SEX, CLASS AND REALISM

In *Sex, Class and Realism* (1) John Hill writes:

*It is not only what films tell us about the society which is important but also what an understanding of the society can tell us of the films and the nature of their representations. This is, in fact, an important distinction. For example, the difficulty of such a well-known book as Raymond Durgnat's *A Mirror for England* is that it simply assumes that conclusions about British society can be arrived at on the evidence of the films alone. Films, he suggests, can be understood as the “reflections” of the society that makes them. But of course films do more than reflect; they also actively explain and interpret the way in which the world is perceived and understood. Moreover, the views which a film, or films, may be suggesting do not necessarily correspond to society has a whole. In a society divided by class, sex and race, access to the means of communication is not equal. Some groups are better placed than other to apply and communicate their definitions of society as the most “natural” and “normal”. So, what a film or films, tells us about society cannot just be accepted as “evidence”, but must itself be explained and interpreted in terms of the groups and the viewpoints with which they are connected.*

Hill concludes that New Wave and social problem films of this period, and the views of the world which they promoted, may well have obscured as much as they enlightened, and obstructed as much as they initiated the potential for social change and reconstruction. Murphy (2), while regarding Hill’s analysis as
open-minded and perceptive, considers that his Marxist perspective leads him to condemn the films’ well-meaning liberalism as ideologically pernicious. It should be noted that Hill’s views are based on the period 1956-1963 rather than two decades and focus on a relatively small number of films (primarily social problem and working-class realism films), ignoring significant films as *The Servant* (1963) and popular genre films such as the Bond movies and the Hammer horror cycle.

The four major directors associated with the New Wave cinema (Anderson, Reisz, Richardson and Schlesinger) came from middle-class backgrounds and, as Armes states (3) they ‘follow the pattern set by Grierson in the 1930s: the university educated bourgeois making “sympathetic” films about proletarian life, not analyzing the ambiguities of their own privileged position.” They certainly had no first-hand experiences of the working class subject matters of the novels and plays created by Alan Sillitoe, Stan Barstow and Shelagh Delaney. Hill (4) maintains that ‘the importance of the point, however, is less the actual social background of the film makers, none of whom ever lay claim to being “just one of the lads”, than the way 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.’

On a superficial level films will tend to reflect current trends, attitudes or anxieties present in society at the time they were made even if they are in the guise of historical romps such as *Tom Jones* (1963). In the 1930s, a film directly attacking events in Nazi Germany might have been considered indecent during a period of appeasement and also contrary to strict censorship ensuring that nothing offensive to foreign governments was screened; however, Alexander Korda’s *Fire Over England* (1937) could portray the defeat of the Spanish Armada in such a way as to leave no doubt among audiences as to the contemporary relevance. As a Jewish-Hungarian émigré, Korda (together with his brothers Zoltan and Vincent) would, with their better understanding of German expansionism and anti-Semitism, fall within Hill’s “better placed groups” with a viewpoint different to that of the pre-war British Establishment. Similarly, Herbert Wilcox’s two films about Queen Victoria starring Anna Neagle, *Victoria the Great* (1937) and *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938) can be interpreted as an Establishment reaction to the abdication crisis by representing the Monarchy in a positive and constructive light.

Michael Balcon, who is generally recognized as the greatest producer of quality British films, was a Grammar School boy from a Jewish background in Birmingham. When Balcon became head of production at Ealing Studios in 1938 he wanted a studio that would produce films with roots in contemporary British life providing a coherent view of Britain (5). To achieve this he formed a creative elite of writers and directors such as T.E.B. Clarke, Robert Hamer, Basil Dearden and Alexander Mackendrick with a commitment to portray the people of Britain and the background that shaped them in the realist tradition of the documentary. In 1945, Balcon stated “The World, in short must be presented with a complete picture of Britain...Britain as a leader in Social Reform in the defeat of social injustices and a champion of civil liberties” (6) and in an unpublished 1974 interview: “At Ealing we produced films; and the only thing we took into account were the things we ourselves wanted to do and...
we felt that if we believed in them strongly enough we could carry the belief through to the audience”(7) (my underlining). The Ealing comedies of the 50’s (with the possible exception of The Man in a White Suit) do seem to reinforce a belief that their cosy view of Britain may well have obscured as much as it enlightened with their paternalistic policemen (Jack Warner), dotty clergy (George Relph) and assorted respectable middle-class eccentrics (Stanley Holloway, Margaret Rutherford, Katie Johnson, Hugh Griffin et al) of London and the home counties. Nevertheless, the comedy films had a basic realism recognizing the importance of community, social responsibility and putting aside individual differences to engage in collective action against the forces of greed or bureaucratic indifference.

The “better placed groups” who directly influenced the New Wave cinema were literary working class “scholarship boys” (8) like Alan Sillitoe, Stan Barstow and John Braine together with documentary film makers John Schesinger and Lindsay Anderson and individuals with theatrical backgrounds, such as John Osborne and Tony Richardson, who wanted to extend current stage innovations to the screen.

In 1959, playwright John Osborne and stage director Tony Richardson founded Woodfall Film Productions financed by Harry Saltzman. Woodfall’s first two productions, Look Back in Anger (1959) and The Entertainer (1960) were originally successful stage collaborations by Osborne and Richardson produced by the English Stage Company. Osborne came from a lower-middle class London background and had a boarding school education, although he did not attend university. After a brief spell as a trade journalist he entered the acting profession and became an actor-manager in various provincial repertory companies. He wrote his first play, The Devil Inside Him in 1950 and received fame and acclaim in 1956 with the production of Look Back in Anger. Tony Richardson came from a Yorkshire middle-class, Oxford educated background. After graduating in 1953 he spent two years with the BBC before joining the British Stage Company as associate artistic director. Look Back in Anger derived from Osborne’s own experience of a drab bed-sit existence in the early fifties and the film version was opened up by scriptwriter, Nigel Kneale (literary, stage, BBC background), to include additional characters and a sub-plot involving Jimmy Porter (Richard Burton) defending an Indian market stall owner against the racism of other traders. Although Kneale’s addition contradicted Jimmy’s rant that “there aren’t any good causes anymore”, it was one of the first serious and non-exploitive explorations of racism by British cinema. The Entertainer (again co-scripted by Kneale introducing additional characters and sub-plots) was a Brechtian non-realistic production drawing parallels between Archie Rice’s (Lawrence Olivier) tacky end-of-the-pier show and the decline of Imperial Britain after the Suez crisis. Both adaptations owe little to the realist tradition or depict working-class life and only reflect Osborne’s lower middle-class preoccupations with sex, class and the decline of British popular culture.

The Woodfall production of Alan Sillitoe’s Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1960) directed by Karel Reisz introduced many conventions and assumptions that were to typify other New Wave films such as A Kind of Loving (1962), The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner (1962), Billy Liar (1963) and This Sporting Life (1963) as well as mainstream productions like Alfie (1965). Saturday Night and
Sunday Morning’s protagonist, Arthur Seaton (Albert Finney), is a young, well-paid lathe operator the Raleigh cycle factory. He lives with his parents (“They’ve got a television set and a packet of fags but they’re both dead from the neck up” comments Arthur) in a back-to-back terraced house in Radford, a working-class area of Nottingham. He has an affair with Brenda (Rachel Roberts) the wife of his workmate (Bryan Pringle). She becomes pregnant by Arthur and has an unsuccessful back-street abortion (required by the censor) and is “punished” by having to return to a loveless marriage. Arthur also has a “regular” girlfriend, Doreen (Shirley Ann Field), whom the film suggests will trap him into marriage and a life of consumerism on a soulless housing estate. Both Brenda and Doreen have an emotional depth and complexity untypical in previous roles for British actresses. The “Saturday Night” of the title represents Arthur’s womanizing, fighting and drinking and “Sunday Morning” his comeuppance when he must face the consequences of his previous lifestyle and lose his freedom. Arthur, shares the traits of other New Wave male protagonists by being individualistic, anti-authoritarian, sexually active, misogynistic and “out for a good time.” The workplace is only briefly shown and merely acts as the source of income to pay for Arthur’s relatively affluent, hedonistic lifestyle. A characteristic of many New Wave films are poetic shots and montages of the northern industrial landscape that Hill argues are “visual abstractions...emptied of socio-economic context” (9). At the beginning of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning there is a high-angle shot of the terraced houses of Radford that gives a God-like outsider’s view rather than the actual point of view of Arthur and his parents. Later in the film, there is a panoramic sweep of the industrial city landscape taken from the high vantage point of Nottingham Castle that, although visually pleasing, has little to do with the narrative of the film. Alan Sillitoe, who wrote the screenplay based on his novel, commented: “Those who see Arthur Seaton as a symbol of the working man and not an individual are mistaken. I wrote about him as a person, and not as a typical man who works a lathe. I try to see every person as an individual and not as a class symbol, which is the only condition in which I can write as a worker” (10). The New Wave films were mostly about interpersonal relationships in northern industrial settings; it was not their intention to explore class relationships or question the economic system. So what they tell us about society are the purely subjective viewpoints of their makers.

Hill’s contention that some groups are better placed than other to apply and communicate their definitions of society is substantiated by the manner in which Michael Balcon and Ealing Studios produced films aimed at liberal social reform influenced by post-war political speeches and writings. In a similar manner, the generally middle-class Oxbridge, theatrical or “scholarship boy” backgrounds of the makers of New Wave films gave an outsider’s view which tended to romantise individual male working-
class figures rather than presenting radical viewpoints. The significance of class relationships was obscured and sexual attitudes had a rigid conformity. However, Hill’s criticisms tend to be generalizations based on the assumption that films should have a progressive ideological agenda and a Marxist interpretation for what happens to their characters. Such a view diminishes from what was genuinely innovative about the New Wave films with their frequently realistic and honest portrayals of working-class life together with the stronger roles played by women than in previous British films.

**Bibliography**


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(1) HILL, J. *Sex, Class and Realism*, British Film Institute, 1986, p. 2-3.

(2) MURPHY, R. *Sixties British Cinema*, British Film Institute, 1992, p. 8-9.


(4) HILL, J. *Sex, Class and Realism*, British Film Institute, 1986, p. 133.


(9) HILL, J. *Sex, Class and Realism*, British Film Institute, 1986, p. 136.


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