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Cinematic Representations of Britishness, 1945–1971

During the Second World War the popular ethos was one of national unity in the face of foreign enemies. The so-called People's War implied a common purpose to which class and gender distinctions were at least temporarily subordinated: workers and managers, officers and non-coms, men and women were united in a struggle to win the war. Shared sacrifice, whether through food rationing, compulsory service, vulnerability to attack, or civilian as well as military casualties, fostered a renewed sense of community, a belief that "Britain Can Take It". Such heightened sensibility was a product of the war and a casualty of the peace. Britain emerged from the war with its economy shattered, its shipping largely destroyed, its cities in ruins, and its people exhausted. A Labour government attempted to make restitution for the years of depression and war by implementing a programmatic welfare state based on full employment, a national health service, public housing, and improved education. But the government had to grapple with a weak economy, colonial insurrection, financial dependence on the United States, and an imperfect peace. The Cold War and the threat of nuclear catastrophe fostered a siege mentality, reinforcing conservative responses in a culture that sought to restore some semblance of normality.

Between 1939 and 1945 the British cinema languished, although a handful of notable films, such as *In Which We Serve*, *The 49th Parallel,* and *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, were produced. Yet these, and most documentary films, were either sanctioned by the government or made for propaganda or morale-boosting purposes. Many actors and directors served in the military; others had decamped for Hollywood, whose products continued to dominate British screens. Although British output could never compete in quantitative terms with Hollywood, the quarter century after the end of the war witnessed a remarkable revival of British cinema, encouraged by government support. Eventually the high cost of production, the international character of film stars, and funding by multinational corporations largely finished off exclusively British films, and many of the most successful films from the 1970s to

COMPARATIV 16 (2006), Heft 4, S. 167-178.

the 1990s saw British and American actors collaborating in productions directed by Brits but financed by American companies.

Before British film-making was engulfed by American and European movies–especially in the years between 1945 and 1970–a distinctive British cinema emerged. A persistent sense of embattlement prompted British screen writers and directors to turn inward, to situate their films in a largely apolitical, domestic or historical context. In juxtaposition to American materialism and Soviet regimentation, British films sought to project such enduring qualities as fairness, community, eccentricity, self-restraint, and humor. Britain was represented as a mildly progressive, unthreatening, liberal democracy, but its underlying postwar values were perceived as conservative, an inheritance from the past that was reaffirmed after the upheaval of wartime. While films explored the emergence of new forces, few sought to change the status quo socially or morally. Rather they reaffirmed the value of the traditional as reassuringly British.

I want to examine more closely four emblematic films that evoke Britishness in the postwar decades in ways that question gender, class, and polity, but do not ultimately subvert prevailing attitudes or challenge the established order. They are often daring artistically and raise questions about personal or social identity, but they seem to refute the potential for change. Since British films were addressed not merely to domestic audiences, but also to the large American and Commonwealth market, one may perhaps read into this innate conservatism a desire to sustain familiar images of Britain among viewers more comfortable with continuity than with change.

Brief Encounter, released in 1945 and based on a 1935 one-act play by Noel Coward, was the most critically praised British film of the 1940s and one of the most celebrated films of all time. Although it has been denigrated as a tear-jerker and a woman's picture, movie critics on both sides of the Atlantic acclaimed it. E. Arnot Robinson called it "the most moving film ever made"[1], while C.A. Lejeune of *The Observer* described it as "one of the most emotionally honest and deeply satisfying films that have ever been made in this country".[2] And its popularity has endured: as recently as 1999, *Brief Encounter* was voted number two in a list of the hundred best British films.[3] Narrated mostly through

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1 *Penguin Film Review 3*, (1947), p. 33.

2 C. A. Lejeune, Chestnuts in Her Lap, London 1947, p. 162.

3 J. Kaplan/Sh. Stowell (eds.), Look Back in Pleasure: Noel Coward Reconsidered, London 2000, p. 16.

flashback with confessional voice-over by the heroine, beautifully played by actress Celia Johnson, the film is set in the late 1930s, but the mood is distinctly postwar. Laura Jesson, an ordinary, unglamorous, middle-class, suburban housewife, takes the train every Thursday from suburb to town to do her shopping, exchange her library books, eat a solitary lunch at the local Kardomah Café, and go to the pictures before returning to her husband and two children. On one such Thursday she comes into casual contact with a married doctor, Alec Harvey, who removes a piece of grit from her eye in the station buffet.The following week, they bump into each other in the street by chance. They exchange greetings and comments about the weather. He then says he must be getting along to the hospital, and she replies that she has to be getting along to the grocer. "What exciting lives we lead, don't we?" he observes with amused sarcasm.[4] The next Thursday they meet accidentally at the Kardomah, have lunch and go to the movies together. As Laura reflects, "I had no premonitions although I suppose I should have had. It all seemed so natural–and so–so innocent."[5] By the fifth week they confess they have fallen in love and kiss for the first time. The intensity of the feelings aroused both thrill and terrify her. Speaking in voice-over, but inaudible to the husband sitting opposite in their drawing room as she muses over the relationship, Laura says,

> You see, we are a happily married couple, and must never forget that. This is my home ... you are my husband–and my children are upstairs in bed. I am a happily married woman – or rather, I was, until a few weeks ago. This is my whole world and it is enough – or rather, it was until a few weeks ago. ... But, oh, Fred, I've been so foolish. I've fallen in love! I'm an ordinary woman–I didn't think such violent things could happen to ordinary people.[6]

Sexual consummation, which might have been expected, never happens. Although the sixth week finds them in a friend's flat to which Alec has a key, the owner returns unexpectedly, causing Laura to flee down the backstairs to avoid embarrassment and making her feel humiliated about the sordidness of prospective adultery. But it is not just guilt that prevents sexual fulfilment. "We are neither of us free to love each other," Laura tells Alec, there is too much in the way. There's still time, if we control ourselves and behave like sensible human beings, there's still time to ... [She bursts into tears and doesn't finish the sentence.][7]

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4 N. Coward, Brief Encounter, London 1990, p. 28.
5 Ibid., p. 31.
6 Ibid., p. 15-16.

Laura finds herself furtively deceiving her husband, is inconveniently observed in a restaurant by a gossipy friend, and feels increasingly self-conscious. "It's awfully easy to lie – when you know that you're trusted implicitly – so very easy, and so very degrading."[8] Although Alec tells her that "we know we love each other – that's all that matters," Laura replies, "It isn't all that matters–other things matter too, self-respect matters, and decency – I can't go on any longer."[9] By the seventh week, they have agreed to part, and Alec accepts a job in South Africa, deliberately placing unbridgeable distance between them.

Hovering on the brink of adultery, the protagonists ultimately choose self-restraint over unbridled passion, duty over indulgence, and concern for others over immediate self-gratification.[10] Suffused with emotion, the film should not be seen as a case study in English repression but rather as a testament to reticence. Such conduct suited the self-image that the British sought to project and which helped to make the film reflective of national character. But there was more to its timeliness than validation of the stiff upper lip. During the war women enjoyed freedom from parental and marital restraints, as well as economic and sexual liberation, as they assumed unfamiliar jobs, often far from home,. The end of the war marked a restoration of domesticity as women resumed traditional roles as wives and mothers. Laura's rejection of romance signaled a return to normality that the war was fought to protect, a normality which included the compliance of the wife to the dictates of marital fidelity. *Brief Encounter* reaffirms the institution of marriage, enjoining the sacrifice of sexual passion outside of it and celebrating ordinariness, contentment, and security within it. Yet the story of a suburban housewife who refused to stray would not have suited the British self-image had it not been couched in middle-class terms. Laura Jesson, jobless and provided for economically by her husband, with a maid to do the cooking, and enough leisure to spend a day a week enjoying herself in town, evokes the middle-class woman's existence in the Home Counties in the 1930s and 1940s, a pattern interrupted by the war, but ultimately reconstituted in peacetime–at least until woman became a permanent part of the labor force and domestic service largely vanished. The prosaic quality of Laura's life can be seen in the cosy domesticity of her home, her reliable, undemonstrative husband, addicted to *The*

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7 Brief Encounter (Anm. 4), p. 48.
8 Ibid., p. 63.
9 Ibid., p. 66.
10 J. Richards, Films and British National Identity, Manchester 1997, p. 123.

Times crossword, her weekly excursions, and the railway refreshment room setting of many of the brief encounters. Her life is constructed around routine, punctuated in the film by departing trains, carrying the couple in opposite directions emotionally and spatially. Few films of the era so successfully extol middle-class virtues of reticence and self-restraint, seeing them as the embodiment of Britishness. Still, it was middle class manners and accents and the sexual restraint of the lovers that made the film less popular among working-class audiences in Britain. Many viewers on the Continent found it incomprehensible that Laura and Alec didn't have sex whether or not they ultimately parted, a view echoed by later generations.

Most successful in capturing the mood and landscape of postwar Britain were the comedies that emanated from Ealing Studio under the aegis of Michael Balcon, who sought to translate socially-responsible values into cinema. Balcon, who disliked the escapist nature of interwar British films, wanted to project the British way of life by depicting enduring qualities of consensus, fair play, communality, and irreverence towards authority. Saluting the "little men" who refused to surrender to bureaucratic authority, he recognized that the people were tired of regulations and even that there was "a mild anarchy" in the air. Balcon described the Ealing comedies of the late 1940s and 1950s as "a safety valve for our more anti-social impulses".[11] Their satirical approach was, as one historian has written, "a relief from the moral platitudes of the 1950s and, even more, the repressive aspects of the anti-communism of the Cold War".[12]

Passport to Pimlico, released in 1949, was the first of Ealing's celebrations of national eccentricity. A comic fantasy, the story revolves around the accidental explosion of a buried enemy bomb in the London district of Pimlico, uncovering an old document, found amid buried treasure, revealing the district to be a sovereign state by order of a fifteenth century Duke of Burgundy. The people of Pimlico declare their independence as Burgundians, tear up their ration books, defy licensing hours, and refuse to have anything to do with England. Whitehall responds by imposing customs duties, controlling currency, closing the borders with barbed wire, and cutting off power and water – a virtual siege. After initial exultation at the elimination of rationing and controls, the inhabitants witness the collapse of law and order as Pimlico becomes

[11] M. Balcon, A Lifetime of Films, London 1969, p. 159.

[12] M. Landy, "The Other Side of Paradise," in J. Ashby/A. Higson (eds.), British Cinema, Past and Present, London 2000, p. 69.

a haven for black marketeers and outsiders hawking stolen merchandise and trading on Sunday. A daydream of liberation from wartime restrictions becomes a nightmare. Although their resolve is strengthened by a campaign of air-lifted "bundles for Burgundy" (simultaneously echoing both American shipments to Britain during the war and the Berlin airlift of 1948-9), the citizens ultimately come to terms with the government, and Burgundy is reabsorbed into England.

Despite its situational implausibility, *Passport to Pimlico* strongly resonated with the mood of England in the late 1940s. To the dismay of the popularly-elected Labour government, the British were in retreat from wartime ideals of unity and classless solidarity. The winter of 1946-47 had been one of the worst in recent history, resulting in a crisis of food production at a time of shortages and continued rationing of goods. A monetary crisis, triggered by the American loan and the obligation to make sterling convertible, cost Hugh Dalton his post as Chancellor of the Exchequer, to be replaced by Stafford Cripps, who was identified with heightened austerity. Indeed a placard in Burgundian Pimlico urges residents to "forget that Cripps feeling". Although Pimlico's residents ultimately forsake their independence, their initial defiance represents a nostalgic recreation of wartime unity that has ceased to be relevant to postwar social conditions. The film shows greed and self-interest effacing the community spirit at a time when the enemy is no longer Hitler but Whitehall. If the film evokes the collectivist spirit of wartime, the militant rhetoric of Churchill, and memories of the evacuation of people in cities, it is also a critique of an indifferent and even hostile bureaucracy in Whitehall. The populist ideology of the war years is resuscitated as the Burgundians seek to defy a foreign and hostile government that happens to be their own.[13]

Yet, in another sense, *Passport to Pimlico* is a manifesto for the postwar Labour rule. By demonstrating the evils that might occur with the blanket removal of restrictions and bureaucratic controls, it seeks to reconcile the people to what Margaret Thatcher would later denounce as the "nanny state". While the people of Pimlico know how to enjoy themselves, singing, drinking, and dancing until the early hours in the local pub, they are incapable of governing themselves and need to be reconciled to civic responsibility. To be sure, Whitehall fails to bludgeon the populace into submission, and the inhabitants are, as in wartime, at their best with their backs to the wall. They are fighting for their

[13] M. Landy, British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930–1960, Princeton 1991, p. 371.

rights against tyranny, even if it is a kind of democratically-elected tyranny. "Just because we are English," one female inhabitant declares, "we're sticking up for our rights to be Burgundians." The compromise, by which Burgundians "lend" their treasure to the nation and are restored as British citizens, is met with relief. "You never know when you're well off until you aren't," one says. Ration books and identity cards return, but unrestrained free enterprise is quashed; cooperation and communality triumph over naked individualism–all in the spirit of Labour rule.

Lest one exaggerate the gravity of the story, it needs to be stressed that this is, above all, a satire, ridiculing the foibles and eccentricities of the English while gently chiding their rulers. Reviewers initially believed that the film's appeal in America would be limited, and that even at home it would take "considerable merchandizing" to attract audiences.[14] In fact, *Passport to Pimlico* became one of the most popular films of 1949 in Britain. In New York, it broke box office records at the art movie theater at which it was screened. Americans relished the depiction of British eccentricity, and reviewers commented that elements of Britishness deserved to be caricatured, especially "the obstinate pride and pompous sense of superiority of Britons generally."[15] British films were popular in the United States when they unabashedly lampooned characteristics that both amused and infuriated Americans, proving that the British did not take themselves too seriously.

Room at the Top, which launched the "new wave" in British cinema in 1958, was very different from either *Brief Encounter* or *Passport to Pimlico*. Whereas class had been implicit in both of the earlier films, it lay at the heart of the cinematic transcription of John Braine's "angry young man" novel, originally published in 1957. For the first time, in a landmark film, the hero was a young provincial working-class man, ushering in a wave of comparable films based on literary sources, including *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), *Billy Liar* (1963), and *This Sporting Life* (1963). Although these social-realist films were not hugely successful commercially in America, they garnered critical praise. *Newsweek* cited *Room at the Top* as "the first top-drawer British picture in a long time which presents British life as it is lived today rather than during England's finest hour or back in medieval times."[16] In

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[14] Motion Picture Herald, 8 Oct. 1949.

[15] Quoted in S. Street, Transatlantic Crossings: British Feature Films in the USA, New York 2002, p. 156.

[16] Quoted in Street, p. 173.

that sense both the book and the later film contribute to the "state of England" discourse of the 1950s and 1960s, focusing on "what's wrong with Britain", which dominated literature, social inquiry, and higher journalism.

Room at the Top became notorious for its candid depiction of sex. Although its hero, Joe Lampton, uses his sexual appeal to get what he wants, the film was more remarkable for displaying the eroticism of its women characters, a decisive break with the tradition of reticence expressed in *Brief Encounter*. It also represented a break with past traditions of film-making by situating its plot in a Northern town, casting it in sharp relief to the predominantly South of England, middle class, genteel traditions of British cinema. Both its sexual frankness and its northern grittiness offered a new perception of British character, a contrast to the usual restrained, repressed stiff-upper-lip Britons. Yet, more important even than sexuality or regional identity, was its emphasis on the primacy of class. As John Braine put it,

> The new dimension of the film was in presenting a boy from the working classes not as a downtrodden victim, but as he really was. It wasn't important that Joe Lampton was honest about sex, what was important was that Joe was honest about the whole business of class. Most ambitious working-class boys want to get the hell out of the working class.[17]

Or, as one reviewer observed,

> The most important thing about this adaptation... is not so much its slightly self-conscious determination to bring sex to the British screen, as its uncompromising suggestion that life today in an English industrial town can be wretched, ugly and corrupt.[18]

Joe Lampton, twenty-five year old bookkeeper and former POW, abandons the poverty of his working-class origins in depressed Dufton to take a job in local government of the industrially more prosperous Warnley. What marks Joe is not anger for past deprivation, but rather envy – "the envy of a have-not for what he wants to acquire".[19] The film seems to condemn Lampton's ruthless determination to jettison working-class solidarity in order to rise to *haute bourgeois* respectability, showing that he can only succeed by sacrificing his integrity and the

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[17] Quoted in J. Richards, Films and British National Identity (Anm 10), pp. 149-50.
[18] Monthly Film Bulletin, Jan. 1959.
[19] A. Walker, Hollywood, England: The British Film Industry in the Sixties, London 1974, p. 45.

happiness of others. While limited professional advancement seems possible for a good looking, ambitious, young man in postwar England, social acceptance proves more elusive. Arrayed against his ascent are representatives of the patronizing upper class, the self-made middle class eager to preserve their gains, and the conformist working class urging him not to rise above his station.[20] Despite efforts to improve himself, his clothes, his accent, his lack of connections tell against him; only sexual magnetism and personal drive count in his favor. Lampton has barely arrived in Warnley when he spots Susan Brown, the nubile and virginal daughter of the town's wealthiest industrialist. He determines to entice her away from her wealthy suitor, but his physical desire for her is indistinguishable from what she represents in material terms. The sports car and the big house seem no less seductive than the pretty girl, who quickly succumbs to Joe's masculine charms. When Joe visits his honest, Dickensian aunt and uncle in Dufton, he tells them about the girl he is courting, but his mixed motives are all too transparent. "I ask you about the girl and all you tell me about is her father's brass," his aunt complains. "Sure it's the girl you want, Joe, not the brass?, adds his uncle. But Joe cannot get the "brass" without the girl, to whom he is sufficiently attracted to try to seduce her.

In the meantime, however, Joe becomes entangled with Alice Aisgill, a lonely, older, unhappily married woman, played with compelling sensuality by Simone Signoret, in an Academy Award performance. Alice is outside the complications of class, especially because the film (in contrast to the novel) turns her into a sexually-liberated Frenchwoman, although one dependent on her unfaithful English husband for her social position. For a while Joe is able to play both strings simultaneously, enjoying steamy sex with Alice while trying to break down Susan's well-bred sexual inhibitions. Although sexual gratification with Alice deepens into love, she cannot obtain a divorce, and the relationship, however intense, seems destined to lead to scandal and unhappiness. When Joe impregnates Susan, her father forces him to marry her, insists that he break with Alice, and offers him a position in his industrial firm, thereby enabling Joe to gain his "room at the top". He has realized his social ambitions, but he has done so by forfeiting his self-respect and the woman he truly loves, who commits suicide in an automobile accident. By the time he has won Susan, he no longer really desires her, and the film ends not with Joe's triumph but his bitter realization that what he wanted might not really be worth having. Thus, while recognizing

[20] Richards (Anm. 10), p. 150.

the unfair advantages of class, the film also appears to sanction the ethos of Joe's sturdy, but poor Aunt Emily, "money marries money. ... Get one of your own class, lad, go to your own people." Rather than being an invocation of social mobility, the film poses the alternative of "authenticity", but not in a way that would justify class transgression.

The Go-Between, the last of the films I want to discuss, is indubitably one of the finest postwar British films. In its depiction of class and sexuality, it can be compared to *Room at the Top*, but, in contrast to the other three films, its setting is a turn-of-century stately home, its central characters are landed gentry, and it is distinctly a costume drama, an early example of what came to be termed the "heritage film". Like *Room at the Top*, it derives from a successful novel, and has a screenplay by Harold Pinter, is brilliantly acted by an all-star cast, and directed by the innovative American expatriate, Joseph Losey.

What initially captivates the viewer is the visual splendor of rural Norfolk and the luxurious lifestyle of the inhabitants of Brandham Hall, centered on the enjoyment of consumption and leisure. Their life, revolves around the solemn observance of ritual and attention to decorum: elaborate meals, picnics, games of croquet, village cricket matches, bathing parties, balls–and morning prayers. Everyone dresses formally for dinner, and a retinue of servants cater to their whims. As one young family member informs his guest, "You must leave [your clothes] lying wherever they happen to fall–the servants will pick them up–that's what they're for." The scenery, the lush gardens and herd of deer, the sumptupous costumes, the family portraits on the walls, the polished silver and starched linen all foster an image of a self-enclosed, but lost world. By reproducing these trappings of a landed society, the film contributes to the sense that the national past is identical to the heritage of the upper classes, an aristocratic, male-dominated, pastoral landscape. Both the novel and the film turn away from modernity towards a conservative, prewar Englishness and inspire nostalgia on the part of the viewer.[21]

While the cinematography draws the audience into complicity with the aristocratic lifestyle, the social critique directly challenges the visual image. The film's narrative recounts a double loss–that of a child's innocence and that of the lovers in a doomed affair that transgresses class barriers. During the sultry summer of 1900, middle-class, thirteen-year-old Leo Colston comes to Brandham Hall to stay with his

[21] A. Higson, "Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film," in: L. Friedman (ed.), Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism, Minneapolis 1993, pp. 112-14.

schoolfriend's family, the snobbish Maudsleys. He becomes infatuated with his friend's voluptuous older sister Marian and is soon enlisted as a messenger – he is called alternately "our postman" and "Mercury, messenger of the Gods" – to carry messages back and forth between Marian and her lover, a local tenant farmer, Ted Burgess. Their illicit sexual encounters are concealed–at least until the film's *denoument* – but they can never carry on their relationship openly. Class considerations dictate that Marian must marry a man of her own social level, or, even better, the aristocratic, battle-scarred Viscount Trimingham, whom she does not love. Leo only barely perceives the tragedy of their situation, but his gradual awakening to harsh adult reality and to the danger of sexuality scars him for life. It is Marian's vengeful, rigid mother who, accompanied by Leo, finds Marian and Ted having sex in an abandoned outbuilding on the estate and ends the affair. The central characters are victims of the class system, destroyed by values beyond their control, by a powerful social tradition that overwhelms them.[22] When Marian is asked by Leo, why she is marrying Trimingham if she is in love with Ted, she can only reply, "Because I must marry him. You wouldn't understand. I *must*. I've *got* to."

The film sets up a contrast between the enclosed social world and imposing architecture of the Hall and the freer, more natural atmosphere of Ted's farm. Ted himself is a natural, Laurentian, sexually-magnetic man, in tune with the rhythms of the outdoors. We see him swimming, shooting rooks, threshing his fields, but when his affair with Marian is revealed, Ted, unprotected by privilege of class, commits suicide. Marian, pregnant with Ted's child, marries Trimingham, who does the honorable thing, accepting it as his son and heir. As Viscountess Trimingham, Marian, her past notwithstanding, has entree into the best society; Ted, on the other hand, is crushed by it. *The Go-Between* is less hesitant in condemning the pernicious effect of class barriers than *Room at the Top*, but it allows the viewer the luxury of identifying them with a more distant past, a past enveloped in the haze of nostalgia. Losey was politically opposed to the sense of superiority and privilege, which he sees as a mask for deceit, but he recognizes its implacable force in an ordered society that has long since vanished.

What then is the Britishness these films represent in the postwar decades? Whether sentimental or gently satirical or sharply critical, they project a culture with certain shared values, with a recognized class system that is slow to change, with a preference for reticence and under-

[22] F. Hirsch, Joseph Losey, Boston 1980, pp. 129-32.

statement, and with a heritage that privileges the pastoral over the industrial. It is a culture in which gender roles remain traditional: men rule, women are subordinate and vulnerable. Much of that was to change in subsequent decades as Britain modernized and became more subject to foreign influences. Yet, as social commentary these films document characteristics of Britishness inherited from the past and surviving the trauma of the Second World War. For better or worse, they are our most effective maps to follow in exploring the British landscape.