

Is There a Distinctive British Cinema?

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Abstract

The essay reviews certain critical junctures of the history of the British cinema in order to determine the reason for its apparent lack of distinct characteristics in terms of narrative theme, cinematic style or mise-en-scène. These critical junctures include: 'social consensus' films of the 1930s; war films of the Second World War and after; the mini-cycle of British epics; the British 'new wave' of the early 1960s; and the 'heritage' film of the 1980s. It is argued that the emergence of a 'national cinema' requires a degree of social and political cohesiveness which has not been present in Britain since the early 1950s. The box-office successes of the 1990s are examined against a background of intensifying regional friction which makes the ultimate emergence of a distinctive British cinema unlikely. The findings of the essay have implications for the relationship between the concepts of national cinema and national identity, seen through the prism of an unusually varied and often intelligent cinematic history.

keywords: British cinema, national cinema, national identity

Résumé

Existe-t-il un cinéma Britannique distinctif?

L'essai examine certains points de jonction critiques de l'histoire du cinéma britannique afin de déterminer quelle est la raison de son manque apparent de caractéristiques tels que thème narratif, style cinématographique ou mise en scène. Ces points de jonction critiques incluent: des films de "consensus social" des années 1930; des films de guerre datant de la deuxième guerre mondiale et après; le mini cycle de l'épopée britannique, la "new wave" (nouvelle vague) du début des années 1960, et le film "héritage" des années 1980. L'on débat sur le fait que l'émergence d'un "cinéma national" requiert un degré de cohésion sociale et politique qui n'a pas été présent en Bretagne depuis le début des années 1950. Les succès au box-office des années 1990 sont examinés sur le fond de frictions régionales s'intensifiant et qui rendent peu probable l'émergence d'un cinéma britannique distinctif. Les résultats obtenus de l'essai comprennent des propositions sur la relation entre les concepts de cinéma national et d'identité nationale, regardés à travers le prisme d'une histoire cinématographique inhabituellement variée et souvent intelligente.

mots- clés: Cinéma britannique, cinéma national, identité nationale

Özet

Özgün Bir İngiliz Sineması Var mı?

Araştırma; anlatı teması, sinematik tür veya mizansen açısından özgün karakteristiklerden bariz bir şekilde yoksun olmasının sebeplerini saptamak için, İngiliz sinema tarihinin belli başlı kritik birleşme noktalarını inceler. Bu kritik kesişme noktaları; 1930'ların 'sosyal mutabakat' filmlerini, II. Dünya Savaşı sırasında ve sonrasındaki savaş filmlerini; İngiliz destanlarının mini-döngüsünü, 1960'ların başlarındaki İngiliz 'Yeni Dalga'yı, 1980'lerin 'dönem' filmlerini içerir. 'Ulusal Sinema'nın ortaya çıkmasının 1950'lerden beri İngiltere'de bulunmayan sosyal ve politik bir uyum gerektirdiği tartışılmaktadır. 1990'ların gişe başarıları; özgün bir İngiliz sinemasının ani oluşumunu muhtemel kılmayan, yoğunlaşan bir bölgesel sürtüşme tabanı düzleminde incelenir. Araştırmanın bulguları aşırı derecede çeşitli ve çoğunlukla zeki bir sinematik tarih prizmasından bakarak, ulusal sinema ve ulusal kimlik olguları arasındaki ilişki hakkında önerilerde bulunmaktadır.

anahtar kelimeler: İngiliz sineması, ulusal sinema, ulusal kimlik

Introduction

To rephrase and amplify the question: can there be identified in the history of the British cinema characteristics which set it apart from other national cinemas? If the question were asked of French or Italian or Swedish cinema, the answer of film critics would be an unhesitating affirmative; similarly for the cinema of India, Iran and Egypt, and perhaps the majority of film-producing countries. Yet despite Britain's long and sometimes impressive history of film production - with notable directors that include Alfred Hitchcock, Michael Powell, Carol Reed, David Lean, Richard Attenborough, Ken Loach and Peter Greenaway - it is remarkably difficult to identify common elements of subject-matter, narrative, mise-en-scene or ideology. Only in a certain tradition of acting, with its origins in the theatre and connected with such names as Olivier, Gielgud, Burton and Finney, can there be found a feature of clear distinction. Recently there has been a tendency among critics and reviewers to associate 'Britishness' in cinema with what has become known as the 'heritage film', but such films represent a minor part of the British output with only a superficial homogeneity. Dilys Powell, who reviewed films for the *Sunday Times* for nearly four decades, from 1939 to 1976, contrasted the absence of a British cinematic idiom with the case in France, Russia and the US:

The French, people with a deep and tender feeling for the underside of life, the shadowed pavement of the street, the human unfortunate, have made their best films on the theme of undisciplined life [with] a kind of poetic realism which found beauty in the smoky confusion of the railway viaduct, the quayside, the murky back-street. In the great days of the Russian cinema, the theme was revolution, the protagonists were the infantrymen in the trenches, the half-starved sailor, the suffering worker in farm or factory ... The American cinema at its best has dealt with the brilliant surface of life ... a representation, fast-moving, sometimes ironic, always realistic, on the face of America: the face of the crowded city, the face of the enormous landscape. Always, one sees the concentration on native material. (Cook 1991: 5-6)

By contrast, according to Powell, the British cinema lacks either a recognisable tradition or common themes. The characteristic image she attributes to the French, Russian and American cinema may be contentious, but the underlying truth of the observation seems unarguable.

Why should there be such a thing as 'Britishness' in film, and why does it matter? The simple answer to this is to be found in the intimate connection between cinema and national identity, which every film-producing country has acknowledged, the British not least. According to Alan Lovell, 'It often seems as if the cinema is the key tool for the construction of British national identity' (Lovell 2002: 204). The connection dates at least from the 1920s. The President of the Board of Trade (a senior cabinet minister) asserted in 1927: 'The cinema is today the most universal means through which national ideas and national

atmosphere can be spread.’ (Aldgate 2002: 30). The Secretary of the Empire Marketing Board - which for six years between 1927 and 1933 was the employer of Britain’s foremost documentary filmmaker, John Grierson - called for the country to ‘master the art of national projection’ and present ‘a fitting projection of England upon the world screens’ (*ibid*). Michael Balcon, Director of Ealing Studios - which during the 1940s and 1950s was effectively the ‘home’ of British cinema - opined: ‘British films, truthfully reflecting the British way of life are the most powerful ambassador we have ... The world must be presented with a complete picture of Britain ... Britain as a leader in Social Reform in the defeat of social injustices and a champion of civil liberties; Britain as a patron and parent of great writing, painting and music; Britain as a questing explorer, adventurer and trader; Britain as the home of great industry and craftsmanship; Britain as a great military power standing alone and undaunted against terrifying aggression’ [Balcon 1969: 48].

From the 1950s onwards, the major issue was not ‘projecting the nation’ but the survival of an authentic British cinema, separate and distinct from Hollywood. It was thought that the domestic market was not by itself sufficient to support an effective homegrown cinema and that the international market, especially the US market required production values which could only be financed by substantial (foreign) investments, entailing financial control of British film production by the US and eventually, cultural and artistic control as well. The fact that by the decade of the 1990s, US films accounted for over 90 percent of the British cinema market and British films for only four percent (Hill 2001: 209) indicates that what had been threatened for so long had become a reality.

Thus there are two separate issues involved - the one essentially political, concerning Britain’s place in the world, the other cultural and economic, affecting firstly the British film industry itself - studios, production companies, theatre owners, scriptwriters and technicians - and secondly British cinemagoers, with their taste (among other things) for films reflecting their own cultural experience. From these separate sources emerged an identical need: the survival and success of films employing British artists, financed by British capital and with an appeal to both domestic and international audiences. In the *British Cinema Book* (1997 and 2001), at least half the articles, including those by established critics of the British cinema such as Alan Lovell, Robert Murphy, Raymond Durnat, Tom Ryall, John Hill, Nick James and Brian McFarlane, are concerned explicitly or implicitly with the *problem* of British film.

A useful contrast is provided by French cinema, which has faced the same challenge of competing with expensively-funded US imports, but which has done so with a much greater measure of artistic self-confidence and political will. Despite US competition, the survival of an authentic French cinema has never been in serious doubt. Pondering the difference between the two

cinematic traditions, the director Francois Truffaut suggested an incompatibility between the words 'British' and 'cinema', which was quoted on British television by director Stephen Frears (Frears, 1995). What is significant is not whether Truffaut was right or wrong, playful or serious, but that still today British filmmakers and critics recall and debate the remark. Critic Alan Lovell, who had given a paper at a 1969 BFI seminar entitled *British Cinema, the Unknown Cinema*, reprised the theme thirty years later in the British Cinema Book. Lovell's thesis is that British cinema is no longer 'unknown' due to the advances in academic scholarship regarding British cinema in recent decades, but the article is still prefaced by Truffaut's comment. Significantly, the only distinctive 'qualities' of British cinema that Lovell proposes are highly generalised, such as 'good taste, restraint, reticence' (Lovell 2001: 200-204).

The present essay provides a critical review of certain trends in British cinema, focussing on the issue of consensus and division within British society at different historical junctures in an attempt to isolate the reasons for the overall impression of disparity and incoherence in the British cinematic output. The hypothesis of the essay is that the apparent cohesiveness of British society, detectable in the Depression years of the 1930s, did not endure beyond the immediate post-war period and since that time - and not always for the same reasons - the country has been subject to particular forms of social divisiveness which have acted as an insuperable obstacle to the emergence of a 'British' cinematic culture. For reasons that will be discussed in the essay, the nature and impact of this divisiveness have not been apparent to British commentators, and are arguably more accessible to those standing outside the culturo-historical context concerned. This proposition, in turn, constitutes the rationale for the present essay.

'Social Consensus' in the 1930s and 1940s: *South Riding* and *The Blue Lamp*

The representation of the idea of 'social consensus' is illustrated in the film *South Riding*, which appeared on British screens in 1937, directed by Victor Saville. The film was based on a novel by the popular novelist Winifred Holtby, whose works were generally concerned with rural life and local politics in the north of England. The story of *South Riding* concerned the arguments between a local squire, a schoolteacher and local officials over a housing development, with the conservative landowner attacking the scheme and the labour party councillors supporting it. The heroine of the film is the schoolteacher, who convinces the landowner not only to drop his opposition to the development but for the first time in his life to appreciate the needs and aspirations of people poorer than himself. The narrative is built around the social and moral redemption of a man isolated and insulated behind the barrier of his class, and the consequent forging of a political alliance between the paternalistic gentry and the progressive forces associated with the Labour party and its housing

programme. At the end of the film, the local people gather for the Coronation Day of King George VI (1936), and everybody sings *Land of Hope and Glory*, the 'anthem' of British Empire. In his speech, the chairman of the council says: 'Without boasting and vainglory, we can be proud of our country. Let us remember those who work for the common good, follow their lead and work in turn for the happiness and betterment of our people' (quoted in Aldgate 2002: 51). In the original version of the film, the national anthem was also sung, with the camera focused on the (republican) Labour Party councillor singing: 'Happy and glorious, Long to Reign over us...'

The year 1937 was in the midst of the Great Depression in Britain. Unemployment rates, especially in the north of the country, were still very high (around two million workers were unemployed in 1936, around 15% of the workforce) and the suffering in northern towns was exemplified by the plight of the Jarrow workers, who marched on London in 1936. In these circumstances, how was it possible for a popular film to depict, without a ridiculous distortion of the facts, a society able to pull together, work together and sing together as in the final scenes of *South Riding*? Part of the answer may be provided by historical studies indicating that the impact of the Great Depression was various and localised, and that signs of returning prosperity were evident, even in parts of the north, by the later 1930s (Stevenson and Cook 1977: 4-5). But more importantly, it is argued that there existed a greater underlying political and social consensus among British people during the 1930s than is easily appreciable today. According to historian Paul Addison, Britain at that time remained 'a small and closely knit community, insular and bound together by strong patriotic or perhaps nationalistic, feelings' (Addison 1975: 276). This in turn accounts for the claim by historians of film that the characteristic of 1930s British films was not to 'lay bare social contradictions [but to] organize the audience's experiences in the sense of fostering social integration and the acceptance of social constraints' (Armes 1978: 113). The newspaper reviewers (of both right and left in political terms) found nothing unreal or distorted in the story of *South Riding*: 'An English picture that is really English,' (Daily Telegraph); 'An authentic picture of English life' (Daily Mirror); 'a story of the realities of English life' (BFI Monthly Film Bulletin) [quoted in Aldgate 2002: 44].

The 'Englishness' of English life was nowhere more clearly reflected in the middle decades of the twentieth century than by Ealing Studios in west London.

The people were the hero. Throughout Ealing films ran the idea that there was such a thing as society and it was made up of communities, organic, cohesive, rooted in shared values, traditions and experiences, tolerant, restrained, decent and civilized, a society that needs defending and is worth protecting ... There is no doubt what view people have of the Ealing comedies and of the world they project. It is a world that is essentially quaint, cosy, whimsical and backward-looking; it is a world that enshrines what are seen as quintessentially English

qualities: a stubborn individualism that is heroic to the point of eccentricity; a hatred of authoritarianism and bureaucracy coupled with a belief in tolerance and consensus; a philosophy that can be summed up in the slogan 'Small is beautiful; old is good.' (Aldgate 2002:128 and 150)

According to Ernest Betts: 'The Englishness of Ealing is apparent not only in the comedies, but in the studio's whole attitude to film-making. It guided the creative process from the choice of subject right through to its release' (Betts 1973: 244). Oddly, the popularity of the Ealing comedies (*The Ladykillers*, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, *Passport to Pimlico*) has survived, despite their 'quaintness' and their parochialism - or maybe because of it. *The Ladykillers* (Mackendrick, 1955) was one of the last of the great comedies. Richards describes it as 'an irreverent farewell' to the England of the mid-1950s and suggests that the character of the old lady who breaks up the band of robbers in the film is 'the spirit of England, the living embodiment of the Victorian age, all lavender and old lace and faded gentility. She is sweet, polite, prim, bourgeois, immaculate and patriotic, a perfectly preserved period piece' (Aldgate 161).

Perhaps the most powerful Ealing film in terms of the representation of 'Englishness' was *The Blue Lamp* (Dearden, 1949) which, like *South Riding*, clearly illustrates the cohesiveness of British society in the middle decades of the twentieth century. *The Blue Lamp* cannot be considered in isolation from the resulting television series (*Dixon of Dock Green*) which ran for over 400 episodes between 1955 and 1967. This series occupied a primetime Saturday evening slot and at its height of its popularity attracted an audience of 14 million (Willis 1991: 190). Police Constable Dixon, played by Jack Warner, was the central character of *The Blue Lamp*, a policeman on the beat in London who was killed in the performance of his duty by the young gangster he was pursuing. The scene in which the death of Constable Dixon - an honest servant of society, a family man, dependable, decent and wise - is conveyed to his dear wife 'Ma' was recalled as follows by film critic Charles Barr: 'It is observed and organised very precisely, finding a balance between English restraint and the unembarrassed expression of grief that can't be contained. In position and feeling alike, it is right at the centre of the film. I would go further and say that it is central to the twenty years of Ealing production ... the scene has an obstinate "weight" to it that is hard to discount, a representative quality which transcends the particular context ... and makes it a definitive enactment of certain codes of behaviour and expression, which whether we welcome this or not, are deeply rooted in our culture' (Barr 1977: 98).

George Dixon (still played by Warner) as the eponymous hero of the long-running television series, was to become the model policeman for two generations of British television viewers. The programme was introduced each week by Dixon delivering a short homily directly to the viewers, on the subject of crime and punishment, the need for people to respect the law and assist the

police in their work. For most British people of this epoch, Constable Dixon not simply *represented* the police, he *was* the police. There was a fictional autobiography of George Dixon, and actor Jack Warner regularly received correspondence and gifts addressed to the character he portrayed (Aldgate 2002: 133). The image of Dixon matched the image of the police constable in the public mind. A survey carried out in 1955 found that three-quarters of respondents expressed 'an enthusiastic appreciation' of the British police. They were described as 'the best in the world' and 'peculiarly English'. Geoffrey Gorer, author of the survey, concluded that 'to a great extent the police represent a model of behaviour and character' (Gorer 1955: 213). It is important to note that Dixon belonged to the era when British policemen (except in rare cases) were on foot and unarmed.

The evidence suggests that this sense of trust and identity of interest with the police had disappeared by the 1960s and, certainly, the 1970s. The screen image of the policeman changed accordingly. In *Z-Cars* (BBC television 1962-1977), there was more violence, more ill-feeling between civilians and police, and tougher, less even-tempered policemen. The press release introducing the series described the location of the police station as 'a mixed community, without amenities and without community feeling', and the Chief Constable of Lancashire even demanded that the series be taken off for bringing the police force into disrepute (Corner 1991: 129).

Predictably, the year wars in Britain (1939-1945) are seen as the high-point of social cohesiveness, with the effects of wartime solidarity extending into the years immediately following. This was the period when cinema audiences were at their most numerous (before television became popular in the mid-1950s) and British films enjoyed their highest reputation internationally. The close alignment of these three indicators - social cohesion, full cinemas and critical acclaim - is in fact remarkable. The period 1945-49 saw the release of a number of works often regarded by critics as the most accomplished and impressive of all British films, including: David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945) and *Great Expectations* (1946); Powell and Pressburger's *I Knew Where I was Going* (1945), *Black Narcissus* (1946) and *The Red Shoes* (1948); Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* (1947) and *The Third Man* (1949); and *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (Robert Hamer, 1949), Ealing Studios' blackest comedy, with a bravura performance by Sir Alec Guinness playing eleven different roles and still regularly shown on British TV.

In 1946, the total number of cinema admissions in Britain were 1.64 billion (Hill 2002: 208), equivalent to a weekly visit to the cinema by every man, woman and child in the country. The link between a financially successful cinema and an artistically and technically creative one needs no elaboration - what I want to suggest is that the *missing link* in the various explanations for the decline of British cinema after 1950 is that of social cohesion and community

togetherness, which was very strong during the war years and progressively weaker thereafter.

War Films in the 1940s and 1950s

The films shown during the war were different in important respects from the ones that began to appear after the war was over and throughout the 1950s. The former maintained a tone of solemnity and lack of triumphalism, with the implicit assumption that togetherness and self-sacrifice were prerequisites of victory. Among these wartime realist classics were: *In Which we Serve*, scripted by Noël Coward, Britain's foremost playwright, and directed by Coward and David Lean; *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*, written and directed by the Powell/Pressburger team; and Sidney Gilliat's *Waterloo Road*. Even more admired by critics was the feature-length drama-documentary *Fires Were Started* depicting real firemen fighting real fires among the blitzed warehouses in the London Docklands. This film in particular, directed by Humphrey Jennings, highlighted the strong links between the new wartime realism in cinema and the documentary films of the 1930s which had been commissioned by government bodies such as the Empire Marketing Board and the General Post Office. According to Robert Murphy, 'the movement towards realism was part of a more general feeling that it was right and necessary for the cinema to show people from all walks of life pulling together for the common good ... If this was truly a people's war, then films can be seen to reflect, as much as they helped to create, the mood of populist pulling together' (Murphy 2002: 73). Murphy also points out that realism was appropriate to situations when many 'ordinary' cinemagoers had direct experience of the bombing of cities or frontline fighting and might dislike attempts to romanticise or glamorise. The realism of *Fires Were Started* or *Millions Like Us* (Gilliat, 1943) actually marked an advance in terms of authenticity on the documentaries of the 1930s, which, being government-sponsored, were under a pressure to ameliorate or idealise the image of working life.

British film critics view the wartime period, and the films that grew out of it, as a special and temporary situation. 'It took war to compel the British to look at themselves and find themselves interesting,' wrote Dilys Powell. 'The circumstances of war, the total effort of the country, narrowed the physical circle in which the creative imagination could work; intent on the business of daily survival, the national conscience began to dwell more than ever on its local problems' (Cook 1991: 6). The characters of *In Which We Serve*, she suggested, made up 'a distillation of national character.'

The 'advance' in realism proved short-lived, because, although the popularity of the war film continued in the late forties and throughout the fifties, the characteristics of the genre changed as direct memory of the war receded. The popular war films of the 1950s, such as *The Dam Busters* (Michael

Anderson, 1954), *Above Us the Waves* (Thomas, 1955) and *Reach for the Sky* (Gilbert, 1956) reverted to a more familiar kind of heroism, one that was mostly limited to the officer class - the pilots of the Battle of Britain or the naval captains of battle cruisers - so that the more egalitarian tone of the earlier films was lost and the precedence of the upper classes implicitly reinstated. Aldgate points out that this trend also affected the representation of policemen, with 'a new concentration on senior officers [played by] actors previously associated with the roles of officers and gentlemen' (Aldgate 2002: 136).

One British war film of the 1950s merits some further comments: *Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957), starring Alec Guinness as the British officer captured by the Japanese whose fellow prisoners are put to work in the construction of a river bridge in Burma. The story centres on the confused demands of duty in the mind of the officer concerned. His leadership of the men is exemplary - keeping their spirits up and their sense of discipline unaffected by the appalling rigours of the prison camp. His determination that the bridge should be finished, however, is challenged by the realisation that he is thus aiding the enemy, and the inner battle between his instinctive need for discipline and obedience and the broader implications of his actions is powerfully depicted. Morally ambiguous and psychologically complex, *Bridge on the River Kwai* marks the end of the cycle of self-confident and triumphalist war films and ushers in an era of darker and more thoughtful works, such as Asquith's *Orders to Kill* (1958) in which a British agent is sent to assassinate a Nazi-sympathiser who turns out to be a decent and sympathetic man. When the killing is nevertheless done, the film becomes a study in the conflict between duty and conscience. Neither of these two films utilises the conventional narrative motifs of the war film genre (comradeship and selfishness, cowardice and heroism, victory and death) and war is only the setting for an exploration of moral and psychological conflicts within characteristically 'English' personalities, strongly dutiful and emotionally reserved.

Historical Epics of the 1960s

David Lean won an Academy Award for Best Director for *Bridge on the River Kwai* (which also won Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Actor), followed five years later by a second Academy Award for Best Director for *Lawrence of Arabia* (also voted Best Film) in 1962. This four-hour epic about the part played by a British officer in the Arab insurgency of the first World War was atypical of British cinema of this or any period. Historical epics, although popular in the US (*Ben Hur*, *Spartacus*, *El Cid*), were beyond the financial means of British companies and their scale was daunting to British directors and producers without experience of comparable works. The exploits of British imperial adventurers had been the subject of small-scale and generally unpretentious works, such as the Alexander Korda trilogy of the 1930s (*Sanders of the River*, *The Drum*, *The Four Feathers*) which, although firmly supportive of the aims and

impact of the British Empire, avoided any excesses of racist superiority. In 1959, *Northwest Frontier* dealt with the rescue of a friendly Hindu prince by a band of British heroes, but the tone of the film was oddly whimsical and the production values modest.

Partly funded by American money, *Lawrence of Arabia* rivalled the Hollywood epics in terms of magnificence of settings, costumes and incident, was successful at the box-office and won the respect of film critics on the grounds of a well-paced narrative, dramatic set pieces and the quality of the acting (notably Peter O'Toole in the main role). The 'hero', Colonel T.E. Lawrence, was a complex character, and the politics of British support for the Arab revolt were contradictory, with the British appearing simultaneously to support Arab self-determination and an Israeli state in Palestine. The resulting lack of clear moral imperatives obviated the expression in the film of imperialist or jingoist sentiment and ensured an even-handedness in the historical approach.

The success of *Lawrence of Arabia* initiated a mini-cycle of British epics - *Zulu* (Endfield, 1963) with Michael Caine and Stanley Baker, *Khartoum* (Dearden, 1966) with Charlton Heston and Laurence Olivier, *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (Richardson, 1968) with John Gielgud and Trevor Howard. Although dealing with episodes of empire in each case, none of the films was especially imperialist, partly because they treated historical events that were essentially disasters for British troops. In *Zulu*, a detachment of British soldiers is massacred by the Zulus; in *Khartoum*, the British General Gordon is murdered by the Islamic followers of the Mahdi; *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, from the Crimean War, was based on a story of incompetent leadership and pointless suffering. It is notable that *The Charge of the Light Brigade* was directed by a member of the 1960s New Wave (Richardson), socially radical and politically leftist. Lean, too, was by no means a pomp-and-glory nationalist, as we have seen in the context of *Bridge on the River Kwai*. Since the history of Britain during the one hundred and fifty years between 1800 and 1950 was so closely linked with the expansion and defence of the Empire, and the economic wealth and power of the small island depended so largely on imperial conquest and trade, a 'cinema of empire' would have been a likely outlet for the expression of national pride. This had certainly been the intention of the Korda trilogy, especially the first of them, *Sanders of the River*, in which the image of the ideal colonial officer did actually serve as a model. As one District Officer put it, 'Most of us had seen a film called *Sanders of the River* before we went out, and suddenly here was this thing, and it was real; one was walking behind a long line of porters - and it was just like the film' - this was one of many similar comments made to Charles Allen for his book on the African colonial experience (Allen 1979: 80). By the time of the cycle of British epics, however, the British Empire was effectively being dismembered and the historical context militated against exuberant colonialist sentiment.

Twenty years later, in 1982, there would be the biopic of Gandhi directed by Richard Attenborough, which also won Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director and Best Actor. Although *Gandhi* - by reason of its scale and its grand historical themes - belongs in the same generic tradition as *Lawrence of Arabia*, it was in my opinion wrongly ascribed by Sheldon Hall to the so-called 'Raj revival' (Hall 2002: 192). The subject-matter was not - and could not have been - approached from an Anglocentric viewpoint. The choice of a British actor, Ben Kingsley, for the role of Gandhi was criticised in India, but in general the film was as successful in India as it was in the West, indicating a considerable achievement in terms of historical awareness and sensitivity on the part of its director. The sympathetic handling of the central political relationships between Gandhi the sage, Nehru the politician, Jinnah the Muslim nationalist and the Mountbattens, British aristocrats appointed to oversee the granting of Indian independence, appears impartial, without avoidance of the major issues. It may be argued that the screening of the life of the great Hindu Mahatma by representatives of India's colonial masters was a considerable achievement, and assessment of the film has been subject to no radical revisionism since the time it was made.

The 'New Wave' and the Work of Lindsay Anderson

Of more interest to contemporary film critics than the 1960s mini-cycle of British epics was the movement among British directors referred to as the New Wave, a translation of the French *Nouvelle Vague*. The directors concerned were Tony Richardson, Karl Reisz, Jack Clayton, Lindsay Anderson and, in the context of his earlier work, John Schlesinger. The better-known films in this category include *Room at the Top* (Clayton, 1959), *Look Back in Anger*, *A Taste of Honey* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Richardson, 1959, 1961 and 1962), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Reisz, 1960), *This Sporting Life* (Anderson 1963), *A Kind of Loving* and *Billy Liar* (Schlesinger 1962 and 1963). Anderson claimed that the New Wave was an attack on a British theatre and cinema which he described as 'snobbish, anti-intelligent, emotionally inhibited, wilfully blind to the conditions and problems of the present, dedicated to an out-of-date, exhausted national ideal' (quoted in Lacey 1995: 166). The new wave filmmakers shared a commitment to make films without considering financial profit, and (a logical corollary) to remain independent of the established film studios. They were influenced by Italian neo-realism as well as the French *nouvelle vague* of Chabrol and Rohmer. The mood of the New Wave films was generally solemn, the settings were mostly urban working class - often in northern towns and cities, the cinematic style was uncomplicated and realistic. British reviewers commonly employed the expression 'kitchen-sink realism' for the New Wave films (e.g. Lay 2002:11), a term suggesting a domestic environment, working-class families and a lack of spectacular incident. The majority of films were based on contemporary theatre plays or novels written by leftist writers such as Stan Barstow, David Storey, Alan Sillitoe and Keith

Waterhouse. A new and less 'theatrical' group of young actors also emerged from these films, including Albert Finney, Alan Bates, Tom Courtenay, Julie Christie and Rita Tushingham.

This recognisably homogenous group of films by young British directors was immediately seen as heralding a new realism. The editor of *Sight and Sound* gave the following definition of the 'new' British film: 'Its subject means something in contemporary terms; its working class dialogue sounds tolerably close to the way people talk; it is not afraid to call things by their right names; and there is an air of drive and energy about it enough to recharge the flat batteries of half-a-dozen studios' (Houston 1960: 89). Reviewing the first film of the cycle, *Room at the Top*, Dilys Powell refers to its 'violent earnestness', its 'creative courage', its 'consummate authority', its 'subtlety of mood'. The film, she concludes, 'gives one faith all over again in a renaissance of the British cinema' (Cook 1991: 23/23). The necessary elements for a 'renaissance' indeed appeared to be present: an articulate and radical band of young directors, a commitment to social conscience and an antagonism to class distinction, an insistence on creative and commercial independence, a supply of well-written contemporary texts and a group of accomplished young actors capable of transcending the class-based stereotypes familiar in films of the preceding years.

Yet this vigorous and articulate movement was effectively over by the end of the 1960s. Schlesinger had turned to over-ambitious melodrama, Richardson to literary and historical epics (including *The Charge of the Light Brigade*) and Reisz to a lavish biopic of the dancer Isadora Duncan, while Anderson shifted from realism to surrealism and expressionism. The critical judgement on the New Wave films of the early 1960s soon changed from enthusiastic to dismissive. Reviews currently appearing in the *Time Out Film Guide* describe *A Taste of Honey* as 'a perfect example of how the New British Cinema has become almost unwatchable', *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* as 'terribly glib', *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* as 'flabby', *A Kind of Loving* as 'clumsy' and the new wave movement as a whole as 'a short-lived and muffed [failed] attempt by the British film independents to make a foray of sorts into the realities of working class life', [Pym 2009: 1055/928/625/568/1135]. Even *Look Back in Anger*, specifically commended by Dilys Powell, is now reviewed in Britain's most comprehensive film guide as 'squalid and turgid' (ibid: 628). Such a complete reversal of critical appreciation may reflect changes in audience expectation and cinematic fashion over five decades, but the New Wave films were already the subject of negative criticism during the *Screen*-based theoretical debate about realism in the mid-1970s, which saw the films as condescending and exploitative (the debate is reiterated in Hill 1986: 117 ff). As early as 1971, Roy Armes had made the point that the New Wave directors made working class films as outsiders - 'university-educated bourgeois making "sympathetic" films about proletarian life but not analysing the ambiguities of

their own privileged position' (Armes 1971: 264). In retrospect, this was a judgement characteristic of 1970s structuralism. The viewer of these films today is more likely to be impressed by an unrelieved solemnity of character and incident and a mood of domestic claustrophobia.

The rise and fall of the New Wave movement can be traced in the career of Lindsay Anderson, whose first film, *This Sporting Life*, was acclaimed by the critics. Penelope Gilliatt in *The Observer* called it 'a stupendous achievement.' The subject is the excessive, inarticulate passion of a rugby footballer (Richard Harris) for his landlady (Rachel Roberts) and the drama is in the man's inability to express or even comprehend his feelings. The violence and apparent savagery of the game of rugby football acts as a metaphor for the brute in man as well as serving as an outlet for the man's frustrated passion. The story is told in a direct, minimalist style, without sentimentality. Unlike the other films of the New Wave, the critical judgement of *This Sporting Life* has remained positive. Critic Tom Milne describes the film as 'a reminder that there really was something stirring in those days of the British New Wave' (Pym 2009: 1165). Yet the film for which Anderson is now best remembered, released five years later, in 1968, was very different in terms of directorial style, narrative approach, acting and, apparently, purpose. The film was called *If...*, with a story centred on a schoolboy at an expensive private school (called in Britain 'public school') whose relations with the headmaster and staff deteriorate to the point where the boy and some fellows resort to the rooftops and open fire with machine guns. The headmaster steps out to arbitrate and is shot in the head. The opening scenes are treated in naturalistic style, but gradually fantasy mixes with reality and the final scenes with the boys (and one girl) conducting a full-blown armed assault on the entire school-buildings, teachers and boys- are extravagant and surreal.

The film was seen as 'savage attack on the public schools' (*Daily Mail*), 'an effective hatchet job on the English Public School' (*Sight and Sound*), but Anderson himself insisted that 'the milieu of the school was a metaphor' and that the film's release at the height of student unrest throughout the western world was coincidental (Anderson 1969: 9). The word 'anarchistic', he argued, was commonly misunderstood. 'Anarchy is a social and political philosophy which puts the highest possible value on responsibility,' he argued (Sussex 1969: 89). This may have been so in the director's mind, but Anderson was ingenuous if he did not appreciate the impact that *If...* was likely to have in the contemporary political atmosphere of 1968, marked by student unrest in Europe and the US and anti-establishment feeling expressed in anti-government demonstrations and strikes.

Anderson also objected to the description of his film as fantasy. 'I would call *If...* a realistic film - not completely naturalistic but trying to penetrate the reality of its particular world,' he said (*ibid*: 12). This claim also seems hard to

justify. The shooting of a headmaster by a young girl (a waitress in a café) may have been intended metaphorically (the victory of freedom and feminism over conservatism and repression) but it was also fantastic. Meanwhile, the advertising for the film was provocative. One poster was made up of two photographs of the actor Malcolm McDowell, who played the lead. In one he was dressed as a schoolboy in uniform carrying books, in the other in a leather jacket carrying a machine gun. The caption underneath asked: 'Which side would you be on?' The promotion of the film not only reflected a fundamental division within society but tended to intensify it. It might be argued that the working-class realism of the New Wave had also been socially divisive, in emphasising the problems and conditions of the working classes rather than the growing prosperity of a united island, but there was an undeniable sincerity in the work of the New Wave, reflected in the realism of its cinematic style. If conditions among poor people were as impoverished as they were depicted, was it not the function of filmmakers to draw attention to them?

Anderson's later films (*O Lucky Man*, 1973; *Britannia Hospital*, 1982) confirmed and elaborated the movement in his work away from documentary-style realism towards ideological symbolism. *Britannia Hospital*, especially, seems like the work of a man who has despaired of finding any solution, or hope of one, to remedy the ills of his country, for which the chaotic and run-down hospital of the title is a heavy-handed metaphor.

In the event, the realism of the New Wave was maintained and developed in the work of two other directors, Ken Loach and Mike Leigh. Loach has an international reputation based on a career of forty years and 25 films and Leigh, a winner of the Palme D'Or at Cannes, also has a dedicated following. Loach's approach is Marxist and his subject-matter directly political and often internationalist, while Leigh is known for an idiosyncratic methodology of rehearsal and improvisation, which produces unusual results (Çelik-Norman 2009b). These two directors may be said to have kept alive the British realist tradition (Lay 2002: 89/90), dating back to the documentaries of the 1930s and the wartime films. However, the work of both directors appeals to what John Caughie sees as a limited 'aesthetic and cultural sphere ... given prestige by international awards' (Caughie 1996: 219). Both directors, in their different ways, draw attention to class antagonisms and might be considered more likely to exacerbate divisions within society than to heal or go beyond them.

The Heritage Film of the 1980s and 1990s

This cycle of films has been the subject of much critical attention in recent years. For the purposes of the present essay, only those aspects of the films are emphasised that make them an inappropriate representation of 'British cinema' as a whole. These can be summarised as follows: (i) Most of the films are specifically English, rather than Scottish, Welsh or Irish. In a period

remarkable for the strength of (anti-English) nationalism in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, the *Englishness* of literary sources, architecture, countryside and character is unpopular among non-English populations; (ii) The stories are drawn largely from nineteenth literary sources (Austen, Thackeray, Hardy, Forster, James), and whatever the qualities of the stories, this constitutes a narrow cultural basis for a national cinema - largely rural and upper class, and largely depending on the sentiment of nostalgia in terms of the receptiveness and reaction of audiences (see Higson 2003: *passim*); (iii) the 'heritage' films of the 1980s were widely regarded as part of a Thatcherite agenda to create a false sense of national unity, at a time (especially during the miners' strike of 1985) when in fact civil society was deeply divided (see Haeffner 1997: Chapter IV).

Certain so-called heritage films of the 1980s, when closely examined, reveal a more complex and less nostalgic mood than is superficially apparent. *Chariots of Fire* (Hudson, 1981), which is accused of being a showcase for English nationalism, had as its protagonists a Jew and a Scot and the narrative is based on a struggle against narrow-minded ethnic exclusionism in sport. In *Another Country* (Kanievska, 1984), the hero was a homosexual and, eventually, traitor to his country. It might also be pointed out that in the works of Jane Austen, perhaps the prime literary source for 'heritage' films, the worst sins are always bigotry, hypocrisy and snobbery, which together constitute the essence of what 'heritage', to its detractors, is guilty of. However, it is how these films are treated in terms of landscapes, beautiful mansions, extravagant costume and lavish furnishings - and how these are perceived by their audiences - that give them their character of exclusivity. The emphasis on period detail, with the camera typically lingering on what is rich and aristocratic (Higson 2003: 171), tends to obscure the more subtle qualities of characterisation and narrative.

What is seen as being offensive in nostalgia is its power to misrepresent and distort historical realities, as analysed by Frederic Jamieson. In the case of 'heritage' films, this means the way in which people, places and events are tinged with the attractive, but misleading, gloss of opulence and stability. Clearly, there is truth in this, as I have previously argued in my essay *Nostalgia versus Feminism* (Çelik-Norman 2009a), and yet it seems an insufficient basis for the rejection of this successful cycle of films as a part, at least, in a national cinematic identity. If nostalgia is considered to be corrupting, many of Britain's great cinematic works would be affected, including the entire corpus of Ealing comedy. Perhaps there is an inherent paradox in disparagement of nostalgia in an industry for which it has been, and continues to be - in the US, in France, in Italy as well as in Britain - such a powerful ingredient of audience pleasure. More significant, surely, in the objections to the heritage film is the first of the three points listed above, the political fragmentation of the UK, which according to Nick James meant that 'a critical caucus in favour of a national cinema *no longer exists*' (James 2001: 304 - my italics).

The 1990s

The 1990s were a decade of international box-office success as far as British cinema was concerned. Films that attracted both large audiences and critical acclaim included *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1995), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Newell, 1993) and *The Full Monty* (Cattaneo, 1997). *Shakespeare in Love* won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1999, the Palme d'Or at Cannes was awarded to Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* in 1996 and The Golden Bear at Berlin to *In the Name of the Father* in 1994. Other widely-admired British films of the decade included *Shallow Grave* (Danny Boyle, 1994), *Brassed Off* (Herman, 1996) and *Land and Freedom* (Ken Loach, 1995). On the international art film circuit, few directors were as much discussed as Peter Greenaway who directed four extraordinary films in five years, 1990-1995: *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*; *Prospero's Books*; *The Baby of Mâcon*; *The Pillow Book*.

'In the light of this collective 'British' achievement in a single decade, it is difficult to agree with Gilbert Adair's verdict given in an article in the Independent on Sunday in 2000: 'By comparison with the half-dozen indisputably great national cinemas (i.e. the French, American, Japanese, Italian, German and Scandinavian), our domestic product has always been, except for a brief flurry of pioneering at the turn of the 19th century, relatively minor' (Adair 2000: C1).

Yet there was still no consensus about the characteristics of the national cinema, and a closer examination of the films mentioned above (excepting Greenaway) reveals why. *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting* were distinctively Scottish. *In the Name of the Father* was set in Ireland and was strongly anti-British. *Shakespeare in Love* was financed and produced in the US. *Brassed Off* was located in a northern mining town at the time of the pit closures of the 1980s, which divided the country as no other political issue of the time; *Secrets and Lies*, like much of Leigh's work, enjoyed little success at the box-office and *Land of Freedom*, although popular in Spain (its subject was the Spanish Civil War), appealed to Loach's usual leftist followers. None of this indicates that the films were insignificant, simply that they occupied a restricted niche within the British cinemagoing public.

The two exceptions were *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *The Full Monty*, which were indisputably British (British directors, scenarists, cinematographers and, with one exception - MacDowell in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* - players). Both were based on lively and genuinely comic scripts. Their success at the box office, nationally and internationally was substantial and unforeseen. *Four Weddings and a Funeral* was set amongst the idle rich of London and the southeast, and the only issue (as in Jane Austen's stories) was who would marry whom. However, there was nothing conventional about the characters, which included a homosexual couple as well as the fourth richest

man in England (modest and eccentric), a very small girl who married an immensely tall man ... and so on. *The Full Monty* was set in Sheffield (in the north) at a time of high unemployment and behind the comedy lies the desperation of working class men with no jobs. Their decision to strip naked (*full monty*) before a large audience of boisterous women in order to earn money to support their families is the climax of the film.

Arguably, these two films were odd, unrelated successes, yet it is perhaps possible to identify certain common characteristics. First of all - and this is rare in British cinema - both films depended on a rich 'laugh-aloud' humour. Secondly, they were both built around a group of friends, and the most touching moments of both films are associated with the unselfishness of *the group*. Thirdly, both provided audiences with the spectacle of people making fools of themselves and therefore unable to take themselves over-seriously. Charley (Hugh Grant) does the unthinkable by running away from his own wedding, and most of his friends also make fools of themselves in their odd yet oddly satisfying relationships. The men in *The Full Monty* all make an exhibition of themselves in a way directly opposing the celebrated British reserve and discretion. All the main characters, it might be said, *escape their Britishness*. In so doing, it may be that they also escaped the usual divisive British distinctions of class, accent and geography.

Conclusion

With the exception of the decade of the 1940s, British cinema is thought by its enthusiasts and its critics to have been, essentially, a failure. Yet there have been many individual triumphs, according to the measure of box-office success, critical acclaim and international awards, as well as a strong acting tradition which has seen a long series of British actors win fame in Hollywood. The sense of failure, I suggest, is because of the lack of recognisable generic characteristics, the lack of what Dilys Powell called a British cinematic *tradition*. My thesis is that the emergence of a tradition - including a set of conventions, stylistic preferences and themes - has been impossible because the British cinema, like British society itself, has been the site of conflict ever since the Second World War. The conflict is essentially rooted in class distinctions and inter-class antagonisms, which have occasionally (as in the late sixties at the time of Anderson's *If...* and again in the Thatcherite eighties in the period depicted in *Brassed Off*) assumed a political guise. It has proved impossible for a 'British cinema' to have arisen on one side of this divide, since (as in the case of 'kitchen sink realism', which was leftist and proletarian, or the heritage film, which is essentially conservative and deferential) it would automatically have stirred up the hostility of the other. By the time that a kind of postmodernist (post-racist, post-sexist, post-classist) cinema was possible (say the 1990s), the divisions and antagonisms between the parts of Britain - north England and south England, Scotland and England, Wales and England, Ireland and England

- had become severe enough to make the concept of Britishness a thing of the past. Foreigners speak of 'the British', but the British do not, preferring generally to speak of themselves as English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish. There has even emerged a kind of cinematic battle of nationalisms, embodied by the film *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995) which celebrated the history of Scotland by rewriting the history of the British Isles.

The inescapable conclusion is that, with the exception of the period between around 1935 and 1950, there never has been a distinctive and recognisable British cinema, and that the likelihood of its emergence is now limited, given the deep political divisions that exist within the different elements of the 'United Kingdom'.

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