Shakespeare and national identity

Although he died centuries before the invention of the cinema, the impact of William Shakespeare on the most popular art-form of the twentieth century has been profound. There have been many adaptations of his plays, but Shakespeare’s influence goes much further than simply adapting his works: his plays have been a source of inspiration for filmmakers in a number of ways and references to Shakespeare and his plays crop up in a variety of unexpected moments. The titles of two films by Alfred Hitchcock are drawn from Shakespeare (Rich and Strange (The Tempest) and North by Northwest (Hamlet)). The St. Crispin’s Day speech from Henry V has also been used as the source of the title for the HBO/BBC World War Two Series Band of Brothers (2001), and also features in Tombstone (1993).

The two most commonly referenced speeches are from Richard II and Hamlet, and both have been employed in the contexts of British and American cinema, respectively, to articulate ideas about national identity.

This England

In the history of British cinema, it is John of Gaunt’s speech from Richard II (Act 2, Scene 1) that has been a source of inspiration for filmmakers. Several films have taken their titles from this speech, mostly produced during World War II: This England (1923 & 1941), The Demi Paradise (1943), This Happy Breed (1944). More than any other moment in the history of drama, it is John of Gaunt’s evocation of that has captured the image and imagination of the nation.

This royal throne of kings, this scepter’d isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,

Perhaps the most famous performance of this speech on film is that of Leslie Howard in The Scarlet Pimpernel (1934). To secure the escape of Lady Blakeney, Sir Percy surrenders himself to Chauvelin and as the firing squad is readied he reflects on the England he is leaving behind. Soft in focus and long in take, Howard’s performance of this speech adds a third dimension to the foppish Blakeney and the cunning Pimpernel and is very much the best scene in the film. This scene, perhaps more than any other in pre-war British cinema, establish the qualities of the English gentleman that also feature in films such as The Drum (1938), The Four Feathers (1939),...
Lindsay Anderson also employs this speech in *Britannia Hospital* (1982) – albeit for a very different effect. As the staff tour the hospital in preparation for a royal visit, pointing the various iniquities of life in modern Britain (militancy of trade unions, the unfairness of the class system, the corruption and insanity of authority, and many others), they come across a patient – ‘our greatest foreign minister since Palmerston’ – (played by Arthur Lowe) who all of a sudden sits bolt upright in bed, quotes Richard II, and promptly dies. Quite what Anderson wants us to make of this is not clear, and the scene lasts only 50 seconds. Anderson is pointing to the difference between the image of the nation articulated by John of Gaunt and the reality of Britannia Hospital, but this may be matter of exposing the hypocrisy of a British national identity that clings to an unrealistic idea of itself; or we may see it as the death of a once great England, that has been reduced to such a low status and has clearly lost something it once had. Depending on how you interpret it, the scene may be nostalgic, but there is no mourning a once great man, and the former foreign minister is covered with a bed sheet and the words, ‘Pity – he would have appreciated a visit.’

Since *Britannia Hospital*, the speech has disappeared from British cinema screens; while *Richard II* has tended to disappear from school curricula, which seem to focus almost exclusively on *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*. It seems unlikely now that audiences would be familiar enough with *Richard II* for a scene like that at the end of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* to work with the same power.

It should also be noted that Muriel Box directed a film called *This Other Eden* (1959), about a town in Ireland that wants to erect a statue to a member of the IRA. Apparently, this was the first Irish film to be directed by a woman. Cork University Press published a monograph on this film in 2001 by Fidelma Farley as part of its *Ireland into Film series*. I have not seen this film, but the title is very suggestive of the political relationship between the British and the Irish.

**Hamlet in Hollywood**

Hamlet’s ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy (Act 3, Scene 1) has been referenced by Hollywood cinema on many occasions. The titles of numerous films have been drawn from the text: *To Be or Not to Be* (1942 & 1983), *What Dreams May Come* (1998), and even *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991). While the Lubitsch’s and Johnson’s *To Be or Not to Be* are comic farces, the other two films both share a sense of crossing over into the unknown (death and the afterlife, or a peace treaty with your mortal enemies). *Star Trek VI* was released in after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the peace treaty between the Klingons and the Federation mirrors this breaking down of a long-standing barrier.

What connects these films is that they exist at the frontier, an idea that has been central to American exceptionalism and national identity. The ‘frontier thesis’ of Frederick Jackson Turner has been one of the most enduring concepts in the study of American History since its original publication in the 1890s. For Turner, it is the frontier that defines America:

> The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. … the frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people. The coast was predominantly English, but the later tides of continental immigration flowed across the free lands. … The growth of nationalism and the evolution of American political institutions were dependent on the advance of the frontier ([1893] 1956: 1-2, 10-11).

The frontier is a place of becoming – it is where America became America, and it is this sense of becoming that occupies Hamlet. Faced with the murder of his father he must come to terms with himself and decide what he will do. This is Hamlet’s moment of becoming, of transformation, of crossing the frontier into adulthood and the future.

Perhaps the most unique example of this idea of transformation, becoming and the frontier is John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine* (1946) (Figure 1). Tag Gallagher (1986:232-233) discusses the role of *Hamlet* in this film, but does not say anything of great interest. He writes that, the ‘pretentiousness of inserting Shakespeare into a western mirrors the advent of culture into the wilderness, and is both undercut and underscored by staging the soliloquy on a saloon table with a drunken actor (Alan Mowbray) and an uncomprehending savage audience (the Clanton boys),’
To call this scene pretentious is, I think, to miss the importance of the idea of the frontier, and Gallagher's subsequent analysis is very literal:

-To be or not to be – that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And, by opposing, end them.

Wyatt, of course, opposes troubles (ought he to?), and Clementine and the Clantons also decide to take action. But Holliday prefers

To die, to sleep
No more – and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to – 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished.

Is not Wyatt in a kind of 'sleep?' Holliday in a nightmare?
Clementine in a kind of dream?

I generally think that Gallagher's book on Ford is quite an interesting one, but this is rubbish. He simply assigns qualities referred to in the speech to characters in the film, and generates no insight whatsoever.

Figure 1
Hamlet's 'To be or not to be 'soliloquy in My Darling Clementine (1946)

The use of Hamlet in this scene may be interpreted in several ways. The placing of high culture in the low surroundings of a saloon does contrast the civilised and the barbaric. The film has, along with just about every other western, been interpreted as a shift from wilderness to garden, from barbarity to civilisation, and so we can see this as an instance of the becoming of the west. Hamlet is a metaphor for the transformation of American society at the frontier. At the same time, we have Doc Holliday who finishes the speech when the actor falters, and so we may this speech as a meditation on Doc's mortality. Like Hamlet, Doc must face up to the future and determine a course of action. He must decide if he is to go on as a drunkard and a gambler, or if he will take a stand for what is right. The coughing fit that ends his performance reminds us of the short time he has left, and so his decision must be interpreted in terms of his own impending frontier – death. We would not expect to find Shakespeare in a western – it is certainly not a common part of the genre, but in My Darling Clementine it is one of the most important. This scene is a moment of pause, in which we are invited to reflect on the central question Shakespeare poses – 'To be or not be' – and to consider the nature and consequences of that becoming. For the west it is the transformation of the wilderness into civilisation, for America it is the becoming of a nation, and for Doc it is a decision on a path to righteousness.

References


Connecting the regional and the global in the UK film industry

UPDATE: 22 November 2010 – this article has now been published as Connecting the Regional and the Global in the UK Film Industry, Transnational Cinemas 1 (2) 2010: 145-160. DOI: 10.1386/trac.1.2.145_1.

This week’s post is a draft of an article that I started writing a while ago and has driven me up the wall for several months, as most of it has been finished for quite some time but I never could quite get it done. The piece is about regional film production in the UK, and the ways in which this production is connected within the UK and beyond. It represents an attempt to enumerate the different types of films produced in the UK’s regions in the absence of any official statistics on the geography of film production in the UK. The abstract is presented below and the pdf can be downloaded here: Nick Redfern – Connecting the regional and the global in the UK film industry.

Abstract

Film policy in the United Kingdom is comprised of two complementary strands: the development of regional production clusters and the positioning of the UK as a film hub in the global film industry. This article examines the relationship between the regional, national, and global scales in feature film production in three UK regions — Northern Ireland, Scotland, and the South West of England — from 2004 to 2006. The results indicate that connections between the regions of the UK and the global film industry are limited; and that where they do exist these connections are either directly to or mediated through London.
which functions as the dominant centre of distribution and finance – and therefore decision-making – in the UK film industry. Northern Ireland, by virtue of its cultural and economic relationship to the Republic of Ireland, stands out as a region in which its connections to other major decision-making centres are as important as its connections to London. The results suggest that while UK film policy has sought to redistribute the productive capacity of the industry, the autonomy of regional production centres remains limited.

Brassed Off

This piece is a slightly re-written version of a paper I gave on regional identity in Brassed Off in March 2007. I am including it here because I think that it is a good example of how the study of British cinema very quickly achieves a critical orthodoxy about some films, and the way in which several film scholars immediately lapsed into the stereotype of the North of England as the ‘land of the working class’ that has been with us since the nineteenth century (see the reference to Rob Shields) suggests a lack of critical imagination. I think that there is more to be said about the changing status of the community in Brassed Off, and that this film provides an excellent opportunity to explore the relationship between economy and culture, and class and region. The one dimensional critical approach of various scholars of British cinema have, I think, missed something interesting about how this film seeks to express identity. They are all too obsessed with class and gender to attend properly to the question of social space in the film, but it is the film itself that suggests we need to go beyond old conceptions of the North (based on economy and class) and to consider the new (based on culture and space).

In this paper I argue that in Brassed Off it is the cultural utopianism represented by the Grimley Colliery Brass Band that overcomes the alienation and economic decline of a Yorkshire mining community. The film is typically approached as a narrative about class and gender; albeit one that problematises those categories with the advent of post-industrial society in the United Kingdom. As such, the film is defined as a portrayal of ‘working class life’ (Hallam 2000: 261) and ‘Old Labour collectivism’ (Monk 2000: 277) that draws upon the ‘iconography of working-class realism’ (Leach 2004: 63-64) in presenting ‘a last throw of the dice for a powerful element in the construction of the identity of large parts of the industrial north of England’ (Blandford 2007: 28). This ‘crisis of post-industrialism’ is cast as ‘the crisis of masculinity’ in late twentieth century Britain (Marris 2001: 47), evident in ‘its treatment of the alternately dying, impoverished, and isolated male body’ (Luckett 2000: 95), and its ‘certain level of nostalgia for a fading masculinity’ (Blandford 2007: 29). Crisis is, however, overcome with ‘a certain utopianism about the possibility of collective action’ (Hill 2000: 183). Brassed Off, then, is seen to play out ‘a drama in which male social and emotional bonds once associated with the workplace and the working man’s club are threatened, mourned, struggled for, and finally restored’ (Monk 2000: 282).

The uniformity of critical opinion regarding Brassed Off reflects the north of England’s ‘intensified “sense of place,”’ which, as Rob Shields (1991: 208-230) had demonstrated, has adopted a ‘consistent form since the nineteenth century in the popular imagination as the “land of the working class.”’ However, in the contemporary era this sense of place is challenged, as the north as ‘land of the working class’ is made problematic by the decline of industry and the transformation of labour. Consequently, the significance of a Yorkshire regional identity in the film has been overlooked, and here I argue that Brassed Off narrates a transformation in the basis for social identity in the town of Grimley from a solidarity based on social class to one based on identification with a regional identity. The ‘social and emotional bonds’ of working class, male culture are mourned, but are not, in the final scenes of the film, restored. As this regional identity is identified with a brass band, it is equally a shift from economy to culture. The identification with the region is located within the nation, and the film represents the affirmation of a British national identity through the expression of a regional, Yorkshire identity.
The issue of regional identity emerged in a number of British films released between 1992 and 2002, including *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill but Came Down a Mountain* (Christopher Monger, 1995), *Blue Juice* (Carl Prechezer, 1995), and *24 Hour Party People* (Michael Winterbottom, 2002) (Redfern 2005a, 2005b, 2007), but no British film released during this period exemplifies the alienation of the regions from the centre, the transformation of work, and the demand to see regional cultures validated in the life of the nation better than *Brassed Off*.

Alienation most obviously features in the film in the decision to close the Grimley colliery. The report produced by Gloria that demonstrates the pit’s profitability goes unread by the management as it is revealed that the decision to close the pit was taken some two years before the miners voted for redundancy. Gloria’s belief that she could make a difference, that her work would enable both the management and the miners to make an informed decision is shown to be hopelessly naïve, suggesting that ‘down south’ they are unaware of the realities of life in the north. Though the miners vote for redundancy it is clear that it is merely a formality, a means for the management to retain control over the community’s future but to transfer responsibility on to the miners. The colliery manager, McKenzie, is shown to be different from the miners: he does not have a Yorkshire accent, he never shares the same space as the miners, does not try to cash in on the kudos the band brings to the colliery, and his office is spacious with wood panelled walls in contrast to the drab grey interiors of the spaces inhabited by the miners (e.g., the pub, Phil’s home). Andy, the youngest miner and band member, accurately predicts the outcome of the ballot will go four to one in favour of redundancy, because he is aware that although the miners want to keep the pit open they know that they have no real choice in the matter. Here the management are represented as gangsters: McKenzie’s seclusion in his office, his assistants hanging on his every word, and Gloria’s observation that he made the miners ‘an offer they couldn’t refuse’ link him generically to Don Corleone in *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972). The alienation of the miners from this decision making process is evident in one sequence where the band’s performance of Rodrigo’s ‘Concierto de Aranjuez’ is heard over shots of a meeting between the management and the union leadership. The miners are excluded from this meeting but the use of music to obscure the negotiations makes the spectator aware of their absence and their lack of a voice in deciding their future. It is only through music that they are able to express themselves. The ease with which the miners are overlooked is revealed early in the film, as we see Ida and Vera, the wives of two of the band members, talking over the backwall of their terraced houses. The handling of space in a series of shot/reverse shot draws on the stereotypes of gossiping Northern women (e.g., from *Coronation Street* [Granada, 1961–] and the paintings of Beryl Cook) and implies that they live in adjacent terrace houses. A wide shot then reveals to us that Ida and Vera do not live side by side but are divided by a backyard in which a former miner sits smoking and reading the paper.

As the narrative of *Brassed Off* centres on the closure of the colliery the economic aspect of the film is particularly strong. The loss of the pit simply means the absence of work and beyond coal mining there is no employment for the men of Grimley. For example, Simmo appears to have no job at all and appears to survive solely on what he can hustle playing pool, even referring to Andy as his ‘main source of income.’ The main focus of this part of the narrative is Phil and Sandra. Burdened by debt acquired during the 1984 miners’ strike, they are unable to keep the bailiffs from the door and eventually their possessions are seized. The bailiffs and the creditors they represent are symbolic of the Thatcher government, being insensitive and ignorant of the struggles of Grimley, and profit from their parasitic relationship to the miners. In order to raise extra money Phil is forced to perform as a clown, Mr. Chuckles. The birthday party at which he performs takes place in a middle class home, and the film contrasts this space (nicely decorated, carpeted, bright) with Phil’s house with its carpet and furniture stripped out. This house is also more modern than Phil’s 1930s dreary council housing and is unattainable to him, and this emphasises the relegation of heavy industry to the past. As McKenzie comments: ‘coal is history.’

On exiting, the mother is surprised to hear that he is a miner, to which he responds: ‘You remember ‘em love. Dinosaurs, dodos, miners.’ This sequence is cross-cut with Sandra unable to pay for the family shopping, and relying on the charity of Vera, who, as the cashier, slips her a five pound note from the till. An exhibitionist shot of the table laid out with the birthday cake and other foods exposes a bounty that the miner’s lack. The one time we see one of the miners eat is when Andy takes Gloria to the fish and chip shop, which represents his idea of going ‘posh.’ (Other than this the men of Grimley appear to survive purely, and specifically, on bitter). Gloria comments sarcastically that if she knew they going to go this posh she would have got dressed up, and here the film notes the cultural and economic difference between the Grimley idea of ‘posh’ and that of someone who has just returned from the south of England. Phil’s other engagement as Mr. Chuckles takes place at a harvest festival, again contrasting the bounty of the middle class mothers and their children with the desperation of the miners.

The closure of Grimley colliery forces a shift in the conception of Yorkshire from one that is defined primarily in terms of economic activity to a definition that is culturally based. Moya
Luckett argues that *Brassed Off* ‘ultimately exposes the Marxist truism that culture has no value without an economic infrastructure’ (Luckett, 2000: 96), but the film seeks to demonstrate that in the era of mass pit closures the colliery band is now more essential to the community of Grimley than ever before representing, pride, continuity, and unity. Originally founded in 1881, Danny states that through two world wars, three disasters, seven strikes, and one ‘bloody big depression’ the band ‘played on every flamin’ time.’ The continuity of the band is also evident in the continuity from one generation to the next: Danny’s son Phil is a trombone player, and Gloria turns out to be from Grimley and the granddaughter of the best bandsman and bravest miner Danny ever knew. She even has her grandfather’s flugel horn, and is accepted into the band by virtue of this historical and familial link. The final shot of the film focuses on Danny, who we know to be terminally ill, and a title tells us that, ‘Since 1984 there have been 140 pit closures in Great Britain at the cost of nearly a quarter of a million jobs.’ *Brassed Off* does not offer any solution to these problems and there are no miracle cures or last minute rescue packages, but the film is utopian in its representation of collective action through the band. Though Danny will die the memory of him will persist through the continuity of the band, and his picture will adorn the practise hall wall alongside Gloria’s grandfather.

Throughout the film there is a division of labour between the men and the women of Grimley, and this is reflected in the way in which social space is divided along gender lines. The men are associated with the pit, the pub, and the practise hall, while the women are shown in domestic situations (e.g., pegging out the washing, caring for children) or in service jobs (e.g., as a waitress, a pub landlady, a cashier, or nurses). Men and women are rarely shown together to occupy the same space: Harry and Rita pass one another outside their house, barely acknowledging each other’s existence; and, unable to cope, Sandra leaves Phil. The economic struggles of Grimley bring families to the point of collapse but through the band they are able to come together. At the Albert Hall the men and women of Grimley are reunited within a single space. Rita and Sandra are in the audience, where previously they have been scornful of their husbands’ interest in the band. With the men on stage and the women in the audience a division of labour remains in place at the end of the film. However, Gloria’s presence in the band suggests that it may be overcome. Gloria is the only female member of the band, and her arrival in Grimley prompts Vera and Ida to take an interest in their husbands’ activities. Gloria’s presence in the band also suggests that class differences may be overcome: it is Gloria who provides the money for the band to travel to London, thereby cleansing herself of the stain of being part of the management and readmitting her to the band. Hill argues that the film projects the image of a ‘populist alliance in which middle-class characters into the community represented by the working-class characters’ (2000: 184); but this alliance is not predicated on gender or class. With the colliery gone it is no longer a pre-requisite of band membership that the musicians be miners, and the grounds for membership is shifted to being from Grimley and this opens the way for a middle-class woman to become a member of the band. In his defiant speech at the Albert Hall, Danny reminds us that it is not music that matters but people. However, in stressing the pride, continuity, and unity the band has to offer Grimley following its economic decline, *Brassed Off* makes the case that music does matter because it represents the community.

Mike Wayne places *Brassed Off* into a category he describes as ‘anti-national national films.’

> The films in this category are defined by their critique of the myth of community which underpins national identity; the myth that is of the deep horizontal comradeship which overlays the actual relations of a divided and fractured society. The myth of unity and shared interests is a powerful means of legitimising the social order. These films are national insofar as they display an acute attunement to the specific social, political, and cultural dynamics within the defined territory of the nation, but they are anti-national insofar as the that territory is seen as a conflicted zone of unequal relations of power (2002: 25).

It is certainly the case that in representing a mining community in Yorkshire, *Brassed Off* articulates the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of the UK as a ‘conflicted zone of unequal relations of power.’ The alienation and economic decline of the residents of Grimley is derived from these inequalities. However, the closing scene of the film does not critique the myth of a ‘deep horizontal comradeship’ but appeals to precisely that myth. On leaving the Albert Hall the band is seen riding on an open-top bus past the Houses of Parliament, and, like many films, the red London bus and Big Ben are used in *Brassed Off* to represent Britishness. By placing the band aboard the bus, the film symbolically places Yorkshire within the nation. It is in this sequence that the band plays Sir Edward Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance No. 1,* or as Danny

...
refers to it (with grudging respect): ‘Land of Hope and Bloody Glory.’ The film thus appeals to the ‘deep horizontal comradeship’ of a British national identity whilst at the same time asserting the regional identity of Yorkshire, and the importance of that regional identity in the nation. *Brassed Off* may be read as an appeal to the nation not to forget that communities such as Grimley are a part of the nation, and though the traditional image of the North as an industrial heartland may no longer be applicable the intensity of identification with the North has not diminished.

**Conclusion**

*Brassed Off* is a *British* film – but its nationality is articulated through the representation of the regional in a harmonious relationship with the national. The alienation of a regional community can be overcome through the unification of the regional and the national, and in representing the Yorkshire region the films make the case for importance of the regional in the UK. *Brassed Off* dramatises the shift from traditional heavy industries to cultural industries and make the case that the rest of the UK needs to recognise this shift and reorient their ‘mental maps’ of the region. It also emphasises the vitality of a regional subculture; and that the nation should respect the uniqueness of Yorkshire, and recognise its contribution to the cultural life of the nation. In contrast to the anti-Thatcherite state of the nation films of the 1980s that questioned the validity of a national identity (e.g., *The Ploughman’s Lunch* [Richard Eyre, 1983]), *Brassed Off* has a positive outlook on the value of regional cultures, a British national identity, and the possibility of negotiating a more sympathetic relationship between the regional and the national.

**Works Cited**


**Tagged:** *Brassed Off*, *British Cinema*, *Film Studies*, *Regionalism*

Hybridity has become a key concept in cultural geography as an interpretive framework for understanding narratives and identities that are resistant to essentialist and essentialising notions of politics and culture (Mitchell 2005). In the study of contemporary British cinema in particular, hybridity has become the central concept in understanding the proliferation of class, racial and ethnic, and gendered and sexual identities and their interaction with British national identity. In this paper I argue that the multiplicity of identities in contemporary British cinema has been accommodated within a discourse of hybridity that defines British national cinema in dynamic terms. However, this concept of a hybrid British cinema has not included Northern Ireland. As in the rest of the UK, multiple identities are a feature of the cinema in Northern Ireland but there are key differences. These issues are explored through looking at two films produced in Northern Ireland at the end of the twentieth century – Divorcing Jack (1998) and Wild About Harry (2000). I argue that in these films the problem of identity in Northern Ireland is represented as the confusion that arises from multiple identities and that no inclusive framework to cope with such multiplicity has yet emerged.

Hybridity and identity in contemporary British cinema

The dominant narrative of hybridisation in contemporary British cinema has been set out by John Hill (1992, 1999), who has argued that the concept of a national cinema should be seen as dynamic and subject to change. Consequently, national cinemas cannot be regarded as being straightforwardly pure, but are necessarily hybrid in that they reflect the diverse nature of the nation itself. For Hill, it is only since the 1980s that a cinema in Britain has emerged that is capable of capturing this diversity. Although this means that the myth of the nation of earlier British films are no longer asserted with confidence, the hybrid cinema that emerged is more British for its diversity. A hybrid British cinema has emerged as a result of the ways in which the British cinema ‘became involved in a cultural politics of “identity” and “difference” and, in doing so, sought to negotiate the complex terrain of class, gender, sexual orientation, “race,” and nationality’ since the 1980s (Hill 1999: xii). It is a cinema that ‘deals with the evolution of a myriad of fluid, complex and sometimes conflicting identities,’ and is comprised of films that are ‘multilayered and complex films, not only in terms of narrative, but also in terms of genre, style, and film form’ (Malik 1996: 211-214). It is a cinema that ‘generates the pleasure of hybridisation in the cinematic form’ by filmmakers who have ‘refused to be bound by a rigid national boundary or a singular (cultural, ethnic or national) identity’ (Malik 1996: 212, 214). It is a cinema in which questions of identity are being played out in ‘the complex post-colonial hybridity of contemporary Britain’ (Brundson 2000: 168); and where those identities are ‘often complex, hybrid and contradictory,’ and the meanings generated tend ‘to be pluralistic, fragmentary and often contradictory rather than ideologically cohesive’ (Monk 2000: 156-157).

Madgwick and Rose write that to ‘understand the United Kingdom in its entirety we must therefore understand its parts – England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland’ (1982: 1), and a regional approach to the nature of identity in the UK has become particularly relevant over the past decade with the re-emergence of the regional agenda in British politics in the late-1980s and the commitment of New Labour to a programme of devolution and regionalization after 1997. The regional has been one of the hottest topics of British politics over the twenty years, and this has begun to be reflected in British cinema studies. A concern with the geography of the cinema in the UK can be seen in the increasing level of interest in the representation of different parts of the UK in British cinema (see, for example, Berry 1994, Dave 2006, Hill 2006, Petrie 2000); the representation of, and attachment to, specific places – the cities (Brundson 2007, Mazierska and Rascaroli 2003: 161-234, Redfern 2005) and landscapes (Redfern 2007a) of the UK; the social
The multiple geographies of Northern Ireland

The history of the conflict in Northern Ireland has its roots in the long and complicated political relationship between the British and Irish and Protestants and Catholics, but has been redefined in recent decades by sociologists and psychologists in terms as a cultural conflict involving a clash of national and religious identities (see O'Dowd 2005). Sociological studies have identified a bewildering range of different identities, including (but not limited to) British/Northern Irish, British/Protestant, Catholic/Irish, Catholic/Northern Irish, Irish/Catholic, Irish/Nationalist, Irish/Northern Irish, Northern Irish/British, Northern Irish/Catholic, Northern Irish/Irish, Northern Irish/Protestant, Protestant/British, and Protestant/Northern Irish (Benson and Trew 1995). Such categories make self-identification possible (Lyon 1997), and serve to ‘simplify the environment’ and make it more ‘understandable’ (Bull 2006) – they serve to answer the questions ‘who am I?’ and ‘who are you?’ Equally, they function negatively and are explicitly used to reject a particular set of identities. It is as important for Catholics in Northern Ireland to view themselves as not British as it is to identify themselves as Irish and for Protestants to be British and not Irish (although there are exceptions for both groups).

Brian Graham writes that ‘this dissonance of identity – ultimately the principle impediment to political negotiations on the future of Ireland – reflects the plethora of places and utter lack of consensus that Northern Ireland has become’ (1997: 209). This ‘plethora of places’ is evident in the differing perspectives on the same place and the intensified parochialism of Northern Ireland in which ethnic differences are spatialised. Reid (2004: 103) writes that ‘although it exists on the island of Ireland and many of its landscapes conform to the Irish ideal … Northern Ireland’s place-identity is confused, fitting neatly into neither Britain nor Ireland, both of which find their own dominant place-identities increasingly challenged.’ The ‘authentic’ image of Ireland has been located in the rural west, distancing the people and their places from the industrialised cities of the British, and explicitly excluding the Protestant community from its image of and idealised Gaelic, Catholic Ireland. At a more local level this confusion produces a mosaic of social spaces that are culturally and physically separate from one another: for example, Derry/Londonderry as a single city experienced from multiple social viewpoints by largely segregated communities, within which smaller enclaves continue to exist (Kuusisto-Arponen 2003). This multiplicity is not limited to the distinction between Protestant and Catholic communities, and Graham (1998) has argued that Protestants in Northern Ireland lack an agreed representation of place and do, in fact, support a set of mutually conflicting set of such representations. Furthermore, this multiplicity is overlaid by Northern Ireland’s position in the European Union (in which it is a designated ‘region’) and the wider world.

The multiple geographies of Northern Ireland lack the framework of hybridity that has emerged in the rest of the UK. This is partly due to the fact that the concept of multiculturalism in the UK is premised on discourses of gender, sexuality, disability, and, primarily, race; and, while these forms of identity are not irrelevant to Northern Ireland, they have been of less significance than the historical ethnic division between Catholic and Protestant. Consequently, the multiple nature of identity in Northern Ireland has not been promoted as a positive attribute but has been, and remains, largely a source of fear and tension, so that while we may think of Northern Ireland as a ‘hybrid, borderland area,’ this has resulted in the fossilisation of ‘identity and difference’ rather than the promotion of the acceptance and celebration diversity (Reid 2004: 109).

Multiple identities in the cinema of Northern Ireland

It is these problems of multiple and confusing identities that are the key themes in two films set in Northern Ireland and written by Colin Bateman – *Divorcing Jack* (1998) and *Wild About Harry* (2000). Aaron Kelly writes that Bateman’s novels ‘serve as a reminder that Northern Ireland is always at least two places: a problematic, forestalling entity for both Irish and British Nationalist teleologies’ (2004: 80), and places Bateman’s novels in the genre of the thriller. It is perhaps more useful to place these films in the sub-genre of the noir thriller, as Bateman draws upon this genre to create a darkly comic world in which the identities of key characters are hidden and/or fragmentary and the past, thought to be long buried, erupts in the present day (see Pratt 2001). Bateman uses all of these strategies, but adapts them to his satirical exploration of the problems...
Divorcing Jack

The narrative of Divorcing Jack follows the investigate-deconstructive pattern of the noir-thriller, as tabloid journalist Dan Starkey becomes entangled in a double murder that implicates politicians, loyalist paramilitaries, and nationalist terrorists, and that threatens to wreck the political process in Northern Ireland. The main thrust of the narrative follows the revelations about a politician, Michael Brinn, whose confession to a terrorist past as Micky O’Brinn, has been recorded on tape and threatens to derail his opportunity to become the first elected leader of a new, independent Northern Ireland.

Starkey is a hopeless investigator and his problems arise from the fact that he consistently fails to recognise anyone. This causes difficulties in the domestic sphere – answering the phone he cannot tell if he is speaking to Patricia, his wife, or Margaret, with whom he is having an affair, and this leads to his eviction from the marital home. More importantly it gets Starkey into trouble in the public sphere, and it is his inability to recognise to who he is speaking and what they are saying that is the driving force behind the narrative. He does not recognise Margaret as the daughter of a prominent political figure and the girlfriend of a well-known gangster, Keegan, he will later mistake for a waiter. Starkey’s misrecognition also has fatal consequences when he inadvertently kills Margaret’s mother in a darkened staircase – a murder he succeeds in getting away with. The macguffin on which the story depends is another example of Starkey’s misrecognition: he thinks Margaret’s dying words are ‘Divorce Jack’ rather than ‘Dvorak’ and so fails to understand the significance of a tape containing Brinn’s confession.

Misrecognition is a central theme of the plot, and is unavoidable given the multiplicity of identities with which we are presented. Where the narrative of film noir typically revolves around a single character whose identity is doubled and whose past re-emerges to disrupt the present, Divorcing Jack takes this to such extremes that every character is either misrecognised, in disguise, or has a second life. Lee, whose dramatic arrival rescues Starkey on two separate occasions from both Loyalists and Republicans, is the most perplexing. We first encounter her dressed as a nun but she turns out to be a stripper. The next time we encounter he she is dressed as a nurse. Like most of the characters she has multiple social roles, or as she phrases it ‘Nun-O-Gram by night, nurse by day.’ This is also true for the minor characters: Margaret’s friend, Jack, is both a civil servant and a stand-up comedian by the name of Giblet O’Gibber. Even Starkey himself puts on a wig in a (futile) attempt at a disguise. Brinn has attempted to forge a new identity as a politician and a man of the people, but his change of name is not an attempt to establish his identity – rather it is intended to obscure his identity but hiding the past. It is the eruption of this past, long thought hidden, that sets in motion the events of the narrative.

The representation of social space in Divorcing Jack shows includes a variety of social places. Donnelly (2005) has noted that the Belfast we see in this film does not exploit the traditional images of the city but displays a tourist version of the city that explicitly avoids references to sectarianism. Belfast is a city of open public spaces (the Botanic Gardens) and attractive and spacious apartments, of new public buildings (the Waterfront Concert Hall) and social spaces (the Crown Bar). It is Donnelly, writes, an image of the city as a tourist destination. In contrast to the modern space of urban Belfast, we have the rundown Catholic township of Cross-my-heart – a gray, monotonous place under the thumb of the local gangster where everyone lives in fear behind the bars on the windows. It is, in essence, a frontier town, and every bit as lawless as one in the Wild West. These two spaces are presented as false. The new modern Belfast is a vision of urban planners, and, as Starkey notes, depends upon the people of Northern Ireland giving up their heritage – it is a space unattached to any particular identity. Cross-my-heart was responsible for framing Brinn; and both are killed.

The confusion of identities and space is also evident in the use of names as labels. The problem of multiple naming is explained by Starkey to Parker, the American journalist, when he outlines the many names for: where Parker uses Ireland in an indiscriminate manner, Starkey points to the use of Northern Ireland, Ulster (if you are a protestant), the six counties of the north of Ireland (if you are catholic), or the province (if you are the British government).

At the climax of the film, Starkey launches into a sustained verbal attack on all sides – Protestant and Catholic, Loyalist and Nationalist. This speech has criticised as striking a false note in the
film’s darkly comic vision of Northern Ireland – a ‘sudden dive into sententiousness’ (Kemp 1998: 42) – but it is of direct relevance to the film’s exploration of the nature of identity in Northern Ireland. Starkey rejects the idea of a clash of national and religious identities for failing to recognise the people of Northern Ireland as people. He accuses of Keegan and Brinn of ‘dehumanising’ Northern Ireland:

"Starkey: I’m an individual. You’re an individual. Dougal off the Magic Roundabout’s a fucking individual. You’re both the same. We’re going straight back to the civil war here because you two don’t give a flying fuck about individuals …"

Ultimately, the ending of the film leaves the political situation unresolved. There is no simple, happy ending for Northern Ireland – nothing in the film (beyond Starkey’s marriage) is resolved. Lee (in her role as nurse) tells Starkey that it is ‘chaos out there.’ Chaos is the natural state of affairs, and one that Starkey revels in. Divorcing Jack takes a comic view of the multiple nature of space and identity that are a source of terror; but at the same time it positively endorses the multiplicity of a community of individuals.

**Wild About Harry**

Like Divorcing Jack, Wild About Harry takes up the question of identity in contemporary Northern Ireland, but approaches it from a different angle. Where Divorcing Jack presented us with a world in which everyone had multiple identities and secret lives resulting from a labyrinthine political situation, Wild About Harry primarily deals with the confused identity of a single character – television presenter Harry McKee – and the manipulation of that identity. Following an assault at a late night garage, Harry has a breakdown live on air before collapsing into a coma at his divorce hearing. He awakes to find that the last twenty-five years of his memory missing and his must come to terms with celebrity, identity, and the present.

Multiple and confusing identities are evident in this film as they are in Divorcing Jack. As he breaks down live on air, Harry exposes Walter Adair, a local MP campaigning on a family values platform, as a bisexual. After an unsuccessful suicide attempt, Adair vows to get his revenge on Harry and at the film’s denouement, he arrives at the television studio to confront his tormentor dressed as a woman. In one clip we find an Irish identity pushed to an extreme, as Harry watches himself on a special St. Patrick’s Day broadcast from Downpatrick interviewing a man named Patrick Fitzpatrick, with a father and a son of the same name and a wife called Patricia Fitzpatrick. Of course, this might be dismissed as simple ‘paddywackery,’ but it does highlight the problems of naming and identity in an amusing way. Nonetheless, it is Harry and the curious nature of his identity that is the central focus of the narrative.

Harry’s situation is a curious one, as he occupies a unique position as a celebrity without an identity. On the one hand, Harry is the presenter of a popular television show with a dedicated audience of (mostly) elderly ladies; and a public disgrace who’s sexual and alcoholic proclivities are in the press on a seemingly daily basis. Even here there is a discrepancy between Harry as the housewives’ favourite of daytime television and the debauched Harry of the tabloids. At the same time, people repeatedly fail to recognise Harry. At the petrol station Harry tries to play on his celebrity as a guarantee for a cheque having forgotten his card – ‘My face is my cheque card’ – but the shop assistant simply stares back at him blankly, blissfully unaware of the celebrity before him. Similarly, Ronnie, the security guard at the television studio, has no idea who Harry is at all and insists on checking the identification of the biggest star at the studio. Celebrity and fame, then, do not equal recognition and Harry’s identity is fragile even before he loses his memory. Indeed, in one scene this lack of identity is exposed as a facet of celebrity, as we are presented with Harry’s replacement on ‘What’s Cooking,’ who, it turns out, is almost identical to Harry in every way. Harry, of course, has lost his memory and completely fails to recognise the stand-in as a version of him.

If other people are confused about his identity, then so is Harry. Seeing Ruth as a mature rather than a younger woman, Harry is forced to come to terms with the present and is shocked by the middle-aged man in his reflection, and the film presents us with numerous shots of Harry looking at his reflection or at his own image but unsure of the face that looks back at him. He is unsure what he food he likes, if he drinks and smokes, where he works, and in a near-fatal incident discovers he cannot swim. The film focuses on these day-to-day aspects of identity, the myriad little details that make us who we are, rather than the broad statements of political and social identity (e.g. race, class, sexuality) that are the common currency of contemporary hybrid British cinema. Leaving the hospital, Harry can be heard to gleefully declare, ‘I’m a new man.’ Later, whilst on a date with Ruth, Harry rejects the past twenty-five years of his life by deliberately
separating his amnesiac-self from his debauched-self: he declares of the womanising and drinking that ‘That was someone else.’

Identity is not fixed, but is something malleable. Quite who Harry is in the present is hard for him to discover as he is being manipulated by those around him. This occurs most obviously after his has lost his memory: Harry’s lack of personal tastes is the result of Ruth’s intervention when she tells him that he does not smoke or drink, and that he eats healthily; while his near-death incident in the pool occurs when his son takes him swimming to test if his amnesia is just an act. On air he is constantly prompted to speak or act by his producer, who it turns out is also responsible for setting Harry on the path to celebrity and infamy that leads to his eventual downfall. The manipulation of Harry’s sense of self is a negative thing, resulting in Harry’s loss of his sense of self – ‘What did I become?’ he reflects – and his inability to determine his own actions compromises his sense of self.

Wild About Harry does not address the politics of contemporary Northern Ireland directly, but the influence of recent history can still be felt. That Harry should lose his memory of the last quarter of the twentieth century takes him back to the early 1970s, before what are euphemistically called ‘the troubles’ began in earnest, and by investing him with a sense of youthful optimism removes the inevitability of recent political history. The ending of the film, which could be described as romantic and cautiously optimistic rather than happy, presents Harry and Ruth with a possible future if they are willing to work for it. The film does not see the past as determining future relationships, and, although the past can never be forgotten, it can be overcome. For Harry this requires a reassessment of his identity in his own eyes and a renegotiation of his relationship to the people in his life. Harry’s ability to re-create his own sense of self thus holds out the possibility of a happy ending – Harry will win Ruth’s heart a second time if he can be himself.

Conclusion

Kelly (2004: 80) describes Northern Ireland as a ‘lived, ambivalent contradiction,’ and he cites Hughes’s assessment of the relationship between culture and politics in Northern Ireland as a ‘richly ambiguous statement of the always-at-least-dual nature of the Northern Irish and their cultures’ (1991: 10, quoted in Kelly 2004: 81). Contemporary cinema in Northern Ireland is as concerned with the multiple nature of identity as the rest of the United Kingdom, and arguably more so. The dominant concept of a hybrid national cinema in the UK is dependent upon the relative stability of different forms of identity depicted in British films (race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, class, region), and represents an attempt to come to terms with those different forms of identity. This is not possible in films such as Divorcing Jack and Wild About Harry which lack precisely that stability that would make any attempt to contain the multiplicity of identities a realistic possibility. The multiple, mistaken, and confused identities of Bateman’s Northern Ireland are a source of chaos that cannot be contained.

Filmography

Divorcing Jack (Scala Productions, 1998) prod. Robert Cooper, dir. David Caffrey, wr. Colin Bateman, novel Colin Bateman, ph. James Welland, ed. Nick Moore, m. Adrian Johnston, Cast: David Thewlis (Dan Starkey), Rachel Griffiths (Lee Cooper), Jason Isaacs (Cow Pat Keegan), Laura Fraser (Margret), Richard Gant (Charles Parker), Laine Megaw (Patricia Starkey), Bronagh Gallagher (Taxi driver), Kitty Aldridge (Agnes Brinn), Robert Lindsay (Michael Brinn).

Wild About Harry (Scala Films, 2000) prod. Robert Cooper, Laurie Borg, dir. Declan Lowney, wr. Colin Bateman, ph. Ron Forunato, ed. Tim Waddell, m. Murray Gold, Cast: Brendan Gleeson (Harry McKee), Amanda Donohoe (Ruth McKee), James Nesbitt (Walter Adair), Adrian Dunbar (JJ MacMahon), Bronagh Gallagher (Miss Boyle), Doon Mackichan (Tara Adair), Paul Barber (Professor Simmington), George Wendt (Frankie), Henry Deazley (Billy McKee), Tara Lynn O'Neill (Claire McKee), Billy Donnelly (Brendan).

References


Redfern N (2006) London spaces in contemporary British cinema: Notting Hill and South West 9,
Claude Hamilton Verity was born at Leeds in May 1880, the youngest child of Edwin and Ann Verity. Edwin Verity was an ironmonger with a workshop at 168 & 169 Briggate as a hardware merchant. It was these premises that Claude was later to use as his workshop, and are now Bar Fibre. These premises are also located approximately 200 metres from the building at Leeds Bridge, where Le Prince shot his footage of traffic at the Corner of Briggate, Swinegate, and The Calls.

Claude was brought up in Roundhay in the north of the city – an affluent part of Leeds that was also home to Louis le Prince and the Whitley family in the 1880s. The 1901 census has Verity listed as a student at a College of Agriculture and resident at Downton, Wiltshire. He also seems to crop up in Seacombe, nr. Liverpool, as an engineering draughtsman c.1910, and there is an engineer called Claude Hamilton Verity living in Scarborough in 1912, who is presumably the same person. He later moves to Harrogate (where his mother’s family were from), and then Harpenden, Hertfordshire.

Verity held many patents, including improvements to stoves, revolving doors, electric radiators, clouderising coal dust, low-temperature carbonisation, and ‘apparatus for the inhalation of medicated vapours.’ All of this suggests that he was a skilled engineer, who could turn his hand to many different things. There is also a book published in 1928, titled Industrial Prosperity, and authored by a Claude H. Verity, but I have not yet confirmed the identity of the author. It is Verity’s patents in the synchronising of sound and pictures that are of main interest to film scholars, and the following is a chronological list of the relevant patents:

- **Synchronization of Machines for Recording and Reproducing Sounds and Movements.** Claude Hamilton Verity, of Leeds, England. No execution date. Filed May 23, 1917, Serial No. 170,531. Classification 352/23. This is a US patent.
- **Synchronisation of machines for recording sounds and movements and for reproducing such sounds and movements by phonograph and cinematograph.** GB318847, Verity, C. H. June 5, 1928.
- **Apparatus for reproducing synchronously recorded disk records and cinematograph films.** GB318688, Verity, C. H. June 19, 1928.


Improvements relating to electric pick-up supports for gramophones and means for indicating the position of the needle in the record groove and to facilitate synchronous reproduction with picture projection. GB324411, Verity, C. H. Oct. 22, 1928.

Most of these patents relate to sound-on-disk systems, but Verity’s appears to have adopted an approach that is less dependent upon the technology and focuses more on the operator’s problem of keeping sound and image together. It’s a very human approach to a technological problem: for example, the 1920 patent for the Synchronisation of machines for recording and reproducing sounds and movements uses two rows of lamps to indicate when the operator has achieved the union of sound and image by manipulating motors to bring the projector and the sound mechanism together, and which will tell the operator when they start to go out of synch.

Verity’s work attracted international attention: one newspaper report from 1922 talks about a German patent, but I haven’t been able to find this; while Verity was crossing the Atlantic to work with the Vitagraph Company in New York. Altman (1992) mentions Verity’s arrival in New York and his demonstration of the synchronisation of music and talking pictures.

Verity’s system worked well and was popular. Verity apparently first demonstrated his talking pictures at the Royal Hall Theatre in Harrogate on 30 April 1921, before moving to London in June/July 1921, and then at the Albert Hall, Leeds in the first weeks of April, 1922.

A contemporary description gives an indication of how image, music, and dialogue were brought together.

**Leeds Mercury, 27 June 1921**

‘TALKING’ PICTURES

LEEDS MAN’S SYNCHRONISM INVENTION

_The latest development in singing and talking pictures was explained at a demonstration on Saturday at the Philharmonic Hall, London._

_The inventor, Mr. Claude Verity, of Leeds, claimed to be able to synchronise perfectly the spoken word and the lip movements by the players shown on the screen._

_By Mr. Verity’s system it is claimed to be possible to synchronise_
speeches, sounds, music, or anything that is at present being done at any of the London theatres – opera, drama, musical comedy, or revue. The inventor does not do away with the orchestra; his object is to synchronise the spoken word or song, the orchestra accompanying the gramophone while the movements are thrown on the screen.

The two productions shown on Saturday, ‘A Cup of Beef Tea’ and ‘The Playthings of Fate,’ proved that the invention has great possibilities.

The public interest in talking pictures can be gauged from this announcement of Verity’s 1922 shows in Leeds, which gives the size of the audience for the initial Harrogate run.

"Yorkshire Evening Post, 3 April 1922

FILM AND GRAMPOHONE

PROGRAMME TO DEMONSTRATE A LEEDS MAN’S INVENTION

Mr. C.H. Verity, the inventor of the apparatus which has made the synchronisation of film and gramophone a practical proposition, is the head of a Leeds firm of hardware manufacturers and merchants. He is presenting his talking and singing pictures at the Albert Hall, Leeds, this week. Entertainments will be given each evening, and on three afternoons. The programme consists of the first film productions under the Verity system of synchronisation.

Mr. Verity claims that the cost of these productions will be no greater than that of the majority of silent films, because it is cheaper to help out scenes and actions by words than by the multiplication of dumb show. There are interesting possibilities in the production of talking pictures in these days when the demand is all for novelty and originality in entertainment. Four performances recently given in Harrogate attracted over 5600 people.

As another report indicates, the road to the synchronisation of sound and image was long and expensive, and it is important to remember that Verity was not a research scientist for a large corporation but ran a hardware manufacturers in the centre of Leeds.

"Yorkshire Evening News, 1 April 1922

SPEAKING FILMS

LEEDS MAN’S SYSTEM PATENTED IN GERMANY

SYNCHRONISATION ACHIEVED

Mr. Claude H. Verity, the Leeds inventor, is making a bold bid to enlist the sympathies of the public in his talking and singing pictures. He claims that he has definitely and absolutely solved the problem of the synchronisation of the voice with the picture on the screen.

For over three years he has been perfecting his idea, and so far it has entailed a cost of £7000, but now to quote his own words: ‘With my system of synchronisation I can guarantee to keep this relation of sound and lip movement under synchronous control to within one-twenty-fourth of a second for any length of time.’

Next week at the Albert Hall, Leeds, the local public will have its first opportunity of judging the merit of the invention.

The solving of the problem of synchronisation was proved and admitted by the critics at Mr. Verity’s first trade show in
Harrogate. There was criticism, Mr. Verity says, not in regard to the question of synchronisation, but in regard to the sound productions of the gramophone used.

CLAIM ADMITTED

Mr. Verity has given many trade shows in various parts of the country, and never once has his claim to have solved the synchronisation problem been doubted. The only thing he needs he points out, is what might be termed a super-gramophone, and in this connection it may be stated, Mr. Verity has gone some way to meet this need.

By the means of electric amplification and a new design of gramophone horn, the inventor ensures that the spoken word is clear and easily distinguishable.

Very shortly a company is to be formed, and with the necessary financial backing the invention should not fail to succeed.

Mr. Verity claims that everything in the way of singing or speaking can be synchronised by means of his method. He also wishes to make it clear that he does not intend to work on the lines of a monopoly in regard to his invention.

PATENTED IN GERMANY

Mr. Verity does not suggest that the whole programme in all the countless picture-houses should be entirely devoted to 'talking pictures;' he introduces the idea with a view to an enjoyable variation in the programme.

The ‘Yorkshire Evening News’ is able to add that Mr. Verity has now had his ‘talking-picture’ idea patented in Germany. This is itself proof that he has not encroached on any previous idea on this point. The German system of granting patents is different to the British system.

Here a patent is granted after a search through British patents only; in Germany the patents of all nationalities are first scrutinised.

For all this effort, Verity does not get much of a mention in histories of British cinema, but he is mentioned on occasion. As noted above, Altman (1992) mentions Verity’s visit to the US and he features in The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film (1984), which suggests that there are references in the New York press to the demonstrations of the Verity system. There is also a reference to Verity’s trip to New York in Gramophone in October 1926, albeit a reference that is inconclusive (I haven’t found the original report):

The problem of synchronizing films and records has been solved if we are to believe the reports of the demonstration of the Vitaphone in New York. There is an excellent and full account of the problem and of the solution in the Wireless World for September 15th. Three years ago we reported the departure of Mr. Claude Verity, who was experimenting in the subject, for America; but it is not said whether he is at the bottom of the Vitaphone. It is the Western Electric Co.’s patents which have made the synchronization possible, worked in conjunction with Warner Brothers’ Pictures Inc (22).

Verity is also mention by M. Jackson Wrigley (1922: 115-116), who refers to the ‘invention of a synchronizer by Mr. Claude H. Verity, a Harrogate engineer, enables the operator, by simply sliding a knob, quite independently of observing the screen, to work synchronization to 1-24th of a second.’

References
In a month’s time I will be presenting a paper at the Manchester Centre for Regional History’s conference on Place and Identity, where I will be talking about why the hybridity thesis in British cinema studies does not work for Northern Ireland. Whilst I have been writing this piece, I’ve been reflecting on the relationship between consensus and hybridity in British cinema and this is a first attempt to outline some thoughts on that subject.

The concept of the ‘national’ has been highly influential in film studies. As an emerging academic discipline in the 1960s, film studies looked to national labels as a simple way of developing a curriculum, and (along with genre) this is still the dominant path taken today. Publishers and distributors of films have followed suit, releasing series of books dealing with the nation in film (e.g. Routledge’s national cinema series, Manchester University Press’s series on French and British directors) or films under national banners (e.g. VCI Entertainment have released a series of British films on DVD in America that place the nation at the fore of their marketing).

However, the concept of the national has been criticised for relying on an image of a homogeneous, unified nation that does not match the reality of living in a complex world. The nation overrides difference, and as a critical label, it blinds us to the diversity of identities in the modern world. The concept of ‘hybridity’ has been used to overcome this objection (see Hill 1992, 1999, Redfern 2006). Hybridity has become a key concept in cultural geography as an interpretive framework for understanding narratives and identities that are resistant to essentialist and essentialising notions of politics and culture (Mitchell 2005). Nations are no longer simply pure – they are hybrid. An individual’s identity is not pure, but is multidimensional and the nature of this identity is dependent upon the circumstances in which the individual finds him/herself.

Here I wish to explore two aspects of the relationship between national identity and other forms of identity in the case of British cinema.

Consensus is a means of coping with difference

Andrew Higson describes the decline of a national consensus and consensual images in the 1960s, but rejects the concept of the national specificity of a hybrid cinema and instead proposes a variety of cinemas that have no recourse to nationality. In Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain, Higson argues that, ‘representations of the nation in British films are not reflections of the actual formation of the nation-state, but rather ideological constructions of “the nation,” a publicly imagined sense of community and cultural space’ (1995: 1). Analysing British films from the 1920s (Comin’ Thro the Rye [Cecil Hepworth, 1924]), the 1930s (Sing As We Go and Evergreen [Victor Saville, 1934]), and the 1940s (Millions Like Us and This Happy Breed [David Lean, 1944]), the industry that produced them, and the culture that consumed them, Higson identifies a set of recurring characteristics that allows for the imagining of the nation as a ‘knowable organic community’ characterised by a ‘unity-in-diversity.’ This community is expressed through a series of distinctive stylistic traits. The British cinema is characterised by a number of filmic traditions (the heritage film, the popular musical-comedy, the documentary-realist film) that, ‘typically refuse the rigours of classical narrative integration in favour of what seems a more “primitive” narrational form,’ distinguished by episodicism, multiple and interweaving narrative lines, and a diegesis that is ‘narratively excessive’ (1995: 276). The British cinema, Higson argues, is ‘a national cinema, then, which displays the multiple attractions of the nation,’ and displays these attractions from ‘a distanced and objective viewpoint’ that encourages the viewer to reflect on the nation, and through an exhibitionist use of space in order to construct ‘a public space, a social space, and a national space, rather than the private space of the classical.
These aesthetic strategies are based on pre-existing cultural traditions that are identified as British, and are motivated in an attempt to reflect the nation to itself and to differentiate an indigenous product from Hollywood. As such, *Comin’ thro the Rye*, ‘should thus be seen as a historically specific response to the increasing domination of British cinema by American films and American standards;’ while *Sing As We Go* is ‘addressed to an audience familiar with the conventions of both music-hall and cinema,’ and to ‘a mass audience on a national basis;’ and *Millions Like Us* and *This Happy Breed* represent the British ‘metaphorically as a small, self-contained tight-knit community, a unity-in-diversity, but one which is structured like a family’ (1995: 96, 166, 179).

The traditions of British cinema Higson identifies were most influential between the 1930s and 1960s. However, since the 1960s the inclusive, all-embracing nation these films construct has ‘been displaced by an attempt to articulate various different social identities, to represent the ethnic, sexual, regional, gender, and class differences around which community and identity have been formed in contemporary Britain’ (1995: 273). This shift towards hybridity is a function of ‘powerful international forces’ that move in the direction of ‘global markets and cultures,’ and a move towards the ‘construction and recognition of many public spheres, rather than a single, universal public sphere,’ at least on behalf of the independent sector of British film production. For Higson, this raises the question of whether such [recent] films can still be usefully be understood as the products of a national cinema, or whether the national in national cinema always invokes the myth of consensus – which such films as *My Beautiful Laundrette* show precisely as myth. What is important about such films is that they refuse over-arching visions of national identity and stress these other senses of identity and belonging which have always criss-crossed the body of the nation, and which often cross national boundaries too (1995: 273).

Thus, the project of a national cinema in the United Kingdom is at an end, and as the role of the nation-state has been challenged over the last three decades Higson states that in this new climate, ‘I would rather call for a socialist cinema, or a green cinema, or a feminist cinema than for the renewal of British cinema’ (1995: 279).

But why should consensus override difference? It is important here to understand the rather unusual way in which the United Kingdom came into existence.

Richard Rose argues that the creation of the United Kingdom was ‘certainly not the product of any logical plan, nor is it the product of a particular ideology’ (Rose 1982: 4). Britishness came into being with the Act of Union of 1707 that formally created England, Wales, and Scotland as ‘one United Kingdom by the name of Great Britain,’ with Ireland added to the Union in 1801. This act established a single political authority under the sovereignty of the monarch, and in doing so superimposed a state-based identity over the existing categories of English, Welsh, Scottish, and, later, Irish. The new identity of British did not eradicate the pre-Union identities of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. Rather, Britishness permitted these older forms of identification to co-exist alongside it. As a political superstructure resting lightly on a diversity of identities, David McCrone suggests that the United Kingdom is ‘a state-nation masquerading as a nation-state:’

By referring to Britain as a ‘state-nation’ we are alluding to this fact that it was a state first, and only later (if it all) a nation. At no times can one seriously consider Britain a ‘nation-state,’ that is a homogeneous cultural grouping which mobilised that homogeneity to become a state. The British state was quite unlike later state formations which sought to align political, cultural, and economic structures in the classical form of the ‘nation state’ (2001: 97-98).

Britishness, then, is an identity founded upon what Tom Nairn (1997) describes as an ‘occluded multi-nationalism,’ and which Ben Wellings argues is an ideology that ‘developed post facto in order to legitimise the new state in the face of possible threats from social and nationalist sources’ (2002: 96). These commonalities have been explored in fascinating detail by Linda Colley in *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*. Colley argues that warfare and protestantism were the unifying factors as the newly-formed United Kingdom engaged in a sustained period of.
conflict with France, the Catholic enemy to the South. They [the British] came to define themselves as a single people not because of any political or cultural consensus at home, but rather in reaction to the Other beyond their shores. Britain, she writes,

was an invention forged above all by war. Time and time again, war with France brought Britons, whether they hailed from Wales or Scotland or England, into confrontation with an obvious hostile other and encouraged them to define themselves collectively against it. They defined themselves as Protestants struggling for survival against the world’s foremost Catholic power. They defined themselves against the French as they imagined them to be, superstitious, militarist, decadent and unfree (2003: 5-6).

From this perspective Britain is, and always has been, hybrid. The national consensus and the identity that rested upon this ('Britishness') was a way of uniting diverse peoples but did not eradicate older forms of identity (Scottishness, Englishness, etc.). Consensus was a way of coping with difference in the nation, but does not necessarily require the elimination of difference.

We can see examples of this in British films from World War Two – This Happy Breed (1944), In Which We Serve (1942), San Demtrio-London (1943), Went the Day Well (1942), The Way Ahead (1944), The Way to the Stars (1945), and Millions Like Us (1943). All of these films bring together groups of men and women from different parts of the UK, and different social classes and show them in sympathetic relationships to one another. The Manchester Guardian review of Millions Like Us noted that,

Nothing more clearly marks the coming-of-age of the British cinema than its treatment of ordinary working people, especially as minor characters or in the mass. The clowns of ten years ago first became lay figures of sociological drama and then, with the war, patriotic heroes. In Millions Like Us they are real human beings, and the British film has reached adult maturity (quoted in Chapman 1998: 44).

The film tells the story of a young woman Celia Crowson (played by Patricia Roc), who is called up for war service as a machine worker in an aircraft factory, and is sent to a government hostel, where she encounters women from a diverse range of social backgrounds: Gwen Price – a Welsh, working class graduate of the University of Wales; Annie Earnshaw – a down-to-earth Lancashire lass; and Jennifer Knowles – a snobbish society girl. In Millions Like Us, then, a small community of people are united in a common cause in which collective social responsibility outweighs individual desires, regardless of class, regional identity, and traditional gender roles. It presents a vision of a society that depends not on competition but on co-operation, offering a vision of Britain as a nation that Higson (1995) as:

- includes people of a variety of class positions;
- includes people of a variety of regional types and accents;
- includes people of a variety of ages and experiences;
- depends on reasonable, democratic, and co-operative forms of authority;
- has the appearance of organic unity; and,
- is structured like a family.

The film ends on an image of stability and unity, but it is one where the individual (Figure 1) is enveloped within an all-embracing community (Figure 2). It is a community in which each individual proves his or her worth to the team, and so by implication to the nation and the war effort.
What’s class/race/ethnicity/sexuality/gender/region go to do with it?

Perhaps the problem we have with these films is that they are naive in their optimism for the possibility in creating a consensual and supporting nation. The UK (like everywhere else) has a long history of racial intolerance, homophobia, sexism and so on. Perhaps the image of a consensual nation is simply too unrealistic for the post-war world, where we need to recognise the importance of other forms of identity (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, region).

However, there is no reason why the national should in any way disappear. To the external observer the apparent boundedness, continuity, and homogeneity of the nation may appear unstable, vague, and permeable. However, Handler (1998) notes that the ‘fuzzy boundaries’ evident to such an observer do not fundamentally challenge the identity of a national entity, and that a ‘subjective boundedness’ – the sense that group members themselves form a distinct and homogeneous community – may be sufficient to overcome large objective differences to achieve a national self-awareness. Difference is only relevant to those who think it is relevant, and there may be many who do not think that it is (or have not even asked themselves the question).
Furthermore, an individual’s expression of their identity tends to contingent on the circumstances in which they function. Pat Hudson suggests that ‘it is likely that people have different concepts of the self simultaneously which are switched on or off by particular situations and contexts,’ and sees the region as just such a heuristic device for the analysis of territory and identity (1999: 14, 8). It is the ability to switch identities on and off according to context that allows individuals to assume a number of seemingly contradictory group memberships.

An oft cited example is how other forms of identity leads us away from the national is a comment by Virginia Woolf:

As a woman I have no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.

This is, I think, a fascinating statement that begs numerous questions about the relationship between gender and geography – what is it to be a woman in a nation? What is it to be a woman in the world? But if you found yourself at a party talking to someone you had just met; and, having asked them where they were from, they replied ‘I am a woman,’ how would you respond? Naturally, you would be confused, because this is a non sequitur: gender identities and geographical identities may influence one another, but they are not substitutable. You cannot be gay or German – the distinction does not have any meaning. You cannot give up a national cinema for a feminist cinema, a socialist cinema, or a green cinema because this would also be meaningless as the one cannot be substituted for the other. Alternative forms of cinema may have nothing to do with the nation – there is no reason why they should. But the non sequitur holds for cinema as it does for the party-goer.

In the context of British cinema, we have come to the hybrid as a means of relating different types of identity. In British Cinema in the 1980s, John Hill describes the emergence of such a national cinema in the UK, reflecting ‘a much more fluid, hybrid, and plural sense of ‘Britishness’ than earlier British cinema generally did. In this respect, while the British cinema of the 1980s failed to assert the myths of the ‘nation’ with its earlier confidence it was nevertheless a cinema that could be regarded as representing the complexities of ‘national’ life more fully than before’ (1999: 241). This hybridity is derived from the ways in which the British cinema ‘became involved in a cultural politics of ‘identity’ and ‘difference’ and, in doing so, sought to negotiate the complex terrain of class, gender, sexual orientation, “race,” and nationality’ in the 1980s (Hill 1999: xii). Like Higson, Hill points to the Stephen Frears/Hanif Kureshi films My Beautiful Laundrette (1985) and Sammy and Rosie Get Laid (1987) as exemplars of the cultural hybridity he seeks to identify as the defining aspect of British cinema in the 1980s. For example, he writes that:

Characters’ identities are constructed across different axes – black/white, male/female, gay/straight – which also place them in ‘different’ and complicated ‘positionalities’ to others. Thus, in the case of the Asian lesbian, Rani (Meera Syal) in Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, her identity is not simply Asian, female, or lesbian but one which is ‘overdetermined’ and shifting… (Hill 1999: 208).

Hill argues that in presenting the shift towards hybridity in 1980s British cinema films such as Sammy and Rosie Get Laid represent the multiple and complex axes of identity (class, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity) that are characteristic of modern Britain. This conception of British national cinema as a historical, impure, hybrid, and complex cinema has become the dominant model in British cinema studies, and this reflected in writing on class (Gillett 2003), race and ethnicity (Malik 1996, Bourne 1998, Alexander 2000), gender (Geraghty 2000, Harper 2000, Monk 2000) and sexuality (Bourne 1996), and regional identity (Redfern 2007) in contemporary British cinema.

Conclusion

The concept of hybridity has become an important critical reference point in British cinema studies, and has been primarily used as a way of dealing with the multitude of contemporary identities in the UK. The emergence of hybridity has taken place in the context of the rejection of consensual images of the nation. However, if we view the UK as a nation that emerged as a hybrid, in which a British national identity emerged through the commonalities of English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish (however complicated this last might be) and did not replace older identities, then we can also view consensus in British cinema as a strategy for coping with the diversity of identities. A research programme for British studies is to trace this shift from consensus to
hybridity.

References


Posted in British Cinema, Film Studies, Film Theory

Tags: British Cinema, Film Studies

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Film Distributors in Leeds, 1927 and 1940
In a comment on The Bioscope I mentioned that I had some information on film distributors in Leeds from the first half of the twentieth century. This post follows up that comment with maps of the location of film hirers/renters listed in Kelly’s directory for Leeds in 1940 and 1927. This information is much needed I think due to the lack of studies of the film rental business in the UK, where I think that exhibition and the cultural geography of exhibition is now recognised as an important topic. Nicholas Hiley, Stuart Hanson, and Mark Jancovich have made substantial contributions in this area, although there is still much to do. Distribution is rather overlooked in film studies in general, lacking the excitement of production or the experience of exhibition – an unfortunate state of affairs for a distribution-led industry.

The maps used here are from the Lonely Planet online guide to Leeds, which has a good interactive guide to the city. The maps show modern Leeds, and the location identified are approximate to their position in the year shown.

Figure 1 shows the location of film hirers/renters in Leeds in 1940, and the clustering around the railway station is very clear. In the 1940s there were numerous railway yards in Leeds and so this area would have a much greater density of lines and stations than can be seen today, particularly running alongside Wellington Street where the concentration of distributors is greatest. It would be worth comparing the clustering of distributors in Leeds around the railway station with distributors in other cities to see if the same pattern is observed: what role the railways played in the distribution of films in the UK is a question worth pursuing.

On this map I have also included two other items of notice indicated by the red numbers: 1 is the location from which Louis le Prince shot his footage of Leeds traffic in 1888, and 2 is the location of Claude Hamilton Verity’s workshop at which he developed synchronised sound for motion pictures in 1917. Verity was brought up in Roundhay, where le Prince lived during his time in Leeds and although I’ve never seen any evidence that the two would have met (Verity was born in 1880 in any case) it is possible that an inventor and engineer like le Prince would have known the Veritys, owners of a large iron working factory in Leeds and who lived nearby. Read the abstract of Verity’s 1917 patent here. These two major events in the history of cinema occur 29 years and just 200 metres apart. In fact, le Prince’s footage of the traffic on Leeds Bridge faces towards the end of Briggate and just cuts off the railway bridge next to which Verity’s workshop was located.

![Figure 1 Film hirers/renters in Leeds in 1940](image)

**Key:**

A. Associated British Film Distributors, Ltd: 58 Wellington Street.

B. Associated British Picture Corporation, Ltd: 17 Wellington Street.

C. General film Distributors, Ltd: 15 Wellington Street.

D. LH Beahan & Co.; Empire Cinemas (Leeds) Ltd.: 14 Wellington Chambers, City Square. RKO
Radio Pictures, Ltd.: Wellington Chambers, City Square.
E. Columbia Pictures Corporation, Ltd.: 9 Mill Hill; John Briggs (Films), Ltd.; Pathé Pictures, Ltd.; Wellington Film Service, Ltd.: 10 Mill Hill.
F. British Lion Film Corporation, Ltd.: King Street Chambers, 1 King Street.
G. Clifford Kemp: 15 Cavendish Chambers, 91 The Headrow (the G on the right), and 28 Park Cross Street.
H. Paramount Film Service, Ltd.: 48 Wellington Street.
I. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, Ltd.: 34 Wellington Street.
J. Charles Thompson: 93A Albion Street.
K. Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, Ltd.: 54 Aire Street.
L. (not on map, but only approx. 1/2 mile down Whitehall Road from railway station) Electrocord Ltd (equipment manufacturers): Domestic Street, Holbeck. Although separate from the other locations mentioned here, this location would still have been very well served by the railways.
N. White’s Sound Film Service (distributors), 23 York Place.
O. (not on map) First National Distributors, Ltd.: 3 Alfred Street (I can’t find Alfred Street on modern maps of Leeds or the 1906 map of the city centre so this one’s a mystery).

If we compare the 1940 with the 1927 map (Figure 2) we can see that as well as being located around the railway yards, there are a number of distributors based in the city centre around Queen’s Arcade and Briggate. These clusters have disappeared by the 1940s, while the overall number of distributors has fallen from 29 in 1927 to 24 in 1940. Interestingly, by 1940 these distributors are sharing more offices and so how the different companies interacted is worth investigating further.

Figure 2 Film hirers/renters in Leeds in 1927

Key:
A. Three distributors are based next door to one another in Queen’s Arcade: Allied Artists’ Corporation, Ltd.: 20A, Balcony; Mercury (Booth Grange) Film Service, Ltd.: 22A, 24A, 26A, Balcony; H.A. Whincup, Ltd.: 16A, 18A, Balcony.
B. Astra Films (Yorkshire), Ltd.: 15 & 17 King Charles Croft; Charles P. Metcalfe, 21 King Charles Croft.
C. Beahan Film Service, Ltd.: 7 New Station Street.
D. Buthcher’s Film Service, Ltd.: 66 New Briggate.
A few weeks ago I looked at the distribution of feature film production in the United Kingdom at the regional level, and I introduced the concept of regionally autonomous production – that is, a film which was produced in a single UK region only, irrespective of any production activity that may have taken place outside the UK (e.g. in the home country of a co-production partner). This is a negative way of defining the regional distribution of film production. A positive measure is to look at how different regions of the UK interact through their common productions.

Using the same sample of films from the UK film Council \( (n = 358) \), Table 1 presents the number of films, which being produced in one region, have connections to the other UK regions. For example, *My Summer of Love* (Pawel Pawlikovski, 2003) was filmed in the Government Office of Regions of Yorkshire and the Humber and the North West. This film connects these two regions in its production.

(I will not address connections between regions at the levels of distribution and exhibition, although, as I noted before, this is important given the London’s domination of these sectors of the UK film industry).

Table 1 Regional interaction in UK feature film production, 2003-2007
From Table 1 we can see that:

- Scotland has a broad spread of common productions with other regions throughout the UK, although, as would be expected, the greatest number of links are to London (the commercial and artistic centre of the UK film industry) and the South East (the location of the major studios at Shepperton and Pinewood).

- Northern Ireland has common productions only with London. As I noted before, Northern Ireland appears to be a distinct entity within the UK film industry, with links to the Republic of Ireland being of more importance. The links to London are inevitably the result of London’s position as the dominant force in the UK film industry and as a global city.

- Wales has numerous common productions with the major production centres in England (East, South East, and London) and also the South West, but very few links to the rest of the UK. Proximity is not then an important issue in regional interaction: Wales has links to the neighbouring region of the South West, but not to the North West, for example.

The Celtic fringe of the UK (excluding Cornwall) does not show an overall pattern of linkages within the UK film industry, and each region interacts with the rest of the UK in a unique way.

Turning to the English regions, we find that:

- The limited number of connections in the North East reflect the very low levels of film production in that region.

- Yorkshire and the Humber has a lot of features in common with other regions, reflecting its relatively low level of autonomy (30%). Films produced in this region are rarely produced only in this region, but as such research on film production at the regional level in the UK is so slight that why this should be the case is not known. The high number of common features with the East Midlands is worth investigating further in particular.

- The North West, by contrast, has a much higher level of autonomy (63.64%), and few common features with the rest of the UK than Yorkshire and the Humber. This may, in part, be due to Manchester’s status as an important production centre for television – the region has a (relatively) large number of firms in the audio-visual industries and so producers are able to access resources without having to leave the region (see Coe and Johns 2004 for a discussion of Manchester as production centre).

- The two midlands regions are similar in their linkages: both are dominated by the main south east England production centre (E, SE, and LO), with only the East Midlands higher than expected links to YH and SW standing out from the pattern.

- The South West also follows this pattern: domination by the south eastern core, with relatively few links beyond.

The position of London, of course, needs no comment – it dominates as one would expect the commercial and creative base of the industry to do.

References

Some curios of old cinemas

Searching through the internet I came across a couple of items that were interesting in the context of British cinemas. First, a few items on the old Essoldo cinema chain. Artist Thomas John Jarrat has painted a cityscape of Newcastle in the 1950s which features the Newcastle Essoldo prominently and is rather wonderful I think.

Also I came across a Hornby 00 gauge model of an Essoldo cinema showing *The Lady Vanishes* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and which will set you back about £20.

John Ryan’s website has a really interesting feature of Essoldo cinemas, including virtual tours of Essoldo cinemas in the north-west of England. Access the virtual foyer here.

Finally, I also came across a paper model of an ABC cinema for your model railway, and which will cost you about £5.
Brighton Rock (John Boulting, 1948)

This is a slightly re-written version of a presentation given before a screening of Brighton Rock at the Mitchell and Kenyon Cinema at the University of Central Lancashire on 16 April 2008.

Adapted from Graham Greene's novel, Brighton Rock was brought to the cinema by John and Roy Boulting in the aftermath of the Second World War. The Boulting brothers had established a reputation for producing films with a commitment to social comment, and actively sought out Greene's novel with its tale of Pinkie Brown, a brutal young killer in 1930s Brighton. For John Boulting the film was to be unlike the illusions of Hollywood, what he referred to as the 'opiates' of the day; and, armed with a commitment to realism the brothers declared that they would 'yet prove how dramatic real life could be' [1].

The film made a star of Richard Attenborough, who had previously taken the role of Pinkie in the stage version of Brighton Rock, and had worked with the Boulting brothers on Journey Together (1945) and The Guinea Pig (1948). Pinkie is 'a character possessed by evil:'

He is lonely, neurotic and isolated, unable to love or trust, and can find fulfilment only in cruelty or violence. Convinced of the
Attenborough’s portrayal of the vicious young criminal has been considered a reflection of anxieties with regard to the influence of American popular culture on young people in Britain, but, ultimately, Pinkie’s malevolence cannot be explained by his social world. Unlike Dallow (played by William Hartnell), the gangster who sees only world before him, Pinkie believes in an unseen world, immaterial, eternal, and inescapable. Pinkie’s tragedy is that he cannot conceive of heaven, while he has a vivid conception of hell. In return for some advantage in this world, Pinkie accepts his damnation in the next; and it is his Catholic vision of the underworld that leads Pinkie to commit his crimes and to refuse the possibility for salvation in his relationship with Rose (Carol Marsh). Death is not the end of the film, and Pinkie’s evil persists beyond the grave. His recorded message for Rose (‘I love you’) is at once hopeful and cruel — a happy ending without mercy.

The critic Raymond Durgnat has noted that the Boulting’s post-war films are marked by a ‘moral disenchantment’ that had eroded the idealism of the brothers’ wartime films such as Thunder Rock (1942) and Desert Victory (1943) [3]. It is this disenchantment that defines the film’s representation of England. Pinkie represents ‘a hedonistic and aggressive individualism which stands in opposition to the nation’s dominant values of duty, service, thrift, restraint, gentleness, and concern for others’ [4]. He represents freedom from the restrictions of the wartime economy, freedom from rationing, and freedom from the strict morality of the day — a fantasy for contemporary viewers, and the price of this fantasy is our acceptance of Pinkie’s wickedness. The Boulting brothers were careful to avoid the charge of glamorising the criminal lifestyle; but Pinkie is evil, and this is the viewer’s source of pleasure in the film. His lack of restraint is attractive rather than repellent. His ability to act beyond the law secure in the knowledge that he is destined for Hades gives succour to the viewer, allowing us to enjoy Pinkie’s evil without troubling our own conscience. Pinkie is already damned, and knows and accepts this. He needs no judgment from the viewer, and so Pinkie’s freedom becomes our freedom.

Although the film made a star of Attenborough, it is Brighton that is the real star of the film. John Boulting, a native of near-by Hove, observed that ‘the setting was not a backdrop; it was one of the characters’ [5]. The opening caption of the film attempts to relegate the criminal activity of the film to the past — a necessary addition to the film in order to secure the co-operation of the local council for the use of filming locations — but in doing so it raises the issue of whether we are watching a genre film or a quasi-documentary on Brighton’s recent, brutal past [6]. The film represents the city in two ways, developing a tension between the generic space of the Hollywood gangster film (the material world of Dallow) and the literal space of the English location [7]. On its American release, the film was retitled ‘Young Scarface,’ referencing the Hollywood gangster films of the 1930s, and the world of Pinkie and his gang is one of darkness and shadow familiar to us from film noir. Like film noir, Brighton Rock uses shadow and mise-en-scène to break up the image and suggest to us the fragmentation of the character’s psyche — we first see Pinkie framed through a ‘cat’s cradle’ made of string. He is already damned, already trapped. This world is Pinkie’s living hell — Prewitt (Harcourt Williams), the lawyer, quotes Christopher Marlowe: ‘Why, this is hell, nor are we out of it.’ In contrast to this use of American style, the Englishness of the film is associated with the cultural traditions of the seaside town — the amusements at the pier, the music hall — which are brightly lit. This only serves to make Brighton all the more terrifying — the British seaside town as a place of innocent pleasure for the holidaymaker is rendered terrifying; the simple pleasures of the amusements become menacing, and the fairground rides that thrill us in safety are the site of the most depraved acts. ‘Dante’s Inferno’ is no mere fairground ride — this is hell [8]. This serves only to emphasise Pinkie’s precociousness, linking childish pleasures to the most horrific of acts — the title, Brighton Rock, comes from Pinkie’s choice of murder weapon. The seemingly safe world is hell, but the holidaying crowds on the promenade do not realise this fact. They lack Pinkie’s insight into world, and so they invite Pinkie’s (and, by extension, our) contempt.

The critical reception of Brighton Rock was mixed. Generally, the film was praised for its realism. Joan Lester, writing for The Reynolds’s News, commended the film for the way in which it ‘relentlessly de glamourises crime and the criminal,’ remarking ‘how completely authentic is the frustration and joylessness of these creates, their fundamental cowardice’ [9]. Reg Whitley, film critic of the Daily Mirror, took the opposite view and described the film as ‘false, cheap, nasty sensationalism’ comprising ‘ninety-two minutes of murder, brutality, beating up,’ which ‘no woman would want to see’ [10]. Today, Brighton Rock has become a classic of British cinema and was placed at number fifteen in the British Film Institute’s poll of the nation’s favourite movies. It has been influential in creating a tradition of the realist gangster film in the United Kingdom that can
be seen in *Hell is a City* (1960), *Get Carter* (1973), and *The Long Good Friday* (1979), having provided us in Pinkie and in Brighton with an image of the immortal soul tortured in hell.

**Credits**

*Brighton Rock* (Associated British Picture Corporation, 1948) *prod.* Roy Boulting, *dir.* John Boulting, *wr.* Graham Greene, *novel* Graham Greene, *ph.* Harry Waxman, *ed.* Peter Graham Scott, *m.* Hans May. *Cast:* Richard Attenborough (Pinkie Brown), Hermione Baddeley (Ida Arnold), William Hartnell (Dallow), Nigel Stock (Cubitt), Wylie Watson (Spicer), Carol Marsh (Rose), Harcourt Williams (Prewitt), Virginia Water (Judy), Reginald Purdell (Frank), George Carney (Phil Corkery), Charles Goldner (Colleoni), Alan Wheatley (Fred Hale), Linda Barrie (Molly), Joan Sterndale-Bennett (Delia), Harry Ross (Brewer), Campbell Copelin (police inspector), Mary Stone (Waitress), Norman Watson (racecourse evangelist).

**Notes**

8. For a similar take on the British seaside, see Simon Ashdown and Jeremy Dyson’s series ‘Funland’ (BBC, 2005), which depicts Blackpool as a hell every bit as terrifying as Pinkie’s Brighton and has the odd nod to Alfred Hitchcock.