

# **Social Realism: A British Art Cinema**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy at the University of Sheffield

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October 2009

## Contents

<u>Acknowledgements</u>	<u>p.4</u>
<u>Abstract</u>	<u>p.5</u>
<u>0.0 Introduction</u>	<u>p.7</u>
<u>0.1 Social Realism and Art</u>	<u>p.10</u>
<u>0.2 Debating Realism</u>	<u>p.17</u>
<u>0.3 Building a Tradition</u>	<u>p.21</u>
<u>1.0 Social Realism: Origins and Departures</u>	<u>p.27</u>
<u>1.1 <i>Millions Like Us</i></u>	<u>p.39</u>
<u>1.2 <i>Love on the Dole</i></u>	<u>p.46</u>
<u>1.3 <i>It Always Rains on Sunday</i></u>	<u>p.53</u>
<u>2.0 Social Problems, New Waves and Art: The 1950s and 1960s</u>	<u>p.63</u>
<u>2.1 The Social Problem Film: Traditions and Rejuvenation</u>	<u>p.64</u>
<u>2.2 Free Cinema and The New Wave: Britain's Art Cinema Begins</u>	<u>p.80</u>
<u>2.3 Critical Voices</u>	<u>p.94</u>
<u>2.4 British Art Cinema and the World</u>	<u>p.121</u>
<u>3.0 Ken Loach: Reluctant Artist</u>	<u>p.130</u>
<u>3.1 After the First Wave: The Development of Socio-Political Art Cinema</u>	<u>p.131</u>
<u>3.2 Realist Renewal: Ken Loach and Narrative Hybridity</u>	<u>p.153</u>
<u>4.0 Realism and Authorship: The Films of Mike Leigh</u>	<u>p.173</u>
<u>4.1 Mike Leigh and the Canon of British Social Realism</u>	<u>p.174</u>
<u>4.2 Mike Leigh as Author</u>	<u>p.189</u>
<u>4.3 Telling the Story: Narrative Structure</u>	<u>p.200</u>
<u>5.0 The 1980s: British Social Realism Becomes British Art Cinema</u>	<u>p.215</u>
<u>5.1 'Freedom plus Commitment': The Continued Traditions of Art Cinema and British Realism in the Films of Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frears</u>	<u>p.221</u>
<u>5.2 'Somehow, Somehow, I Might Escape': Alan Clarke and the Poetics of Actuality</u>	<u>p.237</u>
<u>5.3 'England's Green and Pleasant Land': Relocating Reality in <i>Distant Voices, Still Lives</i> and <i>Handsworth Songs</i></u>	<u>p.253</u>
<u>6.0 Contemporary British Realism: Continuation and Fragmentation</u>	<u>p.272</u>
<u>6.1 Box Office Social Realism: <i>The Full Monty</i>, <i>Brassed Off</i> and <i>Billy Elliot</i></u>	<u>p.27</u>
<u>6.2 Shane Meadows: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Social Realist</u>	<u>p.287</u>
<u>6.3 New Auteurs: Andrea Arnold, Lynne Ramsay and Pawel Pawlikowski</u>	<u>p.304</u>
<u>6.4 Beyond the White Working-Class</u>	<u>p.320</u>

<b><u>7.0 Conclusion</u></b>	<b><u>p.329</u></b>
<b><u>8.0 Bibliography</u></b>	<b><u>p.338</u></b>
<b><u>9.0 Filmography</u></b>	<b><u>p.346</u></b>

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank Jonathan Rayner, for his patience, support and encouragement over the last three years. I would also like to thank other members of the English department at the University of Sheffield who have read my work and have made valuable suggestions: Jonathan Ellis, Sue Vice, Brendan Stone and Danny Karlin. I would also like to acknowledge the support of my fellow PhD students: Phil Rich, Peter Walsh, James Boon and Dan Spence. Last but not least, I wish to thank my dad, my mum, my brother and my wonderful partner, Sarah.

## Social Realism: A British Art Cinema

Since the 1930s, realist cinema has maintained a consistent but ever-diversifying presence within the heart of British film culture. The broad term of social realism has come to represent numerous examples of films that reflect a range of social environments and issues, in a manner that rejects the artifice and escapism of more classically-oriented narrative models. Yet, there has been a tendency to view such films in the context of what they have to tell us about the issues and themes they invoke, rather than what they say about their art. When we think of the New Wave in France, or Neo-Realism in Italy we think of film movements which reflected their subjects with veracity and conviction, but we also see their products as cultural entities which encourage interpretation on the terms of their authorship, and which demand readings on the basis of their form. We are invited to read the films as we would approach a poem or a painting, as artefacts of social *and* artistic worth. Despite the continued prevalence of social realism in British cinema, there is no comparable compulsion in our own critical culture. This study seeks to address this imbalance.

Beginning with the documentary movement of the 1930s and the realist cinema of wartime, I chart the history and progression of social realism in Britain, covering a wide range of directors such as Ken Loach, Mike Leigh, Alan Clarke and Shane Meadows and a number of film cycles, such as Free Cinema and the British New Wave.

The key focus of my analysis lies on the aesthetic and formal constitution of the mode. I seek to highlight hitherto unrealised depths within the textual parameters of British

social realism in order to propose its deserved status as a genuine and progressive national art cinema.

## 0.0 Introduction

This project aims to display the manner in which the social realist mode can and should be acknowledged within the terms of the art cinema convention. However, without thorough explication of the significance of both terms, the debate simply becomes one of nomenclature. It is the importance of acknowledging the significance of both art cinema and social realism that will provide the parameters for a revised understanding of a powerful and important arm of British culture.

Some of the pre-existing definitions of British social realism, while adequate, seem to place limits on a full and thorough consideration of its complexion and influence. In their extensive engagements with cinematic realism, Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment have offered the following overview:

Social realism is a discursive term used by film critics and reviewers to describe films that aim to show the effects of environmental factors on the development of character through depictions that emphasise the relationship between location and identity. Traditionally associated in Britain with a reformist or occasionally revolutionary politics that deemed adverse social circumstances could be changed by the introduction of more enlightened social policies or structural change in society, social realism tends to be associated with an observational style of camerawork that emphasises situations and events and an episodic

narrative structure, creating 'kitchen sink' dramas and 'gritty' character studies of the underbelly of urban life.<sup>1</sup>

What is most interesting about Hallam's and Marshment's summation of the mode's formal and thematic constitution is the identification of the importance of 'environment' in designating the social realist text. Of course, the 'social' in social realism already suggests such a pre-occupation. Yet, a consideration of the rest of this particular definition reveals much about the limitations of such a position. Consider the critics' highlighting of the importance of 'showing' how the aforementioned environment impacts upon its constituents, or the suggestion of a political end to this method, and crucially, the final focus on 'observational' style, and the perceived revelation of the 'underbelly' of an apparent reality. These positions, whilst largely accurate, inadvertently reveal the limitations of pre-existing critical understandings of social realist filmmaking in Britain. The emphasis placed on the filmmaker as performing a reflective function assumes a focus which illuminates a hitherto unseen or unspoken social reality, and in so doing, seeks to engage the political and/or social consciousness of its viewer. What I want to suggest is that the sustained social realist tradition in British filmmaking has encompassed an eclectic and persistently innovative school of creative figures, who have sought to interpret British society in an ever-diversifying range of ways. Their films have said as much about the nation and its problems, as they have about the artists who articulate them. One of the central issues that I want to raise is that social realism is not merely a cinema of mimesis, nor is it one of leftist propaganda,

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 184.



or of reportage. Rather it is the default position of a national film culture which seeks to challenge both our perceptions of the socio-political sphere, and of cinema itself. It is a mode which houses British national film artistry, the details and methods of which should be highlighted, understood, and interrogated.

To this end, it is illuminating to find that pre-existing definitions of social realism tacitly underplay the mode's stylistic potentials:

Often referred to in popular criticism as 'gritty' or 'raw' dramas, words that have close associations with 'the natural', and connotations of 'earthiness', social realism is associated with a lack of stylistic artifice and a transparent naturalism. The words 'gritty' and 'raw' tend to embrace both the thematic elements of the films – which often confront the troublesome relationship between deprived environmental conditions and human psychology – and the 'no frills' style in which they are made.

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The representation of the 'troublesome relationship between environmental conditions and human psychology' is apparently incompatible with a cinema of aesthetic flair and formal innovation, through the presupposition of a modest and underplayed visual and textual remit in films associated with social realist methodology. From examination of British cinematic realism, which will analyse the occurrence of contemporary social representation and realist aesthetics from the documentary movement through to

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<sup>2</sup> Hallam and Marshment (2000), p. 192.

wartime realism, the British New Wave, the works of Mike Leigh and of Alan Clarke and Shane Meadows amongst others, the stylistic parameters of social realism cannot be described simply in adjectives which emphasise a process of authentication and the effective photography of social landscapes and character. Instead, this consistent tendency in British cinema necessitates the uses of terms which seek to emphasise the manner in which social realism repeatedly takes its environment as a starting point before deploying and applying an ever increasing palate of poetic and artistic potentials. As we will also find, even Ken Loach, whose films (on the surface at least) one might choose to associate with the definition of realism proffered by Hallam and Marshment, has amassed a rich and diverse body of work which can never be simply characterised through reference to the 'grittiness' and 'rawness' of the drama-documentary aspiration. In seeking to understand Loach and others like him, by first acknowledging the style and craft of their form, rather than their content, we can present a fuller portrait of the pervasive British social realist mode and the filmmakers who contribute to it.

### **0.1 Social Realism and Art**

Art cinema is crucial to the analysis of the history and aesthetics of British social realist filmmaking. It is a concept that provides us with a framework to understand how social realist films oppose the mainstream forms of cinematic address, both in terms of form and style and within the context of wider institutional factors such as reception, production and distribution. Moreover, by evoking the convention alongside social realism, we are able to seek the origin of the creative forces that shape the delivery of a filmic text, in addition to developing an understanding of the world and/or the issues that it depicts.

In separate works, David Bordwell and Steve Neale have effectively mapped out thorough definitions of art cinema. While Bordwell's more formal emphasis underscores many of the close readings of social realism which form the bulk of this study, I would first like to engage with the wider remit of Neale's focus on the subject:

Art films tend to be marked by a stress on visual style (an engagement of the look in terms of a marked individual point of view rather than in terms of institutionalised spectacle), by a suppression of action in the Hollywood sense, by a consequent stress on character rather than plot and by an interiorisation of dramatic conflict. [...] A different hierarchy is established between action and actant. Different orders of motivation sustain the relations between the two. [...]. It is also true that Art films are marked at a textural level by the inscription of features that function as marks of enunciation – and, hence, as signifiers of an authorial voice (and look). The precise nature of these features has varied historically and geographically, as it were, since it derives in part from another, simultaneous function that these features perform: that of differentiating the text or texts in question from the texts produced by Hollywood.<sup>3</sup>

As we will see, social realist cinema can be understood in the context of an authored 'visual style', which, as Neale suggests, is a central tenet within the art cinema

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Neale, 'Art Cinema as Institution' in Catherine Fowler (ed.), *The European Cinema Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.103-4.

definition. Moreover, Neale's identification of the manner in which art cinema functions in a variety of ways as a reactive response to Hollywood (and by extension mainstream cinema), is crucial if we are to acknowledge how social realism's oppositional aesthetic and thematic inflections are relevant not only to an understanding of the departures from homogenised indigenous cinema, but of the manner in which it contributes to a wider re-assessment of cinema's functions and purpose within the global indices of the art cinema convention. Indeed, Neale's interrogation of the status of art cinema offers an inclusive means of engaging with the industrial factors which help to define a product as artistically worthy, in contrast to a contextual discourse which proffers more conservative forms as mere 'entertainment':

[...] the films will be shown in different cinemas and be distributed by different distribution networks. And they will be marked by different textual characteristics. In constructing and sustaining such differences, the films will almost certainly tend to coincide with and to become supported by discourses functioning to define and perpetuate art and culture.<sup>4</sup>

This kind of institutional designation can occur within the critical and audience-led reception and consumption of social realist cinema, fuelled, in part, by a willingness to accept the filmic product as an artwork. Such a status is repeatedly defined by our linking of the film to a creative presence at its heart, rather than to, for example, its stars, special-effects, or escapist narrative possibility. As Neale states, 'the mark of the author

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<sup>4</sup> Neale (2002), p. 105.

is used as a kind of brand name, to mark and to sell the filmic product', which again encourages our reception of a national cinema such as social realism on the basis of how its directors work, rather than simply attempting to assess the effectiveness of their delivery of a social issue.<sup>5</sup> It is a discourse which engenders an understanding of films as exhibiting the marks and signatures of the artist as director, and signifier of quality. Thus we go to the cinema to see 'Mike Leigh's latest' or 'the new Shane Meadows'. By contrast, it is more likely that one will say let's see 'that *Transformers* movie', rather than the 'latest Michael Bay' or one might suggest 'the new Hugh Grant comedy', rather than 'Richard Curtis' new one'.

If we begin to understand the products of social realism within the institutional parameters of the art cinema convention, then our ability to engage with their stylistic properties is greatly enhanced. To return to Hallam and Marshment, their emphasis on conditions such as social revelation, political position, and the underplaying of style and form as existing within the limiting discourses of observation, are understandings which may be challenged if we take as our point of entry the filmmaker as artistic creator. Indeed, Italian neo-realism of the immediate post-war period represents a convincing example of national art cinema, and while its films can be understood within the kinds of parameters posited by Hallam and Marshment, the cycle owes its continued significance to a far broader understanding of its formal qualities, political complexion, and legacy. Roberto Rossellini, one of Italian neo-realism's founding fathers, discussed realism in terms far removed from those which we have seen used to portray British approaches to the realist mode:

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<sup>5</sup> Neale (2002), p. 105.

I think there is still some confusion about the term realism, even after all these years of realist films. Such people still think of realism as something external, as a way out into the fresh air, not as the contemplation of poverty and misery. To me realism is simply the artistic form of truth. If you re-establish truth you give it expression. If it's a dead truth, you feel it is false, it is not truly expressed. With my views of course I cannot accept the 'entertainment' film, as the term is understood in some business circles, especially outside Europe. Some such films may be partially acceptable, to the extent that they are capable of giving partial expression to reality. [...] It has no love of the superfluous and the spectacular, and rejects these, going instead to the root of things. It does not stop at surface appearances but seeks out the most subtle strands of the soul. <sup>6</sup>

Rossellini's remarks offer numerous and fascinating points of engagement with the theoretical conception of realism. In many ways, his words can be seen as a prototypical alignment of realism with a notion of cinema as art, particularly in the connection of art to truth: as something beyond the surface (offering the potential for subjective investigation within the realist sphere) and holding the power to 'contemplate', rather than simply display the conditions of a realist filmmaker's focus. This interpretation is

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<sup>6</sup> 'The film-maker Roberto Rossellini, interviewed by Mario Verdone: [...] ' cited in Christopher Williams (ed.), *Realism and the Cinema: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1980), pp.17-86 (pp. 31-32).

distinct from that which is most commonly associated with the 'gritty' social realism of Britain, with its apparent focus on social conditions and environments, at the expense of how style and form shape varying levels of meaning. Moreover, the erection of a distinction between cinematic realism and 'entertainment' echoes the manner in which Neale suggests that art cinema functions from a position of differentiation to the classical model enshrined in Hollywood cinema, and (with reference to our understanding of British social realism) authenticates the role of the artist as responding to a more commercialised treatment of the wider medium.

Rossellini presents realism as a mode that encourages an understanding of the potential to go beyond the mere external presentation of reality, and by extension, the limiting attribution of nothing more than a political position to the filmmaker in question. This represents a wider critical appreciation of realism that has been lacking in critical discourse surrounding British social realism. There are numerous reasons for this. While much of this study is concerned with showing that, in social realism, British cinema has a viable mode of representation which can be subjected to the types of critical focus commonly reserved to more lauded national cinemas, the industrial context in which social realism exists is markedly different from those in countries such as France, Italy and Germany, which are more famously associated with art cinema traditions:

[...] it was not until after the Second World War that state support became firmly linked to the promotion and development of national Art Cinemas under the aegis of liberal-democratic and social democratic governments and under the pressure of the presence of America and

Hollywood in Europe. The result was an efflorescence of Art Cinema, the production of the films and the figures and the movements with which Art Cinema tends massively to be associated today.<sup>7</sup>

For Neale, in order to build a sustained and consistent art cinema cycle, the institutional conditions of the film culture in question must be at least partly defined by persistent state subsidy, in a manner which has rarely existed in the more liberalised and market-led British industry. While the creation of movements such as the French New Wave can be firmly linked to such a model, I hope to show how *despite* the political and economic difficulties of making innovative but commercially unpalatable films in Britain, an art cinema has been embedded and developed persistently through social realism. The artificial conditions that have enabled the flourishing of art cinema abroad explicitly draw the viewer and the critic towards an appreciation of the films in a different manner to those which have originated along a more traditional commercial trajectory. This makes it doubly important to ensure that the British films, filmmakers and cycles that deviate from cinematic norms, are afforded equal consideration as culturally worthy, in line with their continental counterparts. Therefore, the tacit suppression of art cinema discourse in Britain, in contrast to other national cinemas, explains to a certain extent the limiting critical appreciation of social realism. However, equally significant are the sustained critical debates about the problematic nature of realism in Britain, which have also ensured that an application of realism, through the liberating framework characterised by Rossellini, has rarely been achievable.

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<sup>7</sup> Neale (2002), p.115.



## **0.2 Debating Realism**

The most prominent theoretical discussion of cinematic realism emerged in the pages of *Screen* with the publication of Colin MacCabe's 'Realism and Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses' in 1974. MacCabe equated the realist film text with the classic realist novel of the nineteenth century: 'A classic realist text may be defined as one in which there is a hierarchy amongst the discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of the truth.'<sup>8</sup> Implicit in this parallel is a sense in which the presentation of a perceived 'reality' is kept in check by its integration within a closed textual discourse, which actively negates the potential for critical, and crucially political and social, interrogations of the text. MacCabe actively echoes Brechtian critiques of realist form and content in his highlighting of the mode's apparent negation of self-reflexivity, implying, by extension, the inactive and closed role of the realist spectator which contributes to a heavily argued condemnation of the mode's innate conservatism:

The narrative discourse cannot be mistaken in its identifications because the narrative discourse is not present as discourse – as articulation. The unquestioned nature of the narrative discourse entails that the only problem that reality poses is to go and look and see what *Things* there are.

The relationship between the reading subject and the real is placed as one

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<sup>8</sup> Colin MacCabe, 'From Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses' in Anthony Easthope (ed.), *Contemporary Film Theory* (New York: Longman, 1993), p.54.

of pure specularity. These features imply two essential features of the classic realist text:

- 1 The classic realist text cannot deal with the real as contradictory.
- 2 In a reciprocal movement the classic realist text ensures the position of the subject in a relation of dominant specularity.<sup>9</sup>

For MacCabe, the apparent inability of the realist address to reveal its status and contrivance severely limits the potential to engage the viewer beyond a position of consumption. I am keen to use the understanding of British social realism within an art cinema convention, as a means of insulating realist methodology from these kinds of criticisms. What we have already seen through an engagement with art cinema and social realist definitions, and what will unfold throughout this study in a survey of British realist cinema, is the manner in which social realism transcends the mere aspiration of the specular. A deployment of art cinema reading strategies enables our understanding to encompass the means of creation as well as signification and delivery in British social realism, mapping a cinematic tradition which persistently invites us to privilege content *and* form. To emphasise this argument, I would like to point to MacCabe's own discussion of realist subject matter in connection with Loach and Costa-Gavras:

Within contemporary films one could think of the films of Costa-Gavras or such television documentaries as *Cathy Come Home*. What is, however, still impossible for the classic realist text is to offer any

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<sup>9</sup> MacCabe (1993), p. 57.

perspectives for struggle due to its inability to investigate contradiction. It is thus not surprising that these films tend either to be linked to a social democratic conception of progress – if we reveal injustices then they will go away – or certain *ouvrieriste* tendencies which tend to see the working class, outside any dialectical movement, as the simple possessors of truth. It is at this point that Brecht's demand that literary and artistic productions be regarded as social events gains its force. The contradictions between the dominant discourse in a classic realist text and the dominant ideological discourses at work in a society are what provide the criteria for discriminating within the classic realist text. And these criteria will often resolve themselves into questions of subject-matter.<sup>10</sup>

For MacCabe, the effectiveness of a realist text is measured by its ability to investigate and portray the problematic nature of the terms of its address - it cannot simply perform a function of 'revelation'. It is in this area that the deployment of Brecht gains weight. In doing this, MacCabe initiates a reading of realist film texts which (as we will see throughout this study through an engagement with much indigenous film criticism) is dominated by a concern with subject-matter, and which marginalises a consideration of aesthetics and the textual constitution of diverse examples of realist cinema. To re-align this response to MacCabe's discussion of realism, we must therefore be mindful of mounting an investigation of the problems of the production of content alone. Of course, if a subject-matter purports to political radicalism but is integrated within a closed narrative structure then the types of concerns mounted by MacCabe, and many other

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<sup>10</sup> MacCabe (1993), p. 62.

critics in his wake, are sustainable. But let us first look at form, before lamenting the apparent impotence of thematic ingredients. Again we must ask, in what way is the director involved? For realism to challenge these criticisms, the creative figure must be at the forefront of our understanding of the films' textual strategies, alerting the viewer to a conspicuous space between narrative and aesthetics, between voice and image. This can be achieved through recourse to an understanding of social realism in the context of the art cinema, in which the text is not simply understood as a closed discourse because of its adoption of a narrative programme. Such a reading strategy invites us to question the construction of that narrative, and often leads us to the realisation that the creative forces at the heart of the film's conception invoke ambiguity and fragmentation within the construction of the realist subject(s). This kind of an understanding empowers the viewer to question authorial motivation, to look beyond the apparent veracity of the images, and to construct meaning in relation to a subjective understanding of the art in question, and in terms of the social world it articulates. As such, we will see how social realism functions as an art cinema that does not simply perpetuate closed relations between reader and text, but which has a function and a potential beyond the incitement to political activity.

This draws us towards a key tenet of this study: the aspiration to re-address the critical imbalance that has blighted the reception of social realism, and which has seen the mode defined as problematic in its socio-political constitution. This conception has severely retarded the potential to engage with the practical criticism that is required to emphasise its status as art, and by extension, to underline social realism's importance to national culture.

### **0.3 Building a Tradition**

Some have suggested that elements of British realism can be understood within the context of art cinema, and in seeking to establish the parameters of this study it is necessary to highlight pre-existing critical arguments on the subject. While the realist cinema of the 1980s provides a focus for a later chapter, at this stage I want to investigate some of Christopher Williams' claims of the emergence of a British art cinema in this period. In characterising the terms of reference against which his discussion of a 'social art cinema' is mounted, he posits the following definition:

The art film deals with issues of individual identity, often with a sexual dimension, and aspires to an overt psychological complexity. Because it sees the individual as more important than the social, the social (which must normally figure in the films, if mainly by way of contrast) tends to be presented in terms of anomie or alienation, from a point of view which has much in common with the consciousness of the unhappy or doubting individual.<sup>11</sup>

The first tangible cinematic movement that can be associated with a history of art cinema is undoubtedly the aforementioned neo-realist cycle of Italy. Williams'

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Williams, 'The Social Art Cinema: a Moment in the History of British Film and Television Culture' in Christopher Williams (ed.), *Cinema: The Beginnings and the Future - Essays Marking the Centenary of the First Film Show Projected to a Paying Audience in Britain* (London: University of Westminster Press, 1996), p. 193.

underplaying of the 'social' element in his summation of the convention seems to ignore the importance of this precedent. Indeed, practitioners of realism in post-war British cinema, from Richardson to Loach to Leigh and beyond, have regularly championed the first manifestation of oppositional realist cinema in Italy. The poetic treatment of actuality bound up in the films provides a substantial foundation to the establishment of a global tradition of realist-inflected art cinema practice. To characterise the art cinema purely in terms of its focus on the individual, seems to discount its potential to marry such a character-led focus with varying degrees of interaction with the social and/or political spheres, whilst maintaining a clear authorial visibility.<sup>12</sup>

Emerging from Williams' assessment of art cinema is the natural conclusion that, up until the 1980s, British cinema lacked such an impulse in its filmmaking traditions:

One can summarise the situation by saying that the British, traditionally, had no art cinema, and later no specific equivalent of the European art cinema, no medium in which the leading issues of subjectivity (individual identity, sexuality, personal relations) or of socio-cultural developments and consciousness (history, community and national relationships) could be directly addressed in image related forms.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Here we may also consider the French New Wave as an example of this challenging convergence.

<sup>13</sup> Williams (1996), p.194.

As we will see in my discussion of the documentary movement, and crucially the British New Wave of the late 1950s and early 1960s, such a conclusion can be challenged vigorously. It is necessary to subject the British realist canon to a broader assessment than that which would be allowed to emerge in assuming a primary focus on the 1980s, a period that (with the inception of *Film on Four*) Williams suggests heralded the formation of a 'social art cinema'.<sup>14</sup> John Caughie also engages with the notion that the convergence of filmic and televisual discourses in the 1980s represented a fundamental shift in British visual culture. However, unlike Williams, he consciously frames this discussion within a consideration of a British visual tradition. In discussing the formal aspects of Loach's *Up the Junction* (and thus deploying the kind of stylistic approach advocated in this study), Caughie evokes the documentary movement, and by extension its relationship to artistically-inclined European traditions:

It is precisely this montage of sound and image which links *Up the Junction* to the modernist tradition in the British documentary movement, a tradition represented in television by the documentaries of the 1950s and 1960s by Dennis Mitchell, and, in cinema, a particular tradition in documentary which stretches back through Free Cinema, Humphrey Jennings, *Night Mail*, to Cavalcanti and the experimentation with sound/image juxtapositions which he brought to the Documentary Movement from his experience of surrealist cinema in France. It also

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<sup>14</sup> Williams (1996), p. 200.

links into the modernist tradition through Eisenstein's writings on sound and image.<sup>15</sup>

What is important here is the manner in which Caughie suggests a means of linking seemingly disparate filmic moments on the basis of their formal elements. In so doing, he offers the possibility to extend such an enterprise by connecting realist cycles and auteurs to their antecedents in order to present a viable tradition of realist screen art in Britain.

However, like Williams, Caughie acknowledges the explicit formation of an emergent art cinema in Britain in the 1980s. Crucially, he frames its inception in the terms of a wider understanding of a tradition of television drama in Britain:

I am proposing the term 'art television'. What I mean by this is an area of television which occupies an analogous position within television to that occupied by the postwar European art cinema (particularly in the period 1946-80), a position which in each instance breaks up the homogeneity of the apparatus – 'cinema itself' or 'television itself'. The analogy is not intended to be precise in every detail – 'art television' and 'art cinema' each have their own pressures and limits – but there are similarities in their ways of being 'non-classical' and in the values which are assigned

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<sup>15</sup> John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.119-120.



to them. I also have a particular interest [...] in tracing the ways in which the *art television* of the 1960s and 1970s is absorbed into the audiovisual space of the *art cinema* of the 1980s and 1990s: the birth of the British art film may have been at the expense of the death of art television.<sup>16</sup>

Caughie's suggestion of the mutual exclusivity of art cinema and art television is problematic when we consider the parameters of this study. For example, in my discussions of Loach, Leigh, and Alan Clarke, their filmic and televisual texts receive equal consideration, drawing parallels and constructing a conjoined narrative beyond the boundaries of media. Such an approach validates a symbiosis between the realms of exhibition that is based around the sense in which signs of conspicuous authorship can be discerned across multiple sources of expression. In order to emphasise the notion of a strong artistic tradition within the British realist mode, it is necessary to position our critical perspective outside the respective film and television industries and their inherent limitation. That is not to suggest that we should ignore any distinctions: instead, it is necessary to emphasise similarities, in order re-calibrate a focus on British realism on the basis of form and style, rather than complicating its contexts.

In marking a point of separation between art cinema and art television, we risk undermining the kind of connections Caughie suggests in his linking of Loach's modernism to British documentary. For example, it is important to locate Loach and Leigh's early television films within the context of the realist cinema of the New Wave if we are to project a fuller picture of the lineage of British social realism as a mode of

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<sup>16</sup> Caughie (2000), p.127.

expression. Similarly, it is necessary to understand how Frears' and Kureishi's work in the 1980s (itself an exercise in the convergence between television and film), is informed by both the likes of Lindsay Anderson (steeped in a tradition of practical film work and criticism) and BBC drama series such as 'Play for Today' and 'The Wednesday Play'. Moreover, in a digital age, the lines of distinction between varying forms of media are blurring. Consumers who wish to compile their own personal archive of British social realism engage in precisely the same kind of viewing experience when watching a DVD of a theatrical release, as they would a copy of television programme. For example, the recently released Ken Loach boxed set includes *Cathy Come Home* (1965) alongside his works for the cinema, such as *Sweet Sixteen* (2002) and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006). Likewise, the cinema version of Clarke's *Scum* (1979) is sold alongside *Made in Britain* (1982), which was produced for TV. Looking forward, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the BFI's vast archive of British television and film could at some point be made available in its entirety online, providing users with the opportunity to view a plethora of visual content, distinct from categorisation. Within this climate, questions steeped in original reception and distribution can be marginalised in favour of a retrospective understanding of the manner in which social realism has (from the documentary movement to the present day), provided a worthy artistic platform against which the personal and public faces of a nation can be portrayed.

## **1.0 Social Realism: Origins and Departures**

The documentary movement has enjoyed an acknowledged place within the genesis of British social realism. John Grierson and his followers created a space within British cinema for authentic and artistic meditations on society, which has since housed numerous and eclectic contributions to the country's realist canon. However, despite the movement's formative centrality, the true extent to which documentary impacted on post-war social realism is open to question. Whilst the wartime period saw the formal and thematic concerns of documentary comfortably inscribed within the propagandist programme of British cinema, as the century continued the development of the social realist model became increasingly characterised by a series of fundamental departures from the Griersonian prototype. I do not intend to discount completely the influence of documentary upon social realism, or British fiction film in general. Rather, it is necessary to interrogate the perceived smooth linear development from documentary, through wartime feature films to social realism, as a means of more thoroughly assessing the complexities of the latter mode.

Samantha Lay provides a broad summary of the discourses that identify social realism as a direct descendant of documentary:

Firstly, the documentary idea posited a different role for film in society.

For the documentarists, film had a social purpose and a role to play for the betterment of society rather than just as mere entertainment.

Secondly, and allied to this point, it did so through a belief that it could

benefit British society, helping to forge a sense of national identity and belonging. Thirdly, the documentary movement brought issues and representations to British screens which portray working class caricatures rather than full-bodied characters in their own right, and as plot ancillaries rather than as the central focus. Fourthly, the documentary movement pioneered practices which would become the markers that distinguished its output from mainstream film. These practices helped to determine the practice of future filmmakers working within the social realist mode.<sup>17</sup>

Lay's account of documentary's influence upon social realism initiates numerous points of analysis. Of course, social realist filmmakers by definition engage more profoundly with society than their mainstream counterparts. The most immediate point at which this becomes visible in the documentary approach is through the presentation of locational verisimilitude. Social realism is visually defined by its commitment to framing the lives of the 'real', within their 'real' environment. *Housing Problems* (Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton, 1935) is a prime example of the way in which meaning is communicated by highlighting the hitherto unheard voices of the marginalised, against the previously unseen backdrop of their habitat. Although the empathetic resonance of the piece is hampered somewhat by the clearly scripted dialogue and non-diegetic voice-over, the film typifies the manner in which the powerful resonances of a revealed reality are facilitated by a visible human and environmental authenticity. Lay effectively contrasts

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<sup>17</sup> Samantha Lay, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2002), pp.39-40.

this form of representation with that of the mainstream treatment of both working-class character and location. The implication that documentary goes some way to destabilising the pictorial discourses of conventional working-class iconography is confirmed by the manner in which social realism has consistently maintained dialogical and locational authenticity as its defining traits.

Central to the existing arguments surrounding the documentary movement is the assumption that it represented a truly national cinema directed not to the impulses of entertainment, but to a belief in an internally disseminated, realist reflection of society:

The documentary movement in the 1930s was thus at the forefront of attempts to establish an authentic, indigenous national cinema in response to the dominance of Hollywood's irresponsible cinema of spectacle and escapism.<sup>18</sup>

As Higson suggests, the documentarists created a space in which film could be defined against the hegemonic influence of mainstream cultural product. In this sense, documentary blazed the trail not only for social realism as an oppositional realist mode, but was central to the formation of a British cinematic lexicon which has, though sporadically, reflected the intellectual and cultural richness of the nation. Later, practitioners as diverse as Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, John Akomfrah, Isaac Julien, Lindsay Anderson, Lynne Ramsay and Shane Meadows, have been seen to

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.187.

operate within an institutional and aesthetic realm actively facilitated by the approach and work of members of the documentary movement. The documentarists were among the first to see the potential of British cinema to be not simply a tool of mass entertainment, but a convergent sphere of poetics and information.

The documentarists created a synthesised mode of address, which united the necessary societal engagement with the performance of cinema as art. John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929), for example, did not seem out of step with Sergei Eisenstein's seminal *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), with which it was first shown in Britain. Films such as *Night Mail* (Basil Wright and Henry Watt, 1936), *Coalface* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1935) and much of Humphrey Jennings' canon, were not merely faceless expositions of working-class environs matched by staid accounts of working life: they were rich and poetic collages of image and sound recording a transient human essence, which complemented their explicit educational premise. The coming of war saw the documentary mode achieve new levels of exposure, as fiction film assumed many of its key characteristics to project a more serious and relevant tone. Although the demands of narrative and the need for concise and direct propaganda kept in check some of the more experimental aspects of the documentary aesthetic, the fiction film in Britain underwent a documentary-inspired overhaul during the wartime period.

The migration of key documentary staff to fiction filmmaking in wartime, with Harry Watt (*Nine Men*, 1943) and Alberto Cavalcanti (*Went The Day Well?*, 1942) enjoying success at Ealing, is explicit evidence of the inscription of documentary method into mainstream British film (during the period). However, more significantly, the work of

figures associated with a previously elitist and/or entertainment culture, such as Noel Coward, Launder and Gilliat, and Anthony Asquith, reflected the almost instantaneous and unchallenged adoption of numerous motifs previously associated solely with documentary. Films including *In Which We Serve* (Noel Coward and David Lean, 1942), *We Dive At Dawn* (Anthony Asquith, 1943) and *Millions Like Us* (Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, 1943) were representative of a score of British features that drew their characters from across the geographical and social spectrum of the nation, counterbalanced causally-driven narrative strategies with more realist episodic approaches, and where possible, sought diegetic verisimilitude through location and actuality footage. Notwithstanding the sheer volume of the wartime realist audience, it could be argued that the films were effective in negotiating a level of understanding between the text and the viewer that the non-fiction films could never have hoped to achieve. By projecting significations of the real through working-class characters in fictionally rendered yet believable scenarios, the war films combined the pathos of drama with the identifiable frame of reference provided by the realist aesthetic. Writing in 1947, Norman Swallow argued that, whilst documentary offered a worthy mode of address, it was the realism of wartime which provided the most effective treatment of society: 'We don't want intellectual efforts alone; we want to see human beings behaving in a human way.'<sup>19</sup>

By marrying the powerful resonance of actuality with the empathetic potential of a dramatic framework, the documentary-fiction of wartime British cinema represented an

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<sup>19</sup> Norman Swallow, 'Social Realism in Film and Radio' *Sight and Sound* (Vol. 1, no. 64, Winter 1947-48), p.170.

effective and successful model of realist filmmaking. Yet the mode of social realism (in its numerous manifestations) that advanced in the years following the cessation of the war, owed a great deal less to the documentary movement than many have indicated. Lay's summation that the documentary movement sought to 'forge a sense of national identity and belonging', holds undeniable truth in relation to wartime fiction film, and to perhaps a lesser extent in the later social problem features, yet one cannot confidently suggest that such an aspiration is applicable to the social realist project.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, this is the key area in which the apparently seamless progression of the British realist movement can be challenged. Numerous facets of the documentary form catalysed the British cinema of wartime, and laid down the conditions for realist practice that would continue throughout the century. The notion of a wide and overarching unity between state and citizen, so powerfully posited in Griersonian documentary and in the subsequent documentary-realist fiction films, is subordinated to the socio-political ambition of unity. Yet it is the expression of disunity and alienation which subsumes the social realism of post-war Britain. The cinema of margins, which evokes the sociological and emotional impulses of isolation, reframed realist content in Britain. The New Wave, and much of what followed in the 1960s and beyond, represented an outright challenge to the paternalistic humanism of documentary. In stark contrast, Grierson primarily saw film as a mode of enfranchisement and social unification, as Ian Aitken summarises:

He believed that the institutions of State possessed intrinsic merit because they were the culmination of long-drawn-out historical attempts to

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<sup>20</sup> Lay (2002), p.40.



achieve social integration and harmony. This led him to the view that the proper function of documentary film was to promote an understanding of social and cultural interconnection within the nation.<sup>21</sup>

The propagandist desire for 'social integration and harmony' meant that the political ethos of documentary film perfectly suited the necessities of wartime. Many of the most well-known examples of pre-war documentary exhibited an explicit narrative of togetherness, mapping the nation and illuminating the previously unheralded communities and regions within tightly woven diegetic frameworks. *Night Mail*, for example, utilises the symbolic potential of the mail train, allowing for a seamless exposition of the interconnectivity of Britain from the rural to the industrial. The film clearly injects the institutions of the state with a romanticised egalitarianism, by capitalising on the figurative power of the train as it serves its country. The film fetishises and poeticises the machine's function of maintaining the networks and unities constituted by the sending and delivery of post. Even the documentaries that focussed solely on specific areas of the country did so in a manner which explicitly cast their worth within the wider framework of national consciousness. Cavalcanti's *Coalface* focuses on the practice of coalminers, and quickly asserts the geographical locations of the mines in which they work by temporarily breaking from the actuality footage of the workers and filling the frame with a map of the Britain, showing the amount of coal that each area produces (for the country). By identifying the regions of industrial production pictorially, the film seeks to induct them within an inclusive national iconography.

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<sup>21</sup> Ian Aitken, 'The British Documentary Film Movement' in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 2001), p.61.

Though made just before the outbreak of war, Jennings' *Spare Time* (1939), focuses on the way in which the working-class spend their time away from their occupations. The film clearly marks the separate organs of industry (in this case coal, cotton and steel) and in doing so provides each with its own autonomous cultural indicators such as music and other forms of group activity. This allows Jennings to emphasise the unity of each individual community, (achieved in typical style through the sourcing of diegetic music which is then redeployed non-diegetically throughout various scenes), whilst utilising repetitive editing and form as a means of marking a conjoined parallelism between his separate subjects. This pursuit of connectivity is extended to the nation through the use of voice-over, with Laurie Lee's commentary notable for lines such as 'between work and sleep comes a time we call our own: what do we do with it?' Lee's middle-class accent contrasted with the use of the pronoun 'we' displays an attempt at evoking a shared experience across social strata. This stylistic treatment of unity is more thoroughly developed in Jennings' wartime documentary *Listen To Britain* (1942), in which the director disposes of verbal commentary and delivers a highly lyrical expression of national unity and defiance. Music acts as a thematic bridge, allowing the film's images to span the nation with cohesive verve.

Although the modernist experimentation of some aspects of the documentary aesthetic was tempered within the realm of the wartime fiction film, the documentarists' project of evoking a national unity for the greater good is undoubtedly visible throughout the dramatic output of the period. The projection of the real as a means of inculcating a

discourse of unity, is therefore a concern of the documentary made thoroughly explicit in popular cinema:

Films such as *In Which We Serve* (David Lean/Noel Coward, 1942) employ location shooting and other techniques derived from the documentary film, in conjunction with a narrative which portrays a united national community [...] In addition, British war-time realism was, in the main, characterised by normative tendencies which differentiated it from the more critical realist filmmaking emerging elsewhere in Europe during the war years, and films such as *Nine Men* (Harry Watt, 1943), *The Way to the Stars* (Anthony Asquith, 1945) and *The Foreman Went to France* (Charles Frend, 1942) function mainly to reassert officially sanctioned, consensual, conceptions of national identity, rather than throw them into question.<sup>22</sup>

As Ian Aitken suggests, the documentary-influenced realism of the period was bound by its close relationship to the state, severely compromising the ability of the mode to interrogate the socio-political milieu in the years following the war. The 'normative tendencies' of British cinema in the period were undoubtedly influenced by the social-democratic ideology of Grierson and his acolytes, who fostered an aesthetic and thematic programme that was easily transferable to the wider platform of the fiction

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<sup>22</sup> Ian Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p213.

film. Post-war social realist cinema can be seen to maintain the formal elements of the wartime drama, while departing from its hegemonic objective.<sup>23</sup>

The Free Cinema documentaries, associated with the early work of Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson and Karel Reisz amongst others, offer an interesting parallel to the documentary movement of the 1930s. The key similarity is that both movements gave rise to realist cycles in fiction film, yet the New Wave was significantly different from the films of wartime. Humphrey Jennings, the documentarist whom the Free Cinema practitioners most admired, used disjunctions between sound and image as a means of creating a tone of national unity between seemingly disparate entities. The manner in which the Free Cinema directors approached this technique indicates the extent to which the aesthetic concerns of 1930s and 1940s realism remained, whilst the socio-political impulses of the period no longer applied. Anderson's *O Dreamland* (1953), for example, features the monotonous and sinister laughter of a mechanical policeman mixed with the ironic use of Frankie Laine's 'I Believe'. This is laid over images of working-class subjects surveying the exhibits of Margate Funfair, forming a mocking comment upon the paralysis-inducing powers of consumerism. Lorenza Mazzetti's *Together* (1956), assumes a semi-fictional approach to the plight of two deaf dockers in London's East End, where the subjective use of silence and the objective interplay of dialogue produces an empathetic portrait of social isolation within an industrial landscape. In many ways the Free Cinema films reappropriated the stylistic motifs of the documentary movement, to comment on the fragmentation of a society that was once represented as united, and as such, finally imbued realist form with interrogative power.

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<sup>23</sup> Aitken (2001), p.213.

For Andrew Higson, the overhaul of the realist paradigm contained in Free Cinema was confirmed in the films of the New Wave. Focussing on Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), he implies that the new social realism, liberated from the propaganda constraints of the 1940s, was free to dissect the constitution of the marginal working-class individual instead of the wider national community:

The regional emphasis of films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) also to some extent challenges the sense of a hegemonic nationality. In these films there is a marked intensification of psychological realism and a deeper attention to the articulation of character and individuality. The community now constitutes the backdrop, the setting for the exploration of the psychological complexity of the (usually young working-class male) protagonist. Both the community of the neighbourhood, and its most domestic form within the genre, the family, have become intrusions on the private (sexual) life of the individual—now the hero of the film.<sup>24</sup>

Before the New Wave, British realism was bound by a requirement to suppress individualism, as a means of enfranchising the constituent elements of society within a homogenised whole. By the 1950s, this condition no longer held relevance, as concurrent movements in theatre and literature that reflected the dissenting voices of the post-war milieu were picked up by the cinema.

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<sup>24</sup> Higson (1995), p.269.

Ian Aitken's suggestion that Grierson held the 'conviction that, in order to communicate effectively, art must employ generalised and symbolic...modes of expression' holds profound significance. This ethos is reflected in the majority of both documentary and realist cinema in Britain before the onset of new realist modes in the New Wave period.<sup>25</sup> Coward and Lean's *In Which We Serve* exemplifies the point entirely, with the three central characters - Captain Kinross (Noel Coward), Walter Hardy (Bernard Miles) and Shorty Blake (John Mills) - explicitly marked as upper-middle, lower-middle and working-class respectively. Each character exudes the stereotypical 'virtues' of his class, positing the idealistic model of unification in wartime. This functional and emblematic treatment of character is extinguished in the social realist model, to the extent that films like *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963), *This Sporting Life* (Lindsay Anderson, 1962) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962) adopt art cinema techniques of subjectivity to deepen their exposition of the individual, and to excavate the fragmentation and dislocation of post-war youth.

Social realism owes a discernible debt to the documentary films of the 1930s and 1940s and to the realist cycle of wartime, yet (as we have seen), numerous elements of the early models are actively reversed within the broad church of the social realist framework. *Millions Like Us* (Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, 1943), *Love on the Dole* (John Baxter, 1941) and *It Always Rains on Sunday* (Robert Hamer, 1947) all present realist treatments of social mores in the 1940s, and each could lay claim to representing an embryonic version of social realism. Yet through close textual analysis,

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<sup>25</sup> Aitken (2001), p.165.

it becomes apparent that the films made during wartime differ markedly from *It Always Rains on Sunday*, released just two years into peacetime. Launder's and Gilliat's and Baxter's films, whilst approaching completely different subjects, both exhibit the limiting and generalised treatment of the social milieu which characterised wartime realist output, where the diktats of Griersonian discourse reigned supreme. However, *It Always Rains on Sunday* clearly and defiantly represents a prototypical social realist text.

### 1.1 Millions Like Us

*Millions Like Us* is the archetypal wartime documentary-drama film. It frames a human story of young love and loss, against a real and informative backdrop of the industrial necessities of the home front, acknowledging the collective contribution of a broad-cross section of Britain's people. The film's central character, Celia (Patricia Roc) leaves home to work in an aeroplane factory, at which she is joined by group of characters from different walks of life. The key figures within this female ensemble are Gwen (Megs Jenkins), a working-class university graduate from Wales, Jennifer (Anne Crawford), an upper-middle-class girl from London who initially sees the work of the factory as beneath her, and Annie (Terry Randall), Jennifer's roommate and a typical figure of the traditional northern working classes, whose social codes are explicitly cast against those of Jennifer. Despite their seemingly disparate class origins, the women eventually form an efficient, family-like working community under the steady guidance of Charlie Forbes (Eric Portman), their supervisor, a typically 'no-nonsense' Yorkshireman. In keeping with the realist format of the period, the film is tinged with a stoic treatment of tragedy, when Celia falls in love and marries Fred (Gordon Jackson), a young airman

who is killed over Germany shortly after the couple's wedding. The individuals within the ensemble, who overcome social differences to work together and in so doing create a symbol of familial national identity, represent a clear ratification of the Griersonian ideal of a 'generalised and symbolic art.'<sup>26</sup> The characters function as symbolic vessels, deployed as a means of marking a figurative and widely recognisable national whole, at the expense of personal interest and division.

This appropriation of documentary ideology permeates the film. The opening credits emerge against the backdrop of documentary footage showing crowds walking to and from work, whilst the final line of the cast list reads 'And Millions Like You'. Here Launder and Gilliat directly associate the actuality footage of work with the audience, explicitly casting them within the realm of the authentic. This attempt at fostering complicity by evoking the associative and resonant powers of the realist diegesis continues in the next sequence, where high-angled shots of crowds at a train station are followed by images of assorted masses on a crowded beach, and similar documentary footage at a funfair. Again, explicit attempts are made to identify the audience with the significance of the images, as a narrator comments: 'Remember that summer before the war, those gay coupon-free days when you and millions like you swarmed to the sea?' Again, the pronoun 'you' is used in order to elicit recognition and to draw the audience within the narrative on an empathetic, and crucially equal, level. The montages displaying 'Millions Like You' create an overwhelming visual sense of commonality in both work and leisure practice (respectively), in much the same way that Jennings and Laurie Lee attempt an aural and aesthetic synthesis of shared experience in *Spare Time*.

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<sup>26</sup> Aitken (2001), p.165.



The documentary style of the opening sequences thus imbues the initiation of the dramatic narrative with a firm sense of authentic continuation, as the montages cut to members of Celia's family, who congregate outside their home before driving to the seaside. The individuals on whom the diegesis has chosen to focus are symbolically 'plucked' from the masses of the opening, as narrative agents representative of the 'Millions Like You', whilst an organ version of 'Oh, I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside' provides an aural bridge between the scenes. In personalising the communal in this manner, Launder and Gilliat maintain the unified verve of the documentary format, whilst concretising the empathetic nuances of the sequences through genuine characters. Similar techniques of symbolisation are put to use in Jennings' *A Diary for Timothy* (1946). Here, the director foregrounds the iconography of virtuous British wartime occupations, which are then personified through the stories of Peter, an RAF pilot and Gronwyn, a Welsh miner, who both function simultaneously as exemplars of their social types, and as emotive signifiers of the personal.

The documentary-influenced evocation of communal iconography, and its deployment within a codified, symbolic structure, is utilised in a later scene during a dance at the factory. Launder and Gilliat foreground the action of the scene with numerous high-angled shots of the room, allowing the synchronicity of the dance itself to complement the sheer numbers of congregated individuals. Again the documentarists, particularly Humphrey Jennings with *Listen to Britain*, framed public acts of enjoyment, such as dancing or attending a concert, within the discourses of constructive recreation. In *Millions Like Us*, the dance scene provides the dual role of re-establishing a formal

representation of unity, and of foregrounding the relationship of Fred and Celia. When the couple step outside the hall to continue their awkward romantic ritual, Launder's and Gilliat's stylistic register alters accordingly, with the eyeline matches and shot reverse-shot sequences individualising the *mise-en-scène* and suggesting a melodramatic aside to the wider, overarching tone of documentary. Again the personal (in this case the romantic), is directly sourced from the communal narrative and aesthetic space, as a means of solidifying the dramatic dimension of the film's propagandist current.

Interestingly, the displacement of Gwen and Charlie from the public *mise-en-scène* in the early part of the scene, functions to emphasise its figurative weight as a signifier of togetherness. While the assorted crowd dance happily, the pair discuss 'the problem of children in wartime', displaying a distinct enthusiasm to use their spare time to converse on matters of intellectual substance, as opposed to merely indulging in the liberation and superficial abandon of dance. This contributes to the general sense that Gwen and Charlie function as father and mother, overseeing the creation and solidification of the familial workforce. What Andrew Higson calls a 'parental consciousness', is evidenced by the manner in which Gwen's unfussy and practical demeanour is contrasted to the naïve idealism of Celia, whom Gwen quietly but effectively supports in the period following her husband's death.<sup>27</sup> Charlie, too, deals out frank and measured advice to the innocent, daughter-like figure, at one point telling the preoccupied Celia: 'Love may make the world go round but it won't win the war.' By forming the family within the communal locale, Launder and Gilliat effectively domesticate, and thus humanise, the working environment, in order to harmonise the apparatus of information and

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<sup>27</sup> Higson (1995), p.233.

propaganda that binds the film. Therefore, characterisation is treated in a primarily symbolic manner, reinforcing the distillation of individualised representation that characterises the documentary form.

While this particular appropriation of documentary style may come as little surprise within the wartime narrative of unity, the film's subtler aesthetic treatment of the working community as nation takes its lead from the more abstract examples of the non-fiction mode. The montage sequences of the early part of the film work in an overtly expositional manner, used to similar effect in the actuality footage of ship construction in *In Which We Serve*. However, when the women arrive for their first day at the factory, a lengthy montage sequence shows actuality footage of women and men working on the construction of an aeroplane. The sequence ends with the maiden flight of the finished product. This quotation of documentary footage indicates contemporaneous wartime labour and endeavour explicitly, augmenting the central narrative in order to emphasise the importance and relevance of the duty that the fictional characters are about to undertake. Crucially, it also marks the synergy of both men and women in the journey from factory to combat, democratising the endeavours of wartime across gender and class lines. This synthesis is poeticised appropriately through the montage, in which long and meditative dissolves capture a series of workers performing their duties in unison. The result is a sequence of almost superimposed images that boldly captures the conflation of the working community, while providing a suitably fetishised iconography of unity in the factory and in the air. This almost expressionistic treatment of actuality footage and montage is used to great effect in *Night Mail* and *Coalface*, as a means of capturing a lyrical essence of unification and interrelation that complements the primary

realist content of the diegesis. By preceding the initiation of a dramatic episode (in this case the first day in the factory), with such a striking adoption of the figurative extremes of documentary, the directors create a symbiosis between the cold realism of the drama and the fluid poetics of the non-fictional mode, reversing their traditional associations and negotiating a seamless convergence between the two forms.

The style of realism at work in *Millions Like Us* is therefore heavily indebted to the symbolic model posited through documentary, which in turn distances itself from the theme of fragmentation inherent within the social realist project. Despite this, there are numerous devices at work in the film that, while never discrediting the overarching thematic and aesthetic framework of togetherness, suggest a prototypical articulation of a more generalised and sustained realist emphasis. The film's suppression of the individual, and its refusal to privilege romantic pursuit over the realities of war, results in what Higson terms a 'dispersal of narrative attention on to a multiplicity of narrative lines.'<sup>28</sup> Such a position requires articulation through an episodic narrative structure, whereby the goal-oriented, cause-and-effect paradigms of the individual are eschewed, in favour of a wider organising framework that more accurately reflects the rhythms of the everyday. In addition to its verisimilitude, this formal composition naturally possesses the potential to mount a more effective analysis of social group(s) in synthesis and/or in struggle with the individual, ensuring its status as the default narrative style in the social realist model.

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<sup>28</sup> Andrew Higson, 'The Documentary Realist Tradition' in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1986), p.87.

Such an approach also holds the potential to vocalise meta-narrative punctuations, instances in which the concentration on characters or episodes of the syuzhet is temporarily interrupted to accommodate a separate path of meaning. For example, whilst on holiday, Celia and her sister, Phyllis (Joy Shelton), attend a dance. Whilst Phyllis holds court with a group of male admirers, Celia is left to dance with an unattractive and mundane misfit. Typically, the scene would end at this point, yet Launder and Gilliat stay in the dancehall and cut to a pair of showgirls. The couple talk about the impending dangers of war, but are never seen again in the film. Following this scene, the upper-middle-class army officers, Charters (Basil Radford) and Caldicott (Naunton Wayne), are introduced in a first-class train carriage that, to their surprise, is invaded by evacuee children. Unlike the showgirls, Charters and Caldicott reappear twice more in the film, but neither come into contact with any of the central characters.<sup>29</sup> Instead both pairs perform a choric function, allowing for the recognition of points of view that, while not directly relevant to the central narrative, function almost didactically, to widen the film's socio-political scope and frames of reference.

A similar act of self-consciousness, where Celia's naïve fantasies and fears are subjectively rendered, occurs more firmly within the central plotline, yet this still displays a knowing willingness to diversify the narrative's range of dispersal. The first instance occurs as Celia awaits her appointment at the job centre. She hopes to secure a supposedly glamorous job such as the one her sister holds in the WAAFs, and as such she imagines a series of occupations (as a nurse, farmhand, or driver) in which she meets

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<sup>29</sup> This sense of self-reflexivity is strengthened by the knowledge of Charters' and Waldicott's involvement in other films in which Launder and Gilliat were involved, such as *The Lady Vanishes* (Hitchcock, 1938) and *Night Train to Munich* (Reed, 1940).

a range of charming and handsome men. These fantasies are framed in a consciously melodramatic manner, and the naivety of their creation is rewarded when Celia soon finds out her real, very different fate. Similarly, when Fred fails to turn up to an arranged meeting with his wife-to-be, Celia daydreams her own tragic suicide, whilst imagining Fred in floods of tears in the dock, as a Judge presumably hands out a sentence for manslaughter. In both instances, Launder and Gilliat consciously evoke a filmic imagery of romantic fantasy, in order to critique the inadequacy of such an address in the (very real) environment of wartime.

Though *Millions Like Us* offers a diversified treatment of documentary methodology, as a transitional text in relation to social realism its deviations are heavily outweighed by a visible and indelible dedication to the symbolism of propaganda. Indeed, it is the attempted suppression of class distinction, and the subsequent manifestation of this proposition through figurative representations of the nation as community, which inflect early, fictional realism of this kind, with a normative and conventionalised complexion.

### 1.2 *Love on the Dole*

On the surface *Love on the Dole*, (a film that focuses solely on a working-class community), may hold greater relevance for the construction and consolidation of post-war social realism. The film is set in the period between 1930 and 1932, and follows the misfortunes of the Hardcastle family as the Depression sets in, causing both Mr. Hardcastle (George Carney) and his son Harry (Geoffery Hibert) to lose their jobs. The scale of the poverty incurred by the family forces Harry's sister Sally (Deborah Kerr) to accept the advances of the lecherous but wealthy bookmaker, Sam Grundy (Frank

Cellier), in order to secure the futures of those she loves. Their eventual union is made all the more tragic by the violent death of Sally's virtuous fiancée, Larry (Clifford Evans), during an unemployment march.

Walter Greenwood published the novel from which the film was adapted in 1933, but, tellingly, in 1936 the British Board of Film Classification rejected an attempted film adaptation. The novel's uncompromising account of the oppression and hardship of a working-class community was deemed to be wholly unsavoury in the pre-war years. However, by 1941, the subject matter of the novel was considered suitable for film treatment, as Sarah Street has noted:

When *Love on the Dole* was finally released it was therefore less about the reduction of unemployment and more about the film's perceived ability to tap into the 'preferred' image of national propaganda.<sup>30</sup>

By framing this story of working-class hardship in the 1930s against the backdrop of the 'people's war' of the 1940s, the film appears as a document of period, which is evoked as a reminder of what, in a domestic sense, the new 'unified' Britain is fighting against: division, inequality and poverty. However, this seemingly valiant deployment of recent history severely undermines the radical potential of the text, facilitating the development of an overarching propagandist address, which heavily obscures the social realist resonances of the film.

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<sup>30</sup> Sarah Street, *British Cinema in Documents* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.36.

The use of intertitles at the beginning of the film is the earliest signifier of this pervasive suppression of political and social relevance:

This film recalls one of the darker pages of our industrial history. On the outskirts of every city, there is a region of darkness and poverty where men and women forever strive to live decently in face of overwhelming odds, never doubting that the clouds of Depression will one day be lifted. Such a district was Hankey Park in March 1930.

The words appear against the backdrop of the sky at night, whilst the frame slowly moves down to reveal the studio-created landscape of Hankey Park, before the viewer gradually follows Mrs. Hardcastle into her terraced home. Here the authoritative and instructive narrative voice is established through the physical text, literally above the subjects he/she describes. This sense of the narrator moving the viewer into 'the region of darkness' on the 'outskirts of the city' is highly reminiscent of one of the roles Grierson initially posited for documentary, that of 'travelling into a world unknown.'<sup>31</sup> As such, the viewer is instantly propelled into a role of passive observation, strengthened by the explicit awareness that the film presents a 'page' of 'history'. This sense of narrative enclosure is finalised at the end of the film when a reversed replication of the opening shot accompanies the film's written epilogue. This time the frame moves

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<sup>31</sup> Kathryn Dodd and Philip Dodd, 'Engendering the Nation: British Documentary Film, 1930-39' in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on the British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996), p.40.



upwards and out of the Hankey Park landscape to meet the physical text against the night sky:

Our working men and women have responded magnificently to any and every call made upon them. Their reward must be a new Britain. Never again must the unemployed become the forgotten men of the peace. A.V.

Alexander.<sup>32</sup>

As First Lord of the Admiralty and a leading Labour member of the wartime coalition government, A.V. Alexander was a well-known figure in 1941. Therefore, this conclusion firmly allies the film with the discourses of the state, nullifying the potentially antagonistic accounts of poverty and violent unrest that have preceded it. Beginning and ending *Love on the Dole* in such a way firmly historicises the narrative, relocating its significance within the context of wartime propaganda. This meta-narrative level of commentary is also felt at numerous points within the film's diegetic realm. For example, Mrs Hardcastle tells her crest-fallen husband: 'Things can't go on like this forever, Henry, one day we'll all be wanted ... people will begin to see what's been happening and once they do there'll be no Hanky Park no more.' These words affirm unsubtly the official socio-political discourse of wartime. In this context, it is strongly implied that the enfranchisement of the working-class (through war) will ensure their prosperity, and guarantee that the unstable climate covered in the film would never return (a point explicitly articulated by Alexander's epilogue). Similarly, Larry explains the theoretical principles of the Labour movement to his co-workers, telling them of 'a

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<sup>32</sup> *Love on the Dole* (British National, John Baxter, 1941, UK)

disaster awaiting in ten years' and how 'man can rebuild a new and better land.' Such direct and politically-loaded references to the contemporary milieu, severely compromise the radical potential of the film's realist appearance, with Larry assuming an unrealistic level of foresight, which indelibly blurs the lines between past and present.

Despite these inconsistencies, *Love on the Dole* represents an unquestionably bold moment within the British cinematic canon. Its engagement with, and exposition of, issues and ideas such as socialism, Marxism, the inequality of the free market, and the inadequacy of the benefits system are remarkable within fiction film of the period. Yet the film's vocalisation of these discourses is framed within its explicitly closed textual apparatus, again demonstrating the influence of the documentary movement upon realist cinema of the period. The debates Larry shares with his colleagues, the argument he has with an inflammatory Marxist agitator, and the manner in which Sally is forced to 'sell herself' in order to save her family, are all politically divisive, yet their complexities and ramifications are engulfed by the generalised address of the film's meta-narrative. Higson identifies the origins of this limiting process in documentary:

First, while wider access to ideas and information may have an emancipatory, democratising effect, the form in which those ideas are presented - in this case, documentary film - may actually discourage the individual from participating in rational discussion by situating the

discussion in the text itself, such that the individual is once more outside the public sphere, a mere passive, if enlightened, spectator of it.<sup>33</sup>

This effect is heightened in the fiction film, given the introduction of emotive and empathetic characterisation within the narrative. Moreover, in *Love on the Dole* both the implicit and explicit pursuit of historicisation erects a further barrier to the development of independent strands of social and political meaning. The parameters of meaning within the filmic text are visible and immovable: the central dialectics presented throughout are concluded absolutely through the fixed construction of its propagandist narrative mechanisms. Accordingly, the film's adoption of the documentary aesthetic, through the use of montage technique, conflates the elements of socio-economic significance into easily palatable narrative episodes. For example, the moment when Harry Hardcastle informs his girlfriend that he intends to gain a new job initiates a highly simplified figurative treatment of the realities of unemployment. Images of factories and machines consume the frame, dissolving into one another, before Harry's hopeful face is superimposed on the industrial iconography. The curiously disembodied image of Harry cuts to that of a shadowy figure (presumably a factory foreman) shaking his head, and this sequence is replicated twice more, in order to emphasise the futility of the search for work. There then follows a close-up of Harry's boots, accompanied by a series of superimposed calendar leaves upon the frame, indicating the passage of time as the boots become increasingly weathered. Harry's face then reappears against the backdrop of the factories, addressing the camera as he says: 'Please God give me a job.' This montage distils the hardship of long unemployment into a series of enclosed

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<sup>33</sup> Higson (1995), p.184.

signifiers, negating the potential for analysis or contemplation. This ascribes an immediate narrative function to the period of time that the sequence covers, missing the potential to investigate or explicate wider issues relating to unemployment.

The formal and aesthetic creation of this climate of enclosure engulfs the *mise-en-scène* in equal measure. The studio set, which is so unashamedly evoked in both the closing and opening sequences, solidifies a generalised feeling of claustrophobia, which on one hand contributes to the sense of sorrow elicited in the audience for the characters' plight, yet on the other, confirms that the conditions of the film's subjects are a thing of the past. This graphic distancing, through the enclosed spaces of the studio-made environment, converges with the wider propagandist treatment of the historical moment, to figure a notion of period and place which is far removed from the spectator's frame of reference and allows the film to function as a codified and manipulated entry within the collective discourses of wartime.

The sole focus upon working-class characters within a working-class environment gives *Love on the Dole* a surface appearance of boldness, appearing to mark a new position within the sociological lexicon of the realist fiction film paradigm. Yet its innate conservatism is betrayed by the symbolic compartmentalisation of these apparently unique characteristics, which results largely as a consequence of the process of periodisation. The antagonistic and interrogative potentials of the social realist form are barely hinted at within the firmly solidified enclosure of recent history. The questions of disunity and dislocation that present themselves within the narrative are conveniently

concluded, through the pervasive linkage of this apparent account of recent history to the perceived utopian collectivism of the contemporary socio-political milieu.

### 1.3 *It Always Rains on Sunday*

Writing in 1947, Norman Swallow communicated his fears for socially engaging, realist cinema in the post-war climate:

The revolution has been accepted by the documentary film-makers. The recruitment by the story-film of such documentary craftsmen as Harry Watt and Cavalcanti has helped to produce the necessary authentic background. The true future of British films lay, one would have thought, along this path. I use the phrase "would have thought", because within the last year or so all the lessons of war-time film making seem to have been forgotten. We are once more offered the old list of colourful escapism: *An Ideal Husband*, *Uncle Silas*, *Jassy* and *Bonnie Prince Charlie*. The social scene can only be used as a background for melodramatic pieces about the Spiv – *They Made Me a Fugitive* and *It Always Rains on Sunday*. At a time when the nation seems to require social understanding above all things, its film industry has gone back to 1938. A fine opportunity is being missed.<sup>34</sup>

It is no secret that the British realist cinema underwent something of a regression in the years following the war, a period in which the audience had understandably grown tired

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<sup>34</sup> Swallow (1947), p.170.

of self-reflection. Yet it is incorrect to suggest that *It Always Rains on Sunday* relegated social engagement to the status of a backdrop. Taking into consideration the realist cinema that had preceded the film, one can understand Swallow's conclusion. The perceived realist requirement of 'social understanding' was communicated in an overtly paternalistic and integrationist manner.<sup>35</sup> Documentary film and documentary-fiction evoked the social in order to actively shape its constitution in real terms, as is illustrated by the creation and promotion of the familial community as national metaphor, frequently deployed in wartime. Liberated from the shackles of propaganda, *It Always Rains on Sunday* was one of the first films to utilise the aesthetic and thematic aspects of actuality to simply reflect, rather than re-construct, the social milieu, hinting at a new realist sphere which was not directly subordinated to the purposes of unification or education.

Swallow's condemnation of *It Always Rains on Sunday* seems to imply that the film's tendency towards 'melodrama' obscures the sociological potential of its setting and subject matter. The perceived source of this obscuration undoubtedly lies within the central narrative line, in which Tommy Swan (John McCallum), an escaped convict, seeks refuge in the home of his ex-fiancée, Rose Sandigate (Googie Withers). Rose has now settled with a new husband, George (Edward Chapman), two stepdaughters Doris (Patricia Plunkett) and Vi (Susan Shaw), and a son of her own, Alfie (David Lines). After chancing upon Tommy hiding in the Sandigates' bomb shelter, Rose agrees to help her former lover, giving him food and allowing him to rest in the house whilst the rest of the family go about their Sunday rituals obliviously. Eventually a local journalist

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<sup>35</sup> Swallow (1947), p.170.

(Michael Howard) is informed that Tommy and Rose had a previous relationship, and goes to the house to get his story. Tommy flees but he is eventually captured in a rail yard, while an ashamed Rose attempts to gas herself.

However, *It Always Rains on Sunday* does not simply focus on the Sandigates and Tommy Swann, as Swallow indicates. Rather, it uses this fragmented familial structure as a platform to examine numerous other representatives of the amoral world that the film depicts, negotiating a similar level of narrative 'dispersal' to that achieved in *Millions Like Us*.<sup>36</sup> In distinction to the wartime film, this cross-section represents an embittered, disillusioned and fragmented society. Characters like Lou Hyams (John Slater), the wealthy but unscrupulous 'businessman', his brother Morry (Sydney Tafler), a music shop owner and band leader who regularly cheats on his wife, and the inept gang of Spivs (played by Alfie Bass, Jimmy Hanley and John Carol) are all afforded their own storylines. These exist independently of the central premise, adding depth and diversity to the narrative, and providing a wider and more realistically disparate reflection of the community.

Given the importance of community to the wartime and documentary realist projects, the difference in its exposition here provides fertile ground for an examination of the embryonic impulses of social realism. The environment that houses the characters of *It Always Rains on Sunday*, is, as the title suggests, visibly and aurally defined by an unremitting downpour throughout the diegesis. The opening shots of the film establish the Sandigates' unremarkable terraced house, before cutting to differing images of the

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<sup>36</sup> Higson (1986), p.87.

area, including a lone policeman walking past a church. George Sandigate is then seen opening his window and quickly shutting it, returning to bed. The external shots in this sequence are a recurring feature of the film, continually reaffirming the effects of the environment upon its inhabitants. The lack of music draws attention to the heavy sound of the rain, and the punctuating replication of the shots contributes to an atmosphere of claustrophobia.

This sense of entrapment is reaffirmed later in the film through a crowd scene at the market. A high-angled establishing shot shows the frenzied chaos, as a gentle downward pan adopts a point-of-view perspective, heightening the stifling nature of the *mise-en-scène*. The depiction of the crowd here provides useful contrasts with similar compositions in *Millions Like Us*. The actuality shots of masses of people walking to and from their workplaces, and the high-angled to medium shot progressions in the dancehall are all designed to evoke a sense of unity in Launder's and Gilliat's film, displaying acts of uniformity and synchronisation. By locating the crowd scenes in *It Always Rains on Sunday* within the capitalist realm of the market place, the community is shown as self-interested and dislocated. Here the evocation of the masses only serves to increase the pervasive sense of lonely claustrophobia, constituting a reversal in the symbolic treatment of communal space.

This articulation of entrapment and fragmentation within the community affects many aspects of the film. For instance, the exterior of the Sandigates' home, which, as mentioned, is repeatedly used as a bridge between scenes, lies just in front of a railway bridge. The recurring evocation of this enclosed domestic space within the equally



enclosed communal area of Bethnal Green, set against the bridge (a symbol of progression and freedom), serves to deepen the level of imprisonment for the film's protagonists, forming a climate in which means of escape are constantly visible, yet represent a liberation which can never be achieved. For example, when Tommy attempts to escape from the clutches of Detective Sgt. Fothergill (Jack Warner), he does so at the railway yard, but he is repeatedly foiled in his efforts to stow away on the assorted freight trains. Preceding his capture, Tommy encounters Whitey (Jimmy Hanley), who having mugged and beaten to death the corrupt businessman Caleb Neesley (John Sarew), is, himself, subsequently knocked out by Tommy, who in turn steals Caleb's money. These interconnected cycles of violence and theft create a profound sense of ingrained and self-perpetuating amorality within the community. In this sense, *It Always Rains on Sunday* is unlike similarly socially-inclined works of the period, in that it fails to articulate a hierarchically disseminated proposition for change. Instead there exists an unapologetic meditation upon the decay of the once feted working-class community. The Bethnal Green of *It Always Rains on Sunday* offers no emancipation: Tommy is captured and Rose, trapped in a dull, lifeless marriage, fails even at suicide.

The fatalism created by the enclosed spaces of the *mise-en-scène*, and the morally dubious nature of the characters, offer little redemption or conclusion. Ealing's drama-documentary *The Blue Lamp* (Basil Dearden, 1949), released just two years after *It Always Rains on Sunday*, also acknowledges the fractured state of post-war Britain. However, in conflating aspects of the cause-and-effect-led thriller with the more loosely woven realist strategy, social problem films like *The Blue Lamp* have a tendency towards characters who represent fixed societal archetypes, which enable the production

of clear thematic binaries within the narrative (Jack Warner's P.C. Jim Dixon provides the most obvious example of a pronounced embodiment of establishment honour and virtue). As a result, ambiguous or problematic figures see the more complex aspects of their personalities contained or concluded within an overarching schema that seeks to prescribe, diagnose and then treat its social ills within a cohesive and satisfying narrative network. Dixon's murderer, the amoral juvenile Tom Riley (Dirk Bogarde), is captured through the interrelation of the police and the community, and the film ends with an upbeat and morally satisfying restoration of order. Despite Tommy Swan's arrest at the end of *It Always Rains on Sunday*, a similar sense of conclusion is absent. The survival of Rose, combined with her husband's unfettered devotion, suggests a continuation of the bleak social and emotional conditions established at the film's outset. Thus, the less clearly defined social position of the film weaves a distanced analytical element within its constitution. Here, proto-typical realist strategies underline a new way of viewing the social milieu in narrative film. For Christine Geraghty: 'realist and melodramatic elements work together to offer an account that is both emotional and analytical', and the film's take on 'contemporary life ... surely has its place alongside Gainsborough's more expansive modes.'<sup>37</sup> Yet, I wish to suggest that rather than conflating pre-existing generic dimensions, *It Always Rains on Sunday* anticipates an eventual shift towards new and liberated forms of realist practice.

Crucially, the dislocating dispersal of characters within the film, each with their own ambiguous moral constitutions, contributes to an unresolved and thus more markedly

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<sup>37</sup> Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties – Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.91.

realist narrative. This is illustrated by the characterisation of Lou Hyams. Early on in the film he picks out George's youngest daughter, Doris, at the arcade he owns, and offers her a job as a waitress at one of his clubs in London's West End. His charm and charisma, his spiv-like appearance, and his conspicuous personal wealth suggest that Lou is seeking to manipulate Doris for his own ends. This expectation is partially supported by the narrative when the job proposal creates a rift between the naïve Doris and her boyfriend, causing him to confront Lou at a boxing match. Surprisingly, Lou calmly states that if Doris's father does not wish her to take the job then the matter is closed, restoring the young lovers' relationship and confusing the perception of Lou that is established in his first scenes. At the fight Lou wins £50, because he bribes the loser to take a 'dive', re-establishing his spiv-like associations. However, he then proceeds to donate his winnings to the local vicar who is collecting funds for a new gymnasium. This opaque treatment of good and evil is curious in that it refuses the kind of symbolic categorisation that is readily visible in the wartime film.

George, the only figure in the film who does not seem infected by the moral uncertainty of the post-war community, finds his good nature re-imagined as ignorant and emasculated. Whilst playing darts in the pub he scores a perfect '180' but his happiness is tempered when he tells his friend: 'I knew I'd get it one day, pity Rose wasn't here to see it.' In fact, at this moment his wife is otherwise engaged, making love to the escaped convict who, unknown to George, has spent the day hiding in his house. George's blind dedication to Rose, exhibited at the film's conclusion, serves to confirm the loss of the figurative patriarch within the film's complex symbolic structure. Such a challenge to the masculine family structure in both a practical and metaphoric sense would be

unthinkable in the cinema of wartime, yet within the unremittingly bleak sphere of *It Always Rains on Sunday*, the portrayal of such disunity seems rational.

*It Always Rains on Sunday* represents a reworking of the figurative and literal premise of a communal utopia, established at the core of British realist filmmaking in the 1930s and 1940s. Where films like *Millions Like Us* actively validated national unity through the representation of familial community networks, the sense of lost hope, individualism, and conceit in Hamer's film, suggests a pollution of this ideal. Here the community is again taken as the film's thematic catalyst, yet the characteristics and institutions by which it defines itself connote an altogether sinister and more problematic conception of social relations. In this sense, *It Always Rains on Sunday* is a key transitional text within the canon of British realism. The film represents a concerted attempt to wrestle the treatment of actuality away from the establishment centred discourses laid down by the documentary project, contributing to the creation of an environment in which realist accounts of societal practice could begin to articulate a more pointedly critical tone. The film's subsequent critical placement within the post-war cycle of social problem films is perhaps misleading. Despite the diverse constitution of that particular sphere of British cinema, *It Always Rains on Sunday* must be separated from the confines of generic categorisation. Released in 1947, the film stands alone as an example of embryonic social realism. Its refusal to conform to the didactic address and generalised symbolism of conventional realism, and the manner in which the narrative presents open-ended and ambiguous conclusions for its characters, creates a climate in which the revelation of the 'real' opens up to new potentials.

The continued development of realist cinema in Britain is, of course, indebted to those practitioners who first placed actuality and/or interpretations of actuality upon the screen with consistency. The documentarists and the documentary-drama filmmakers of the war began to 'look' at Britain in a manner which, in a socio-political sense, was consciously inclusive, and stylistically and formally, showed a hitherto unseen commitment to mirroring the rhythm and climate of life. Yet social realism, as we understand it today, taking in the developments of such key figures as Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz, John Schlesinger, Ken Loach, Mike Leigh Alan Clarke and Stephen Frears, is a very different prospect. When the aforementioned directors have practiced within a realist framework, their work has been defined by their institutional, aesthetic and thematic position at the margins of the British cinema. Whilst the documentary movement posited an alternative to the escapism of the mainstream, its closeness to the institutions of the state severely undermined the potential to articulate an antagonistic or interrogative position.

Social realism truly begins to assert itself when the hegemonic alliance between the realist mode of address and the voice of the establishment is destabilised. As we have seen, despite the apparently bold portrayal of working-class life in *Love on the Dole*, the potential for complex psychological, political or social analysis is quashed by the subordination of character and environment to a collectivised, propagandist aim. Equally, it cannot be claimed that *It Always Rains on Sunday* mounts an explicit political articulation, given that it is still bound by the normative conventions of mainstream cinematic practice. However, what distinguishes the film is its vocalisation of disillusioned and alienated impulses within a fatalistic and open-ended narrative schema.

It utilises the pervasive urban melancholy of its diegesis to invite tacit socio-political readings outside of the hitherto closed realm of the realist text. As a document of prototypical post war realism, *It Always Rains on Sunday* marks an early shift in the treatment of society within the class-bound realm of the British cinema.

As socially relevant works continued to gather pace in the years following the war, the renovation of the realist paradigm along more oppositional lines began to quicken in equal measure. While social problem films such as *Flame in the Streets* (Roy Ward Baker, 1961), *Victim* (Basil Dearden, 1961), *Sapphire* (Basil Dearden, 1959) and *Yield to the Night* (J. Lee Thompson, 1956) exhibit a paternalistic approach to divisive issues in a similar manner to the documentarists, they all acknowledge failures and breakdowns within the institutions of state, representing their respective narrative spaces in a manner which suggested a fragmentary and conflicted public environment. Films of this kind showed the potential for realist cinema to progress within the traditional parameters of the British studio environment, as reactive apparatuses of social engagement, whilst the New Wave, which emerged alongside the social problem cycle, took an altogether more aggressive and oppositional approach. Moving against the innate conservatism of the mainstream, and taking their lead from the already established European art cinema, the self-styled auteurs of the New Wave relocated realism within the realm of the individual, pushing its aesthetic boundaries to new areas of experimentation. Just as the marriage of documentary and fiction film produced a popular wartime realism, the conflation of these varied modes of realist practice would come to define the new social realism in the second half of the century, as the mode of expression which would provide Britain with arguably its first popular, indigenous and oppositional art form within the cinema.

## 2.0 Social Problems, New Waves and Art: The 1950s and 1960s

For almost the entirety of the 1950s, British realist cinema was dominated by the social problem genre. This group of films used a socio-political backdrop that tapped into the contemporary concerns of the period, and deployed an essential narrative orthodoxy that conformed to the conventions of mainstream entertainment cinema. As such, the social problem cycle was able to fictionalise potentially divisive societal issues within a tightly focussed and cohesive textual fabric, which ensured closure and the restoration of normality. The social problem film continued the realist practice established through documentary and concretised through the documentary-drama of wartime: it sought to educate and enfranchise the audience within a recognisable and cogent textual apparatus, while reinforcing a centrally disseminated view of society.

The 1950s was a famously divisive decade, during which the former British Empire began to disintegrate. The discernible links between the Suez Crisis and the first performance of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court in 1956 provide a fertile point of entry for a discussion of the second strand of British realist cinema in the period. Osborne's play was directed by Tony Richardson, a member of a small band of young, cinephilic firebrands, (including Lindsay Anderson, and Karel Reisz) who began to critique and interrogate the cinema of the establishment, firstly through writing and then through their own, low budget shorts. With the first Free Cinema exhibition at the National Film Theatre in 1956, these directors sought to present a realist approach to cinema, which challenged the implicit doctrines of conformity, integration, and deference that underpinned the previously dominant Griersonian discourse, and which

had continued to manifest themselves in the social problem film. Along with Osborne at the Royal Court and an ever-increasing band of young and antagonistic writers, Free Cinema was part of a recognition of the cultural divisions which lay behind a nation in decline. As the directors began to move into feature production, what has been termed the New Wave emerged, in which the works of the likes of Osborne, Alan Sillitoe, Stan Barstow, David Storey, John Braine, Willis Hall and Keith Waterhouse and Shelagh Delaney were adapted for the screen. The films combined a refreshing social verisimilitude (that tackled explicitly the illusion of a conjoined and conformist national whole perpetuated in previous realist cycles), with an increasingly uncompromising approach to form (in which surface realism was transcended consciously in order to realise the poetic and figurative potentials of actuality). Free Cinema and the New Wave laid the foundations for the creation of a British social realist cinema, which has since persisted on the margins of mainstream cultural practice.

### **2.1 The Social Problem Film: Traditions and Rejuvenation**

If the New Wave began in 1958 with Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top*, the social problem film predated its genesis by at least a decade, and continued in production into the 1960s. The social changes of the post-war milieu provided an authentic backdrop for one of the most sustained and consistent British genres. An early and successful social problem film, Basil Dearden's *The Blue Lamp* (1949), dealt with the oft-represented 'problem' of juvenile delinquency. It was Dearden and his production partner Michael Relph's third film of this kind for Ealing, following *The Captive Heart* (1946) and *Frieda* (1947), which had both handled the issue of post-war readjustment. During the



war the pair filmed *The Bells Go Down* (1943), a documentary-drama about the work of the London Fire Service during the Blitz, that can be viewed within a sub-cycle of wartime dramas which performed propaganda functions for specific services, including *The First of the Few* (Leslie Howard, 1942), *In Which We Serve* (Noel Coward and David Lean, 1942), and *The Way Ahead* (Carol Reed, 1944). Although made almost half a decade after the conflict, *The Blue Lamp* performs a similar function for the police. Its documentary opening is highly reminiscent of the realist cinema of the early 1940s, complete with a voice-over and actuality footage which is coupled with the steady integration of fictional narrative through the introduction of Jimmy Hanley's PC Andy Mitchell. There are other similarities as the film progresses, such as the wartime emphasis on the family in a literal and wider national sense, which can be seen in Mitchell's acceptance as George Dixon's (Jack Warner) and his wife's (Gladys Henson) surrogate son, and his integration within the socially-cohesive police force in which detectives and bobbies work collaboratively for the common good. This in turn connects with the wider community's successful attempts to apprehend the delinquent Tom Riley (Dirk Bogarde). Thus, the familiar textual methodology of collective representation initiated in documentary and wartime documentary fiction, continues to affirm the integration of citizen and state through the social problem film, where homogeneity was encouraged and difference was contained.

However, notable contrasts exist between the narrative models of wartime documentary fiction features, and the post-war social problem film. Most significantly, the social problem film's conflation of melodrama, thriller and noir elements, largely facilitated by a more concerted approach to character and location, is evidence of the perceived

redundancy of the documentary feature's episodic approach to narrative, which had been the most natural bedfellow for the communal, explicitly propagandist discourse of wartime. As a result, social analysis is attempted in tandem with the development of a plot structure that exists on the premise of its ability to restore, contain, and conclude the constituent elements of the narrative. This has the effect of emblematising the social problem within a single character or narrative entity, causing the 'problem' to be concluded within the closed structure of the film, eliciting an identically narrow social judgement from the audience, and restoring order within the bounds of the diegesis:

It is also this stress on the individual which helps confirm the ideology of containment characteristic of the narrative drive towards resolution. For the social problem film does not really deal with social problems in their social aspects at all (i.e. as problems of the social structure) so much as problems of the individual (i.e. his or her personal qualities or attributes). [...] if the causes of problems are located in the individual, then, *prima facie*, there is no necessity for a reconstruction of the social order. As a result, the endings characteristic of the social problem film tend to oscillate between one or other of two types, stressing alternatively, the re-establishment of social order or the achievement of social integration.<sup>38</sup>

Whilst the social problem films identified and dramatised key issues of the day, their deployment within a textual framework which actively endorsed the maintenance of

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<sup>38</sup> John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-63* (London: BFI, 1986), p.56.

conservative institutions and hierarchies, limited the possibility for audience engagement and inquisition. Therefore, despite the recognition of ruptures within the idealised, utopian nation of the wartime documentaries and features, a positive affirmation of the status quo is posited consistently through the social problem film. As Samantha Lay writes: 'these films can be seen as a continuation of the documentary movement's mission to inform and educate citizens.'<sup>39</sup> Like the documentaries and wartime feature films, their educational exposition of social issues results in the confrontation and reduction of their potentially problematic effects within a rigid textual framework. As a result, while films like *Victim* (Dearden, 1961) explored hitherto untouched subjects such as homosexuality, and *Flame in the Streets* (Roy Ward Baker, 1961) and *Sapphire* (Basil Dearden, 1959) attempted to engage with race issues, the fundamental social changes implied within the films are never analysed or embraced. Rather they are conscripted within a joint social and narrative order that suppresses their perceived disruptive potential. When discussing *Victim*, John Hill writes:

Gays are identified as existing in all walks of life (from Lord to wage clerk) and one of the components of the film's strategy of surprise is the revelation of homosexuality in otherwise normal and socially well-adjusted characters. Despite verbal addresses to the contrary, the gay community is to this extent 'normalised.'<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Samantha Lay, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2002), p.55.

<sup>40</sup> Hill (1986), p.92.

Thus while the social problem films laid claim to a liberal treatment of minority groups, they were in effect negating their social significance within a clearly marked discursive sphere. In *Sapphire*, the racial prejudices of the central characters are exposed via the sensitive portrayal of Sapphire's brother Dr. Robbins (Earl Cameron), whose occupation as a doctor, willingness to seek justice, conservative sartorial appearance, and mild and measured manner, see him integrated comfortably within the film's archetype of a deferential national identity, which is offered tacitly as a model of life for its black subjects. Like Robbins, Paul Slade (Gordon Heath) is interviewed by the investigating officers (Michael Craig and Nigel Patrick) at the police station, yet he embodies a version of racial identity that is in direct contrast to that of the doctor. His accent is more pronouncedly non-English, he dresses flamboyantly, drives an expensive and conspicuous car and is accompanied by his glamorous girlfriend, hinting at a dangerous and foreign sexuality. Slade's antagonistic and aggressive attitude towards the police is maintained through his concealment of information relating to the case, which, in compromising the narrative conclusion of the detective genre's pursuit of justice and closure, sees him automatically ostracised in both a narrative, and a wider social sense. His unwillingness to conform to the moral codes of the police, and by extension to the white establishment, sees him placed outside the positive social model inscribed within the film, via the presence of the doctor. The normalisation of the other, and the discipline executed through the narrative of those minority dissidents who seek to depart from the status quo in the social problem film, suggests a level of conformity which, despite its liberal pretensions, connects the cycle with the wholesome, propagandist social address of documentary and wartime fiction.

Despite the thematic conservatism enshrined within the social problem cycle, there is evidence that, stylistically at least, a handful of these films began to hint at new directions for the mainstream British realist cinema. Like Basil Dearden, J. Lee Thompson was a highly prolific exponent of the genre, and like Dearden, he advanced its potential in the late 1950s with an increased focus on location shooting, exemplified in the John Mills and Hayley Mills vehicle *Tiger Bay* (1959). Yet it was Thompson's collaboration with the screenwriter Ted Willis, on the gloomy and claustrophobic *Woman in A Dressing Gown* (1957), which marked a surprising aesthetic complication of the social problem paradigm.

While their second and final project, *No Trees in the Street* (J. Lee Thompson, 1959), saw its socio-political significance nullified (due to a highly fetishised 1930s period setting, book-ended by a weak framing story which reinforced the 'never had it so good' mythology of the day), *Woman in a Dressing Gown* took a simple tale of adultery in a lower middle-class sphere and presented a voyeuristic and unsettling perspective on family relations in the 1950s.<sup>41</sup> The plot revolves around Jim (Anthony Quayle) and Amy Preston (Yvonne Mitchell), and follows the couple as Jim attempts to break free from the marriage and start a new life with his mistress, Georgie (Sylvia Syms). Amy is shown to be utterly inept in her role as a housewife, much to the annoyance of Jim and her son, Brian (Andrew Ray), and as the title suggests she cares little for her appearance. The *mise-en-scène* in the Prestons' flat reflects the sense of disorder that emanates from Amy, with stacks of washing-up and piles of papers on the dining table conflicting with

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<sup>41</sup> Like *Love on the Dole*, *No Trees in the Street* uses a 1930s setting to cover issues such as poverty and organised and violent crime. Thus, despite the commitment to socially relevant issues, the contemporary significance of the film's thematic focus is tempered somewhat by its periodised compartmentalisation.

the idealised notion of the 1950s domestic environment. Thompson almost immediately underlines the cramped and stifling effect of the disorder, with a series of curious shots originating from areas such as the grill pan, and the inside of a cupboard, whilst the family are observed in dialogue through a pile of jumbled books and papers. On one hand, Thompson emphasises the chaotic nature of the domestic and familial space, providing early narrative justification for Jim's affair with the domestically-competent and sexually-potent Georgie, whilst on the other, he begins to present a level of meaning where the frenetic movement of the camera exhibits a performance of authorial self-consciousness, making the audience aware of their observant role within the realist diegesis.

The distinction between Georgie and Amy is emphasised when Jim visits his lover early in the film. At the film's opening, we see the labyrinthine council block in which the Prestons reside, a symbol of the disengagement and entrapment which characterises the film's central relationship. As we move into the flat, Amy is busy burning breakfast for her son and husband. In contrast Georgie's domestic space is highlighted in an establishing shot which shows a delicate Edwardian terrace in what appears to be a leafy, suburban area, and as Jim arrives she is preparing a roast dinner in her immaculate kitchen. Yet despite these obvious contrasts, in the scenes in Georgie's home Thompson again exercises an (almost) unsettling stylistic lexicon, in a similar manner to the previous sequences at the flat. As the couple enjoy their meal, the camera perspective is positioned outside of Georgie's barred window, and the soundtrack is dominated by church bells and the sounds of rain, frustrating the viewer's natural expectation to hear the couple's conversation, while the camera slowly moves downwards and the scene

fades to black. John Hill has offered a reading of this sequence which suggests a narrativised implementation of style: 'The effect is clearly to disrupt our identification with the situation and to establish, in so doing, the ultimate emptiness of the relationship between the two characters.'<sup>42</sup> However, such conspicuous moments of narrative and spatial obstruction are not simply reserved for Jim and Georgie.

The marital bedroom shared by Jim and Amy is persistently shown in the dark, with sharp spears of light creating foreboding shadows, which contrast with the bright, albeit cluttered, ambience of the living and dining areas. Interestingly, when Jim tells Amy he is leaving her, the scene is staged in the dark and cramped bedroom, with Thompson choosing to frame much of the action behind the bars at the foot of the bed. Again, this evokes the imprisonment motif effectively, while its deployment in the bedroom hints at a sense of sexual isolation for the couple. Moreover, the final shots of the film appear behind the Prestons' window, as the curtain moves across the frame to close out the viewer. Here the obstructive style suggests a challenge to the narrative's supposed conclusive resolution. Thus, Thompson's disorientating style finds thematic articulation in the evocation of enclosed and turbulent personal, social and sexual lives, while also hinting at the intrusion of an authorial hand that sits uneasily with the apparent naturalism of Willis's screenplay. Despite the film's conservative denouement (the restoration of the family structure and apparent rehabilitation of its agitators, which reinforces the dominant social doctrines of the genre), its aesthetic complications hint at an attempt to reform the staid conventions of the British cinema from the inside.

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<sup>42</sup> Hill (1986), p.96.

Thompson's earlier film *Yield to the Night* (1956) is perhaps even more challenging in its stylistic and formal renewal of the social problem model, and Steve Chibnall's description of *Woman in a Dressing Gown* as 'a textbook example of the distanced style and its dialectic of involvement and alienation', is equally applicable here.<sup>43</sup> The film follows the final days of the prisoner Mary Hilton (Diana Dors), as she awaits her death for the murder of her former lover's mistress.<sup>44</sup> Through flashback and voice-over, Mary tells the viewer of the moments which lead up to the beginning of her relationship with Jim (Michael Craig), and her eventual crime. Given that we know Mary is imprisoned for murder from the film's outset (since the pre-credit sequence clearly shows her shooting a gun), there is little suspense to be derived from her back-story. Moreover, in the present time diegesis it is made clear that the chance for a last-minute pardon from the Home Secretary is slim. Thus, much of the film is concerned with the painful moments of Mary's final days, following her routines, and lingering on the minutiae of the experience of her incarceration, as we move slowly to the inevitable conclusion of execution. In this sense, Thompson underplays the thriller element of the social problem's usually rigid narrative schematic, opting, in the prison scenes at least, for a purposefully downbeat episodic form that is augmented aesthetically by a disorientated and highly conspicuous *mise-en-scène*.

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<sup>43</sup> Steve Chibnall, *J. Lee Thompson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.141.

<sup>44</sup> Its anti-capital punishment subtext was given increased contemporary relevance through the controversy surrounding the case of Ruth Ellis, who was hanged for the murder of her husband in the previous year.



Early in the film, Mary tells her guards she intends to go to bed. At this point, the camera moves downwards to a position underneath the bed. For a few moments, all the viewer is permitted to see are Mary and the guards' feet, before the camera moves upwards to reveal Mary in her nightgown. A similar composition occurs when Mary grows agitated during a game of chess and angrily throws the pieces to the floor. Once Mary composes herself she, and her guard, MacFarlane (Yvonne Mitchell) pick up the pieces, and again the camera moves down from the medium shot, (which frames the upper halves of its subjects' bodies), to a low-angled perspective on the floor, which focuses on the feet and hands only:

Throughout the film, the editing highlights the fragmented body and the disjointed images constitute Mary's perceptions of her environment. The spectator becomes conscious of legs, arms, doors, the overhead lamp and the bed. [...] At stake is the familiar destruction of the female body by the authorities (and by the camera).<sup>45</sup>

What is implied in Landy's discussion of Mary's environment, is that Thompson is aware of a need to reflect the internal torment of his subject through *mise-en-scène*. However, more abstractly, he identifies, or perhaps reflects, the masculine gaze of the camera, interrogating its significance within the female space and reflecting the resultant problematic position through obstructive and fragmented placement.

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<sup>45</sup> Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p.456.

The pervasive sense of unease within the confines of the prison is augmented by Thompson's refusal to introduce any music other than a solitary drumbeat, which amplifies moments of tension within the present time narrative. Thompson extends this claustrophobic treatment of Mary's internal sphere to the moments in which she is permitted outside to exercise. As Mary walks out of the prison, the camera is placed at an acutely low angle at the opposite end of the walkway on which she stands, obscuring and distorting our perspective of the protagonist. This spatial relationship is reversed in the following shot, which sees the camera taking up a position high up in the midst of a tree, looking down upon Mary. The director's approach to *mise-en-scène* and editing, while highly stylised, does find linear articulation, as a means of reflecting Mary's literal decay, and as an exaggerated reflection of the spatial environment in which she resides.

Yet, as in *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, Thompson's approach can also be understood within the context of authorial self-consciousness. Towards the end of the film, one of Mary's flashbacks appears to impinge upon the present time narrative as she awakes violently, suggesting her recollections are entwined with her nightmares. McFarlane is by her side and attempts to reassure her, but a clearly dazed Mary angrily shouts at the guard: 'You want to kill me, I hate you, I hate all of you!' Thompson frames the outburst in a close-up, before moving outwards and upwards to a high-angled medium shot in which the room's piercing light bulb is to the foreground, MacFarlane is static in the middle of the frame, and the disoriented Mary is placed at the back of the shot. This composition is maintained for a few seconds when, just as the scene begins to close, McFarlane angles her head slightly to look directly at the camera. This emphasises the solidity of the *mise-en-scène* whilst breaking the diegetic illusion to draw the viewer's

attention away from the melodramatic elements of the narrative, asserting the immediacy of the socio-political moment. Thompson once again violates the parameters of his chosen mode, with a moment of aesthetic subversion that simultaneously emphasises its themes, whilst transcending their placement within their rigid narrative framework, directly presenting the viewer with a dialectic position relating to the social significance of the plot.

The social problem film can be viewed as a logical successor to the documentary drama of wartime and, by extension, the documentary movement of the 1930s. Its inability to extend narrative and thematic boundaries as a means of challenging or reshaping the dominant political and aesthetic discursive formations of the period saw the realist impulse, yet again, contained within a fixed socio-political and cultural hierarchy. Once more, a reductive level of didacticism handicaps the potential for antagonistic or inquisitorial social engagement, an evaluation which is strengthened by the films' tightly focussed narrative structures and integration of 'popular' elements of melodrama, thriller and noir genres. In a stylistic sense, there is evidence that certain individuals, such as J. Lee Thompson, sought to reinvigorate the mode with departures in form and aesthetics. *Woman in a Dressing Gown* and *Yield to the Night* incorporate numerous examples of marked authorial style which deepen and complicate the presentation of social issues, yet the films' formal deviations are kept in check by a firm restoration of the national and familial representative tropes which dominated the realist product of the war and post-war years. The British New Wave, which ran concurrently with the social problem cycle towards its final years, married the aesthetic reappraisal of realist methodology, with an approach to character and form which was far more empathetic and forgiving of

its markedly dislocated subjects. Many of the New Wave features took as their central characters figures who consistently railed against the social orthodoxies of the day. Colin Smith (*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* d. Tony Richardson, 1962), Frank Machin (*This Sporting Life* d. Lindsay Anderson, 1963) and Arthur Seaton (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* d. Karel Reisz, 1960), are protagonists whose social, emotional, (and by implication) political choices, represent explicit challenges to the status quo. Whilst such characters exist in the social problem narratives, much of their impact is suppressed and subordinated towards the nullification of their antagonist impulses, by negotiating a reformation within the idealised social whole, or total disintegration through death or incarceration.

An example of the former solution can be found in *The Angry Silence* (Guy Green, 1960). The film centres on the factory worker Tom Curtis (Richard Attenborough), who refuses to join a strike and is ostracised violently by his fellow workers. Tom's lodger, his co-worker Joe Wallace, joins in the 'angry silence' until, towards the end of the film, he is forced to see the injustice of the strike and Tom's forced alienation. Following a vicious beating delivered to his friend, Joe speaks out against the strike and the action perpetrated against Tom, effectively dissociating himself from the threats to the established order constituted in his, and his co-workers' stance for much of the film. Interestingly, Joe's lack of enthusiasm for the political dimension of his occupation, his self-interested motivations for striking, and his active pursuit of women, see him as a character who shares many of the traits of an archetypal New Wave protagonist. Crucially, these facets are presented as subversive in relation to the successful restoration of the film's narrative and social equilibrium. Thus, the character traits that

the New Wave films attempt to present empathetically through various subjective means, and via the integration of episodic approaches to narrative, are actively disciplined and condemned within the rigid structure of the social problem film. Similar distinctions can be made in the social problem films' treatment of youth, specifically youth culture. Films such as *Beat Girl* (Edmond T. Greville, 1960), *Violent Playground* (Basil Dearden, 1958), *Sapphire* (Basil Dearden, 1959), and *Term of Trial* (Peter Glenville, 1962) are notable for the implicit links made between the pseudo-sexual undertones of Rock'n'Roll and Jazz music, and crime and delinquency. This can be contrasted with the Free Cinema documentaries *Momma Don't Allow* (Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson, 1955) and *We are the Lambeth Boys* (Karel Reisz, 1958), and the New Wave films *Look Back in Anger* (Tony Richardson, 1959) *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962) and *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963), in which the representation of youth culture (specifically music), is not marked by its signification as an arm of dangerous subversion which challenges the social order. Rather, these elements are integrated in order to authenticate the spatial organisation of the films and/or to provide lyrical articulation to specific scenes or moments of characterisation.

*The Angry Silence* offers another point of comparison, in that its focus on working-class social issues, its northern setting, and its integration of elements of locational verisimilitude, suggest evidence of the social problem cycle aiming to rejuvenate itself in the face of the cultural shift compounded by the New Wave films (and initiated four years before at the Royal Court). As the films of the New Wave momentarily came to dominate the realist zeitgeist, numerous social problem features began to replicate their

key tropes and characteristics. *The Leather Boys* (Sidney J. Furie, 1962), presented the scenario of a young married couple, Dot (Rita Tushingham) and Reggie (Colin Campbell) who upon experiencing troubles in their relationship are compromised by the introduction of Reggie's biker friend Pete (Dudley Sutton), who is gay. The use of Tushingham (whose screen debut in Richardson's *A Taste of Honey* (1961) made her an instant New Wave icon), and the inclusion of location sequences at a holiday park, provide strong and visible associations with the new cinema. Similarly, Dearden's *A Place to Go* (1963), has Tushingham as its female star and focuses on a rebellious young man, Ricky Flint (Michael Sarne), and his attempts to break free of the dead-end conformity of his family and peers:

An appeal to conformism also characterises Basil Dearden's final youth movie, *A Place to Go* (1963) [...] The central character [...] is nurturing ambitions of freedom and escape [...] but ultimately forced into an acceptance of his lot. Lacking inadequate parental control (his out of work father has turned to busking), his social 'indiscipline' inevitably leads to violent crime (robbing the factory where he works). His salvation then depends on a rejection of fantasy and a reconciliation to his social and marital responsibilities. [...] his prospective marriage to Cat ensures his lenient treatment in court. The site of his illegitimate love-making (the bomb site) is destroyed and the film concludes with a long shot of Ricky and Cat walking across a stretch of wasteland towards the new flats before them (cf. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*). [...] In its counsel

of conformity and repression, *A Place to Go* represents a more than fitting epitaph to the social problem films of Basil Dearden.<sup>46</sup>

As Hill suggests, the film combines the classical social problem format of narrative resolution (that ensures a restoration and reinforcement of familial and societal ties), with the inscription of specific surface elements of the New Wave. It is interesting to note that Dearden, along with his partner Michael Relph, were by the far the most prolific proponents of the social problem film, yet by the end of their careers they had grown highly receptive to the changes and agenda setting initiated by the likes of Tony Richardson. Despite their concessions to changing realist fashions, the inclusion of star actors such as Bernard Lee (playing Mike's 'cockney' father), and the Ealing stalwart John Slater, severely undermines renewed attempts at authenticity. What was perhaps most recognisably refreshing about the New Wave films, in the short term at least, was their use of young, untested, often provincial actors, who brought a new style of performance to the screen. Established stars were often only used to ensure finance and prestige for the early features (such as Richard Burton in *Look Back in Anger* and Laurence Olivier in *The Entertainer*), or they were deployed self-consciously as implicit symbols of institutionalised order, in opposition to the young protagonist (e.g. Michael Redgrave in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*).

The attempted hybridisation of social problem and New Wave, in the former mode's later incarnations, exemplifies the influence of directors like Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson on the realist paradigm in Britain during the early 1960s. Despite the

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<sup>46</sup> Hill (1986), p.95.

appearance of change, what these later social problem films failed to relinquish was the cocktail of narrative and aesthetic rigidity, and thematic conformity, which the films of the New Wave, and the earlier Free Cinema shorts were able to deconstruct.

## **2.2 Free Cinema and The New Wave: Britain's Art Cinema Begins**

Like the social problem films, Free Cinema took many of its cues from the documentary movement, yet what they chose to borrow and build upon from the tradition differs markedly. The films of Dearden, Thompson, and Baker et al, share with documentary the Griersonian notions of social interconnection, and film as an outlet for education and enfranchisement, whereas the likes of Lindsay Anderson idolised Humphrey Jennings, whose markedly poetic approach to actuality saw the pill of utilitarian propaganda sweetened with an aesthetic flair previously unseen in the British cinema. Anderson's *O Dreamland* (1953), which was included in the first Free Cinema programme, can be read as a conscious homage to Jennings, in skilfully applying his signature technique of harmonious conjunction between sound and image, and reversing it. The diegetic sourcing of music and the mechanical sounds of the park's attractions, relayed non-diegetically over shots of entranced holidaymakers, forms a bleak, figuratively-charged portrait of the Britain Anderson's hero once idealised. Free Cinema films such as Robert Vas's *Refuge England* (1959) continued this central emphasis upon the potential of technique to contain and deliver meaning, in its abstract portrayal of a Hungarian refugee's first day in London. While a voice-over provides a certain degree of narrative solidity to the protagonist's mystified journey through the capital, Vas integrates Hungarian folk music to the soundtrack as a means of relocating the subjectively



rendered point-of-view shots of the city's iconography within the outsider's perspective, de-familiarising the audience's perception of once recognisable national symbols.

Lorenza Mazetti's short fiction film *Together* (1956), mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, is perhaps the most explicit example of the aesthetic shifts that the Free Cinema, and later New Wave directors, were attempting to initiate within the realist paradigm. *Together* is the simple and affecting tale of two East End dockers who are both deaf and mute. It documents their friendship sympathetically and their attempts to interact with society, before, at the film's conclusion, one of the pair falls off a bridge and drowns. Mazetti exhibits an expressive and lyrical treatment of space and location, married with a profound treatment of character, and shapes an embryonic version of the expressive and poetic realism that would come to define the most uncompromising works of the New Wave.

Following the opening exposition, which shows children playing on a bombed-out stretch of wasteland, Mazetti introduces a high-angled long take which captures a boat passing down the Thames. This is then contrasted by two low-angled shots of the dockyard, marking the industrial environment in a manner which express its proportions in terms of claustrophobia and stasis, while paradoxically intimating its potential for progression and movement. This expressive and exhibitiv register is complicated by the introduction of the two characters as they leave their place of work. As the pair communicate, Mazetti frames their introduction through a series of point-of-view shots, within the shot-reverse-shot paradigm. This apparent concession to convention is made problematic by the out-of-focus complexion of the perspective shots that draw attention

to the fact that, due to their disability, both men receive and disseminate information in a confused manner. The point-of-view shots then, deliberately focus on the hands of the active agent in the exchange, as the pair converse using sign language rather than through the eyes and the mouth. This conscious reworking of a mainstream narrative model is motivated by a desire to vocalise, subjectively, the experience of the marginalised entity. In the opening scenes of the film, Mazetti establishes a treatment of narrative and space which is marked by an expressive style. This causes the viewer to consider the significance of urban space beyond its narrativised surface appearance, a proposition which is given human form through the subjective portraits of the two protagonists

Mazetti skilfully negotiates a convergence between a documentary approach to landscape and place, with a subjective register that interrogates the socio-spatial position of her characters. This methodological balance is exemplified during a scene in which the two men enter a pub. The camera gently pans around the room, capturing the diegetic music and dipping in and out of various dialogical changes to convey the conviviality of the East End 'boozer'. Point-of-view close-ups from the dockers' perspectives cause these conversations to be silenced, re-initiating the subjectified treatment of their disability. Yet the diegetic music remains, as Mazetti draws attention to both the minority, and the majority perspective. This is further complicated when an old man attempts to communicate with one of the mutes. All sound becomes erased, focussing dramatically on the internal realm of the protagonist, and parachuting the viewer into a shockingly empathetic sphere, as the man mouths blankly in the point-of-view frame. Following this, the sound returns, and the camera captures an audible

conversation between two revellers. Mazetti's manipulation of sound in this sequence suggests her willingness to violate convention as a means of deepening and complicating the film's portrait of its subjects. As such, she draws attention to her authorial role in a manner which reinforces the highly expressive complexion of the opening. The experimental nature of a film like *Together*, was indicative of the manner in which the Free Cinema group were willing to complicate the realist format to incorporate a heightened and more explicitly artistic role for the filmmaker(s).

This notion of a personal authorial input was essential to the Free Cinema project: 'we believe that objectivity is no part of the documentary method, that on the contrary the documentarist must formulate his attitude, express his values as firmly as any artist.'<sup>47</sup>

Anderson's passionate statements of intent were a characteristic of the publicity drive that accompanied the Free Cinema programmes, yet they revealed key philosophical concerns which would find reflection in the documentaries and in many of the New Wave films. Central to this discourse is the emphasis on notions of 'art' and the 'artist', as shown by Anderson's 'Stand Up! Stand Up!' A vociferous attack on the British Cinema establishment in *Sight and Sound*, the article, showed that he and his acolytes idealised a simplistic notion of film as a truly worthy form:

It is a matter of fact, not of opinion, that the cinema is an art. This does not call for theoretic discussion - unless, of course, you enjoy that kind of intellectual exercise. If it is simply the truth we are after, the question has

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<sup>47</sup> Lindsay Anderson, 'Free Cinema' from *The Universities and Left Review*, (Summer 1957) in Paul Ryan (ed.), *Never Apologise: The Collected Writings of Lindsay Anderson* (London: Plexus, 2004), p.74.

already been answered empirically. If *L'Atalante*, *Strike*, *Rashomon* and *Louisiana Story* are not works of art, then there is no way of describing them. And if Griffith, Renoir, Jennings and De Sica are not artists, we will have to invent a new word for them.<sup>48</sup>

This statement suggests that Anderson believed in a model of film art as exercised by established international auteurs. When viewed in the light of the work of Anderson and his colleagues, this signals that, unlike the mainstream practitioners of British Cinema, the Free Cinema/New Wave group were willing to deploy an artistic vocabulary developed from outside the national sphere, to challenge the conformist status quo. The nature of the Andersonian polemic can naturally be compared to the work of the *Cahiers* critics of France, whose critical reassessment of international films and directors developed the original European New Wave and particularly gave the emphasis to the author as artist. However, Anderson discounted this connection:

We certainly had not time for the auteur theory. From the start we knew that the film director was the essential artist of the cinema; but we also knew that films have to be written, designed, acted, photographed, edited and given sound.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Lindsay Anderson, 'Stand Up! Stand Up!' in *Sight and Sound* (Vol.26, No.2, Autumn 1956), p.66.

<sup>49</sup> Lindsay Anderson, 'Sequence: Introduction to a Reprint' (30<sup>th</sup> March 1991) in Paul Ryan (ed.), *Never Apologise: The Collected Writings of Lindsay Anderson* (London: Plexus, 2004), p.48.

The level of collaboration in both Free Cinema and New Wave films confirms the practical articulation of this belief, with the cinematographer Walter Lassally working across numerous films with Anderson, Richardson, and Reisz between 1956 and 1963, and artistic partnerships between all three beginning with *Momma Don't Allow* (Tony Richardson and Karel Reisz, 1955) and ending with Karel Reisz's role as producer on Lindsay Anderson's *This Sporting Life* (1963). The principles of Free Cinema, and the accompanying critical discourse outlined in journals like *Sequence* and *Sight and Sound*, seemed to promote a looser conception of filmic practice than was advocated in *Cahiers*, instead carrying at its heart a belief in poetic humanism, and the notion of the film text as artistic product:

These films were not made together; nor with the idea of showing them together. But when they came together, we felt they had an attitude in common. Implicit in this attitude is a belief in freedom, in the importance of people and in the significance of the everyday. *As film-makers we believe that no film can be too personal. The image speaks. Sound amplifies and comments. Size is irrelevant. Perfection is not an aim. An attitude means a style. A style means an attitude* [author's italics].<sup>50</sup>

The Free Cinema manifesto is not prescriptive nor detailed in its advocacy of an artistic realist cinema, yet as Tony Richardson indicates, it was clearly defined against the

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<sup>50</sup> Lindsay Anderson, John Fletcher, Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz, and Lorenza Mazzetti, 'Free Cinema Manifesto' cited in 'Free Cinema booklet' by Christophe Dupin included in *Free Cinema: The Definitive Film Collection* (BFI DVD, 2006), p.7.

theoretical musings of the French model: 'Unlike Andre Bazin's writings, which were the theoretical basis of the French *nouvelle vague* directors, ours was a quite unpretentious statement of what we believed movies to be all about.'<sup>51</sup> Aside from the inscription of the Free Cinema principles within the New Wave cycle, the importance of the movement can be derived from its negotiation of an indigenous approach to cinematic art, and its subsequent reappraisal of the treatment of actuality within the British cinema. This is crucial in the creation of a 'style' and an 'attitude' to be expressed in cinematic terms, which was set against the incumbent realist paradigm, as Karel Reisz implies in his exchange with Alexander Walker:

As Karel Reisz looked back on this time from the vantage point of the 1970s, it seemed to him that 'Free Cinema' was cinema of reaction, not revolution - 'a reaction against the Ealing tradition that films were made in a "school" and the Rank system that they were made in a factory. With the British film industry in bad straits, this kind of power structure was becoming irrelevant, so this was the moment to say, "We shall take things into our own hands and become film authors." And it did give the films we made a very different feel – directors' films, not industry films.'<sup>52</sup>

Thus, Free Cinema can be viewed as a movement that sought to offer an alternative view of Britain to that propagated by the assembly-line product of the studios. The notions of personality and art can be easily identified in the way in which the films sought to

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<sup>51</sup> Alexander Walker, *Hollywood England* (London: Michael Joseph, 1974), p.28.

<sup>52</sup> Walker (1974), p.36.

assemble a fresh stylistic lexicon, which often invested figurative meaning in the treatment of space and subject. This constituted a poetic realism that transcended the functional surface realism of the social problem. Moreover, the significance of this promotion of artistic and poetic values was not merely evidenced in the textual characteristics of the films. By promoting Free Cinema as an alternative forum for cinematic expression, the programmes collected together work by numerous international directors, which had the effect of allying the British alternative cinema, as represented in the films of Anderson, Richardson, Reisz, et al, with other progressive movements in Europe. Similarly the rhetoric of film criticism articulated by Anderson before, and during, the life of Free Cinema, maintained a persistent view of film culture and art which was reflected in his own and his colleagues' cinematic products:

Britain was at least intellectually at the very core of the foundation of the European art cinema in the 1950s, even if the art films as such – in the Bordwellian sense of personal vision, loose narrative structure, ambiguity and various levels of heightened realism – were not really to emerge until the 1960s [...] The seeds for an art cinema and auteurist policies were to a large extent sown in 1950s Britain, not least by the journal *Sequence* [...] Britain and *Sequence* had, among others, Lindsay Anderson, the writer who would most eloquently formulate the art cinema credo, even before Truffaut did so [...] He was also to be a central intellectual figure within the European art cinema, among other things organising the famous 'Free Cinema' screenings at the National Film Theatre in London in between 1956 and 1959, where many of the most well known European auteurs

(Claude Goretta, Alain Tanner, Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Roman Polanski) were first presented to an international audience.<sup>53</sup>

Hedling's summation of Free Cinema, and Lindsay Anderson's formative role in the development of the European art cinema, are notable, given the relative lack of enthusiasm for British film culture in discussions of 'world cinema'. One could extend Hedling's emphasis to suggest that in Free Cinema's fictional short *Together*, Mazetti clearly exhibited thematic and stylistic concerns in keeping with the model of art cinema. David Bordwell's summary of the narrative elements which define the model, surveys a range of recurring stylistic and formal elements across the post war period:

The film will deal with "real" subject matter, current psychological problems such as contemporary "alienation" and "lack of communication" [...] the art film protagonist is presented as sliding passively from one situation to another [...] More broadly, the author becomes the real-world parallel to the narrational presence "who" communicates (what is the filmmaker *saying*?) and "who" expresses (what is the artist's personal vision?)<sup>54</sup>

*Together* can certainly be read within this paradigm, and it is clear that, institutionally at least, Free Cinema and its supporting theoretical and critical discourse was a vocal force

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<sup>53</sup> Erik Hedling, 'Lindsay Anderson: *Sequence* and the Rise of Auteurism in 1950s Britain' in Ian Mackillop and Neil Sinyard (eds.), *British Cinema of the 1950s: A Celebration* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp23-24.

<sup>54</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp.206-211.



in the development and promotion of oppositional cinema in the 1950s. Although the Free Cinema grouping and manifesto were developed largely as publicity stunts, there was genuine substance in the group's idealistic antagonism. As early as 1947, Anderson, and writers such as Gavin Lambert, Penelope Houston and Karel Reisz, were using their journal *Sequence* to lament the quality of mainstream British cinema, whilst arguing for an artistically-inclined approach to the medium. Anderson's early writings offer a valuable insight into the kind of philosophical position that motivated the Free Cinema and New Wave directors to challenge the staid doctrines of their national cinema:

The first duty of the artist is, not to interpret, nor to propagandize, but to create. And to appreciate that genuinely creative work of art involves the willingness to jettison our own prejudices and to accept those of the artist. If you expect all films about children at school to be realistic in style and psychological or sociological in approach, you will not be able to get much enjoyment from a fantastic, satirical masterpiece such as *Zero de Conduite*. If you have forgotten that poetry, visual as well as verbal, is its own justification, you will call *L'Atalante* sordid and obscure and join the critic of *The Times* in condemning *My Darling Clementine* to the "graveyard of mediocrity"<sup>55</sup>

Here, Anderson challenges the restrictive propagandist discourse at the heart of wartime realism, arguing that it proves a barrier to genuine artistic expression and reception,

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<sup>55</sup> Lindsay Anderson, 'Angles of Approach' from *Sequence 2* (Winter 1947) in Paul Ryan (ed.), *Never Apologise: The Collected Writings of Lindsay Anderson* (London: Plexus, 2004), p.193.

whilst condemning the critical hierarchy that supports such a proposition. One can also sense the embryonic articulation of the 'poetic' and 'personal' approaches to actuality and realism which would define the textual and critical organisation of Free Cinema and the New Wave. Such a position is made explicit in a later *Sequence* article:

What is required is a cinema in which people can make films with as much freedom as if they were writing poems, painting pictures or composing string quartets.<sup>56</sup>

Free Cinema, then, provided an early realisation of this artistically-inclined and socially-committed oppositional discourse, in which film was seriously discussed as a transcendental artistic concern. Moreover, despite its limited exhibition, the movement represented one of the first concerted attempts to relocate the realist impulse in British cinema away from its hegemonic inscription within the mainstream. Free Cinema provided training and an experimental platform to a group of filmmakers who believed in the poetic potentials of reality, and sought to energise realist filmmaking with a renewed focus on aesthetics. Its key protagonists, Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz and Lindsay Anderson were to take their opportunity in the form of the British New Wave, the short-lived but indelibly influential cycle of realist feature filmmaking which ran from 1959 to 1963.

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<sup>56</sup> Lindsay Anderson, 'A Possible Solution' from *Sequence 3* (Spring 1948) in Paul Ryan (ed.), *Never Apologise: The Collected Writings of Lindsay Anderson* (London: Plexus, 2004), p.339.

Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top* (1959) fulfilled the key criteria which would come to shape the New Wave paradigm; it was adapted from the work of a regional novelist (John Braine); it was set in a Northern town rather than in London or the south east; it focussed on working-class and lower middle-class characters; it utilised location shooting, and its protagonist was engaged in a socially-unacceptable sexual relationship. The film was equally fresh in its willingness to challenge the narrative models of previous realist conventions: its open-ended denouement for example, suggests that marriage and family may not be the perfect ideal. However, it was not until the formation of Woodfall, and the production of *Look Back in Anger* (1959), that the New Wave as a concerted film movement began to gather pace. Woodfall consisted of the American film producer Harry Saltzman, the writer John Osborne and the director Tony Richardson. Since *Momma Don't Allow* (Tony Richardson and Karel Reisz, 1955), Richardson's career as a theatre director had blossomed at the Royal Court. *Look Back in Anger*, with all its cultural and commercial importance, was naturally the first choice for the fledgling production company's debut feature. Richardson followed with another Osborne adaptation, *The Entertainer* (1960), but it was not until his Free Cinema colleague Karel Reisz directed *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) that the New Wave and Woodfall enjoyed its first commercial breakthrough. Richardson would experience more success with *A Taste of Honey* (1961), before concluding Woodfall's relationship with working-class realism with *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1963). Outside of Woodfall, Lindsay Anderson directed the adaptation of David Storey's *This Sporting Life* (1963), with Karel Reisz as producer, and the creative partnership of Joseph Janni (producer) and John Schlesinger (director) began with *A Kind of Loving* (1962) and *Billy Liar* (1963).

Despite initial critical and commercial enthusiasm for the films, the fashion for fatalistic Northern realism was soon replaced, as British cinema once again shifted its focus towards the capital. In recent years, the New Wave has endured a mixed reputation: while its cultural importance is rarely discredited, film historians and critics have been quick to point out its shortcomings. Whilst many point to the films' outdated treatment of gender and sexuality, Andrew Higson and John Hill have argued that an acute fetishisation of the working classes occurs across the New Wave, resulting in a key ideological shortfall in relation to the pursuit of realism. While this argument will be dealt with at length later, recent critical works, namely B.F. Taylor's *The British New Wave: A Certain Tendency?* have sought to recalibrate the critical discourses surrounding the cycle, arguing for closer readings of the films as singular entities. Responding to John Hill's criticisms regarding the iconography of landscape in the New Wave film, Taylor writes:

Once again, however, this is all just a question of emphasis. Approaches of this kind place their greatest emphasis on viewing the New Wave collectively, stressing the (social realist) similarities they share [...] and using the fact of these similarities to include the films in broader debates about class, gender and/or ideology. Dissatisfied with this tendency, my intention has been to take an alternative approach and consider each of the films individually.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> B.F. Taylor, *The British New Wave: A Certain Tendency?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p.171.

The implication here is that an overly thematic analysis, which focuses on the socio-political ramifications of the films, has retarded the potential for thorough textual analysis of the constituents of the New Wave. By seeking to identify common strands in order to facilitate a wider conception of the New Wave as a group of films, inevitably the aesthetic features which make individual films unique become obscured. In order to develop the argument that the New Wave exhibits features of the proto-typical British art cinema, which has influenced greatly the stylistic development and diversification of the British realist model, it is crucial to adopt the kind of narrow focus that Taylor advocates. Although I shall still refer to the New Wave as a loosely formed generic cycle, it is also necessary to identify the differences which exist both textually and institutionally across the films. *Room at the Top* for example, was directed by Jack Clayton, who, despite being an undervalued and diverse practitioner within the British cinema, was from a markedly different school of filmmaking to those most centrally involved with the New Wave. Since he shared no links with Free Cinema or documentary, the fact that Clayton's film was adapted from a New Wave novel provides his only sustainable connection with someone like Lindsay Anderson. Similarly, John Schlesinger, who directed *A Kind of Loving* (1962) and *Billy Liar* (1963), had no connection with Woodfall or Free Cinema, and was hired by the producer Joseph Janni after his documentary for ITV, *Terminus* (1961). Similar points can be made about the textual constitutions of the films: Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* for example, blends objective and subjective registers with a subtly figurative treatment of location; Richardson's films are varied, with *A Taste of Honey* delicately emphasising the lyrical potential of movement and landscape, and whilst *The Loneliness of the Long*

*Distance Runner* attempts a clear excavation and pictorial representation of memory, Anderson's *This Sporting Life* is by far the most ambitious of the New Wave films, creating a complex marriage of psychological allegory with numerous violations of narrative linearity; and Schlesinger's two films veer from pared down realism, to fantastical black comedy. While all the films can of course be united on the basis of their origins as novels or plays, their locations, their choice of actors, or their sexual politics, key differences exist between them which ensure that they can be viewed as stand-alone texts. However, what unites the films most of all, is their commitment to the expression of new stylistic potentials in working-class realism, and viewing them in this manner allows us to comprehend the way in which the films as a group, deviated from the existing conventions of British cinema.

### 2.3 Critical Voices

With this liberated retrospective position in mind, it is necessary to approach some of the other key criticisms which have dominated the reception of the New Wave cycle. Many of them emanate from the comparisons made between the European New Waves, particularly that of the French, and the British. While it is important to analyse the differences and similarities between these film movements, the British New Wave should not necessarily be validated or discredited in relation to a critically-lauded neighbour. Peter Wollen's inflammatory attack on the cycle represents such a position:

[...] the idea of a New Wave involved putting film first and not subordinating it to literature or theatre, as Truffaut argued in his notorious polemic against adaptation in *Arts* magazine. The Angry Young Men

films, however, plainly put film second. Their success was directly derived from the success of the original plays and novels by Osborne, Amis, Braine, and Sillitoe. *Look Back in Anger*, *Room at the Top*, *The Entertainer*, *A Taste of Honey*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* came out in their original forms between May 1956 and September 1959. The film versions which came out after a three year interval, between 1959 and 1962, clearly depended on the prepublicity and acclaim already generated by their literary sources for their initial impact. [...] Osborne, Sillitoe, and Delaney all wrote their own scripts for the film adaptations of their work. The same procedure was followed with *This Sporting Life* (1963), written by the author of the novel, David Storey (and directed by Lindsay Anderson), and with John Schlesinger's *Billy Liar* (1963), written by Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall, based on their own play of Waterhouse's novel! This film of an adaptation of an adaptation is about as far from Truffaut's ideal of auteurism as you can get.<sup>58</sup>

Raymond Durgnant makes a similar point:

The films are based on proven successes in other media, their production stimulated by the influence of new talents on commercial producers.

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<sup>58</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Last New Wave: Modernism in the British Films of the Thatcher Era' in Lester Friedman (ed.), *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* (London: University of Minnesota/UCL Press, 1993), p.137.

[...] in other words the British cinema renewed itself, tardily no doubt, by orthodox commercial procedures.<sup>59</sup>

These criticisms are multi-faceted, but all hold significance in relation to a reappraisal of the New Wave's institutional reception and textual constitution. Wollen's key argument is that the New Wave films' failure to conform to the French model of auteurism undermines any potential for them to appear unique by comparison. As we have shown, the theoretical background of Free Cinema, and by extension the New Wave, bore little relation to the auteurist principles of the French, with Anderson and Richardson actively distancing their philosophical and critical approach to film from Bazin and the *Cahiers* school. Although the young British directors privileged the director as artist, they actively endorsed a notion of filmmaking as a communal process, involving everyone from the technical crew to the actors. This was reflected in the collaborative partnerships that shaped the New Wave, which both Wollen and Durgnat seem to dismiss as in some way artistically impure. Woodfall for example, was originated as a creative partnership between writer and director; Osborne and Richardson, David Storey and Lindsay Anderson worked closely together on *This Sporting Life* just as Karel Reisz and Allan Sillitoe did on *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. The works were not simply faceless adaptations in the tradition of British cinema, but symbiotic convergences of literature and film. As Lindsay Anderson summarises, the narrative framework of Storey's source text was key to the filmic end product of *This Sporting Life*:

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<sup>59</sup> Raymond Durgnat *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p.129.



Storey wrote another script beginning with the patterned 'flash-backs' as in the book, when Arthur Machin, the hero, has his memories revived while under a dentist's anaesthetic. But it still wasn't right and the third script which was the one we used, stuck even more closely to the book. So you see, the film's structure which some critics believed we derived from the style of Alain Resnais is explicit in the script almost from the first, because *its* interweaving of past and present was based on the first quarter of the book.<sup>60</sup>

What is most arresting structurally about the film, its complex narrative framework, is an attempt to mirror the fragmented shape of the novel. Here, the integration of writer and director displays the manner in which the complexities of the written text can be augmented by their faithful transposition onto the screen. Interestingly, despite this level of collaboration, Anderson still felt the work could satisfy the Free Cinema aim that 'no film can be too personal':

Which leads me briefly to an intuition of the kind of film I really would like to make – a film about all this, all of us, and the problems and meaning of our lives now [...] and where we are going, and the aspirations and the egoism and unhappiness...This was obviously the way *L'Avventura* affected Karel – what the *Cahiers* people call *film d'auteur*, a first-hand work, not a dramatic construction well directed by

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<sup>60</sup> Walker (1974), p.173.

somebody – which is what *Sporting Life* could be, unless I can really get inside it and make it a personal allegory.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, while Anderson implicitly admires the auterist notion, and is clearly aware of the potential short-falls of adaptation, he still strives for an inscription of authority. To this end, it is possible to read *This Sporting Life* in line with Anderson's suggestion of a 'personal allegory'; its atmosphere of repression and internal violence, of unarticulated feeling and unspoken truths, with a view to Anderson's diaries, deftly mirrors the emotional and sexual complexities of the director.

An examination of Tony Richardson's adaptations of dramatic texts also challenges Wollen and Durgnat's attacks on the New Wave. As Stephen Lacey writes: 'New Wave screen adaptations were not merely the "films of the plays." The latter were, in significant ways, radically reconstituted on the journey from stage to screen.'<sup>62</sup> Richardson's *A Taste of Honey* was defined by a complete move from the studio, as the film was shot entirely on location, thus extending the narrow parameters of the source text. Referring to Richardson's techniques, Alexander Walker writes:

[...] it is vital to remember how unorthodox they were at the time, almost heretical coming from someone working inside the industry's studio

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<sup>61</sup> Lindsay Anderson in Paul Sutton (ed.), *The Diaries* (London: Methuen, 2004), p.70.

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Lacey, *British Realist Theatre: The New Wave in its Contexts 1956-65* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.167.

centred traditions of England or Hollywood. They again show the timeliness of Richardson's entry into film-making.<sup>63</sup>

Richardson's bold 'opening up' of *A Taste of Honey* facilitates the whimsical lyricism that defines the film's visual complexion. The scenes at the playground, the bonfire, the cave, and the canal sequences all work to deepen and complicate the portrait of Jo, adding another layer of reflective interpretation to the manner in which the character was conceived on stage.

Richardson's passion for location shooting was born out of a pursuit of verisimilitude in performance as well as space. He believed that naturalistic environments promoted naturalistic acting. Recalling his experiences filming *The Entertainer*, he writes:

It confirmed me for ever in the opinion that, except in some special cases – a subject like a musical for example, or a scene with special technical problems – studios were anathema: that their artificial conditions produced artificiality in acting and image (which for me has been the greatest criticism of all the American studio films of the 1930s and 1940s, for which I have never had and will never have either admiration or reverence), and that I would never be happy shooting except in the open air or inside real locations.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Walker (1974), p.63.

<sup>64</sup> Tony Richardson, *The Long-Distance Runner: An Autobiography* (London: William Morrow and Co, 1993), p.109.

Richardson therefore dedicates his use of location towards the achievement of a purely cinematic aim. This extension of the theatrical precedent represents clear creative agency from the director, which is bound up in a personal artistic philosophy.

Durgnat's criticisms, relating to the fortuitous commercial circumstances that accompanied the New Wave's inception, can be justified. To a large extent the films were produced in precisely the same manner as the social problem films from which they attempted to depart (and challenge). Interestingly, Bryanston, the company formed out of the ashes of Ealing Studios by Michael Balcon, developed a production partnership with Woodfall. Bryanston, which produced the post-Ealing films of Dearden and Relph, was by no means a radical production company. In fact, it represented a distinct line of continuity from the (institutionalised) tradition of British cinema that the New Wave's polemicists railed against. Thus, key films such as *The Entertainer* (1960), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *A Taste of Honey* (1961) were financed, partially at least, by the man who with Ealing had created the 'school'-like tradition of filmmaking against which Free Cinema had reacted.

Various other industrial elements worked in the favour of the New Wave. The X certificate and the appointment of a new censor at the BBFC, John Trevelyan, greatly benefited the promotion of films which challenged the conservative nature of the establishment:

Just prior to 1958, film censorship in Britain had become unworkably restrictive. A new censor, appointed by the film industry but independent of it, had brought to the job the stiff rectitude of his Civil Service background instead of the expected ability to know when to resist and when to relent. Relations between the film industry and the Censorship Board were near breakdown when the former finally decided that enough was enough and picked a new man, one of the Board's examiners, to be its executive secretary. The increasingly liberal tone that this excellent choice, John Trevelyan, managed to maintain from 1958 until his retirement in 1970 helped to create the atmosphere in which a new kind of cinema could flourish in Britain, once the other fertilising elements were applied to it.<sup>65</sup>

It was not by chance that Trevelyan's appointment coincided with the films of the New Wave, all of which were promoted on the basis of their uniquely frank approach to sex and youth. Indeed, it was precisely these elements which made the New Wave commercially palatable in a film industry which was increasingly acknowledging its changing audience. Between 1946 and 1959, annual admissions dropped from 1635 million to just 581 million. The increasing availability and popularity of television was widely regarded as the major factor in this shift, as cinema lost its family-oriented key demographic. By the late 1950s, the film industry had to rely on the young to fill its theatres:

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<sup>65</sup> Walker (1974), p. 43.

The overall decline in admissions had the effect of increasing the proportion of the audience in the young adult category. This group had always had a disproportionately high representation among cinema audiences, but by 1960 this position was one of absolute majority. Despite the general audience decline 44 per cent of those between 16 and 24 still attended cinemas at least once a week and a further 24 percent at least once a month.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the monumental drop in cinema attendance in the post-war years, a committed support base remained in the shape of the young. As such it was natural to assume that the films that dealt with issues relevant to this group, such as those of the New Wave, would be received well commercially. Thus economic and institutional factors undoubtedly counted heavily in favour of the cycle. To this end Durgnat's assertion that the subsequent 'renewal' of British cinema by the New Wave was 'commercially...orthodox' holds true.<sup>67</sup> However, the implicit assertion that these factors in some way discredit the textual product of the new cinema is incorrect. One of its greatest achievements was the manner in which new aesthetic, formal and thematic methods became integrated within the commercial framework of the British cinema, which had for so long been resistant to change.

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<sup>66</sup> Stuart Laing, *Representations of Working Class Life 1957-64* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p111.

<sup>67</sup> Durgnat (1970), p.129.

The films themselves constituted a radical movement in the British cinema, even if the process of their production did not. The shared traits of art cinema form and style, most successfully summarised by David Bordwell, reflect the manner in which key European cinemas such as the Italian neo-realist and French *nouvelle vague* initiated new narrative and aesthetic codes that have come to define the challenge to mainstream filmmaking practices across the world. The fact that the British New Wave films exhibit numerous facets of Bordwell's categorisation is evidence of the British cinema's role, albeit underplayed, in a post-war reaction to hegemonic modes of cinematic practice.

Two films stand out as clear examples of British art cinema within the New Wave cycle: Tony Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), and Lindsay Anderson's *This Sporting Life* (1963). Anderson's film, with its goal-bereft, marginalised central character, Frank Machin, its alinear narrative structure, and clear moments of authorial self-consciousness and authority exhibits numerous traits which Bordwell attributes to the art cinema paradigm. The film's subjective flashback structure is established early on, as Machin receives anaesthetic from a dentist, which sparks numerous recollections. As Bordwell writes: 'the art cinema presents psychological effects in search of their causes'.<sup>68</sup> Explicitly this notion suggests a thematic framework which is bound up in the excavation of the protagonist's internal fragments. Implicitly, Bordwell suggests the interlinking of this concept within a narrative structure which actively seeks to reverse the cause-and-effect model perpetuated by Hollywood.<sup>69</sup> Frank's memories conform to this schema. At one point, for example, during a

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<sup>68</sup> Bordwell (1985), p.208.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p.208.

recollection of a fight between himself and the rugby club captain Len (Jack Watson), Frank meets Johnson (William Hartnell), the club's scout, and asks him for a trial. Before Johnson has a chance to answer Frank runs away. The next scene shows Frank at a trial. Bordwell writes: 'The viewer must...tolerate more permanent causal gaps than would be normal in a classical film' and 'the narration asks us to unify the fabula by appeal to the plausible improbabilities of "real life"'.<sup>70</sup> In this case, Anderson attempts to render the progression of Frank's memories as realistic. As the associative conception of thought suggests, recollections would not conform to a linear model of cause-and-effect. He, of course, does not need to remember the process by which he accepted the trial. This approach to subjective realism is crucial to numerous manifestations of the art cinema model:

This is a fully expressive realism in that the syuzhet can employ film techniques to dramatise private mental processes. Art-cinema narration employs all the sorts of subjectivity [...] Dreams, memories, hallucinations, daydreams, fantasies, and other mental activities can find embodiment in the image or on the soundtrack [...] conventions of expressive realism can shape spatial representation: optical point-of-view shots, flash frames of a glimpsed or recalled event, editing patterns, modulations of light and colour and sound – all are often motivated by character psychology.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Bordwell (1985), p.207.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp.208-9.



Thus, Frank's experience on the dentist's chair has Anderson distorting the continuity of the image to attempt to aesthetically construct the protagonist's mental processes. For example, while Frank is being gently sedated, the camera moves towards his eyes, as Anderson cuts to a medium shot of Frank, and Margaret, the object of his desires. He asks her to go for a walk and Anderson cuts back to the present time, before cutting back again to the presentation of another memory related to Margaret. These flashes of recollection represent violent, subjective interjections, which attempt to render the exact processes of Frank's recollection. Although Anderson was keen to play down his indebtedness to Resnais, this stylistic approach is similar to the one used in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) to represent Elle's (Emmanuele Riva) fragmented memorial record. John Francis Kreidl called Resnais' presentation of flashback 'a vocabulary of association': this also applies to Anderson's treatment of memory, in that he presents the viewer with a visual representation of a subjective point which gives no credence to the cause-and-effect demands of narrative omniscience.<sup>72</sup> Rather, the intention is to tie the unfolding of narrative events to the internal associative progression of the protagonist.

While flashbacks were hardly new to the post war British cinema, their integration within a wider expressive, subjective realist aesthetic was. Coward's and Lean's *In Which We Serve* (1942) offers what can be described as the paradigmatic presentation of memory, when, following the sinking of their ship, the perspective switches between the flashbacks of Kinross (Noel Coward), Blake (John Mills) and Hardy (Bernard

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<sup>72</sup> John Francis Kreidl, *Alan Resnais* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p.57.

Miles). Their recollections are prefaced by a close-up shot of the face and a gentle softening of focus before the presentation of a condensed collection of relevant episodes. Anderson's disorientating and stylised treatment of memory offers a uniquely individualised approach. In this sense, the development of aesthetics born out of the art cinema lexicon saw the New Wave actively facilitate its relocation of the realist impulse away from the collective, representative position of documentary and wartime documentary-fiction, to a pointedly psychological and internal realm.

Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* has at its heart a marked fragmentation of temporal continuity which is born out of a thematic emphasis upon the excavation, and exposition, of the troubled, marginalised and abstracted individual. Richardson begins the film with its protagonist, Colin, running down a country road. The temporal instability of the image becomes evident when, following the cessation of the opening sequence, the succeeding 15 minutes progress in a chronological, linear form as Colin arrives at the Borstal and we see his initial experiences with staff and the other inmates, before flashbacks showing Colin's home life are introduced. Colin is only permitted by the governor to run without accompaniment after fifty minutes of the film, and the opening scene is framed in a manner that strongly indicates that Colin is alone. Moreover, he sports the Borstal's P.T. uniform in which we later see him train and compete. Within minutes, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* creates the dual effect of establishing the power of the director to manipulate and distort the viewer's ability to organise narrative information, while thematically, it foregrounds the apparatus whereby the protagonist's troubled and disordered mental and emotional constitution becomes visible as the film's central motif. For Bordwell, such a device is typical of the

art film: 'the flash-forward functions perfectly to stress authorial presence ... such instances typify the tendency of the art film to throw its weight onto plot not story; we play a game with the narrator.'<sup>73</sup>

Like Anderson, Richardson attempts to pursue 'subjective verisimilitude' by integrating aesthetic and narrative elements to illustrate the memorial process. The first instance in which this becomes obvious (in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*) comes when Colin showers following a football match, in which he performed well. The Governor (Michael Redgrave) praises him, whilst the camera stays on Colin in close up. The governor continues to speak despite being out of the frame, as he converses with a colleague. His line ('It's not hard to guess what sort of home life that lad had') is clearly heard amongst the sounds of the changing room, as the viewer begins to share Colin's aural perspective and Richardson prepares to navigate a shift from an objective to a subjective register. The camera remains on Colin during a three-second period of absolute silence. Suddenly, non-diegetic sounds are heard, which are soon resourced diegetically, as the next shot assumes Colin's point of view in flashback and we learn that the sounds are in fact those of his mother placing coal on the fire. She greets him by saying: 'Where the bloody hell have you been?' Whilst the memory appears to be logically motivated by the governor's comment, the initial suppression of the scene's aural elements sees Richardson frame the flashback as a violent injunction upon Colin's mind, as there is no explicit formal act which necessitates the narrative shift (again suggesting an attempt to cinematically render the processes of recollection).

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<sup>73</sup> David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice' in Jill Forbes and Sarah Street (eds.), *European Film Theory and Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p.98.

The first flashback lasts only ten minutes and works, episodically, to foreground the nature of his personal and familial relationships, whilst establishing his taste for petty theft. Richardson's return to the present time narrative is once more signalled by deviations in aural and spatial representation. As an unsteady handheld camera follows Colin around his empty living room (pausing as Colin spots a bottle of herbal medicine on the mantelpiece), lines from a previous scene (an argument between Colin's mother and father) are heard on the non-diegetic soundtrack. The dialogue penetrates the vivid surface naturalism of the diegesis to suggest a return to the interiorised temporal realm. Once more Richardson alters aesthetic and formal components to reflect the rhythms of Colin's memorial dissemination. The next shot sees Colin in the workshop at the borstal, which again alters the temporal register. However, this scene performs a punctuating function, bridging (between) Colin's recalled narrative and the central diegesis. Indeed, the following scene shows Colin and his family arriving home in the funeral car, as it becomes apparent that the flashbacks are taking the form of associative memorial episodes, rather than coherent narrative entities in themselves.

The funeral scene develops Richardson's stylised aesthetic and aural representations of consciousness. A cut from the workshop introduces the image of the hearse arriving outside the house. Diegetic sound is virtually absent in the sequence: we do not hear the car door shutting or its engine, nor is there any hint of atmospheric or environmental sound, as if Colin's memory here is snatched, and half-formed. The family approach the door of the house and the silence is broken when one of the children asks: 'Mum? Isn't dad coming back anymore', to which the mother replies, 'Shut up, he's dead!' The

family remain in long shot, distant in the frame as the dialogue continues and we do not see the faces of the mother or the child in conversation. Combined with the otherwise silent diegesis, and without conventional visual indicators of conversation, the voices appear disembodied, and the obvious overdubbing marks a clear violation of continuity between sound and image. The flashback sequences thus appear oddly surreal, presenting a disturbance or a lack of clarity in Colin's memory. It is now clear that Richardson distorts the subjective images of Colin's past in order to figure the protagonist's fragmented psychological state. In the flashbacks, the director subtly but consciously erodes the secure sense of an objective, documentary, realist aesthetic as seen in the present time narrative, to negotiate an explicit distinction between the film's multiple temporal registers.

In a later sequence, when Colin and his girlfriend Audrey walk along an empty beach at Skegness, Richardson once more suppresses atmospheric sound completely. The expected sounds of waves crashing and seagulls are absent, and instead we hear the strangely distant voice of Colin, as he recalls a previous trip to Skegness with his family. The couple's framing heightens the discordant aural-visual relationship. Initially they are in medium shot, facing the camera. This is followed by a dissolve to a close-up, before another rapid dissolve assumes a position behind the couple. The dialogue remains consistent while the visual perspective frequently alters, denying synchronicity between the singular aural element and its source. The *mise-en-scène* becomes paradoxically claustrophobic, and the wide, open space of the sea appears enclosed. Once again the visualised image becomes subordinated to the conditions of Colin's subjective recall, perhaps suggesting he is incapable of evoking a vision of unbridled freedom whilst he

resides in jail. These memories then, do not solely perform a narrative purpose, providing background and uniting the uniting character threads. Rather, their presentation is manipulated, in order that they should appear as distorted, half-remembered images from the troubled mind of the protagonist, which have been subjectively reformed as expressionistic, impulsive fragments.

Richardson's liberal approach to style and form as a means of realising the relations between past and present in the internal realm of his protagonist, finds some kind of resolution in the film's closing sequence. As Colin leads in the race against the local public school, countless short flashbacks, some solely aural, others solely visual, conflate to justify his act of rebellion in refusing to win the race. While Richardson's stylised presentation of memory dominates *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, the film also exhibits numerous other inflections of art cinema technique. At one point Richardson juxtaposes the public image of the state institution with its dark underbelly, by cutting between the violent punishment administered to Stacey (an inmate who attempts to escape), and the rest of the borstal boys singing 'Jerusalem'. At another, Colin and Mike (James Bolam) are shown running towards a car in fast motion (a technique reused when the pair watch television later in the film), and when Colin and his family are out shopping television advertising icons punctuate the shots. In this sense, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* is the New Wave representative which most self-consciously foregrounds the authorial hand, with a variety of stylistic motifs which subvert and complicate the staid realist traditions of the British cinema.

Despite the explicit commitment to alternative narrative/aesthetic strategies within the film, other New Wave features which present, at first glance at least, a more objective realist programme, can be seen as ushering in subtle invocations of a heightened oppositional lyrical approach to notions of space and narration. Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, which established the commercial vanguard of the new cinema, is one such example.

The opening titles emerge in white print against a black background, accompanied by the consistent hum of industrial noise. An establishing shot reveals that the sound emanates from the interior of a bicycle factory, which is shown in a medium shot that gently tracks to the right to reveal Arthur at his lathe. The shot frames Arthur for around ten seconds. Reisz then cuts to focus on his hand, and whilst the sound of the factory is maintained, Johnny Dankworth's jazz score is added to the soundtrack. Arthur then introduces himself in a voice over. He passes comment on his fellow workers, with point-of-view shots framing his subjects. While watching Bert and the foreman Mr. Robson in dialogue, Arthur mockingly 'imagines' what the conversation may constitute: 'Yes Mr. Robboe, No Mr. Robboe, I'll do it as soon as I can Mr. Robboe.' Curiously, Reisz includes the diegetic sound of the factory whilst silencing the conversation, as a means of privileging Arthur's internal subjective voice over the other characters. Reisz thus marries a succession of objectified images with a subjective, selective aural element. After the factory scene, the full titles emerge with a high-angled shot of the men leaving the factory, re-establishing the objective documentary aesthetic within the narrative which effectively suppresses the subjective element. Arthur's voice-over is now absent: he has become one of many who uniformly ride their bicycles home. In this

sense, Reisz establishes the art film condition of the 'biography of an individual'<sup>74</sup> through the subjective register, whilst providing an external exposition which seems to suggest the pursuit of an 'objective verisimilitude.'<sup>75</sup>

Despite this enterprising convergence of perspectives, recent critics of the New Wave such as Andrew Higson have been quick to locate the film within a classical paradigm:

A film like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is still a narrative film which aims to achieve the conventional verisimilitude of classical cinema. [...] The spectator is invited to attend the unfolding of the story, not to the way in which it is told.<sup>76</sup>

Higson implies that the narrative self-reflexivity and aesthetic stylisation, which characterise art cinema departures from the classical convention, are absent from the film. However, in attempting to justify his position regarding the film's classical basis, Higson draws our attention to a crucial succession of shots which follow the beating of Arthur at the hands of Bert's serviceman brother and his colleague:

[...] a series of three shots move from a spectacular townscape (a view not seen before in the film) taken from a high camera position, dissolving

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<sup>74</sup> Bordwell (2001), p.95.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.97.

<sup>76</sup> Andrew Higson, 'Space, Place, Spectacle: Landscape and Townscape in the 'Kitchen Sink' in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Continuum, 1996), p.136.



to a high angle long shot of the backyards of two rows of terraced houses [...] and finally cutting to an interior shot of Arthur lying in bed. At one level this is an absolutely classical movement from the general to the particular from above.<sup>77</sup>

The 'spectacular' shot to which Higson refers lasts nine seconds and remains completely static: it is an unusually extended, contemplative, punctuation shot. The length of the take urges the viewer to observe the vast poetic potential of the camera's gaze, temporally halting the flow of the narrative to hint at wider meanings both within the image and, self-consciously, beyond its parameters. Stuart Laing has called this an example of the 'environmental' shot 'unmotivated by the 'narrative': in this sense, such a shot is atypical of the classical paradigm, given its length and superfluity in relation to the demands of the fabula.<sup>78</sup> In *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Reisz uses this poetic authorial interruption to signal a wider complication of the film's narrative registers, as Arthur's voice-over narration used at the film's opening is re-initiated in the next shot as the protagonist lies in bed. This re-introduction of the subjective voice signals the subtle break in objective realism, and in so doing confirms the expressionistic poeticism of the punctuation shots as part of the film's wider complication of formal methodology (whereby the tools of the author are revealed, albeit subtly, to the viewer).

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<sup>77</sup> Higson (1996), p.138.

<sup>78</sup> Laing (1986), p.125.

Higson has noted that the 'spectacular' shot is a recurring aesthetic motif in the films of the New Wave, and that it most commonly takes the form of a long shot taken from a high vantage point across a town or city. Examples include Arthur and Doreen surveying the new housing estates at the conclusion of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, the moment when Jo tells Geoff of her pregnancy in *A Taste of Honey*, and the shots of Frank looking over the city following his final argument with Margaret in *This Sporting Life*. Higson has labelled this 'that long shot of our town from that hill', and he is concerned by the manner in which the New Wave directors use the device to assert the primacy of the observer (the director, the cameraman, the audience) over the character.<sup>79</sup> This motif can be linked to the New Wave directors' pursuit of Jenningsesque poetic realism which had begun in their Free Cinema shorts:

Jennings [...] was interested in a poetic cinema. The British New Wave shared Jennings' view. [...] The 'authors' use recognisable units of meaning in a way that goes beyond the surface realism of mainstream 'realistic' film and documentary realism, in order to get at 'poetic truths'. Poetic truths are human, existential truths, and run counter to social facts. The implication is that social facts are really surface facts – things that can be counted, categorised, labelled, and accounted for. Poetic truths have deeper, universal and existential concerns. Thus for the British New

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<sup>79</sup> Higson (1996), p.151.

Wave filmmakers, film should not merely reflect the surface realities of everyday life, but should penetrate that surface to reveal human truths.<sup>80</sup>

Lay suggests that poetic realism runs counter to the sustained level of social compartmentalisation which the New Wave directors saw as evident in the surface realism of documentary, wartime-documentary and social problem films. Thus, while the realism of the British New Wave was still socially engaged, it carved a distinctive aesthetic and formal apparatus which attempted to transcend mere reportage. Taking the example of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* once more, one can explicitly identify these separate impulses. Arthur's sexual mores, his lack of political enthusiasm, and his disaffection with work and family suggest (the illustration of) an easily recognisable social archetype, and the film's handling of wider issues such as the onset of consumer culture, and the re-development of the traditional working-class community is pointedly visible. These elements of the film are presented frankly, and in a refreshing manner, marking a more naturalistic and less institutionally-anchored treatment of realist subject matter. However, they operate on an entirely separate set of aesthetic and thematic indices to the aforementioned deviations from classical style and narrative, such as the environmental shots and the interplay of objective and subjective perspectives. It is these moments and sequences, and similar ones in films such as *A Taste of Honey*, *This Sporting Life*, *Billy Liar*, and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, which offer a wider and more penetrating treatment of character and space. Here the viewer is free to contemplate a narrativised reading of situation: Frank's isolation on the hill as a figuration of his newly realised emotional alienation (*This Sporting Life*), or to suggest

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<sup>80</sup> Lay (2001), p.63.

an aesthetised, self-conscious indicator of filmic reality: Richardson's arbitrary disjunctions of image and sound as Colin and Audrey walk down the beach, or as in the wasteland long shots in *Billy Liar*, a lyrical treatment of the personal and the political, as Councillor Duxbury and Billy chat against the backdrop of a changing Bradford skyline.

Higson, however, fails to allow these poetic moments to be read as diversely:

The city, apparently a place of poverty and squalor, becomes photogenic and dramatic. In becoming the spectacular object of a diegetic and spectatorial gaze – something precisely 'to – be – looked – at' – it is emptied of socio-historical signification in a process of romanticization, aestheticization (even humanization). This production of the city *as image* undercuts the moral sanction which authorizes our gaze at it, and at the same time tends to separate the protagonist from the space which defines it.<sup>81</sup>

Higson sees this move to the 'spectacular' as a negative obscuration of the social, political and historical potentials of realist subject matter, the implication being that overtly aestheticised and stylised motifs, common within the formal framework of New Wave cinema, impede the revelation of a desired socio-political end:

The spectator of the 'kitchen sink' film is in a privileged position, privy both to the interior monologue of the figure in the city, and to the master-

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<sup>81</sup> Higson (1996), pp.148-9.

shot, the all-embracing view of the city from the outside. This position of visual mastery is also a position of class authority, which relates back to the authority of the voice-over in an instructional documentary such as *Housing Problems*, where the middle class professional, the expert, guides our view of the working class as victims of slum housing. It is position of mastery to which the working class protagonist of the 'kitchen sink' film has only a limited access: it is, as we have seen, the position to which the victim-who-desires-to-escape-aspires.<sup>82</sup>

Higson advances his position to suggest that the formal characteristics of these techniques represent a visual manifestation of a politically passive, and thus negative, social perspective. The allusions to Griersonian documentary suggest an undermining of the New Wave's bold revolutionary claims, implying that despite their working-class focus, the films' visual flair and marked authorial presence reinforce the bourgeois mastery of the audience, whilst simultaneously entrenching the imprisoned working-class subject(s). The claim that the stylistic experimentation and self-consciously conspicuous motifs of the films proved a bar to social analysis is unquestionably strengthened by John Hill's criticisms in *Sex, Class and Realism*, that underline the sense of a critical paradigm which limits a broader consideration of the New Wave.

Covering similar ground to Higson in relation to the environmental shots, Hill writes:

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<sup>82</sup> Higson (1996), p.151.

[...] in so far as the city impinges on the lives of the characters, so the relationship between the two is de-socialised: the external, impersonal city, on the one hand, its powerless 'prisoners' on the other.<sup>83</sup>

By tacitly arguing that such a 'relationship' should be socially focussed, Hill suggests that ideally every shot within a realist diegesis should perform a social function rather than, for instance, a purely aesthetic one. Hill intimates that the director's foregrounded position within both the non-diegetic and diegetic realms of the New Wave film contributes greatly to this socio-political gulf:

[...] 'this outsider's view' is inscribed in the films themselves, the way the 'poetry', the 'marks of the enunciation' themselves articulate a clear distance between observer and observed.<sup>84</sup>

This 'distance', is interpreted by Hill as a major contributing factor to the perception of the working-class as 'prisoners' within the New Wave. By talking of 'poetry' and 'marks of enunciation', Hill suggests it is the aesthetic organisation; the intentional invocation of art cinema methodology, that engenders this supposedly manipulative and ideologically dubious position.

Higson and Hill mistake the 'poetic' approach to actuality in the New Wave (largely an attempt to utilise space and location as figurative signifiers), for a practice that attempts

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<sup>83</sup> Hill (1986), p.136.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p.133.

a social or political function, and, in so doing, they justifiably argue for its impotence in this sphere. However, if we are to consider the 'poetic' realm of the more stylistically complex New Wave films as evidence of a continuation of the Free Cinema principles outlined in the original manifesto, we can begin to navigate a separate path of meaning. Notions of art, poetry and personality firmly ally the directors with a pursuit of art cinema aestheticisation. Given this understanding, we can begin to justify lyrical and self-consciously poetic approaches to realist iconography as aesthetic ends in themselves, which should be liberated from the sociologically-inclined discourses perpetuated by Hill and Higson. Though worthy and fundamental to any understanding of the British New Wave, their criticisms start from a misleading notion that the New Wave filmmakers were, first and foremost, social documentarians, who ultimately failed to produce authentic renditions and analyses of working-class life. This was never the case:

It certainly will be restrictive if we make films for too long about 'working class people', looked at objectively almost with a documentarist's vision (or a sociologist's which is worse.) Of course, too, it must rule tragedy out; for tragedy is concerned with what is unique, not what is representative. Throughout *This Sporting Life* we were very aware that we were not making a film about anything representative; we were making a film about something unique. We were not making a film about a 'worker', but about an extraordinary (and therefore more deeply

significant) man; and about an extraordinary relationship. We were not in a word making sociology.<sup>85</sup>

Whilst Anderson is specifically talking about his own film, much of what he says is equally true of other New Wave features. He actively endorses the notion of individuation through characterisation and narrative (and by extension, style), which finds articulation in the goal-bereft, alienated and abstracted New Wave protagonists. Unlike wartime realism or social problem films, the characters of the New Wave are not intended to function as distillations of whole classes or sub-strata of society. Rather they are projected as points of fascination, whose internal ambiguities the spectator is invited to excavate and interrogate. This process is facilitated by the disarmingly self-conscious stylisations and formal patterns which Hill and Higson criticise. Indeed, Hill identifies this strategy as a further barrier to socio-political analysis within the films:

[...] there is an ideology of individualism cemented into the narrative form: it is the individual's desires and motivations which structure the film's forward flow, the attainment or containment of these which bring the narrative to a close [...] the more tightly wrought narratives and dominant central characters of the British 'new wave' work against an expression of the collective experience of working class life.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Lindsay Anderson, 'Declaration' in Paul Ryan (ed.) *Never Apologise: The Collected Writings of Lindsay Anderson* (London: Plexus, 2004), p.96.

<sup>86</sup> Hill (1986), p.138.



Higson implies that the pursuit of individualism results in a form of containment, allying the narrative structures of the films to those of the conservative social problem cycle. What Hill fails to acknowledge is the conspicuously rendered meta-narrational devices which complicate and explicitly challenge this perceived linearity: the poetic takes, and the imbalance of subjective and objective registers for example, which compromise the closed appearance of the text and obscure narrativised conceptions of form and meaning. Moreover, as Anderson notes, the films were never intended to work towards an 'expression' of 'working class life'. They consciously aspired towards something more profoundly sublimated, a poetic aim that is charged by the central position of the disturbed protagonist.

#### **2.4 British Art Cinema and the World**

Critical views of 'poetic realism' have quashed the New Wave's potential categorisation as an example of a genuine, indigenous art cinema product, comparable to the French *nouvelle vague* or Italian Neo-Realism. It is highly significant that the poetic-realist aspects of the films have been criticised in relation to their socio-political connotations, rather than being praised for their stylistic purpose as part of a wider pursuit of a more subtle and sophisticated filmic language. Higson and Hill show that by pursuing these ends, the aesthetic and textual complexities of the films become subordinated to a purely thematic treatment. However, it is interesting to note that enunciated moments of poetic realism are commonplace in examples of world cinema that exist in a far more complementary discursive critical framework than that which presently binds the British

New Wave. Luchino Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (1948) deals with working-class subject matter, and employs episodic narrative structures and locational verisimilitude which define its realist appearance. Admittedly, unlike the British films, its character focus is far more dissipated, its socio-political aims far more wide ranging and explicit. However, Visconti is still prone to the figuratively-charged long takes of isolated figures against spectacular landscapes which Hill and Higson deride within the New Wave film. Consider for example the moment when Ntoni (Antonio Arcidiacono) and Nedda (Rosa Costanzo) sit on top of a steep hill and discuss their future. Visconti frames the figures in a long, high-angled, deep shot, which locates them in the middle of the frame, seemingly isolated, against the vast backdrop of the sea. Visconti chooses to frame his subjects spectacularly to encourage supplementary meaning within the image, as he attempts, like the filmmakers of the New Wave, to transcend the immediate signification of the realist diegesis. This pursuit of poetic realism then, can be read within a wider art cinema framework, without being viewed as a manipulative social practice.

It is not only neo-realist cinema which attracts comparison with the New Wave. Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955), deals with socially-marginalised characters in a markedly poetic manner. In Ray's film, experience of narrative information is coloured and lyrically charged by expressionistic, highly contemplative collages of images. When Apu (Sunir Banerjee) and his sister Durga (Umar Das Gupta) follow the sweet seller out of the village, Ray chooses to project the movement of the children by focussing on the stream which holds their reflections. Purposefully then, Ray draws attention to the camera and simultaneously chooses to capture his subjects in a distanced, abstract

manner. Similarly, when Apu and Durga leave the village, the movement of the narrative seems to pause momentarily as a train passes by the children. When a letter arrives from Apu's father the director suspends the narrative momentarily to include a series of shots of the nearby river and its wildlife, subtly dwelling on plants and insects. These shots function in precisely the same way as Reisz's extended landscape sequences, which proceed the 'Sunday Morning' section in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

Comparing examples of international realist art cinema to the British New Wave is useful for numerous reasons. In part, we can disassemble the negative compartmentalisation that has occurred around the British films, arising from ambiguities surrounding poetic realism, by finding artistic precedents for these strategies in established examples of alternative, national art cinemas. In so doing, common techniques and effects can be identified, and by considering the already discussed invocation of the art cinema style within the films, a place within the pantheon of art cinema can be found for the British New Wave. This could not be possible if the films merely aped or replicated the groundbreaking aesthetic and formal strategies of post-war art cinema directors, and movements (such allegations have of course been made about the similarities between Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and Truffaut's *400 Blows* [1959]).<sup>87</sup> While it is true that the New Wave directors were fascinated by the likes of Bunuel, Vigo, Renoir, Visconti, De Sica and Ray, their films were consistently marked by a balance of European stylistic subversion, with a firm commitment to national cinematic and cultural tropes. As we will see, the New Wave

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<sup>87</sup> Laing (1986), p.129.

films are worthy of reassessment precisely because they bring with them these unique indigenous characteristics, which converge with the shared principles of the art cinema model to initiate a truly British art cinema.

To return to the forming principles of Free Cinema and its surrounding critical discourses, it is clear that there was a concerted attempt to locate the theoretical basis of the movement as separate from the doctrines of *Cahiers* and the *Nouvelle Vague*. In stylistic and filmic terms, this can be found in the notion of a 'commitment to the everyday', which in itself can be derived from the documentary principles of the 1930s. Whilst much of Free Cinema's groundbreaking verve is derived from its assault on the utilitarian, educative, and institutionalised gaze of the Griersonian school, it is crucial to note that the default commitment to realism, and by extension, working life which Free Cinema and the New Wave assumed, had found its initial manifestation (in cinematic terms at least) in 1930s documentary. By integrating art cinema nuances within the realist diegesis, the Free Cinema and the New Wave directors were rejuvenating an established tradition of British filmmaking through a convergence of indigenous and foreign influences.

Thus the development of realist aesthetics and subject matter within the New Wave film maintained and developed the traditional parameters of British cinema, and brought with it a level of diversification and progression which refreshed a staid paradigm. Yet it was not only the development of British realism which saw the New Wave directors marking a new position for a national art cinema. Theatrical traditions had long been a defining characteristic of British cinematic product, be it through adaptation, acting style, or use

of cinematic space, and the New Wave films took these tropes, and refreshed them through their re-deployment within a more stylistically liberal and artistically potent filmic framework. The approach to adaptation through collaboration saw the New Wave directors adopting a markedly differing conception of cinematic authorship to that of their French counterparts. This is reinforced by the theatrical backgrounds of key new wave directors such as Anderson and Richardson. New Wave films carry with them an integrated literary component which manifests itself in both the spatial, performative, and dialogical spheres of the films.

We can identify such a literary impulse when we compare the overtly poetic treatment of external space in all the New Wave films to the dramatic moments which are framed in interior environments. In many ways, this is a practical balance of registers; *The Entertainer* and *Look Back in Anger* are consciously 'opened up' from their original theatrical locations (the stage and Jimmy Porter's flat), in order to provide cinematic interest and diversification of the original texts. However, in films such as *This Sporting Life*, the contrast seems more cohesively interwoven, particularly the film's intense subjective emphasis on its protagonist and its figurative and expressionist treatment of the rugby field, set against the emotionally fraught exchanges between Mrs. Hammond and Frank within the walls of their home, which are characterised by a rhythmic theatrical claustrophobia, in both dialogue and the foregrounding of space:

[...] *This Sporting Life* [...] to a certain extent represents a symbiosis of the theatrical and cinematic spaces as well as theatrical and cinematic acting conventions. [...] The fact that Anderson came to the cinema with

several theatrical productions behind him, and also shot the film in continuity as he would have directed a theatrical production, [...] could have something to do with this development.<sup>88</sup>

This 'symbiotic' convergence of theatrical and filmic influences within the New Wave, has the effect of revising the dramatic pathos and close emphasis upon performance within the British cinematic tradition, against a progressive and challenging textual framework which sought to convey emotional and intellectual complexity in a different manner. Thus, the New Wave aspired to retain and reform the indigenous cultural elements which define the British cinema (a realist aesthetic and theatrical style), confirming the art cinema textual product of the New Wave as uniquely British. If we take into consideration the critical opposition to hegemonic practices of traditional filmmaking in Britain (as articulated in *Sequence*), and the fervour for a realist style with recourse to notions of the poetry and art, it becomes clear that the New Wave represented the 'textual end-product' of a sustained project of critical and institutional opposition to the mainstream and a genuine attempt to mark a new course for British cinema.

Despite its commitment to the development of national cinematic tropes, what cannot be underestimated is the degree to which the New Wave was equally a product of foreign influence. Analysing the aesthetic and formal characteristics of New Wave films reveals key similarities within international art cinema movements. It is clear that the

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<sup>88</sup> Erik Hedling, *Lindsay Anderson: Maverick Filmmaker* (London and Washington, Cassell, 1998), p.54.

cinematically literate directors of the New Wave were able to extend their boundaries of inspiration beyond the narrow aesthetic confines of the British studio system. However, this hybridisation of internal and external influence was not merely manifested within the textual product, but can also be felt at the institutional level of the filmmaking. At Woodfall, Harry Saltzman gave financial impetus to the embryonic stages of the New Wave, and was one of the first of a number of American producers and studios who provided the commercial platform for the rejuvenation of British cinema in the 1960s. Meanwhile, John Schlesinger's producer Joseph Janni was an Italian who brought with him an outsider's view to British society and culture:

In those days England had forgotten she possessed provinces. She denied that her people even had a sex life: sex was regarded, if it was regarded at all, as an exclusively Continental pursuit. The Italians, in the years before the French *nouvelle vague*, had made all the best pictures about provincial life, which included the frustrations and pleasures of sex life, and I was bitten by the desire to do the same for England. I began looking around for subjects that would interlock the human and social themes and persuade us we were seeing parts of life that in Britain we knew very little about, though in Italy they had become the foundation of a national cinema.<sup>89</sup>

Janni, who had studied with Vittorio De Sica in Milan, was aware of the importance of a national art cinema that focussed on the marginalised and alienated, just as Neo-Realism

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<sup>89</sup> Walker (1974), p.110.

had done so successfully in his own country. The two New Wave films that he produced with John Schlesinger on direction duties, carry with them concrete invocations of art cinema technique and subject, with *A Kind of Loving* (1962) perhaps the most socially involved and naturalistic of the cycle, and *Billy Liar* (1963), projecting a fantastical subjective narrative structure which heralded the start of a stylistically liberal period in 1960s British cinema.

The involvement of Saltzman and Janni exemplifies how the New Wave, whilst doggedly British at its base, brought with it an openness to outside influence which enabled it to transcend its precedents in documentary, wartime feature and social problem. What is crucial about the New Wave and its relationship to the development of social realism, is this departure. The social problem film saw the hegemonic stranglehold on realism continue throughout the 1950s. Despite attempts by directors such as J. Lee Thompson to diversify the aesthetic arsenal of the cycle, the films were consistently defined by a restoration of civilised order and a suppression of the individualistic tendencies which posed a threat the status quo. By negotiating a shift away from this standardised mode of address, the films of the New Wave expanded the potential of the realist paradigm, both formally and thematically. Dislocated, alienated individuals could now be examined without recourse to social categorisation through narrative closure. In turn, this movement away from figurative, collectivised treatments of identity was furthered by the foregrounding of authorial centrality. Realism became a platform from which personal expressions of style and poetry could be released. What had once appeared a narrow and merely functional aesthetic framework, had been opened up to numerous possibilities through lyrical treatments of location, and



subjectivised narrative technique. Most crucially, the New Wave has created a space within the British cinema in which realism provides an ideological, and crucially, an aesthetic, tool of opposition. Its relocation of the realist impulse away from the centrally disseminated discursive framework, liberated indigenous filmic practice in Britain, fostering a climate which continues to produce challenging and artistic works of national cinema.

### 3.0 Ken Loach: Reluctant Artist

Having engaged with the development of British social realism in a chronological format, it is now necessary to suspend such an approach temporarily. In Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, British cinema has two directors who have transcended the trappings of fashion and period, demanding a focus on their work across the decades. The following two chapters will seek to find a place for both Leigh and Loach within the wide parameters of realist art cinema in Britain, while maintaining a necessary emphasis on the aspects of their work that mark them as highly idiosyncratic and noteworthy auteurs.

Arguably the most prolific and enduring of all British directors, Ken Loach is the definitive social realist. From his earliest work on *Diary of a Young Man* (1964) to his most recent film *It's a Free World* (2007), Loach has maintained an uncompromising thematic interest in the socially and economically marginalised, and in doing so, has consistently sought to reveal the mechanisms by which capitalist societies victimise their weakest constituents. This dual emphasis on politics and social realities has led to the development of Loach's distinctive formal and aesthetic signature that has come to serve as the paradigm for British social realism. This demands location shooting; static or purely reactive camera placement; a rejection of stars, and a dialogical style that appears improvised in its naturalism. All are pervasive features within Loach's canon and beyond, and can be seen as the most notable textual signifiers of post-New Wave British realism.

In addition to dominating the realist landscape within Britain, Loach's success abroad (most notably in Germany, France and Spain) has led to various co-productions, whilst providing his home country with a viable filmic export during periods in which British cinema has failed to find a consistent voice internationally. Indeed, his films have regularly found more success in Europe than in the UK, which, in large part, allows him to secure consistent funding for his projects. Loach is then both an international and a British director, but never a spokesman for his own national cinema. Through his sheer longevity and the maintenance of a stylistic and thematic voice that is uniquely his, Loach resists specific genre-based or delineated categorisation. While we can be sure that he is a politically committed realist filmmaker, beyond that, attempting to understand Loach in relation to British social realism offers multiple complexities. Most, if not all, of the works made by Loach during his 55 year TV and film career incorporate a broad range of narrative and aesthetic modes, such as art cinema, documentary-drama, Brechtian modernism, poetic realism, and critical naturalism. If we are to understand Loach's contribution and place within British social realism, whilst maintaining a focus on the characteristics which define him as a true maverick of world cinema, it is necessary to identify the way in which these formal elements are inscribed within his work. In so doing, we are able to assess (more thoroughly) the role and importance of social realism within British culture.

### **3.1 After the First Wave: The Development of Socio-Political Art Cinema**

The story of the British New Wave is one of a light that failed, a fleeting moment within British cinema that gave us much but offered more, as its visionary directors were largely subsumed within the Hollywood system and/or rejected by their failing domestic

industry. Yet by relocating the realist impulse away from the centralised discourses that bound documentary, wartime documentary-drama and social problem films, and initiating the move towards the more liberated and oppositional realms of art cinema and working-class expressivity, Anderson, Reisz, Richardson and Schlesinger ensured a tangible legacy. When Loach began making TV plays and ventured into feature filmmaking in the mid-1960s, he was doing so within a cultural environment in which the forms and themes associated with realism had already been tentatively broached. Loach built on the innovations of the New Wave and advanced the boundaries of his chosen mode of expression via the blueprint of social realism.

Loach was inspired by the writings of the Northern realists, whose work had provided the source material for the New Wave directors. Like them, Loach could see in the literature a cultural space in which the under-represented and marginalised were, for the first time, recognised through art:

The novels of the late 50s particularly influenced me; writers like Alan Sillitoe, John Braine, Stan Barstow, and David Storey. They had provincial settings in common with my background, and I became interested in reflecting that non-metropolitan life. The actual subjects we were all trying to tackle in films made us political...But it was quite a politicising decade wasn't it? All those public events of the sixties.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Jonathan Hacker and David Pirie, *Take 10: Contemporary British Film Directors* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.292.

Here, a tangible link can be located between the Free Cinema/New Wave movements and Loach, including a shared enthusiasm for the political, and concurrent cultural move away from a metropolitan middle-class focus in the post-war cinema. In the early part of his career, Loach can be seen as a worthy descendant of the New Wave, maintaining and strengthening the pursuit of a relevant and representative British cinema. However, he refutes the suggestion that the Free Cinema/New Wave movement was a direct influence on his work:

I didn't see any films which were part of Free Cinema until a few years ago. I don't wish to denigrate them because they were very interesting, and, I am sure, very important. But personally they didn't affect me at all.

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Thus, while Loach emerges in the mid-1960s as the heir to the Angry Young Men, concretising the realist address as a potent tool of opposition, he does so from a distinct and unique cinematic standpoint that, at first glance at least, holds little connection to the New Wave project. Yet contextual similarities persist. Like their predecessors, Loach and his contemporaries were highly conscious of the need to overhaul the aesthetic conventions and thematic pre-occupations of visual culture:

There were a number of things in our mind when we started doing what we called plays, recorded plays. First of all I did a series with Troy Kennedy Martin and John McGrath called *Diary of a Young Man* [1964].

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<sup>91</sup> Hacker and Pirie (1991), p.293.

At this stage I really didn't know one end of a camera from another, but Troy had written a manifesto for a theatre magazine called *Encore*. This was very influenced by Brecht and the French New Wave, and sought to establish a new grammar for fictional television involving the use of stills, cutting to music, not observing natural time and a lot of things like that. The series was very much a testing ground for those ideas. The ideas were carried on when we did things like *Up the Junction* [1965], [...] Also we were following the news so we tried to work in the style of *World in Action* and other current affairs programmes so that people didn't think "we have had the facts now we will have the fiction" but rather "we have had the facts now here's some more facts with a different point of view."<sup>92</sup>

Catalysed by Kennedy Martin's manifesto, *Diary of a Young Man* (1964) now appears as a sort of sketch-pad for the formal experiments which were to define much of Loach's work in the 1960s, integrating various devices of subjectivity and accommodating a multitude of narrative and aesthetic registers. What is also interesting about Loach's observations is the suggestion that he and those like him were seeking to alter the 'grammar' of their medium, just as Anderson had advocated through his polemics relating to film form in the 1950s. Like the New Wave generation, Loach and his contemporaries were dissatisfied with mainstream representations of actuality. Indeed, the implication that Loach's 'Play for Today' work incorporated a critique of current

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<sup>92</sup> John Hill, 'Interview with Ken Loach' in George McKnight (ed.), *Agent of Challenge and Defiance: The Films of Ken Loach* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), p.161.

affairs and news programmes suggests a more deliberate attempt to reframe the discourses of realism:

Ideally they wanted their programmes to be indistinguishable from the items on the television news which preceded them: hence the importance they attached to the right-time slot. Their programmes would then resemble actuality material, now used for propaganda and not balanced reporting. In a phrase they were fond of using, they wanted to 'stretch reality' – not remove it, as they felt the conventional television plays were doing.<sup>93</sup>

As Alexander Walker observes, an almost revolutionary attitude towards the parameters of verisimilitude underpinned Loach's early work. Where the New Wave sought to challenge the conventions of cinema, figures like Loach and Garnett extended the cause to widely-consumed genres of television.

Tellingly, much of the inspiration for this vociferous pursuit of change seems to have been derived from sources outside Britain's own cultural sphere. In Loach's films, references to Godard and Brecht sit alongside the director's repeated enthusiasm for Italian neo-realism: 'Those classic post-war Italian films just seem to have an immense respect for people. They give people space and they're concerned with their concerns.'<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Alexander Walker, *Hollywood England* (London: Michael Joseph, 1974), pp.375-6.

<sup>94</sup> Graham Fuller (ed.), *Loach on Loach* ed. by Graham Fuller (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1998), p.34.

Similarly, the New Wave directors had acknowledged European art cinema movements, borrowing formally from the likes of Godard and Truffaut and, like Loach, expressing an admiration for the commitment to the everyday space and the everyday person, that defined neo-realism. These similarities are significant in that they suggest a tangible lineage through which to track the development of British social realism. While not based on direct formal or aesthetic connections, there is a sense of shared purpose and collective inspiration that provides a valuable context from which the development of the mode can be assessed. The New Wave's pursuit of a lyrical, reflective and poeticised realist address finds some currency within Loach's work (it certainly pervades his treatment of landscape and location). However, in the works of Anderson and Richardson for example, the poetic agenda is predicated upon subjective and psychological exposition. By contrast, Loach's thematic focus and the textual apparatus that facilitates it, suggests a conscious move towards a communal gaze, in which the artistic register of his work serves a direct social and political purpose, as Walker argues:

The 'Free Cinema' directors [...] had involved themselves sympathetically with the working-class milieu; they showed compassion and understanding and looked as unpatronizingly as they could at this under-explored section of society. What they did *not* commit themselves to do was – to change it. [...] It was from television towards the end of the 1960s that the much more critical attack on ingrained class assumptions was mounted.... [Tony] Garnett, [...] joined the BBC TV

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team who were launching a new series called the *Wednesday Play* in 1965 – and there he linked up with Ken Loach. Both men believed the series was slanted towards the problems of the middle classes, whereas as good Marxists they were bound to reserve *their* compassion for the mass of the people, not the favoured individuals.<sup>95</sup>

Walker's summation of the distinction between the Free Cinema and New Wave movements, and the work of Loach and Garnett in the 1960s, represents much that can be related to the continued development of realism as a distinctive arm of British cinema. A move from the reactive to the proactive, from the internal to the external, characterises the manner in which Loach and Garnett re-appropriated the realist project and attempted to convert it to an instrument of change. While the New Wave presented painterly projections of divided selves, underpinned by opaque and merely symbolic engagements with the social sphere, Loach and Garnett addressed society directly, using authentic and direct imagery to project tangible problems:

Behind the outwardly quiet and clerkly disposition of Loach bristles fierce indignation manifested, for instance, over a film like *The Angry Silence* having the temerity to attack the only thing that the workers have to offer besides their labour for the capitalist system – which is their solidarity. 'Maybe if you had twenty films about the workers you could afford the luxury of making one about a casualty of their political solidarity,' says Loach. 'If you are going to make only one film, you must

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<sup>95</sup> Walker (1974), p.174.

select your viewpoint to sustain the aspirations of the mass, not the selfish conscience of the individual.' A tough-minded tone like this had not been heard on the cinema screen, nor on the television one, much before the mid-1960s, when everything tended towards the 'balanced' approach.<sup>96</sup>

It is interesting that Walker alludes to Loach's criticisms of Guy Green's *The Angry Silence* (1960), a film which typifies the long-running social problem genre. Whilst the films of the New Wave renegotiated the aesthetic terms of the previously conservative realist address (enshrined in many of these post-war features), and avoided prescriptive and conclusive narrative forms, they failed to approach the 'problems' of society with any verve. Instead, socio-political significance was abstracted within complex figurative treatments of character and space. Loach and Garnett took the 'problem' as their starting point, and used new and challenging forms to ensure that the issues raised in the films resonated with the audience in a clear and profound manner. There existed a necessity to ensure that unlike in social problem films, the social ill was not suppressed through narrative means but was pointedly visible and vital beyond the parameters of the text.

The best known of his early works, Loach's 1966 TV play *Cathy Come Home* adopts various issues relating to housing provision and homelessness, as Cathy (Carol White) and her husband Reg (Ray Brooks), experience a series of misfortunes which ultimately leave Cathy homeless, with her children in care. Its unremittingly bleak narrative is made all the more potent by its articulation via a highly complex aesthetic and formal register. Its deployment of modernist and art cinema stylistic techniques, bound up

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<sup>96</sup> Walker (1974), p.174.

within a pointedly leftist agenda, sees the boundaries of film form transgressed to a markedly political end.

Cathy's retrospective voice-over is a regular aural motif within the film. She reflects on the narrative as it unfolds, inferring a temporal instability common within the art cinema. Moreover, the tone of her dialogue implies strongly that she is being questioned or interviewed. This device suggests a conflation of fictional and non-fictional forms to underline the veracity of the image.<sup>97</sup> On one hand, Loach utilises the level of empathy that such an approach affords in order to humanise the social issues the film tackles. On the other, he is able to subordinate this distinctly non-diegetic level of narration towards a communalised address. This finely ordered balance enables a more liberating perspective for the viewer, as Caughie suggests:

[...] the documentary fragments play a more ordered role [...] they give Cathy's experience its sociological meaning. But the principle of montage still applies, leaving a gap which only the spectator can fill between the rational administrative approach to a social problem and the emotional devastation which that problem represents at the level of experience: the rationality of the documentary voice and the experience of the drama.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Again this finds manifestation within the art cinema as John Schlesinger's *Darling* (1965) shows in markedly different circumstances.

<sup>98</sup> John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.119.

This is evidenced most potently when Cathy and Reg are forced to move out of their modern apartment into the crowded high-rise that houses Reg's mother and siblings. Before accepting this proposition, Cathy and Reg attempt to seek rented housing. They go door to door, but are rejected. An anonymous male voice-over outlines the statistics of the housing shortage, whilst the diegesis depicts the couple. This conjoins the fictional and non-fictional realms of the film, as Cathy's voice over re-emerges soon after. The convergence of both registers continues when the couple move to the tenement. Initially, Loach follows what is later revealed to be Reg's mother in medium shot, as she moves towards her door. This focus creates an emphasis on the fictional character that is countered by the non-diegetic voices of the tenement's residents (young and old, male and female), as they posit positive and negative opinions of their home. The external realm is temporarily abandoned, as Loach cuts to a conversation in Reg's mother's flat, with the next cut returning to a high-angled shot of the children playing within the walls of the block. This type of distanced, documentary gaze once more authenticates the location. A multitude of tracking shots from varying perspectives frame the residents, as their disembodied voices return to the soundtrack. Following this, Loach once more re-introduces the interior, fictional space, capturing a conversation between members of the family around the dinner table. This pattern repeats on numerous occasions as worsening relations between Cathy and her mother-in-law are juxtaposed with the external images and voices outside the flat. By the end of the sequence, Cathy and Reg have moved out. Here Loach balances the communication of narrative information, emotively rendered within the fictional register, with seamless expositions of authentic tenement experiences – utilising both the documentary representation of fact, and the emotive processes of fiction to articulate private and

public worlds. What *Cathy Come Home* shows is the manner in which art cinema and modernist techniques are redeployed from their associations in the internal and the abstract, towards a conspicuous deliverance of social and political meaning.

*In Two Minds*, Loach's 1967 treatment of David Mercer's play, is another example of the bold stylistic approach that characterised the director's early work. Where a broadly societal scope defined *Cathy Come Home* and the controversial *Up the Junction*, *In Two Minds* holds a pointedly domestic focus, as it dramatises the worsening psychological condition of Kate (Anna Cropper), a young girl whose mental health problems are exacerbated by her dysfunctional home life. Where formal experimentation was directed towards an exposition of social and institutional spheres in Loach's previous works, much of this film's aesthetic agenda is embodied in the portrayal of the character. Thus, the protagonist acts as figurative conduit through which the implicit confines of state and family are interwoven.

Like *Cathy Come Home* and *Poor Cow* (1967), characterisation is established in an interview-like processes. However, in this case the voice of the psychiatrist is prominent throughout, questioning Kate, her family and lover, and thus establishing an exploratory function within the film's narrative structure. This begins immediately with a close shot of Kate as she discusses her mother. The interviews do not provide a linear function. Rather, they act as organising motifs from which the temporally unstable narrative evolves. For example, early on in the film the psychiatrist interviews Kate's father about her condition. When the scene finishes Loach cuts to Kate in a hairdresser's salon. The stylist leaves her momentarily and Kate simply walks out. This is then followed by an interview with Kate's mother. Here the (already) established interview format jars

against the introduction of unsolicited narrative fragments. The episode in which Kate leaves the salon holds nothing more than a tangential associative link between the interviews with her parents, as once more Loach employs a variety of stylistic measures that complicate the tone and delivery of the narration.

This style is developed somewhat in interviews with Kate. At one point the diegesis relays handheld shots of Kate outside a cafe, whilst on the non-diegetic soundtrack we hear her conversation with the doctor. This increases the sense of disjunction between image and sound that contributes to unstable temporality and narrative discontinuity within the film. This disorientation begins to inculcate an acute sense of Kate's condition, with non-diegetic aural voices battling with a presentation of apparent visual verisimilitude. Thus the film's form acts as a mirror to its thematic programme, replicating Kate's turbulent internal realm.

When the psychiatrist interviews Kate in her garden, Loach furthers this formal figuration of character. As the viewer hears the conversation between the pair, close-up pans of plants, brambles and branches of trees once more dislocate the aural element of the diegesis. Eventually the camera settles on Kate, as Loach reconnects sound and image, yet the lingering exposition of the pastoral imagery suggests an attempt to frame symbolically the exploration of her condition through signifiers of environment and nature. The psychological, and the internal is then inscribed within an iconography of the external. This subtly provides an image-centric representation of the film's attempts to advocate Laingian theories relating mental illness, which suggest environmental and familial influences.

Like *Cathy Come Home*, *In Two Minds* deploys bold textual strategies to weave a highly cogent connection between form and meaning, ensuring the work's socio-political agendas are bound up within every aspect of their exposition. Seen alongside Loach's first feature, *Poor Cow* (1967), the early part of the director's career can be understood as a re-imagining of the formal codes of realism, in which the boundaries of visual and aural grammar are extended to vocalise his and his collaborators' radical and hitherto unheard beliefs. Within a wider sense, Loach had reconfigured the art cinema and oppositional impulses of post-war realism which had begun with the New Wave. Yet with the release of Loach's second feature film *Kes* in 1969, a more distanced and observational realist register replaced the conspicuous stylisation of his previous works, heralding the completion of a period which which he now views as a formative, rather than defining, moment of his career:

Given that we were very young, we'd try anything and this seemed to make a lot of sense then. Some things have stayed: it's just some of the external mannerisms that have become rather tedious. Cutting to stills, for example, is only good for one or two projects. You can't do that film after film. Doing things that are pared down is something I've always tried to do, although I have failed on a number of occasions. The aim is to find the most economical way of doing something rather than the flashiest, the most dramatic, the most cinematic or the most stunning.

Finding the simplest way of doing something came out of that early work.

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Loach suggests that his previous methods obscured and undermined the expression of meaning. Implicit in his statement is a realisation that style should only be utilised as a facilitator of narrative, where previously it had often worked in conspicuous opposition, or as a separate entity within the work.

In tone, *Kes* is therefore far less chaotic. The integration of static frames and prevalence of fixed camera positions initiates a markedly humanistic treatment of space and character, which is absent in the disorientating realm of *Cathy Come Home* and *In Two Minds*. Loach has highlighted changes in the manner in which he utilised lighting, along with the aforementioned camera positioning, as critical advances in his work:

We wanted to light the space so that it fell democratically but unostentatiously on everyone. Not only is it more pleasing that way, but the lighting isn't then saying, 'This is the leading actor in the scene or the film and these other actors aren't so important.' This is what we did on *Kes* and it became a central tenet of how we worked [...] I like the placidity of a fixed lens and the fact that it doesn't jolt the audience. Once you're accustomed to what the lens's vision is, then you can stay with that and the audience isn't constantly being pulled in and out. I don't like using a wide-angle lens because it will also tend to push up from below the actors and distort their features and turn them into objects; it's not

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<sup>99</sup> Hill (1997), p.161.



sympathetic in that way. I'd rather not crowd the actors or be so intrusive.

If you give people space, it gives them a dignity. A slightly narrow lens – but not a telephoto lens – just seems more respectful.<sup>100</sup>

Loach identifies the paring down of his stylistic lexicon within a move towards a more sympathetic and visible treatment of character, in which the foregrounding of identity is not overtly manipulated on an authorial level. One can describe this progression as a movement from didactic criticism to empathy, in which the conspicuous critique of actuality inherent in Loach's 1960s work is stripped down to locate the pursuit of realism in human terms. However, as we have seen, the defining characteristic of Loach's pre-*Kes* period was a subordination of style towards a social and political end. While in *Kes* this aim is not absent, it is conveyed in much subtler terms. Indeed, the politicised treatment of aesthetics remains, still inviting interpretation on a formal level.

Much of the film deals with the divergent and opposing spaces in which Billy (David Bradley) exists: his home life and school life are frequently set against the tranquillity of his time with Kes. Before Billy first encounters Kes, a series of shots frame him harmoniously within a beautified pastoral space, as sharp shafts of light pierce through an idyllic area of woodland, and long takes record him from various perspectives. As Billy emerges and sees the kestrel for the first time, his point of view is rendered in long panning takes, accompanied by gentle music suggesting a gentle, dream-like realm distinct from the naturalistic cut-and-thrust of the scenes at home or in school. In scenes at the pub where Billy's brother and mother drink, rapid cuts interrupt conversations

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<sup>100</sup> Fuller (1998), pp.40-41.

they have with their respective friends, and shots repeatedly return to the band playing. Similarly the football scene at school is accompanied by ironic intertitles giving the score, and appears as a self-contained comedic interlude.

These sequences clearly operate on a separate thematic level to Billy's scenes with Kes, connoting a sense of the alienating reality and impending imprisonment of the industrial environment. This distinction is acknowledged formally in the expansive framing of Billy and Kes, in which the immediate rural space and the residential locale below, sees the landscape incorporating both sides of Billy's divided existence. Thus we are able to identify a concern for the socio-political connotations of landscape and space within Loach's less stylised, post-*Poor Cow* work.

A similar foregrounding of space as a figurative emblem is central to the films of the New Wave, and as such, we can once more connect Loach with an advancement of the realist project on stylistic grounds, despite his apparent ambivalence towards aesthetics. Indeed, in the films of Reisz, Richardson, Anderson and Schlesinger one can, to varying degrees, locate various treatments of location within the symbolic realm, existing on a distinct level in keeping with conceptions of art cinema style, whereby space is used to represent levels of meaning which do not directly facilitate the immediate demands of the narrative. Such motifs are characteristic of numerous moments within Loach's canon. Films such as *Family Life* (1971) and *Looks and Smiles* (1981) exist outside of the director's prolific periods, yet they can be read critically as transitional works in which the relationship between *mise-en-scène* and narrative organisation is still at an

evolutionary stage (arguably it is not until Loach's return to feature filmmaking in the 1990s that we can begin to discern a pervasive Loachian style).

*Family Life*, Loach and Garnett's final work together, is a feature film remake of *In Two Minds*. As one would expect, the stylistic deviance of the original is replaced with a more distanced, observational gaze in keeping with *Kes*. However, as with *Kes*, there still exists a specific sense of aesthetic and formal agency which foregrounds the authorial presence. For example, the film's opening consists of six black and white stills, which are held for unusually long periods. The first shows an aerial shot of a housing estate; the second a closer perspective, framing a row of houses in medium shot; and the third adopting a position behind two young boys on bicycles. These shots are reframed in alternating patterns across the next three stills, before a cut to Janice (Sandy Ratcliff) in therapy. Here Loach immediately draws attention to the suburban environment in which the narrative will unfold, with the eerily prosaic nature of the black and white stills hinting at notions of confinement and stasis. This representative treatment of environment is concretised when Janice's lover emphasises to her the mundane and ritualised nature of her home life, arguing that she should escape. While this dialogue is relayed, Loach cuts to the same kind of location shots which dominated the film's opening, with this subtle disjunction in narrative continuity utilising the poetic register of the film, in order to implicate wider environmental influences in Janice's condition.

In *Looks and Smiles*, Loach follows the fortunes of three Sheffield school leavers, centring on Mick's (Graham Green) failure to find a job during the first throes of Thatcherism. Like *Family Life*, the film's title sequence constitutes a series of high-

angled shots, surveying the varying spaces in which the narrative will unfold. Following the opening, Loach utilises Sheffield's near mountainous landscape, as Mick and his friends race motorbikes on a hill offering a perspective above the city, while its buildings are captured beneath. This type of motif echoes shots in *Kes*, and evokes a similar contrast between childhood and the impending uncertainty of adulthood. Later in the film, a similar location is used to show job-seeking Mick and his army-bound friend Alan, chatting in a playground. Following an argument with an older woman the pair walk off, and once more Sheffield's urban landscape is conspicuous in the distance. Such clear comparisons between de-humanised, industrial environments, and disaffected, downtrodden youth, once more recall the films of the New Wave (for example, when Arthur and Doreen sit on top of the hill at the conclusion of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* [Karel Reisz, 1960] facing an uncertain future). Similarly, Colin and Mike (both jobless and sharing Mick and Alan's disillusionment with society) rest with their respective girlfriends on top of a hill with the city beneath them in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962). In the New Wave, these types of sequences come to constitute a poetic register, as moments in which the narrative is temporarily suspended to allow for the illustration of wider and more figurative tropes. One can attribute a similar meaning to the comparable scenes in films such as *Looks and Smiles*. Indeed, Loach's decision to film entirely in black and white marks a consciousness of style and an awareness of the inherent associations of industrial iconography, suggesting an invitation to view the cold and disconcerting exposition of 1980s Sheffield with a critical eye.

Tony Garnett, whose collaborations with Loach ended before *Looks and Smiles*, has rejected the suggestion that their early work held artistic pretensions:

[...] if somebody pointed out that what they were doing was not remotely like the real world or anybody's real experience, they would say, 'We're doing art.' We were very firmly not doing art, right? We were just trying to make sense of the world.<sup>101</sup>

The definition of 'art' with which Garnett takes issue is one in which the social purpose of drama or film is obscured or negated by a pursuit of style. As we have seen, experimental inflections of art cinema or modernist characteristics within Loach's early work are subordinate to an articulation of meaning which is explicitly socio-political in its relevance. The only apparent challenge to this came in Loach's 1986 film *Fatherland*. The film operates with a dual narrative and thematic purpose following the folk singer Klaus Dittmann, as his criticism of the DDR forces him to defect to the West. Loach approaches Dittmann's attempts to reunite with his father, and his realisation that the West represents different rather than lesser evils than the East, with equal commitment. Interestingly, the more personal dimension of the film (Dittmann's relationship with his father) is often referenced in Felliniesque fantasy sequences, in which a small child stands on a beach, often next to an older man playing a grand piano. The viewer is also privy to Dittmann's chaotic and turbulent flashbacks, rendered in black and white, in which he runs from DDR officials. This emphasis on subjectivity within the film

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<sup>101</sup> Stuart Laing, 'Ken Loach: Histories and Contexts', in George McKnight (ed.), *Agent of Challenge and Defiance: The Films of Ken Loach* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), p.17.

distinguishes it from Loach's canon as an explicit move towards art cinema. As such, *Fatherland* sits uneasily with much of Loach's recent work, and with reference to his 1990s renaissance Loach once more seems keen to distance himself from this apparent artistic divergence:

If you can be fairly accurate about the way people are and what they are up to that's always interesting and relevant. Providing you are true to people you don't have to invent theories or construct an aesthetic for what you do. Just go and be accurate and that will be contemporary by definition.<sup>102</sup>

As a reflection on the seemingly stripped down approach seen in the latter part of his career, Loach suggests that the uncompromising modernism of his 1960s films and the distanced poeticism of work like *Kes* and *Looks and Smiles* is largely reined in after 1990's *Riff Raff*, and is replaced by a heightened pursuit of authenticity, albeit within a more efficient and cogent narrative framework. However, Loach can still be seen to explore and attempt the communication of more figurative levels of meaning, once more revealing an art cinema dimension within his work.

On the surface, *Bread and Roses* (2000), Loach's dramatisation of the plight of un-unionised immigrant janitors in Los Angeles, satisfies the paradigmatic conditions of the director's later films. These can be understood as a tightly focussed narrative structure which houses numerous dialectic expositions revealing systemic inequality and injustice,

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<sup>102</sup> Hill (1997), p.165.

and incorporating the integration of emotive characterisation within an authentic *mise-en-scène*, reinforced by a dialogical naturalism. However, there are moments within the film that echo earlier examples of the symbolic representation of environment and space. When Maya (Pilar Padilla) arrives at the office block in which her sister works as a janitor, Loach establishes this explicitly capitalistic space by displaying a marked consciousness of its inherently negative characteristics, in relation to the characters who dominate the film. Initially the street outside the building is framed with a high-angled long take, showing a crossing in which few cars or people are present. Such a shot consciously reverses the iconic representation of the American city, whereby crowds and traffic connote a chaotic vitality, often communicated in point-of-view or medium-angled shots which locate the viewer within the space. With Loach opting for a more distanced perspective, and with the absence of the aural and visual indicators of the city, this urban/commercial iconography is de-familiarised, encouraging the viewer to understand the space in different terms. This is strengthened as Maya and her sister Rosa (Elpidia Carillo) enter the building. The camera adopts a low-angled perspective within the entrance way, and the frame is partially obscured by thick pillars which conceal the sisters, suggesting that they are in some way absorbed by this increasingly personified space. Shortly after this the camera returns to an aerial position, while still within the entrance to the building: Maya is now an isolated figure, redrawn within the imposing structures of the block, as pillars once more act as a physical barrier to our visual comprehension of the character. Following a conversation with the security guard, we rejoin Maya's point-of-view, which initiates a series of low-angled, gentle pans revealing the vast towers in the surrounding area from the bottom up. This conscious marginalisation of the inactive human figure, against the powerful anthropomorphic

treatment of the buildings, suggests an attempt to render Maya's personal struggle against the forces of commerce, within a distinctly figurative environment.

Whilst *Bread and Roses* hints at a re-invigoration of Loach's externally politicised, poetic register, *My Name is Joe* (1998) incorporates a fuller conception of subjectivity than in any of his work since *Fatherland*. Whilst flashbacks are used in films like *Land and Freedom* (1995) and *Ladybird* (2017) for means of narrative brevity, at times *My Name is Joe* utilises the device to offer a more internalised, albeit subtle, exploration of the subject. The film follows the fortunes of its eponymous protagonist (Peter Mullan), a recovering alcoholic who is forced to compromise his burgeoning relationship with a health visitor, Sarah (Louise Goodall), by trafficking drugs to pay off his friend Liam's (David McKay) debts.

As a guilt-ridden Joe drives through the Scottish countryside (carrying out his forced duties) we first hear, then see him, telling his best friend (and alcoholics anonymous sponsor) Shanks (Gary Lewis), of his decision to work for a drugs boss in order to help Liam. These subjectified visual and aural elements combine with the striking exposition of the rural space outside of the car, as the spectator's perception of the environment is once more imbued with a degree of symbolism. Indeed, following the evocation of these memorial fragments, Joe stops the car at a beauty spot and looks out onto a mountainous landscape, as bagpipes play in the distance. Given the unexpected introduction of Joe's internal perspective in the previous scene, and its opening up of the film's poetic register, we can now begin to understand this vast space as a reflection of the protagonist's state of mind. Moreover, the diegetically-sourced bagpipes combine with



the beautiful vista to touch upon stereotypical conceptions of national identity. Joe, a representative of marginalised, hidden Scotland, is transcribed incongruously within a visual and aural framework, which suggests a marketable vision of the nation. The spectator is forced to consider Joe, and those like him, within this wholly incongruous discourse.

Thus, once more we are able to locate stylistic elements within Loach's work, which illustrate and amplify narrative elements on a figurative level, suggesting an artistry within his own treatment of the social realist medium which allies his work to the traditions of the New Wave. In keeping with the New Wave, Loach has located a space within the realist aesthetic which houses the communication of meaning on a non-literal level, ensuring that a register exists within his films that acts as a counterpoint to the apparent transparency of the conventions of documentary-drama.

### **3.2 Realist Renewal: Ken Loach and Narrative Hybridity**

Despite Loach's rejections of an artistic or stylistic pre-occupation within his work, it is clear that aesthetically at least, one can begin to understand his canon in these terms. Yet the complexities of narrative within the Loachian model demand a broader conception of his films. While art cinema and modernist approaches usually connote narrative ambiguity, and classical narrative posits cohesive and positive thematic resolutions, it is logical to surmise that such conventions fail fully to extrapolate the means by which Loach facilitates the fictional thrust of his work through an amalgamation of these conventions. What becomes obvious in a survey of Loach's work is the manner in which narrative style is increasingly hybridised; various methodologies converge to produce

the organisational framework which best houses the director's thematic and aesthetic concerns. What is interesting then, is the way in which Loach, an apparent maverick of British and international cinemas, invokes and appropriates standardised narrative approaches from a wide range of sources, to create something wholly distinctive.

Deborah Knight has argued that Loach can be termed a 'critical naturalist', suggesting that his films 'exploit the narrow space between the artistic and the social which is the hallmark of naturalism.'<sup>103</sup> For Knight, Loach is a descendent of Emile Zola; he produces a form of social representation which is at once authentic in its reflection and passionately interventionist in its exposition:

Naturalism's goal from Zola to Loach has been to reflect upon – and not just reflect – the circumstances of socially disempowered individuals and groups [...] Like the experimental scientist, the naturalist does not set out merely to record or to document some aspect of the observed world; instead, in an attempt to explain what she has observed, the naturalist recreates in controlled conditions – in the novelist's case, in the novel itself – something she has previously observed in actual environment. When the experimental method is applied to literature, the novelist's objective cannot be merely to describe what she has observed; her

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<sup>103</sup> Deborah Knight, 'Naturalism, narration and critical perspective: Ken Loach and the experimental method' in George McKnight (ed.), *Agent of Challenge and Defiance: The Films of Ken Loach* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), p.60.

objective is to reveal the mechanisms which explain the circumstances that have been observed.<sup>104</sup>

What resonates in Knight's reading of critical naturalism in relation to Loach, is the manner in which this terminology justifies the complex approach of the director in presenting specific characters; scenes; or pieces of dialogue, to articulate a certain social or political viewpoint, which underscores and permeates the delivery of his films on a narrative level:

Loach's films [...] consistently employ a wide variety of types and situations of dialogue: discussion, meetings among co-workers, speeches, interviews, recollections, confrontations (whether between members of different levels of social services, the police and doctors; between members of one family or between couples) and many more. Very often, his films begin with one character asking questions of another character, where initially we know little or nothing about either the characters or their circumstances, and thus have no obvious cues about how we should respond to either – for instance, a psychiatrist questioning a young female patient about herself and her family (*Family Life* [1971]); a news conference (*Hidden Agenda* [1990]). Loach also uses voice-over tracks of characters speaking to begin films, so that we listen to as-yet anonymous characters, and from what they say we must gather some sense of how to

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<sup>104</sup> Knight (2007), p.61.

understand the images we see (*The Rank and File*). A more recent variation, *Ladybird Ladybird*, is Jorge insistently questioning Maggie about her past.<sup>105</sup>

Knight intimates that Loach's propensity towards dialogical dialecticism is what defines the revelatory aspect of the director's critical naturalism. The representation of debate; formal and conversational question and answer exchanges; and the clear delineation of opposing forces in narrative, and within the socio-political thematic sphere, allows for a convergence of authentic reflection and substantial manipulation on the part of the director and screenwriter. As Loach himself reflects:

I think they're films about a process that is dialectical: that is, the struggle between opposing forces to push events forward. But they're more a description of one side of that process, which is the working-class side. They're often about people's attempts to be articulate or to come to some understanding of their situation; their attempts to develop a class consciousness, and the attempts of the people who try to lead them away from a class consciousness toward collaboration and accepting their lot or toward fighting and struggling. But they're films that show or describe that dialectical struggle rather than embody it.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Knight (1997), p.66.

<sup>106</sup> Fuller (1998), p.12.

Loach's willingness to show the 'dialectical struggle' from the 'working-class' side, takes on a variety of forms in his work. In many of his later films, single characters act as emblems of social and/or political consciousness in which speeches and dominant contributions to debate or conversation make explicit the socio-political message towards which the narrative is directed. Ricky Tomlinson's Larry, in *Riff Raff*, regularly attempts to inspire his co-workers by detailing the assaults on the working-class initiated in Thatcher's Britain, romanticising union organisation, and acting as the group's spokesman when they express grievances over the poor health and safety provision on the site. In Loach's most recent films, this dialectical agent is still at work within characterisation. In *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, Dan (Liam Cunningham) articulates the case for the retention of socialist principles within the newly formed Republican court, when a landowner attempts to force an elderly peasant to pay damages for unpaid food bills. In *It's a Free World*, Angie (Kierston Wareing) attempts to justify her commercial success to her father, Geoff (Colin Caughlin), who responds by posing persistent questions relating to the migrant workers' pay and conditions, and the negative implications faced by their countries through the loss of skilled workers and professionals. In both cases, a distinctly leftist view is proffered on the basis of moral empathy and fairness, humanising the economic polemic and rendering the socialist case in emotive terms.

While specific characters will often be designated to carry forward social and political arguments in Loach's work, there are other occasions in which narrative progression is temporarily suspended, and all characters become subordinate to the delivery of the dialectic. For example, in *Hidden Agenda* (1990), when Kerrigan (Brian Cox), and

multi-layered portraits of characters, in favour of emblematic approaches which saw figures embodying specific social classes and/or viewpoints. The most explicit example can be found in the three-pronged social structure in Coward and Lean's *In Which We Serve* (Noel Coward and David Lean, 1942), as working-class, lower middle-class and upper middle-class characters project a desirable model of inter-class unity and productivity in wartime. Arguably Loach's treatment of peripheral characters is similarly emblematic. As we identified with Larry in *Riff-Raff* and Dan in *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, individuals are often deployed for the substantiating effect that their social class and/or socio-political viewpoint brings to the communication of the narrative. Reflecting on his work on *Land and Freedom* (1995), Loach identifies the manner in which he seeks to embody specific thematic impulses within specific characters to concretise the presentation of the polemic:

The Spanish war is also one of those events that unlocks the twentieth century. When the mists have cleared, it was apparent that the British, French, and American governments had supported the fascists in Spain because the revolution there was going to benefit the working class. [...]

It was very important to us that these conflicts were reflected through the relationships, that they didn't exist in the abstract, that it wasn't a film about 'ologies' or 'isms', that it was really a film about David and the betrayal of his group, and his relationship with Blanca and why she felt betrayed. All that has more resonance with people than a lecture would. [...]

The situation today is that there is mass unemployment as there was at the time of the Spanish Civil War, and the far right is on the march

again as it was then. We wanted to show that connection. It makes me think of the oft-quoted Orwell remark, 'Who controls the past, controls the future,' the gist of which is that history is written by those who are in power now, and so, in that sense, history is contemporary.<sup>108</sup>

Loach's thoughts on the film identify a number of relevant issues. The director recognises the device of embodying 'abstract' ideas in human vessels, in this case David (Ian Hart) and Blanca (Rosana Pastor) and their relationship, works to humanise potentially dry social, political, and historical issues. Once again, we can identify links between the conservative genesis of British realism and its oppositional manifestation in Loach's work. Moreover, Loach also displays a consciousness of the relationship between the contemporary and the historical in the film. The framing device which sees David's granddaughter constructing the plot by surveying her grandfather's possessions and letters, ensures narrative efficiency and brevity whilst subtly emphasising the perceived contemporary relevance of his struggle in the Spanish Civil War. Again we can locate tangible links between this aspect of Loach's narrative style and that of wartime realism. As is evidenced in *Love on the Dole* (John Baxter, 1941) realist aesthetics and period settings can converge to render the past an emblematic and instructive document, relating directly to the present. This treatment of history is referenced consciously in Loach's invocation of Orwell, and strengthens the notion that Loach's presentation of apparent authenticity, whilst deliberately naturalistic and expositional, contains a high level of contrivance and manipulation.

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<sup>108</sup> Fuller, (1998), pp.99-101.

**Knight's argument that this particular realm of Loach's narrative practice is evidence of a critical naturalist approach, allows us to offer an alternative perspective. Rather than finding its derivation in a 'one size fits all' narrational mode, the director exhibits a willingness to appropriate and hybridise a wide variety of dramatic and cinematic tropes. For Loach, narrative acts as a facilitating framework for the multitude of social and political messages he wishes to convey, and he utilises the intricacy of the mechanism to ensure their effective communication to the spectator. As such, a variety of tried and tested story-telling conventions are reshaped and interwoven against the unique Loachian aesthetic. For Knight, the clearly structured narrative framework, which many of Loach's films adopt, is another component of the critical naturalist model:**

**Narrative naturalism has a recognisable dramatic form. [...] the inevitable plot pattern is from bad to worse. [...] Whatever we might hope for naturalist characters, and whatever they might hope for themselves, the audience realises that the aesthetic conventions of naturalism are such that these hopes will likely go unrealised, or only be realised at a cost to the characters involved. [...] Naturalist characters are unlike the central characters of 'classic realist' films, who are able to initiate and complete actions which result in dramatic change. [...] In naturalist narratives, the range of possible actions for any character is profoundly circumscribed. So too is the power of the characters to act. [...] While viewing a naturalist film, an audience does not just experience frustration empathetically through a projective engagement with the character – an engagement which might nevertheless allow them to remain optimistic**



that, in the end, things will turn out right after all. Rather, an audience experiences frustration directly as a consequence of the dramatic structure of naturalist films.<sup>109</sup>

Knight sees this rigid, deterministic structure of 'bad to worse' as a perfect facilitator for Loach's emotive treatment of character, allowing him to embody his socio-political world-view within a narrative formula which renders the limited existence of the marginalised individual within a capitalist society. Characters' attempts to change or achieve social mobility are blighted by the mechanisms of the state that finds their embodiment within the fabric of the narrative structure itself. By way of comparison, Knight's evocation of the 'classical realist' model leads us to locate the similarities between Loach's rigid narrative formula, and those of the default entertainment model. As Knight implies, the tight and cohesive structure of both forms ensures a necessary emotional engagement with the spectator. By purposely retaining the character(s) within the confines of the deterministic narrative (which simultaneously connotes their negative socio-political circumstances), Loach exploits our empathetic relationship, inviting us to interrogate the environment that imprisons and contains them. Applying this rationale to the classical model, our empathetic instinct is satisfied as we share in the character's liberation from negative narrative/social circumstances, through the attainment of a specified goal. Thus while both models are designed to engender distinctly separate responses (criticism and satisfaction, respectively), it is their shared structural rigidity, based as it is on character identification and a focussed and linear organisation of events, which sees them achieve their desired ends. Where the loose and ambiguous structures

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<sup>109</sup> Knight (1998), pp.75-77.

of an art cinema narrative empower the audience to find resolutions in (for example), psychological or philosophical realms on a subjective basis, Loach's inverted classicism provides the spectator with a singular point of resolved identification.

*Ladybird Ladybird*, Loach's 1993 film about domestic abuse begins with its central character, Maggie (Crissy Rock), recovering from an abusive relationship, with her children in care, and ends with Maggie in a loving relationship, yet having had more children put in care. Thus while there is a degree of hope at the film's conclusion, Maggie remains a victim of both implicit state violence, and personal psychological violence. At the film's conclusion, the empathy engendered in the audience through Maggie's relationship with Jorge (Vladimir Vega) and their attempts to keep their newly born children, is re-constituted as anger at the immovable institutional and bureaucratic barriers which retain her in a negative position. For Hallam and Marshment, the lack of thematic resolution displays Loach's continual rejection of classical models, because of their failure to recognise social realities:

By showing the social and economic inequities which shape the lives of those who lack the economic power or the personal resources to overcome them, Loach reworks conventional melodramatic structures to show that the coincidence of events over which individuals have no control cannot be solved by a trite narrative resolution. [...] At the end of *Ladybird Ladybird*, Maggie has lost two of her children fathered by Jorge and the four children she has had to different fathers. Although we are told that Maggie and Jorge remain together and have three more children

who they are allowed to keep, the fact remains that she has borne six children who are lost to her. There is an equilibrium restored at the end of the film through the announcement of these facts, but it is not an equilibrium that recovers Maggie from her loss, or a solution to the problems that created the cycle of events in which she becomes trapped. [...] There are no simple resolutions to these dilemmas in life, and it is the refusal of the film to depict a fictitious resolution that is the source of its claim on reality.<sup>110</sup>

Hallam and Marshment's assertion that Loach evokes the structures of melodrama almost self-consciously, is undoubtedly worthwhile. As we follow the burgeoning relationship of Maggie and Jorge, which is represented along conventional romantic lines, the spectator's inherent expectations of hope and redemption for the couple are blighted by the film's conclusion. What occurs is a reassertion of social reality through the ironic deviance and eventual breach of cinematic convention. Yet in evoking these paradigms, one can begin to suggest that, rather than working within a neatly defined narrative structure as Knight suggests, Loach once more shows a pragmatic willingness to hybridise the most effective generic tropes in order to facilitate the delivery of a socio-political message. This is evidenced in the deployment of emblematised characterisation, which taps into the mid-century traditions of British realism, and in the appropriation of narrative conventions such as melodrama in *Ladybird Ladybird*:

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<sup>110</sup> Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema* (Manchester: The University of Manchester Press, 2000), p.212.

*Ladybird Ladybird* establishes the institutional features of the enemy so that it becomes difficult to blame an individual social worker, care assistant, solicitor or judge. The decisions taken against Maggie may appear implausible, untrue or biased; but considered as part of a melodrama of protest, they are actions by an enemy against an innocent.<sup>111</sup>

As Leigh identifies, the framing of social reality within the easily interpreted structures inherent within mainstream cinematic convention, allows for a simplification of the social and political dimensions of the narrative. With this in mind, it is possible to suggest that Knight's identification of Loach as a 'critical naturalist' can be challenged by the suggestion that, in narrative terms at least, he adopts a hybridised approach, utilising the spectatorial associations of various genres and codes to humanise potentially harsh realist content. This sense of 'sugaring' the social and political 'pills', accounts for Loach's willingness to concede to aspects of classical models.

One could suggest that by regularly utilising single protagonists, Loach plays on standard conceptions of individualism in the cinema, and exploits the potential identification that such a focus affords. However, Knight is able to absorb such a practice within the critical naturalist framework:

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<sup>111</sup> Jacob Leigh, *The Cinema of Ken Loach* (London and New York, Wallflower: 2002), p.155.

Protagonists in the tradition of British naturalism are quite unlike protagonists in non-naturalistic genres. They are unheroic or anti-heroic protagonists caught up in what is obviously a difficult struggle to make a better lot for themselves. Because naturalism has an inherently critical perspective, we see why the central protagonists of naturalistic narratives are not 'heroic'. Heroes are capable of great actions. The protagonists of naturalist narratives are seldom able to break free from the constraints of their socio-cultural environments. The dreams to which they aspire are ones which they cannot realise – or, if they realise them even in part, it is at a much greater cost than they had previously imagined.<sup>112</sup>

Once more there is evidence of a conscious deployment of generic devices (in this case the notion of heroism), towards an unfulfilling and open-ended conclusion, again emphasising both the redundancy of narrative convention and prevailing socio-political discourses. However, the over-prescriptive framework which Knight assumes leads us to re-consider Loach's varied and eclectic canon. While Loach's work is filled with characters who are individuated, only to be imprisoned within an endemic and fatalistic cycle of social despair, there are also numerous characters and narrative structures that escape this apparent inevitability.

*Sweet Sixteen* (2002) is another example of Loach's propensity towards narrative hybridisation, yet in a manner which runs counter to Knight's assertions, Loach actively embraces the implications of 'the heroic' in the character of Liam (Martin Compston),

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<sup>112</sup> Knight (1997), p. 67.

and his rapid rise and fall. Liam is not simply 'one of the lads' or an exemplar of disaffected youth, as he repeatedly displays numerous characteristics which distinguish him from his friends. His savvy, street-smart intellect is brought into focus when he and Pinball (William Ruane) are invited to meet the local drug boss. An impertinent comment sees Pinball ejected, but Liam retains a coolness and maturity that impresses the older criminals. As a result he is given increasing responsibility and monetary reward. Liam's courage is emphasised repeatedly. At one point he is robbed by three addicts, yet he attempts to reclaim his product, taking a number of beatings before Pinball intervenes. As Liam is initiated into the drugs gang, he is asked to stab a man in a toilet. Liam resolves to do so, but he is stopped by the gang at the crucial moment (having proved his loyalty). These instances invite the viewer to admire and glorify Liam as an extraordinary entity, a process which is heightened by the knowledge that Liam's sole 'goal' is to collect enough money to accommodate his drug-addicted mother when she is released from prison, taking her away from his abusive step-father. By the film's conclusion the goal, is, to some extent, completed. Liam has secured a luxury flat with the proceeds of his drug deals and his mother lives with him momentarily, before returning to Liam's nemesis, the stepfather, whom he stabs in revenge. Thus Liam's demise is not directly sourced within the confined social structures of his environment. Rather, it emerges through psychological and emotional factors. Liam's journey as a talented drug dealer; his fast rise to success; his initiation; the Freudian relationship between him and his mother (his fatal flaw) and its violent manifestation in the stabbing of his stepfather, suggest a reworking of the gangster film's integration of Shakespearian tragedy. Here Loach transgresses his own boundaries to communicate the hardship of poverty-stricken and drug-ravaged areas of Scotland, by evoking numerous standardised

fictional mechanisms, all the while retaining the poetic realist register that remains a constant in much of his work. Moreover, the film's final shots further emphasise its inter-textual diversity. As a fleeing Liam stands on the empty beach facing an empty sea and uncertain future, we are reminded of the ending of Truffaut's definitive treatment of disaffected youth in *The 400 Blows* (1959).

This readiness to incorporate empathetic characteristics of narrative convention is echoed in numerous other Ken Loach films. *It's a Free World* shares with *Sweet Sixteen* a coupling of the heroic rise and fall within a firmly transcribed socio-political context. We see Angie's attempts to provide a future for herself and her young son, polluted by capitalist greed and exploitation. Loach's *Raining Stones* (1993) recalls the plot of De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), when unemployed Bob (Bruce Jones), has his van stolen; the means by which he hoped to secure enough money to pay for his daughter's communion dress. Bob is eventually forced to borrow money from a loan shark, who threatens Bob's young family, before the protagonist accidentally kills him during an altercation. When Bob confesses all to his priest, he is absolved of guilt and the film finishes hopefully at his daughter's communion. Like De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, Loach utilises the singular, goal-orientated focus of classical narrative to provide an easily definable and engaging structure with which to frame the desperation of poverty. The apparent 'happy ending' serves as a contrast to many of Loach's films, yet by maintaining a keen eye for wider social issues in the film, through the depiction of drug addicts outside the shopping precinct, and the revelation that Bob's best friend's daughter can only find employment as a drug dealer, Loach ensures that the final scenes

do not resolve the systemic social issues with which the film engages: indeed, Bob is no nearer to finding a job.

This 'happy ending' of sorts is also visible in Loach's often ignored *Ae Fond Kiss* (2004), which is notable as the first Loach film to deal directly with issues of race, and for its explicit sexual content. The film follows the 'love against the odds' relationship of Casim (Atta Yaqub), a Glaswegian Muslim, and Roisin (Eva Birthistle), an Irish Catholic. After numerous threats to their relationship, the film concludes with Casim leaving home and his disapproving family, finally to be with Roisin, who has been sacked from the Catholic school at which she works. The film is again evidence of Loach's recycling of popular forms (in this case the *Romeo and Juliet* style romance narrative), which are given new life through their setting within a social realist aesthetic. Just as *Sweet Sixteen* encourages the viewer to engage with social issues relating to unemployment, through elements of the highly engaging gangster narrative, *Ae Fond Kiss* utilises the emotive and sympathetic qualities of the romantic form to humanise the incompatibility of religious faith and contemporary mores. The film is Loach's first to show repeated and frank instances of sexual intercourse, as Loach foregrounds the burgeoning love affair between Casim and Roisin. The application of another conventional register (that of the erotic art cinema) evokes notions of a transcendental union between lovers, of sexuality as a reflection of the sharing of the self. The scenes allow Loach to authenticate the profound love the two characters share (emphasising its credibility in the face of social pressures), and on a visual level they are distinguished from the distance of the documentary gaze, as Loach adopts a more static observational perspective, enclosing a private aesthetic sphere which is uniquely Casim's and Roisin's.



As we have seen, Loach's approaches to characterisation and narrative, the organs of storytelling, are distinctly multi-faceted. As a politically committed filmmaker Loach adopts and adapts the narrative vehicles that best facilitate the delivery of his position. While his often emblematic treatment of character and dialogue recalls the origins of British realism, he is equally willing to appropriate the generic devices of melodrama, romance, or the gangster film, from sources outside Britain. This apparent pragmatism can be contrasted with the aesthetic dimension of his films, in which we have located a consistently poetic approach, whereby stylistic constructions are predicated by an attempt to render social concerns visually, as an illustrative or complementary apparatus to the expositional dialogical and narrative structures. Indeed, typically for Loach, the unifying factor in both realms of his filmmaking is firmly political, with narrative and stylistic strategies both directed towards an effective assertion of theme. However, his most recent film *Looking for Eric* (2009), is undeniably his most commercial yet, and the changes it initiates may suggest a substantial shift in method in this late stage of Loach's career. Though many have pointed to depressed postman Eric's (Steve Evets) cannabis-induced visions of Eric Cantona as the biggest point of departure from the Loachian style, as we have seen Loach is no stranger to devices of subjectivity and temporal instability when his themes demand them. Surprisingly, what is most distinctive about the film is its uncharacteristically conclusive denouement. *Looking for Eric's* taut finale - in which the social and emotional problems evoked throughout are all to quickly enveloped into a happy family reunion - sees the director discarding the open-endedness which has for so long been one of his defining motifs. In jettisoning the ambiguity of his previous work, the film's multiple themes such as gang culture, mental health difficulties and the decline of the family have no afterlife, no context in which to

evolve outside of the text, and the classical narrative and comedic elements supersede the usual resonance of the thematic realm.

Notwithstanding this apparent change in the director's commercial priorities, an assessment of Loach within the canon of social realism demands a long-sighted and close appraisal of the aesthetic realm of his vast body of work. It is here that we can discern the indelible and continuing influence that Loach has on the mode. In maintaining and diversifying the stylistic framework of actuality established through the New Wave, Loach has strengthened the means by which social realism, as a subgenre of British cinema, is able to operate as an oppositional artistic force. This has, in turn, ensured that the representation of themes relating to social reality, find manifestation in substantial and appropriate formal frameworks.

#### 4.0 Realism and Authorship: The Films of Mike Leigh

Mike Leigh's career of nearly forty years' duration has seen the assembly of an oeuvre that defies blanket generic or period categorisation. It is reductive to assess Leigh's contribution to social realism as British art cinema in any other way than to afford him a singular focus, just as we have done with Loach. Indeed, like Loach, and the films of the British New Wave, an aesthetic, formal and thematic commitment to veracity lies at the centre of Leigh's works. We are of course, able to locate tangible similarities and contrasts between Leigh and fellow practitioners of the realist mode. This enables us to understand how social realism functions as an organic, ever-evolving means of cinematic address, and how its constituent elements contribute to its consistent renewal and progression.

Conversely, we must also look to extrapolate the aspects of Mike Leigh's work that suggest authorship, which confirm an approach to the realist image and subject matter that is uniquely the director's. Locating British social realism within the discourse of art cinema compels an appraisal of its products predicated on stylistic and aesthetic analyses. Leigh's work thoroughly satisfies such an approach. Narratives of ordinary life are consistently downbeat, episodic and open-ended in structure: Leigh's films repeatedly eschew causal construction in favour of subtler associative linkages. His *mise-en-scène* and camera placement are regularly static, with long takes fostering rigidly intense compositions. Characterisation in Leigh's films can be truly three-dimensional (with actors undergoing lengthy periods of improvisation in collaboration with their director), or self-consciously narrow and exaggerated (as social types and

mores are critically analysed through performance). Leigh's style, so unique in its treatment and deployment of the realist model, is such that he is able to secure funding for his projects despite not being able to produce a written script at the formative stages. A truly maverick filmmaker, along with Loach, he is, without question, one of the key exponents of British social realism today.

#### **4.1 Mike Leigh and the Canon of British Social Realism**

Both Leigh and Loach share a commitment to the maintenance of narrative and aesthetic codes, which consistently depart from dominant cinematic models, and in so doing, both demand a complex critical reception from their viewers. Yet, as has been briefly intimated, Leigh and Loach markedly differ in a number of areas. Loach's approach to social realism is, on a superficial level, paradigmatic of the mode: he offers politically oppositional accounts of the socially and economically marginalised from which the viewer gains a sense of capitalist society's victimisation its weakest elements. For Leigh, the political impetus is important, but rather than acting as the lens through which narrative and characters are developed, it exists as a background upon which intimate and highly complex portraits of individuals, families, and relationships emerge. Ray Carney surmises the basis of this distinction with precision:

One might say that while Loach looks at the effect, Leigh studies the cause. Loach studies bureaucracies; Leigh examines the individual qualities that make bureaucracies the way they are.

[...] I would argue that the institutional critique is in fact the simpler, more superficial, and more naïve way of understanding these situations. [...] The bureaucracies of the individual imagination are far subtler and more insidious than those of any man-made institution.<sup>113</sup>

Carney's comparison of Leigh and Loach is unfairly balanced in the former's favour. Central to the ongoing tradition of British realism is a communication, in emotive human terms, of the manner in which social, political and economic structures impact upon society. No director has achieved this with as much clarity and effectiveness as Loach. The first component of Carney's argument, that Leigh occupies the emotional and psychological sphere left barren in Loach's prescriptive polemics, is more substantial. Loach's relentless pursuit of a clear, and convincing justification for socialism, manifests itself within the form of his work, as otherwise naturalistic narratives repeatedly accommodate dialogical exchanges or statements of a political and/or social and/or economic nature, leaving the viewer in no doubt as to the 'message' which the filmmaker wishes us derive from his work. This didactic approach is markedly different from Leigh's view of realism and the cinema:

For me, making a film is an exploration into what we feel. I'm not concerned with making films that are conclusive or prescriptive, and certainly not propaganda. I make films where either rationally or emotionally I tend to ask more questions than give answers. I feel that the

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<sup>113</sup> Ray Carney and Leonard Quart, *The films of Mike Leigh: Embracing the world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.33-34.

audience should have something to work with when the film's over, something to discuss and argue about. But really what I'm talking about is the actual world out there -- getting that on the screen.<sup>114</sup>

Leigh eschews the kind of agenda-driven approach to representations of actuality that dominates the work of Loach and the wartime realist canon. Instead, he attempts to project a more distanced treatment of character and place, empowering the audience to attribute emotional or socio-political significance where they see fit.

In 1985 Leigh released his final feature for television, *Four Days in July*. The film centres on the parallel lives of expectant parents-to-be in Belfast: a Catholic couple, Collette (Brid Brennan) and Eugene (Des McAleer), and a Protestant couple, Lorraine (Paula Hamilton) and Billy (Charles Lawson). Through a series of near-mirrored scenes, Leigh portrays a four-day period, up to and including the day when both women give birth. Five years later Loach's *Hidden Agenda* (1990), (his own treatment of the 'Troubles') was released. *Hidden Agenda* is problematic in its attempts to combine a conventional thriller narrative structure, with a substantial treatise on the conflict in Northern Ireland. Archetypal Loachian dialectical devices are deployed throughout, as, in spite of the compelling pace of the narrative, the viewer is made acutely aware of the director's views of the socio-political context of his subject matter. Leigh's approach to Northern Ireland differs noticeably. Whereas Loach deals with a complex 'dirty tricks'

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<sup>114</sup> Anonymous, 'Listening to the world: An Interview with Mike Leigh' (1996) <http://www.salon.com/weekly/interview960916.html> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2008]

campaign, initiated by the British secret services, Leigh chooses to focus simply on ordinary people, despite the politically divisive and volatile setting, by showing us two separate couples and their respective friends as they prepare for the birth of their children.

One scene in particular underlines this prioritisation of human relations over an apparent political imperative. Following the establishment of both couples, Leigh initiates a specific focus upon Eugene and Collette, as the latter arrives back to the house with a newly acquired pram. Leigh has Dixie (Stephen Rea), a window cleaner, arrive at the house, joining Eugene and Collette's neighbour Brendan (Shane Connaughton), who is fixing the couple's toilet. When Dixie and Brendan meet, it soon emerges that the two spent time in prison together, as shared memories are punctuated by Dixie's anachronistic sense of humour: 'What was the ship called in *Mutiny on the Bounty*?' A highly naturalised and informal tone is set as the pair exchange memories, and no sense of a conspicuous authorial exposition seeks to illuminate the socio-political implications of the scenario. Indeed, the film's underlying thematic dimension is evoked in an almost covert manner, in unprovoked aural cues (for example, when the characters hear bands preparing for the following day's parade). This sparks a shift in the conversation, as Eugene begins to talk casually about how, as a child, he helped Protestant children to collect wood for the ceremonial bonfires. The implication seems to be that the present climate would preclude such a practice, but this is never made explicit to the audience, and the carefully constructed naturalism is not compromised. Similarly, the group discuss Collette's and Eugene's desire to buy a house. Eugene suggests that he intends to do so with the benefits of a compensation claim relating to his chronic injuries. This

initiates a smooth and logical justification for the explanation of Eugene's condition, once more allowing the film to accommodate a highly authentic, humanised treatment of the conflict. Eugene explains to Dixie how he was shot accidentally by joy riders. This in turn leads him to recall the sorrow he felt for fellow newly disabled patients when he was admitted to hospital, and to remember other instances in which he has been unfortunately injured (being shot in the leg on the way to mass, and being caught up in a bomb blast in the previous decade), as the group ultimately laugh at Eugene's misfortune. Dixie offers another amusing conundrum before Collette goes for a nap, and the two men leave. The scene lasts seventeen minutes in total. What Leigh exhibits is an emphatic articulation of humanism. Rather than seeking to imbue his characters with emblematic function, the potential political and social significance of the scene is at the mercy of the natural rhythm of the dialogue, reversing the Loachian narrative strategy. Here one of the defining tenets of the director's realist credentials is confirmed, in his embrace of dialogical authenticity at the expense of contrived polemics.

While textual distinctions between the work of Leigh and Loach are marked and distinct, in institutional terms the pair operate in similar spheres. Both share a surface antipathy for British realist traditions, and both operate as confirmed mavericks in a commercial sense, marking their products in a clearly authored manner. Indeed, like Loach, Leigh acknowledges the importance of the Free Cinema and New Wave cycle, but rejects any tangible sense of linkage to his own work:

I didn't discover Free Cinema until after it happened because that was in the Fifties, when I was still a teenager in the provinces. Their work, as



you know, led to the New Wave of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Having grown up in an urban world, it was exciting to know that there was a cinema attempting to deal with that, although one sometimes had reservations about whether it was quite real or slightly artificial.<sup>115</sup>

However, once more in the context of the New Wave, Leigh does speak more encouragingly about the emergence of Ken Loach and Tony Garnett at the BBC in the mid 1960s:

[...] what one didn't know was that that was all going to collapse, that television was going to blossom and change, and of course the important thing that did happen, although our particular generation was too young to be part of it, was *The Wednesday Play* revolution when BBC2 started, which produced the Tony Garnett and Ken Loach kind of company. And in a way, looking at it objectively, though one couldn't have really perceived this at the time, what had happened is that the impetus, I think, of the Woodfall films and the so-called British New Wave films, had become dissipated, I think when they started to do things like *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Lee Ellickson and Richard Porton, 'I Find the Tragicomic Thing in Life: An Interview with Mike Leigh' in *Cineaste* vol. 20, n.3 (1994), pp.10-17, (p.75).

<sup>116</sup> Gavin Millar, 'Mike Leigh: The Guardian Interview' (1983)  
<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/audio/id/1148503/index.html> Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2008]

Leigh's citing of Loach and Garnett's overhaul of the realist paradigm as a central factor in the formative stages of his own career confirms that, in a basic sense at least, he and his oldest contemporary were seeking to break away from the apparently stylised terrain of the New Wave. This suggests that the early motivation for both of their careers came from a desire to seek a new and more authentic mode of realist address.

It is perhaps this kind of ambivalence towards the Woodfall generation which has led numerous critics to highlight the manner in which Leigh's work rails against the conventions of British realism. Molly O'Hagan Hardy has gone as far as to suggest that Leigh's *Vera Drake* (2004) represents an active attempt to critically disassemble and reconstitute some of the more conservative elements of the British New Wave, particularly the overbearing masculinity of Karel Reisz's treatment of Alan Sillitoe's novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960): '*Vera Drake* can then be understood as Leigh's attempt to recreate the kitchen sink films in startlingly realistic terms'.<sup>117</sup> O'Hagan justifiably argues that the treatment of abortion in Reisz's film is characterised by a silencing of suffering female voices, in favour of a dominant portrait of Albert Finney's carefree and sexually aggressive Arthur Seaton. O'Hagan sees Leigh's decision to set the film in 1950 (eight years before Sillitoe's novel is published, and ten years before the release of the film), and to focus on illegal abortion (a sidelined thematic dimension of the earlier feature) as evidence enough for some kind of pronounced reversal of the New Wave's dubious gender bias. Crucially, for the purposes of this

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<sup>117</sup> Molly O'Hagan Hardy, 'Gendered trauma in Mike Leigh's *Vera Drake* (2004)' in *Studies in European Cinema* (Volume 3, Number 3, 2007), pp.211-221, (p.215).

study, O'Hardy grounds her analysis of Leigh's films in an apparent referencing of the New Wave's textual motifs:

Leigh locates his film in the tradition of the kitchen sink films of the late 1950s and early 1960s British cinema, a tradition that originates from the leftist documentary movement of inter-war England. The kitchen sink films aimed at realistic portrayals of the working class; the *mise-en-scene* of *Vera Drake* invokes the aesthetics of these films, and Leigh makes specific allusion to Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), a film based on Alan Sillitoe's 1958 novel.<sup>118</sup>

Rather than invoking the aesthetics of the New Wave, it is more appropriate to suggest that Leigh actively inverts the visual complexion of films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. As we have already identified, much of what was 'new' in the New Wave came from the directors' fresh approach to landscape and location. The pursuit of an aesthetic of lyricism, through figuratively charged long shots and environmental treatments, represented a marked shift in the representation of actuality in British feature filmmaking. While Leigh is no stranger to this type of approach, the bold expansiveness of the New Wave is actively rejected in *Vera Drake*, with Leigh adopting a marked focus on the cramped internal spaces of his subjects. The vast majority of external shots in the film come at night, and one of the only times in which the viewer sees bright daylight comes as Vera (Imelda Staunton) enters her employers' house through the basement, as walking feet and a busy street are glimpsed above the protagonist's small

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<sup>118</sup> O'Hagan Hardy (2007), p. 215.

body. Exchanges of dialogue are framed in typically narrow physical realms, evidenced when Lily (Ruth Sheen) visits Vera for the second time, to discuss abortion appointments. Leigh captures the conversation in medium shot with the frame showing a table at its centre and the two women facing each other on its margins. The only external visual stimuli are Vera's flower patterned wallpaper and a picture of a rural scene at the centre of the wall. This consciously static, almost mundane treatment of composition and *mise-en-scène*, is symptomatic of the film's downbeat foregrounding of narrative spaces, which increases the streamlined intensity of its thematic agenda and is a world away from the brash stylisation which defined the New Wave. Thus Leigh sees the atmosphere engendered by the film's aesthetic dimension as subordinated towards the effective delivery of his highly emotive, and purposefully singular, narrative programme:

I make no apology for the fact that the film is very, in a way, kind of distilled. I felt the need to - in cinematic terms - to tell the story, to make the film in a very kind of heightened, pure... the journey is a very pure, direct journey [...] if it were a more naturalistic film, that is to say if it were made and expressed in terms of the surface details of real life, in *actual* terms, then the radio would be on all the time and you'd hear radio programmes which they would listen to. But it's in the nature of the storytelling that it's distilled, it's heightened and focuses very much on the raw, emotional, white heat of what it's actually about.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Sandra Hebron, 'Mike Leigh - *Vera Drake* (2005)' <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/interviews/leigh.html> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2008].

The pursuit of an authentic and naturalised *mise-en-scène* is tacitly dismissed as extraneous, a proposition which is reversed in the films of the New Wave, in which poetic treatments of location can be seen to transcend the immediate demands of the narrative. However, Hardy's evocation of the New Wave in relation to Leigh cannot be dismissed out of hand. Where in *Vera Drake* the director opts for a conspicuously minimal *mise-en-scène*, in his other works he regularly evokes external space in a manner which transcends the functionality of narrative authentication. While once more connecting Leigh's work to the New Wave, Ray Carney dismisses such a notion:

Leigh's films look very different from the films of the British New Wave. [...] The emphasis in Leigh's films is rarely on the landscape or cityscape bounding his characters' lives. He has no interest in providing a documentary realist vision of the way the world looks in his films [...] He almost never has his characters interact with the public settings that surround them. [...] Leigh mainly stays with interiors, the behavior of his characters, and the small-scale incidents that are his films' dramatic spine.<sup>120</sup>

This seems consistent with Leigh's overt dismissal of a conscious foregrounding of space in symbolic terms. He denies the presence in his work of 'a kind of symbolism that can be decoded and translated', arguing, in more ambiguous terms, that if such

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<sup>120</sup> Carney and Quart (2000), p.10.

meaning is derived from his films it is 'to do with a visual language that is organic to what is going on'.<sup>121</sup> Yet there are numerous examples in Leigh's films of moments in which characters interact with their environments to engender a figurative platform, similar to that seen in the films of Loach and the New Wave before him.

*All or Nothing* (2002) surveys three dysfunctional families in a South London high-rise housing complex. The tower block is a central tenet of the film's narrative and representative realms, as Leigh evokes its vast and labyrinthine structures to show the simultaneous interconnection and alienation of his subjects. Luckily Leigh, was able to secure an empty block of flats which was soon to be demolished:

We had this whole place to ourselves. I could control everything that you could see and it helped to inform the general atmosphere of the film. It could have been an estate that was boring to look at but it was a really interesting thing. [...] The whole thing about making films in an organic film on location (sic) is that it's not all about characters, relationships and themes, it's also about place and the poetry of place. It's about the spirit of what you find, the accidents of what you stumble across. It was great to find this place that had these qualities.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Derek Malcom, 'Mike Leigh at the NFT' (2002) <http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,6737,809562,00.html> [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> February 2008].

<sup>122</sup> Malcom, (2002).

Leigh's talk of 'control', 'general atmosphere', the idea of 'a really interesting thing', 'the spirit of what you find' and 'the poetry of place', confirms that he identifies a role for his locations from which a clear 'visual language' can emerge. In relation to *All or Nothing*, this is particularly evident during the scene in which Rory (James Corden) suffers a heart attack. Initially Leigh frames the shot from a high-angled perspective, as Rory plays football in the quadrangle at the centre of the block, Rory starts to fight with another boy and then pulls away whilst he is taunted about his weight. When it becomes clear that Rory is struggling for his breath and clutching his chest the other boys run away. Leigh maintains his distanced perspective as this crucial moment of the film plays out (the only stylistic concession is a series of short pans from side to side). Leigh then cuts to a shot of Maureen (Ruth Sheen) outside her door. The reverse shot re-initiates the scene's opening composition, confirming the shot's origin as the first balcony of the block (the floor on which all the characters live). Leigh then cuts back to a panicking Maureen as we see her begin to run before Leigh opts for a closer shot of Rory, breaking the initial distance. He then shoots the stricken Rory from a low-angled perspective, moving from an expansive treatment of the space to a markedly claustrophobic one, as Carol (Marion Bailey) runs towards him. The confused and drunk Carol is eventually joined by Maureen, who tells her to call an ambulance. Leigh changes the scene to Phil's cab, before cutting to Samantha (Sally Hawkins) as she arrives back at her flat to see her mother (Carol) inactive and distraught with the phone in her hand, only able to utter the word: 'ambulance'. Samantha quickly runs out to the balcony, and, after seeing what has happened below, she hurriedly rings the emergency services. Maureen's static impotence recalls the nuances of the emotionally and physically frozen long take at the start of the initial scene. Leigh undermines the apparently communal connotations

inherent in the long balcony and the quadrangle, by actively setting his characters' powerless reactions against the space, with his camera persistently switching from representing the perspectives of his characters to that of the inhuman physicality of the block.

The use of the tower block in *All or Nothing* allows us to view Leigh's treatment of location in the context of parallel examples from other spheres of British realism, as we once more identify the manner in which man-made and natural spaces can function as an authorial tool to both reflect, and comment upon, human subjects. There are numerous episodes in his films which suggest a more direct and immediate interaction between character and location.

Leigh's 1984 made for TV film *Meantime* is perhaps his most politically potent work, focusing as it does on the plight of two jobless brothers, Mark (Phil Daniels) and Colin (Tim Roth), as unemployment soared at the height of Margaret Thatcher's reign. Like *All or Nothing*, Leigh utilises the poetic quality of the council block, repeatedly framing his subjects against, or within, the environment. This is combined with an apparent need within Leigh's *mise-en-scène* construction to inculcate a sense of a tangible iconography of 1980s disillusionment. Early on in the film, as Leigh surveys Mark and his skinhead friend Coxy's (Gary Oldman) aimless activities, he deploys a short, ten-second scene, in which a long shot captures the demolition of a building. As a boulder smashes into the caving structure, the distant figures of Mark and Coxy wildly run around, narrowly avoiding flying debris. In the background lies another block of flats, and above it the sky is fiercely grey. The scene, without dialogue to suggest auxiliary narrative significance,



allows the viewer to consider the image in purely figurative terms, with the frame working as a kind of portrait of disenfranchisement and destruction in Thatcherite Britain.

A similar vignette is deployed later, as Colin walks back from his auntie Barbara's (Marion Bailey) house. Leigh begins the scene with a frontal shot of Colin as he walks along the street. As he turns a corner we see Coxy again, in the skinhead uniform of red braces, white t-shirt, skinny jeans and doc martens, as a gentle pan downwards reveals him tightly packed into a barrel, banging a stick against the walls, gently rolling back and forwards. There is a look of bemusement from Colin and he walks out of the frame. Leigh's static shot rests on Coxy for around 12 seconds as he begins to hit the structure from inside. Again, the lack of dialogue and the scene's loose relationship to any kind of narrative structure further compels us to look on its composition with a more distanced and critical eye. Coxy, a figure whose attire connotes a sense of disillusionment and tribalism that taps into contemporary social concerns, is trapped in a confined space seemingly incapable of escape, as Leigh once more utilises space, (and in this sense a symbolically charged *mise-en-scène*), to reflect and contribute to an iconography of despair and alienation.

In *Naked* (1993), an equally conspicuous and poeticised take on location emerges, with Leigh framing his anarchic and disconnected protagonist Johnny against incongruous images of commerce. When Johnny (David Thewlis) leaves a café, Leigh cuts to a medium shot at a low angle of two high-rise office blocks, with similar buildings in the distance. The two blocks bookend the frame as Johnny walks between them. The low

angle sees Johnny's exit from the shot appear as though he walks over the viewer's perspective. Leigh then cuts to a shot of Johnny smoking and reading at the front of the frame, with the large corporate buildings in the background. Here Leigh plays on the aura of power and antagonism which pervades the portrait of Johnny, pitting him against easily identifiable images of inanimate corporate control, where Johnny's mere presence seeks to challenge their imposing concrete structures. These scenes echo the manner in which Leigh juxtaposes Cyril (Philip Davis), the bearded and embittered socialist motorbike courier of *High Hopes* (1988), against the Lloyds tower, with a low-angled shot showing him powerless and vulnerable in the shadow of all that he detests.

Despite Leigh's signature style (with the long takes, static shots, and improvised characterisation just some of the defining features of his authorship), it is clear that it is possible to induct him within a wider tradition of British realism. The manner in which space is deployed as a more nuanced vessel of thematic meaning allows us to discern palpable links between his work and that of Ken Loach, and the directors of the New Wave cycle. Moreover, we can also view the use of these types of motifs and devices within a wider discourse of authorship, which relates directly to an understanding of Leigh in relation to the art cinema. We have seen how the poetic dimension in Leigh's work draws attention to his presence, as repeatedly he suspends a dialogical register, and moves to one which is explicitly visual in its constitution. Yet this is by no means the only way in which Leigh, the auteur, asserts himself within his films.

## **4.2 Mike Leigh as Author**

Central to the convention of art cinema as a stylistic and formal practice is the greatly increased emphasis placed on the hand of the director. When the film text throws up questions or ambiguities, it is she or he who becomes imbued with the status of artist:

If we are thwarted we appeal to the narration, and perhaps also to the author. Is the narrator violating the norm to achieve a specific effect? In particular, what thematic significance justifies the deviation? What range of judgmental connotations or symbolic meanings can be produced from this point or pattern?<sup>123</sup>

As Bordwell implies, the complexities of the art film in all its forms compel us to acknowledge the role of the director in shaping and manipulating meaning on the subtlest of levels. Despite the collaborative process Leigh enacts with his actors in the formation of a script, he is without doubt a central figure in this mould:

When the film goes before the camera the improvisations are over. There is a final script, and Leigh adheres to it. There is nothing anarchic or free-form about his directorial methods. He allows no one just to take off and emote. He is in total control of the set, collaborating on a shot's setup with his cinematographer, gauging the amount of light that is necessary,

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<sup>123</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin, 1985), p. 212.

attentive even to the color of a folder a character is carrying, and with great precision taking care that the music and sound are just right.<sup>124</sup>

This sensibility is reflected in numerous facets of Leigh's work, with his pronounced and unique style implying a great degree of personal control over his product. As previously mentioned, the use of the static frame and accompanying long takes repeatedly emerge as dominant features of Leigh's filmmaking, and they certainly represent elements through which we can recognise a distinct degree of authorial presence. To return once more to *Meantime*, we have seen how Leigh taps into a recognisable topography of alienation in the film, inviting the viewer to consider the associative qualities of the image through a sustained foregrounding of space and location. The disjunction in narrative that such a position represents challenges viewers' anticipation of mere narrative delivery.

There are other instances in which Leigh disruptions expectations of narrative and spatial clarity, through his use of static frames and long takes. For example, following Mark and Coxy's trip to the building site, Leigh cuts to the pair sharing a can of a special brew and sitting on a wall. A gentle pan follows them as they get up to leave, and we now see a long path which is adjacent to a canal. The image is distinctly ordinary, with Mark and Coxy gradually walking into the distance, yet Leigh resists the impulsion to cut or pan, and maintains the static composition for some forty seconds. This is a remarkably long period of time for a viewer to watch as two young men play-fight and make noises at each other next to a canal on a drab afternoon, yet the shot is utterly

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<sup>124</sup> Carney and Quart (2000), p.204.

fascinating. Its mundane staidness forces us to look beyond the immediate. The author gains our attention as he asks us to stop and consider the characters at this early juncture in the narrative. Here, Leigh's stark imagery is oddly compelling as its permanence affords the viewer an empowering level of critical distance.

Later in the film a similar set-up occurs, this time in the flat where Colin and Mark live with their mother Mavis (Pam Ferris), and their father Frank (Jeff Robert). The scene begins with the perspective emanating from a doorway. At the centre of the frame lies a washing-up machine with which Mavis struggles. As an angry Mavis calls Frank for help, Leigh lowers the angle of the shot so that the camera is directly in line with the washing machine. Now, as each member of the household comes in and out of shot, we can only see their legs and hear their voices as they argue, with the centralising visual motif a broken washing machine. This static foregrounding of the mundane again shows evidence of Leigh's use of the long take (one minute and forty seconds in this case) to extract nuances and engender consideration beyond the obvious. We, as an audience, are not asked to consider the thematic significance of a broken washing machine, but instead we may choose to speculate on the nature of family; of poor communication and entrapment, as paradoxically an apparently closed and minimal canvass becomes fertile with meaning.

This last scene, in particular, suggests the importance of sound in relation to static composition in Leigh's work. By downplaying visual stimuli, an audience's focus can be sharpened towards aspects of dialogue, with the compelling first exchange between Hortense (Marianne Baptise) and Cynthia (Brenda Blethyn) in *Secrets and Lies* (1996)

standing testament to this notion. Alternatively, Leigh uses non-sourced or off-screen voices to re-contextualise the visual substance of a frame. The most prominent example of such a device can be found in *High Hopes*, when Mrs. Bender (Edna Dore) is given a birthday cake by her daughter, Valerie (Heather Tobias). Initially, the shot has Edna at the centre of the frame in medium shot. This allows for a potent visual juxtaposition of Mrs. Bender's old clothes and understated appearance, with her crooked neck and unenthused manner, against the conspicuous and garish decor of Valerie's dining table. Once the candle has been blown out, Valerie attempts almost violently to feed her mother the cake (which sparks a ferocious argument with Cyril). Mournful string music is introduced with a gentle pan that begins to move towards Mrs. Bender's face until it consumes the frame entirely. With the shot lasting two minutes and twenty seconds, the scene concludes with Leigh lowering the sound of the argument, and bringing the music to the fore in a subtle step towards subjectivity which inculcates the sense of empathy between character and viewer. The length of the take, and its uncompromising focus on Mrs. Bender's face, creates a compelling partition between image and sound, as the frantic nature of the argument is offset by the still, and ultimately empty expression of sadness on Mrs. Bender's face. Interestingly, this particular treatment of static composition is re-deployed in an all-together different context in *Vera Drake* when Reg (Eddie Marsan) and Ethel (Alex Kelly) sit on a sofa in medium shot at the centre of an unmoving frame. Off-frame Vera, Sid (Daniel Mays), and Stan (Philip Davis) joke playfully about the hole in Reg's trousers: on-frame, Ethel offers to fix it. Here Leigh uses the technique to accommodate a dual emphasis upon the family as a communal entity (through aural foregrounding), and the burgeoning relationship of Reg and Ethel

(a visual constancy) as being simultaneously distinct from, and a part of the familial sphere.

The relationship of sound to static imagery and composition is particularly effective in Leigh's first film *Bleak Moments* (1971), which focuses upon Sylvia (Anne Raitt), a secretary who cares for her mentally disabled sister Hilda (Sarah Stephenson). The film has no non-diegetic music and is notable for its minimal and downbeat *mise-en-scène*, engendering a stark atmosphere throughout. As such, moments of potential emotional significance, which would normally be accompanied by music in Leigh's films, are simply left without non-diegetic augmentation. As Hilda can barely speak, scenes in which she interacts with her sister, who is inexpressive herself, are often bereft of dialogue, thus perpetuating the cold ambience of the film. Leigh enhances this with a series of emotionally cold and distant vignettes. Following a scene in which Sylvia goes to the off-licence, he cuts to her in the dining room, where she is visible through a serving hatch placing a clock on a ledge. In front of her Hilda eats breakfast; the frame is static, and the scene finishes. These moments of apparent inconsequence are afforded the same aesthetic treatment as scenes such as the one in which Hilda inexplicably hits her sister, who momentarily cries out before smiling stoically, and pushing Hilda's head towards her knees in almost habitual fashion. In this scene, Leigh frames the two frontally as they sit on a sofa. Again camera movement is absent, and the sense of variation comes from the sound of the impact of Hilda's punch and Sylvia's muted cry, with the harsh but dulled noise mirroring the stark aesthetic. Here, in Leigh's earliest film, we see the first use of a device which has become central to his authorial signature, with its deployment pervading numerous aspects of the film's stylistic register. Thus,

the deep sense of an emotional austerity that underpins the film is facilitated by the wide-ranging delivery of a series of devices that were to become crucial to Leigh's authorial signature.

As well as the aesthetic dimension of authorship, there are numerous other ways in which we can understand Leigh as an art cinema practitioner. Foremost among these is the notion of self-reflexivity, which can have the effect of engendering a necessary critical distance between audience and image in order to facilitate a more complex engagement with a film's substance. As we have seen, aspects of conscious style and the maintenance of authorial signatures can, to an extent, deliver this function, but in a number of Leigh's films we see a more thorough establishment of authorial presence. In *Secrets and Lies*, Leigh actively records the work of photographer Maurice (Timothy Spall), through a series of shots in his studio. The direct result is that the audience see an authentic representation of Maurice's occupation, with the perspective emanating from behind the camera as scores of characters from all walks of life pose for their photos in scenes throughout the film. Many of the characters deployed here are not played by specialist extras. Instead, Leigh uses numerous actors who have performed in previous (and future) Leigh films, and are clearly identifiable with the director.<sup>125</sup> This type of motif is also used in *All or Nothing*, with the back of Phil's taxi repeatedly performing a similar function. Likewise, the vast ensemble cast of *Topsy Turvy* (1999), and the

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<sup>125</sup> Teresa Watson (*Topsy Turvy*) Peter Wight (*Meantime*, *Naked*, *Vera Drake*), Gary McDonald (*All or Nothing*), Alison Steadman (*Nuts in May*, *Abigail's Party*, *Hard Labour*, *The Short and Curlies*, *Life is Sweet*, *Topsy Turvy*) Liz Smith (*Bleak Moments*, *Hard Labour*) Sheila Kelly (*Nuts in May*, *Home Sweet Home*) Angela Curran (*Who's Who*, *Naked*, *Topsy Turvy*, *Vera Drake*), Linda Beckett (*Bleak Moments*, *Hard Labour*, *High Hopes*), Philip Davis (*Who's Who*, *Grown-ups*, *High Hopes*, *Vera Drake*), Wendy Nottingham (*The Short & Curlies*, *Topsy Turvy*, *Vera Drake*), Anthony O'Donnell (*Nuts in May*, *Vera Drake*) Mia Soteriou (*Topsy Turvy*).



number of women receiving abortions in *Vera Drake*, gives Leigh the opportunity to emphasise his acting troupe, again underlining the artifice of his filmmaking. Interestingly, in *All or Nothing*, when a drunken Carol collapses at a bar, she is helped to her feet by two men played by Mark Benton (Ricky in *Career Girls* [1997]) and Matt Bardock (Mr. Tripp in *Topsy Turvy*). The pair have no lines and are on screen for a matter of seconds, yet Leigh still chooses to use actors from his previous works to play roles normally fulfilled by extras. Relating this notion to *Secrets and Lies*, Garry Watson writes:

[...] this might be seen as Leigh's version of the Brechtian alienation of distancing device. Only up to a point, however, because while it certainly makes us aware of the fact that this is art, it does so without really forcing us to relinquish (even if it slightly weakens) the illusion that it is simultaneously real life. In my view, this makes it all the more effective. And, furthermore, it seems that this sequence encourages us to look back (and forwards) on all those occasions when Leigh is reusing the same actor as other examples of the same distancing device, which Leigh effectively redefines so that in his hands it both distances us and draws us in at the same time [...] The point about the Brechtian distancing device is that it is supposed to facilitate reflection. And, in its own quiet and subtle way, this is precisely what the studio portraits sequence does: it

encourages and helps us to reflect – in this case, on Leigh's art and what it is trying to do.<sup>126</sup>

For Watson, Leigh's incorporation of dramatic devices which foreground self-consciousness, are made all the more effective by their seamless integration within the realist diegesis. To add to Watson's point here, whilst the devices draw attention to the presence of the author, and to wider notions of performance and characterisation, they also incorporate a greater societal view than is authentically viable in Leigh's family-centric narratives, satisfying their inclusion within a realist agenda whilst simultaneously negotiating a necessary 'distance' between audience and image. Karen Jaehne furthers the point, arguing that in suspending the central narrative to incorporate Maurice's photography sequences, Leigh invites the audience to consider the creative process which he himself enacts:

There is a faintly autobiographical tinge to Leigh's lessons about human vanity and the artifice of images in Maurice's patience with human nature, waiting for his photographic subjects to achieve that moment worth preserving. It also has the reflexive function of hinting at Leigh's own improvisational process in finding what works.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Garry Watson, *The Cinema of Mike Leigh: A Sense of the Real* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), p.131.

<sup>127</sup> Karen Jaehne, *Secrets and Lies & Career Girls* by Mike Leigh; Simon Channing Williams' in *Film Quarterly* (Vol. 51, No. 3 Spring, 1998), pp.52-56 (p.52).

This can be similarly applied to *Topsy Turvy*, which can be read as a direct commentary on the creative process: 'I felt it would be a good thing to make a film about us, what we do, we who suffer and go to hell and back taking very seriously the job of making other people laugh.'<sup>128</sup> These varying functions of Leigh's self-reflexive technique suggest another facet of Leigh's authored style, in that he is able to encourage his viewer to discern varying and separate levels of interpretation within his work, stepping beyond the immediate limits of character identification.

Therefore, Leigh's practice of self-reflexivity opens up his characters and images to limitless meta-narrative potentials. In common with the director's persistent exercise in art cinema practice, the character of Johnny in *Naked* serves as the most archetypal reflection of the convention. Johnny's inconsistencies and persistently ambiguous motives chime with Bordwell's summation of the art cinema protagonist.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, the physically, geographically, intellectually, and spiritually dislocated Johnny, with his paranoid and apocalyptic world view, provides Leigh with a voice with which to interrogate his thematic preoccupations:

Thus, while the film has been seen by some to be about homelessness or the legacy of Thatcherism, the film's adoption of arthouse conventions – the goal-bereft protagonist, weakly motivated narrative causality, emphasis upon psychological states rather than social conditions –

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<sup>128</sup> Michael Billington, 'Mike Leigh interviewed by Michael Billington' (1999) [http://film.guardian.co.uk/Guardian\\_NFT/interview/0,4479,110595,00.html](http://film.guardian.co.uk/Guardian_NFT/interview/0,4479,110595,00.html) [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> March 2008].

<sup>129</sup> Bordwell, (1985), p.207.

encourages a reading of the film less in social and political terms than in terms of the more general 'existential' themes of alienation, communication breakdown, uncertainty, and emotional discontent characteristic of the traditional art film.<sup>130</sup>

As John Hill intimates, the looser narrative formulation of the art film provides a structural mirror to the protagonist's profound ambiguities. With Johnny at the formal core of the film, Leigh solidifies his presence through uncharacteristically bold composition, allowing Johnny's dominance to penetrate on every level of the film's appearance. This is particularly true when Johnny attempts to help a young homeless couple, Maggie (Susan Vidler) and Archie (Ewen Bremner). The first scene in the sequence presents Johnny and Maggie walking through a wasteland area populated by homeless drifters. They are held in the distance at the middle of a fixed frame, as Johnny mounts a monologue on the underground networks of the tube, personifying the city and thus aurally confirming the clear metaphorical quality of the scene. The next shot is framed from the end of a bridge which the couple approaches. Initially they are obscured before they enter into the light and create imposing shadows behind them. Leigh then has Johnny and Maggie getting a hot drink from a van, before cutting to a medium shot as the two walk across the frame. Behind them, vast, apparently derelict buildings, consume the background, negating any opportunity for the natural environment to offer respite, and furthering the sense of artificial enclosure. Archie then disrupts the frame (both aurally and visually), as he angrily runs towards the pair. The proscenium arch-like

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<sup>130</sup> John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp.171-172.

composition is crucial here, as the animated argument contrasts with Johnny's stationary and momentarily passive demeanor. Tellingly, he is always at the centre of the frame, with the warring couple alternating at either side of him. When Archie and Maggie exit the barren stage, they leave Johnny still in the middle, as dust and smoke pass by him. Initially, through the vast, urban wasteland, Leigh's *mise-en-scène* directly reflects the presence of his marginalised protagonist. Subsequently, through the spatial organisation of the other characters, Johnny is consciously centralised, as Maggie and Archie unknowingly orbit around him. The nuances of this sequence echo those established later in the film, when Johnny seeks refuge in the office block presided over by security guard, Brian (Peter Wight). In one particular scene, an irate Johnny performs one of his paranoid rants relating to barcodes and an eventual apocalypse. Leigh frames the sequence in partial darkness. While the room in which the conversation takes place is absent from light, the adjoining room is not, creating an alarming contrast. This expressionistic stylisation suggests again a kind of subjective *mise-en-scène*, in which the environment seems to directly reflect the words and posture of the protagonist.

Both scenes display Leigh's ability to transcend potentially glib socio-political connotations by removing his central character and composition from the boundaries of narrative convention. This in turn facilitates a much wider thematic potential. *Naked* exhibits the manner in which Leigh is able to mount a series of diverse formal strategies which broaden the interpretative potentials of his work, and emphasise his authorial agency. The aforementioned compositions invite us to consider character as visual, as well as narrative entity, graphically representing the notion of the individual whilst interrogating his actions. We see an explicit engagement with the structure of the film on

these terms, with the centralising force of Johnny crucial, on aesthetic, thematic and formal levels.

### 4.3 Telling the Story: Narrative Structure

As we have repeatedly seen in the light of the documentary movement, the New Wave, and the films of Ken Loach, one of the central features of British social realism's relationship with the art cinema concerns the way in which the art film repeatedly defies conventional film narrative, in favour of an organisational structure more akin to the rhythms and patterns of 'real-life'. Questions are left unanswered, and order is not always restored:

The art film's "reality" is multifaceted [...] The viewer must [...] tolerate more causal gaps than would be normal in a classical film. [...] The art film can thus become episodic, akin to picaresque and processional forms, or it can pattern coincidence to suggest the workings of an impersonal and unknown causality.<sup>131</sup>

In the films of Leigh, in which repeated ambiguities emerge through the establishment of particular characters or plot lines that are never resolved, this kind of approach to narrative is common. For example, in *Meantime* we are introduced to a couple from the estate who argue about a second-hand pram bought in preparation for their new baby. The female half of the couple (Leila Bertrand) sits next to Hayley in the laundrette, and the man (Hepburn Graham), is racially abused by Coxy. Indeed, it is following the latter

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<sup>131</sup> Bordwell (1985), p.206.

incident that Leigh cuts to the argument scene in the couple's flat, but after this, neither character resurfaces in the film.

In *All or Nothing*, Samantha repeatedly taunts the obsessive and mysterious Craig (Ben Crompton) in the gardens of the estate. Towards the end of the film, Craig reveals her name carved into his skin. A panicked Samantha is later shown crying in her room. Again, this episode is entirely divorced from the central narratives associated with the families of the estate, yet it exhibits a willingness to disperse and extend the film's structural reach, imbuing it with depth and further intriguing the audience.

*High Hopes* begins in a pointedly misleading manner with a long shot of Wayne (Jason Watkins) walking through a busy street. Wayne is lost and stumbles upon Cyril and Shirley, who let him sleep at their home. He leaves to go home in the first quarter of the film. Here our expectation is confounded. We might think that Wayne is the central character of the film, rather than simply a thematic catalyst to show us Shirley and Cyril's caring nature. Likewise, the opening of *Four Days in July* has soldiers questioning a comic character called Kevin McCoy (John Keegan) at a checkpoint. Following his exit he never again emerges in the film. In *Career Girls*, Leigh has his reunited friends, Annie (Lynda Steadman) and Hannah (Katrin Cartlidge) meet randomly with three individuals from their university days during one weekend. Here Leigh actively violates our apparent expectations of realism to bring the film's themes, and memorial narrative structure into sharper focus.

In all of these instances, Leigh exhibits central facets that can be associated with art cinema narration. In one sense he appeals to our sense of reality, (things are not always as they seem, people come and go without explanation), yet in another, he again manipulates and defies audience expectation, once more establishing himself as the author. In keeping with Bordwell's discussion of the art cinema convention, these strategies of ambiguity are designed to propose questions to the viewers, engaging them not through the suspense or superficial investment of cause-and-effect, but through something more transcendental, which is fundamental to our appreciation of life and art. Leigh's embrace of narrative devices associated with art cinema traditions facilitates the authentic tone of his films, whilst maintaining a simultaneous position of authorship.<sup>132</sup> Here, the conditions of observation and performance converge in a manner common in the canon of British social realism. Tony Whitehead agrees that Leigh's rejection of classical conventions in favour of a freer narrative practice illustrates a pursuit of authenticity, yet he is quick to disassociate his praise from wider proponents of realism: 'Human emotions and experiences are too complex to fit easily into neat and tidy narratives or orderly conventions of 'realist' drama.'<sup>133</sup> As we are beginning to identify in Leigh's work (alongside a range of realist cycles and directors), realism is rarely 'tidy' or 'orderly', it is in opposition to these pejorative signifiers that it defines itself.

In Leigh's case, a liberated narrative approach affords him the opportunity to present his ensemble characters in a multi-dimensional, realistic fashion. He is able to show us their

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<sup>132</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin, 1985), p. 212.

<sup>133</sup> Tony Whitehead, *Mike Leigh* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p.173.



daily practices and interactions without recourse to a rigid causal expectation. In family dramas such as *Vera Drake*, *All or Nothing*, *Secrets and Lies* and *Life is Sweet* (1990), Leigh captures his characters at work, with their friends, and alone with their lovers, in addition to thoroughly foregrounding their place within the family sphere which defines all three films. As Carney writes in relation to *Life is Sweet*, this type of approach again taps into a pursuit of a more authentic, real-life portrayal:

One way Leigh keeps both the spatial and temporal adjustments going is by circulating his characters through different narrative situations. [...] It is not simply a matter of presenting the same character against different backgrounds. Wendy and Andy, Nicola and Natalie are really quite different people in each of these roles. We see entirely different sides of them, just as we do when we meet people in different situations in life.<sup>134</sup>

Crucially, the wide narrative dispersal that such a methodology incorporates can allow for a kind of egalitarian focus, by which characters never overshadow or dominate other figures included within an overarching narrative sphere. In reference to Nicola's (Jane Horrocks) Bulimia in *Life is Sweet*, Barbara and Leonard Quart write:

Nicola, however never seems a grim case history, partly because the caricaturing makes her rather appealing and funny, and partly because Leigh's narrative method involves moving casually from plot to plot,

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<sup>134</sup> Carney (2000), pp. 207-208.

from humor to humor, so that the scene's full anguish is almost tripped over, and then quickly shifted away from again, to a series of sequences about the other family members' work lives. There is no evasion, but the sequence's painful intensity is leavened with images of other people caught up in the flow of life.<sup>135</sup>

Here, the episodic approach to characterisation has ensured that an unnecessary and diverting level of identification with Nicola is negated by the multi-stranded structure of the film. This ensures that the character's distress is viewed in the wider context of the family, and encourages a more rounded appreciation of its connotations.

While Leigh's narrative episodes and character portraits defy incorporation within a rigid cause-and-effect schema, we are able to discern clear links between them which suggest a fixed system at the heart of Leigh's films. Indeed, as he explains, the process of engaging with his work on a structural level simply involves a rejection of causal expectation:

[...] the narrative of the vast majority of my films, almost all of them, has been what I would call cumulative narrative where certain things happen which are causal, but for the most part, it's been more this happens and by seeing that and then this in relation to that and this other event, you

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<sup>135</sup> Barbara Quart and Leonard Quart, 'Life Is Sweet by Mike Leigh; Simon Channing-Williams' in *Film Quarterly* (Vol. 45, No. 3 Spring, 1992), pp. 49-51 (p.50).

accumulate a sense of movement without it actually being causal.<sup>136</sup>

Leigh therefore asks us to view the 'events' and episodes he presents as part of his films, in the context of 'movement', thus suggesting a more symbolic and nuanced extrapolation of meaning and significance, consistent with his highly authored style. As Bordwell writes, in rejecting the rigidity of classical narration the art film compels us to approach its narratives in this way: 'Lacking the "dialogue hooks" of classical construction, the film will exploit more connotative, symbolic linkages between episodes.'<sup>137</sup>

The notion of 'symbolic linkages between episodes' chimes with Leigh's 'cumulative narrative' approach. Indeed, one of the primary means of ensuring the structural rigidity of his work is the use of parallels and contrasts between scenes:

As the repeated bedtime conversations in *High Hopes* suggest, Leigh's fundamental organizational device is the paralleled scene. The films are virtual echo chambers of compared imaginative positions. The viewer becomes a connoisseur of the contrasts, even when the characters are completely oblivious to them. [...]<sup>138</sup>

As Carney suggests, the structural process enacted by sequences, such as the bedtime

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<sup>136</sup> Billington, (1999).

<sup>137</sup> Bordwell, (1985), p.210.

<sup>138</sup> Carney, (2000), p.16.

scenes in *High Hopes*, allows the viewer to see the three couples in their most intimate setting in quick succession, providing the audience with a clear opportunity to assess the characters. Of course, in *High Hopes*, Leigh compels us to look on Cyril and Shirley with more affection, contrasting their honest, heartfelt and substantial night-time conversation with the farcical vacuity of Valerie and Martin (Philip Jackson), and the upper-class caricature of the Boothe-Brains (Lesley Manville and David Mamber). In *Meantime* the device is less pronounced, instead asking us to make subtle connections based on dialogue and *mise-en-scène* relating to the obvious class difference between the two sisters.

Leigh's use of parallelism does not simply extend to isolated scenarios such as bedtime scenes, it can also inflect aspects of character and narrative to represent a pervasive platform of meaning throughout his films. In *Vera Drake*, Leigh contrasts the numerous abortions administered by Vera, with the plight of her upper-middle-class employer's (Lesley Manville) daughter, Susan (Sally Hawkins). Susan is raped early on in the film, and seeks an abortion, and Leigh regularly cuts between shots showing Vera at work and scenes involving Susan. At one point we see Vera attending to her sick mother, before a cut to Susan shows her in a bright and comfortable private room awaiting her abortion, Leigh then cuts to a scene showing Vera having administered an abortion to a panicked and confused West Indian girl in a seemingly dark and dank room. Leigh then confirms the parallel with the following scene showing Susan and Vera passing on the stairs. In this sense, the parallel works on a separate narrative level, with Leigh compelling us to view Vera's central plight in the context of the prejudicial social and political mores of the period.

In *Naked*, Leigh extends the parallelism to characterisation, with the vile, sexually aggressive figure of Sebastian/Jeremy (Greg Cruttwell) directly mirroring Johnny throughout the film. Following Johnny's initial meeting with Sophie (Katrin Cartlidge), Leigh cuts to Sebastian/Jeremy firstly lifting weights and then having a massage. Leigh then cuts back to Johnny as Louise (Lesley Sharp) arrives home, before returning to Jeremy/Sebastian in a restaurant with the masseuse (Carolina Giammetta), eating violently and asking inappropriate questions to his partner. Leigh then returns to Johnny initiating a seduction of the willing Sophie. We then see Jeremy/Sebastian leaving the restaurant, where there is a strong suggestion that he has seduced the waitress (Elizabeth Berrington). Leigh then cuts to Johnny having sex with Sophie, before showing Jeremy/Sebastian raping the waitress. This conscious attempt to contrast and compare Johnny and Jeremy/Sebastian is initially disarming given that the film fails to establish any tangible narrative link between the two characters until the final quarter. The only association the audience can discern between the pair is predicated on a symbolic understanding of their similarities and differences. Leonard Quart offers an interesting justification for the inclusion of the Jeremy/Sebastian character:

This upper-class figure operates in the film as Johnny's totally vile alter ego. He is a smirking misogynist who treats all the women he encounters with violent contempt. His character is without any redeeming charm or vulnerability – a man whose nihilistic behavior goes over the top, a cartoon of an upper-class, drawling, decadent psychopath. As in *High Hopes*, Leigh again here demonstrates how his hatred for the upper-class

can subvert his capacity to do anything more than caricature them. The one-dimensional, frightening Jeremy also serves to make the more complex, less predictable Johnny look a great deal more sympathetic.<sup>139</sup>

To attribute this doubling process to a humanisation of the central protagonist, coupled with an opportunity to engage in class-based satire, seems a simplistic understanding of Leigh's craft, given what we have seen relating to his deployment of pronounced authorial strategies, and considering his readiness to deploy ambiguities in common with the art cinema convention. Indeed, it is telling that when the pair finally meet, a delirious, beaten up Johnny, greets his alter-ego, whom he has never before met, with a near-psychotic sense of recognition. Once more Leigh has played a game with his audience, initially anticipating the parallel in expectation of a climatic confrontation between the pair. Our suspicions are dashed. Instead, we are left to dwell on the almost expressionistic treatments of misogyny and sexual violence that both men represent. Here parallelism engenders a deepening of narrative ambiguity, which invites our understanding of its purpose on a more profound level than simplistic dramatic justifications.

*Secrets and Lies* reveals yet another manifestation of this structural device. In what is perhaps Leigh's most famous scene, estranged mother and daughter, Hortense and Cynthia, sit in a café and talk for the first time. The encounter represents a classic example of Leigh's use of static composition and long takes, with the second of the two

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<sup>139</sup> Leonard Quart, 'Naked by Mike Leigh; Simon Channing-Williams' in *Film Quarterly* (Vol. 47, No. 3 Spring, 1994), pp.43-46, (pp. 44-45).

takes lasting seven minutes, as Cynthia and Hortense sit at a table in medium shot. The starkness of the composition intensifies our emotional engagement with the exchanges of dialogue, whilst sharpening our sense of the subtleties in movement and expression from both women. With Cynthia dressed in white on the right half of the frame, and Hortense dressed in black on the left, Leigh doubly emphasises the visually obvious, and more narrationally significant contrast of skin colour. This clearly demarcated graphical composition intensifies our perception of other contrasts. When Cynthia is hit by a flash of memory and recognition we see her turn to the wall, head lowered, in tears. On the other side of the frame Hortense is the opposite: upright, with a pronouncedly stoic expression on her face. With the emotional intensity of this scene, and its stark compositional complexion fresh in the audience's memory, Leigh returns to replicate its spatial organisation later in the film as the pair sit in a bar. This time their comfort with each other is palpable, where distinction was previously conspicuous it is now similarity that abounds: with their physical closeness emphatic, their bodies meet in the middle of the frame, reflecting the shared happiness on their faces. Here a sense of spatial replication is used to connote movement and progression between the two episodes, in both a narrative, and a symbolic sense.

In *Happy-Go-Lucky* (Mike Leigh, 2008), the device begins to take on a broader thematic purpose. The film can be viewed logically as an 'essay on education', with the central character Poppy (Sally Hawkins) an optimistic and enterprising Primary school teacher the film can be understood in relation to her encounters with other educators.<sup>140</sup> Poppy's

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<sup>140</sup> Jonathan Romney, 'Happy Go Lucky' <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/happygolucky-15-812003.html> [Accessed June 5<sup>th</sup> 2009]

driving instructor, Scott (Eddie Marsan), is a dangerous sociopath, whose views on education are born out of personal resentment, paranoid delusion and racism – traits which are actively contrasted with the unerring idealism, optimism and tenderness of Poppy. The Scott/Poppy contrast is not a simple binary opposition, in common with Mike Leigh's oeuvre the film presents a wide variety of narrative episodes; with Poppy's flamenco teacher (Katrina Hernandez) offering her another point of contrast in a context separate from the more dominant plotlines. At the flamenco classes we see a fiery (and perhaps over-enthusiastic), but effective philosophy of teaching, born out of emotional identification (the teacher comically succumbs to hysteria when attempting to stir the passions of her class). This positive depiction of education adds texture to the film's thematic concerns, presenting another representation of learning that can be critiqued in the light of Scott and Poppy.

We can therefore discern a clear organisational process in Leigh's films that allows his dramatic episodes to unite on numerous levels without recourse to the artificiality of classical doctrine. If this sense of associative linkage confirms the way in which art cinema narration refigures the structures of conventional plotting, it is interesting to note how Leigh responds to an audience's natural expectation of conclusion and the restoration of order on these terms. Consistent across Leigh's films are moments in which characters face up to problems, experience revelation, or a new sense of understanding; this kind of situation creates a formal centre point for the art film:

The boundary situation is common in art-cinema narration; the film's causal impetus often derives from the protagonist's recognition that she



or he faces a crisis of existential significance. [...] The boundary situation provides a formal centre within which conventions of psychological realism can take over. Focus on a situation's existential import motivates characters' expressing and explaining their mental states.<sup>141</sup>

The notion of a 'boundary situation' is crucial to the structuring of Leigh's films, providing a point of unification that breathes relevance into numerous moments of apparent inconsequence. It is when the audience is offered a moment of satisfaction, as a kind of emotional or psychological catharsis is experienced by both character and spectator. In *Life is Sweet* Leigh does much to define his characters on the basis of specific and dominant psychological and emotional traits. As such, Nicola is persistently obstinate, and perpetually rude to her parents, sloganeering in cod-marxist terms and refusing to contribute to family practices. In contrast her mother, Wendy (Alison Steadman), is presented as cheery and good-humoured throughout: her first reaction is to laugh, and there is a distinct sense that Wendy uses humour to divert sadness. When Wendy confronts Nicola about her behaviour and health towards the end of the film, these fixed and rigid caricatures are rendered extinct, as hitherto unseen feelings pour out of both mother and daughter. Leigh gives a tangible emotional core to a film in which a chef buys a clapped out burger van, an entrepreneur opens an obscenely vulgar and pretentious restaurant, and a boyish female plumber plans a holiday. Similar moments include Phil and Penny's resolution to repair their relationship in the wake of Rory's heart attack in *All or Nothing*, Maurice's 'Secrets and lies' monologue following Hortense's and Cynthia's revelation at the barbeque in *Secrets and Lies*, and Keith's

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<sup>141</sup> Bordwell (1985), p.208.

(Roger Sloman) frantic outburst following his fight with Finger (Stephen Bill) in *Nuts in May* (1977). These boundary situations negotiate a centralised narrative and thematic space in Leigh's films in which inculcated and ordered perceptions of character are undermined, delivering a sense of dramatic pathos built around emotional - rather than narrative - revelation. Despite their ambiguities, apparent hyper-realities, and open-endedness Leigh's films contain a subtly lineated structure which ensures genuine audience investment in character and situation. Leigh's skill is that he is able to initiate this ordering process in a nuanced manner, which ensures that the potential for our appreciation of his films' thematic spheres to go above and beyond the boundaries of the text, is never challenged by invitations to engage in over-wrought empathy or identification. In reference to *Hard Labour* (1973), Tony Whitehead identifies the way in which the moments of crisis in Leigh's narratives have the power to suddenly alter the tone, focus and thematic weight of his films:

It is Mrs Thornley's religion that supplies the immediate context for the breathtaking sting in the film's trail when she goes to confession and tells a priest, who can barely tear himself away from the *Manchester Evening News*, that 'I just don't love people enough' [...] This sad, hopeless ending – the priest merely sending her away to say 'Five Hail Marys, on Our Father, and a Glory Be - elevates *Hard Labour* from poignant comedy-drama to near tragedy.<sup>142</sup>

This is an example of the kind of emotive dramatic motifs that provide the loose

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<sup>142</sup> Whitehead (2007), p. 35.

and apparently mundane episodic organisations of Leigh's films with shape and resonance. In a broader sense, this form of structuring underlines the way in which the art film is able to maintain its realist integrity while advancing a sense of emotional impact.

Mike Leigh is a central figure in the argument that British social realism represents an ongoing tradition of indigenous art cinema. Taking actuality as his starting point Leigh has established a unique and multi-faceted approach that distinguishes him from his contemporaries and ensures that he remains as an oppositional cinematic voice, both nationally and internationally. As we have seen, pronounced evidence of authorship pervades Leigh's films, despite focusing on apparent 'real lives' and 'real places', Leigh is persistently able to initiate paths of meaning which go beyond an immediate sense of sociological significance, yet by rooting his art in reality, potentially abstract ideas resonate profoundly with his audience. For example, Leigh marries an observational aesthetic: through long takes and static composition; and naturally evolving dialogue that appears inconsequential, with numerous exercises in poetic *mise-en-scène*; narrative experimentation; and explicit self-consciousness, ensuring a subtly expositional impulse in his cinema.

In order to facilitate and effectively deliver the complexities and subtleties of his work Leigh enacts rigid structural methods, which ensure clarity and cogency. For example, we have seen the way in which the director actively rejects causal methodologies in favour of a more associative approach to structural linkage. Indeed, Leigh is able to use compositional replication, parallel scenes, and character doubling as subtly effective

narrative hooks to engender a sense of movement, and provide his audience with a clear interpretative lexicon. Crucially, the deployment of these formal elements can be demarcated from the realist diegesis, allowing Leigh to create critical distance between audience and subject whilst maintaining a sense of narrative connectivity that ensures a degree of emotional investment in his characters. Similarly, Leigh's use of the 'boundary situation' or 'crisis point' provides an emotive fulcrum on which the ambiguities of his films can be perpetually re-focused and re-imagined. Thus, one of Leigh's greatest strengths is the ability to communicate a challenging model of art cinema, that is able to incorporate varying and numerous levels of meaning with a human face.

In this sense we are able to comfortably incorporate the work of Leigh alongside that of Loach, and the practitioners of the British New Wave. Whilst style and thematic pre-occupation varies, the films are united by the adoption of an art cinema model which is firmly rooted in the projection of reality. This ensures that the iconography and dialogical rhythm of the everyday is able to be subjected to a wide variety of paratextual meanings: critical, poetic, social, and artistic realms of signification are facilitated by the delivery of a formal and aesthetic code which negates simplistic notions of identification and suspense.

## **5.0 The 1980s: British Social Realism Becomes British Art Cinema**

After the relatively barren 1970s, British cinema enjoyed a renaissance of sorts in the 1980s. The release of internationally popular, prestige products such as *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981), and *Gandhi* (Richard Attenborough, 1982) announced a new mood of apparent imperial nostalgia to the world, while films like *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985) hinted at a renewal of socially conscious filmmaking which, though operating on the margins of commerciality, had underpinned Britain's national cinema since the 1930s. Whilst it is reductive to condense a review of the period into these two divergent generic spheres, it is important to view these apparently opposing examples within the context of the reign of arguably the most divisive and influential Prime Minister of modern times. Many of the films of Thatcher's decade betray an understanding of what, on one hand, can be seen as a celebration of a new type of national identity, steeped in the iconography and mythology of the empire, and on the other, a vociferous explication of the social injustices and class inequities of the period. For the purposes of my work, it is worthwhile to understand social realism as an increasingly antagonistic and critical form during the 1980s, as its varying depictions and reflections upon the socio-political landscape of the nation were perpetually informed by an active dissatisfaction with the Conservative government.

Yet this study does not seek to illustrate the manner in which British realist product reflects or challenges the political discourses of its day. There are numerous titles which succeed in this with great conviction and clarity. Instead, in this chapter it is my aim to analyse the manner in which a number of filmmakers in the period advanced and

diversified realist methodology, concretising the notion of social realism as not simply a drama-documentary form which reflects contemporary issues, but as a complex dramatic and artistic framework which utilises both its themes and its forms to engage its audience in a wholly different manner to mainstream cultural products.

Whilst many films in the period were, to varying extents, inspired by a need to comment on the perceived shortcomings of the Conservative administration, ironically, the regeneration of the British film industry in the 1980s can be traced back to legislation executed by Thatcher's government. The formation of Channel 4, which began broadcasting on November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1982, constituted the arrival of a completely new source of funding for British filmmakers:

[...] between 1981 and 1990 Channel Four partially funded the production of some 170 films by independent companies, and it quickly became a major player in the impecunious arena of the British film industry.<sup>143</sup>

As Paul Giles shows, a significant proportion of the films produced in the decade were funded to some degree by the new channel. Beginning as a new forum for filmmakers and writers to produce made-for-TV films (in a period when the BBC's 'Play for Today' was coming to the end of its illustrious run), Channel 4's impact was not felt fully until its re-negotiation of the 'holdback' arrangement between the British cinema exhibitors

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<sup>143</sup> Paul Giles, 'History with Holes: Channel Four Television Films of the 1980s' in Lester Friedman (ed.), *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started* (London: UCL Press, 1993), p.74.

association and Britain's television channels. Channel 4 reached an arrangement whereby films which did not exceed a budget £1.25 million could be shown on the channel a matter of months after their theatrical premiere. This catalysed the channel into placing greater investment into its film division, as well as encouraging filmmakers and writers to produce work in conjunction with Channel 4 as a means of reaching both a commercial audience and a wide television viewership. Of course, since the 1960s, the relationship between filmmaking and television had been long established in Britain, with directors such as Mike Leigh and Ken Loach among others, producing their first work for the BBC. However, Channel 4 was a wholly different prospect, not only because it conjoined the worlds of film and television, but because its commercial constitution actively encouraged a genuine diversity of content:

[...] Channel Four's modes of production differed importantly from earlier television practices. Whereas the BBC and Independent Television previously produced their own dramatic material and purchased viewing rights to films after their theatrical release, Channel Four's charter required the broadcasting of programs made by independent suppliers. Hence Channel Four defined itself more as a 'publishing house', a policy stemming from the Annan Committee's report in the late 1970s, which recommended some decentralization within broadcasting institutions. <sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Giles (1993), p.73.

Thus, where it is possible to locate an apparent 'house style' in the television plays of the BBC, the more wide-ranging remit of Channel 4 ensured a greater variety of filmic product:

There is little doubt that Channel 4's imaginative funding strategy after its inception in 1982 created a space for a British art cinema of sorts to take shape in the 1980s. Films as diverse as *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), *Caravaggio* (1986) and *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988) had major financing from Channel 4.

While much of my study has been focused on affirming the persistent presence of a British art cinema in the form of social realism, O'Pray is right to point out that the economic and cultural conditions inherent within the new channel's approach to film actively encouraged a greater degree of experimentation. The flowering of new and distinct voices in the British cinema added a greater eclecticism to the national art cinema. Moreover, the manner in which these kinds of films achieved a higher degree of prestige and longevity on the basis of their theatrical releases led to a wider emphasis on authorship, with consistent recognition finally arriving for British directors:

Whereas the British New Wave still operated within a broadly commercial system in which directorial 'authorship' was not a particular selling point, British films since the 1980s have increasingly depended upon a system of production and distribution characterized by state or television support and more international and specialized 'arthouse'



exhibition. Such a system has placed an increasing emphasis on the definition and promotion of British cinema in terms of its directors.<sup>145</sup>

Thus the renewed institutional mechanisms, symbolised by Channel 4's intervention to the British film industry, facilitated the emergence of a burgeoning group of British auteurs whose innovative and artistically committed work was able to prosper during the period. In the field of British realism, these new industrial conditions saw the likes of Mike Leigh and Ken Loach emerge from the relative anonymity of TV work, to enjoy success towards the end of the 1980s and early 1990s with films such as *High Hopes* (Mike Leigh, 1988), *Life is Sweet* (Mike Leigh, 1990) and *Riff-Raff* (Ken Loach, 1991) all of which received backing from Channel 4.

While Leigh, and later Loach, emerged from the period as genuine realist auteurs, with distinct and recognisable signatures ensuring their lauded status within the international arthouse, it has been suggested that the 1980s was a decade in which the influence of British realism was on the wane:

Critical and popular appreciation grew for what you might almost term Satan's cinema: the adventurous work of Derek Jarman or Peter Greenaway, or, reclaimed from the past, the films of Powell and Pressburger, Hammer Horrors, and Gainsborough melodramas. At the

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<sup>145</sup> John Hill, 'From the New Wave to 'Brit Grit': Continuity and difference in working-class realism' in Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (eds.), *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.255.

same time, in the journal *Screen* and numerous academic havens the very mechanics of cinema were being investigated; films and their meanings were deconstructed into codes, signifiers and modes of representation. This put the entire notion of realism under threat in a different way: if what we saw on the screen was a mere chimera, an illusion manufactured through symbols and audience expectations, how could we ever believe again in Grierson's herrings, Humphrey Jennings' firemen, or the other touchstones of British realism?<sup>146</sup>

As Geoff Brown suggests, the likes of Jarman and Greenaway, whose pointedly anti-realist productions were at the forefront of a new avant-garde in British cinema in the 1980s, implicitly questioned the ability of realist practices to communicate their thematic agendas with relevance and veracity. Brown also alludes to the oft-mentioned *Screen* debate of the 1970s, and its effects on British film culture. Whilst the critical questions raised about the functions of British realism were undoubtedly pertinent, it is not fair to suggest that they undermined or retarded the development of the medium during the period. Rather, these factors, which were unquestionably part of a wider diversification and hybridisation of genre and form in the 1980s, re-invigorated social realism, opening up its radical potentials and giving rise to its continued development as a genuine, indigenous art cinema.

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<sup>146</sup> Geoff Brown, 'Paradise Found and Lost: The Course of British Realism' in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London, BFI: 2001), p.249.

## **5.1 'Freedom plus Commitment': The Continued Traditions of Art Cinema and British Realism in the Films of Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frears**

Hanif Kureishi and Steven Frears' writer-director partnership began with *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), and ended two years later with *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987). Despite the minimal fruits of their collaboration, both films tell us much about the manner in which the formal and thematic templates of British realism were re-aligned in the 1980s. *My Beautiful Laundrette* was arguably the first truly international success of the Channel 4 period, gaining an Oscar nomination for Kureishi's screenplay. Its thematic focus was wide and sharply resonant in the period, concentrating on socially relevant issues such as inter-racial same-sex relationships, differing diasporic experiences, the decline of the white working-class and the ruthless pursuit of Thatcherite enterprise culture. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* was no less vital in its scope, using the bohemian relationship of Sammy (Ayub Khan-Din) and Rosie (Frances Barber) as a lens through which to observe the breakdown of Britain's inner-cities, racial violence, neo-colonialism, post-colonialism, and gender politics. What is equally important is the manner in which Frears and Kureishi, across both films, communicate these broad socio-political agenda through numerous complex narrative and aesthetic frameworks. While the visual and formal conventions of Hollywood genre cinema are evoked regularly, narrative lines are left unresolved or unexplained in an episodic structure. The films incorporate moments of extreme self-consciousness, sudden shifts to subjectivity, and the persistent conflation of naturalistic and heightened performance styles, and both seek to communicate auxiliary levels of meaning through the organisation of aural and visual elements. In short, while the formal codes of social

realism are adhered to implicitly, both *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* demonstrate a fundamental progression for the form.

Despite the adoption of apparently uncharacteristic (for Britain at least) art cinema strategies in both films, there still remains a clear indebtedness to the traditions of British social realism: namely the British New Wave which arose from the Royal Court and the 'Play for Today'/'Wednesday Play' BBC series from which Loach, Leigh and Stephen Frears emerged. Kureishi, who calls Lindsay Anderson 'the godfather of all of us', displays what can be termed an Andersonian ability to mount polemics on the short falls of British cinema<sup>147</sup>:

We need a cinema that is both critical and intelligent, sensuous and celebratory, reflecting the diversity and contradictions of our lives. It could exist; it is waiting to happen, except for the fools standing in its way.<sup>148</sup>

The parallels extend beyond a shared diagnosis of their industry. Like Anderson and his acolytes, Frears and Kureishi were able to identify a conservative, middle-class cinema of apparent quality against which to launch their own comparably radical works. For the New Wave, there were decades of superficial representations of the working-class

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<sup>147</sup> Don Boyd, 'Hanif Kureishi-Q and A' (2007), <http://www.timeout.com/film/news/1634/hanif-kureishi-q-a.html> [Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> July 2008].

<sup>148</sup> Kenneth C. Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p.39.

against which to rail, as well as a dominant cinematic form which was resistant to the advances and poetic potentials of European cinema. *My Beautiful Laundrette* was released against a background of Heritage cinema such as *Chariots of Fire* and the so-called Raj Revival, with films such as *A Passage to India* (David Lean, 1984) and the TV series *The Jewel in the Crown* (Jim O'Brien and Christopher Morahan, 1984), which offered a markedly different conception of the nation and its relationship to the Asian diaspora than that delivered by Frears and Kureishi's oppositional works. In *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* in particular, Kureishi's screenwriting is chiefly concerned with the negative implications of Britain's colonial past, and the manner in which its legacy impacts upon contemporary Britain. Moreover, Frears' and Kureishi's casting of Roshan Seth (Papa) and Saeed Jaffrey (Nasser) who had both appeared in *A Passage to India*, suggests a desire to re-appropriate signifiers of colonial experience within a more realistic context. Indeed, in the writing of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Kureishi seemed to carry with him a dissatisfaction at the apparent ease by which the 'Raj Revival' appeared to represent British cinema:

I was tired of seeing lavish films set in exotic locations; it seemed to me that anyone could make such films, providing they had an old book, a hot country, new technology and were capable of aiming the camera at an attractive landscape in the hot country in front of which stood in a star in a perfectly clean costume delivering lines from the old book.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and The Rainbow Sign* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986), p.43.

Thus like the New Wave, Frears and Kureishi's work in the 1980s seemed partly inspired by a need to offer an alternative cinematic voice to that represented by the conservative mainstream. Again, a move towards realism and the embrace of a less conclusive and functional formal and aesthetic programme distinguishes British oppositional cinema. For Bart Moore-Gilbert, the stylistic, as well as thematic deviations from the nostalgic cinema of the 1980s were fundamental to the uniqueness of the Frears-Kureishi collaborations:

'Style' in Kureishi's films has important cultural/political significance. Insofar as the vision of England in 'Heritage' cinema (or Jane Austen, for that matter) invokes a hierarchical, orderly and knowable nation, there is a homology between form and political ideology. *Chariots of Fire*, for example, has a clear beginning, middle and end, a definite hierarchy of narrative voices and an all-seeing eye which can resolve the most disparate elements of the film into a final, transparent whole. By contrast, Kureishi's rejection of many of the conventions of narrative realism and his iconoclastic mixture of different genres and cinematic influences complements his thematic interest in 'anarchist' ideas.<sup>150</sup>

Thus Frears' and Kureishi's films responded to the conservatism of form as well as the social and political constitution of mainstream 1980s cinema. Just as the New Wave films rejected the simplicity and reductive organisation of the cause-and-effect

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<sup>150</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi: Contemporary World Writers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp.96-97.

paradigm, as a means of offering greater emotional, psychological and social resonance, so *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* manipulate filmic language, and critique the restrained and limited complexions of dominant forms, to offer wider dimensions of understanding and meaning.

While a detailed appraisal of the ways in which style is organised in the films will follow, it is pertinent to identify the manner in which the Frears-Kureishi films can be seen to continue the traditions of post-war British realism. We have seen that they share with the New Wave an oppositional perspective in both theme and form, but it is also relevant to note the manner in which the films' engagement with contemporary social concerns reflects a long held pre-occupation in British screen culture with issue-based drama. As mentioned, the television play tradition which produced the decade's realist figureheads such as Frears and Alan Clarke, has played a similarly fundamental role in determining the continuing presence of British social realism. In discussing his work, Kureishi identifies the links between his own generation and the previous one:

For me *Film on Four* had taken over from the BBC's *Play For Today* in presenting serious contemporary drama on TV to a wide audience. [...] On my way up to London the morning after a *Play For Today* I'd sit in the train listening to people discussing the previous night's drama and interrupt them with my own opinions.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Kureishi (1986), p.41.

There is a clear sense that for Kureishi, and others of a like mind, the kind of socially conscious dramatic work enshrined within the 'Play for Today' canon was to be taken up in the more adventurous and liberated climate created by Channel 4. Crucially, Kureishi and Frears were able to apply the principles of the tradition to issues arising in the 1980s relating to ethnicity, sexuality, and political division.

In this vein, the presentation of sexuality as a social issue provides a useful entry point into an understanding of the way Frears and Kureishi ground their work in a realist thematic programme, which is augmented by the deployment of art cinema strategies. The central relationship between Johnny (Daniel Day-Lewis) and Omar (Gordon Warnecke) is highly refreshing in the context of British cinema: up until *My Beautiful Laundrette*, only a handful of films touched upon the subject of homosexuality.<sup>152</sup> Yet while there is a degree of refreshment to be derived from a cliché-free representation of same-sex love and desire, it is an understanding of the narrative frameworks that facilitate the foregrounding of the relationship, which demonstrate the truly seminal quality of Frears and Kureishi's approach.

In her analysis of the film's narrative organisation, Christine Geraghty identifies the variety of ways in which the film's multitude of plotlines are organised:

The business plot [...] has a clear structure, narrative events that work through cause and effect and a set of political themes based on ironic

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<sup>152</sup> *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (John Schlesinger, 1971) and *Nighthawks* (Ron Peck, 1978) are both strikingly different and noteworthy representations of male gay experience in Britain.



inversions. This political dimension also helps to position the secondary story of the two brothers, in which the contrast between them indicates the complexity of emigrant, diasporic experiences.<sup>153</sup>

Thus the cause-and-effect organisation of the 'business plot' gives the film a kind of formal cogency: Omar's rise through the family business and his brushes with criminality conform to the generic conventions of a *Bildungsroman*, or gangster narrative commonly used in classical cinema. At the same time, the political dimensions of the narrative regularly underpin Omar's, and the family's, capitalistic enterprises via explicit dialogical references: 'Mrs. Thatcher will be happy with me' (Salim); 'There is no question of race in the new enterprise culture' (Nasser). As Geraghty points out, the subtler juxtapositions between the brothers Nasser and Papa, and their emotional reunion towards the end of the film, allow for a more nuanced treatise on the contrasting experiences of Asian immigrants, as the morally bereft businessman Nasser cries in the arms of the former socialist firebrand Papa, now a bedridden alcoholic. However, the romantic narrative negates these conclusive thematic spheres:

[...] compared to the business plot there is no meta-commentary that positions this relationship within a political discourse. While Omar's entrepreneurial ambitions are positioned in a recognizably Thatcherite economy, Omar and Johnny's relationship is developed outside the debates about gay rights and sexual orientation that were a feature of left-

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<sup>153</sup> Christine Geraghty, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), p.41.

wing eighties politics. It is this refusal which singles out the romance plot [...] no ideological justification is offered for actions that the characters themselves do not explain. The gay romance plot therefore offers the pleasures of the romance narrative but refuses to pin the couple down or to define them by the ideal moment of romantic fulfillment. In refusing explicit statements or political connections, the gay romance provides a counterpoint to the more explicit causal links and political commentary of the business plot.<sup>154</sup>

Johnny and Omar kiss and make love at numerous points in the film, yet there is never any explicit reference to the relationship made by either character or those around them. At the film's conclusion we see the pair kissing, as Omar cleans Johnny's wounds. At this point there is no indication of their future together, or how the pair will confront the socio-political and familial practicalities of their illicit, same-sex, inter-racial, communion. Moreover, Frears and Kureishi actively seek to undermine and complicate the audience's perception of the couple's relationship by regularly framing their romantic rituals within the visual language of familiar genre cinema. For example, when Omar drops Johnny off at the launderette towards the end of the film the pair kiss in the car, before Omar departs. While a seemingly innocuous component of the film, the farewell kiss in the car at night is unquestionably synonymous with heterosexual visual discourses, and is an example of what John Hill calls 'traditional romantic conventions...that normalize gay sexuality; while, at the same time...the film is ...using

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<sup>154</sup> Geraghty (2005), p.42.

its gay relationship to subvert those very same conventions'.<sup>155</sup> In identifying the generic intertextuality at work within the film (other examples including the framing of the launderette as a modern day western saloon, and the manner in which Tania miraculously boards a train near the film's conclusion) the social emphasis on Johnny and Omar is given subtler signification, as filmic tropes are distorted against the background of romantic relationship which in turn manipulates its cinematic precedents.

This free approach to visual and formal treatments of radical social/sexual themes can be contrasted usefully to more conservative forms. Indeed, when British cinema has presented an issue-based focus within tightly organised narrative frameworks (such as in the social problem genre of the 1950s), the rigidity of cause-and-effect has seen apparent social deviance negated through a necessary 'tying up of loose ends', in which radical agents or elements are normalised or contained. By rejecting this kind of formal conformity and opting for the open interpretations and ambiguities of art cinema narrative, in which 'reality' is presented without the need to explain or conclude within the boundaries of the text, the writer and the director are able to hybridise issue-based social realism with experimental narrative forms to genuine effect. Thus, the lack of 'a meta-commentary' to allow the viewer to locate the relationship in a 'political discourse', is in itself a profoundly political act, which frees the audience from the more familiar didactic or cliché-laden representations of homosexuality in popular culture.

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<sup>155</sup> John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.213.

In *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, Frears and Kureshi once more engage with culturally and ethnically mixed London society, and again pursue strategies of art cinema to deepen and widen their thematic project. The film's opening focus is on a London wasteland space, with the title music quickly being joined on the soundtrack by fragments of Margaret Thatcher's speech after her party's 1987 election victory. Of particular importance as the film's themes unravel, is her line: 'we've got a big job to do in some of those inner cities.' Here, Kureishi and Frears present the viewer with an unsolicited image of urban desolation, which is quickly contextualised by the aural evocation of Thatcher. In initiating a symbolic register which relies on the conflation of non-sourced fragments of image and sound so early in the film, the film immediately invites understanding within both a socio-political context (given the obvious signification of the wasteland imagery with Thatcher), and narratively, as a film which will encourage interpretations on a figurative basis. The wasteland space later re-emerges as the almost hyper-real environment which houses Danny (Roland Gift) and his new-age traveller companions, whose stylised appearance and propensity towards musical and artistic performance poses further questions for the viewer, as we are asked to understand their political and social dislocation in real terms. The use of the wasteland also leads the viewer to the realisation that the image of the emptied, depopulated space at the start bears no relation to the carnivalesque communality at the film's peak, and the chaos of the concluding scenes as property developers forcefully evict the travellers, which, in a temporal sense, de-stabilises the film's already loose approach to narrative linearity. Indeed, the latter scene connects to the first, not on a cause-and-effect basis, but through recourse to the stylistic elements at work. Just as Thatcher's words jar against the desolate urban space at the beginning, in this case the violent eviction is

accompanied by Holst's 'I Vow to thee my Country', as images of a decaying Britain are juxtaposed against aural elements which suggest mythical connotations of a sense of Britishness no longer relevant in the world that the film depicts. The tactic of juxtaposing sound and image, setting a harsh visual reality against aural evocations of nationhood, once more connects the appropriation of art cinema strategies in Frears and Kureishi's work with that of the New Wave and Free Cinema movements. In the earlier case, the Free Cinema films such as Anderson's *O Dreamland* (1953), regularly elicited meaning on a symbolic level by using sound to re-contextualise imagery, just as Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) shows a borstal boy being beaten by guards, while the rest of the inmates sing 'Jerusalem' in a show of communality.

While there is evidence of a clear lineage between Frears and Kureishi's work in the 1980s, and the traditions of post-war realism, it is also true that *Sammy and Rosie Gets Laid* builds on social realism's convergence with art cinema conventions. To return to the motif of the wasteland it has been suggested that the physical evocation of the space intertextually connects with T.S. Eliot's modernist work of the same name:

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is the major literary intertext of *Sammy and Rosie* (fragments of Eliot's poem are inscribed on a bus on the site where Danny lives) [...] the film opens with a vista of waste land, to the condition of which, Kureishi implies, Britain is being reduced by Thatcherism. [...] . it may be the case that the style of *Sammy and Rosie* reflects a desire to find visual equivalents for modernist literary technique

[...] Most notably, Kureishi's film is (de)composed into a collage, recalling Eliot's (de)construction of London in terms of a 'heap of broken images'. As this suggests, *Sammy and Rosie* generates its meanings primarily by (often highly incongruous) juxtaposition, characteristically effected by sudden, unfaded, camera cross-cuts. Instead of relying on traditional narrative unities, such as plot, both artists bind their works together by indirect means. Thus, like Tiresias's role in Eliot's poem, Danny functions as a unifying structural feature in Kureishi's film, linking disparate characters and situations by his floating presence.<sup>156</sup>

For Moore-Gilbert, the clear allusion to Eliot's work allows us a way of viewing *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* within a similar modernist framework. This is undoubtedly a prudent means of analysis, given the film's appropriation of freer art cinema-based strategies and its rejection of classical paradigms. Indeed, the manner in which the film organises its narrative elements on an associative basis, in conjunction with some cause-and-effect linkage, suggests an accommodation of the modernist's presentation of meaning on a more nuanced and sophisticated level. Following the wasteland scene, and the brief introduction to Danny on the Tube, Frears and Kureishi cut to the house of a young black jazz trumpeter and his mother. Fast cuts and hand-held camera show the police raid the house as the man tries to escape, while the scared mother throws chip fat on the police; an action which sees her shot and killed. This episode provides the flashpoint for the riots that act as a backdrop for the unfolding of the narrative, and give Frears and

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<sup>156</sup> Moore-Gilbert (2001), pp.94-95.

Kureishi a textual justification for the explication of their socio-political framework. However, in the manner that Moore-Gilbert suggests, the next scene is connected on an entirely different level. Eschewing the realist aesthetic of the first scene, Frears' camera begins on a naked female bottom before gently panning up the naked bodies of (the soon to be revealed), Sammy, and his American lover Anna (Wendy Gazelle). The pair are embracing and talk about the nature of Sammy and Rosie's Bohemian relationship. The two W's tattooed on each of Anna's buttocks are explained (so WOW is spelt when she bends over), as Sammy's description of Rosie re-emerges as a voice-over, with a cut to her at a council flat where she finds the body of an old man in a bath (she is a social worker). The first scene, which vividly displays an act of police brutality, is in huge contrast to the playful superficiality of the one involving Sammy and Anna, with the cut between the murder and Anna's buttocks providing a particularly conspicuous point of contrast. The manner in which the middle scene connects to the next is equally telling, with Sammy's description of his and Rosie's marriage acting as an accompanying voice-over to a concerned Rosie as she walks around a dilapidated council flat. Thus, while the scenes allow the conveyance of narrative information (introducing us to key characters and establishing necessary background), they also work to locate the facile bourgeois pleasure-seeking of Sammy and Rosie within the more substantial socio-political reality of their immediate environment.

To return to the specifics of Moore-Gilbert's reference to Eliot, Danny is seen as a Tiresias-like figure, whose presence interlinks the key thematic and narrative strands of the work. Danny is Rosie's lover and acts as a sort of confidant/protector for Sammy's father Rafi (Shashi Kapoor), connecting both the personal/familial themes and the more

political spheres relating to Rafi's history and his diagnosis of the decaying England. Despite his central role within the film, Frears and Kureishi tell us very little about Danny. We know that he lives as a nomad amongst the travellers in the commune, that he has a son, and that the woman who dies at the outset acted as a mother figure in his own childhood. Yet rather than defining his characterisation, as do Sammy and Rosie's personal traits, history, and political beliefs, this background information is delivered in fragments to the more established characters. Understanding Danny within the more liberated conditions of a modernist framework, (seeing him act a unifying presence and narrative facilitator rather than a fully formed persona), leads us to another connection to Frears and Kureishi's appropriation of art cinema methodology. As Susan Torrey Barber writes, Danny's marginalisation is a persistent feature of his presence in the film:

Danny is frequently located outside events, for example, watching the riots or living in the waste ground on the edge of South London. His positioning suggests the black community's marginalization in British society. As Danny comments, his only way of centering himself is to ride the trains all day (adopting the name of one of the stations, Victoria, as his alias), as if making contact with various points of the city will center his identity and re-establish his legal residence.<sup>157</sup>

While Barber is right to interpret Danny's dislocation in terms of his ethnicity, if we continue to build on Moore-Gilbert's modernist interpretation of the film's narrative

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<sup>157</sup> Susan Torrey Barber, 'Insurmountable Difficulties and Moments of Ecstasy: Crossing Class, Ethnic, and Sexual Barriers in the Films of Stephen Frears' in Lester Friedman (ed.), *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started* (London: UCL Press, 1993), p.229.



organisation it could be argued that Danny's depiction can be aligned to Bordwell's description of the transient and rootless 'art film protagonist'.<sup>158</sup> In the context of art cinema, this form of character invites interpretation precisely on the basis of his or her ambiguities and the refusal of the film's narration to signify motive in the classical form. Thus the audience is asked to understand their presence in a more complex manner, connecting this passivity and ambiguity to philosophical and/or socio-political significations.

This understanding of the film within the conventions of art cinema and literary modernism, also leads us to a discussion of the portrayal of Rafi. A former despot, who as the film progresses, is revealed to have committed numerous Human Rights abuses in his home country, Rafi is haunted throughout by a shadowy figure who takes on numerous forms throughout the film (appearing as Rafi's taxi driver in the early scenes, as a lurking malcontent as Rafi moves through the streets around Sammy and Rosie's home, and as the prisoner turned torturer in the nightmare which leads Rafi to his suicide). This blending of subjective and objective perspectives points once more to Frears' and Kureishi's rejection of 'flat' realist strategies, displaying a willingness to present a psychological as well as socio-political perspective:

Art-cinema narration employs all the sorts of subjectivity [...] Dreams, memories, hallucinations, daydreams, fantasies, and other mental activities can find embodiment in the image or on the soundtrack [...]

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<sup>158</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 208.

conventions of expressive realism can shape spatial representation: optical point-of-view shots, flash frames of a glimpsed or recalled event, editing patterns, modulations of light and colour and sound – all are often motivated by character psychology.<sup>159</sup>

This willingness to house multiple perspectives (in this case the psychological realm relating to Rafi), sees the art cinema schema at work in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* subordinated towards a delivery of a wider and more complex thematic agenda than more objective forms of social realism, just as we see in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Indeed, in line with the notion of an associative, modernist, narrative organisation, the treatment of Rafi's internal sphere can be seen to give rise to a discussion of what Michael Walsh calls the film's approach to a 'crisis of symbolic paternity', framing Rafi's 'experience of darkness and immobility' against his mournfully elegiac yearning for the England of his youth, and Sammy's embittered attitude towards him, as well as Rosie's traumatic reflections on her own father.<sup>160</sup>

Understanding the films of Frears and Kureishi as social realism that fully embraces the art cinema project tells us a great deal about the manner in which the mode diversifies and advances during the 1980s. In a manner which evokes the precedent of the New Wave, formal and narrative expectations are continually thwarted and subverted in both

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<sup>159</sup> Bordwell (1985), p.208-9.

<sup>160</sup> Michael Walsh, 'Reality, the Real, and the Margaret Thatcher Signifier in Two British Films of the 1980s' in *American Imago*, vol. 52 (1995), p. 169-189 (p. 185).  
[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american\\_imago/v052/52.2walsh.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_imago/v052/52.2walsh.html) [Accessed 10th June 2008]

films in a way which raises numerous questions for the audience across a breadth of thematic spheres, whilst being framed in socially relevant and politically charged environments which directly relate to contemporary circumstances.

## **5.2 'Somehow, Somehow, I Might Escape': Alan Clarke and the Poetics of Actuality**

Like Stephen Frears and like Loach and Leigh, Alan Clarke received his first introduction to filmmaking through British television. Yet unlike his better-known contemporaries, Clarke made only two films before his untimely death in 1990. The great majority of Clarke's work was produced for the BBC in the 1970s and 1980s, which raises questions about his placement alongside the fully-fledged practitioners of realist cinema mentioned elsewhere in this study. However, just as Ken Loach's bold approach to questions of style and form in TV plays such as *Cathy Come Home* (1965), and *Up the Junction* (1965) re-invigorated the British cinema's long relationship with realism, so too Alan Clarke's uncompromising style and sometimes beautiful, sometimes brutal approach to subject matter made a lasting impression on the mode of realism as a filmic form, and informed much of what emerged after it. Moreover, as the posthumous popularity of TV work such as *The Firm* (1988) and *Made in Britain* (1982) and of the re-made for film TV drama *Scum* (1979) show, Clarke is seen by the wider viewing public as something of a figurehead in the sphere of cult British filmmaking. As analysis of some aspects of Clarke's work will show, he was a true auteur in the sense of the development of formal and stylistic signatures, the recurrence of key thematic tropes, and a willingness to expand and critique the boundaries of his medium, characteristics

made all the more impressive by the fact that they were largely displayed in the more economically and morally conservative arena of television drama.

While Clarke is most well known for the controversial *Scum* and its banned BBC original (1977), there is no question that his most challenging and experimental work was produced in the 1980s, where Dave Rolinson saw him to be 'attaining precisely the ideological complexity for which critics had been calling' and displaying a 'restless experimentation and formal dynamism which addresses these issues as part of a wider questioning of the "visual epistemology" of state and media discourses.'<sup>161</sup> The implication here is that Clarke's work represented a valid response to the criticisms of realism that emerged in the late 1970s around the *Screen* journal. For Rolinson, Clarke's increasingly self-reflexive style which paid due attention to form as well as theme, and which continually drew focus to the artifice of his technical practice, distinguished him as a realist filmmaker during the period, and insulated him from the criticisms relating to realism as an inexpressive, politically conservative mode. This sense of self-consciousness and the emphasis on form as a vessel of meaning in Clarke's work, is of particular interest in relation to an understanding of social realism as art cinema. With *Elephant* (1989), Clarke's stark, thirty-nine minute summary of seventeen sectarian murders in Northern Ireland, rejecting any recourse to story-telling or narrative linearity, he reached a peak of abstraction in his filmmaking with what Rolinson calls an 'ideological meditation of the narrative process'.<sup>162</sup> Yet in his earlier work in the decade for TV and in film (*Rita, Sue and Bob Too*), there is much evidence of a filmmaker

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<sup>161</sup> Dave Rolinson, *Alan Clarke* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.96.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p.131.

whose work may appear naturalistic, but who, persistently questions that assumption through a self-expressive and nuanced approach to editing, *mise-en-scène* and technique, offering multiple levels of meaning for his audience.

*The Firm*, a film that in one sense provides a powerful and authentic treatise on the nature of football violence, also offers numerous points of meta-commentary on the psychological and sexual undertones associated with male aggression and desire. The film follows Bex (Gary Oldman), leader of a branch of hooligans known as the ICC, as he tries to form a national firm for the upcoming European Championships in Germany. His rival, Yeti (Philip Davis), of the Bucanneers, refuses to accept Bex as leader, and much of the film builds up to the inevitable and ultimately destructive final battle between the two men and their firms. Clarke's refusal to show any football during the film (thus suggesting that the violence is entirely separated from the sport) and his poignant emphasis on Bex's family life, gives it a sociological potency which provides the defining thematic overtones of the work. However, the manner in which Bex sets about on his single-minded mission to destroy Yeti distinguishes *The Firm* from mere socio-political treatise, bringing to mind questions of psychological ambiguity in common with the art cinema.

When Bex returns to his childhood home at an early stage of the film, he locks the door and uncovers a vast arsenal of handheld weapons, picking out one in particular (a metal baton). He raises his hand and presses a button which enables the weapon to extend. He then hits the bed repeatedly with increasing ferocity, shouting out 'Yeti', with each point of impact. The childhood bedroom, the extending weapon, the impact on the bed, and

the carnal screams for Yeti suggest the beginning of a pseudo-sexual undertone which is present in the acts of violence committed by Bex throughout the film. When the ICC are outnumbered during a fight in Birmingham, their youngest member, Yusef (Terry Sue Patt) is chased and cornered by the rival firm's leader, Oboe (Andrew Wilde), who knifes him, scarring him across the face. In retaliation Bex and Snowy (Robbie Gee) force their way in to Oboe's home, and Bex slashes his enemy in the same way. However, Clarke's framing of the struggle again alludes to the convergence of violence and sexuality hinted at in the bedroom scene. Bex sits on top of the horizontal Oboe and wildly shouts his name, as shot-reverse-shots show Oboe replying by repeating Bex's name in the same manner. As this ritual reaches a crescendo, Clarke suddenly cuts to a distanced perspective behind the two men, and it is in this partially obscured manner that we witness the climactic stabbing.

In the scene between Bex and Oboe, Clarke evokes enough of the filmic language and style associated with representations of romance and sexuality, to blur the lines between anger and desire in the delivery of extreme violence between the men. This complex underpinning of Bex's confrontations in the film reaches its own climax in the penultimate scene with Yeti. Their previous contact (a telephone conversation in which Bex promises Yeti: 'I'll ingrave my name all over your arse'), undoubtedly builds upon the ambiguous representations of male sexuality and violence, and sets up the final battle (when Bex and the remaining members of the ICC ambush the Bucanneers' pub). Bex manages to tackle Yeti to the floor and begins to beat him relentlessly, as the compositions used in the Oboe scene are replicated. Once more Bex lets out cries of passion, shaking his head back and forth and taking deep breaths as if lost in a moment

of unsurpassable euphoria. However, Yeti pulls out a pistol and shoots Bex, once more playing on the phallic connection with weapons hinted at in the bedroom scene.

This reading of male desire and violence in *The Firm* illuminates an aspect of Clarke's filmmaking which is underrepresented. The starkness of his narrative approaches and the veracity of his *mise-en-scène* draws conspicuous attention to any subtle manipulations of editing and composition, which lead us to consider increasingly profound levels of significance, and more latent suggestions in the representations of character. Moreover, the depiction of Bex, shrouded as it is in ambiguities surrounding his motives and the source for his aggression, works in a similar way to the open-ended characters of the Frears and Kureishi films, inviting viewers to attempt more complex and subjective interpretations of the films' central figures.

While steadicam (which will be discussed shortly) dominates Clarke's stylistic arsenal, we have seen how the framing of particular characters in *The Firm* works to elicit a broad potentiality of significations. In *Made in Britain*, a TV film which focuses on Trevor (Tim Roth), a self-destructive young offender, it is often Clarke's subtly expressive use of cinematic space and location which suggests further complexities to his realist approach.

The film's repeated use of vast white spaces against which Trevor is framed suggests a temporary suspension of narrative information, as Clarke seems to invite the viewer to understand his protagonist in purely symbolic terms. In particular, the scene in which Trevor and Leeroy (David Baldwin) go to an abandoned and emptied out swimming

pool to retrieve Trevor's stashed tools, places the characters in a surreal space, divorced from the busy and loud streets presented in steadicam which dominate the film's external environments. The space, an embodiment of emptiness, is replicated by the similarly white and vast road tunnel which Trevor walks down angrily later in the film, as he screams 'bollocks!' at passing vehicles. This use of white is repeated again in the middle of the film when, as Trevor is lectured by police and social workers, he mounts a racist rant against the backdrop of a starkly foregrounded white wall. This composition again sees Trevor related to notions of emptiness, using space and location to mirror his relationship to society.

The lecturing scene alludes to another of Clarke's subtly communicated motifs in the film. A senior policeman draws a circle diagram which shows the continuing cycle of criminality into which Trevor is expected to fall. This suggests the way in which borstal will lead to jail, which will lead to further crime, and so on. It is the kind of road map for desolation and self-destruction that ties into the film's fatalistic account of Thatcher's Britain. The association of circularity and stasis in relation to incarceration is also paralleled in the film's stylistic approach to Trevor's own imprisonment. Following a violent outburst at his residential centre, Trevor is placed in a holding room. The door shuts and the camera rests on the window of the door, and we watch as Trevor walks round and round in circles. This set-up foregrounds the audience's position as observer, watching as Trevor figuratively performs the thematic motif enacted in the lecture scene, and as the barrier of the window is used to comment simultaneously on the disconnection between society and the prisoner, and between viewer and art. Moreover, in the film's final scene, Clarke reverses the technical and thematic means of



communicating this notion. The perspective begins on the toilet. As the viewer hears a near constant buzzing sound, a gentle handheld pan moves across the room to see Trevor pressing the buzzer of his cell rhythmically, and staring robotically at the door. The camera, having framed him in profile, begins to circle him. Again, the associative links between scenes sees the film operate on a wider symbolic level, allowing Clarke to critique societal presentations of imprisonment and social dislocation with a great degree of sophistication.

Thus, a kind of authorial consciousness underpins Clarke's work, both as a means of directing a more nuanced meta-narrative commentary, and as device by which a necessary critical distance is engendered between the viewer, the text and the author, which invites interrogation of his films' and his medium's stylistic complexion. In *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1986), this manifests itself in a different way. Just as connections between the British New Wave and the Frears and Kureishi films can be made, so too Clarke's work can be located within this tradition. The bawdy tale of two teenage, working-class Bradford school girls, who embark on a bizarre ménage a trois with Bob (George Costigan), a middle-aged estate agent, (whose children they babysit), was seen by Alexander Walker as a 'revival of the old kitchen-sink milieux of the early 1960s now responsive to the new sexual forthrightness of the 1980s. Sexual energy was deemed to banish social hopelessness.'<sup>163</sup> This comparison is also evident in the film's replication of the long, expansive shots over cities and townscapes, common in the films of the New Wave. What is interesting, however, is that while Clarke seems to

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<sup>163</sup> Alexander Walker, *Icons in the Fire: The Decline and Fall of Almost Everybody in the British Film Industry* (London: Orion, 2004), p.79.

consciously evoke the iconography of the 1960s realism, he does so against a thematic template which has transcended the conservative gender politics and sexual repression implicit within the relationships portrayed in the films of Richardson, Reisz, Schlesinger and Anderson. As such, the inherent connotations of the visual references to the New Wave are complicated. For example, when Bob drives the girls to the Moors during the daytime, Clarke opts for a long shot, with the grass in the foreground, Bob, the car and the girls in the middle, and the vast landscape in the distance. The shot lasts twenty seconds, and like a New Wave film, the shot's length suggests a degree of authorship which draws attentions to the director's hand. This moment of staid narrative suspension is further complicated by the cut to a more involved steadicam medium shot, which shows Rita (Siobhan Finneran) running through the grass. The steadicam then picks up all three characters as they walk against the landscape, before Clarke re-establishes the static long take used at the start of the scene.

Stylistically, the scene represents a persistent foregrounding of directorial technique, moving as it does from the stillness of the initial composition, to the vivid fluidity of the steadicam, before returning to the fixed parameters of the long shot. This kind of rhythmic editing allows for a regular switch of distanced and complicit perspectives, asking the viewer to understand the characters in starkly different spatial arrangements. This also has the effect of isolating the long take within the film's stylistic lexicon, encouraging us to read its connotations as separate from those inherent within the oft used steadicam compositions. Moreover, the threesome's talk of 'jumps' (slang for sex) and 'cow shit', jars against the comparatively earnest dialogue that we would associate with such expansive treatments of landscape in the New Wave, with Clarke using the

liberated bawdiness of his characters to critique the cinematic associations of the space. The long shot is replicated later in the film, as Sue (Michelle Holmes) and Aslam (Kulvinder Ghir) sit atop a hill, looking out over the city. Aslam asks Sue to be his girlfriend. Here the dialogue references the awkward mating rituals framed by similar shots in films such as *A Kind of Loving* (John Schlesinger, 1962), yet the repeated tragic-comic use of the term 'paki', and the couple's comedic attempts at romance undermine the comparative sincerity of the New Wave. Again, Clarke references an intertextual trope before reclaiming and re-orientating its significance through its appropriation by Rita and Sue, exemplars of 1980s Bradford.

While we can locate a necessary updating of some of the key aesthetic tropes of the New Wave in Clarke's films, it is also interesting to consider the way in which Clarke, like the directors of the New Wave, manages to carve out a distinct authorial signature and presence in works of adaptation. In Tony Richardson's filmic treatments of John Osborne's *The Entertainer* (1960) and *Look Back in Anger* (1958), the director was able to retain the potency and contemporaneity of the source texts, whilst achieving an 'opening out' of their theatrical limits, using the new found poeticism of environment and space inherent in the work of the New Wave to establish the film text as worthy of criticism and engagement on its own terms. This convergent relationship between literature and theatre and the cinema, has characterised many of the developmental facets of British realism. Ken Loach's innovative adaptations of Nell Dunn's novellas in the early 1960s again proved that British cinema's traditional reliance on source texts (found in the field of social realism at least), initiated a new kind of symbiosis in which the liberated aesthetic and formal methodology of film could match the depth and

resonance of literary origins. Clarke's bold and highly experimental adaptation of Jim Cartwright's *Road* (1987) continues this tradition.

*Road* had initially been intended to be filmed on video at a studio set, but fortuitous circumstances relating to a strike by technical staff at the BBC enabled Clarke to shoot the work on film, and on location. This is crucial to Clarke's vivid and chilling treatment of the play's eponymous road, relaying as he does a series of expressionistic vignettes as its inhabitants and their surroundings articulate a barren hopelessness rooted in the socio-economic inequalities of Thatcher's Britain. In the words of Rolinson: 'Clarke captures the wasted energy of unemployment by portraying working-class characters walking nowhere through deserted communities – reflecting the paradoxically static 'road' of Cartwright's title.'<sup>164</sup> The boarded up houses and empty interior spaces which form a backdrop for the film's characters enliven the theatrical source text, relating a social reality to the viewer which is at once disturbingly surreal, and achingly authentic. Indeed, the dialogue of the film, more emblematic and performative than the naturalism found in many of Clarke's other 1980s work, encourages us to view the characters on a more symbolic level, which provides a platform for Clarke's stylistic innovation.

The final scene, perhaps one of the most stunning of Clarke's canon, depicts the culmination of a night out, for Brink (Neil Dudgeon) and Eddie (William Armstrong), and Louise (Jane Horrocks) and Carol (Mossie Smith). The two couples (male and female) argue and drink, betraying their frustrations and unhappiness. Eventually Brink and Eddie put on a tape (Otis Redding's 'Try a Little Tenderness'), which stops each

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<sup>164</sup> Rolinson (2005), p.115.

character 'dead in their tracks'. As the song plays, Clarke's camera gently pans across the faces of his cast, pausing in close-up so the viewer is given time to focus on their intensely emotional profiles. Clarke foregrounds himself within the *mise-en-scène* in this highly stylised sequence, taking each character and literally showing them to the audience one after the other, with each pause engendering empathy and pathos, as the emotive music plays on. When the song finishes the editing strategy remains. As we return to Eddie's face, he mounts an impassioned monologue born out of personal and national dissatisfaction. Then Clarke shows us Brink's face, who, following a shot-reverse-shot exchange with Louise, launches into his own soliloquy on unfulfilled ambition, imprisonment and alienation. The process continues until each character has their say within the highly formalised cathartic space. The film ends following the group's increasingly ferocious chant of 'Somehow, somehow, I might escape.' The scene relies on the theatrical sloganeering of the source text, utilising the emblematic qualities of the dialogue (composed, as it is, of speeches and monologues), for a vital and profound distillation of the play's thematic pre-occupations. However, these messages are facilitated by Clarke's stylistic dynamism. Using the communal aural and spatial associations of the chanting and the circle respectively, his meditative portraits of each character personalise the images, striking a balance between the delivery of individual pathos and understanding, and a awareness of the wider social ills expressed within the group. What this scene constitutes is a continued occurrence of the convergent relationship between British theatrical traditions and the increasingly authored style of filmmaking in British realist cinema. Here, art cinema inflections give fluidity and stylistic substance to the powerful and bold, but potentially stunted stage-orientated source material. Just as the lyrical foregrounding of external space in the New

Wave powerfully contextualises the fractured and embittered two-way exchanges of dialogue associated with the original plays and novels of the cycle, so Clarke's propensity to experiment with the representation of social reality extends the parameters of Cartwright's original.

As a theatrical adaptation which works as a film in its own right, *Road* tells us much about Clarke's conspicuous and unique style. For John Hill, it is precisely the director's proliferation of signatures which allows the film to transcend other representations of social reality:

Set in a desolate housing estate in the north of England, it draws on several of the signifiers of northern realism and successfully communicates some of the desperation associated with unemployment and poverty. It does so, however, through a heavily stylized form. Domestic interiors are stripped bare and display the minimum of props, characters speak in an exaggerated manner and directly address the camera, pop songs are used in an often diegetically unmotivated and obtrusive fashion. [...]. In *Road*, [...] the moving camera works in a way that goes well beyond its conventional attachments to realism and documentary, generating kinetic and rhythmic patterns (particularly in association with music) that exceed the requirements of both narrative logic and symbolic expression. As such, *Road* is a film in which, in

Bordwell's useful phrase, 'the perceptual force of style' is both prominent and dominant.<sup>165</sup>

Paying particular attention to Hill's interest in the steadicam technique most closely associated with Clarke, it is interesting to note his evocation of Bordwell, who also said that the art cinema 'foregrounds the *author* as a structure in the film's system.'<sup>166</sup> Hill seems to imply that the steadicam in particular, works clearly to foreground directorial style as a separate entity, rather than simply as a service to realist or documentary aspirations. It is a technique that is put to great use throughout Clarke's 1980s work, and its beauty is largely derived from the multiplicity of thematic and formal dimensions it enables. In one sense, Clarke is allowed to place his audience alongside, within, behind, or in front of his characters, in a highly vivid and authentic manner, giving his images a naturalistic momentum whilst simultaneously toying with audience expectations of investment and empathy. In *The Firm*, as Bex walks towards the pub to face the Yeti for the final fight, Clarke's steadicam places us alongside the character. However, our ambiguous understanding of the protagonist is immediately spurned by Bex's running away from the camera, leaving us lost and behind him. Similarly, we move alongside Trevor in *Made in Britain* as he walks the streets at night. When he pauses and looks in a department store selling household goods, and propagating a kind of domestic ideal Trevor has never experienced, he runs off screaming 'Bollocks'. Tellingly, the viewer, who is spatially allied with the steadicam, remains behind him and watches him into the

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<sup>165</sup> Hill (2000), p.257.

<sup>166</sup> David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice' in Catherine Fowler (ed.), *European Film Theory and Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p98.

distance. Clarke's use of the steadicam allows him, in the words of David Hare 'to get right in there.'<sup>167</sup> As in *Elephant*, it also sees the audience 'forced to participate in a journey we have no desire to undertake', just as we are made to listen to Valerie's (Lesley Sharp) eight minute monologue in *Road* given directly to steadicam, as she bitterly outlines a barely imaginable vision of social, economic, and emotional poverty.<sup>168</sup> Thus, while the steadicam encourages engagement and acts as a vessel of veracity, it is simultaneously both a symbol and tool of authorship. It allows Clarke to pose questions to the audience at regular intervals within the films by diversifying the function of the device: by making it act as both a means of complicity and of divisiveness, one of subjectivity and objectivity. Clarke's steadicam is his dominant directorial signature, and underlines the manner in which style is of equal importance to thematic substance in his treatment of social realism.

In this vein, Hill's understanding of the steadicam, as an aspect of Clarke's style which highlights self-consciousness, is worthy of further consideration. In *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, steadicam plays a typically central role, dominating the film's opening scenes. It follows Sue's drunken father (Willie Ross) past boarded up houses and flats, before Sue moves out to the middle of the frame and takes up the steadicam's focus, which then takes in her calling at Rita's house, before the gradual cuts see the steadicam surveying the more sedate and affluent detached houses of George's estate. Hill calls these 'highly

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<sup>167</sup> Richard Kelly (ed.), *Alan Clarke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p.200.

<sup>168</sup> Howard Schumann, 'Alan Clarke: In it for Life' in *Sight and Sound* (vol. 8, n. 9, September 1998), p.20.



stylised shots' which 'exceed the requirements of narrative exposition'.<sup>169</sup> This brings to mind his analysis of the New Wave's persistent suspensions of narrative information, in which their expansive landscape shots act as 'marks of the enunciation' which 'articulate a clear distance between observer and observed.'<sup>170</sup> In his analysis of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, he also makes this connection, but shields Clarke's film from the criticisms pointed at the New Wave, seemingly on the basis of its lighter comedic tone:

The effect of this self-conscious use of film technique however, is less the aestheticisation of poverty (or industrial cityscapes) characteristic of earlier films than a sort of detached comic gaze.<sup>171</sup>

However, the sense of 'detachment' through conspicuous stylisation sees Hill once more on familiar ground with regard to his criticisms of the New Wave's apparent stylistic superfluity. In analysing a scene in which Sue, Aslam and his sister are surveyed by steadicam walking along a path while discussing the logistics of inter-racial marriage, Hill writes:

The shot itself is one continuous take, a lateral tracking shot of the kind which by then has become familiar. As such, it is also a shot which seems primarily to follow an aesthetic logic (of formal pattern and rhythm)

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<sup>169</sup> Hill (1999), p.175.

<sup>170</sup> John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-63* (London: BFI, 1986), p.133.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, (1999), p.183.

rather than one with a clear narratively motivated purpose. While such formal inventiveness is one of the undoubted pleasures of the film it is also the case that this foregrounding of technique is also symptomatic of a certain refusal by the film to engage seriously with Asian characters (this is the only shot in which Aslam's sister appears) or to tackle the questions to which the relationships between the Asian and white characters (many of whom indulge in racist remarks) give rise.<sup>172</sup>

Hill's discussion of the negative associations of class fetishism and superiority associated with the long shots in the New Wave is connected to the 'ideology of individualism cemented in to the narrative form' which, in the films of the New Wave, denies an 'expression of the collective experience of working-class life.'<sup>173</sup> As such, his criticism of the New Wave's pursuit of lyricism through formal aspects which exist outside the parameters of narrative, connects to what he identifies as a failure to pay necessary attention to the social issues raised within the films (a criticism he also relates to Clarke's steadicam use in *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, with regard to its deflection of the potential to analyse race-relations). Thus, what we encounter is a failure of critical discourse relating to British cinema to view social realism like Clarke's, which is expressive and experimental in its conspicuous authorship, as worthy of analysis on the basis of its formal composition alone. In this limiting view, style and its foregrounding must find manifestation in the revelation of substantial socio-political themes. It cannot

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<sup>172</sup> Hill (1999), p.183.

<sup>173</sup> Hill (1986), p.138.

exist within the discourse of art cinema, where style and formal ambiguities can be understood in relation to less immediate questions relating to perception and authorship. This is not to say of course that Clarke's film's fail to engage with the issues of their time. That is precisely what they do, but his strength as a director is to resist mere didacticism, and marry a socio-political awareness with an artistic flair that offers the viewer a vault of meaning besides that which is immediately apparent.

### **5.3 'England's Green and Pleasant Land': Relocating Reality in *Distant Voices, Still***

#### ***Lives and Handsworth Songs***

Form then, is a central theme in the story of 1980s British cinema. As we have seen in the work of Frears, Kureishi, and Clarke, the decade saw an increasingly experimental approach to the apparent structural and aesthetic boundaries of realism. This came against a backdrop of challenges to realism's ability to comment upon society effectively. These manifested themselves in increasingly anti-realist approaches in cinema, both reflected and inspired by new schools of film criticism. The theoretical critique of realism initiated in publications such as *Screen* had, by the 1980s, engendered a climate whereby the bastions of British cinema's long-held association with the mode were increasingly worthy of reassessment.

With the canonic backbone of British cinema undergoing a through deconstruction, the stage was set for the flowering of alternative artistic voices in the British cinema. In what Peter Wollen has called Britain's 'Last New Wave', new approaches to questions of actuality and expression were initiated in 'a series of uncompromising films made by

original, oppositional, visually oriented modernist auteurs.<sup>174</sup> Jarman's *The Last of England* (1987), coming at the peak of Thatcherism, reveals much about the limitless potentials of a form which rejects recourse to codes of realism. Its alinear, modernist collage approach is alive with brutally emblematic images of a socio-political dystopia, which, despite their heightened forms, are nevertheless grounded in contemporary mores. In addition, Jarman retains a unique personal voice which is not only represented in his foregrounded status as a film artist, but also in the multitude of autobiographical fragments which underscore the film. If we view Jarman's film as representative of 'The Last New Wave', then there is no question that the rejection of realist forms afforded the 'new romantic' filmmaker a far greater artistic range with which to antagonise and engage his or her viewer.<sup>175</sup>

However, as we have seen already in the overview of British realist product in the 1980s, figures such as Clarke, and Frears and Kureishi, were able to integrate newer expressive forms thoroughly, whilst maintaining a non-abstract approach that pertained to a visible locational verisimilitude and real-world iconography. The achievement of these filmmakers lies in their ability to maintain the resonance and contemporaneity of realism, whilst advancing its artistic potentials, in the tradition of British realism from the documentary movement through to the New Wave, Ken Loach and Mike Leigh. When realist approaches are thoroughly eschewed, questions emerge over the ability of

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<sup>174</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Last New Wave: Modernism in the British Films of the Thatcher Era' in Lester Friedman (ed.), *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started* ed. Lester Friedman (London: UCL Press, 1993), p.49.

<sup>175</sup> Michael O'Pray, 'New Romanticism' and British Avant-Garde Film in the Early 80s' in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (London, BFI: 2001), p.259.

new forms to achieve the universality and humanity of the traditional realist film. Moreover, it is also necessary to question the extent to which so-called anti-realism, moves away from the traditions of the more expressive poetic treatments of actuality which underscore the development of British social realism. In seeking to reject its guiding principles and conventions, there is a sense in which the new forms merely concretised the influential position of British social realism.

To return to an analysis of the period's more radical films, Black Audio's *Handsworth Songs* (John Akomfrah, 1986) is a documentary relating to the race riots in the Birmingham suburb of Handsworth in 1985 which bears comparison with the films of Clark and Frears. It relies on a collage-like conflation of original footage, news reports and interviews, as well archive material, to mount not only an analysis of the riots and the numerous issues surrounding them, but also to become a treatise on the nature of the media's representation of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, and on the roots of racism in British society (as the film looks back to the earliest wave of immigration). Indeed, the sense of a multitude of visual and aural sources is apparent from the outset of the film. The viewer is presented with the image of a clown's head, a heavily distorted night-time shot, the sounds of police sirens and the distorted tones of anonymous authority and establishment figures, in the opening minutes. What becomes clear is that linearity and conventional exposition are rejected, and that the film's focus on reality is rooted in a more abstract realm where meaning is to be discerned from symbolic signifiers and associative linkages. For example, the opening shows us an image of birds. Their sound is retained as Akomfrah cuts to a shot of the police in riot gear. The visual juxtaposition inherent in the cut and the maintenance of the aural element of birdsong re-

contextualises the riot image, forcing the viewer to re-imagine the conception and presentation of the police, which is again complicated by the next shot showing the clown's head in close-up. This complex establishment of symbolic links and disjunctions works to undermine our respect for the veracity of the camera. This in turn establishes some of the film's key thematic centre points, which relate to the inaccurate representation of Black British voices in the media. In a wider sense, Akomfrah's stylistic position ties into the work of the 'Last New Wave', as described by Wollen. Hill sees the major formal preoccupations of Akomfrah and his collective as 'a self-consciousness about the filmmaking process and an emphasis upon film as a medium; a refusal of the conventional mechanics of identification and an encouragement to the spectator to maintain a critical relationship to what is shown on the film screen'.<sup>176</sup> The ideal of engendering a critical distance between spectator and text, and the focus on laying bare the processes of filmmaking, can be seen to constitute a thorough rejection of the apparently closed textual parameters of conventional realist approaches.

However, though *Handsworth Songs* appears to map new terrain in terms of its formal complications of actuality representation, there are many elements of the film's stylistic composition that suggest clearly discernible links with traditions of British realist filmmaking. Again, if we look to the Free Cinema documentaries of the early 1950s, there are numerous formal parallels to be drawn. The image of the clown's head as an abstract symbol to set in motion a re-appropriation of actuality footage, is reminiscent of the haunting mechanical policeman motif in *O Dreamland* which both visually and

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<sup>176</sup> Hill (1999), p. 219.

aurally complicates and disturbs Lindsay Anderson's observation of Margate revellers. In *Handsworth Songs*, 'Jerusalem' is deployed twice. It is first used to accompany images of riots, and later it is spliced with audio archives of Margaret Thatcher speaking on immigration, over 1950s archive footage of the 'Windrush' generation. The use of music as a tool of contrast and meta-narrative (particularly the utilisation of pieces associated with national forms of mythology and imagery), is a strategy used regularly in the Free Cinema films. In *Refuge England* (Robert Vas, 1959), Vas contrasts the grand iconography of central London with charmingly simplistic Hungarian folk songs to characterise the displacement and alienation of his immigrant protagonist. Humphrey Jennings, arguably the greatest influence on Free Cinema, made music a consistently independent vessel of meaning in his films, using its thematic associations to conjoin seemingly distant fragments of imagery from one scene to the next. As we have already seen, Frears and Kureishi also deploy similar practices in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, with the use of 'I Vow to Thee, My Country' providing a bitterly ironic undertone to the scenes of riots at the film's conclusion. While Akomfrah's deployment of 'Jerusalem' achieves similar effects to the use of nationalistic music in the Frears and Kureishi film, there are also numerous echoes to the Free Cinema movement and pre-war documentary traditions associated with the origins of British realism. Indeed, if we view *Handsworth Songs* within the same modernist school as Jarman, further connections can be located. As Wollen writes of Jarman: 'Whereas the mainstream of romanticism has always expressed and consolidated national myths, Jarman subverts them.'<sup>177</sup> This sense of tackling the basis of national mythology is a thematic concern across the canon of

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<sup>177</sup> Wollen (1993), p35.

British realism, and it is certainly significant that it also forms a thematic background to the anti-realism of the likes of Jarman and Akomfrah.

The connections between the oppositional documentaries of Free Cinema, and the work of black experimental filmmakers in the 1980s, are not limited to textual parallels. Akomfrah's Black Audio Film Collective, was joined by the likes of Ceddo and Sankofa, in rejecting the auteurist approaches of mainstream white cinema, and opting for a more communal approach which emphasised the contributions of the wider group rather than the individual. In seeking to map a new cinematic form to articulate diaspora experience, the groups also sought to create new means of production. As Manthia Diawara writes:

Akomfrah described the need for a collective practice in Black Audio's approach to film, as opposed to privileging the director as the sole creative force in a film. The collective approach emphasized the division of labor among the producer, the director, the persons in charge of distribution and publicity, the audience for the film, and so on.<sup>178</sup>

This again chimes with the work of the Free Cinema group in both their rejection of auteurism, and their embrace of a wholly communal approach to filmmaking, which saw

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<sup>178</sup> Manthia Diawara, 'Power and Territory: The Emergence of Black British Film Collectives' in Lester Friedman (ed.), *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started* (London: UCL Press, 1993), p.151-152.



numerous collaborations across their work.<sup>179</sup> Anderson's propagandising of Free Cinema emphasised a rejection of 'auteur theory' and, by extension, an endorsement of the collaborative elements of filmmaking.<sup>180</sup> Despite being the driving polemical force of the movement, Anderson consistently underlined the importance of communality in the philosophical and textual approaches to the films. Thirty years before the Black Audio Film Collective sought to overhaul conventional approaches to actuality by rejecting the institutional practices of the mainstream, the Free Cinema group were engaged in a strikingly similar practice. Of course, that is not to suggest that black experimental film of the period was derivative. In subject matter alone the films marked new terrain for British cinema, and formally they strengthened the modernist impulse in the period, offering the viewer a more antagonistic and complex re-reading of the defining principles of realist cinema. There is a sense in which advancements in form and aesthetics are married with radical socio-political discourses, in a manner hitherto unseen in oppositional British cinema. While 'straight' realism as a medium of expression is largely rejected in the works of the collectives, the persistent evocation of documentary imagery suggests an aspiration to reframe the realist mode's parameters, whilst attempting to maintain its resonance. Yet the most influential factor in the emergence of the black film collectives is deemed to be the sense in which, for a while at least, black British filmmakers were rejecting the formal apparatus of the coloniser:

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<sup>179</sup> For the films of the first Free Cinema programme Anderson worked with John Fletcher on *O Dreamland*, *Momma Don't Allow* was a directorial collaboration between Richardson and Reisz with Fletcher again involved and with Walter Lassally in charge of photography, and *Together* though directed by Mazzetti, was edited by Fletcher and Anderson, and again involved Lassally.

<sup>180</sup> Lindsay Anderson, 'Sequence-Introduction to a reprint' in Paul Ryan (ed.), *Never Apologise: The Collected Writings of Lindsay Anderson* (London: Plexus, 2004), p48.

This remapping of the black British film cultural terrain effectively helped to shift the cultural terms of reference away from the narrow scope of traditional race relations and multiculturalism and towards new ways of conceptualising the role and status of black representation... These films effectively changed the cultural agenda, by demonstrating that it was possible to engage in formal experimentation and to take cultural media intervention beyond the narrow bounds of race relations iconography.<sup>181</sup>

Pines represents the view that where the black experience had previously been related on British screens, its appropriation within the formal codes of the national cinema retarded its potential to achieve the flowering of a genuine cinematic voice for ethnic minorities. As we have seen previously, the tightly bound narrative structures of the social problem cycle saw 'deviant' or 'other' social types or groups either condemned or normalised within the boundaries of the text, and films which related to the black British experience, such as *Sapphire* (Basil Dearden, 1959), *Pool of London* (Basil Dearden, 1951) *Flame in the Streets* (Roy Ward Baker, 1961), were no exception. However, the notion of a limiting race-relations iconography based on the formal codes of realism is complicated by films such as *Pressure* (Horace Ové, 1976) and *Burning an Illusion* (Menelik Shabazz, 1981). Both films operate along the formal codes of what can broadly be

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<sup>181</sup> Jim Pines, 'British Cinema and Black Representation' in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London, BFI: 2001), p.181.

described as social realism, and both represent the kind of bold and imaginative use of the form alongside the conventions of art cinema, which characterise the points of analysis in my study as a whole. Horace Ové's *Pressure*, follows the fortunes of school leaver Tony (Herbert Norville), who, despite his qualifications, finds that his race precludes him from gaining employment. Experiences of police violence against blacks and the realisation of the inherent racism within the British society he initially lauds, radicalises the Tony, and he becomes involved in a black power group. On one hand, the film utilises non-professional actors, location shooting, episodic narrative structures and a documentary aesthetic to provide a clear picture of the socio-political and economic themes that Ové seeks to address, while on the other, dream sequences and lyrical treatments of character in relation to location, deepen the realist surface and offer the viewer a psychological, as well as social, treatment of the black British experience. Similarly, *Burning an Illusion* uses the political radicalisation of its protagonist to survey the inequalities of British society, and like *Pressure*, the film cohesively marries subjective narrative patterns with a documentary aesthetic. Here, the voice-over narration of Pat (Cassie McFarlane), initiates narrative episodes that communicate her burgeoning relationship with Del (Victor Romero), his imprisonment, and her political awakening.

We can therefore understand these films within the established canon of British social realism, and British art cinema. As such, Pines questions their effectiveness in communicating with veracity the experience of the black diaspora. Yet as we have seen, in the first instance the films of the black collectives can be understood within the framework of a wider modernist shift in British oppositional cinema represented by

Jarman, and, in the longer view, can be seen to share parallels with the Free Cinema movement which initiated social realism's vanguard movement, The New Wave. The opposite view on the relationship between form and the black British cinema is relayed by Mark Norfolk in his condemnation of the experimental films, and his celebration of work such as *Burning an Illusion*:

However, as much as the establishment lauded these films with their mix of documentary and drama, they were in reality, inaccessible to the man on the street with their avant-garde artistic style. What the people needed were real stories, that represented their real selves on screen.<sup>182</sup>

This brings to mind more profound questions relating to British realism, and the extent to which form facilitates meaning. The rejection of even the loosest narrative conventions relating to realism, catalyses the modernist films of the 1980s to achieve a much wider potentiality of meanings. However, in converging elements of narrative cogency with art cinema strategies, it can be argued that British social realism achieves an effective marriage of social resonance and universality, with the potential to project meta-narrative lines of inquiry and engagement with its audience.

To widen the terms of this debate, Terence Davies' *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988), is a film that combines a thematic focus that could comfortably be described as social realist, with an expansive formal template which taps into the art cinema and modernist

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<sup>182</sup> Mark Norfolk, *Burning an Illusion* in *Black Film Monthly* (July/Aug 2005, Vol.17, No 31), p.51.

impulses of the decade. Davies' semi-autobiographical treatment of a family oppressed by their abusive patriarch (Pete Postlethwaite) in 1950s Liverpool is a truly stunning treatise on the nature of memory and formative experience. Using a complex and fragmented flashback structure, Davies looks at the individual memories of the family as they recall the profound moments of their lives. Eschewing naturalistic dialogue, meaning is often conveyed through group singing, occasional voice-over, static composition, and symbolic *mise-en-scène*. As such, critical viewpoints have looked to identify the numerous points of departure for the film in relation to the British realist tradition:

Although set in the recent past, the film eschews the realist devices of earlier decades of British cinema. It instead presents antirealist representations as if recognizing the ineffectiveness of traditional British cinematic discourses to combat the historical situation that has resulted in Thatcherism. Like Derek Jarman, Davies recognizes that an alternative British cinema must necessarily involve a different set of visual practices.<sup>183</sup>

As Tony Williams indicates, the film's formal complexities do suggest a self-consciousness of style, which actively encourages the viewer to engage with their own position as observer. To this end, the film develops a number of key visual motifs which

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<sup>183</sup> Tony Williams, 'The Masochistic Fix: Gender Oppression in the Films of Terence Davies' s in Lester Freidman (ed.), *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started* (London: UCL Press, 1993), pp.238-239.

simultaneously facilitate its thematic delivery and act as signifiers of artifice. Chief amongst these is the repeated emphasis upon the threshold of the family home, which is initiated at the start with a static frame on the doorway, as a singing mother (Freda Dowie) comes in and out of the shot. This regularly repeated spatial composition acts as perennial window into the lives of the family, displaying them to the outside, and letting the outside in, and signalling beginnings (weddings) and endings (funerals) whilst persistently foregrounding the spectatorial role of the audience. Davies also uses static framing to establish the photograph-like composition that repeatedly operates as a platform from which the individual flashbacks of the family members are launched. For example, in the opening scenes of the film, the family is in the front room, facing the camera in medium shot. All the characters are stationary, and all are dressed in black mourning wear. A picture of the father is on the wall at the back of the frame, and the stillness of the family and the length of the take see them resemble a photograph. A tracking shot towards the family members sees them disperse, breaking this illusion as the camera continues its movement through to the photograph of the father. The characters' sudden movement comes as a result of Davies' stylistic choice: the forward tracking shot, which immediately identifies the spatial motif with a kind of anti-realist self-consciousness. This understanding of the photograph composition underscores its second deployment: this time the family are smiling in wedding clothes, but again they are still, as if posing. Davies pans across the family, pausing at Eileen (Angela Walsh), who says: 'I wish me dad was here', breaking the formal expectations of the composition, before panning across to Maisie. This time, an off-screen voice (Maisie's) can be heard saying, 'I don't, I bleeding hated him'. This then initiates a brutal memory of Maisie's, in which she is beaten by her father as she scrubs the floor. Here, Davies

uses the established photography motif to signal the family, before utilising subjective devices to initiate a flashback sequence for an individual member of the group, thus setting in motion the fragmented recalled narrative that dominates the film's organisational strategy. As Phil Powrie writes: 'The act of viewing becomes, for the spectator, something like leafing through a photograph album', which reflects the manner in which the photo-like composition provides Davies with the facility to accommodate individuated narrative tracts throughout the film, without compromising the wider focus on the family.<sup>184</sup>

As mentioned, these 'visual practices' indicate a similar critique of pre-existing conventions of narrative cinema to that invoked in the films of Jarman, and the black film collectives. Cause-and-effect is rejected for more associative or formalised codes, which in turn allows for great depth and poetic potentiality. However, Williams' comments on the similarities between Jarman and Davies suggest a definitive break with the tradition of British realism. Again, it is of fundamental importance to understand the progressions of the realist mode, and the departures from it, within the context of pre-existing filmic cycles. The manner in which Davies' film establishes from the outset, an alinear temporal constitution, which engenders recalled narrative frameworks, is not dissimilar to the strategies used by New Wave directors such as Tony Richardson (*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*) and Lindsay Anderson (*This Sporting Life*). In both films, flashbacks are not simply integrated within a classical formation as a

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<sup>184</sup> Phil Powrie, 'On the Threshold Between Past and Present'-'Alternative heritage' in Justine Ashby Justine and Andrew Higson (eds.), *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.318.

storytelling device. Rather, they disrupt the temporal flow of the present time narrative, complicating the boundaries of objectivity and subjectivity and introducing a psychological dimension to their realist appearances. Just as Maisie's voice over signals a break in temporal register, so too the abstract images of Frank (Richard Harris) as a coal miner in *This Sporting Life*, abruptly signal one of the many forays into his internal realm. In the absence of cogent but limiting narrative structures, British social realism has relied on subtly associative parallels and links in the form of repeated compositions and aural signifiers to bind seemingly disparate scenes and episodes, on a symbolic level. Indeed, where Mike Leigh uses slight alterations in the make up of his repeatedly static and formalised compositions to indicate narrative and character shifts, so too Davies initiates connections between scenes based on contrast and comparison which work to deepen our understanding of his thematic approach. For example, the scene in which Eileen gets married to Dave (Michael Starke) is immediately preceded by a flashback to her father, which works to compare both men as symbols of aggressive patriarchy. Later, as Dave's short-tempered and abusive nature is realised, the connection is firmly established. Similarly, when a dying 'father' lies in hospital in solitude, Davies cuts to Tony (Dean Williams), alone in what appears to be a cell, playing his harmonica. Again, the establishment of parallels serves to display the manner in which the father's remembered legacy seeps into his children's existence, both literally and figuratively imprisoning them.

This contextualisation of the aesthetic and formal strategies at work in *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*, can be seen to validate the categorisation of the film as a social realist text. There are, of course, moments of heightened or anti-real imagery, which suggest the



film can be equally viewed, in line with Tony Williams' comments, as one removed from the dominant realist practices in the period. For example, in one of the film's most visually arresting moments, the orchestral theme of *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Henry King, 1955) begins and the frame is consumed by a mass of umbrellas fending off heavy rain, a crane shot reveals cinema posters for *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* and *Guys and Dolls* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1955), Davies then deploys another crane shot across a crowded cinema, before cutting to an intent Maisie and Eileen as they cry in their seats. However, the music remains in the next scene, as we see the *mise-en-scène* dominated by a series of glass frames that are painted white, as, in slow-motion, Maisie's husband, and Tony, shatter through the windows. We soon learn that the two men have suffered an accident at work, which gives the highly expressionistic set-piece narrative justification, yet the fantastical re-interpretation of this 'real' space operates as critique of cinematic representation when it is juxtaposed with the film watching of the previous scene. It is this kind of highly elaborate lyrical episode which leads many to the suggestion that Davies actively eschews the frameworks of realism, yet understood alongside the aspects of the film style and form which conform to the convergent spheres of art cinema and social realism, there is little to suggest that Davies' work, although highly progressive, can be viewed outside the broad conventions of the mode.

Thus, like the black film collectives, Davies, a highly idiosyncratic and autobiographical filmmaker, still works from a formal and aesthetic platform that connects to the traditions of Jennings, Free Cinema and the New Wave. Indeed, far from being a decade in which realism was denounced in favour of apparently liberated modernist forms, what we actually see is a more integrated convergence of oppositional film approaches, which

catalyses the social realist mode through diversification and hybridity. As we saw in the work of Frears and Kureishi, central to this coming together of varying modes of expression is a willingness to embrace the new institutional and aesthetic climate of the period, without compromising the social resonance of pre-existing realist traditions. Moreover, the manner in which Frears and Kureishi develop, and more profoundly integrate the narrative strategies of art cinema, sees a continual 'opening up' of realist film texts on the basis of their ambiguities and the continual defiance of classical conventions.

Alan Clarke is undoubtedly also a product of this convergence, as we see the emergence of an authorial style more conspicuous than any other in the canon of British social realism. Clarke operates clearly as an art cinema auteur, repeatedly drawing attention to both the shortfalls of his medium, and his own mechanisms of expression within the film text. The fact that he achieves this while maintaining an eye for the socio-political themes that underscore his subjects, is testament to the seamless symbiosis between social realism and art cinema, that defines his work and that of other British realist auteurs throughout the post-war period.

For social realism, the 1980s represented a period of vibrant renewal and awakening, rather than a crippling realisation of its shortcomings. Precisely as a product of the new funding arrangements, the fiery theoretical debates and the subsequent flowering of new schools of cinematic modernism, British social realism concretised its relationship to art cinema in order to maintain its relevance in a changing cultural, and socio-political

climate. It is this diversification that ensures the mode's continued progression throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

## **6.0 Contemporary British Realism: Continuation and Fragmentation**

Social realism in the 1980s was defined by an increasing politicisation of themes, and an eclecticism of form. The divisive Tory administration represented a model of conservatism in both cultural and social terms against which the largely left wing British art cinema was able to define itself. The subsequent removal of Margaret Thatcher, and the establishment of the New Labour government in 1997, complicated the simplicity of this ideological division. The implicit assertion of Labour's third way, conflating free market economics with the principles of social democracy, muddied the artistic waters by complicating the terms through which socially conscious cultural products were able to mount definitive political statements.

This complex political climate held great significance for social realism. In one sense, the anti-Thatcher imperative which, for example, had motivated the films of Frears and Kureishi, was removed. There was no longer a pervasive symbol of authoritarianism to oppose. Moreover, the decline of industry in Britain during the 1980s and early 1990s meant that it was becoming increasingly difficult to identify a mass social group through which political concerns could be mounted and articulated. As such, one of the defining characteristics of contemporary British realism has been a return to more domestic narratives, and focuses on individuals or familial groups. As Julia Hallam writes: 'working-class identity is depicted not as the collective political unity of a group in society but as a site for exploring...personal stagnation, alienation and social

marginalisation'.<sup>185</sup> As traditional working-class communities erode and move from industrial communality to post-industrial, service-sector fragmentation, we see a shift in the focus of social realism, where the default focus on working-class representation is forced to undergo significant alteration. As Hallam implies, this focus on 'social marginalisation' finds new currency in the multitude of divisive socio-political issues generated since Labour's return to power. Immigration, crime and the inner city, racism, surveillance culture, sexual alienation, gender politics and political apathy are a sample selection of the themes that find manifestation through realist cinema in the contemporary period. The white working-class, previously the staple of social realism, now sits alongside ever expanding and diversifying groups as an area of focus within the mode. Thus, the 1990s and 2000s have given rise to a proliferation of thematic possibilities for social realist filmmakers, but the mode's differing appearance in the last two decades is catalysed equally through the ever-changing institutional complexion of the British film industry.

Channel 4, which was central to social realism's renaissance in the 1980s, has seen its role in film production steadily diminish in recent years. As Samantha Lay observes:

A new relationship developed between television and film in the 1980s.

However, in the 1990s this 'delicate ecology' was disturbed by changes

wrought by the Broadcasting Act 1990, particularly its impact on Channel

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<sup>185</sup> Julia Hallam, 'Film, Class and National Identity: Re-imagining communities in the age of devolution' pp.261-273 in Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (eds.), *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.261.

4. Under the Act, Channel 4 was made responsible for raising its own advertising revenue. Thus Channel 4 was forced to become more competitive in terms of competing for advertising with the other commercial channels, and because of this it was under pressure to attract more viewers. This meant that gradually over the decade Channel 4 reduced its investment in feature films and targeted the funds it did have available more carefully [...] <sup>186</sup>

Channel 4's lessening commitment to cinema was confirmed beyond doubt in 2002, when FilmFour was re-absorbed within the channel's drama department amid massive budget cuts. Therefore, operating within an increasingly unforgiving and ever-expanding market place, the channel naturally curtailed its commitment to the kind of bold, challenging and risky filmmaking that defined its output in the 1980s. Social realism, as a non-mainstream and uncompromising film style has, to a certain degree, fallen victim to this commercial prioritisation.

However, the changing circumstances of film production in the UK have not spelt the end for social realism. Combining with the thematic shifts associated with the changing political situation in Britain, the institutional alterations and new critical perceptions of the mode have seen it take on an increasingly eclectic appearance in the contemporary period. In one sense, the incompatibility of social realist form with mainstream narrative paradigms has led to a highly successful convergence of social realist subject matter

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<sup>186</sup> Samantha Lay, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit* (London: Wallflower, 2002), p.99.

with other commercially palatable classical models. Profitable films such as *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996), *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) and *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000), have utilised the emotive resonance derived from portrayals of working-class subjects and married it to the universal appeal of underdog scenarios and comedy usually derived from mainstream genres. The successes of the aforementioned films have signalled one way in which social realism can maintain itself in an increasingly aggressive film market. However, the manner in which these commercial social realist hybrids appropriate the narrative ingredients of mainstream cinema sees a natural rejection of the kind of art cinema structures that, as we have seen, have come to define 'purer' forms of social realism since the 1960s. In the continuing output of Mike Leigh and Ken Loach, and with the emergence of Shane Meadows, Lynne Ramsay, Pawel Pawlikowski and Andrea Arnold amongst others, we can detect the maintenance and development of the realist model. Identifying these approaches to social realism in the contemporary period presents a number of propositions, namely that a commercial treatment of actuality can be once again defined against a more artistically challenging and forthright approach to British realism not seen since the late 1950s and early 1960s. The continued success of Loach and Leigh, and the emergence of a new generation of comparable younger filmmakers, has shown that social realism as a bold indigenous art cinema can survive in an industry increasingly motivated by market forces.

It has been suggested that this endurance is largely attributable to the manner in which producers and distributors have emphasised authorship as a marketable concept in realist filmmaking, whereby films are sold on the basis of their artistic credibility to narrower but committed audiences. Lay points to 'the concentration on the director as author with

his or her own unique signature style, themes and concerns' as 'another factor in the marketing of British social realist texts to an 'art house' audience both here and internationally.'<sup>187</sup> Thus, the contemporary period has seen social realist directors, who operate under a broad art cinema umbrella, develop and establish distinct artistic identities for themselves, in the process giving new life to the mode of expression. Indeed, this marketing of the director as author, something still relatively new in the British cinema, has strengthened the case for the wider consideration of British social realism as a viable art cinema. This increases the impetus to view British realism on the basis of its stylistic merits, an acknowledgement displayed by John Hill: 'As realism has become more overtly identified with "*auteurs*", so the degree to which it is reliant upon various forms of aesthetic motivation has also increased.'<sup>188</sup>

Contemporary realism offers many points of interest. At opposite ends of the spectrum we see a commercial treatment of the mode contrasted against an increasingly unique and artistically vibrant 'other' cinema. Both approaches, and many examples in between, make this a crucial period in the development of social realism, and ensure its confirmation as Britain's art cinema.

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<sup>187</sup> Lay (2002), p.109.

<sup>188</sup> John Hill, 'From the New Wave to 'Brit-grit': continuity and difference in working class realism' in Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (eds.), *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.257.



### **6.1 Box Office Social Realism: *The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot***

Having been released just a year apart, *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off* seemed to herald something of a new mood in British cinema and British society. Both films looked at how groups of men, shattered by post-industrial gloom, found new hope in performance, talent and courage. Released three years after *The Full Monty*, *Billy Elliot* differs in its focus on a single eponymous hero, but still attempts to display the way in which redemption can be found in the midst of economic decline. The narratives in all three films show their characters overcoming numerous obstacles to achieve success, despite the harsh economic realities facing their communities (the closure of pits in *Brassed Off*, the miners' strike in *Billy Elliot*, and the demise of Sheffield's steel industry in *The Full Monty*). As such, notable events in recent working-class history are deployed as a backdrop to authenticate and intensify the goal-oriented, linear narratives at the heart of all three films. Crucially, the band win the national competition in *Brassed Off*, Billy gets to dance school and becomes a star in *Billy Elliot*, and the strippers successfully hold a sell-out show at the conclusion of *The Full Monty*. The protagonists in all three films achieve narrative salvation, yet the social conflicts that deliver depth in their stories remain unresolved. As we have seen, by way of contrast, the deployment of art cinema aesthetic and narrative conditions has facilitated the means by which social realist works have resonated outside the bounds of conventional film structure, where open-endedness and ambiguity reinforce the verisimilitude of real locations and social issues. Therefore, it is necessary to highlight the conservative narrative constitution of the commercially successful social realist hybrids, as a means of more thoroughly assessing more oppositional treatments of the mode in the contemporary period.

Despite its classical complexion, *Brassed Off* is by no means upbeat throughout, and makes numerous attempts to keep in check its positive resolution and comedic elements by marrying the depiction of the declining coal industry (and the subsequent effects on the community as a whole), to sub-plots relating to its characters' personal turmoil (Danny's [Pete Postlethwaite] terminal illness, Phil's [Stephen Tompkinson] attempted suicide and the collapse of his home life as a result of debt, and the 'against the odds' relationship between Gloria [Tara Fitzgerald] and Andy [Ewan McGregor]). Indeed, the effort to maintain the film's social realities (the economic and social decline as a result of the mine's closure), whilst holding, at its centre, the fictional pursuit of success in the band competition at its centre, finds symbolic articulation when the triumphant group return to Grimley after reaching the finals only to find that the redundancy vote has been successful. While this apparent conflict between the film's two worlds hints at the unstoppable momentum of negative social forces, in a narrative sense it can be crudely justified, as it represents the final barrier which will be overcome to achieve the film's concluding goal.

When the band taste victory, we see a disarming of the film's potentially resonant elements, as the demands of narrative overtake the potential for an authentic socio-political treatise. Danny miraculously defies doctor's orders and joins the band on stage, (where he delivers a fiery speech lamenting the Tory government's unforgiving treatment of his community - another example of the film's attempt to reconcile an authentic socio-political message within the restraints of fiction), Andy and Gloria put aside their differences and are re-united, and Phil appears to have re-formed his

relationship with his wife, Sandra (Melanie Hill). He asks her 'Are you coming back Sand?' to which she replies, 'I dunno.' Phil jokingly says 'I've got a chair now', and in equally light-hearted tones, Sandra responds: 'It all sounds very tempting!' These resolutions see the goal achievement associated with the success of the band extend to the film's subplots, ensuring that no loose ends are left untied in a narrative sense, despite the realities of the pit closure.

Similarly, the communal struggle faced by the unemployed steel workers in *The Full Monty* is combined with a series of individual narratives that attempt to give human depth to the socio-political backdrop. As in *Brassed Off*, these personal traumas are enveloped glibly into the wider conclusion offered by the completion of the goal at the heart of the film's central narrative. We are led to believe that Gaz's (Robert Carlyle) child support issues can be worked out after his estranged wife attends the strip show with their son. Dave (Mark Addy) appears to have overcome his chronically low self-esteem by deciding to perform at the last minute, while Lomper (Steve Huison), who was suicidal at the film's outset and attempting to come to terms with the death of his mother, achieves salvation by falling in love with Guy (Hugo Speer). The men's problems, all linked to the loss of their jobs and livelihoods, are resolved through their unconvincing integration into the classical narrative's overbearing demand for completion.

On the surface, Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot* distinguishes itself from these social realist comedies through its primary focus on a single character. Yet, like *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, it draws its emotional core from a carefully constructed backdrop of social

and economic decline (in this case the miners' strike), against which it qualifies the conditions for the narrative escape of its central character. However, this focus on individuality does present some complications which are not apparent in Herman's and Cattaneo's films. Billy, the child and brother of two striking miners, is repeatedly foregrounded as 'different' from the supporting male ensemble, both in the family and the wider community. His preference for the feminine dancing, over the more traditionally masculine pursuit of boxing, is the most explicit example of Billy's distance from the communal masses represented by his father and brother and the rest of the striking miners. This conflict between the individual and the communal impulse, which is noticeably absent from the other two films, is given figurative manifestation at numerous points within the film, most notably when Billy's father and brother, Jackie (Gary Lewis) and Tony (Jamie Draven), argue fiercely with Mrs. Wilkinson (Julie Walters) over Billy's desire to continue ballet. Billy runs around the terraced streets to The Jam's 'A Town Called Malice', dancing angrily as he moves through the uniform rows of houses. At the end of the sequence, we see a frustrated and tired Billy banging his fists and kicking against a corrugated iron fence, an explicit attempt to render symbolically Billy's fruitless attempts at emancipation from the narrow confines of his existence.

Despite the emotional power derived from this scene, the film's attempts to interrogate the problematic treatment of the individual in conflict with the oppressed mass is thwarted by the same kind of narrative demands which undermine pursuits of authenticity in *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off*. For example, Billy's relationship with Michael (Stuart Wells), a gay, cross-dressing misfit, is another attempt to contrast him

against the aggressively heterosexual working-class community that initially despairs at his enthusiasm for dance. However, it could be argued that the coupling is evoked as a means of normalising Billy's unconventional pursuit of ballet, given the relationship's deployment within a narrative which ultimately suspends its transgressive elements in order to pursue the emphatic delivery of the protagonist's successful goal completion. As he tells the admiring Michael 'Just because I like Ballet it doesn't mean I'm a puff you know.' This notion is given more credibility when we consider the other ways in which the narrative attempts to contain the problematic individual via community opposition, and by extension, an emasculation and normalisation of Billy's feminine pursuit. When Billy's father comes round to his son's talent and attempts to collect the required funds to send him to London for an audition, he initially sets out to cross the picket line and returns to work. An emotionally charged scene follows in which a tearful Jackie is persuaded by Tony to find another way, and a collection amongst their striking friends enables Billy and his father to travel to London. This ensures that Billy's individualism is sanctioned by the film's implicit socio-political sympathies. Rather than succumbing to the economics and politics of self-interest for salvation, Billy's talent is facilitated by the apparent communal impulse that provides the emotional backbone of the narrative. However, when a jubilant Jackie enters the Miner's Welfare club to share the news of Billy's success ('He did it, he fucking did it!'), he is greeted by his friend who tells him, 'Have you not heard man? Strike's off, the union caved in yesterday.' In this moment, one which echoes the return of the band to Grimley in *Brassed Off*, the social realities of mass economic decline are contrasted against individual happiness. Yet in the next scene, despite the unhappy resolution of this element of the film's focus, we see Jackie and Billy revelling in the latter's success and saying their goodbyes. The

ending of the film, a flash-forwarded postscript in the present day, sees Jackie and Tony at the ballet watching the triumphant Billy, now an adult, starring in *Swan Lake*. By bringing the narrative up to date in such a manner, the potential for interrogation of the film's uneasy housing of individual and communal impulses is lost. The miners' strike, now sixteen years in the past, is represented literally as history. The contrast between Billy's excited emancipation and the stasis of the defeated miners is lost, in favour of a thorough and emphatic conclusion which privileges Billy's goal completion over the film's (now merely) functional evocation of social realism.

What unites these films is an emotive deployment and treatment of authentic working-class subject matter, which ultimately serves to facilitate a more conventional, classical structure. This turn in the development of social realism offers a number of significant points of discussion. With reference to the changing political circumstances of the late 1990s, all three films' presentation of working-class characters reversing the fortunes implied by their economic and social situation, and achieving an alternative means of redemption outside of the traditional structures of mass labour, points to an anticipation or a reflection of the early mood of neophilic optimism which greeted Labour's return to power in 1997. As John Hill writes:

In contrast to the relative pessimism of Loach's films, these films offer a certain utopianism about the possibilities of collective action. [...] they celebrate the recovery, in a post-industrial context, of the collective spirit that such communities have traditionally stood for, even if the shared experience of work which they originally grew out of has disappeared. In

this respect, the idea of working-class community is mobilised less in the service of class politics than as a metaphor or the state of the nation.<sup>189</sup>

In this way, the shifting political narrative of the contemporary period - which called for an end to the divisiveness of the class politics represented by the left-right dichotomy of the 1980s - catalyses an initial cultural move toward a more optimistic reflection of working-class life. Going even further, Clare Monk comments on *The Full Monty*:

*The Full Monty* fantasises a post-industrial Britain in which a flexible former manual workforce can remould themselves, with only temporary pain, into new careers in the creative and entertainment industries so heavily favoured by the nation's image-makers in the late 1990s.<sup>190</sup>

Monk suggests that New Labour's temporary embrace of British culture (symbolised by the rhetoric of 'Cool Britannia'), and perhaps the more substantial aims of the New Deal, to encourage the long term unemployed (often victims of mass industrial decline) to re-train and diversify, find manifestation in the positive and upbeat post-Thatcher narrative proffered in *The Full Monty*. In examining these political parallels, Samantha Lay goes as far to suggest that 'whilst *The Full Monty* takes as its historical point of

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<sup>189</sup> John Hill, 'Failure and Utopianism: Representations of the Working Class in British Cinema of the 1990s' in Robert Murphy (ed.), *British Cinema of the 90s* (London: BFI, 2000), p.183.

<sup>190</sup> Claire Monk, 'Underbelly UK: The 1990s underclass film, masculinity and the ideology of "new" Britain' in Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (eds.), *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.285.

reference the collapse of heavy industries during the Thatcher administrations, it actively works to “heal the wounds” through a Blairite “things-can-only-get-better” optimism.’<sup>191</sup>

In highlighting the extent to which these films reflect shifting political and social values at the end of the 1990s, we are able to draw on the history of British social realism to identify precedents for such a relationship with the discourses of the state. Many critics have commented on the way in which films such as *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off* represent a renewal of previous filmmaking cycles in Britain, that emphasised the depiction of united groups as national metaphors in the face of seemingly insurmountable social forces. As Nigel Mather writes:

I would suggest, [...] that a defining feature of several of the communal/regional narratives produced during the 1990s was a concern to resurrect an earlier tradition of British filmmaking which was topical, provocative and entertaining, and through which writers and directors could draw attention to what was perceived to be a lack of government and collective intervention, aimed at ensuring a reasonable and tolerable standard of living for current-day citizens.<sup>192</sup>

More specifically, Julia Hallam notes:

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<sup>191</sup> Lay (2002), p.104.

<sup>192</sup> Nigel Mather, *Tears of Laughter: Comedy-drama in 1990s British cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p.22.



A hankering for the spirit of Ealing ghosts both these bittersweet comedies, the Ealing of that brief postwar period when a focus on whimsical characters in small communities pulling together for the common good projected an idealised image of a nation united by adversity.<sup>193</sup>

Both critics seem to imply that the types of ensemble-driven, post-war narratives found in Ealing films like *Whisky Galore!* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1949) and *Passport to Pimlico* (Henry Cornelius, 1949), are invoked in films such as *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*. Mather, in particular, finds parallels in the 1990s films to the subtly satirical relationship between the Ealing films and an establishment defined in the mire and bureaucracy of 'Austerity Britain'. However, I would suggest that while both critics are correct to locate precedents for the contemporary films in post-war Ealing output, it is pertinent, in a wider discussion of social realism, to extend the frames of reference.

The type of narrative structure deployed by the aforementioned Ealing films clearly descends from the realist cinema of wartime, in which socially united ensemble casts represent the nation as a whole metaphorically, in the delivery of specific propaganda messages. As we have seen, this treatment of realism, in which its radical potentials are undermined and its universality and relevance emphasised, unquestionably saw the social realist mode temporarily centralised as a mode of address articulating an establishment endorsed world-view. As we have also discussed, what occurs in 1950s cinema is a move away from a kind of broad address (structured around episodic

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<sup>193</sup> Hallam (2000), p.267.

narrative linkages ensconced in the wartime film), to a more taut and classically inflected treatment of social issues. In these social problem narratives, we see social reality evoked merely as backdrop within the cause-and-effect structures of the thriller, thus limiting the opportunity for artistic or political interrogation of form and theme. It is against this background of limiting and highly conventionalised treatments of actuality that an art cinema response emerges in the form of the British New Wave.

This is relevant to a discussion of contemporary social realism because, in the hybrid comedies of *The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot*, we have seen a similar manipulation of social realist form within an ultimately classical structure. Moreover, thematically speaking, we have seen how justification for the resultant conclusive and upbeat resolutions can be derived from an explicitly establishment sphere, in the anticipation and reflection of New Labour. Thus, the climate of realism in the contemporary period can, to some extent, be seen to mirror its formative period in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Social realism, momentarily located within a conservative, classically derived model, creates a point of departure, and the mode is once more re-imagined through a pursuit of alternative art cinema strategies.

## **6.2 Shane Meadows: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Social Realist**

The 1990s and 2000s saw the emergence of a group of disparate but committed realist auteurs, and undoubtedly, at the forefront, stands Shane Meadows. Meadows' short, but so far prolific career, stretches from his feature debut *Twentyfourseven* (1997) to the

recent *Le Donk and Scor-Zay-Eee* (2009), and takes in a total of seven theatrical releases. His films, often co-written with childhood friend Paul Fraser (with the exception of *This is England* [2007] and *Dead Man's Shoes* [2004]), draw on his own experiences repeatedly, and exhibit aesthetic and thematic consistencies that mark Meadows as a paradigmatic auteur.<sup>194</sup> Moreover, this autobiographical dimension, coupled with his films' focus on memory, his rejection of conventional narrative structures and a propensity towards self-consciousness both aesthetically and structurally, maintain and advance the development of social realism as a British art cinema.

Meadows is unashamedly a 21<sup>st</sup> century filmmaker, in the sense that his creative autonomy and personal vision are informed by a wide array of sources. Closer to home, and in keeping with many of the post-New Wave directors already discussed in this study, Meadows is mindful of the influence of British social realism's figureheads:

One of the things that had a big impact on me was Alan Clarke's *Made In Britain*, which was incredible. You see, in England, in the Eighties a lot of filmmakers didn't get funding and had to go into TV. And Mike Leigh, Ken Loach, Alan Clarke, Stephen Frears, all in the Eighties seemed to be making films especially for Channel 4. So as a kid my cinema, I was getting it through the TV. They weren't TV movies, they were great pieces of cinema, yet I was getting access to them [...] When Channel 4

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<sup>194</sup> Fraser contributed 'additional material' to *Dead Man's Shoes*.

first kicked off in Britain, they had a film every week, so you'd have *Made In Britain* or *Walter* or a Ken Loach film.<sup>195</sup>

Here Meadows talks passionately about the institutional and creative genesis of social realism, tacitly placing himself within the tradition maintained by the likes of Clarke, Leigh, Loach and Frears. By Meadows seeking to induct his own work within this canon, we see a strengthening of the discursive bonds that shape social realism as a viable and persistent arm of British culture. This pride in an indigenous filmmaking tradition finds equally significant articulation in another interview, which sees Meadows highlighting the distinctions between British realism and American cinema:

If you look at American telly and at American people when they're talking on f\*cking [sic] shows, there's no humility. It's a film no matter where they are or where they're talking. The President's in a movie: when he talks it's got to have a beginning, middle and an end. The whole thing is just one big f\*cking [sic] farce. This country, because of our reserve, we do, I think, like looking at the reality of ourselves and telling stories about ourselves.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> A, Wilkinson, 'In the Somers Town' <http://www.eyeforfilm.co.uk/feature.php?id=513> [Accessed 29<sup>th</sup> September 2008]

<sup>196</sup> Stephen Applebaum, 'Shane Meadows Interview and Q and A' <http://www.britmovie.co.uk/features/applebaum/meadows01.html> [Accessed 29<sup>th</sup> September 2008]

Meadows contrasts a British reserve that emphasises reality, against a kind of American excess which prioritises storytelling. Crucially, he seems to imply that the kind of narrative that incorporates a clear 'beginning, middle and an end', does not find currency in the British realist mode that he pursues, that rather sees us 'telling stories about ourselves'. While we will discuss Meadows' storytelling approach in greater detail later, it is interesting to note that the type of realist tradition that he sees himself as maintaining in his own work is, for the director, based on a rejection of conventional narrative structures associated with Hollywood, giving further credence to the notion that social realism represents Britain's oppositional art cinema.

Although he references the greats of British realism, Meadows is no cultural nationalist. He underlines his post-modern credentials by evoking Scorsese with equal enthusiasm:

*Mean Streets* was one of the biggest influences on me because I had grown up with a similar group of small-time hoods, but they were in the Midlands and I wanted to make a film about them. I took a lot of inspiration from watching that. Alongside this British realism in my films but then a lot of influence of how Scorsese used music and visuals [sic]. So it goes a little bit beyond the kitchen sink drama hopefully and in *Somers Town* the way I use music throughout it hopefully adds a beauty and a lyricism.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Wilkinson (2008).

Whereas his antecedents in British social realism drew influence from the Czech and French New Waves and Italian neo-realism, Meadows, as the modern cinophile, looks to arguably the most influential auteur of post-classical Hollywood for inspiration. This suggests one of the key factors in the ever-diversifying complexion of British realism in a globalised and digitised age, where directors are fluent in the language of film from beyond the narrow confines of their own national cinema. In this case, Meadows discusses the biographical elements of Scorsese's work as formative, but more specifically, he references the director's stylistic signature as equally influential, which offers a point of entry for a more detailed consideration of Meadows' canon.

Scorsese's use of music is a distinguishing trait in his work. Be it Bernard Herrmann's sparse jazz score in *Taxi Driver* (1976), the use of The Rolling Stones in *Mean Streets* (1973) or the elegiac 'Intermezzo' in *Raging Bull* (1980), Scorsese's choice of soundtrack never merely amplifies for dramatic effect. At its most conspicuous, and often in conjunction with more self-conscious devices such as slow-motion cinematography, non-diegetic sound breaks up narrative and begins to add a separate, but persistently complementary, line of poetic meaning to Scorsese's work. Meadows' Scorsese-inspired pursuit of 'beauty and lyricism' finds articulation through a similar use of music in his own films.

*This is England*, Meadows most successful and critically acclaimed film to date, is set in the early 1980s and is built around the character of Shaun (Thomas Turgoose), a young misfit torn between two gangs: one, a multi-racial skinhead group led by Woody (Joseph Gilgun), and the other, a National Front-inspired crew led by Combo (Stephen Graham).

Music plays a key role in supplementing the progression of the narrative involving Shaun's relationship with both groups, and in articulating wider points about the socio-historical nature of the skinhead movement. After Shaun gets his head shaved and is given a Ben Sherman shirt, Meadows initiates a montage sequence presented in slow-motion, capturing the group in a variety of naturalised compositions (playing football, congregating under a bridge) and more artificial set-ups (tracking shots in side profile, and walking towards the camera). The sequence is set to Toots and the Maytals' cover of 'Louie Louie'. Later in the film, a similar montage shows Shaun with Combo's gang. This time Meadows sets the images to Ludovico Einaudi's 'Fuori Dal Mondo'. In opting to present Shaun's integration into each group through a comparative visual composition, Meadows draws our attention to the difference in the aural elements of each scene. The first sequence, displaying an altogether more happy moment in Shaun's summer, taps into the historical authentication provided by the use of a popular ska act, Toots and the Maytals, who were, at the time of the film's setting, highly popular amongst the racially-united skinhead sub-culture. A black Jamaican band's cover of a black American song, made famous by a white American band, seems a perfect signifier of the racial harmony that Meadows seeks to evoke in his depiction of the positive aspects of skinhead culture. The use of a contemporary classical artist's work in Einaudi has markedly differing connotations. The music's haunting and sparse complexion reverses the joyous atmosphere of the initial montage. Here we are asked to view Combo's group in direct opposition to Woody's. Indeed, throughout the film the classical score frames Shaun's most harrowing moments, and accompanies much of his flirtation with the extremist politics of Combo and his friends.

In this case, we have seen how Meadows utilises Scorsese-esque visual and aural signatures as a means of transcending the mere progression of narrative information in his films. Here we see Meadows utilising style to communicate multiple meanings, in common with the art cinema paradigm. Moreover, this example shows us one of the many ways in which Meadows foregrounds his authorial presence; the musical interlude with the shots of faces directed towards the camera and slow-motion, not only interrupts the realist diegesis and underlines a sense of artifice, but also establishes Meadows as the controlling eye, clearly and conspicuously drawing the viewer into his symbolic schema.

In Meadows' first film, *Twentyfourseven*, we see a similar stylistic break in rhythm. As the boxing trainer Darcy (Bob Hoskins) takes his auntie Iris (Pamela Cundell) to ballroom dancing, once again slow-motion is used. The soundtrack veers between diegetic and non-diegetic realms as the pair dance. Meadows' own comments on the sequence are particularly significant:

The dance sequence shows that in the same way he gets in with the lads, he also pays respect to his auntie's generation. If it had just stayed at normal speed, it wouldn't have meant much. But with the slow motion, it says, "hold on a minute". This dance takes you back to the 50s, it gives you a link to where Darcy comes from. What may be a crappy village hall



would at one time have been beautiful, and the only way I could show that was through my camera.<sup>198</sup>

This quotation is telling on a number of levels. Firstly, Meadows justifies the change in register on a narrative level, both contrasting and comparing Darcy's treatment of his auntie to his engagement with the lads in the gym. Secondly, and most crucially for our understanding of Meadows as an art cinema auteur, he frames the move to slow-motion as a means of partially suspending the film's established rhythm, in order to invite the viewer to pause and consider. Simultaneously, this emphasises his authorial presence and empowers the viewer to decode the images on their own terms. In suggesting that he wished to evoke a sense of history or memory in his representation of the dance sequence, Meadows re-invokes a key thematic strand in the film. In a wider sense, this attempted engagement with issues of personal and public memory can be understood as another aspect of Meadows' delivery of thematic and structural elements commonly associated with art cinema.

*Twentyfourseven*, in spite of its apparently simplistic central tale of a benevolent boxing trainer who starts up a gym in order to get disenfranchised young men off the streets, actually exhibits a highly ambiguous temporal form. The film begins with Tim (Danny Nussbaum), walking his dog near an abandoned railway line. He finds a tramp asleep in the carriage, who it soon becomes clear is Darcy. We then see Danny putting Darcy in the car and taking him to his house, where he puts him to bed. As Darcy sleeps, Danny

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<sup>198</sup> Geoffrey McNab, 'The Natural' in *Sight and Sound* (vol. 18, n. 3, March 1998), p.16.

leafs through some of the items he found on Darcy: a look at a letter sets in motion Darcy's voice over, which soon becomes the starting point for the central narrative to unfold. Firstly the voice-over introduces Darcy himself ('I was a forgotten thirty something in the 80s'), before cutting back to Tim reading the letters. We then hear Darcy talking about the fallacy of housing developments over a sequence of two high-angled static shots of estates. We then see him introducing members of Tim's family, who clearly live in the houses highlighted in the establishing shots. After this, Darcy introduces us to Tim's friends, and talks about youth unemployment. It is now clear that Tim's role in the framing device has ceased, as Darcy becomes the central narrative agent. Already, this presents complications, as Darcy outlines his credentials as a force for good in the community, while by now the audience is explicitly aware of his eventual demise. Soon after this introduction, Meadows initiates a signature montage to music as jump cuts and fast close shots accompany Van Morrison's 'Wild Night', and we watch Darcy shave and dress in front of a mirror, represented by the camera itself. Interspersed with this sequence are grainy home-video images of a small boy (intended to be Darcy) in 1950s clothing. Thus, Meadows initiates multiple narrative voices in the opening (firstly Tim's, then Darcy's and finally with the self-reflexive montage sequence, his own). These conspicuous stylistic shifts represent Meadows himself asking us to 'hold on a minute'. Moreover, the introduction of the home video footage sets in motion another temporal register, and thematically re-enforces the senses of fragmentation, memory, and history in Tim's own piecing together of Darcy's narrative.

In rejecting conventional linear narrative structures, Meadows creates viable conditions in which to present the film's downbeat and open-ended narrative episodes. As

mentioned, from the outset Darcy's homelessness and alcoholism makes us aware that he has experienced personal failure, and at the film's conclusion this is confirmed in his death. This enables Meadows to present the eventual demise of the boxing club without the trappings of suspense or melodrama. Similarly, Darcy's fruitless pursuit of a female shop worker is not weighed down in the expectations of conventional romance. Here art cinema structures of story telling, coupled with a visible authorial presence, enable the viewer to engage with the film's themes on numerous levels of connotation, in marked contrast to the ultimately streamlined and tightly woven narratives of the aforementioned social realist comedies.

Temporal and narrative ambiguity (and a resultant focus on memory), are equally crucial in Meadows' *Dead Man's Shoes*. The film is centered on Richard (Paddy Considine), a soldier who returns to his hometown in Derbyshire to seek vengeance for the brutal bullying of his mentally disabled brother, Anthony (Tony Keibel), at the hands of a group of small-time gangsters. Like *TwentyFourSeven* an explicit emphasis on the importance of memory is established early on. The opening scenes intercut shots of a grown-up Richard and Anthony walking through vast rural spaces, with Cine 8 footage of the pair playing as children. This immediate tension between temporal registers of past and present sets in motion the film's persistent interrogation of the nature of memory.

This is particularly evident in the manner in which flashbacks are presented throughout. A black and white, handheld, and often aurally distorted style is assumed for the presentation of memorial images. These fragments persistently impinge on the present

time narrative, showing recollections of abuses perpetrated upon Anthony. Early on in the film, when Herbie (Stuart Wolfenden) discloses to Tuff (Mark Sadot) and Soz (Neil Bell), that he thinks he may have encountered 'Anthony's brother', Meadows cuts to such a flashback, showing the gang forcing Anthony to take drugs. We then cut to Richard, which, given his stated desire for revenge, suggests that he too is in some way privy to the memory. The use of a technique implying the presentation of subjective memory but used to show perspectives shared by numerous characters (one of whom [Richard], could not rationally draw on such a recollection) thwarts the audience's desire for narrative rationality. Indeed, at the film's conclusion, when Richard asks his final target, Mark (Paul Hurstfield), to kill him, black and white images in the style we have come to associate with the flashbacks, penetrate the present time diegesis. Snatches of Mark with his children, and of Richard with Mark's children, shots of Anthony scared and alone (in the wake of abuse by the gang) and of Richard committing the murders that have brought him to this point, are all shown. This collage of memories, which cannot all be logically sourced to either character, serve to heighten the sense of temporal ambiguity at the film's climax, the point at which resolution is sought.

The revelation that Anthony is ultimately revealed as having died, further contributes to the illogical nature of the film's memorial register, undermining the authenticity of the many exchanges and compositions involving Anthony and Richard. This brings to mind greater subjective ambiguities, suggesting Anthony's presence as a form of psychological manifestation on Richard's part, or as a ghost or fantastical 'other' figure. The latter suggestion feeds into a wider sense of the film's generic eclecticism. As we have seen with Meadows' appropriation of elements of Scorsese's style, he is not afraid

to derive motifs from variety of cinematic discourses, as elements of the revenge thriller and ghost story in *Dead Man's Shoes* underpin the director's social realist template. Indeed, the film's maintenance of a persistently complex art cinema narrative structure justifies Meadows' conflation of more generic quotations within the wider sphere of self-consciousness, rendered justifiable by the persistence of the director's conspicuous authorial presence.

Thus, in his incorporation of motifs from outside the boundaries of social realism, Meadows breaks from many of the form's established traditions. Yet by maintaining and developing an authorial signature, and by repeatedly rejecting the conventions of classical narrative, Meadows contributes to the development of the British art cinema.

His films, all made on location, all involving many non-professional or unheard of actors, and with dialogue developed through workshopping and improvisation methods, display clear links with established realist auteurs such as Mike Leigh and Ken Loach. More pertinently, we can locate in Meadows a sense of visual poetry and symbolism in his representation of space that has long been a feature of many of the realist cycles and filmmakers' work already discussed in this study.

When Meadows alters the visual grammar of a particular scene, his request for us to 'hold on a minute' can be readily associated with his presentation and deployment of characters within musical montages, accompanied by slow-motion and/or stressed cutting. However, it can be just as easily related to his presentation of place and landscape. For example, at the emotional peak of *A Room for Romeo Brass* (1999), after

Romeo (Andrew Shim) comes to see his former friend Gavin (Ben Marshall), with the mentally unstable Morell (Paddy Considine) in tow, Meadows cuts to a high-angled shot of the town at night. Crucially, high-speed cinematography is adopted, as the lights race and flash below the camera. This pause in the realist diegesis not only re-affirms directorial presence, but also invites the viewer to reflect on the emotive core of the narrative by momentarily re-contextualising its elements. In a similar fashion, his recent *Somers Town* (2008) displays a persistent fascination with the structures and spaces of its eponymous subject in North London. The static black and white foregrounding of buildings and green spaces, both suggests a self-conscious reflection of the protagonist Marek's (Piotr Jagiello) fascination with photography, and a pronounced attempt to aestheticise urban space in a way which complicates the mere facilitation of narrative, as Meadows himself suggests in explaining his choice to film in black and white:

I went to London - I'd not really shot outside of the Midlands before. I was very excited but when I actually started taking photographs of the various locations, because there was a massive range of buildings from a massive range of times we ended up with a huge variation in colour. So I started to worry that it wasn't going to look great. I had some of the photographs converted into black and white and suddenly it started to look like the same place rather than this mish-mash.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Wilkinson (2008).

Here, Meadows reveals a fascination with space and its presentation, in that he demonstrates a desire to manipulate and re-configure the exposition of (in this case) the buildings around Somers Town. His wish to engender a sense of uniformity and consistency seems to be motivated on purely aesthetic grounds.

From this, we can derive another example of Meadows, the conspicuous author, re-shaping and re-constituting images and thus inviting interpretations which transcend literal meaning. For example, in *This is England*, the initial foregrounding of Shaun's alienation is not only shown in the bullying he experiences at school. In a typical sequence set to music, we see Shaun in a variety of symbolically fertile compositions: alone on a bike framed frontally, staring in the window of a toy shop, alone in a field, firing stones from a catapult, sitting in an abandoned rowing boat, riding his bike through a desolate warehouse, and throwing stones into the sea. These images, accompanied by the music, see Meadows actively courting the audience's attention, serving to invite us to view the sense of loneliness and despair that Shaun feels on a figurative, as well as a narrative level.

At this point, we can begin to re-assert the lineage of British social realism previously mentioned. As we saw in relation to the critical debates which surrounded the British New Wave, similar poetic motifs underscore films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960), *A Taste of Honey* (Tony Richardson, 1961), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962) and *This Sporting Life* (Lindsay Anderson, 1963). Symbolic meaning and/or a sense of authorial self-consciousness can be derived from sequences and compositions such as the long-held

punctuation shots which survey urban space (static aerial shots of Arthur's [Albert Finney] street and house in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* for example), high-angled long shots which have the protagonist(s) spatially removed from the town or city below (evidenced in the four-shot progression as Frank, [Richard Harris] looks out over the city in *This Sporting Life*), and/or relatively long sequences to music which frame characters against their environments and often move beyond the narrative imperatives presented by dialogue (such as Colin's [Tom Courtenay] runs through the woods in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and Jo's [Rita Tushingham] walks around the canals in *A Taste of Honey*). The aforementioned treatments of space and landscape in the films of Meadows, and his conspicuous deployment of characters set against poetically charged environments, chimes with the New Wave directors' propensity towards aesthetic features which transcend narrative function, as John Hill writes: 'a characteristic of the British 'new wave' is its deployment of actions and, especially, locations which are ostensibly non-functional, which only loosely fit into the logic of narrative development.'<sup>200</sup> As we have seen, the same can undoubtedly be said of Meadows' treatment of narrative, and in both cases we can see how this 'non-functional' aesthetic programme works in a wider sense to emphasise meaning on a meta-narrative level, in common with a freer art cinema model that offers up a wider array of meaning than the tightly woven narratives of conventional cinematic address.

To extend the parallels between Meadows and the New Wave directors, we must once more look to Higson's and Hill's criticisms of 'kitchen sink' realism's pursuit of poetic

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<sup>200</sup> John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963* (London: BFI, 1986), p.129.



realism. For John Hill, the type of compositions mentioned previously compromise the pursuit of realism, and over-emphasise the role of the director:

[...] the style and iconography employed by the British 'new wave' is obtrusive; despite the claim to realism, the directorial hand is not hidden in the folds of the narrative but 'up front', drawing attention to itself and the 'poetic' transformation of its subject-matter. The implicit statement, 'this is reality', is so transformed into a stylistic assertion of a controlling eye/I.<sup>201</sup>

With regard to the New Wave, we have seen how understanding the works which constitute the cycle under the umbrella of art cinema enables us to find justification for the conspicuous presence of the author in these apparently 'obtrusive' motifs. Moreover, we have also seen, in relation to Meadows' films, a similar foregrounding of artistic self-consciousness. However, what is perhaps most limiting in Hill's criticism is the implication that this repeated display of the authorial hand engages a negative position of control, and by extension manipulation. Higson develops this point to interrogate the position of the viewer:

The spectator of the 'kitchen sink' film is in a privileged position, privy both to the interior monologue of the figure in the city, and to the master-shot, the all-embracing view of the city from the outside. This position of visual mastery is also a position of class authority [...] It is a position of

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<sup>201</sup> Hill (1986), p.132.

mastery to which the working-class protagonist of the 'kitchen sink' film has only a limited access [...]<sup>202</sup>

Here Higson suggests that the spectator, and by extension the director, locate the protagonist in a narrow and impenetrable social sphere, in which the character(s), and the social group they represent are aestheticised in an entirely one-sided process of visual and authorial fetishism. Both viewpoints seem to emanate from a concern with the sociological dimensions of working-class representation. In seeking to represent working-class life poetically, the directors of the New Wave (all of whom were middle-class), open themselves to charges of class superiority and manipulation. Roy Armes summarises this evaluation: 'Anderson, Reisz and Richardson in fact follow the pattern set by Grierson in the 1930s: the university-educated bourgeois is making 'sympathetic' films about proletarian life, not analysing the ambiguities of their own privileged position.'<sup>203</sup> These class-based criticisms of the New Wave contained within Hill's and Higson's interrogation of aesthetic features, limit the potential to engage with social realism as an art cinema form, given the apparent objective to view the films from a sociological, rather than formal or aesthetic perspective.

However, comparing Shane Meadows' work to the New Wave does offer an alternative means of understanding social realism on a stylistic basis. While the New Wave

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<sup>202</sup> Andrew Higson, 'Space, Place, Spectacle: Landscape and Townscape in the 'Kitchen Sink' film' in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Continuum, 1996), p.150.

<sup>203</sup> Roy Armes, *A Critical History of British Cinema* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.234.

directors' attempts to render their working-class subjects poetically can be seen to be lacking credibility given their own social background, it is impossible to level such a criticism at Meadows. With the exception of *Somers Town*, all of Meadows features have been set in and around the working-class communities in the East Midlands from which he hails, and many of the films relate directly to his own personal history.<sup>204</sup> As the director states: 'Maybe you don't have to make a film about a genre, maybe you can make a film about your own life'.<sup>205</sup>

In sharing the New Wave's lyrical treatment of realist subject matter, and defying the apparent sociological connotations of such an enterprise, Meadows' work shows us that we can view the traditions and development of British social realism on a textual level, which in turn encourages an understanding of the mode within an art cinema sphere. Meadows' films confirm that social realism, when it emanates from an apparently authentic voice, still seeks to frame its subjects and environments in a way that encourages a variety of meanings outside the immediate. In highlighting this comparison, we can no longer point to the limiting, sociologically inclined analysis of realist texts, without first considering aesthetic motivation, or the propensity towards the poetic and the figurative in numerous cycles and filmmakers associated with British social realism.

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<sup>204</sup> *A Room for Romeo Brass* is inspired by Meadows' relationship with his co-writer and childhood friend Paul Fraser. *This is England* is partly inspired by Meadows' brief, adolescent flirtation, with skinhead culture.

<sup>205</sup> S.F. Said, 'Filmmakers on Film: Shane Meadows on Mean Streets' <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3582670/Filmmakers-on-film-Shane-Meadows-on-Mean-Streets.html> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2008]

To re-locate our discussion of Meadows within the context of contemporary realism, Meadows' development of the realist mode, as well as his maintenance of its key tropes, represent a blueprint for the continued survival and progression of social realism. As we have seen, the nuances of realist expression can be analysed and judged most acutely when compared to a widely-subscribed but limiting mainstream entertainment cinema. Just as Meadows emerges as a new voice with a distinct style, as an alternative to a dominant popular realist paradigm, so too other realist auteurs have arisen, sharing with Meadows an ability to re-shape the wide parameters of social realism, whilst asserting their own unique voices.

### **6.3 New Auteurs: Andrea Arnold, Lynne Ramsay and Pawel Pawlikowski**

In grouping Meadows alongside Andrea Arnold, Lynne Ramsay and Pawel Pawlikowski, I am not attempting to imply that the new British realist auteurs in some way represent a second New Wave. Although they stand in marked contrast to a conventional mainstream, and they continue to emphasise art cinema credentials, there is no shared polemical or institutional impetus (such as that evidenced in the New Wave), and each director emerges from a different geographical and social background. However, the aforementioned filmmakers are united on the basis that each one works innovatively within the realist form, whilst seeking to emphasise their own artistic signatures. Yet we are also able to discern identifiable traits across their work, that not only find parallels with their contemporaries, but also relate to the persistent appearance of visual motifs and iconography across the realist canon as a whole. For example, the poetically charged treatments of landscape and environment seen in the work of Shane

Meadows can also be located within the limited feature film work of the three directors that come under consideration in this section. Meadows consistently engages with such aesthetic configurations, which in turn can be traced back to the work of the New Wave directors and the documentary movement before them. It is crucial to note here that the class-based criticisms interrogated by myself in relation to Meadows, and previously associated with the New Wave, also find no currency when applied to the treatment of space and environment in the work of other contemporary realist voices. Like Meadows, Lynne Ramsay's two feature films *Ratcatcher* (1999) and *Morvern Callar* (2002), were both filmed in and around locations familiar to the director from childhood. Similarly, Ramsay repeatedly attaches symbolic levels of meaning to environment and landscape in a conspicuous manner. As we will see when surveying Pawliwoski's work he too, foregrounds location as a figurative vessel, yet unlike Meadows and Ramsay he maintains an outsider's perspective. Originally hailing from Poland, one senses that he is insulated from debates relating to class fetishism in the UK. Commentaries upon a putative insider's or outsider's approach are significant in that they underline the limiting nature of debates which first look to social discourses rather than aesthetic understandings of artistic motivation, which instead can reveal the shared motifs across the generations of social realist directors that recur in spite, and not because of, specifics of social background. As we will see by looking more closely at Lynne Ramsay's feature films, by focusing on the textual and visual dimensions of her work rather than the socio-political connotations, we uncover a bold and innovative purveyor of realist form.

Both *Ratcatcher* and *Morvern Callar* are distinguished by an unerring attention to visual details which bear little or no relation to narrative delivery. Instead, they are evoked - like the slow-motion montages in *Meadows* - as poetic invitations for the viewer to engage with wider discourses, distinct from the immediacy of story and character. In *Morvern Callar*, for example, Morvern (Samantha Morton) takes her boyfriend's body to an isolated rural space, and whilst she pauses to wash her hands in a river, Ramsay goes in for a close shot of insects shuffling through thick mud. A few scenes earlier, Morvern, in her role as supermarket worker, inspects a carrot. Again, a close shot brings our attention to a vivid detail, this time a maggot crawling around the hole in the vegetable. These moments, divorced from a heavy-handed compulsion to narrativise their significance, are offered in order for the audience to contemplate their integration on a wide variety of levels. In *Ratcatcher*, when James (William Eadie) first encounters Margaret Anne (Leanne Mullen), a close shot picks up a graze on the girl's knee, followed by another, closer shot (now James' point-of-view), as Margret Anne asks, 'Do you want to touch it?' In an interview with *Sight and Sound* Ramsay justifies the scene:

I'm very interested in focussing on details and making audiences see things they don't normally see. What I do a lot in *Ratcatcher* is frame something so that it's what you don't see that's important. I try to be economical, to show the bare minimum and leave the rest to the imagination. Maybe that makes the film harder for audiences but I think it makes it a more rewarding experience, creating a kind of mystery and tension.

That close up of Margaret Anne's knee reminds people of childhood, but it also says something about her character as well. From that tiny little detail, that close-up of her body. I think you understand that she's a bit brutalised herself.<sup>206</sup>

Ramsay's words reveal much about the intentions of her style. The notion of empowering the viewer's 'imagination' is crucial in our understanding of the way these kinds of self-conscious visual motifs function in social realism, in liberating poetic and symbolic expression from the narrow boundaries of narrative linearity and opening them up to subjective potentials. In mentioning the manner in which the focus on the knee can be understood within the context of the viewers' own childhoods, whilst simultaneously suggesting how its significance can be located in a more conventional sense as a reflection of character, Ramsay articulates the way a multitude of meanings can be derived from such compositions.

Ramsay's preference for bold imagery over conventional narrative reaches its arresting peak when a bored James takes a bus to the end of the line, and finds himself in a wide open suburb, which contrasts with the cramped, litter-infested tenements of his own community. James stumbles across a newly built, uninhabited house, and enthusiastically plays in it. He enters a room with a large window facing out to a vast cornfield. A gentle pan forwards follows behind him as he runs out to the field. Once outside, Ramsay frames her subject with a handheld camera, punctuating takes with jump cuts as he runs around, with the last shot of the sequence holding him stationary in

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<sup>206</sup> Liese Spenser, 'What are you Looking at?' in *Sight and Sound* (vol. 9, n. 10, October 1999), p.18

medium shot as he looks towards the camera. Like the close shots in *Morvern Callar*, and the previously mentioned foregrounding of the knee in *Ratcatcher*, this sequence can be understood in numerous ways. Of course, there are clear links to James' character development and Ramsay's sparse narrative. The new house and open spaces represent something of a dream scenario for the film's protagonist as his family waits on the council list. Yet the images also invite interpretation as collages of memory to be engaged with on symbolic levels by the audience. The absence of dialogue and the expansive nature of the space encourage identification with childhood experience, representing a figurative blank canvas, as Ramsay herself implies in relation to the knee shot. Moreover, the jump cuts and James' look towards the camera, not only imply the kind of self-consciousness normally associated with art cinema, but also reflect a photographic treatment of memory and image in their stunted and disruptive rhythm, snatching at subjectively rendered moments.

In *Morvern Callar* we see a similarly poetic summation of the film's thematic preoccupations. Following the successful agreement of her book deal, Morvern and her publishers walk around the Spanish town in which they are staying. Quite suddenly, and with no recourse to narrative justification, Ramsay has Morvern in slow-motion (with little cutting and only the atmospheric sounds of birds and insects as accompaniment) walking through a Spanish burial ground. No mention is made of this in her engagement with the publishers before or after, and the sequence seems to be developed through a wholly different register to that which frames their exchanges of dialogue. Here, symbolic interpretation is once more available. The image of a contented and liberated Morvern, moving through a space housing dead people, immediately evokes notions of



emancipation, self-determination, and mortality, concepts that underpin the film's minimal narrative programme. In a wider sense, the sequence can again be understood as a moment which invites reflection, and an absorption into the film on a more subliminal level of reception. As Duncan Petrie notes in relation to *Ratchacher*: 'The central force of *Ratchacher* is in the access it provides into an emotional landscape characterised by significant places, objects and interactions, forcing the viewer to look, listen, to feel and ultimately to understand.'<sup>207</sup> Taking this into account, the representations of space, objects, and closely observed detail must be understood on a figurative level, in which the image and its multiple connotations outweigh literal engagements with story and character. In an interview with Geoff Andrew, Ramsay underlines the manner in which form and style shape her work, at the expense of more conventional approaches:

GA: In your shorts, and *Morvern Callar*, you seem happy to tell your stories without recourse to much dialogue. You use the images and the sounds to tell your stories.

LR: I love to see great dialogue in the cinema but I hate to see "Film TV". When I go to the cinema, I want to have a cinematic experience. Some people ignore the sound and you end up seeing something you might see on television and it doesn't explore the form.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Duncan Petrie, *Screening Scotland* (London: BFI, 2000), p.216.

<sup>208</sup> Geoff Andrew, 'Lynne Ramsay' <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2002/oct/28/features> [Accessed 1st December 2008]

Tacitly, Ramsay seems to suggest that the experience of watching her films encourages a sensory response, in which form and meaning must be interrogated more profoundly than in more mainstream cinematic paradigms. Once again, we see how realist directors are adopting increasingly idiosyncratic approaches to their subject matter, which invite complex responses from their viewers. The sense of meaning beyond the immediate, of the conspicuous author and their self-aware treatment of form within the realist paradigm, is equally apparent when discussing one of Ramsay's most distinctive contemporaries, Pawel Pawlikowski.

Like Ramsay and Meadows, Pawlikowski works within a realist mode, focusing on marginalised characters in real locations, applying episodic narrative strategies, and insisting on underplayed, often improvised dialogue. In common with Meadows and Ramsay, he can be understood to assert a clear authorial presence, marked by a pervasive maintenance of art cinema inflection. Indeed, he too establishes a vivid platform of meaning through non-narrative foregrounding of environment, space and location, working in a kind of associative union with the minimal story element of his films. *Last Resort* (2000), his first feature film, focuses on Tanya (Dina Korzun) and Artyom (Artyom Strelnikov), a Russian mother and son pair who reside in Margate along with newly arrived fellow immigrants. The film primarily concerns itself with Tanya's ultimately successful attempt to escape, helped by Alfie (Paddy Considine). Tanya and Artyom are placed in a council flat overlooking both the Kent coast, and the disused 'Dreamland' theme park. This enables Pawlikowski to frame both the flat itself as a powerful motif from the outside, and the perspective from inside looking out. As

Iain Sinclair notes, Pawlikowski's treatment of space in this manner is crucial to the film's rhythmic and emotional pattern:

The fictional element is challenged by a number of stunning wide-angle long shots. Views from the tower block over the spectral elegance of the curved bay, the vestigial pier, or down on the out-of-season funfair. This split consciousness – chillingly beautiful glimpses of the actual cut against human pantomime – gives *Last Resort* its structure.<sup>209</sup>

To develop Sinclair's point, we can derive a multitude of thematic and formal patterns from Pawlikowski's treatment of his symbolically fertile seaside location. There is a profound sense in which the often prolonged and static treatment of landscape enables the film to assume a consistent, but subdued sense of rhythm. This amplifies and gives poetic articulation to the frustration and despair of Tanya and her son, establishing a viable emotional structure in which character generated feeling and sensibility is regularly re-imagined in visual terms. Moreover, in punctuating scenes of dialogue with frequent, silent environmental shots, Pawlikowski maintains a clear distance between observer and observed, which enables the expressive treatment of external space to be understood on separate terms to the depiction of character.

This sense of an expressive but cogently deployed structure is evidenced in a series of scenes when Tanya and Artyom arrive in Margate. As the pair enter their tower block flat for the first time, we cut to an external shot of the building, taken from a low angle

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<sup>209</sup> Iain Sinclair, 'The Cruel Seaside' in *Sight and Sound* (vol. 11, n. 3, March 2001), p.18.

looking upwards. There then follows a static internal shot from the back of the room as the pair cross the threshold, then a cut to a perspective in the doorway as Tanya tries to make a phone call, which precedes a point-of-view perspective from the window looking over to the beach and the sea front. There is then a cut to Artyom with his face pushed against the window (confirming ownership of the point-of-view), followed by another shot from the window which this time surveys the theme park with a sign conspicuous in the *mise-en-scène*, stating 'Dreamland Welcomes You'. Already, a wide variety of meanings can be derived from the interplay between external and internal spaces. The low-angled shot of the building, without point-of-view, emphasises its imposing stature, with the stasis of the framing hinting at the stasis of existence within the space (a notion re-established in the static foregrounding of the flat's interior). When we assume Artyom's point of view, Pawlikowski establishes a distinction between a subjectively motivated perspective, and the objectively rendered external shots, building on the outside-looking in and inside-looking out dichotomy that is central to the twin concepts of fatalism and imprisonment which pervade Tanya and Artyom's early experience in Margate. Moreover, in establishing a rhythmic patterning between the inside of the flat and the views outside, Pawlikowski taps into the vast figurative potentials of the council flat and its paradoxical combination of a reality of incarceration (manifested in the internal space) with an illusion of escape (mapped out in the vast expanses visible from the top, looking down and across).

This figurative blending of environment, observation and perspective permeates the next few scenes. As Artyom and Tanya walk through a disused shopping precinct towards a telephone box, Pawlikowski frames them from above. Coming so soon after the

interplay of external and internal shots associated with the flat, this distanced and almost condescending perspective could see us ally it with an imprisoned observer just like Artyom a few scenes before, or more ominously an authority figure, in keeping with the film's treatment of Margate and its suggestions of control and order.

Following the phone call, Pawlikowski cuts to an image of the flat at night. This time the building entirely consumes the frame, removing it from its physical context and surroundings, and inviting interpretations of its personifying qualities in a similar way to its low-angled framing earlier in the film. Tanya then meets an online pornographer to discuss a job. The delivery of this narrative information precipitates another 'pregnant pause' in the form of an eight-second-long take of the tower in medium shot, its stillness only threatened by the sounds and movement of seagulls circling the structure. In immediately following a moment of dramatic significance with a prolonged focus on an object now clearly associated with the film's symbolic realm, Pawlikowski reasserts his authorial presence, and marks this static and meditative quality of his landscape treatment as a signature motif. This self-conscious inflection is of course augmented by the structural and expressive functions offered by the shot, providing continued evidence of the film's figurative rendering of its character's internal realms.

Pawlikowski's next feature, *My Summer of Love* (2004), centres on the relationship of two girls, Mona (Natalie Press) and Tamsin (Emily Blunt), during a hot summer in North Yorkshire. Working-class Mona, struggling to cope with her ex-convict brother Phil's (Paddy Considine) born-again religious fervour, is manipulated and drawn into a web of lies by public-school girl Tamsin. As in *Last Resort*, Pawlikowski places great

emphasis on the figurative potentials of landscape, played out in the recurrence of expansive and vivid visual motifs. Aerial shots of Todmorden (the town in which the film is set), New Wave-esque compositions incorporating the girls on a hill overlooking the town, repeated static long takes of the pub in which Phil and Mona live, and most profoundly, a valley upon which Phil and his followers erect a large crucifix, all suggest an attempt to impose supplementary levels of meaning on the environments which the film's characters inhabit.

As we have seen, Pawlikowski's use of imagery in both *My Summer of Love* and *Last Resort*, is distinguished by a starkness of *mise-en-scène* that encourages the application of meaning:

The world in the film is a little abstract. I wanted a more timeless and elemental world, one in which the sort of emotions I'm interested in could occur. The landscape I'm talking about has little to do with the surface of contemporary Britain, where we are so swamped with images, information, endless noise that it's hard to respond to anything in a fresh way [...]<sup>210</sup>

The notion of the landscape in some way reflecting the emotional life of his films finds rational manifestation in the types of compositions already highlighted. Moreover, the

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<sup>210</sup> Jason Wood, 'A Quick Chat with Pawil Pawlikowski'  
[http://www.kamera.co.uk/interviews/a\\_quick\\_chat\\_with\\_pawel\\_pawlikowski.php](http://www.kamera.co.uk/interviews/a_quick_chat_with_pawel_pawlikowski.php) [Accessed 30th November 2008]

director's attempt to liberate the space from the iconography of 'contemporary Britain' is equally engaging. While practising the principles of social realism in his work, Pawlikowski seems mindful of a need for his films to transcend the purely social element, which further substantiates the development of the poetic realist tradition in the work of contemporary filmmakers. Once again this brings to mind the comments and criticisms of Hill and Higson relating to the New Wave's treatment of landscape, and the re-application of those discourses across the work of new auteurs like Ramsay and Meadows. In bringing the British landscape into focus from an outsider's perspective, Pawlikowski, originally from Poland, resists such a sociological critique. Indeed, in discussion on his use of the English landscape, Pawlikowski tells David Thompson:

England is interesting because the landscape is more postmodern than anywhere else. [...] in Britain there's a spiritual vacuum and the fact that the meaningful aesthetics of family and religion have fallen by the wayside allows you to reinvent them. It's a blank page – there are tribalisms but there's no collective belief system to measure the individual against.<sup>211</sup>

In viewing Britain from the perspective of an outsider, and therefore avoiding its geographical trappings and by extension its biographical connotations, Pawlikowski is able to pursue a freer treatment of landscape in which space is able to function on the basis of its symbolic potential, as opposed to its sociological reality. In a wider sense,

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<sup>211</sup> David Thompson, 'Pawel Pawlikowski: Another England' in *Sight and Sound* (vol. 14, n. 10, October 2004), p.38.

these quotes suggest a continuation of the manner in which British realist cinema increasingly places greater emphasis on the mechanisms of narrative, rather than its substance. In the case of Ramsay, we have seen how story information is suppressed in favour of a sensory pursuit of abstract and arresting imagery. For Pawlikowski, this notion manifests itself in the way space and place are subtly manipulated in order to re-frame character perception, enabling environment itself to form a sparse but profound visual narrative. Andrea Arnold's *Red Road* (2006), sees social realism's appropriation of the art cinema model provide the director with the opportunity to both engage in the social issues arising from her thematic focus, and to re-deploy the same themes within the fabric of the narrative, doubly emphasising their resonance.

Initially, it should be mentioned that *Red Road* is unique for its genesis as the first (and so far only) part of *Advance Party*, a trilogy of films set to a series of rules established by Gillian Berrie, Lars Von Trier, Lone Sherfig and Anders Thomas Jensen. Part-funded by Scottish and Danish money, the films will focus on the same set of characters and will each be made by a first time director. These production details are interesting for their significance in a wider analysis of contemporary British realism. The gradual breaking down of national boundaries in relation to filmmaking has been evidenced in our discussion of Meadows' Scorsese-inspired approach, and Pawlikowski's outsider's view of British iconography, and should be considered alongside the knowledge that one of the 1990s most controversial and critically acclaimed works of social realism, *Nil by Mouth* (Gary Oldman, 1996), was funded entirely with French money through Luc Besson's production company. The aims of the *Advance Party* project are also interesting in that they suggest a conflation of two modes of realist practice, namely that



of Britain and the more ideologically and aesthetically structured Scandinavian style associated with the 'Dogme 95' directors.

*Red Road* is centred on Jackie (Kate Dickie), a CCTV operator in Glasgow. Through her work she spots a man from her past, Clyde (Tony Curran), who, we eventually learn, was responsible for the death of her husband and daughter in a motor accident. Jackie, sets about pursuing Clyde in an attempt to gain revenge. The plot seems atypical of a film that conforms to aesthetic practices associated with realism, having more in common with the thriller genre. However, as previously suggested, analysis of the film's narrative structure suggests an altogether more enterprising and innovative engagement with structure.

Early on in the film, Jackie enters her flat and picks up a wedding invitation. At this stage we have no idea whose wedding it is for, and what relation they bear to Jackie. A few scenes later, now at the wedding, we realise that the invitation was the first in a series of non-verbal narrative indicators which form the film's observational style. At the ceremony, the bride introduces Jackie as her sister-in-law, thus answering the first of our queries. Later on, an older woman wonders why Jackie is not dancing at the reception, telling her: 'you were dancing at your wedding': we now know that Jackie was once married. In the corridors outside the function room, Jackie encounters an elderly man called Alfred (Andrew Armour). The two share a steely but ambiguous exchange in which both mention a man, simply referred to as 'him'. In the next scene (in Jackie's flat), she pulls out a newspaper article with a headline that reads 'BLACKIE HILMAN GETS TEN YEARS'. In the following scene, she is in the CCTV room,

watching the flat in which she earlier appeared to recognise someone. She receives a phone-call that seems to be relating to the flat or the man, yet we only hear Jackie's side of the conversation, once more disrupting the flow of narrative information. Thus at this point, tension is built but thwarted through a structure of realist observation, as fragments of narrative are presented purely on the basis of our 'watching' of Jackie's life, both at work and at home. In the next scene, we hear an answering machine message, clearly from the man she was speaking to in the earlier scene. In it, he confirms that the man to whom they were both referring has been released. Once again, the delivery of this narrative information is achieved by purely realistic means: our objective, observational perspective allows us access to the audible answering machine. Thus the film's narrative itself is an exercise in realism, producing its moments of story development only when rationally justified through Arnold's surveillance-like approach. This sees the film's thematic engagement with the divisive contemporary theme of a surveillance society (rendered on a literal level through the foregrounding of Jackie's occupation, and repeated shots of surveillance cameras throughout the film) interwoven within its narrative project. As Arnold states:

A lot of people wanted me to reveal what had happened very early on, but I resisted that. It's to do with perception: CCTV is a way of looking at people two-dimensionally, making judgements based on that moment, that action, how they're dressed. You might see someone that way, but

then when you get to know them you see them three-dimensionally.

There are reasons or stories that make sense of their characters.<sup>212</sup>

So rather than applying the film's thematic focus to a conventional thriller narrative, Arnold utilises the freer structures of the art cinema to frame the audience's experience of *Red Road* within its own thematic discourses. Our observation of Jackie's life, and the conclusions we draw, falsely or correctly, mirror the act of watching and of piecing together fragments of information, that is bound up in the process of surveillance. In *Red Road* Arnold is able to engage with an issue of contemporary socio-political relevance, and strengthen its delivery by rendering it in artistic depth. This opens up the narrative's concerns to the notions of ambiguity and subsequent interrogation, inherent within a viewer's experience of an art cinema text. To return to Pawlikowski, *Red Road* shares with *Last Resort* a bold representation of a markedly 21<sup>st</sup> century thematic focus that is given humanity and stylistic power through its articulation within an innovative and ever-progressing social realist project. With this in mind, we can now look to how the increasingly flexible aesthetic and formal parameters of social realism in the contemporary period enable the mode to extend its traditional range of focus.

#### **6.4 Beyond the White Working-Class**

As we saw at the outset of this chapter, the political changes in the 1990s and 2000s and their social ramifications make the representation of an easily identifiable, homogenous

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<sup>212</sup> Hannah McGill, 'Preview: Red Road' in *Sight and Sound* (vol. 16, n. 11, Nov 2006), p.28.

working-class increasingly difficult and possibly irrelevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Therefore, social realism's traditional association with the marginalised has altered somewhat, meaning a diversification in the subjects and focuses of representation. In some contemporary realist films, such as *Last Resort*, traditional working-class representation has been augmented by a focus on the new immigrant class, and its increasingly divisive presence in British society, as Samantha Lay outlines:

Representation in contemporary British social realism has shifted its focus quite dramatically. While working class people are still central to the stories, they are increasingly seen juxtaposed with 'others' whose situations are also characterised by their powerlessness, thus providing an interesting new tension in some social realist films. This is particularly the case with films that represent asylum seekers and migrant workers, both legal and illegal. Such representations are central to such films as *Ghosts* (Broomfield 2006), *It's a Free World*, *Last Resort* (Pawlikowski 2000), *GYPO*, and *The Margate Exodus*.<sup>213</sup>

The ever-diversifying social realist mode continues to respond to the changing fabric of society, whilst retaining a primary concern with marginalised characters, and by extension the expectation that such a focus constitutes a revelation of social reality.

Lay's argument could also be widened to include social realist films that deal with other

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<sup>213</sup> Samantha Lay, 'Good intentions, high hopes and low budgets: Contemporary social realist film-making in Britain' in *New Cinemas* (Volume 5, Issue 3), p.242.

contemporary issues, such as inner city gun crime (*Bullet Boy* [Saul Dibb, 2004]), or drug culture (*Better Things* [Duane Hopkins, 2008]), reflecting the manner in which the kind of didactic, broad, and oppositional representation of class politics which underpinned social realism in TV and film during the 1980s, is absent from films which mount a more specific focus.

Another result of the fragmentation of socio-political binaries and discourses in contemporary British society seems to be the manner in which realism, with its ever-deepening deployment of abstract formal and aesthetic strategies, has begun to find articulation within narratives which focus on middle-class characters. Rather than reflecting a focus on primarily social or political issues, the integration of art cinema practices within the realist mode of expression has enabled more thorough interrogations of the internal realm and the emotional sphere, as distinct from class politics. At this point, it is crucial to remember that the 1990s saw a raft of middle-class comedies, highly reminiscent of the type that partly marked moves to realism in both the 1930s and the late 1950s, and it is pertinent to acknowledge films such as Roger Michell's *The Mother* (2003), in the context of this historical parallel.

With the last statement in mind, it is perhaps ironic that Michell also presided over *Notting Hill* (1999), exactly the type of highly commercial narrative film to place in contrast with the contemporary realist cinema. Suitably, Michell's handling of this project is markedly different from his work on *Notting Hill*. He establishes a highly symbolic *mise-en-scène* focus, which is facilitated by the kinds of static compositions that we have come to associate with much realist filmmaking of the period.

Undoubtedly, the film's subject matter demands such an approach. Written by Hanif Kureishi, a key figure in the development of 1980s British realism, the film focuses on May (Anne Reid) an elderly woman who, with her husband, Toots (Peter Vaughan), goes from Nottingham to London to visit their son's and daughter's families, who live in a wealthy, unnamed suburb of London. During their visit, Toots dies suddenly. It quickly becomes clear that the grief stricken May is a burden on both her neurotic daughter, Paula (Cathryn Bradshaw), and on her businessman son, Bobby (Stephen Mackintosh). Darren (Daniel Craig), a friend of Bobby's from university, is building a conservatory on Bobby's family home. He's a directionless dreamer who is trapped in an unhappy marriage and engaged in a highly fraught affair with Paula. Unlike her children, Darren has time for May, and the two soon begin a sexual relationship. While the film touches upon class-related issues, *The Mother* shows how the increasingly eclectic social realist mode can extend its focus to engage with issues of a subtler nature. Here marginalisation is not economic or political, but is derived from a generational, sexual and familial sense of displacement. In *The Mother*, the realist aesthetic, with its figurative capacity, is applied enterprisingly to hitherto unspoken areas of British life.

In narrative terms, *The Mother* conforms to the kind of sparse episodic structure that is associated with social realism. May, the alienated protagonist, arrives in London with her husband to see her family. Her husband dies, her family reject her, she begins an affair, the affair ends, and she leaves. Thus, in common with the films already discussed in this chapter, *The Mother* has its narrative programme supplemented by a richly

textured aesthetic lexicon, which invites the audience to consider May and her actions in the context of a wide array of symbolic registers.

For example, the level of May's alienation is rendered through a repeated foregrounding of her alone against spaces and environments that emphasise her isolation. Towards the film's fraught conclusion, Michell initiates a series of shots of May in central London, accompanied by a minimal Jazz score. The montage begins with May in the London eye, and Michell frames the experience through a sequence of point-of-view shots, combined with external shots viewing her capsule against recognisable London landmarks. One particularly disarming composition has May in medium shot, framed externally in the capsule with the Metropolis behind and below her. Here May's isolation is not only emphasised, but we also get a sense of her in contrast to both the city (and all that it represents), and the contemporary structure of the eye itself, which simultaneously seems to contain her, and underlines her dislocation from an iconography of 21<sup>st</sup> century progression.

This urban displacement, and an engagement with seemingly contradictory notions of security and isolation, is continued in the next part of the sequence, as May sits in a coffee shop. Michell frames her from behind within the shop, as May perches on a window seat looking out to a busy street. Thus our perspective of May is punctuated by both her own reflection (partially distorted in the window) and the assorted masses that pass. Michell emphasises the symbolic potency of this composition by sustaining the take for eight seconds, before moving to a perspective outside the coffee shop and facing

May, as if to ally the viewer with the crowds whose presence so exacerbates the protagonist's fractured state.

The representation of the physical aspect of May's relationship with Darren is presented in equally symbolic terms. When they first have sex, Michell frames their mutual undressing of each other through a doorway, obscuring half of Darren's body, underlining a distanced, observational role whilst also acknowledging the transgressive nature of their inter-generational lovemaking. As Darren masturbates May, their contact is again partially obscured. This time a blurred but close aerial shot hovers over the couple, before Michell cuts to a perspective at the end of the bed. Still the couple are blurred, but now a curtain propelled by the wind at the right hand bottom of the frame blows back and forth, occasionally covering the couple entirely. Then a side-on close shot captures May's face as she experiences orgasm. The scene takes place in a white walled room, with a white curtain and bed, with white sheets as if to emphasise the purity and absolution of May's liberating sexual experience. The gentle flight of the curtain and its integration within the *mise-en-scène* provides a figurative counterpoint to the grief eroding re-birth of May's sexuality.

Both of these scenes show how the twin notions of an active and pronounced authorial hand, and an expressive and reflective *mise-en-scène*, enable the realist address to interrogate the emotional and social terrains of its characters. In the London sequence, a poetic treatment of character in relation to recognisable environments opens out May's depiction to wider discourses beyond the narrative's immediate domestic focus. The treatment of the sex scene sees the same kind of figurative register applied to the



character's internal realm, seeing the integrated practices of social realism and art cinema vocalising suppressed impulses within the protagonist.

Like *The Mother*, Carine Adler's *Under the Skin* (1997) extends the social realist form to engage with issues centred on sexuality, and is thus another example of the manner in which the mode broadens its focus in the contemporary period. Set in Liverpool, the film follows Iris (Samantha Morton) as she comes to term with the death, from cancer, of her mother (Rita Tushingham). Iris deals with her grief by pursuing sexual hedonism, donning her mother's wig and a pair of sunglasses in order to re-invent herself through encounters with numerous men. Her behaviour is presented in marked contrast to her far more settled sister, Rose (Claire Rushbrook). The film relies on an intense subjective treatment of Iris (through voice-over and fantasy sequences), and an elliptical and fragmented visual style (incorporating jump cutting, handheld camera, and muted colour), to interrogate and excavate the sources of its protagonist's tortured state. As Charlotte Brunsdon suggests, its visual complexion marks a new turn in the British cinema:

What the stylistic variation of the film suggests is that she is in danger of losing her very grounding – and this can be read as an interrogation of the kinds of stories that British cinema has traditionally told. For, unusually in British cinema, this is a story about emotion not being repressed, even if it is denied. Iris's grief interrupts the naturalism with which the north is

usually represented, the mobile body-led camera, the saturated colour and the use of slow motion offering a different representational repertoire.<sup>214</sup>

Brunsdon's comments relating to the representation of the North suggest the manner in which social realism has begun to re-frame its traditional geographical associations. Whilst *Under the Skin* represents numerous departures from a 'naturalistic' approach to its subject, its downbeat narrative, and the nature of its approach to dialogue and understated performance, give it the appearance of a realist film. While I would disagree with the suggestion that subjectivity is not congruous with British realism, it is fair to suggest that in enacting the subjective register so fervently, Adler re-calibrates the mode's stylistic and thematic indices to mount a textured engagement with femininity, hitherto unrealised in British cinema. One such example would be the moment in which Iris encounters a vision of her dead mother as she trawls through the lost property section of her workplace (a bus company headquarters). Here the notions of memory, loss, and psychological excavation are implanted both literally within the *mise-en-scène*, and through the symbolic associations of the space. This internalised, protagonist-motivated rendering of the film's visual motifs facilitates its intense focus on a single character. Similarly, when Iris meets her first sexual partner (following her mother's death) in a cinema, the film's aesthetic is manipulated to render her internal processes. Their initial romantic contact is presented through frequent jump cutting, as Adler presents the act as a product of Iris' fragmented and delusional mental state, again deploying overt stylistic tools to represent the internal dimension of the protagonist.

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<sup>214</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, 'Not Having It All: Women and Film in the 1990s' in Robert Murphy (ed.), *British Cinema of the 90s* (London: BFI, 2000), p.174.

As in *The Mother*, in *Under the Skin* we can see the way the wide parameters of social realist address have enabled the mode to interrogate issues outside of its traditional remit. Central to this is the way in which the art cinema inflections of British realism provide filmmakers with a means to engage in expressive and poetic aesthetics, and to interrogate notions of subjectivity, whilst maintaining an overt veracity in both theme and form. With this in mind, it is interesting to re-consider Lay's statements about the expansion of social realism to focus on newly marginalised social groups that reflect the ever-changing political climate of contemporary Britain. While we have seen how notions of sexuality and gender are viable within the flexible realist mode, Saul Dibb's *Bullet Boy* shows how the controversial and relatively new issues associated with inner city violence in Britain's black communities can be re-framed within a stylistically eclectic realist register.

*Bullet Boy* focuses on Ricky (a young black man from Hackney), as he returns from a spell in a young offender's institution. Once home, he becomes embroiled in a conflict between his best friend, Wisdom (Leon Black), and another group of young men, which results in both Wisdom and ultimately Ricky being shot dead. Meanwhile, Curtis (Luke Fraser) Ricky's admiring younger brother, finds a handgun in Ricky's room, and when he takes it out to play, he accidentally shoots his friend. The film therefore taps into some of the topical issues surrounding masculinity, violence, and race that underscore contemporary media discourses relating to inner city London, and in particular, its Afro-Caribbean communities. What is interesting about *Bullet Boy* for our discussion is that, despite the thoroughly modern subject-matter, it engages with the same kinds of art

cinema stylistic practices that we have seen enacted in a range of differing films in the period, deepening and expanding the signification of its thematic agenda in the process.

Most potently, Dibb utilises Hackney Marshes as a key symbolic terrain within the film. Its repeated foregrounding works in a similar manner to the council flats and the sea in *Last Resort*. For example, as Ricky cleans his gun, we take on his point of view, looking out from the family flat over the fields outside. Here Ricky's feelings of entrapment, both social and physical, are deftly articulated by the connection between his handgun, and all that it represents, and the kind of poetic escape offered by the vast expanse on the other side of the window. Both Ricky and the viewer sense that this apparent paradox can only ever be realised in abstract terms. Similarly, the establishment of the marshes as a fertile symbolic space which is juxtaposed against the violent realities of the community, is presented in the moments before a police raid on the flat. A static long take of the marshes at dusk presents an image of spectacle and beauty, augmented by a suppression of aural elements, an atmosphere shattered in the next scene as the police arrive. The long takes and static composition of *Bullet Boy* elevate the contemporaneous trappings of its subject matter to a level in which the theme can be poeticised. The film's meditative rhythm, with its repeated returns to the marshes, works to keep in check its 'action' elements, never allowing the motif of gun crime to be sensationalised or to provide a manipulative level of tension.

By way of contrast, the commercially successful *Kidulthood* (Menhaj Huda, 2006) and *Adulthood* (Noel Clarke, 2008) films approach *Bullet Boy*'s subject matter in a markedly different manner. Rather than tapping into the resources of social realism and the art

cinema, Noel Clarke and Menhaj Huda adopt fast-paced and heavily stylised approaches which seem more derivative of music video than Ken Loach films. Multi-racial ensemble casts, and a soundtrack of contemporary Grime, R'n'B and Hip Hop, emanate from cultural discourses which are far more suited to the subjects of both Clarke and Dibb's gaze, than the staid, withdrawn poetics of *Bullet Boy*. However, it is interesting to note that in spite of *Kidulthood's* and *Adulthood's* fresh appearance, their narratives are streamlined, goal-orientated and lacking in ambiguity or complexity. Both films comfortably adopt classical rise-and-fall motifs, with the explicit social issue as a permanent backdrop.

The comparison between the expressive and expansive aesthetic and formal structures of realism, and the closed nature of mainstream entertainment, brings us back to the start of our discussion of contemporary social realism. In evoking films like *The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot*, I aim to show how realist subject matter, however emotive, loses much of its resonance when delivered within a tightly woven narrative paradigm. By way of contrast, the emergence of social realist auteurs like Meadows, Ramsay, Pawlikowski and Arnold works to display the manner in which the art cinema-derived conventions of the mode continue to offer up multiple levels of meaning and interpretation to the viewer. Therefore, taking the contemporary period within the wider context of social realism's historical development, we have seen how the mode develops and extends its constitution on the basis of a move towards art cinema in the face of dominant and limiting conventional trends. Just as the New Wave emerges in the 1960s as an art cinema built largely in opposition to a homogenous mainstream, so too the likes

of Meadows carve out new and exciting treatments of realist subject matter which appear as departures from a similarly conservative contemporary film culture.

Yet the story of contemporary social realism by no means represents a mere repeat of historical trends. Within a newly fragmented and globalised socio-political and cultural climate, the formal and thematic focus of the mode has shifted profoundly. In response to a breaking down of Britain's traditional social boundaries, we have seen a greater fluidity in the notion of what constitutes appropriate subject matter for the social realist film. The well-worn treatment of marginalised and alienated voices, hitherto defined on purely economic terms has, in the 1990s and 2000s, come to accommodate an eclectic array of narrative opportunities. This widening remit has arrived in conjunction with an ever progressing stylistic grammar for social realism, exemplified by the manner in which Pawel Pawlikowski represents the displacement of immigrants through the poetic treatment of a council flat, or the way Lynne Ramsay approaches her treatment of a disenfranchised check-out girl in Scotland by persistently allowing vivid imagery to supersede its narrative function. Contemporary British realism is an ever expanding entity, catalysed, as ever, by its grounding in the progressive art cinema.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

In my discussions of the films, directors, cycles and sub-genres that have shaped British social realism, I hope to have shed new light on what is a rich and diverse arm of national culture. In emphasising elements such as the traditions of poetic space, challenging and complex narratives, and innovative treatments of human and social portraits in convergence, we can see a style of cinema that demands interpretation beyond limiting discursive paradigms mired in questions of authenticity and socio-political commitment. In the previous chapter, I highlighted some of the recent developments within the British realist mode, which demonstrate just how unstable such definitions of social realism have become. In taking as their starting point a focus on British environments and their constituents, these films have examined the physical, social, and psychological realms of individuals in a wide variety of environments, and in so doing have continued to extend the potentials of the mode, whilst exhibiting a clear lineage derived from previous examples. With this in mind, I want to return to Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999) in order to re-address some of the fundamental motifs that have underscored this study.

In her monograph on the film, Annette Kuhn rejects the categorisation of *Ratcatcher* as social realism, and her dismissal of the mode tells us much about the difficulties we face in concretising a wider understanding of the traditions of British cinema:

*Ratcatcher's* characters and settings – a working-class family living in a Glasgow slum tenement – might suggest that the film belongs to the

tradition of social realism that is widely regarded as a distinguishing mark of British cinema, from the British New Wave of the 1960s to the contemporary social problem films of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh. But the comparison does not stand up even to minimal scrutiny, because the [...] realism of the film's settings is constantly brought up against its poetic elements. If realism is not a particularly useful critical category with which to approach the film, though, *Ratcatcher* does set up and weave together several levels of 'reality' (including a social realist one). These different realities are in part associated with the film's various settings – but only in part. In fact, one of the film's unique qualities is the way its various levels of reality imbue each setting in overlapping, and sometimes changing, ways.<sup>215</sup>

The most immediately problematical element of Kuhn's underestimation of social realism is the manner in which she unites its defining elements in the shape of the New Wave, Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, and presents them as a homogenised mass against which the uniqueness of *Ratcatcher* can be emphasised. We have seen how the products of the aforementioned cycle, and the separate canons of the two auteurs, are distinct from one another and their precedents, each possessing their own thematic, formal and aesthetic agenda, whilst equally we are able to identify the elements which unite them in the context of a cinematic tradition. In citing the separate 'levels' of 'reality' in *Ratcatcher* and the manner in which a surface realism is contrasted against an authorially-disseminated 'poetic' register in *Ratcatcher*, Kuhn implies the absence of

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<sup>215</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Ratcatcher* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.17.



similar ingredients in films like *This Sporting Life*, *Kes*, or *Meantime*. Kuhn seems to dismiss the potential of social realism to stretch beyond the immediate levels of surface reportage, allying her views to wider critical discourse that has consistently sought to emphasise the socio-political dimension of realist product, at the expense of its textual qualities. This has left us with a limited perception of social realism, based around a false idea of a cinema concerned solely with recording its environment, and/or carrying a socio-political message in resonant terms. Interestingly, Ramsay herself maintains these understandings of the mode when she is quoted elsewhere in Kuhn's study:

A lot of people have misconstrued this film as social realism, and I don't think it is. I try to avoid some of the clichés of that. To be honest, I was trying to go into the psychology of the scenes, ... trying to get under the skin of it a bit, inside the boy's head...so you go from this kind of harsh reality into something that's much more hard to pin down.<sup>216</sup>

Like Kuhn, Ramsay seems to define elements that we would associate unproblematically with art cinema, such as a focus on subjectivity and a resultant complication of narrative strategy, as incompatible with the conception of social realism as a mode of filmic expression. As we have seen, countless examples of the eclectic social realist canon have been defined by their marriage of objective and subjective approaches to realism, and by a rejection of conventional narrative methodologies. Clearly, *Ratcatcher* challenges pre-conceptions of realist practice, but it is rooted in a textual and visual discourse which

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<sup>216</sup> Lynne Ramsay cited in Kuhn (2008), p.85.

finds profound and productive parallels with various other examples of British realist cinema.

Both Ramsay and Kuhn's dismissals of the apparently limited social realist mode suggest a continued and deep-seated resistance to exploring its constituent elements, parameters, and possibilities. Re-addressing this kind of understanding has, of course, been a major motivation in the process of this study. I have shown that these kinds of pejorative characterisations of an apparently un-stylised, understated cinema of surface observation, have no basis when held up against close-readings of social realist cinema. Indeed, it is clear that there is no paradigmatic social realist film or director. Rather, the realist impulse in Britain represents a liberating framework through which countless film artists construct personal engagements with their society.

In railing so vehemently against the pre-existing definitions and understandings of social realist cinema, we might suggest that it is the term itself that is no longer relevant. In responding to the critiques of Kuhn and Ramsay, perhaps it is the idea of 'social reality' that naturally conjures perceptions of a cinema which resists innovation and exists on the level of documentation rather than art. However, in aligning art cinema to social realism, we are able to tap into a consistent and wide-reaching global tradition that encourages a focus on social reality in convergence with other 'realities', that does not preclude the potential to attribute figurative meanings on the basis of character psychology, or that celebrates the role of the author in imposing stylistic variations and signatures, and encourages the reader to de-code the text in varying ways. The starting point for this mode of expression is in the social realm, be it through the presentation of space, or

place that taps into a recognisable iconography, or through a character who embodies social pressures made visible through emotional articulation. The communication of 'reality' is not simply rooted in location or dialogue, but finds manifestation in subtler frameworks of narrative and character. Understanding a tradition of social realism as wide, diverse and progressive allows us to assess more holistically the artistic qualities of national cultural forms.

The acceptance of a national culture is fundamentally important to conveying a sense of the historical movements of realist expression in Britain. However, in the closing stages of this study I want to begin to suggest how we might consider social realism as a global art cinema product, in addition to our understanding of its relevance to issues of nationhood.

David Bordwell's observations on art cinema have underscored many of the readings of social realism in this work. It is therefore noteworthy to acknowledge the content of his 'Afterword' to 'Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice' in *Poetics of Cinema*. One of the most significant annotations to his original essay is in the highlighting of a move towards the static long take as a key motif of art cinema:

As if in rebuke to the 1960s reliance on montage and camera movement, several directors cultivated an approach based on the static, fairly distant long take. In Europe, this took the shape of what I've called the *planimetric image*. [...] This device presents the scene as a more abstract configuration, perhaps distancing us from its emotional tenor, and it can

support those psychologically imbued *temps morts* that are crucial to the realistic impulse of the mode. [...] The planimetric image became quite common in world cinema [...] and constitutes one of the art cinema's permanent contributions to cinema's pictorial repertoire.<sup>217</sup>

With reference to my approaches to the likes of Mike Leigh, Terence Davies, Shane Meadows, and Pawel Pawilwoski, it is clear that such a device and its derivatives can be comfortably associated with the British tradition of art cinema in the form of social realism. Not only does this serve to underline the sense in which textual analyses of social realist films reward comparisons with conventions based on formal characteristics, it could also be said to suggest the indelible presence of traditions associated with British realism within a wider, globalised understanding of art cinema.

Bordwell also extends the institutional focus of his original piece to engage with notions of the economic and industrial status of the art cinema in the twenty-first century:

The filmmakers and movements that defined the postwar art cinema earned much of their fame on the festival circuit, from *Rashomon* (winner at Venice in 1951) through *If* (winner at Cannes in 1969). When my essay was published in 1979, there were at most 75 principal film festivals; today there are about 250, with hundreds more serving local, regional, and specialist audiences. [...] Each year hundreds of programmers are chasing the world's top three or four dozen films. [...] Festivals are the

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<sup>217</sup> David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (Routledge: New York, 2008), p. 163.

major clearinghouse for art cinema, with prizes validating the year's top achievements. To win at one of the big three – Berlin, Cannes, and Venice – or to be purchased at Cannes, Toronto, or Sundance lifts a film above the thousands of other titles demanding attention.<sup>218</sup>

Bordwell's observations suggest a number of significant points for an understanding of the British realist art cinema. Firstly, the principle of the film festival is clearly established as the space in which the commercial and critical status of the art cinema is confirmed. Crucially, Bordwell's charting of the proliferation of festivals in the last thirty years suggests a wider global spread of the spheres in which artistic credibility is attributed to cinema. Moreover, in implying the connection between quality (as decided by a judging panel) and commercial success, Bordwell underlines the continued way in which art cinema commodifies itself in direct contrast to the economic complexion of the 'entertainment' model.

The existence of this ever-widening global commercial framework poses profound questions for our conception of the function and remit of national cinemas, and British realism specifically. In approaching similar questions of art cinema's institutional framework, Steve Neale suggests that the kind of commercial structures to which Bordwell refers have the capability to engender a generic classification for art cinema which transcends the differentiation of national cinema:

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<sup>218</sup> Bordwell (2008), p.165.

Where previously the history of Art Cinema had been, apart from its authors, one of a series of unstable and short-lived movements [...] the names of its authors, indeed, serving as the only conceptual means by which to categorise its output consistently, it now appears that there is a relatively permanent genre towards which Art Cinema internationally has begun to gravitate, assured as it is of an international market, notoriety and (generally) a degree of cultural and artistic prestige.<sup>219</sup>

A structure of distribution and reception of global art cinema products naturally engenders the breaking down of boundaries and distinctions between its varying national cinema elements, ensuring a movement towards a loose generic paradigm that ensures artistic status and credibility. Realism (the key organising trope in Bordwell's earlier definitions of the art cinema's formal characteristics) seems perfectly suited to this unifying formal base across which a global art cinema is able to define itself. The culture of film festivals cited by Bordwell provides evidence for the continuation of the central role which realism holds. In the past few years, British films within the realist mode have enjoyed pre-release recognition at established and respected festivals, with *Happy Go-Lucky* (Mike Leigh, 2008), and *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008) for example proving particularly successful.<sup>220</sup> Perhaps more significant is the recent critical response to films such as *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* (Cristian Mungiu, Romania, 2007) and *The*

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<sup>219</sup> Steve Neale, 'Art Cinema as Institution' in Catherine Fowler (ed.), *The European Cinema Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.117.

<sup>220</sup> *Happy-Go-Lucky* saw Sally Hawkins win the Silver Berlin Bear for Best Actress, and Mike Leigh nominated for the Golden Berlin Bear at the 2008 Berlin International Film Festival. *Hunger* won Steve McQueen the Golden Camera at Cannes in 2008.

*Class* (Laurent Cantet, France, 2008).<sup>221</sup> Both films can be seen to circulate within the social realist mode, and while each has much to say about their national subjects, it is equally true that they and films such as *Somers Town* (Shane Meadows, UK, 2008) can be understood within a unified aesthetic and formal framework which transcends categorisation by country of origin. This textual convergence has the clear potential to disseminate the realist traditions of national cinemas with fluidity in a global cinematic context. The kind of engagements with global cinema that saw Loach borrowing from the French and Czech New Waves, and even Scorsese influencing Meadows, can be intensified, consolidating the cross-cultural artistic potentials of the realist address.

I have focussed on how artistic renderings of the everyday have created a strong and worthy cinematic tradition, which has produced a substantial and progressive area of British cinema. I want this both to be a celebration of the importance of the figures and works that have contributed to social realism, and a way into considering how we engage with images of reality outside and beyond the narrow confines of a national focus. With the possibility for a re-assessment of British realism along these lines, I want to suggest that we can now perhaps speak of the British art cinema tradition in the same breath as those of France, Germany, or Italy. In turn, this can engender a focus upon the differing treatments of realism in wider, more rewarding, and more productive contexts.

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<sup>221</sup> *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* was winner of three prizes at Cannes in 2007 (Cinema Prize of the French National Education System, FIPRESCI Prize, and Golden Palm) and *The Class* was awarded the Golden Palm in 2008.

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## 9.0 Filmography

- Abigail's Party* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1977)
- Adulthood* (dir. Noel Clarke, 2008)
- All or Nothing* (dir. Mike Leigh, 2002)
- The Angry Silence* (dir. Guy Green, 1960)
- Battleship Potemkin* (dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1925)
- Beat Girl* (dir. Edmond T. Greville, 1960)
- The Bells Go Down* (dir. Basil Dearden, 1943)
- Better Things* (dir. Duane Hopkins, 2008)
- Bicycle Thieves* (dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1948)
- Billy Elliot* (dir. Stephen Daldry, 2000)
- Billy Liar* (dir. John Schlesinger, 1963)
- Bleak Moments* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1971)
- The Blue Lamp* (dir. Basil Dearden, 1949)
- Brassed Off* (dir. Mark Herman, 1996)
- Bread and Roses* (dir. Ken Loach, 2000)
- Bullet Boy* (dir. Saul Dibb, 2004)
- Burning an Illusion* (dir. Menelik Shabazz, 1981)
- The Captive Heart* (dir. Basil Dearden, 1946)
- Cathy Come Home* (dir. Ken Loach, 1966)
- Chariots of Fire* (dir. Hugh Hudson, 1981)



*The Class* (dir. Laurent Cantet, 2008)

*Coalface* (dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, 1935)

*Dead Man's Shoes* (dir. Shane Meadows, 2004)

*A Diary for Timothy* (dir. Humphrey Jennings, 1946)

*Diary of a Young Man* (dir. Ken Loach, 1964)

*Distant Voices, Still Lives* (dir. Terence Davies, 1988)

*Drifters* (dir. John Grierson, 1929)

*Elephant* (dir. Alan Clarke, 1989)

*The Entertainer* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1960)

*Family Life* (dir. Ken Loach, 1971)

*Fatherland* (dir. Ken Loach, 1986)

*The Firm* (dir. Alan Clarke, 1988)

*The First of the Few* (dir. Leslie Howard, 1942)

*Flame in the Streets* (dir. Roy Ward Baker, 1961)

*Ae Fond Kiss* (dir. Ken Loach, 2004)

*The Foreman Went to France* (dir. Charles Frend, 1942)

*Four Days in July* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1985)

*The 400 Blows* (dir. Francois Truffaut, 1959)

*49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* (dirs. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1941)

*4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* (dir. Christian Mungiu, 2007)

*Frieda* (dir. Basil Dearden, 1947)

*The Full Monty* (dir. Peter Cattaneo, 1997)

*Gandhi* (dir. Richard Attenborough, 1982)

*Guys and Dolls* (dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1955)

*Grown-Ups* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1980)

*Hard Labour* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1973)

*Handsworth Songs* (dir. John Akomfrah, 1986)

*Happy Go-Lucky* (dir. Mike Leigh, 2008)

*Hidden Agenda* (dir. Ken Loach, 1990)

*High Hopes* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1988)

*Home Sweet Home* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1982)

*Housing Problems* (dirs. Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton, 1935)

*Hunger* (dir. Steve McQueen, 2008)

*In Two Minds* (dir. Ken Loach, 1967)

*In Which We Serve* (dirs. Noel Coward and David Lean, 1942)

*It Always Rains on Sunday* (dir. Robert Hamer, 1947)

*It's a Free World* (dir. Ken Loach, 2007)

*The Jewel in the Crown* (dirs. Jim O'Brien, Christopher Morahan, 1984)

*Kes* (dir. Ken Loach, 1967)

*Kidulthood* (dir. Menhaj Huda, 2006)

*A Kind of Loving* (dir. John Schlesinger, 1962)

*The Lady Vanishes* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1938)

*Land and Freedom* (dir. Ken Loach, 1995)

*The Last of England* (dir. Derek Jarman, 1987)

*Last Resort* (dir. Pawel Pawlikowski, 2000)

*The Leather Boys* (dir. Sidney J. Furie, 1962)

*Le Donk and Scor-Zay-Zee* (dir. Shane Meadows, 2009)

*Life is Sweet* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1990)

*Listen To Britain* (dir. Humphrey Jennings, 1942)

*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1962)

*Look Back in Anger* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1959)

*Looking for Eric* (dir. Ken Loach, 2009)

*Looks and Smiles* (dir. Ken Loach, 1981)

*Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (dir. Henry King, 1955)

*Love on the Dole* (dir. John Baxter, 1941)

*Made in Britain* (dir. Alan Clarke, 1982)

*Mean Streets* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1973)

*Meantime* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1984)

*Millions Like Us* (dirs. Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, 1943)

*Momma Don't Allow* (dirs. Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson, 1955)

*Morvern Callar* (dir. Lynne Ramsay, 2002)

*The Mother* (dir. Roger Michell, 2003)

*My Beautiful Laundrette* (dir. Stephen Frears, 1985)

*My Name is Joe* (dir. Ken Loach, 1998)

*My Summer of Love* (dir. Pawel Pawlikowski, 2004)

*Naked* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1993)

*Night Train to Munich* (dir. Carol Reed, 1940)

*Nighthawks* (dir. Ron Peck, 1978)

*Night Mail* (dirs. Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936)

*Nil by Mouth* (dir. Gary Oldman, 1996)

*Nine Men* (dir. Harry Watt, 1943)

*No Trees in the Street* (dir. J. Lee Thompson, 1959)

*Notting Hill* (dir. Roger Michell, 1999)

*Nuts in May* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1977)

*O Dreamland* (dir. Lindsay Anderson, 1953)

*A Passage to India* (dir. David Lean, 1984)

*Passport to Pimlico* (dir. Henry Cornelius, 1949)

*Pather Panchali* (dir. Satyajit Ray, 1955)

*A Place to Go* (dir. Basil Dearden, 1963)

*Poor Cow* (dir. Ken Loach, 1967)

*Pressure* (dir. Horace Ové, 1976)

*Raging Bull* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1980)

*Raining Stones* (dir. Ken Loach, 1993)

*Ratcatcher* (dir. Lynne Ramsay, 1999)

*Red Road* (dir. Andrea Arnold, 2006)

*Refuge England* (dir. Robert Vas, 1959)

*Riff Raff* (dir. Ken Loach, 1991)

*Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (dir. Alan Clarke, 1986)

*Road* (dir. Alan Clarke, 1987)

*Room at the Top* (dir. Jack Clayton, 1959)

*A Room for Romeo Brass* (dir. Shane Meadows, 1999)

*Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (dir. Stephen Frears, 1987)

*Sapphire* (dir. Basil Dearden, 1959)

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (dir. Karel Reisz, 1960)

*Scum* (dir. Alan Clarke, 1979)

*Secrets and Lies* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1996)

*The Short and Curlies* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1987)

*Somers Town* (dir. Shane Meadows, 2008)

*Spare Time* (dir. Humphrey Jennings, 1939)

*Sunday Bloody Sunday* (dir. John Schlesinger, 1971)

*Sweet Sixteen* (dir. Ken Loach, 2002)

*A Taste of Honey* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1961)

*Taxi Driver* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1976)

*La Terra Trema* (dir. Luchino Visconti, 1948)

*Term of Trial* (dir. Peter Glenville, 1962)

*Terminus* (dir. John Schlesinger, 1961)

*This is England* (dir. Shane Meadows, 2007)

*This Sporting Life* (dir. Lindsay Anderson, 1963)

*Tiger Bay* (dir. J. Lee Thompson, 1959)

*Together* (dir. Lorenza Mazetti, 1956)

*Transformers* (dir. Michael Bay, 2007)

*Twentyfourseven* (dir. Shane Meadows, 1997)

*Under the Skin* (dir. Carine Adler, 1997)

*Up The Junction* (dir. Ken Loach, 1965)

*Vera Drake* (dir. Mike Leigh, 2004)

*Victim* (dir. Basil Dearden, 1961)

*Violent Playground* (dir. Basil Dearden, 1958)

*The Way Ahead* (dir. Carol Reed, 1944)

*The Way to the Stars* (dir. Anthony Asquith, 1945)

*We are the Lambeth Boys* (dir. Karel Reisz, 1958)

*We Dive At Dawn* (dir. Anthony Asquith, 1943)

*Went the Day Well?* (dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942)

*Whisky Galore!* (dir. Alexander Mackendrick, 1949)

*Who's Who* (dir. Mike Leigh, 1979)

*The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (dir. Ken Loach, 2006)

*Woman in a Dressing Gown* (dir. J. Lee Thompson, 1957)

*Yield to the Night* (dir. J. Lee Thompson, 1956)

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