, attempt to navigate. Roeg and Clifford's rhizomic editing structure coerces the spectator into seeking a relationship between connections that may, or may not, exist. As Izod notes, 'the opening sequence shows how the need to connect images arises for the spectator from the juxtaposition of shots in a fragmentary pattern that restricts plot connections and draws attention to themes' (1992: 68). However, these connections emerge not only through the meticulous associative and elliptical editing style; e.g. a ball thrown into the pond is mirrored in the sequence by the tossing of a packet of cigarettes; the breaking of a mirror into shards is echoed by a boot splashing into a puddle (bringing to the fore the fragile and threatening qualities of reflective surfaces, of sight itself), but also through the careful implementation of *mise-en-scène*. For, as I now intend to show, Roeg's art as a British filmmaker does not simply reside in temporal labyrinths of disassociation, but also through a network of chromatic association.

## Colour

A classic perception of the cultural state of 1970s British cinema is that of Alexander Walker, who described this period as being 'like the country itself: it had a residual energy, but in the main was feeling dull, drained, debilitated, infected by a run-down feeling becoming characteristic of British life' (Walker 1985: 15). However it is worth considering that the 1970s was the decade when colour finally became the dominant aesthetic within cinema. Therefore it is appropriate to devote some time to consider Roeg's use of colour, and what such a consideration offers in terms of evaluating both decade and director.

It needs to be acknowledged that the presence of colour within film theory remains, at best, elusive, an elusiveness that Brian Price proposes stems from colour being 'an occasional subject of the theorist, historian, or practitioner; a source more of fleeting observation that of rigorous conceptualization' (Price 2006: 1). Consequently for a filmmaker like Roeg, who utilizes film colour in innovative and challenging ways (both as a cinematographer and director), colour has routinely been ignored in favour of discussion of editing, time and narrative.

When colour has been subject to some form of consideration has tended to be as a substitute or signifier for its semiotic other, in other words red = warm/blood/desire, blue = cold/depression. For example, in the context of *Don't Look Now*, Leslie Dick concludes that red 'functions as a sign for…loss, an image of the ever-present possibility of sudden death' (Dick 1997: 12). Mark Sanderson considers the film's colour to aesthetically denote familial relations, that 'father and daughter are indentified with red, the colour of blood, danger and martyrdom and magic; mother and son seen in shades of blue, the traditional colour of hope, loyalty and faith'. Sanderson continues his argument by arguing that Roeg's use of colour 'does not adhere to a strict symbolic code. The colours are used impressionistically to enhance mood, not for their intrinsic meaning' (Sanderson 1996: 44).

However, though readings such as Dick and Sanderson's do offer some sense of aesthetic consideration, their conclusions inevitably leave colour as a somewhat ethereal component of the *mise-en-scène*, as if colour's inherently ambiguous quality prevents it from being anything more than a cosmetic layer within the filmic. Roeg's use of colour in the 1970s can be seen as a continuation of the experimentation with colour prevalent in his cinematographic work in the 1960s, of particular note *The Masque of the Red Death* (Roger Corman, 1964) and *Fahrenheit 451* (François Truffaut, 1966). The 'tenuous' economic situation facing British cinema in the 1970s 'opened up rare opportunities for creative freedom on the part of enterprising and ambitious talents' (Smith 2008: 74), enabled the continuation of Roeg's experimentation with film colour. This economic freedom (in the case of *Don't Look Now* funding from an Anglo–Italian consortium) enabled Roeg to explore aspects of film without being beholden to the demands and pressures of more dominant funding models. This, then, was an environment of exploration that Roeg subsequently would find increasingly diminished as funding and opportunities became limited from the 1980s onwards.

I want to consider how colour fits into Roeg's experiment and in turn leads to alternative areas of theoretical enquiry within Roeg's work. To explore this alternative perspective I want to consider the specific role of colour in a series of aesthetic connections which opens up questions of identity and gender.

## Chromatic doppelgangers

*Don't Look Now*'s aesthetic is based around a colour strategy that elevates one particular hue, red, over a more restrained and desaturated palette. In other words, *Don't Look Now* is constructed around the juxtaposition of a vibrant red (associated specifically with Christine and the dwarf in particular) with a landscape and urbanity comprised of a more subdued palette of blues, greens, browns, grays, whites, blacks, etc. Venice, for example, through this aesthetic strategy, becomes monochromatic, a wintry liminal urbanity within which the transient eruptions of red draws the spectator's eye, teasing us to look. As Anthony Richmond, the film's director of photography, recollects, this aesthetic juxtaposition between vibrant/desaturated was an integral concern in pre-production, particularly in relation to the film's *mise-en-scène*:

> Nic is very visual…he knew that taking the colour red out of everything except the dwarf's clothing and the little girl's mac, really played a very big part in the design and costume design…It's a very subtle thing, you don't miss it, your eye really just goes to the red jacket of that girl and then the dwarf. (Richmond 2002)

Therefore Roeg implements colour, at one level, to attract the spectator's gaze, and simultaneously elevates the significance of red's presence. I would argue that this chromatic visual flair, this sleight-of-eye, subsequently leads the spectator subliminally into a complex

series of aesthetic connections. For rather than operating simply as aesthetic spectacle, colour, in the context of Roeg's experiment, becomes an active element, linked into transitions between frames, narrative preoccupations and demarcations of the body. For example in terms of editing colour is used to link spaces and actions together, e.g. the throwing of a red/white cigarette pack whose flight ends up as a red/white ball (thrown by Christine) landing in the pond, or the cut from the red of Christine's mac to the red of the flames burning in the Baxter's fire. However it is the notion of colour as narrative and its relationship to the body that I want to focus on here.

*Don't Look Now* is dominated by two manifestations of colour and body – that of Christine and the dwarf – a connection consistently referred to in previous theoretical attention, but routinely unexplored. From the outset of the film, Roeg's aesthetic strategy, through composition, soundtrack and edit, coerces the spectator into connecting together the twin red bodies of Christine and the dwarf. In part this coercion is intended to alleviate the lack of causality, the lack of reason behind the film's narrative. In other words, colour becomes the impetus behind the rhythm of the narrative, the memory of the red of Christine becomes overlaid onto the corporeality of Venice's murderous denizen; and it is this enigma (the question of how/is it Christine?) that ultimately leads to John's demise. For as colour theorist David Batchelor argues, colour has been positioned in Western culture as 'a permanent internal threat, an ever-present inner other which, if unleashed, would be the ruin of everything, the fall of culture' (Batchelor 2000: 23). Consequently it can be argued that John's desire to uncover the truth beneath the red leads to a *fall*, his death by the blade of Venice's killer.

Roeg introduces this connection from the outset of the film, commencing when John inspects images of the church he will restore in Venice. For in the bottom right of the slide that he examines sits a solitary red-cloaked figure. Accompanied by a score (by Pino Donaggio) that bridges the transition between spaces (a score that recurs in the presence of the dwarf's body) the film cuts from the unidentified body in the slide to an upside-down Christine running besides the water's edge, her red raincoat reflected in the pond's water. The juxtaposition, similarity of composition and colour match between the two bodies, immediately implies a sense of connection, for not only are both dominated by red, but both bodies are inverted and reflected, Christine in water, the dwarf reflected and inverted in the process of projection. In turn this connection then sets up the narrative impetus within its Venetian setting, the mystery of whether the red is that of Christine's, the enigmatic question at the heart of the film.

However, red in the film offers more than simply a network of connection, it can also offer moments of disruption, spaces in which issues of identity and gender are raised. Such a space is that of Christine's death, a moment that incorporates one of Roeg's most innovative, and intriguing, implementations of film colour.

## Spiral

Questions surrounding identity and gender permeate *Don't Look Now* narratively and aesthetically. Kristi Wilson, for example, identifies Christine's doll as embodying these questions, 'dressed in fatigues and a helmet…from the waist up, and a shiny skirt and combat boots from the waist down…an early indication that traditional narratives of masculinity, and gender roles…will be complicated in the film' (Wilson 1999: 283). Roeg's use of colour can also be seen to be exploring this complication of gender and identity. Particularly at the moment of Christine's death, in which John's attempts at recovering her from the pond are juxtaposed by an eruption of colour that spirals from the dwarf's body in the slide.

The sequence commences with John accidently spilling water onto the slide (another juxtaposition of water and glass). After mopping up, John inspects the slide through a magnifying glass, his gaze augmented. At this moment, red suddenly discharges from the dwarf's image in the slide, a breaching of colour that partially obliterates both the dwarf's body and the integrity of the image of the church as well. The result of this sudden, illogical eruption of colour is that it seemingly triggers John's paranormal ability, indicated by a cut to his face held in a moment of reverie. John's immobile face is subsequently juxtaposed against a blurred long shot of his son running to the house for help. The blurring, distance and subject of the composition infer the fallibility of John's second sight, for he does not see Christine falling into the water, but also raise questions of causality.

What is intriguing about this moment connecting colour with second sight is that it is a continuation of a larger preoccupation with colour as a source of threat in Western culture. David Batchelor argues that colour is routinely perceived as 'dangerous', that it is 'a drug, a loss of consciousness, a kind of blindness' resulting in a 'loss of focus, of identity, of self…a loss of mind…of delirium…madness perhaps' (Batchelor 2000: 51). It is therefore no wonder that John's first experience of second sight is linked directly to an eruption of colour within the *mise-en-scène*. It is as if it is the presence of red, its autonomous subversion of both form and temporality, that brings John into a state of 'delirium'.

As the sequence continues, Roeg's sculpted *mise-en-scène* and editing begins to explore and depict the trauma of the event, for as John lifts Christine from the water, time enters into a repetitive loop, with a combination of slow-motion and jump-cuts; the soundtrack emphasizing his anguish, rage, pain and bewilderment. Christine's retrieved body, water cascading down her red coat, is accompanied by the gradual movement of colour within the slide, with red slowly spiraling inward, turning from red to blue then white. The spiraling inward of colour has been inferred in past analysis as reminiscent of a gondola, Christine's body or Venice's geography. John Izod for example describes the spiral as a 'wash' that 'forms a foetal shape that with savage irony precisely matches the curve of the dead girl's body as her father cradles her in his grief' (Izod 1992: 69). Faced with an emergence of colour that disrupts both artifice and narrative, previous theoretical discussion has retreated towards identifying it as nothing more than an elaborate cinematic Rorschach test, seeking patterns and shapes that emerge from the chaotic fluidity that spirals within the frame.

However, instead of considering the spiral as an aesthetic reflection, one possible approach is to consider it as a device that raises questions concerning the relationship between body and colour, in particular within *Don't Look Now*, the body as abject. For the denouement of the film is the revelation that the identity of the body in red is not Christine, but Venice's serial killer, that what John discovers concealed within the red body in Venice is not that of childlike innocence (the resurrection of Christine) but is in fact a femininity of abjectness. The spiral, its movement, transgression and its obliteration of both body and image all infer the potential for the body within the slide to be considered abject. As Barbara Creed argues, a key aspect of abjectness is 'that which crosses or threatens to cross the "border"' (Creed 1993: 11). At the commencement of the sequence, colour emerges, red crossing the threshold of the dwarf's corporeal integrity. In other words colour seemingly escapes from her body, and this act of escape results in her body becoming formless. Thus colour crosses a conceptual border.

However the abject quality of colour is not only limited to moment of transgression but also is implicit in the juxtaposition of Christine and the dwarf. For Creed continues that 'most horror films also construct a border between what Kristeva refers to as "the clean and proper body" and the abject body, or the body which has lost its form and integrity' (Creed 1993: 11). When one considers Christine as the former, and the dwarf (a body that we have discussed as formless) as the latter, what becomes evident is that red becomes a connection between two disparate bodies, a dyadic relation that positions both bodies at opposite ends of a chromatic spectrum, with one young/innocent/virtuous, the other aged/corrupt/sadistic, a body of innocence and potential lost, contrasted with a body of threat that eventually challenges John's patriarchal position.

Intriguingly the relationship between colour, femininity and threat is a longstanding preoccupation within Western culture; a fear of colour that Batchelor terms chromophobia. Consequently, chromophobia has resulted in colour becoming an 'object of extreme prejudice…systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded', prejudice which results in colour becoming an extension of 'some foreign body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological' (Batchelor 2000: 22–23).

Thus Roeg's use of colour in *Don't Look Now* aligns the spectacle of red with differing aspects of femininity – bodies of opposition that contribute to John's death, one whose death produces the enigma that he desires to resolve, the other the murderous answer to the riddle. However this connection between femininity and colour is not confined to solely *Don't Look Now*, for Roeg in his films consistently constructs feminine bodies imbued with the potential to destabilize patriarchal and hegemonic gender roles. For example, *Bad Timing*'s (1980) Melina (Teresa Russell) whose colourful costumes and hidden past are juxtaposed by the monochromatic suits and searching gazes of her male counterparts. Or Pherber (Anita Pallenberg) in *Performance* (Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell, 1970), who implements colour, in particular a potent red mushroom, to deconstruct Chas's (James Fox) sense of self. Colour therefore in Roeg's films is more than simply a superficial plastic surface, but in fact

suggests a complex series of association and connections, between bodies and power. That within colour resides some of Roeg's most challenging and innovative experiments.

## Conclusion

> The inability, or disinclination of even established-name directors in Britain to articulate a view of life and society in freshly conceived and individual terms, and to translate these aesthetically…with an unmistakable signature. (Walker 1974: 462)

It may seem odd to conclude an analysis of a 1970s filmmaker with a quote that specifically refers to the state of British cinema in the 1960s. But Walker's disenchanted list of the failings of the 1960s filmmaker seems relevant to Roeg. For Roeg is defined by an 'unmistakable signature', presenting life and society through a lens of innovation, experimentation and complexity. As Neil Sinyard has argued, 'Roeg is a complete filmmaker who, one feels, could not express himself in any other form' (Sinyard 1991: 1). To extend Sinyard's quote further, not only could Roeg not express himself in any other form, but it could be argued that Roeg could not fully express himself in any other decade. For the 1970s presented Roeg with an environment that allowed him to fully explore film as an art of time, and to question film as innovatively as Godard, Antonioni or Resnais.

Truffaut, around the time of filming *Fahrenheit 451* in Britain at Pinewood (and in France) with Roeg as his cinematographer, famously remarked to Hitchcock that there was something incompatible with the terms 'British' and 'cinema'. In hindsight it is almost as if Roeg's first decade as a director sought to prove his past employer's assertion wrong; that British cinema could in fact produce work of breathtaking complexity, intellectual rigor and exhilaration. Indeed, if the 1970s is a cinematic black hole, then in this decade Roeg produced a vision of dazzling originality, resulting in five films – *Performance* (Cammell and Roeg, 1970), *Walkabout* (1971), *Don't Look Now* (1973), *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), *Bad Timing* (1980) – that burned brightly in the gloom.

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**Edited by**
**Paul Newland**

# DON'T LOOK NOW

## BRITISH CINEMA IN THE 1970s

While postwar British cinema and the British new wave have received much scholarly attention, the misunderstood period of the 1970s has been comparatively ignored. *Don't Look Now* uncovers forgotten but richly rewarding films, including Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* and the films of Lindsay Anderson and Barney Platts-Mills. This volume offers insight into the careers of important film-makers and sheds light on the genres of experimental film, horror, and rock and punk films, as well as representations of the black community, shifts in gender politics, and adaptations of television comedies. The contributors ask searching questions about the nature of British film culture and its relationship to popular culture, television, and the cultural underground.

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