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CINEMA: THE NEW WAVE

THE RISE OF a ‘new wave’ in British cinema should be welcomed, but it is still too soon to venture any more than a provisional estimate of its achievement. The two most gifted exponents of the movement—the directors Karel Reisz and Lindsay Anderson—have so far made just one film each, and it may be that *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Reisz) and *This Sporting Life* (Anderson) have had more praise than they deserve. The lacklustre history of British cinema has understandably made critics indulgent of any director who challenges the narrow outlook of the film industry.

From its beginnings, world cinema has been dominated, culturally and economically, by the United States. The first sound film was American. The first colour film was American. Almost every talented European director has spent some time working in the US, many remaining there permanently. Even Eisenstein went there to shoot *¡Que viva México!* Few European films have penetrated the American market, while the rest of the world has long been awash with US output. Initially, German film appeared a potential rival. But heavy American investment in the German industry, combined, of course, with the ascent of Nazism, dealt with that challenge. Almost all its major directors—Murnau, Lang, Ophüls—emigrated across the Atlantic. German cinema never recovered.

British cinema has remained more subordinate to America than any other. In France, Italy and Japan, the linguistic difference and—in general—the lesser extent of American cultural and economic penetration allowed the development of a more autonomous cinema. Moreover, some masters—Renoir, Rossellini and Mizoguchi—remained at home

despite the rupture of the War. Britain, by contrast, gave Hitchcock to Hollywood. But if the UK's cinema emerged as an appendix of America's, it simultaneously developed an attitude of naïve provincialism. This was a completely commercial cinema, in the American manner, unquestioning in its respect for the 'star' system, valuation by audience size and formulaic subject matter. Yet it sought to free itself from this by reasserting a distinctively British character. While the American cinema was genuinely American, catering for a public whose cultural identity was still coalescing—developing in a reciprocal relationship between spectator and director—British cinema sought to graft a caricature of Britishness onto its imitation of American cinema, one which pandered to the dilapidated sentimentality of its public.

During the 1950s, American cinema confronted a deepening crisis, accompanied by the rise of television. Production was drastically reduced. The industry placed its hopes in grandiose, wasteful super-productions, culminating in *Cleopatra*. As a result, the possibility of a relatively low-budget, quality cinema emerged in Europe. Ingmar Bergman was first on the scene. Then in 1958, French cinema took the lead. Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* and *Les Cousins*, *Hiroshima, mon amour* by Resnais and Godard's *À bout de souffle* showcased a whole range of new possibilities. In Italy, Antonioni achieved worldwide fame, and neo-realism was brought up to date. The growing shortage of new American films gave impetus to these 'new waves'. In France, experimental films began to circulate in mainstream venues, helped by the country's quasi-anarchic distribution system. In Britain, however, two monolithic distributors, Rank and ABC, persisted in their conservatism. It seemed that British cinema would be left behind.

Finally, in 1960, new horizons opened up. This was due not to any change of heart on the part of producers and distributors, but to the success of a new group of playwrights and novelists. With one bestseller or box-office hit after another, film adaptations of the group's work became an attractive proposition. Warner Brothers supported the recently-formed film company Woodfall, enabling Tony Richardson to make *Look Back in Anger*, based on John Osborne's play. (Richardson had been its stage director.) John Braine's novel *Room at the Top* was directed by Jack Clayton, with Simone Signoret bringing great emotional force to her role, winning an Oscar for her performance. Reisz's *Saturday Night and*

Sunday Morning, adapted from Alan Sillitoe's novel, was an unexpected box-office success for Rank. Richardson followed this with *A Taste of Honey*, adapted from Shelagh Delaney's successful stage play, and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, another adaptation from Sillitoe. The British 'new wave' had arrived.

Antecedents

The literary and theatrical antecedents of the new British cinema set it apart from its French and Italian equivalents. While the new French directors wrote their own scripts, or at least worked from material written specifically for the cinema, the British relied on adaptations—from a narrow and fairly homogeneous set of writers. It is therefore not easy to separate the distinguishing qualities of the new cinema from those of the new theatre or new novel. British cinema has not produced directors with a deep cinematic culture like Godard or Truffaut, Rivette or Rohmer, developed through their work at *Cahiers du cinéma*. Before they had any chance of making films, these French directors had conceptualized an understanding of film's history and an aesthetics of cinematography that accorded great importance to *mise-en-scène* and acknowledged in particular the formal and stylistic achievements of the major American directors. Samuel Fuller's influence on *À bout de souffle* or George Cukor's on *Une femme est une femme* is altogether evident.

The new British directors, it should be said, also began as critics and theorists. Reisz, Richardson and Anderson all took part in the Free Cinema movement of the 1940s, and Anderson was a co-founder of the journal *Sequence*. The emphasis, however, was always on the need to develop cinema's social conscience. This sensibility was already present in the watchword they adopted ('the poetry of the everyday'). They found it hard to conceive of its transformation in audio-visual terms without the ornament of an essentially literary idea and plot. The directors had not developed original ideas or found a style for transforming literary material into something cinematographically valid. Reisz himself came to admit that 'our films lack style and imagination, with the result that so far they have been works of small account—with no sense of the urgency of an exceptional personality'. The British 'new wave' is therefore vulnerable to the charge that its primary interest is sociological, that it presents not a new idea of cinema but a new range of subjects and milieux.

Take for example *A Taste of Honey*, the best-known film by the most prolific of the new directors, Tony Richardson. The film was shot in industrial Salford and deals with subject matter hitherto unknown to British cinema: a woman's illegitimate baby with a black father, and close friendship with a homosexual man. Richardson extended the original theatrical work, taking his camera out of the single room in which the play is set and into the city itself. But he provides little sense of the social reality of Salford, preferring a picturesque, sentimental image of working-class culture and its environs. Additional dialogue is performed in carefully chosen shots. New visual indices are added: a procession, a bonfire, a children's dance, a statue. But none of these elements contribute anything of value to the original. Formal embellishments and 'artistic' photography provide a lively but light-weight context for the issues that *A Taste of Honey* addresses.

One new British film that makes a determined effort to take a step in the right direction is Anderson's *This Sporting Life*, released this year. This too is based on a successful novel, by David Storey, and Anderson worked closely with Storey on the script. It emphasizes not the social conditions dealt with in the novel, but the personal drama of the two protagonists, a rugby player and his landlady, who are unable to develop a satisfying relationship however much each is opaquely aware that the possibility exists. The film has great weaknesses: a scene in a high-class restaurant illustrating the rugby player's lack of decorum is confused and misjudged. The death scene in the hospital is encumbered by the presence of an enormous spider, the sequence worthy of the symbolism of Bergman. All the same, Anderson shows himself capable of tackling and resolving situations of violence and strong feeling without embarrassment, something to be welcomed after the long years of prudery and reserve in British cinema. If in his will to exert his directorial personality he indulges in too many obligatory flashbacks and tricky camera angles, he nevertheless takes seriously the fundamental problem of dramatic cinema: how to indicate interior thought and emotions in external ways that can be captured photographically. Anderson's next films will show how far he can develop this talent.

Much will depend on whether the industry's giants, particularly the distributors, can be convinced to take on experimental projects. In the eyes of the financiers, the achievements of Reisz, Richardson and Anderson remain tied to the sales and box-office success of their sources. For

example, after *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Reisz hoped to make a film about Ned Kelly, the legendary Australian outlaw, with an original script. The project was perceived as too risky and shelved. Peter Brook, the most independent among the directors of the current cohort, has not found a way of working within the industry. He had to go to France to film *Moderato cantabile*, and resort to private subscription, headed up by Elizabeth Taylor, to make *Lord of the Flies*. Meanwhile, the industry is busy trying to replicate the new movement in vulgarized form. Unfortunately, films like Bryan Forbes's *The L-Shaped Room* have done well at the box office, especially in the United States.

One remarkably promising director with links to the 'new wave' has shown what can be achieved in existing conditions. The American Joseph Losey found that, thanks to Joseph McCarthy's blacklist, he was no longer able to work in the US and so moved to Britain, where he has made four films. His career trajectory is in marked contrast to those of other directors forced into exile by McCarthyism. Jules Dassin, after the virtuoso *Rififi*, ended up fixated with Melina Mercouri and the worst kind of melodrama. John Berry made the indifferent but politically progressive *Tamango*, a film set on a slave ship, analysing the imperialist mentality and appealing for solidarity with the colonial liberation movements. On the other hand, Cyril Endfield has just finished making *Zulu*, inspired by an incident at Rorke's Drift during the war against the Zulu nation, celebrating British heroism.

Among these directors, Losey's European career has been outstanding. He hasn't forgotten what he learnt from the American film industry, but neither, for all the difficulties he has faced, has he capitulated politically or socially. His first British film, *Time without Pity*, was an indictment of the death penalty. His second, *Blind Date*, depicted police corruption in a murder investigation involving the interests of the rich and powerful. Then came *The Criminal* (or *The Concrete Jungle* in the US), which condemned the penal system and the role of organized crime in wider society. His fourth film, *The Damned*, attacked the death-drive of the nuclear-armed state, which is presented in terms of 'security measures', 'civil defence' and so on. Losey's films address political and social issues with far greater immediacy than those of the 'new wave'. They are also formally and stylistically superior. His work recalls Fritz Lang's American period, its clear, well-ordered shots and the revelations of the camera. While Samuel Fuller, himself also under the influence of Lang and also

openly polemical, has developed the rhythm of shot and montage, Losey has done the same for photographic values.

Losey's best film, *The Criminal*, merits close attention. The hero, Bannion (played by Stanley Baker) is a gang boss destroyed by his romantic self-image. He challenges a large-scale criminal organization of which he is merely an instrument, though all the while imagining that his personality makes him independent. The organization, led by an anonymous figure, integrates legal and illegal activities into a single capitalist unity, controlling events both inside and outside the prison. It carries out a successful plan to free Bannion from prison, then kills him when he refuses to go along with its scheme. The action of the film is dominated by Bannion, who is boastful and violent, but also intelligent, with an attentive and lively mind. Gradually he is drawn into the vortex and in his final fall is killed, alone in the middle of a vast, snow-covered field, his powerlessness in brutal contrast to the strength and energy he has shown in search of the fortune that society has denied him, but which he believes is his as a matter of natural right. *The Criminal* presents an image of that society and of the hero's presumption, condemned by a social order that he cannot fully understand. It could serve as a model for the kind of film the British 'new wave' aspires to create. It is a tragedy that recognition of Losey's significance has come from Paris rather than London. His most recent release, *The Damned*, is showing in suburban cinemas as a supporting feature. His new film (*The Servant*) which is barely finished shooting, may repair this injustice. The script is by Harold Pinter, a highly successful playwright.

Three other directors should be mentioned here. Clive Donner has completed *The Caretaker*, based on Pinter's play of that name and now showing solely at the Berlin Festival. His most recent release, *Some People*, is an exemplary instance of a vivid and imaginative treatment of a subject—the Duke of Edinburgh awards, intended to promote a sense of initiative among young people—with which he evidently has no sympathy whatever. Alexander Mackendrick's new film, *Sammy Going South* was a big disappointment after *Sweet Smell of Success*. Maybe the writer (Clifford Odets), and the director of photography (James Wong Howe), should have received the credit for that instead. Seth Holt's new film, *Station Six Sahara*, is scheduled for the autumn; his most recent, *Taste of Fears*, was a horror film based on Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques*—and, in the opinion of many critics, preferable to it.

There is one last consideration to bring to a discussion of the prospects for British cinema: the standard of acting and the inability of the industry to retain its big names. American cinema has long been poaching Britain's best actors. It's strange to find that the three 'stars' of *Cleopatra*—Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Rex Harrison—are all British. Burton, what's more, played the lead in *Look Back in Anger*. Lawrence Harvey (*Room at the Top*) has gone to America and Richard Harris (*This Sporting Life*) stars beside Marlon Brando in *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Albert Finney left for Broadway after his successes with *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *Tom Jones*. Fortunately, the school of British acting has always proved itself capable of renewal. Yet the flight of actors to America has negative consequences, both artistic—because the new generation has brought to light a new style of acting, which it would be a shame to lose—and financially, because investors respond more promptly to the appeal of a new 'star' than to a new director.

The unprepossessing record of British cinema makes it difficult to offer an objective assessment of new and more positive developments. Some critics, whose judgement has been clouded by the habit of scepticism, have seen nothing but the old defects in a new form. Others, anxious to greet any new sign of life, have hailed the 'new wave' as a renaissance. Reisz himself has rightly judged that 'the real test of our impact will come in five years' time'. By then, Anderson and Reisz will have produced further work—and their efforts will hopefully have been consolidated by other new talents. Losey may have received the broad recognition he deserves. The independent producers will have been strengthened and become less dependent on Rank or ABC. Finally, Britain would have a cinema the equal of any in the world—to the extent that this is made possible by the crisis of the American film industry. And then, we may hope, British cinema will forget that it is British and remember, once and for all, that it is cinema.

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