

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: RE-VIEWING THE BRITISH CINEMA

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By discarding what they view as monologic and myopic historiography, by demonstrating that social and cultural events commingle messily, rigorously exposing the innumerable tradeoffs, the competing bids and exchanges of culture, New Historicists can make a valid claim to have established new ways of studying history and a new awareness of how history and culture define each other.

—H. Aram Veeger, *The New Historicism*

THIS COLLECTION OF essays began as a double issue of the journal *Film Criticism* covering the period in English cinema between 1900 and 1975. The public response to the issue was immediate and positive. The essays included in that issue broke new ground in British film history and aesthetics, and they brought to light the work of a number of important but hitherto overlooked British cinéastes, including Montgomery Tully and Brian Desmond Hurst. In addition, the volume featured an outspoken interview with director Lindsay Anderson and Caroline Merz's essay on Wendy Toye and Muriel Box, two British filmmakers who have never really received the public attention they so obviously deserve.

Editing that issue of *Film Criticism* was a distinct pleasure, but it also had its downside; there were a large number of essays and interviews that I would have liked to include but could not, simply because of lack of space. This volume allows me to reprint the entire contents of the issue and add an additional ten articles to the existing text, affording an overview of the British film that ranges from the pioneering battlefield cine-reportage of Frederic Villiers all the way to the most recent work of director Terence Davies. In all cases, the essays in this volume deal with aspects of the British film that are not considered in other anthologies and with directors and/or films who have all too often been marginalized within critical discourse. The resultant collection, then, affords the reader a view of the British film in the twentieth century simply unavailable elsewhere.

There are a number of excellent survey volumes on mainstream British film history, cited at the end of this introduction and briefly considered here. John Barnes's *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England*, for example, offers a comprehensive look at the work of a number of pioneer British filmmakers, notably Robert W. Paul, but doesn't touch on the work of a number of other important early figures in any real detail, including the Frenchman Augustin Le Prince (who did his most important early work in England, before he mysteriously disappeared) and Frederic Villiers. Paul is perhaps the best known of the early British film pioneers, and Barnes's book predictably foregrounds Paul's undeniable accomplishments in the medium. However here, as elsewhere, it is the dominant tale that is being told at the ostensible expense of lesser-known, but perhaps equally important, cinema artists.

George Perry's *The Great British Picture Show* also tells the tale of the dominant order within fictional narrative filmic practice, highlighting the work of Alexander Korda, Alfred Hitchcock, Cecil Hepworth, Maurice Elvey, Anthony Asquith, Victor Saville, Sir Laurence Olivier, and other well-known names in British cinema history. Other figures, notably Lance Comfort, Brian Desmond Hurst, Lawrence Huntington, Wendy Toye, Muriel Box, and Montgomery Tully, get decidedly less attention. These personages have for too long been confined to the margins of the British film canon, yet their work is of great interest to modern scholars and historians. We can see now that "A" films (that is, films with a lavish budget and well-known personalities as principal stars) have for a long time been given an artificial precedence, because of their lavish physical execution, over "B" films of equal or greater thematic interest. Often, these more modest films question the dominant social order in ways that mainstream films would not dare to do, if only for fear of not recouping the substantial investment involved in their production.

Many "Bs" (or "quota quickies") were designed simply as escapist entertainment. But even in the humblest British "programmer," the seeming predictability of the narrative often disguises implicit critiques of the British social, sexual, political, and class order. As the essays in this volume on such established canonical "classics" as *The Red Shoes*, *Passport to Pimlico*, *Peeping Tom*, and other films demonstrate, even those "A" films ostensibly made in defense of the dominant social order often contained the seeds of rupture within their respective frames. A number of the essayists included here have reexamined these seemingly "exhausted" texts and arrived at fresh and insightful reinterpretations that tell us a good deal that is new not only about the films themselves, but also about the British upper classes who brought about their creation.

Charles Barr's *All Our Yesterdays*, Ernest Betts's *The Film Business*, James Curran and Vincent Porter's *British Cinema History*, Roy Armes's *Critical History of the British Cinema*, and other standard survey texts on British film history and practice afford the reader an excellent overview of the general outlines

of canonical cinema in the United Kingdom, but, of necessity, they cannot explore every area of the industry without becoming prohibitive in length. Newer texts in film theory and history, such as Robert Murphy's *Realism and Tinsel*, Paul Swann's *Hollywood Feature Film in Post-War Britain*, and Alexander Walker's *Hollywood UK: The British Film Industry in the Sixties*, concentrate on smaller blocks of time and/or thematic material, and they suggest that a reinterpretation of certain periods (or, indeed, any period that one might choose of potential interest) may profitably be pursued within the scope of a more narrowly focused study. Beyond all this are the immensely serious and still largely unexplored questions of British colonialist film practice, racial inequities and stereotypes in British cinema, and social and sexual marginalization within the British film. These are some of the issues explored in this anthology; at least, we can make a start in this direction.

Women have been ruthlessly marginalized from historical British cinema discourse (both critically and practically), and we hope to attempt some small correction in this regard. Although there are now a number of well-known women working in various capacities within the film industry in Great Britain, such important historical figures as Wendy Toye, Muriel Box, and Jill Craigie have never received their proper due. In this volume, I have tried to bring historical British feminist film practice a bit more into the light, through the agency of Caroline Merz's aforementioned essay on Box's and Toye's work, and also a recent interview with director Wendy Toye, whose career has been considerably undervalued by most historians.

Then, too, Brian Desmond Hurst's career as a filmmaker within the British studio system was continually modified by his position as a gay filmmaker within an overall structure of heterosexual patriarchal cinema practice. Brian McIlroy's essay in this volume illuminates the problems and inequities visited upon Hurst both personally and professionally as a consequence of this societal marginalization. In conjunction with this line of inquiry, it is only comparatively recently that questions of British colonialism have been directly addressed within the cinema of the United Kingdom, most notably in the series of films made in the late 1980s by scenarist Hanif Kureishi and director Stephen Frears. These films are also examined in this anthology.

As Michel Foucault notes, "in modern thought, historicism and the analytic of finitude confront one another" (1970, 372). Nowhere is this truer than in the study of twentieth-century filmic practice, in which the spectator and theoretician are both confronted with a series of texts of such spectacular complexity as to nearly defy definitive analysis. Recent critical writings, such as Stam, Burgoyne, and Flitterman-Lewis's *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, give proof to the inescapable fact that there is no "solid ground" upon which the new critical historicist can base her/his work. Rather, it is the continually unfolding dynamic of an utterly flexible spectrum of textual and methodological possibilities that gives the present-day theorist the freedom to explore a nearly infinite series of texts

and critical approaches, without genuflecting to canonical precedents of the past.

This is not to say that the works cited at the end of this introductory essay are in any way defective in their scope and/or methodological approach to cinema history, theory, and practice. But it does signify that any study (including this one) defines limits of inclusion and exclusion by the very creation of its textual perimeters. Further, the New Historicist approach suggests that the current "bedrock" of cinematic archaeology is, in fact, only another layer of geologic limestone that needs to be stripped away, perhaps to reveal yet another series of structures beneath it. The reinterpretational essays in this volume, in conjunction with those that break new ground in cinema history, afford an invitation to yet another series of historical and critical explorations into the history of cinema theory and practice in the future.

There is certainly a measure of comfort and exhilaration provided by this historical uncertainty. In cinema theory and history, as in other areas of critical studies, new discoveries lead to newer areas of exploration, and our most important and fruitful task in current critical practice is to investigate activity at the margins of textual and critical production. Thus, this text concerns itself with "the tale not told" (in Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's phrase) by most canonical surveys of British cinema practice, and it concentrates on the women and men whose impact on film in the United Kingdom is real, but often unexplored. As Zavarzadeh notes, "seemingly innocent films—what are usually taken to be neutral aesthetic acts of entertainment—are sites of . . . ideological investment" (1991, 1). Who is to judge the "centrality" of certain forms of discourse or the "marginality" of others? Instead of seeking an artificial center, this volume questions the valorization of certain areas of the British film industry and seeks to suggest new horizons for future critical and historical investigation.

Stephen Bottomore's article on the work of Frederic Villiers, the first British war cinematographer, brings to light the life and career of a person who has been generally forgotten in cinema history. It is more than a little ironic that most casual students of history can recall and readily view the work of Matthew Brady, the justly famous still journalist of the American Civil War, yet the work of Villiers, who brought his primitive motion picture camera to the front of the battle lines, has somehow vanished from our collective memory. Bottomore's essay goes a long way to restoring Villiers to his rightful place in British cinema history.

Much the same might be said about the work of Brian Desmond Hurst, whose work in cinema was filtered through his own personal identity as a gay filmmaker working in a pronouncedly homophobic society. It is certainly correct to see Hurst as an uncelebrated, and often ignored, cinema artist who paved the way for such later film artists as Derek Jarman and Terence Davies. Brian McIlroy does a brilliant job in presenting the complex and often difficult life of this pioneering filmmaker.

My own article on Montgomery Tully's film *Boys in Brown* examines not only Tully's career as a director, but also the difficulties of working within the British studio system. In particular, I discuss the forced use of the "Independent Frame Method," a money-saving system of photographic nonrepresentationalism used by Rank to bring down both the cost and the shooting time of their less ambitiously mounted films. As I note, the Independent Frame Method had consequences far beyond the immediate economic and temporal considerations foreseen by Rank, and it served as a metaphor for the entire enterprise on British colonial rule.

Brian McFarlane's piece on Lance Comfort and Lawrence Huntington deals with the work on those directors who are usually relegated to the rank of "program filmmakers." As McFarlane correctly points out, Comfort, Huntington, and the other directors discussed in his essay often used the genre film as vehicle for their personal concerns. Certainly this is not a new concept, but in examining the life and works of these underappreciated filmmakers, McFarlane opens up a rich new vein of critical study and brings into the existing canon a brace of refreshing and innovative films that tell us a great deal about the social circumstances of their creation. The artificial distinction between "high" and "low" has long ago been profitably done away with by a number of writers; here, McFarlane maps out the territory that is opened up when these synthetic barriers are abolished.

Andrew Higson's essay on David Lean's *This Happy Breed* sees Lean's work as an attempt to pull the nation back together as a war was drawing to its conclusion, to restate the vision of Empire as a reassuring constant in a world that had been utterly changed by the events of the preceding decade. Higson argues that Lean was both successful and unsuccessful in this attempt. Lean's film harkens back to a period of relative political and social stasis within British society but, as Higson notes, this period was marked by a rigidly controlled system of social, sexual, racial, and political hierarchies, all of which were called into question by World War II. *This Happy Breed's* vision of British society, then, is seen as something both outdated and artificially constructed, something that Lean attempted to "reconstruct" in his film.

Neil Rattigan's piece, "*The Demi-Paradise and Images of Class in British Wartime Films*," takes this exploration of societal stratification one step further, exploring the societal codes and values that led to the rigid separation of one social, political, racial, or economic group from another through a system of clearly defined (but popularly unacknowledged) codes and signifiers. In order for the United Kingdom to survive in World War II, Rattigan argues, this careful partitioning or multileveling of British society was essential for the mobilization of national forces, dividing leaders into one group, followers into another, and spectator/civilians into yet another discrete aggregation. Rattigan's examination of the "images" used to perpetuate and disseminate the rules of class structure during the war demonstrates both the insidious and pervasive aspects of filmic iconogra-

phy, showing that a series of codes and glyphs swept over the wartime cinema-going audience, lulling them into acceptance of the class system while simultaneously diverting their attention from the rigidity of the roles they were forced to accept.

Tony Williams examines the classic comedy *Passport to Pimlico*, a film that has certainly been written about before. Williams, however, sees in the work a desire to temporally liberate, or perhaps more accurately identify and suppress, the “repressed fantastic” implicit in the subtext of the film. Seen as a series of narrative tropes on postwar British social structures, the film posits the existence of a secessionist subset of the United Kingdom. In *Passport to Pimlico*, the residents of the London neighborhood of Pimlico, through a complex series of plot machinations, declare that they are in fact “Burgundians,” and thus not subject to the draconian rationing laws of postwar Britain. The artificial release from British rule depicted by the balance of the film’s narrative is climaxed with the readmission of the rebels to British society and the restoration of the rationing rules that the inhabitants of Pimlico had sought to escape. In his examination of the film, Williams demonstrates how *Passport to Pimlico* delights in rebellion only to add to the ultimate authority of the system it criticizes; to abrogate existing values is to invite chaos.

Cynthia Young’s rereading of *The Red Shoes*, the Powell/Pressburger classic, is another “re-vision” of a film that has long since entered the cinematic canon. In suggesting to its audiences that it was altogether acceptable, even desirable, to sacrifice one’s self for one’s art, the film also firmly restated the overriding and repressive power of the artistic patriarchy, specifically through the character of the ruthless impresario, played by Anton Walbrook. Young seeks to deconstruct the overarching mythos the film so transparently revels in and demonstrate how the desired coefficient of the film’s narrative was continued subservience to a system of values that, as I have already suggested, were rapidly becoming both obsolete and irrelevant. In addition, *The Red Shoes* seeks to reaffirm the primacy of male dominance in all spheres of British commercial and social intercourse, an enterprise made “necessary” by the vast numbers of British women made economically self-sufficient through the agency of wartime munitions employment.

Caroline Merz’s piece on Wendy Toye and Muriel Box briefly considers the careers of these two groundbreaking feminist directors; Box began her career as a novelist and writer, while Toye started her work in the cinema as a dancer and choreographer. Unfortunately, Muriel Box is no longer with us; but Wendy Toye is still actively involved in the theater, and she readily consented to a long and detailed interview on her life and work, which I conducted during the summer of 1992. Toye is refreshingly direct in her recollections of working with Alexander Korda for his company, London Films, as well as in those of her later activity as an independent filmmaker, financing her own productions. Interestingly, despite her

reputation as a person skilled in the handling of farcical comedy, both on screen and on the stage, Toye reveals that she was always more at home as a director of "fantasy films."

In "The Last Gasp of the Middle Class: British War Films of the 1950s," Neil Rattigan explores the re-visionary process that was already well underway when the events of World War II were still part of the collective public's recent memory. These films attempted to "refight" the conflict that had just been won; they also called into question what exactly had been accomplished between 3 September 1939 (the date that Britain declared that a state of war existed between itself and Germany) and 1945. Further, the events in Korea and the decline of British colonial rule were never far from the narrative concerns of these reconstructional war films. Rattigan demonstrates that while these productions attempted to shore up morale at home, reassuring a restless public that the world had remained essentially unchanged, they also implicitly (and often unconsciously) acknowledged that the values underlying the war had been fatally called into question by the rapidly changing social milieu of the 1950s.

In line with this, Laurence Miller's index of British film noir may come as something of a surprise to most readers, who may have generally assumed that the noir cycle is a narrative enterprise unique to American cinema practice. However, as Miller notes in his catalogue, the noir cycle, which started in Britain in 1940 and lasted into the late 1950s, foregrounded social concerns unique to the English sensibility, coded into a variety of subgenres dealing with motifs of revenge, false accusation, amnesia, flight, betrayal, and other social and personal dilemmas. Miller shows that these films reflected and reinforced the instability of the social structure in Britain both during and after World War II and, in many cases, foreshadowed the collapse of many of the systems of social discourse that had been so fervently embraced by the public for such a long period of time.

Lester Friedman and Scott Stewart's interview with Lindsay Anderson is both wide ranging and surprisingly candid. Anderson discusses his impatience with, or perhaps resistance to, current film theory, particularly the work of Peter Wollen. Anderson also offers direct and anecdotal accounts of working on the set with Bette Davis and Malcolm McDowell, and he implicitly argues for the existence—or at least what he perceives to be the need for the existence—of a uniform system of values for the appreciation of cinema practice. Anderson's voice is that of a no-nonsense practitioner who deals with the day-to-day practicalities of getting a film finished on time and under budget.

Ilsa J. Bick's essay on *Peeping Tom* re-views this well-known and often discussed film by Michael Powell in an entirely new light. The film caused a public and critical furor when first released in 1960, and it brought cinema discourse to a new level of graphic specificity. The film's narrative centers on a young cinematographer who murders his victims while filming their death agonies. Powell himself played the young man's (Karl Boehm's) father, making this an

intensely personal and dark consideration of the mechanics of sadism, sexual and social repression, and personal violence. Interesting enough, *Peeping Tom* was made at the height of the reign of the Hammer horror films, such as *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) and *Dracula* (1958). While the Hammer films also dealt with admittedly gruesome subject matter and were reviled by many popular critics of the period, they managed to escape general censure as spirited works of Grand Guignol. *Peeping Tom*, however, received a disastrous commercial and critical reception, and for all intents and purposes ended Michael Powell's career as a filmmaker within the British cinema industry. Ilsa Bick suggests some of the reasons why this happened and posits that the male gaze implicit in all patriarchal film practice may have found its most perverse expression in Powell's film.

David Sanjek's "Twilight of the Monsters" examines the more traditional British horror films of the late 1950s to the 1970s and demonstrates that changing values of representational violence, as well as the multivalencies of contemporaneous societal discourse, led to the collapse of the 1959-65 horror "Renaissance" in England. Sanjek is nostalgic for the more restrained "fairy tale" approach of the production studios Hammer and Amicus, yet he also argues that horror, operating as it does on the margins of cinematic discourse, must continually seek ever more graphic representationalism to appeal to increasingly jaded audiences.

Edward T. Jones's examination of *The Go-Between* discusses this often underappreciated Joseph Losey/Harold Pinter collaboration, exploring the ways in which Pinter, in his narrative structure, is aided and abetted by Losey's penchant for lengthy takes and long tracking shots, a style that can be traced back to Losey's earlier films of the 1960s, particularly *The Servant*. *The Go-Between* represents for Jones a restatement of the values espoused by Losey and Pinter in their earlier work together and an exploration of how these beliefs have been transmogrified by the passage of time and events.

Next, Stephen Frears, who has recently gravitated to mainstream Hollywood with his not particularly successful film *Hero*, is interviewed by Lester Friedman and Scott Stewart. When this interview was recorded, Frears was fresh from his triumph as director of *My Beautiful Laundrette* and would shortly go on to make *Dangerous Liaisons* and *The Grifters*. The freshness of Frears's vision in the mid-1980s, and his ability to work under severe constraints of time and budget (as Lindsay Anderson notes in his interview with Friedman and Stewart, *My Beautiful Laundrette* was shot in 16mm, as a television movie, and only later released theatrically) are effectively conveyed in this interview, even as Frears notes that Friedman and Stewart obviously "expected a younger man" on their first meeting.

In an accompanying essay, Leonard Quart examines the films of Frears and his key scenarist during the 1980s, Hanif Kureishi; this piece offers a number of interesting insights into the ways in which the Frears/Kureishi films serve as mordant social commentaries on the policies of Thatcherism. *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* are both "era-specific" film texts; their

evocative landscape of urban decay and social breakdown serves as a compelling backdrop for narratives of social, racial, and sexual displacement. Though the Thatcher era may be officially over, these films serve as reminders of the inequities spawned by her "reign" in office and give proof that political commentary and spectatorial pleasure need not be mutually exclusive, as is often assumed to be the case.

Finally, I had the opportunity to view Terence Davies's most recent film, *The Long Day Closes*, at the Society for Cinema Studies Conference in the spring of 1991 and a chance to briefly meet the director in person. We exchanged telephone numbers, and as this anthology was being readied for publication, it seemed to me that an interview with Davies would be the perfect way to complete this selection of essays. As I discovered during my interview, Davies is moving from a series of intensely personal, autobiographical films to a suspense thriller set in New York, which he hopes to shoot in early 1994. The interview covers Davies's early work for the BFI Production Unit and his international success with *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*, as well as the drastic circumstances of his childhood and the enormous influence that American films (particularly musicals) have had on his career as a director.

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