Strands of Realism:

The instructional, the narrative and the poetic in British cinema, 1929-2003

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Contents

Summary

In his article, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film': The Documentary-Realist Tradition', Andrew Higson argues that the documentary movement in Britain splintered into three discernible types of documentary: the instructional (John Grierson), the story or narrativised form (Alberto Cavalcanti, Harry Watt), and the poetic (Humphrey Jennings). Higson goes on to identify these strands as prototypes of realism that have continued in one form or another across the subsequent generations of realist film-making in Britain, namely, the wartime era, Free Cinema and the New Wave. In this thesis I will examine the persistence of these strands as they occur within the major eras of realism mentioned above, and continue the triumvirate account of British realism into the contemporary period, particularly in the work of Ken Loach, Mike Leigh and Terence Davies.

I will argue that while realism in British cinema keeps 'reinventing itself' across successive generations, key distinguishing characteristics persist. Aside from the continuation of the instructional, narrative and poetic strands of realism over time, this thesis will also engage with what I see as the defining themes of each era, such as the relationship between socio-historical shifts and the ways in which each generation of British realism seeks to reinforce or 'revolt' against previous conventions or eras. The use of working-class 'types' within the British realist tradition, the evolution of a specifically British realist aesthetic, the relationship between realist modes and the creation of a specifically *British* national identity and the shift from the 'public gaze' of documentary realism to the private realm of psychological realism are the key points of discussion.

Statement of originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution and contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Melinda Hildebrandt

Acknowledgements

The literature review

Ways of seeing: insight and perception in realist theory and film-making:

Every object, be it man or beast, natural phenomenon or artefact, has a thousand shapes, according to the angle from which we regard and pin down its outlines...each of them expresses a different point-of-view, a different interpretation, a different mood. Each visual angle signifies an inner attitude. There is nothing more subjective than the objective.[1]

This statement from Béla Balázs is central to understanding the multi-layered and problematical issue of realism in the cinema. Through the camera lens, people, events, and actions are examined, scrutinised and dissected by a critical eye with a purpose in mind – a preconceived idea about how the world should look. From the photographic tradition, to the film-making that grew out of it, visual documentation has been about selecting a subject, framing it in a certain light, angle, and pose, and finally, capturing it in a enduring position or movement. These are entirely conscious and personal choices made at the level of production. Certainly, subjectivity is a fact of *all* artistic modes of representation. This obvious statement becomes problematical when one comes to think about realism, a means of artistic expression that by its very nature seems to be in denial about the subjective processes involved in production. Indeed, *any* film which chooses the real world as its subject, and then claims to render it *truthfully* (a tricky term) is bound to raise questions regarding its perceived level of objectivity/subjectivity.

Customarily, some of the techniques that have been employed to render a certain vision of the 'real' on screen are: the use of montage, the framing of the mise-en-scène, and the duration and depth of a shot. Whether such means are

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[1] Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), p. 90.

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applied in order to conceal or announce the presence of an all-pervading film-maker is another matter entirely. The possibility of, or even the ethics involved in, attempting a 'really real' film production is a topic that has invited ceaseless debate from all quarters. Cultural theorists, philosophers, Marxist aesthetic theorists, and film theorists are just some of the groups who have declared a stake in the realist enterprise, whatever its artistic manifestation. On the one hand, a theorist might assert a position on behalf of the realist artist, and suggest ways that he or she could render the real world 'correctly'. Artistic techniques are the dominant focus in discussions of this kind. Other theorists view the realist representation from the point of view of the spectator, and judge the validity of the artwork in terms of its accessibility to an audience. The degree of freedom one supposedly has to select an individually divined version of the real is central to this part of the debate. Formal aspects in this case are to be suppressed in favour of an approach that does not impose preconceived ideas about a representation on the spectator. Point of view, then, is central. Whose gaze is being accommodated, what has been selected to be looked at, how and why is the 'seen' being constructed as it is, and how far is one able to view any given representation from another perspective? All of these questions are at the core of theories of realism, and thus will in one way or another, inform the central discussion of British realist film practice in this thesis.

Already it is clear that in all analyses of realism, a multi-faceted dialogue that shifts and intersects is inevitable. When realism is invoked in an all-purpose way, to suggest a uniformity of meaning, this complex nature is neglected. Later I will argue the same point about realism in British film, which is far from being defined in homogeneous terms. There are several dialectical theories present within realist discourse, where the conflicting presence of oppositional views

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about realism results in an intricate and often overlapping variety of meanings. Therefore, the notion of realism as a monolithically delineated concept is a fallacy. Even so, it is not the aim of this thesis to introduce a *new* theory of realism, argue for a 'correct' approach, or to attempt to reconcile the competing theories that already exist. I will endeavour to trace the general history of realist theory, from its linguistic heritage, to its philosophical origins, and the point at which realism is inscribed by Marxism as a politicised mode of representation by such opposed theorists as Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht. I also want to discuss realist film theory, where this mode's conceptualisation has tended to splinter into dialectically opposed camps in a form- or content-based approach to film-making.

The best examples of this theoretical division are found in the writings of André Bazin, who has strong ideas about the best way to render reality on film. His thesis oscillates between a mise-en-scène approach and a montage-based approach to realist film-making. Although this literature review is largely based on international aesthetic and film theories within the realist debate, I want to finish with a brief account of how these ideas have influenced British discussions and production of film, from John Grierson to modern writings on cinema in Britain. The details of this theoretical lineage will provide a useful insight into the seemingly unlimited array of ideas, preoccupations and methods that influence the process of creating a realist film. Such a complex mode of representation is bound to produce, as Bazin himself has said, "not one realism, but several realisms".[2] This statement echoes Andrew Higson's assessment of British cinema to be introduced in the next section of this thesis, that it is made up of several *strands* of realism within a single national tradition. Unravelling the cinematic process of

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[2] André Bazin, 'William Wyler, or the Jansenist of Directing', in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays & Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, ed. by Bert Cardullo (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-23, (p.6).

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looking at the 'real' world – just who is seeing, how they perceive or frame a chosen subject, represent it on screen and how it is received by the spectator – is crucial to identifying the multi-layered nature of realist film production.

A realist representation derives its theoretical and aesthetic impetus from the artist's attitude to, and view of, the terms 'real', and 'reality'. Therefore, the choices made by realist film-makers in regard to the treatment of subject matter can be seen to reflect their moral, ethical, and political investment in that 'real' world, and the truths it represents to them. If the raw material of a realist work of art, be it a novel, painting, or film, is 'reality' or the 'real' world, then it is important to explore the epistemology of these related terms/notions, in order to establish their wider implications within realist discourse. The linguistic history of the terms, real and reality, reveals a cavalcade of constantly evolving applications, all of which have affected views of realism.

Raymond Williams begins his examination of these terms with the "common distinction between *appearance* and reality [which] goes back, fundamentally, to the early use – 'the reality underlying appearances'".[3] It is this reality underneath that realism is ultimately concerned with. Importantly, this tendency also distinguishes realism from naturalism. Seen in this context, realism accounts for the always already observed layer of the physical world, then moves beyond it, hoping to reveal the forces at work *behind* the empirical façade. This notion of realism has a political connotation that will be explored later. From a very early point in history the notion of a double-sided reality has complicated discussions of the term 'real'. During the fifteenth century it was used "in matters

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[3] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 216.

of law and property, to denote something actually existing. There was a connected persisting later use for immovable property, as still in real estate".[4]

The ideological implications of such a link between real and property have been investigated by Linda Martín Alcoff in the text, *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory*. Alcoff constructs a notion of real that reveals entrenched attitudes about class and status. "In English the words 'realm' and 'real' share a common root, and in premodern times the word 'real' meant 'regal' or 'royal'. Such an association implies a connection between what is real and what is in the royal jurisdiction, that is, what the king controls, owns, and has dominion over".[5] This dominion has a perceptual element, as in "premodern Europe, the royal realm comprised all that the king could *see* [my italics], all the lands and peoples visible from the elevated overlook of the king's castle".[6] Here, real is defined within a context of "authoritarian perspectivism",[7] where the landscape of the real, and by implication, access to 'truth', is governed and controlled by a ruling class.

Realism and notions of class continue to be conflated to the present-day, as British realist films, especially those made by the New Wave film-makers and . Ken Loach, engage with the hierarchical and thus inequitable nature of the nation's society. This epistemic background provides a useful method of deconstructing film realism, where the process of representing the real - *what* is being seen, *how* it is reproduced on screen, and the extent to which the spectator is able to participate in the constructed vision of the real - is infused with ideological, political, and moral significance. The sixteenth century saw the use of the term real shift from "the sense of something actually existing...[to] an implicit

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[4] Williams, *Keywords*, p. 216.
[5] Linda Martín Alcoff, *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 201.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., p. 202.

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or explicit contrast with something *imaginary*".[8] Concurrently, real was also "contrasted…with *apparent*…in wider arguments about the true or fundamental quality of some thing or situation – the real thing, the reality of something".[9]

The usage of real, then, has shifted numerous times, from considerations of what is tangible, or visible in the physical environment, to a regard for the unseen, or unknowable nature of human existence. Definitions of realism have tended to stem from these dialectically opposed senses of what 'real' can possibly signify. Where "a realist in pre-eighteenth century society took real in the general sense of an underlying truth or quality, the post-nineteenth century realist persists with the sense of *concrete* existence in opposition to that which operates on an abstract plane".[10] This account of the constant shifts in meaning that the terms real and reality have undergone, exhibits the impossibility of ascribing a single definition to realism.

The development of a multi-layered, and often contradictory conception of reality, and by extension, realism, also exists strongly within the domain of philosophy. Traditionally, the structure of philosophical arguments about the subject of realism has splintered into two oppositional theories. These are termed correspondence and coherence. The former theory is primarily concerned with a scientific examination of the surfaces of the external world, that which we can *see*. Correspondence theory is based on the assumption that "the appropriation of reason and the method of science are…[the] necessary elements for successful inquiry".[11] In a filmic representation, this view of reality would result in a privileging of the mise-en-scène, where the visual world is apparently preserved. The myth of realism as a "styleless style" would be advocated by a film-maker

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[8] Williams, *Keywords*, p. 216.
[9] Ibid., pp. 216-17.
[10] Ibid., p. 217.
[11] Alcoff, *Real Knowking*, p. 65.

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supportive of the correspondence theory approach to the real world. Terms such as science, data, definition and documentation immediately conjure up an artificial sense of objectivity, where the world is apparently presented *as it is*, rather than filtered through the artist's individual perception of it. Underlying the main premise of correspondence theory is a *moral* judgement concerning the potential for reality to be represented in art. The real world, it seems, should not be tampered with, or overwhelmed by style, so that its inherent virtues survive the artistic process intact. Here, art is naïvely constructed as ethical *only* if it acts as a mirror held up to reality, *objectively* reflecting what already exists *on the surface*, as if it could actually do this.

On the contrary, coherence theory suggests that beneath the external world "there are many real forces —from inner feelings to underlying social and historical movements, that can be understood by insight and intuition".[12] By nature, a representation of this kind, that demands a more penetrating examination of the external world, would be evoked in largely emotive terms. As opposed to the referential determination of a correspondence theory reality, coherence theory views the world through an openly *subjective* lens. In film, coherence theory would manifest in a preference for montage, and other editing techniques, where the style/presence of the film-maker is more obvious. The film-maker not only records the surfaces of the physical - the *actually* seen minutiae of the real world – he or she looks beyond it, selecting, juxtaposing and distributing to create a more abstract sense of reality. Realism in this context depends on a construction of the world *as we see it*, placing the jurisdiction of the real world firmly within the command of the individual.

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[12] Williams, *Keywords*, p. 260.

There is a clear distinction here between two dominant attitudes towards realism. One is convinced that a purportedly unfettered presentation of the real world is what establishes realism. The physical world must appear to be the central and all-embracing focus of a representation. The other viewpoint emphasises the role of the individual within that physical world, who constructs a personal vision of reality from its empirical details. This represents a movement into the realm of human experience, where the real world is subordinated to the centrality of the spectator, the individual who *sees*, and thereby, controls what is seen. This dialectic is, fundamentally, a conflict between two opposed sensibilities, of the objective and subjective.

It is important to remember that such philosophical theories of realism were based on purely abstract reasoning, and on the surface, appear to be easily partitioned. However, as language intervenes, bringing with it the unavoidable element of subjectivity, these classifications become blurred. Once the artist enters as mediator between the external world and the spectator, the language or methods of his or her craft instantly complicate the division between coherence and correspondence theories of realism. The notions of objective/subjective blur and cannot be truly separated, even if the artist attempts to be true to one or other philosophical ethic of realism. In looking at the manifestation of realism in film, it will become apparent that the underlying notion of realism as a highly principled form of artistic practice that aspires to a certain 'ideal' stems from these philosophical theories of realism.

The emergence of new images and stories in art and literature and the power these had to publicise the lives of the working class saw realism recognised by Marxist aesthetic theorists as a mode of representation with significant political

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potential.[13] In this context, theorists such as Marx, Engels, Lukács and Brecht

viewed art as a tool for a higher moral and dogmatic purpose. While they all held

different opinions about *how* it should be used, these theorists/artists shared a

belief in realism, with its emphasis on contemporaneity and empirical and social

truth, as a means of exposing concealed and potentially harmful ideologies. This

utilitarian conception of realism posits it as intrinsically 'truthful', as it is intended

to reveal hidden agendas that have hitherto remained unnoticed in society.

Traditional Marxism "focused on the way in which a contextual economic,

social or political environment shaped, moulded and determined the modern

subject. The concept of ideology which arises from the Marxist tradition is that of

a 'real reality', and a 'real' human nature, which is hidden from the modern

subject. A well- known metaphor is that of the camera obscura: the optical device

through which the world is presented to the subject upside-down".[14] For many

Marxists, realism presented a way of uncovering this deception. Its often fierce

application in regard to contemporary social conditions, especially in respect to

the working classes, made realism most equipped to make the real world known to

the dispossessed modern subject, who is apparently being manipulated and

exploited by masked forces he or she cannot see.

As I will discuss in the Introduction, realism quickly came to be associated

with the social milieu and lives of the rural and working classes. This new

signpost of the 'real' was an appropriate choice as far as Marxism was concerned.

Who better than the unenlightened masses should realism choose to represent,

than the very people Marxism hoped to raise the consciousness of? Marx never

used the term realism but there is evidence in his letters and literary reviews to

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[13] British 'New Wave' film-making capitalised on this political potential with films like *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), which dealt openly with pertinent social issues.
[14] Ian Aitken, 'Realism and Redemption: Realism and the utopian tradition within film theory', (unpublished conference paper, The Bath Millenium Conference, 1999, UK). p. 2.

suggest that he supported it as a means of presenting the modern subject in a truthful light. His writings on aesthetics reveal a need for art to represent something more than superficially authentic surfaces.

In a literary review by both Marx and Engels, there is an implied sense of inadequacy in regard to art that attempts nothing more than verisimilitude. They begin by praising the depictions of revolutionary figures in A. Chenu's *Les Conspirateurs* and Lucien de la Hodde's *La Naissance de la Republique*:

> Hitherto these people have never been pictured in their real form; they have been presented as official personalities, wearing buskins and with aureoles around their heads. In these apotheoses of Raphaelite beauty all pictorial truth is lost. The two books under review...go into the private lives of these people, showing them in carpet slippers, together with their whole entourage of satellites of various kinds. *But that does not mean that they are any nearer a true and honest presentation of persons and events* (my italics).[15]

On the one hand this quote shows that for Marx and Engels, a representation that redressed to a large extent the romanticisation of historical figures was important. In a sense, attention to the minute details of an individual's domestic existence has a levelling effect. A revolutionary figure seen in an ordinary context is cut down to size, neither romanticised nor sentimentalised. He or she is a person like any other. Realism viewed in this context is a noble equaliser. Then again, the last line of the quoted passage suggests that this achievement is in itself viewed by Marx and Engels as insufficient.

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[15] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Literature and Art: Selections from their Writings* (Bombay: Current Book House, 1956), p. 35.

Similarly, Russian Marxists who promoted socialist realism insisted that naturalism was merely "bourgeois realism",[16] serving no real purpose outside of its shallow reproduction of the modern world. Balázs was another detractor of naturalism, especially where it occurred in film, which he believed had much greater representational potential: "Having first escaped to the fairytale romanticism of exotic adventure, the film now escaped to the small detail of the new naturalist style. In its fear of the whole truth, it hid its head like an ostrich in the sand of tiny particles of reality".[17] This view is shared within Marx and Engel's estimation that a 'true and honest' representation is defined beyond the limits of one that merely gestures at the surfaces of real life. For these theorists a mode of representation that does not engage in social commentary or attempt to critique the traditional structures of a given society, cannot claim to have been made in the interests of realism. This legacy of the politicisation of realism as a polemical mode of representation has persisted, from artists like Eisenstein, to Brecht, right up to the films of British director and socialist, Ken Loach.

Another Russian theorist, Roman Jakobson, put forward a theory of realism in his 1921 article, 'On Realism in Art', alluding to its traditionalist and political potential, notions that are entirely relevant to the development of the mode in British cinema as each era is defined by its appropriation of, and opposition to, inscribed conventions of realism. He begins by outlining the basic duality inherent to discussions of realism:

1. Realism may refer to the aspiration and intent of the author; i.e., a work is understood to be realistic if it is conceived by its author as a display of verisimilitude, as true to life (meaning A).

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[16] Lukács, 'The Ideology of Modernism', in *The Lukács Reader*, ed. by Aprad Kadarkay (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 187-211 (p. 187).
[17] Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, p. 88.

2. A work may be called realistic if I, the person judging it, perceive it as true to life (meaning B).[18]

In the first case, Jakobson asks that we consider the perspective of the author as, and in the second it is "the reader's impression [that] is the decisive criterion".[19] He expands on this understanding of realism by introducing the notions of 'conservative' and 'revolutionary' attitudes to realism that reside within meanings A and B. The revolutionary stance is "achieved by rejecting the essential features of the previous tradition",[20] while a conservative position would "reject the 'new' tradition by claiming that its practitioners dwell on the inessential".[21] It is a view of realism developed by Marxist critic Raymond Williams who suggested that the use of realism is usually characterised by a 'revolt' against past conventions or previous generations of realism.[22] He draws a distinction between two forms of revolt: one that offers new content, such as people or ideas, within a traditional form; and the other that seeks to invent new artistic forms to communicate more essential realities.[23] This concept will be developed further in the subsequent chapters as the use of realism in British cinema shifts from 'conservative' to 'revolutionary' depending on historical conditions and the attitudes of individual film-makers.

Remaining with politically motivated theories of realism for the moment, while Marx, was on the whole "cool or indifferent to realism...Engels advocated it".[24] He was primarily attracted to realist representations that presented "typical

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[18] Roman Jakobson, 'On Realism in Art', in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. by Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (London: The MIT Press, 1971), pp. 38-47 (p. 38).

[19] Ibid., p. 38.

[20] Paul Willemen, 'On realism in the cinema', *Screen*, 13:1 (Spring, 1972), 37-45 (p. 37).

[21] Ibid.

[22] Raymond Williams, 'Recent English Drama', in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature 7: The Modern Age*, ed. by Boris Ford, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 496-511 (pp. 497-9).

[23] Ibid.

[24] Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski (eds)., *Marx and Engels on literature and art: a selection of writings* (St.Louis: Telos Publishers, 1973), pp. 4-5.

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characters in typical situations".[25] This artistic principle is also known as typage and it is an important concept that will be revisited in all of the main chapters of this thesis. In a letter to Minna Kautsky, Engels discussed the novel *Old and New* (1884):

> The characters in both milieus are drawn with your usual precision of
> individualisation. Each person is a type, but at the same time a completely
> defined personality—"this one" as old Hegel would say. That is as it
> should be.[26]

Here, Engels judges the novel's realism in terms of the characterisations on offer. Characters that seem 'typical' of their surroundings reinforce the perceived reality of their immediate social milieu. In Engels' view, one of the main principles of realism involved a twofold authenticity. The plausible existence and characterisation of a certain type of person was reflected and in turn reinforced by, a relevant social context. Individuality, albeit couched in ordinary conditions, was to be preserved. Therefore, an artist who places remarkable characters in a typical environment undermines his or her claims to realism. It is a view that will become important in the next chapter when I discuss British documentary realism and the influence of Eisenstein on depictions of working class types. The Russian film-maker offers the clearest example of a politically motivated artist drawing upon the "principle of *character typing*, or *typage*".[27]

It should be remembered that Eisenstein had an ambivalent attitude to realism. "While he paid public homage to Marx and Lenin and was certainly committed to many of their theories, Eisenstein was not the kind of thinker who

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[25] David Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 24.

[26] Marx and Engels, *Literature and Art*, p. 39.

[27] Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein* (London: BFI Publishing; Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 141.

embraces a single idea or tradition which he then systematically develops".[28]

Even though he accepted what socialist realism was trying to do, later in his career

he objected to its rigidity and non-inclusiveness of different approaches to film-

making, especially montage. Eisenstein's avant-garde film practice and its

subsequent influences on realist film-making further problematises the notion of

realism as a monolithically defined and content-based mode of representation.

Nevertheless, Eisenstein's use of typage as "a translation, in terms of *physical*

appearance, of moral qualities and/or of a social and political position",[29] is

relevant here. His method of characterisation "actualises 'global images' (Good

Mother, Virgin, Saint) through clothing, facial features, and gestures. For him,

such 'types' are not wholly characterised by either their class determinants, or any

perceived symbolic status. Eisenstein's people are deliberately constructed within

a transhistorical field, where they are not reduced to a single role (i.e. femininity),

and are precarious".[30]

These variable character types resist being branded from a definite, and by

implication, limiting perspective. This intrinsic duality, where the archetypal

appearance of a character is used to reveal essential social and moral traits is

typical of Marxist aesthetic theory. As Raymond Williams suggests, "the 'typical'

is the fully 'characteristic' or fully 'representative' character or situation: the

specific figure from which we can reasonably extrapolate; or...the specific figure

which concentrates and intensifies a much more general reality".[31] Here, people

are agents of social change, but are subordinate to a higher political order. Highly

individual characters would merely detract from the ideological meaning of art.

As I will demonstrate in the coming chapters, typage is a recurring device

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[28] J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 42.
[29] Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, p. 141.
[30] Ibid., pp. 141-43.
[31] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), p. 101.

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throughout the history of British realism, as working-class 'types' are employed in a variety of ways.

One of the founding ideas of Marxism provides further insight into its adoption of realism as an artistic complement to its central ideology. It is the notion that "an essential human nature, based on the need to engage in free creative activity, is subjugated and corrupted by the systematising forces of capitalism".[32] This view extends to art that is seen to perpetuate rather than question, these systematising forces. Marxist aesthetic theorists were in favour of art that could act as a deconstructive agent, laying bare the fundamental problems of a capitalist society. Realism could be such a mediator of the contemporary world.

It was from this tradition that Georg Lukács emerged to develop his critical theory of 'reflection', a variation on the Marxist-Hegelian notion of a realist aesthetic and that supports the Jakobson 'revolutionary' approach to realism. Lukács' theory was about perceiving the underlying forces of society in literary works. For Williams, "it is not the 'mere surface' or 'appearance only' which are reflected in art, but the 'essential' or 'underlying' or 'general' reality, and this is an intrinsic process, rather than as a separated process in time".[33] Lukács' idea of realism was in keeping with the Marxist view, in that he wanted it to go beyond the directly observable nature of contemporary society. He wrote:

> If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface. If a writer strives to

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[32] Aitken, 'Realism and Redemption', pp. 1-2.
[33] Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 101.

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represent reality as it truly is, i.e. if he is an authentic realist, then the question of totality plays a decisive role.[34]

Totality is a concept that Lukács derived from Lenin, and it is vital to his theory of realism. Lenin wrote that "in order to know an object thoroughly, it is essential to discover and comprehend all of its aspects, its relationships and its 'mediations'".[35] Adopting this argument as the basis of his writings on realism, Lukács went on to contend that the "profundity of the great realist...depends in great measure on how clearly he perceives...the true significance of whatever phenomenon he depicts".[36] In defining what this 'totality' is, Lukács continues the trend of theorists who determine realism, or the real world, in a dual sense. Lukács totality is the "dialectical unity of appearance and essence".[37] A realist is charged with the task of revealing the relations between these two layers of existence. Lukács contends that "the surface of social reality may exhibit 'subversive tendencies', which are correspondingly reflected in the minds of men".[38] However, it is only in presenting the essence *beyond* appearance that reality can be revealed most successfully. Lukács presents Thomas Mann as an example of a *"true realist"*,[39] since he shows "how thoughts and feelings grow out of the life of society and how experiences and emotions are parts of the total complex of reality. As a realist he assigns these parts to their rightful place within the total life context. He shows what area of society they arise from and where they are going to".[40]

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[34] Georg Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. by Ernst Bloch et.al., (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 28-59 (p. 33).
[35] Quoted in ibid., p. 33.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., p.36.
[40] Ibid.

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Taking the part of the spectator, Lukács believed a realist approach to history had evolved from an unenlightened and complacent one that had merely observed the physical effects of capitalist forces at work. Realism signalled a way to actively *participate* in history as it occurred. The politicised role of the author within this enterprise was to provide a candid and at the same time, *accessible* account of current affairs for the spectator. A collapse in the strength of Lukács' ideology takes place when he "lapses into formalism and essentialism".[41] As he was solely interested in content, he tended to dismiss avant-garde writers who were more concerned with innovations of form and technique. The formal aspects of the literary process represented for Lukács' a divergence from the kind of realism that should suppress the presence of the author. He would call any overt use of technique "external commentary".[42] Apparently, the spectator's access to the *content* of a representation would only be impeded by such commentary, which for him has no place in realist literature.

Clearly Lukács would not have viewed as pejorative the perception of realism as a 'styleless style'. There is an inherent difficulty in requiring artists to engage with their society and its effects while at the same time asking them to suppress personal style and commentary. It is a naïve point-of-view and unrealistic in its overriding desire for 'objectivity'. More to the point, "Lukács' definition of realism leaves no room for any literature that 'lays bare the device'"[43], such as that produced by the modernist Brecht. whose influence led to discussions about modernist film that confronted spectators with a different kind of reality. The conflicting notions of realism theorised by Lukács and practised by Brecht represent "the basic split in Marxist aesthetics between a belief in art as

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[41] Stuart Sim, *Georg Lukács* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 104.

[42] Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', p. 34.

[43] Rodney Livingstone (ed)., *Georg Lukács: Essays on Realism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), pp. 16-17.

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disorienting and provocative and art as accessible".[44] The terms used to describe this split are *dialectical* and *mechanical* materialism.

Raymond Williams' definitions of these terms are typically clear and succinct. In discussing the meaning of dialectical materialism, he writes that reality is "seen not as static appearance but as the movement of psychological or social or physical forces; realism is then a conscious commitment to understanding and describing these. It then may or may not include realistic description or *representation* of particular features".[45] One might contend that a film-maker who blatantly reveals the artifice of a filmic representation, for example, by emphasising editing techniques, using amateur actors, employing intrusive voice-overs, and unstable camerawork, is actually providing a higher degree of realism. The spectator is supposed to take comfort in the knowledge that what they are seeing is an illusion, which in a Brechtian sense, is empowering.

By contrast, a mechanical materialist approach to realism, "the object [or representation] is not really lifelike but by convention and repetition has been made to appear so. This can be seen as relatively harmless or as extremely harmful...as a pseudo-objective version of reality...to pass off a FICTION or a CONVENTION as the real world".[46] This is the dominion of classic realism, such as that practiced in mainstream Hollywood (*The Best Years of Our Lives*, 1946; *Shane*, 1953), which projects a version of the real world that is flawlessly mimetic. A film of this kind would tend to favour the mise-en-scène, which preserves rather than distorts the appearance of reality. Techniques such as deep focus photography and the long-take are consciously used to reinforce a film's smooth and outwardly realistic representation. Whether this kind of classic

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[44] Sim, *Georg Lukács*, p. 104.
[45] Williams, *Keywords*, p. 219.
[46] Ibid., pp. 220-21.

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realism is in any way unethical, as the spectator is offered a 'false' representation presented as 'real', is another matter entirely.

Siegfried Kracauer is one film theorist for whom the mechanical materialist approach to realism is not seen as unethical or immoral. He was chiefly concerned with film content, and like Bazin his "allegiance was first to reality".[47] Kracauer's "vocation was to bring mankind into harmony with it via the cinema".[48] One of the notions of film realism he espoused was something he called the *found story* which has particular relevance for mechanical materialism. This notion is based on the premise that it is possible for film to present the real world naturally, objectively, and without contrivance:

> The term "found story" covers all stories *found in the material of actual physical reality* (emphasis added). When you have watched for long enough the surface of a river or lake you will detect certain patterns in the water which have been produced by a breeze or some eddy. Found stories are in the nature of such patterns. Being discovered rather than contrived, they are inseparable from films animated by documentary intentions. Accordingly they come closest to satisfying that demand for the story which "reemerges within the womb of the non-story film.[49]

"By definition found stories are dependent upon the chaotic and unpredictable whirl of life which spins them out. They are open-ended, unstaged and indeterminate".[50] Dudley Andrew suggests the films of Robert Flaherty (*Nanook*

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[47] Andrew, *The Major Film Theories*, p. 105.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 245-46.
[50] Andrew, *The Major Film Theories*, p. 123.

of the North, Man of Aran) and Italian neorealism[51] (*Paisa, La Terra Trema*) as examples of Kracauer's notion:

> For their stories arise out of the locale and culture being filmed. Never in these films does an individual initiate a plot, for the plot must come from reality itself. The individual exists in these films to bring out the human dimensions of a broad and objective situation, to make us as spectators view it deeply and passionately rather than for its informational content.[52]

Kracauer has been derided for what appears to be a naïve view of the cinema, and his lack of consideration of its formal aspects does suggest a denial of its inherent subjectivity, but his privileging of the spectator's point-of-view is has value. Films like *La Terra Trema* that present themselves as a version of Kracauer's found story, should not be perceived as insincere, and thereby corrupt. In fact, where form is suppressed in a film, the importance and accessibility of the story (content) is heightened, and is still full of meaning for the discerning spectator. Rather than remaining distanced from the raw material of the film, one is invited to engage with it in a meaningful way. This has nothing to do with trust. It is simply an acknowledgment of the validity of different methods of constructing film realism. In Chapter One, I will demonstrate the relevance of Kracauer's theory to the theoretical views of John Grierson and the films of Robert Flaherty.

André Bazin, *the* key theorist on film realism, also advocates a mechanical materialist approach to film-making. According to Bazin:

> The cinema has never ceased to pretend that it shows things as they are.
>
> "At the movies", says an old peasant woman in Jules Renard's *Diary*

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[51] While neorealism seems compatible with dialectical materialism, it also has relevance for mechanical materialism, which demonstrates the futility of attempting to ascribe absolute characteristics to realist film-making.

[52] Andrew, *The Major Film Theories*, p. 123.

(*Journal*, 1887-1910), "you always believe that what you see is real".

Except for a few films in which the filmmakers have systematically tried

to elude the realism of the scenery, the essence of the artistic efficacy of

the cinema, even when set in a fantasy or fairy-tale world, has always been

founded on material verisimilitude.[53]

Bazin does not view this as questionable in an ethical sense, since it provides

further evidence of the innate capacity of cinema to render the world

convincingly. He believes that "the technical objectivity of photography finds its

natural extension in the aesthetic objectivity of the cinema",[54] and that the

spectator accepts as true its effortless rendering of the real world.

To expand further on this idea, in Bazin's view, film is unique, among all

the arts, in its ability to create a faithful, albeit compromised, impression of the

world. Unlike Lukács, Bazin held that politics should not dominate the realist

debate or discussions of cinema in general. "Cinema must always drive us to

understand ourselves and our way of life by freely creating images of the past,

present and future. It should never be coerced into creating specifically political

images which could only be didactic and, by that very fact, inferior to a cinema

which questions and discovers both nature and humanity".[55] In this Bazin moves

away from realism that is concerned to illuminate the politicised public sphere,

into the private domain of feelings and emotions. It is for this reason that his

theory of realism, that emphasises the cinema's capacity to help us 'understand

ourselves', is important to the examination of British film realism to follow, where

an increasing interest in the individual above the collective develops the use of

poetic and psychological realism, from the New Wave to the present day.

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[53] '*Farrebique*, or the Paradox of Realism', in *Bazin at Work*, pp. 103-109, (p. 104).
[54] Ibid.
[55] Dudley Andrew, *André Bazin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 136.

Like Bázin, I believe that the film medium is without equal among the arts for its capacity to render an impression of the multi-layered nature of the real world. The level of realism cinema is able to achieve has surpassed the efforts of other media that have adopted the natural world as their subject. The novel is jointly composed of descriptive prose and dialogue passages, and thus can provide an insight into the "inner life" of its inhabitants. Literature can give an associative *impression* of the environment being described. Obviously, the more detailed the description, the more precise the impression. Semiotically, in literature the gap between the signifier (word, term, description) and the signified (the thing being described) is wide enough for the reader to participate in the creative process. Without the intrusion of corroborative evidence, such as a photograph or illustration, the imagination is free to expand the author's world to incorporate images of one's own. In spite of that, the novel is a tangible thing, that is held in one's hands to reveal words on a page. It is a static object that is brought to life within the mind's eye of the reader. This fact makes the suspension of one's disbelief difficult to maintain.

Painting and photography are also fixed renditions of a given reality. Both can present a powerful and often emotive illusion of movement, and three-dimensionality. A combination of environmental details and an individual's facial expression, pose and circumstance can reveal his or her status and emotional wellbeing. While these media can offer a high degree of pictorial truth, they lack the ability of literature to delve into the hearts and minds of its characters. They remain flat objects, fixed within a permanent frame, and forever focused on a single subject.

In contrast, the filmic medium is comprised of both language (dialogue) and a governing visual element. It is significant that one of its earliest monikers

was *moving pictures*. For the first time, people and other natural phenomena could be viewed on a screen, *in motion*. Film had broken through the aesthetic inertia of other media to project two major elements of human existence: space and time. For its first audiences, cinema was not just surface verisimilitude, it was *life*. Certainly, this is a naïve view of a medium that is as much of an artificial construct as literature, painting or photography. Except such naivety also pays homage to film's ability to facilitate an audience's suspension of disbelief. On screen, people speak, interact, walk, run, work: they are animated and alive. Their three-dimensionality is not an impression, it is a fact. It is not surprising that the initial reaction to the Lumière brothers' first film screened in Paris in 1895, *La Sortie des ouvriers de l'usine Lumière*, was instant delight. Images in their films of an oncoming train, a game of cards, a labouring blacksmith, the bustle of a city street, and so on, triggered the 'pleasure in recognition' principle that is so important to the popularity of cinema.

Béla Balázs acknowledged cinema's ability to elicit strong emotional responses, owing to its approximation of reality:

> In the cinema the camera carries the spectator into the film picture itself. We are seeing everything from the inside as it were and are surrounded by the characters of the film. They need not tell us what they feel, for we see what they see and see it as they see it...Our eye and with it our consciousness is identified with the characters in the film, we look at the world out of their eyes and have no angle of vision of our own....our eyes are in the camera and become identical with the gaze of the characters. They see with our eyes. Herein lies the psychological act of "identification".[56]

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[56] Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, p. 48.

The spectator is not only drawn to the familiarity of the world on screen, he or she feels on behalf of the characters represented there. Unlike literature though, film is a predominantly visual medium, so the gap between signifier and signified is difficult to ascertain. The immediacy of the photographic image means that cinematic signs will "resemble real life referents in ways that are customarily beyond the novel's capacity for iconic representation".[57] From the spectator's point-of-view, this fundamental difference represents a compression of the space given by a novel, to make imaginative choices about a representation.

The semiotic nature of film is an appropriate context to expand the discussion of Bazin's theory of film realism. In his essays, he constantly takes up the position of the spectator, and asks whether the techniques being employed by a film-maker provide ample room for the audience to inspect the diegesis of a film *on their own terms*. "Bazin wants the modern subject to return to nature, via the medium of film – the medium above all others which can display nature – so that the transcendent reality which exists within nature can be comprehended".[58] This humanist philosophy informs his argument that "the film image should not 'compose' reality, as ideology does, but should transcribe reality".[59] If reality is preserved in all its complexity, its wonders remain intact for the spectator to take pleasure in them.

Like Kracauer, Bazin formed a utopian vision of cinema as a mediating filter that could reveal nature to humankind. "It is clear, therefore, that Bazin is principally concerned with film's ability to represent reality, rather than with the aesthetic properties of the medium per se".[60] This emphasis on reality as the primary asset of film influenced his assessment of its formal aspects. Like other

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[57] Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 26.
[58] Aitken, 'Realism and Redemption', p. 6.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

theorists, Bazin's discussion of realism is characterised by a choice between two opposites. In this case, they are mise-en-scène and montage. Mise-en-scène is "the term usually used to denote that part of the cinematic process that takes place on the set, as opposed to montage which takes place afterwards. Literally, the "putting-in-the-scene": the direction of actors, placement of cameras, choice of lens",[61] and so forth, mise-en-scène "is more important to realists, while montage is central to expressionism".[62] Montage is basically, editing, or the post-production cutting where shots are selected and juxtaposed as part of the cinematic storytelling process.

For Bazin, the mise-en-scène contained vital elements that could preserve the complexity of a film's diegesis, and by extension, reality. He wrote that the "whole tendency of the *mise-en-scène* is to efface itself. The alternative, positive definition would be that, when this self-effacement is at its extreme, the story and the actors are at their clearest and most powerful".[63] To demonstrate, Bazin analysed Wyler's use of the camera in *The Little Foxes* (1941):

> Bette Davis is sitting in the middle ground facing the viewers, her head at the center of the screen; very strong lighting further underlines the brightness of her heavily made-up face. In the foreground, Marshall is sitting in three-quarter profile. The ruthless exchanges between husband and wife take place without any cutting from one character to the other. Then comes the husband's heart attack: he begs his wife to get him his medicine from the bedroom. From this instant, the whole drama resides...in the immobility of Bette Davis and the camera.[64]

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[61] James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History and Theory of Film and Media*, Revised Edition (Oxford: OUP, 1981), p. 441.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Bazin, 'William Wyler', p. 2.
[64] Ibid., p. 3.

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In Bazin's terms, this scene represents a paradox, as "the highest level of art coincides with the lowest level of *mise-en-scène*".[65] It is precisely because of what the camera *does not* do that gives the scene its power. The stasis of the camera and the framing, which remain on Davis, who herself remains inert while Marshall exits the shot (to die, one must assume), heightens the dramatic tension of the scene.

This use of mise-en-scène also operates to give the spectator a sense of the scene's inherent realism, as "the camera does not follow the path of the average viewer's eyes by cutting from one character to another".[66] In a mechanical materialist sense, the presence of the camera is smoothed away so that the audience is not alerted to its presence. Most important for Bazin, the primacy of 'reality' is maintained as the dynamics of the scene are allowed to remain central.

The Best Years of Our Lives was another Wyler film that Bazin viewed as an exemplar of realism because of its mise-en-scène. His statement that "reality is not art, but a truly 'realistic' art can create an aesthetic that is incorporated in reality",[67] is particularly pertinent for Wyler's film about a group of returning World War II veterans. According to Bazin, "Wyler was not satisfied merely to be faithful to the psychological and social truth of the action...He tried to find aesthetic equivalents for psychological and social truth in the *mise-en-scène*".[68] One of these equivalents was the use of deep focus photography, or depth of field. This technique is important to realists who want to maintain the sense of a complex reality on screen. Wyler found in depth-of-focus shots a way to create a realism that was as uncomplicated as possible:

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[65] Bazin, 'William Wyler', p. 4.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., p. 5-6.
[68] Ibid., p. 6.

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Greg Toland's talent for keeping the different planes of the image

simultaneously in focus allowed me to develop my own style of directing.

Thus I could follow an action to its end without cutting. The resulting

continuity makes the shots more alive; more interesting for the viewer,

who can choose of his own will to study a particular character and who can

make his own cuts.[69]

Bazin recognised in this statement the basic difference between the realism of

Wyler and the films of Welles and Renoir. "Renoir used simultaneous, lateral

mise-en-scène mostly to underline the connections between plots, while Welles

uses deep focus in a sadistic way to taunt the audience, "[70] and to draw attention to

himself. This is closer to Expressionism than realism, whereas Wyler uses depth-

of-focus shots democratically, to open up his filmic world for the spectator's joy

alone. For Bazin, Wyler's aim for "perfect neutrality"[71] is translated into the mise-

en-scène of *Best Years*:

The lenses used in *The Best Years of Our Lives*…conform more to the

optics of normal vision and tend because of deep focus to foreshorten the

image, that is to say, to spread it out on the surface of the screen. Wyler

thus deprives himself, once again, of certain technical means at his

disposal so that he can respect reality better.[72]

One scene that symbolise this respect for reality is the confrontation

between Al (Frederic March) and Fred (Dana Andrews) at Butch's (Hoagy

Carmichael) bar. The scene begins with Al and Fred conversing in the foreground.

March convinces Andrews that he must end his relationship with Peggy (Teresa

Wright). Fred proceeds to a phone booth at the back of the bar, presumably to

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[69] Quoted in Bazin, 'William Wyler', p. 8-9.

[70] Ibid., p. 9.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid., p. 10.

fulfil this agreement. In the foreground, Al talks to Homer (Harold Russell), who is receiving a piano lesson from Butch. "The field of the camera begins with the keyboard of the piano large in the foreground, includes March and Russell in an 'American shot', encompasses the whole barroom, and distinctly shows in the background a tiny Andrews in the telephone booth".[73] This is a startling use of depth-of field, as the action occurs across two planes, and the most crucial event, that of Fred breaking up with Peggy, takes place in the background and out of ear-shot. The spectator, like Al, knows what is happening in that phone booth, and is privy to both planes of action. One can choose from this scene to look at numerous events occurring simultaneously, as in real life. The mise-en-scène in this case has recreated for the spectator an illusion of *spatial* realism, where the shot is multi-dimensional and open for scrutiny.

Conversely, the "more the image tends to resemble reality, the more complex the psycho-technical problems of editing becomes".[74] Depth of field has made the smooth transition between shots a complex process, requiring a "technical *tour de force*".[75] A cameraman like Toland who is likely to be moving from a scene shot with a conventional lens, to one that "must encompass the entire mass of set, lights, actors within a virtually unlimited field",[76] has to ensure that every surface *looks* the same. In considering this, Bazin shows that he is well aware of the contradiction created by the degree of technicality involved in the creation of a so-called "neutral" shot.

Bazin's contention that the mise-en-scène should define itself in its absence"[77] extends to montage, or editing. The fewer shots used, and the longer their individual duration tends to suggest a *temporal* realism. "For rather evident

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[73] Bazin, 'William Wyler', p. 14.
[74] Ibid., p. 11.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., p. 10.

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technical reasons, the average number of shots in a film diminishes as a function of their realism, of the long take with its respect for continuous time and unfragmented space".[78] Silent features demanded more shots of shorter duration, in order fill in the narrative gaps left by the absence of sound. The flow of the story, and the audience's understanding of it, depended on the rhythm and duration of the shots. Colour and sound are just two of the technical developments within film that have added substantially to the director's storytelling palette. Realism in film is much more possible today than it ever would have been for its original practitioners. The ever-increasing complexity of the mise-en-scène means that there are a multitude of methods available for the film-maker to create a sense of realism *within* the shot.

It was Bazin's belief that "the long or uninterrupted take represented "true continuity" and reproduced situations more realistically than montage, leaving the interpretation of a particular scene to the viewer rather than to the director's viewpoint through cutting".[79] In Chapter Four we shall see that Mike Leigh's films contain numerous example of the long take, where a stationary camera observes the interactions of the characters on screen, allowing the spectator to perceive the action in *real time*. Bazin would have approved of Leigh's constant employment of the long-take, especially for events of great emotional significance. As with correspondence theory and mechanical materialism, Leigh and Bazin favour an approach to editing which portrays the real world *as it exists*.

The only form of montage that Bazin made any positive references to is analytical cutting, or psychological montage. He links this editing technique to the possibility of achieving *perceptual* or *psychological* realism in film. In this instance it is the spectator's point-of-view that is of central concern. Only this

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[78] Bazin, 'William Wyler', p. 10.
[79] Bert Cardullo, 'Introduction', in *Bazin at work*, pp. ix-xvi (p. xiii).

kind of editing can give an adequate impression of the way we perceive the natural environment around us. Obviously, this impression is constructed in overtly subjective terms, as the perceptual field of the events on screen is governed by a single individual. To illustrate, Bazin used the example of the image of a dead child. For him:

> A dead child in close-up is not the same as a dead child in medium shot is not the same as a dead child in color. Indeed, our eyes, and consequently our minds, have a way of seeing a dead child in real life that is not the way of the camera, which places the image within the rectangle of the screen. "Realism" consists not only of showing us a corpse, but also of showing it to us under conditions that seek equivalents for these givens.[80]

One would not look at the image of a dead child as the equivalent of a wide shot. The natural instinct of the mind, and therefore the eyes, is to dissect, to scrutinise and break down a scene into elements, which are then reconstructed to make sense of what has been seen.

Therefore, the use of "'psychological montage', which divides a scene into a certain number of elements (the child's face, hands, location) implicitly corresponds to a particular natural mental process that makes us accept the sequence of shots without being conscious of the cutter's hand at work".[81] This feeds into Balázs' notion of the "identification" principle in film viewing. The spectator does not notice the cutter's hand at work since psychological montage situates him or her in the position of the character on screen. Balázs' words quoted earlier are pertinent here: "We see what they see and see it as they see it...Our eye and with it our consciousness is identified with the characters in the film, we look at the world out of their eyes and have no angle of vision of our own". Nor do we

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[80] Bazin, 'William Wyler', p. 7.
[81] Ibid.

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question the techniques that have constructed such an illusion for we have already accepted the feelings they produce.

All of the ideas discussed so far are part of the *international* theoretical debate about realism, but as the focus of my thesis is British film, I want to discuss the ways in which these ideas influenced British discussions and production of film realism. In Chapter One, I will expand on the ideas and influences of Britain's earliest and most important realist film theorist, John Grierson, so for now I will introduce his approach to film and reality, and his impact on subsequent eras of British film realism. Grierson emerged in the 1920s to provide a "theory of modernist documentary realism".[82] Although influenced by contemporary Soviet Cinema produced by Eisenstein, particularly the persuasive techniques of dramatisation such as the use of stories and the typing of character, Grierson's approach to cinema was conservative in the Jakobson sense, in that he saw in film a method of preserving the framework of democracy.[83] His Calvinist and Marxist leanings also informed his didactic and utilitarian view of documentary film-making: films should educate the masses, and the creative process itself should not reflect the individuality of any given director.

Aside from his interest in the philosophical writings of neo-Hegelian philosopher F. H. Bradley and the idealist-socialist A. D. Lindsay, Grierson admired Béla Balázs' idea "that film was able to express a poetic reality which existed beyond, but could only be comprehended through, the empirical"[84] Balázs' influence can be found in Grierson's promotion of the strongly empirical documentary film form as *the* method of signifying the real on screen, and his admiration for the poetic in the films of American documentarist Robert Flaherty.

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[82] Ian Aitken, *European Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 162.
[83] Ian Aitken (ed.), *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 2.
[84] Aitken, *European Film Theory*, p. 167.

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Grierson's dominance of the British realist film landscape is the result of his prolific theoretical writings on film practice during the 1920s and 1930s, and the application of his ideas in the British documentary film movement he founded in the 30s, establishing the key forms of British realism. Although Grierson's didactic approach to cinema has been heavily criticised, it should be remembered that he provided a path for the philosophical and theoretical elements of the European realist debate to enter the British sphere, where local films have not always been regarded as worthy of high critical treatment.

An examination of British film criticism, particularly of the post-World War II era when a proliferation of film magazines devoted to film criticism emerged,[85] suggests an increasing engagement with European realist film theories. Discussions of film in the journal *Screen* graduated from a focus on the merits of film education[86] to film criticism, although Claire Johnston asserted in 1971 that in general film criticism in Britain "seems almost primitive...[and] exists largely at the pre-Bazin stage".[87] Johnston acknowledges the influence of the journal *Sequence* in the early to mid-fifties with writers like Gavin Lambert and Lindsay Anderson (I will discuss his critical essays in Chapter Three), whose "involvement with the re-discovery of the American cinema and their concern about critical values led to a measure of self-scrutiny".[88] This fact in itself, writing about American cinema instead of British cinema, is what Alan Lovell refers to as a symptom of Britain's minority film culture, where "a taste for 'foreign' quality

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[85] Claire Johnston, 'Film Journals: Britain and France', *Screen*, 12:1 (1971), 39-46 (p. 39).
[86] In 'Notes on British Film Culture', Alan Lovell suggests that the debate about the educational purpose of film studies in the 60s and 70s were partly shaped by Grierson's documentary movement with its propagandist focus on lecturing, teaching and film exhibition (*Screen*, 13:2, Summer 1972, 5-17, p. 12).
[87] Johnston, 'Film Journals', p. 42.
[88] Ibid., p. 43.

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films such as the early 1950s Italian 'Neo-Realist films or the French 'New Wave' of the 1960s, rather than 'popular' circuit films",[89] is the defining factor.

Despite the persistent attitude that British films are somehow organic and therefore unworthy of serious film criticism, it is important that British film journals entered the realist film debate. For instance, in 1972, Volume 13:1 of *Screen* was dedicated to discussions about issues of film realism. Andrew Tudor's article, 'The Many Mythologies of Realism' examines the inherent ambiguities of the term realism and interacts with the Jakobson's 1921 essay 'On Realism in Art' and the theories of Kracauer and Bazin. He names *Housing Problems*, *Night Mail* and *A Diary for Timothy* among a long list of films that can be termed 'realist', and mentions Grierson and Flaherty in relation to documentary realism in Britain. Paul Willemen also engages with Jakobson's argument and writes about the American Western, Agnes Varda, Vincente Minnelli. He briefly mentions "the various forms of British Realism, whether they be Documentary or Free Cinema"[90] but only to say that they commit "the mystification of asserting that 'reality' is being filmed 'directly'".[91] The realist debate continues with British critical writers such as John Corner in his 1992 article such as 'Presumption as theory: realism in television studies', and Christopher Williams in 'After the classic, the classical and ideology: the differences of realism', in which he interacts with Corner's realist theories on British television.[92] Far from Johnston's accusation of "primitive" film criticism, British writers are engaged in a sophisticated discussion about the dialectical oppositions and contradictions that accompany all analyses of realism the concept, and the mode of representation.

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[89] Lovell, 'Notes on British Film Culture', p. 7.
[90] Willeman, 'On realism in the cinema', *Screen*, 13:1 (Spring, 1972) 37-45 (p. 41).
[91] Ibid.
[92] Christopher Williams, 'After the classic, the classical and ideology: the differences of realism', *Screen*, 35:3 (Autumn, 1994), 275-92 (pp. 275-76).

It is precisely because film can represent the world so accurately that it is placed under greater pressure than any other medium to be true to a world that contains so many different experiences of it. Everyone has a stake in it, which is why people have such strong reactions to films that seem to deviate from reality as they perceive it. This very personal response to art that attempts to recreate some aspect of nature is evident in the theories of realism I have outlined. Each theorist has a distinct take on what the 'correct' approach to reality is.

Of course, there are points at which some theories intersect with others. The linguistic history of the terms 'real' and 'reality' reveal a double-sided view of realism that has been long cultivated. The opposition between abstract and concrete resembles Lukács' notion of totality, and the dialectical unity of appearance and essence. The philosophical theories of coherence and correspondence suggest a foundation for Bazin's competing views of montage and mise-en-scène. Whatever the driving force of a theory, from politics, aesthetics to humanism, the natural world remains it focus. Differing opinions and methods exist, and many visions of the real are possible, but what these theorists share is a commitment to the real world, to representing it in a way that conforms to a certain ideal. In film, realism involves a process of making choices about that world, and "what is left out and what is included have a significance of their own"[93] Selections made at the level of production, such as what lenses to use or the duration of crucial scenes, are all a part of a film's realism. The number of choices available and the specific vision of the real world held by the individual director ensure that each realist film brings something new to the discussion of realism.

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[93] Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, p. 47.

A group of film-makers who share a political viewpoint or aesthetic preoccupation will still have varied preferences when it comes to realism. The key lesson to come from this chapter was asserted by Brecht and is shared by Bazin. The latter said that: "Each period looks for its own [realism], [and] the technique and the aesthetics that will capture, retain, and render best what one wants from reality".[94] For realism is not one set of rules handed down over time, it is a constantly evolving mode of representation, aided by technical advancement, and re-evaluated by each era of film-makers who employ realism as a way to come to terms with contemporary society and its effects on the individual.

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[94] Bazin, 'William Wyler', p. 6.

Introduction

<u>Towards an account of realism in British cinema:</u>

As the literature review demonstrates, realism is far from a monolithic notion. In fact, beneath its vast conceptual umbrella resides a multitude of strands and possibilities. From its origins in philosophy, to its analysis in a variety of theories, and manifestation in film practice, realism has acquired a wide collection of identities. The growing diversification of the term, and its associative meanings, has laid bare a wide variety of assumptions about exactly what can be reasonably termed *realist*. Additionally, artists and audiences bring to an artistic representation their own set of preoccupations and assumptions about realism, and what *purchase* on the 'real world' a piece should display. Realism, then, exists within a highly subjective environment, where its form and function are shaped by the subjective *agendas* of those who use it, in theory or practice. This makes the challenge of delimiting the landscape of realism a considerable one.

For this reason, frustration, and exasperation often characterise the critical discourse of theorists who attempt to diagnose the term realism. So complex and diverse are its history and application, that attempts to define its parameters often read like a foray into a theoretical minefield. In an abstract sense, Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophy estimate realism as "the reification of the ideal, belief in the prior reality of universals and in the merely contingent reality of things. The idea exists outside the thinker and therefore the thing".[1] In the arts, the search for a practicable definition of realism and its implications has led many to despair of its accessibility and worth as a critical concept. It has for many become "to use

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[1] George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley*, (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 8.

Henry James's phrase, a 'baggy monster', spilling out into virtually every art movement and group.[2] John Corner has assessed the development of the notion of television realism as "a situation whereby the very notion itself is close to being devoid of all useful analytical meaning".[3] "The *problem* (my italics) of realism",[4] is the phrase Christopher Williams chose to introduce his anthology of film realism, implying that it is an enigmatic term that resists simple explication.

Underlying much of the discourse on realism, particularly that which attempts a precise diagnosis, is a pejorative attitude about its slippery nature. If it cannot be pinned down, it must be discarded: This seems to be the alternative on offer. Another phenomenon sees realism coupled with naturalism, in an attempt to specify its meaning by association. The assumption here appears to be that one can better understand a concept if it is categorised, or classified, as a part of a collection of terms. This tendency is present in the employment by some of binary opposites, in an attempt to fix realism in an either/or dialectic where judgements of true/false and objective/subjective leave no room to move. On this complex critical plane, the interaction of such "diametrically opposed senses in which the term can be used",[5] illustrates the untenable prospect of applying a single meaning to realism.

Having said all this, it is not the task of this thesis to explore every context within which realism has been situated. Rather, it is to assess realism as a concept loaded with many connotations, all of which inform the choices that are made at *the level of interpretation*. Contemporary politics and culture, individual and/or national ideologies, aesthetic considerations, and moral judgements all factor in to

[2] James Malpas, *Realism*, (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997), p. 6.
[3] 'Presumption as theory: realism in television studies', *Screen*, 33:1 (Spring, 1992), 97-102 (p. 97).
[4] Christopher Williams (ed.), 'Introduction', in *Realism and the Cinema: A Reader* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul in association with the BFI, 1980), pp. 1-17 (p. 1).
[5] Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 13.

the use of realism as a mode of representation. Consequently, realism is not simply concerned with the reproduction of the 'real', where mere fidelity to the ideal of verisimilitude is paramount. The 'ism' exists in those spaces where the choices made about the 'real' - what has been chosen, how it has been presented, and why - are all aspects of the artist's *comment* on a given physical environment. In this way, unique manifestations of realism can emerge from the conceptual quagmire, as cultural specificity is a major determining factor of visual and ideological content. By its very nature, this multi-faceted enterprise necessitates discussion "in an arena in which historical, technological, aesthetic and sociological factors constantly jostle with each other".[6]

The scope of this research will be limited to British cinema, where realism has a long, multifaceted history. Within this context, realism takes on a specific set of connotations and meanings. This is where the central concern of the realist debate provides a framework for discussion: the role of *form and content*, or technique and subject matter, in the realist enterprise. Here, the nature of realism is determined by processes of selection, omission, description, and methods of addressing the viewer. An exploration of these processes, where deliberate choices are made at the level of production, will develop the notion of a highly distinctive and largely idiosyncratic *British* film realism. Such a method will be an effective way to unravel the entanglements of realist discourse, while foregrounding the interpretation of the real world, and realism, that British cinema has promoted since the birth of the documentary tradition in the 1930s.

Shane Meadows' *24 7 TwentyFourSeven* (1997), was the film that triggered my academic interest in realism in British cinema. Having studied the British cinema of World War II, and the films of the New Wave, I had been

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[6] Williams, 'Introduction', in *Realism and the Cinema*, p. 3.

exposed to the strong, though shifting tradition of realism in British cinema. Meadows' film, shot in a grainy black and white, and set in a working class community, seemed to be stylistically and thematically consistent with the British realism of the earlier periods, particularly the New Wave. A quote from Meadows himself draws further parallels with this era: "'I've had an affection for black and white films ever since I was a little lad. They manage to capture Britain in all its essence. Class becomes so obvious in black and white 1950s films--it was much more apparent in the dress, so I suppose that's what I was after'".[7] Meadows' nostalgia for the British films of the past is overtly expressed in his use of black and white cinematography and the privileging of the working class experience of British society.

It seemed to me that *24 7 TwentyFourSeven*, with its subdued visual style, bleak urban landscape, and working class characters, was revisiting the major signposts of realism explored by previous eras of British cinema. Meadows' conscious decision to derive his aesthetic and narrative impetus from a traditional strand of British realist film-making while exploring contemporary subject matter was something I wanted to explore further. I was also interested in my own set of assumptions, biases and preconceptions about realism as a mode of representation. For example, why did Meadows' film look and feel 'more real' to me because it was in black and white and featured regional accents? Was it because I too was reminded of films like *Room at the Top* (1958) and *The Angry Silence* (1959), whose associations I had transposed onto this one? These were just some of the questions I took with me into my research of realism in British cinema.

After beginning my doctoral research in 1999, I began searching for a

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[7] Quoted in Simon Wheelan, *A first effort, dangerously praised*, 20 May 1998, <http//www.wsws.org/arts/1998/may1998/film-m20.shtml> [accessed 11 May 2000] (para. 8 of 14).

critical approach to British cinema that could help focus the idea of it as a

complex tradition that keeps repeating itself over time. Then I came across an

article by Andrew Higson titled, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film':

The Documentary-Realist Tradition', and saw in it a way of discussing realism

that maintained an awareness of the inherent ambiguities of the concept and mode,

while developing a framework for examining the multi-faceted yet persistent

characteristics of the British realist tradition. The distinctly non-monolithic nature

of realism that I demonstrated in the literature review, where discussions about the

nature of the real world split into dialectically opposed camps of form and content

and representations of that world inevitably produce a variety of realisms, is

epitomised by the notion of *strands* of British film realism that Higson argues

were established during the documentary movement of the 1930s.

In essence, the article evaluates the implications of Alan Lovell's assertion

that "the importance of the documentary movement lies not in the quality of

individual films, but in the impact it had in general on the British cinema".[8] In the

process, Higson deconstructs the notion of a monolithic use of realism in British

cinema by identifying three strands of documentary film-making that emerged

during the 1930s, the *instructional*, the *narrative* and the *poetic*, and by extension,

three different (but interconnected) types of realism in British cinema. In

identifying these strands, he develops a critical framework that "both

reconstruct[s] a familiar map of British cinema, and at the same time de-

familiarise[s] that construction".[9] This article, which I will discuss in detail in

Chapters One to Four, provides the theoretical structure of this thesis as the three

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[8] Alan Lovell and Jim Hillier, *Studies in Documentary* (London: Secker & Warburg/BFI, 1972), p. 35.
[9] Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film': The Documentary Realist Tradition', in *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. by Charles Barr (London: BFI, 1986), pp. 72-97 (p. 73).

strands form the basis of my discussion of British film realism.

Higson follows the instructional, narrative and poetic strands through the wartime, Free Cinema and New Wave[10] eras of British realism, determining the parallels between the kinds of realism being practiced there, and the relationship they have with the three prototypes of the documentary period. Aside from engaging with, and expanding on, Higson's triumvirate formulation of British realism I want to argue in this thesis that the continuity of realist film practice in Britain extends beyond these two generations. It is my contention that the three prototypes of realism established during the documentary movement have also had a marked influence on the realism of the modern era as practiced by Ken Loach, Mike Leigh and Terence Davies. More specifically, I believe that a specific correspondence exists among certain film-makers, as aesthetic links can be made between directors such as Humphrey Jennings and Lindsay Anderson or Alberto Cavalcanti and Mike Leigh. As such, this thesis tends towards an auteurist approach to cinema, partly from an effort to limit the focus of the thesis to a manageable scope and also because the careers of certain directors, like Cavalcanti, Jennings, Harry Watt, Anderson, Leigh, Loach and Davies suggest an overt commitment to one or two of the realist strands.

Aside from looking at the ways that the documentary strands have manifested and changed in contemporary British realism, I also want to explore the reasons behind the consistent return to this mode of representation in British cinema, particularly from the Raymond Williams point of view, who suggests that it usually stems from a 'revolt' against previous conventions. The history of realism in British cinema problematises this notion of the 'revolt', as there is a

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[10] The term 'New Wave' is a derivation of the French 'nouvelle vague', which was used to describe innovative film-makers such as Truffaut and Godard.

constant return to traditional forms of realist film-making, despite historical and aesthetic changes. This idea supports the dual contention of Roman Jakobson, who argues that "there is the realism which is conservative (we are preserving realism in the face of attack) and revolutionary (our new approach is more realistic than the old".[11] As I mentioned in the literature review, Jakobson's approach to the ambiguity of realism as a mode of representation is a significant one to this thesis, as the following discussion of British film realism will reveal a tradition that reveals a conventional approach to the society and images of past eras, and also a departure from, and opposition to them.

In Chapter One, I will establish the nature of Higson's strands of realism with a focus on the documentary movement of the 30s. Contrary to much of the discourse on this period, it is not a solidly uniform tradition dominated by the ideals of its founder, John Grierson. One of the aims of this chapter is to demystify the notion of a singular form of film-making under the banner of 'British documentary'.[12] Using the instructional, narrative and poetic strands, I will demonstrate that from the nucleus of the Griersonian 'documentary idea' sprang three distinct prototypes of British realist film-making, represented by three particular films: the instructional in Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey's *Housing Problems* (1935), the narrative in *Pett and Pott: A Fairy Story of the Suburbs* (1934) by Alberto Cavalcanti and the poetic in Robert Flaherty's *Industrial Britain* (1933). This movement will also be considered as pivotal in the emergence of particular social concerns in British film, as for the first time one can perceive a new conception of the working class. The emergence of the strands, the beginnings of the conflation of British realism with images and stories

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[11] Andrew Tudor, 'The Many Mythologies of Realism', *Screen*, 13:1 (Spring, 1972), 27-35 (p. 28).
[12] Ian Aitken's recent study, *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology* is an example of the kind of work that helps such 'demystification'.

of contemporary working-class life and the presence of strongly *individual* ways of representing the 'real' in the documentary movement are the key points of this chapter.

World War II (1939-1945) initiated great social upheaval in Britain, and saw the partial graduation of realism into the ranks of the fiction film. The nature of mainstream British realism at this time and its relationship to the documentary tradition and contemporary society are all discussed in Chapter Two. Of particular concern is the influence of the documentary movement, or more particularly, the input of documentary film-makers such as Harry Watt and Humphrey Jennings, on realist film production during the war. This period is characterised by a 'conservative' use of realism as the need for *national* unity led to the creation of a mythic national *consensus*. This view of the British realism of the time as propagandist[13] is present in the three strands which remain intact throughout the wartime era. As representative of the strands, I will analyse *Target for Tonight* (1941), as the instructional strand shifts into journalistic and narrativised territories, *The Way Ahead* (1944) as symbolic of the fully realised narrative strand with documentary influences, and *Fires Were Started* (1943), a poetically rendered docu-drama signifying, in microcosmic terms, the national war effort. Once again, representations of working-class stories and *types* is important, as British wartime society with its shifting demographic and changing attitudes is closely linked to the rise of realism during this period.

The post-War continuation of the British realist strands is the subject of Chapter Three. With the arrival of Lindsay Anderson, the Free Cinema movement and the 'New Wave' (1958-63) comes a new kind of overtly politicised realism.

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[13] This is a tricky term which can be employed in various ways. I use it here, and throughout the thesis, to denote a narrative mode which makes a case for a particular political or social point of view, not pejoratively as is often the case.

Unlike the wartime era, Free Cinema and the New Wave are partly characterised by a 'revolutionary' approach to realism, where an opposition to past eras and statements about national identity is forged, especially in Anderson's polemical writings in the journal *Sequence*. However, along with the construction of the mythic working-class, male, anti-hero established in films such as *Look Back in Anger* (1959), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), and *A Kind of Loving* (1962), there remains a deeply traditional view of British culture. Along with the recurrence of interest in working-class life, this period can be seen to consolidate a specifically *British* iconography of realism, as the scenery of domestic life is fully promoted to the public sphere. A detailed analysis of the film *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) will explore the persistence of the poetic strand while examining the development of psychological realism in British cinema.

The final chapter ushers in the modern era as the latest manifestation of the strands of realism in British cinema. Moving beyond the scope of Higson's research, I will argue that the representative film-makers of this contemporary generation of realism are Ken Loach (instructional), Mike Leigh (narrative) and Terence Davies (poetic). While each film-maker offers a very personal approach to the strands they represent, there are remarkable connections to the documentary movement in their films. In *Cathy Come Home* (1966), Loach, an intensely political social realist, approaches instructional realism from a didactic point-of-view, suggesting a partial affiliation with John Grierson; Leigh, with his peculiar brand of comic-tragic domestic realist drama, recalls in *High Hopes* (1988), the earlier films of Alberto Cavalcanti with their humour, surrealism and caricatures; Davies' personal journey into his own memory in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988, UK/Ger) is, like some of the films of the New Wave, engaged in a psychological realism that is poetically expressed. In this, his films are most

reminiscent, in stylistic terms, of the work of Humphrey Jennings. In this final chapter it will emerge that although these film-makers are engaged with personal issues and contemporary political issues their films still exhibit the influence of past film-makers and the continued persistence of the strands.

By examining the cultural intertexuality of realist film practice in Britain, one is able to discern its intrinsic motivations. British film realism, while the recent product of a long history of realist philosophy and application, has a function and complexion all its own. As realism is adopted by each generation of British film-makers, its use becomes intransigently tied to the society and climate within which it is made. This thesis will not assess realism as a criteria, or question the degree to which it 'successfully' renders the external world. Rather, it will seek to determine its *function*, and the means by which it allows British film to define itself against other national cinemas and cultures. It is in this light that realism in British cinema shall be analysed, as a product of the societal and political concerns of the nation. As the society shifts, so too does the purchase on realism that emerges across time, while the common thread of the strands remain.

Chapter One: The Documentary Film Movement

The origin of the strands:

The documentary movement of the 30s provided the framework for the development of realism in British cinema. Its founder, John Grierson (1898-1972), was a Calvinist and a moral philosophy scholar who perceived in film the potential to educate the masses and thus unite British society. According to him, the medium of film could serve an educational and thereby democratic purpose: "The thought of a revitalized citizenship and of a democracy at long last in contact with itself",[1] were of the utmost importance. Grierson's vision of the cinema was based on the idea of cinema as an instrument "of civic enlightenment".[2] He wrote that because "the citizen under modern conditions, could not know everything about everything all the time, democratic citizenship was impossible".[3] Grierson saw in cinema a powerful method of preserving the modern democratic framework. In his estimation, art should be a hammer, not a mirror, driving home to people the 'true' nature of modern society in a factual way, and thus, launching one key strand of British film realism. Individual personalities and styles were to be subordinated to this common goal. Grierson's strong theoretical views on documentary as an 'anti-aesthetic' movement, and the need for a moral, didactic cinema of information, not entertainment, permeate many of the documentaries made during the 30s.

In establishing this tradition of British documentary realism, Grierson's personal aesthetic and theoretical influences provide an important theoretical link

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[1] John Grierson, 'The Course of Realism', in *Grierson on Documentary*, ed and comp. Forsyth Hardy (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), pp. 70-83 (p. 73).
[2] Ibid., p. 79.
[3] Ibid., p. 78.

to the wider tradition of realist criticism discussed in the literature review. Ian

Aitken, in his *European Film Theory and Cinema*, accounts for the variety of

philosophical and filmic influences on Grierson's realist theory of documentary

cinema, and states that:

> Grierson arrived at a definition of the principal function of the
>
> documentary film as that of representing the interdependence and
>
> evolution of social relations in a dramatic, descriptive and symbolic way.
>
> This function was simultaneously sociological and aesthetic: sociological,
>
> in that it involved the representation of social relationships; and aesthetic,
>
> in that it involved the use of imaginative and symbolic means to that end.[4]

Besides the philosophical influences[5], Grierson was also inspired by certain film

theorists and film-makers, whose work seemed to feed back into the film theories

he was most heavily engaged with.

For instance, as I suggested in the literature review, Grierson greatly

admired the writings of theorist Béla Balázs, who argued that through the

unrivalled quality of the photographic image, film was capable of expressing a

powerful poetic force on screen.[6] This idea intersects with Grierson's promotion

of the documentary film form as *the* method of signifying the real on screen, and

his admiration for the films of American documentarist Robert Flaherty, the so-

called father of poetic realism. One can see the influence of Flaherty's American

documentaries, such as *Nanook of the North* (1922, US) and *Moana – A Romance

of the Golden Age*[7] (1926, US) on one of the central tenets of Grierson's theory of

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[4] Aitken, *European Film Theory*, p. 165.

[5] In the above book, Aitken describes the influence that neo-Hegelian philosopher F.H. Bradley
and idealist-socialist philosopher A.D. Lindsay had on Grierson, which helped to form his beliefs
about the importance of the State, among other things (pp. 162-66).

[6] Balázs, 'The Future of Film', reprinted in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet cinema in
documents 1896-1939*, ed. by Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul,
1988), pp. 144-45 (p. 144).

[7] Grierson is credited with the first English usage of the term 'documentary' in a review titled

documentary, namely, "to find new meanings and excitements in the familiar through applying the creative treatment of actuality…to the close-to home workaday modern world".[8] It is notable that Kracauer, whose theory of naïve realism echoes Grierson's own view, also admired Flaherty who "in his naïveté…really says what he feels…and if he does not always come to grips with the problems he wants to expose, *he proceeds, nevertheless, with an instinct so infallible as not to endanger future solutions*".[9]

Grierson was also greatly affected by Flaherty's use of documentary and his poetic treatment of ordinary subjects and brought him to Britain to make *Industrial Britain* (1933), and their motivations for making films do contain similarities. "Flaherty wanted to use film to discover and reveal little known people and places, Grierson wanted to use film to enlighten and shape the modern, complex, industrialized society in which most of us live".[10]

Grierson's 'uncovering' and discovery of working-class people in British society also compares well with Flaherty, especially with regard to the latter's contribution to the vision of English workers in *Industrial Britain*. Despite Grierson's enormous regard for Flaherty's film-making and its subsequent influence on him, Grierson's role in the British documentary film movement role was as an observer or agitator rather than film-maker and so his personal vision of the cinema ("I look on cinema as a pulpit, and use it as a propagandist"[11]) took on a life of its own.

'Flaherty's Poetic *Moana*' in *The Documentary Tradition* ed. by Lewis Jacobs (New York: Norton and Co., 1979), pp. 25-27.

[8] Jack C. Ellis, *The documentary idea : a critical history of English-language documentary film and video*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice Hall, c1989), p. 72.

[9] Siegfried Kracauer quoted in Richard Griffith, *The World of Robert Flaherty* (New York: Da Capo, 1972), p. 142.

[10] Ellis, *The documentary idea*, p. 74.

[11] Grierson, 'Propaganda: A Problem for Educational Theory and for Cinema', *Sight and Sound*, 2:8 (Winter 1933/34), 119-121 (p. 119).

The other major filmic influence on Grierson was the Soviet cinema of the 1920s, particularly that of Eisenstein. The "Soviet method of intense dramatisation (the use of stories and plots, the typing of character, rhetorical editing devices) …was the obvious method to attract Grierson since the Soviet directors also saw film as a social weapon".[12] The Soviet approach to cinema gave Grierson a way of moving beyond his favoured theory of naïve realism, such as the notion of the 'slight narrative' developed by Paul Rotha and adapted by Kracauer into the 'found story'[13] in the post-war period, which sought to offer an illusion of everyday life 'captured' on screen. "Grierson felt that his material had to be 'dramatised' or 'interpreted' if he was to achieve his ambition of using the film to involve men in the historical process".[14]

However, Eisenstein wanted to use montage techniques and working class types to demonstrate social differences and inequities, whereas Grierson was ideologically opposed to such a use of film within his own social context. For the "less melodramatic problems of reconstruction"[15] in non-revolutionary Britain, Grierson wanted a less rhetorical style of film-making. He was also not in the business of subverting British society, or revealing the problems inherent to the British class system, rather, Grierson rejected revolution for "the common problems of everyday life and to the common – even instructional – solutions of them".[16] This absorption of, and subsequent move away from, certain influences to suit the needs of the individual as film-maker and the social context of the time, is the exact nature of British realist cinema: that it is a malleable, shifting mode, subject to personal influence and open to historical change.

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[12] Lovell and Hillier, *Studies in Documentary*, p. 25.
[13] Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 247.
[14] Lovell and Hillier, *Studies in Documentary*, p. 25.
[15] John Grierson, 'Summary and Survey: 1935', in *Grierson on Documentary*, pp. 52-70 (p. 65).
[16] Ibid., p. 66.

Grierson's contemporary dominance as *the* key British writer on theories of documentary film, and his espousal of instructional realism over other more poetic or dramatised modes, contributed to the notion that British documentary realism itself is dominated by his preferred style. Contrary to the notion of a unified, monolithically articulated cinema fostered by some writers on this period, the movement was in fact characterised by a variety of documentary styles and kinds of realism. Forsyth Hardy's deification of Grierson and the obfuscation of differing styles of documentary in his anthology text, *Grierson on Documentary*, is a classic example of the kind of writing about the movement that elides its inherent diversity.

For example, in describing the formation of the movement and its key participants, Hardy suggests that Grierson "persuaded [Sir Stephen] Tallents to engage other young men who, like himself, wanted to use film rather than make films",[17] and then goes on to list Basil Wright, Harry Watt, Humphrey Jennings and Edgar Anstey among the so-called "sociologists, a little worried about the way the world was going"[18] who were recruited to join the documentary cause under the Grierson banner. While acknowledging Grierson's theoretical contribution to documentary film discourse, Hardy mistakes Grierson's patriarchal attitude for a singularly dominant documentary style, failing to examine the varied stylistic contributions of film-makers like Jennings, Watt or Wright to the movement.

This mythological notion of Griersonian British documentary continues in contemporary film criticism, such as the view offered by Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins in their 1996 book *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*, where they state that "the British documentary movement of the

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[17] Forsyth Hardy, 'Introduction', in *Grierson on Documentary*, pp. 11-19 (p. 12).
[18] Ibid.

1930s was the self-conscious creation of a single determined individual: John Grierson".[19] Despite the inclusion of other essays and interviews in the book that point to a diverse documentary movement, their own assessment of the period never really moves beyond a preoccupation with Grierson's seemingly inflexible theoretical and aesthetic stance on documentary. Aside from Andrew Higson's important re-appraisal of British documentary film and its multi-layered structure, Deane Williams has also engaged with the problematically dominant perception of Grierson's 'ownership' of British documentary film-making.

Williams comments that early writings on the actual films made during the 30s influenced their reception which had a marked influence on the development of a monolithically defined notion of the movement: "Not only were the films made by Harry Watt, Edgar Anstey, Basil Wright, Arthur Elton, Alberto Cavalcanti, and Robert Flaherty understood as 'Grierson films', they were often understood through the vision for them that Grierson proposed".[20] As I will demonstrate in this chapter, upon viewing the films made by such a wide variety of individuals from disparate backgrounds, it is clear that the Griersonian paradigm of instructional film-making did not accommodate all of the film-makers who participated in the movement. The emergence of distinctive film-makers like Alberto Cavalcanti and Humphrey Jennings, and with them, new forms of documentary realism, severely undermined the suggestion that the documentary movement was characterised by merely one cinematic approach.

In the introduction, I discussed Andrew Higson's article "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film': The Documentary-Realist Tradition', in which he identifies three strands of documentary film-making that surfaced during

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[19] MacDonald and Cousins, *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 93.

[20] Deane Williams, 'Between empire and nation: Grierson in Australia', *Screening the past* (1999) <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr0799/dwfr7e.htm> [accessed 10 August, 1999] (para. 2 of 15).

the movement: the instructional documentary, the story-documentary, and the poetic documentary. As well as being the three strands that make up the documentary-realist tradition, they represent the triumvirate tradition of realism that Higson argues, have reappeared in subsequent generations of realism in British cinema. These are not mutually exclusive strands, but in general terms, certain key distinguishing characteristics set them apart. In this chapter I want to work through each of the strands assessing the various styles, themes, realist representations and the attitudes to working-class people that characterise them. I will also provide three lengthy film analyses for each strand of documentary realism discussed. In this way the various identities that dominate British realism will begin to emerge.

Didacticism and realism – the instructional documentary

The instructional documentary, from the Griersonian school of realism, is traditionally made up of "a mixture of voice-over, interviews and a montage of illustrative images (there are few signs of shot matching, or reverse-field strategies, perhaps the key elements in narrative continuity editing)".[21] This is realism with an overt moral and ideologically informed agenda. One is conscious of the didacticism of the aesthetic choices made, such as the use of a voice-over, which is usually performed in an overbearing, almost dictatorial tone. These films generally emphasise Grierson's interest in actuality footage ("the living scene and the living story"[22]) and/or montage editing ("for a review of a subject or situation more intricate and more intimate than any mortal eye can hope to match".[23]). Films like *Drifters* (Grierson, 1929), *Workers and Jobs* (Elton, 1935), *Coal Face* (Cavalcanti and others, 1935), *Enough to Eat?* (Anstey, 1936) and to a certain

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[21] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 79.

[22] Grierson, 'First Principles of Documentary', in *Grierson on Documentary*, pp. 35-47 (p. 37).

[23] Grierson, 'Flaherty', in *Grierson on Documentary*, pp. 29-35 (p. 30).

extent, *North Sea*[24] (Watt, 1938) "abandoned rudimentary documentary naturalism and the processes of narrative construction common to commercial feature films".[25] Instructional documentaries were to be as formally distinct from the fiction film as possible: this was not film-making for entertainment's sake. As alluded to earlier, Grierson's attraction to the Soviet cinema of the 20s and its dramatically rhetorical use of montage is important here, as it "laid the groundwork for the didactic emphasis"[26] that is central to this strand of realism.

Bill Nichols' notion of the underlying 'voice' of the film-maker is closely linked to the function of montage editing, and helps to explain the connection between a film style and its political implication. "In the 1920s, the sense that the voice of the film-maker—and through this voice a government or society—took shape through the ways in which views of the world were recast in shooting and editing held paramount importance".[27] The complexities of the kind of associative montage employed in instructional documentaries, where images of the contemporary world are selected and deliberately constructed, can be seen to "give expression to a particular viewpoint".[28] I will discuss this notion more closely during the analysis of *Housing Problems* (1935). The influence of the Soviets' use of character typage is also obvious in the films that belong to this strand, such as *Coal Face*, or *Workers and Jobs*, where archetypal physical characteristics are used to communicate something moral, political or social about the person or group in question. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter and in subsequent chapters, typage also features strongly in the story and poetic strands of British documentary realism.

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[24] *North Sea* is an interesting example of a documentary that crosses into two strands of realism, with its combination of montage editing and story elements.
[25] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 40.
[26] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 97.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

In discussing the general characteristics of the documentary movement of the 30s, Higson points out certain elements that are particularly relevant to the instructional strand. He argues that:

The social-democratic impulse proposes that the documentary film – and social documentation in general – fills an information gap in establishing communication between the state and the citizen of the new democracy, thereby constructing a 'public sphere'.[29]

Films of the instructional strand institute "a public gaze at public processes, where 'public' implies a sense of common, uncontested social activity and social knowledge".[30] Unlike the films of the New Wave which I will examine in Chapter Three, documentaries within the instructional strand, and in the movement in general, are not concerned with the desires and problems of an individual protagonist, rather, they "tend to deal with the work of a particular 'public' institution, or activity, that can be broadly perceived as *social*".[31] As I will demonstrate in my analysis of *Housing Problems*, the notion of a public gaze is intrinsically tied to the controlling 'voice' of the documentary film-makers, defining this strand's *instructional* standpoint.

Despite what appears to be the structural and technical rigidity of the Griersonian style of instructional documentary, it must be said that *Drifters* displays some overt poetic tendencies, and *Coal Face*, with its use of light and shadow, is largely expressionist in style. The style of the latter film is a case of Cavalcanti's European cinematic background inevitably rising to the surface. With *Drifters*, the poetry comes from the elegiac treatment of the fishermen's daily work and the unusual voice-over that speaks in hushed tones, idealising the

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[29] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 77.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

activities of the working-class. One of Grierson's major aesthetic and stylistic influences is also present here: the poetic treatment of actuality points to his interest in the documentary films of Robert Flaherty, whom I will discuss in greater detail with an analysis of his film *Industrial Britain*. These are important examples of the strands overlapping, despite the seeming coherence or inflexibility of each one. They also point to the fallacy of a unified documentary movement, where individuality is suppressed. There are however characteristics that distinguish this strand of documentary-realist film-making from its counterparts, one of the earliest examples being *Housing Problems*, which I will discuss below.

Housing Problems

Housing Problems opens with a long establishing shot of the rooftops of a housing estate, accompanied by an authoritative voice-over that introduces the film's subject: "the problem of the slums". It is "That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill", the term coined by Andrew Higson to describe a shot "where we are outside and above the city, but where the city is itself prominent in the frame",[32] which for him became an "iconographic cliché"[33] of the British New Wave films of the 50s and 60s. Higson also makes the point, and it is an important one to consider with *Housing Problems*, that That Long Shot "involves an external point of view, the voyeurism of one class looking at another".[34] This notion recalls the premodern definition of 'real' discussed in the literature review, where the royal realm encompassed the king's controlling view, looking down on his subjects. After this opening image (a signifier of the working-class milieu the

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[32] Andrew Higson, 'Space, Place, Spectacle: Landscape and Townscape in the 'Kitchen Sink' film', in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, ed. by Andrew Higson, (London: Cassell, 1996), pp. 133-56 (p. 145).
[33] Ibid., p. 133
[34] Ibid., p. 152.

film is entering) the camera pans across a series of rooftops, revealing row upon row of squalid homes, jammed together like prison cells: this is where the underprivileged live.

Beginning the film in this way, with an external point-of-view shot, is consistent with the use of an authoritative voice-over in an instructional documentary like *Housing Problems*, where an unseen observer who exists outside of the domestic landscape of the slums comments on its features. The dominant position of *instruction* rather than involvement is firmly in place at the outset. This particular style of narration belongs to the 'voice of God' tradition identified by Bill Nichols, who aligns the use of a "professionally trained, richly toned male voice of commentary",[35] with "the expository mode"[36] of documentary, which "rely heavily on an informing logic carried by the spoken word".[37] Here, images provide secondary support to the primary voice of the narrator.

According to Nichols, in films with narration of this kind, "the commentary is…presumed to be of a higher order than the accompanying images. It comes from some place that remains unspecified but associated with objectivity or omniscience".[38] The God-like, upper middle-class voice-over that mediates throughout *Housing Problems*, between the intermittent voice-over of the local councillor (who has a more obvious role in the film's discourse), and the monologues spoken by several slum-dwellers, is a fine example of the mode of exposition described by Nichols. It functions to suggest an objectivity in relation to the images, and thereby the subject, while controlling or influencing the ways in which the images can be read. There is an obvious class hierarchy at work here, headed by the anonymous upper-class narrator, followed by the professional

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[35] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p. 105.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., p. 107.
[38] Ibid.

middle-class councillor, who is an authority on the slums, but not the guiding, dominant voice of the documentary, and completed at the lower end by the working-class residents, the vocal though powerless subject/object of the film.

Taking up the film again, a voice-over (now that of the councillor) goes on to describe the terrible situation of the slums' inhabitants over a series of montage sequences intercut with panning shots that depict sagging rooftops, a house built up against a factory and a wall braced with a large pole so that it will not fall down. All are illustrative shots that substantiate the councillor's allegations that these overcrowded houses were ill-conceived and are now falling down. The next montage sequence comprises rapidly edited, disturbing shots accompanied by the original, upper-class voice-over, which explains the content of the images: neglected walls and woodwork; rusty taps (no running water); poor clothes-line facilities in narrow backyards; the interior of a decaying house, its plaster giving way; a lavatory and sink stationed in close proximity (linked to the high rates of disease and poor sanitation in the slums). These montage sequences provide important empirical evidence of the extreme poverty experienced by people in the slums of Britain.

The early section of *Housing Problems* is generally concerned with conveying the nature of the inhumane domestic interiors of the slums. Information about the depth of the poverty experienced within the slums, rather than the experiences of the people themselves, is primary. To the film's credit, when it decides to focus on the working-class people who live within these crumbling walls, it allows them a chance to speak for themselves. Contrary to what usually takes place in an instructional documentary, where the authoritative voice-over is central and constant, the makers of *Housing Problems* include many sequences where men and women speak directly to the camera about the poverty that is

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theirs to relate. Mr. Norwood, in medium-shot, speaks in his working-class accent about the mice, rats and bugs that plague his daily homelife. He is then framed in a wide-shot, placing him squarely within his immediate environment. Mrs Hill is the next to speak, framed in a medium-long-shot; she sits in a dark corner and tells of the filth on the surfaces of the walls and the vermin that live inside them. Intercut during her monologue is a close-up of a bug crawling up a wall. "We're fed up", she says.

These sequences are a combination of associative editing and variation: as the people describe their living conditions, the images correspond, lending empirical evidence to the verbal accounts. Mrs Graves is the next candidate, framed in a medium-long-shot that clearly illustrates her appalling living conditions. The grime on the walls is clearly visible, as are the signs of decay. She recalls a time when she awoke to find a rat on her face, then talks of having no cupboards for food, so the rats contaminate what little rations the family has. Neither of the authoritative, disembodied voice-overs intrude during these testimonials, of which there are several more, although the upper-class narrator introduces each speaker. It is important that we should become closely acquainted with these people, learn their stories, and hear the way they speak. While the film controls when they are introduced, how much screen time they have, and how they are framed in relation to their surroundings, the sheer fact of their direct contribution to the discourse of the film is historically important. It not only represents a slight departure from the instructional documentary tradition of a strictly non-diegetic commentator overseeing events, but it also represents working-class people accounting for their own situation.

As admirable as this inclusive gesture is, the film collapses its serious attempts at investigative journalism by becoming an advertisement for its

sponsors, the gas industry, and the London County Council (LCC). Ian Aitken has argued that in *Housing Problems* "the often strongly conveyed critique of privation is subsumed within a discourse which primarily functions to further the interests of the institutions which sponsored the film".[39] In the description given by Mr. Berner, whose family live in one room, without a bath or a place to store food, there is a conspicuous reference to his ability to cook with gasoline, a positive among the many negatives of slum life. The monologue segment ends with the return of the dominant voice-over that, over a panning shot of the slum rooftops, announces the Council's plan to build new flats. Rather than examine why people have been allowed to live in such horrendous circumstances, the Council's (and by extension, the film's) solution is simply to move the 'problem' somewhere else.

A shot of a man pulling down a rotted wall shows how pressing the need is for the people who live in the slums to relocate, "but where to put people while new homes are made?" is the question asked by the narrator. Once posed, this concern is not really explored satisfactorily. Instead, the documentary offers a montage sequence featuring images of the Council's prototype for the new flats. Various angles of this clean, new model, its layout, exteriors, interiors, and structure are shown in quick succession, juxtaposed in the following sequence to an interior shot of a slum house. This latter shot is a slow, purposeful one that takes its time panning across the details of domestic decay. Viewed directly after the fast-paced montage of the new-and-improved housing model, it is clear that the documentary is as concerned with promoting the efforts of the Council as it is with demonstrating the plight of the slum residents.

This visual endorsement of the Council is reinforced by the subsequent

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[39] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 23.

testimony of Mrs. Reddington, whose family has been recently installed in a new flat. She compares the contemporary three-bedroom home to their old two-room abode that the seven members of her family had been living in. Speaking of how clean it is, Mrs. Reddington relishes the fact that it is "all her own". Seemingly forgotten are the cramped conditions that plagued their past homelife, and the viewer is left with the image of an open window in the new flat, curtains blown softly by the breeze flowing through: this is a "fresh" start, courtesy of the LCC. The image is a poetic touch of quite a self-conscious kind, but it provides a stylistic link to the poetic realism of Robert Flaherty, whose films offer a lyrical treatment of the ordinary. There are several testimonies like this one, which give positive accounts of the new homes, with only the slightest backward glance, such as Mrs. Atright who will "never forget" the rats at the old place. The 'problem of the slums' appears to be solvable.

At its conclusion, *Housing Problems* conveys a belated uncertainty about the extent to which this latter statement is true. The voice-over states that "only the fringe of the problem has been touched" over yet another panning shot of the crowded rooftops. A shot of a baby crawling on the road cuts to an image of a cat among rubbish. The juxtaposition of shots in this instance to produce a third meaning demonstrates the influence of Eisenstein's theory and application of montage on this Grierson-informed strand. The association in this instance between a child and a cat is clear: these people have been living no better than animals. Just why this has been the case is a question the film is unwilling or unable to address.

Both Brian Winston and Bill Nichols posit this gap in the film's engagement with its central 'problem' as the result of a form of class prejudice, where "the urge to represent the worker romantically or poetically, within an

ethics of social concern and charitable empathy, denied the worker a sense of equal status with the filmmaker".[40] There is a strong sense of this in *Housing Problems*, where the emotional distance created by the instructional mode between film-maker and subject suggests a "politics of charitable benevolence",[41] rather than a relationship devised in equal terms. However, the film stops short of blaming the poor for their situation and *Housing Problems* ends powerfully with the non-diegetic voices of the working-class people relating their experiences over shots of children playing on the street. One proclamation stands out among the throng, and it is the last sentence uttered in the film: "Tis no fault of ours".

In retrospect it is easy to be critical of the diluted political stance taken by the film-makers of *Housing Problems*, though such an appraisal is not unproblematic when one examines the historical context within which the documentary was made. According to Aitken:

> Between 1935 and 1939 the film units outside the GPO made films for
> corporate sponsors on a variety of subjects. Films from this branch were
> more sociological and less concerned with formal experimentation than
> some of the other films made by the documentary movement.[42]

There was intense "pressure on film-makers to privilege the political concerns of their sponsors, subsequently, they were forced to compromise their own artistic/ideological concerns".[43] Taking this into consideration, it is hardly surprising that the primary concern of *Housing Problems* is to promote its sponsors rather than attempting to answer the more pertinent questions raised by its investigation into 'the problem of the slums'.

Additionally, instructional documentaries were influenced by the

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[40] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p. 140.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 22.
[43] Ibid.

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Griersonian belief that the "State, which is in no way seen as part of a class system, is identified with what best serves the long-term interests of people",[44] thus conveying an impression of a non-stratified society. This view is strongly evident in *Housing Problems*, where the efforts of government institutions are represented as unifying, giving the working-class access to apparently decent living conditions. The subject of housing problems in the slums is used as a means to an end, that being the enhancement of public opinion of the State, not as a means of enacting social change. So, the pressures faced by film-makers like Elton and Anstey were ideological as well as economic.

A third and final reason for the film-makers' obfuscation of the State's liability in *Housing Problems* is located in Grierson's essay, 'Education and the New Order', where he details the educational role of documentary film: "It does not teach the new world by analysing it. Uniquely and for the first time it *communicates* the new world by showing it in its corporate and living nature".[45] Grierson's didactic imperative of an observational rather than an analytical style of documentary film-making is difficult for makers of films dealing with social problems. What is projected as an objective communication of information translates into an uneasy sense of critical distance, and by implication, ambivalence towards the film subject.

The question that remains to be asked is what kind of realism does this kind of instructional documentary represent? The style of *Housing Problems* is very much in the journalistic vein of reportage, with an emphasis on observation in the form of sophisticated montage sequences that appear to develop a description rather than a story. Yet instructional documentaries cannot suppress the artificial nature of their purchase on realism. The images are chosen

[44] Lovell and Hillier, *Studies in Documentary*, p. 19.
[45] In *Grierson on Documentary*, pp. 122-33 (p. 129).

deliberately, juxtaposed in meaningful contrast to each other, and coupled with a persuasive voice-over that makes us aware of the artifice of realism. For Eisenstein, montage served to offer, through film *form*, new perceptions or opinions. The overt artifice of montage "where shots are juxtaposed that do not 'naturally' go together",[46] was for Eisenstein a rejection of conventional photographic realism and its imposed set of beliefs: "Absolute realism is by no means the correct form of perception. It is simply the function of a certain social structure. Following a state monarchy, a state uniformity of thought is implanted".[47]

The agenda of the instructional documentary, then, is not an aesthetic one, where *Housing Problems* is promoted as an objective sieve through which the 'real world' is conveyed to the audience. What it does display is the art of propaganda, where on one level, images are used for their informative potential, and on another (the 'hidden' agenda), they further the didactic purpose of the film-makers. In this context, images are not chosen for their aesthetic value - instructional documentaries are not 'artistic' - they are selected for a dual function: a basic relevance to the subject (information) and their intrinsic shock value (propaganda). Invading parasites, filth visibly oozing down walls, and so on, are images that contain a certain scandalous appeal. It is what Higson calls the aestheticisation of working-class poverty and struggle. "Slums, in this tradition, become seductive, fascinating...if we are visually fascinated by these images, we can at the same time rest assured that our gaze is morally sanctioned".[48]

The voyeuristic employment of the shots described also serves to

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[46] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p. 96.
[47] Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram', in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. by Jay Leyda, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), pp. 28-45 (p. 35).
[48] Higson, 'Space, Place, Spectacle', p.143.

"aestheticise struggle out of the image".[49] What is represented as an unusual,

almost otherworldly spectacle for a middle-class audience, is, in reality, the

unpleasant minutiae of everyday life for the working-class people of *Housing*

Problems. What is more, the working-class people are represented as stereotypes

rather than psychologically complex individuals. Influenced by Eisenstein's use of

character typing or *typage* as "a translation, in terms of *physical appearance*, of

moral qualities and/or of a social and political position",[50] we do not learn about

the individual personalities of the people of *Housing Problems*. They are

permitted to speak individually, but only in relation to the type of milieu they

belong to.

Here, a crucial element of documentary film-making is being established

along with a key method of differentiating it from its fictional counterpart.

According to Friedrich Engels, this lack of individuation of characters prevents

them from being romanticised or idealised within the text, and secures a realism

that privileges the social above the personal.[51] The method of communicating

images without analysis is m nt to serve an educational purpose, though all the

decisions made about how to reveal the actualities imply a certain level of analysis

or commentary at the very least. This is not only cinema that shows working-class

people in their various environments, it is *useful* as well.

It is a style of realism, with its didactic and rhetorical use of images and

voice-over that is employed for its moral rather than political potential. While it

does draw attention to the plight of the working-class by using actuality footage

and interviews, it does not politicise their experiences by suggesting links between

politics and social realities. As Higson suggests, "the documentary film addresses

[49] Higson, 'Space, Place, Spectacle', p.143.

[50] Aumont, Jacques, *Montage Eisenstein*, p. 141.

[51] Marx and Engels, *Literature and Art*, p. 39.

the spectator as a citizen of the nation, not as a subject of one or another antagonistic class, race or sex".[52] It is a coercive realism, with a tenuous relationship to the Marxist aesthetic tradition, however it is also prone to shifts based on sponsorship and ideological pressure and an ill-defined attitude to the stratification of British society.

Narrativism and realism - The story-documentary

The second strand of realism to emerge during this period is the story-documentary, "a forerunner of the television documentary-drama",[53] which marks the beginnings of narrativisation within the documentary movement. In looking at this strand of British documentary film-making, Higson focuses mainly on its manifestation during World War II. Harry Watt and Alberto Cavalcanti are most often associated with this strand. The combination of documentary-style footage and narrativisation in Watt's *North Sea* and the strong narrative elements in *Night Mail* (Wright, Anstey and others, 1935) "in many respects completely abandoned Grierson's early model of documentary".[54] Yet it was Cavalcanti who really came forward during the 30s to challenge Grierson's ideological and aesthetic beliefs.

As Aitken points out, "Cavalcanti disagreed with Grierson's conception of documentary, and had argued instead for a broader definition of realist cinema which could accommodate a variety of film-making styles".[55] These men are polar opposites, as remote from each other as any two people could be. "Grierson was didactic, dogmatic, ascetic, homophobic and colonial in mentality. Cavalcanti, on the other hand, was a cultivated European intellectual with Third World sensibilities, something of a hedonist, and gay".[56] Cavalcanti's somewhat surreal,

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[52] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 77.
[53] Ibid., p. 79.
[54] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 21.
[55] Ibid., p. 22.
[56] Ibid.

and often satirical look at the familiar, pushed beyond Grierson's naïve idea of realism. Unlike Grierson, Cavalcanti wanted to expand his documentary style into the realm of fiction film-making: "I have the same pleasure in doing features as I did in documentary".[57] Despite Cavalcanti's disputation to the contrary,[58] Ian Aitken argues that Cavalcanti and Harry Watt set out to try and "evolve a style that would be more acceptable to commercial film producers",[59] as the movement began its decline towards the end of the 30s.

Regardless of the differences that are created by the narrative elements of this strand in its documentary form, character typage is often used (though for varied reasons than the poetic strand yet to be explored), where 'types' often function to communicate the moral qualities or social status of individuals. In the case of Cavalcanti, typage is more a function of the *humour* of his parodic tendencies than an allegiance to the Marxist aesthetic of realism, as is the case with the instructional strand. The connotations created through his depictions of certain character types is important to the fictional mode of realism and will be examined in Chapter Four in relation to Mike Leigh, whose films blend humour and characterisation in a remarkably similar way to Cavalcanti's.

The combination of documentary, narrativisation and surrealism in Cavalcanti's films established a different kind of realism within the documentary movement, one that had as much to say about contemporary British life as the instructional documentary. His background among the Parisian avant garde and his early development as a surrealist film-maker often produced images that can be considered at a tangent to the kinds of realism prevalent in the British documentary movement. In *Pett and Pott: A Fairy Story of the Suburbs* (1934),

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[57] Quoted in Elizabeth Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary: The Story of the Film Movement Founded by John Grierson* (London: University of California Press, 1975), p. 185.
[58] *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the British Documentary Film Movement* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 147.
[59] Ibid.

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there is a bizarrely conceived sequence on a train, where Mr. Pott is travelling home from work. The interior shots of the train offer a slanted view of the word, where businessmen in identical clothes are seated in perfect unison. This approach, where certain observations about work and identity to emphasise societal conformity are conveyed in overtly surreal terms, has more in common with Cavalcanti's pre-1930s surrealist films in France, such as *Rien que les heures* (1926), and helps to explain the harsh reaction to the film (Forsyth Hardy and Basil Wright both used the term 'grotesque' to describe it) among some of his contemporaries and signals the beginning of a division among the movement.

"John Taylor believed that *Pett and Pott* illustrated Cavalcanti's unsuitability as a member of Grierson's documentary film movement, and also argued that the film revealed the first signs of the detrimental impact which, according to Taylor, Cavalcanti was later to have".[60] In moving away from the Griersonian model of instructional documentary into a more fictionalised and often surreal mode of film-making, Cavalcanti was heavily criticised. Paradoxically, Grierson praised the film in 1935, describing *Pett and Pott* as 'ingenious' and 'effective'.[61] The criticism of Cavalcanti partly stems from a need among some people, like John Taylor, to preserve a narrow view of British documentary that is not representative of the differences present within the movement. Higson is aware that "in order to 'remember' Cavalcanti, a key figure within the documentary movement, it is necessary to remember *against the grain*...of dominant film cultural history".[62] He makes the same point about Humphrey Jennings, whose films will be examine in Chapter Two.

As well as drawing attention to idiosyncratic film-makers within the

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[60] Ian Aitken, *Alberto Cavalcanti: Realism, Surrealism and National Cinemas* (Wiltshire: Flicks Books, 2000), p. 73.
[61] Grierson, 'Summary and Survey', p. 60.
[62] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 75.

movement, Higson also points out that the work of film-makers such as Cavalcanti and Watt within this developing strand, do not necessarily demonstrate "the severance of documentary and narrative cinema, but for their convergence in the story documentary".[63] The impact of this convergence will be fully considered in Chapter Two, but now, I will analyse *Pett and Pott* in detail, drawing attention to its style, thematic preoccupations, and what I perceive as its inherent realism which is definitive of this strand.

Pett and Pott: A Fairy Story of the Suburbs

Pett and Pott is the story of two neighbouring households, the Petts (good) and the Potts (evil). The first thing one notices that is markedly different from *Housing Problems* is its use of actors, music and sound. In the opening title sequence, there is a list of 'The Good Citizens' followed by character names and the actors who will play them. The next title card features 'The Evil Citizens', with character and actor names as before. With these signifiers of fictionalisation, Cavalcanti announces the artifice of his documentary film, and allies himself with the commercial cinema. The humorous nature of the title sequence is enhanced by the use of a playful music score (composed by Walter Leigh) on the soundtrack. The seriousness of the instructional documentary use of voice-over has been replaced by music, another move towards fiction film-making.

The opening image of *Pett and Pott* is a tracking shot that moves towards a sign that reads: 'Paradise Building Plots: You Have Never Lived Until You Have Lived Here!' The iconography of this suburban landscape is presented in a series of dissolving shots: a female hand gently pushing a kitten outside; two women with baskets talking on the street; two dogs by a lamppost; washing hanging on a line; two adjoining houses. The same light-hearted music plays throughout this

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[63] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 75.

sequence, and the editing style is smooth and continuous. The camera then tilts

downwards from a skyward position to one of the houses. This shot dissolves into

an interior shot of the house and the back of a small child playing the piano, which

dissolves into an exterior shot of the doorway and the sign, 'Peacehaven' above

the door. A voice-over tells us that "this is the house of Mr. and Mrs. Pett". This

shot is followed by a series of images of their domestic setting (wedding photo,

pet bird, and so on), and the introduction of Mrs. Pett (Marjorie Fone) who is

being helped into an apron by her daughter. The dominant sound at this point is

the screaming of a baby somewhere off-screen. Cavalcanti shows the family going

about their daily domestic activities.

The contrast between the two families is established by a segment of

intercutting shots that alternate between the two couples at home, revealing much

about their relationships and their moral fibre. The Pett couple is framed in their

living room space, sitting on either side of the fireplace, the central point of the

domestic landscape. Mr. Pett (J.M. Reeves) is reading a newspaper, and Mrs. Pett

is sewing. There is no intimacy between them and they are physically separated in

the frame by the fireplace itself. Cavalcanti cuts to the corresponding room but a

very different scene at the Pott's house. Mrs. Pott is lying back gracelessly in a

chair smoking while Mr. Pott (Eric Hudson) reads the paper. She is reading her

novel again, signifying her frivolity, and tapping her finger incessantly on the

chair. Her discontent is as palpable as is his ignorance of it. The upholstery of the

Pott's lounge suite is a gaudy design of swirling lines, in stark contrast to the

Pett's plain, conservative one. The camera switches back to the Pett house, where

Mrs. Pett listens intently to her husband's conversation. Cut to the Potts and Mrs.

Pott ignoring her husband's conversation, her attention held by a fashion

magazine.

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There is nothing subtle about a sequence like this one, where associations and judgements are enunciated through the mise-en-scène and the juxtaposition of shots. The use of sound, where the tone of the music score denotes the nature, good or bad, of each couple, conveys in clear terms where our allegiances should be situated. Despite the use of such narrative techniques, which would appear to undermine the pretence of realism in *Pett and Pott*, they reveal much about the social mores and moral preoccupations of contemporary British culture.

Similar to *Housing Problems*, the development of *Pett and Pott* is influenced by sponsorship constraints; in this case, Cavalcanti's story must somehow feature the promotion of the telephone. As this is a fictional film, he is able to construct his endorsement of this Post Office utility around the disparate moral natures of his characters. As well as making the story plausible, Cavalcanti chooses to satirise some of the moral preoccupations of British society in an attempt to balance the sponsor's role in his film. The narrative of the film is propelled in certain directions by the telephone and its role in the lives of the Pett and Pott households. When Mr. Pott suggests that his wife might find a phone useful, she replies: "Oh no, I'd much rather have a maid". Cavalcanti cuts straight from this to Mrs. Pett ordering food over the phone then splices the screen diagonally to show the grocer (Humphrey Jennings) organising her order as she speaks. The domestic advantages of the telephone are clearly represented.

Conversely, the non-use of the phone translates into terrible problems for the pleasure-seeking Potts. The maid they hire instead of acquiring a phone turns out to be unscrupulous, helping a burglar-at-large infiltrate the Pott home. She is able to do this because Mr. Pott is out carousing with dancing girls, and Mrs. Pott is exhausted from a long bout of shopping. The images of Mr. Pott's immorality are humorously depicted, as he does not appear sinister, merely ridiculous as he

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goes about cheating on his wife. Shots of him shouting "Whoopee!" as he falls awkwardly on two strange women at a club are certainly more comical than threatening to the moral fabric of society. The worth of having a telephone rather than a maid is reinforced when the Pett's daughter Polly (June Godfrey) hears strange noises next door and calls the police. She has saved Mrs. Pott from physical danger, and protected society from a criminal element. Perhaps the most overt reference to the sponsors of the film comes from The Judge (Bruce Winston) of the subsequent court case who says that this sorry tale is "an advertisement" for the value of possessing a "Post Office telephone". In the end, the Potts are humiliated in court, as The Judge also states that, if it were not for their debauchery, the incident would never have happened.

One sequence involving two women talking on the phone undercuts its so-called utilitarian use advocated in court. Cavalcanti cuts between the women talking and two birds perched on a telephone wire. The use of sound is the most interesting aspect of this segment, as the diegetic chattering of the women is echoed by the chirping of the birds on the soundtrack. Non-diegetic music also accompanies the scene, matching the high-pitched noise of the women and birds. Cavalcanti's good-humoured use of images and sound points to the other, more frivolous purpose of the telephone, satirising its supposed social importance.

Even though this cautionary 'fairy story' is more entertaining than instructional, it shows that sponsorship constraints affected all forms of documentary film practice during the 30s. *Pett and Pott*, produced by the GPO Film Unit, was faced with the same limitations as *Housing Problems*. However, *Pett and Pott* "is a richly parodic and extravagant work which makes only fleeting reference to its supposed promotional purpose".[64] and it is possible that different

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[64] Aitken, *Alberto Cavalcanti*, p. 71.

realisms condition the use of sponsorship. Cavalcanti uses sound, varied editing techniques and actors to assist him in making *Pett and Pott* humorous instead of hectoring.

The realism of the film is located in the treatment of character, an area the story-documentary with its use of narrative film strategies is better equipped to flesh out than the instructional documentary. From the descriptions given so far, it is apparent that the characters in *Pett and Pott* are types, defined by their moral behaviour or domestic role. Cavalcanti employs the method of character typage reminiscent of the Soviet cinema of the 20s by using physical characteristics, such as clothing, and social behaviours as emblems of morality. The conservatism of the Petts is inscribed in the iconography of their home with its pious respect for domesticity, and their bland appearance. By contrast, the Potts are marked out as the 'immoral' types partly because of the contrast with the Petts, but also through their costumes and frivolous behaviour which suggest their materialism and the rejection of social mores.

Beyond these types, though, Cavalcanti's surrealist inclination lends a psychological realism to the film. To counter the apparently moral perfection of the Pett family, he focuses on Mrs. Pott in a series of images that make her the most psychologically complex character of the film. She is flawed, but multi-dimensional and all the more real for being so. The first shot where Mrs. Pott's emotional nature is developed is a long-shot from behind her as she walks home, adorned in a fur coat and laden with parcels. She is then filmed from the front, a long-shot that depicts her at the bottom of a high climb of steps. The angle and the framing of this image literally and metaphorically diminish Mrs. Pott. Intercut between a succession of shots reinforcing Mrs. Pett's domestic merit, Cavalcanti returns to Mrs. Pott again and again, always the same shot of her trudging up

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those steps with her parcels. Each time she looks a little more frayed, the parcels slipping from her grip.

There is also a repetition of close-ups of her feet clad in high-heeled shoes, as she struggles to make her way home. The weight of her avarice is wearing her down, and her home life is falling apart, as shots of her husband going out with another woman reveal. One interior image sees her alone and fussing with her jewels, but she is in tears. The adjoining shots of familial bliss around the hearth of the Pett house seem artificial when compared to the emotional deterioration of their neighbour. Cavalcanti repeats the staircase image once more, accompanied by a solemn trumpet tune. Mrs. Pott runs in slow-motion, never making it to the top of the stairs. It is a surreal, almost dreamlike shot, full of despair and emptiness. Mrs. Pott's materialism is viewed harshly in a societal sense, yet on a personal level, Cavalcanti reserves the film's sympathy for her. We learn nothing about the psychological identity of Mrs. Pett, who is only ever framed in relation to her domestic setting. Mr. Pott is an adulterer, but he is a stereotype, lascivious and ludicrous. Mrs. Pott is the only character in the film allowed a truthful response to her domestic situation. Rather than being fulfilled by her materialism, it slowly destroys her. This woman of the new middle-class is not merely defined by what she buys or doesn't do in the kitchen. Cavalcanti, using music, editing, and slow-motion techniques extends his characterisation of Mrs. Pott to include her inner life.

The story-documentary is not so concerned with realistic surfaces, or how 'real' a representation appears visually. It contains too many fictional elements to affect that level of artifice. This kind of documentary is also not intent upon maintaining a critical distance from its subject matter, which is why Cavalcanti's satirical, surrealist style is better suited to this form of documentary. This freedom

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to express his natural cinematic talents meant that "despite being a Brazilian with a European background, or perhaps because of it, he could put his finger precisely on the essential Britishness of the British and make it a special point of interest".[65] In *Pett and Pott* the repeated slow-motion images of Mrs. Pott move beyond the visually credible representations of Mrs. Pett, yet they help the spectator to understand her on another, equally plausible, level. This is an instance "where realism has simply been carried a stage further into surrealism. This kind of effect can be achieved only by first ensuring plausibility and then demonstrating the implausibility of the plausible".[66] The serene images of Mrs. Pett dutifully minding hearth and home come to seem a little too blissful, when one is introduced to the extent of the unhappiness experienced next door. It is a point that Cavalcanti makes in his own idiosyncratic way, and despite sponsorship requirements and social conventions, he re-defines documentary realism in the process. Cavalcanti's use of character types, satirical humour and surrealistic or dark imagery to suggest something about the 'inner life' of an individual is a style of film-making that will be apparent later in the thesis, principally in the work of Mike Leigh.

Abstraction and realism – the poetic documentary

The third strand of realism found in the form of poetic documentary further dissolves the myth of a unified documentary movement. According to Higson, in the poetic strand, "montage is most foregrounded",[67] but there is a stronger connection to the instructional strand in that "the poetic ambiguity of these films – the metaphorical and associative possibilities of the montage juxtapositions – are often contained by the imposition of a voice-over, which, as

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[65] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 195.
[66] Ibid., p. 196.
[67] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 79.

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in the case of *Industrial Britain*, institutes a particular reading of the images".[68]

Films like *Song of Ceylon* (1934-5), *Drifters*, and *Coal Face*, which contain a

poeticisation of a culture or class of people also "draw on the undoubted influence

of the poetic realism of Robert Flaherty's earlier 'anthropological' films, to

construct the working class as heroes: such films gaze at the socially useful labour

of Britain's artisans and craftsman".[69] This attitude to the working class harks

back to an earlier manifestation of realism in British art and literature, where the

importance of the worker as a signpost of the 'real' was central to unseating

Classical depictions of heroism.[70] If the instructional strand can be seen to deliver

a view of the working class as 'victims' who are remote from the film-maker, then

the poetic strand is concerned to show the working class in an idealised light,

triumphant in the face of industrialisation and modernity.

In British film, Humphrey Jennings is most often associated with this

documentary strand of realism. In his films he "is concerned to explore the

revelation of the symbolic in the everyday, through the use of an impressionistic

style dependent on juxtapositions and association".[71] Jennings' conception of the

poetic documentary discarded linearity in favour of a collage of widely varied

images. The connection between each image lies in what is symbolically related

about the "'legacy of feeling'"[72] of the nation. It is a form of documentary that is

at once artistic and observational. Jennings' films are lyrical, often obscure,

layered, and as such, his political stance is difficult to pin down. His abstract

documentaries suggest a poetic realism, a fact that was later championed by

Lindsay Anderson who named him as an influence. This connection will be

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[68] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 79.

[69] Ibid., p. 78.

[70] Matthew Paul Lalumia, *Realism and Politics in Victorian Art of the Crimean War*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1984), p. 149, and Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 105-8.

[71] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 216.

[72] Ibid.

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explored further in Chapter Three. However, Jennings' contribution to the documentary movement of the 30s is almost non-existent, making only *Spare Time* in 1939. The emergence of his significance to British realism took place throughout the period of WWII, with films like *Listen to Britain* (1942) and *Fires Were Started* (1943), which I will examine in Chapter Three. To demonstrate how a documentary of the 30s attempted such a poetic, abstract representation, an analysis of Robert Flaherty's *Industrial Britain* (1933) will show how the symbolic use of images can convey much about British society and its people.

Industrial Britain

Grierson had greatly admired American documentary film-maker Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* for its poetry and what it conveyed about the natural energies of it subject. In his essay on Flaherty, Grierson is lyrical in his praise: "A happy fortune has at last brought Robert Flaherty to England...He was the initiator of the naturalist tradition in cinema, and is still the high-priest of the spontaneities".[73] He goes on to write that "Flaherty's most considerable contribution to the problem is, as always, his insistence on the beauty of the natural".[74] In the early 30s Grierson, then with the EMB Film Unit, invited Flaherty to come and shoot *Industrial Britain*. It was to be a film that explored the relationship between the old ways of British craftsmanship and the evolution of a new, industrialised Britain.

Flaherty's style of film-making differed radically from those already working within the movement. He was slow and wasted lots of money on film stock, searching for inspiration. In one account Basil Wright describes his experience of driving Flaherty "from London to Exeter and points west",[75] in

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[73] Grierson, 'Flaherty', p. 29.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Quoted in Arthur Calder-Marshall, *The Innocent Eye: The Life of Robert Flaherty* (London:

search of locations for his own film *The Country Comes to Town* (1931). Flaherty was inspired by the people and sights he came across on the trip, and Wright was moved by his enthusiasm and "his way of seeing things".[76] As I mentioned earlier, Flaherty's style, which would later inspire the 1960s *cinema-verité* film-makers, corresponds to Kracauer's notion of the "found story", in that he would shoot masses of footage to allow the "story...[to] come out of the life of a people, not from the actions of individuals".[77]

Unfortunately, Grierson was unhappy with Flaherty's progress on the film, and fired him when he had almost completed shooting.[78] As a result, *Industrial Britain* has Flaherty's undeniable stamp of poetic enunciation *and* Grierson's instructional documentary style in the form of a didactic voice-over that at times undermines the points made within the shots themselves. Consequently, the film is torn between the lyricism of its symbolic approach and its overbearing instructional elements. There is a tension between Flaherty's "concern with craftsmanship"[79] and Grierson's "belief in industrial progress".[80] However destabilised, Flaherty's poetic cinematography and choice of shots are strong enough to counter visually the verbal opinions imposed on *Industrial Britain*.

The first section of the film is dedicated to the nature of British craftsmanship, a sort of ode to the Pastoral Age. It is also where Flaherty's poetic approach to film-making is most vividly represented by meaningful shot construction and juxtaposition. A voice-over speaks briefly of "the old order changing" as classical music plays gently on the soundtrack. The images are

W.H. Allen & Co., 1963), p. 135.

[76] Calder-Marshall, *The Innocent Eye*, p. 136.

[77] Flaherty quoted in Arthur Rosenheimer Jr., 'They Make Documentaries: Number One - Robert J. Flaherty', *Film News* (New York, April 1946), vol. 7, no. 6:1-2, 8-10, 23 (p. 23).

[78] Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 90.

[79] Richard M. Barsam, *Non-Fiction Film: A Critical History*, rev. edn, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 91.

[80] Ibid.

striking in their composition and the rhythm of the editing coupled with the tempo of the music adds to the expressiveness of their subject matter.

The opening shot of the documentary is of the sails of a windmill turning before a brilliant dawn sky in time to the measured pace of the music. The bulk of the windmill is off-screen until the next shot, a tight close-up of its slanted roof and central window, with the music still playing in time to the rotating sails. For the following shot, Flaherty switches the angle of the previous shot slightly, maintaining the gentle rhythm of the film through the movement of the sails, the tempo of the music and the timing of the cuts, allowing a few beats before each edit. He then uses a medium-shot of a spinning-wheel followed by a close-up of a weaving machine being pushed up and down, then a wide-shot of a woman at its helm, working it back and forth. Movement is constant in all of these images, generating a sense of fluidity and lyricism. Flaherty uses off-screen space to great effect, as with the windmill, and the shot that follows the weaving sequence, where he frames a haystack in the right of the screen.

The image is dominated by the early morning sky, with a section of the haystack shown in the right side of the frame. There is a pause, with the soft music still playing, until a farmer walks into the on-screen space from the left of the frame with a bail of hay, which he places on the stack. Flaherty completes this opening sequence with a close-up of the hay, all neatly bound into small sections. The last two images suggest that the pastoral scene is an incomplete one without the labour of the farmer, promoting a harmony between humanity and the natural world. This harmony is reflected in a technical sense by the rhythm of each shot, as they come together with the fluid employment of movement, timing, editing, and music.

The film is full of images like these, of different kinds of work, the skill

involved reflecting the dedication of the workers themselves. One gains a sense of the nature of the work, how it is carried out, and the variety of jobs performed by both men and women. The iconography of craftsmanship shown in *Industrial Britain* is a definitive example of how a documentary film can have a poetic quality, and yet communicate something previously intangible about the atmosphere or feeling of an indigenously British way of life.

The remarkable thing about *Industrial Britain* is this attitude to the skilled labour of the workers that it represents. The film is, on one level, a homage to the simplicity and yet basic importance of the old style of craftsmanship that is under threat. Like *Drifters*, it romanticises the efforts of the working-class, but at the same time it is also an "attempt to relate the individual worker to the larger industrial process, to encourage their pride in their work, and to bolster their morale".[81] The Soviet method of typage is evident here, though it is used in a different and more serious way than in the story strand. Flaherty's 'types', the craftspeople and workers, function to suggest their social position in a wider context, namely, their diminishing role in the face of industry, and a moral quality that implies the value of their enterprise versus the faceless machines.

Flaherty does this by juxtaposing images of the new mechanised form of industry against the corporeal labour of the rural working-class. It is here, that *Industrial Britain* best employs what Higson describes as the "poetic ambiguity" of the films within this strand, as Flaherty's images of tradespeople working within the context of industrial development contain "the metaphorical and associative possibilities of the montage juxtapositions", in an effort to illustrate their new relationship with a changing world. Flaherty does not necessarily view this as a harmonious cohabitation, as his visuals show a definite anxiety that the

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[81] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 216.

old ways will eventually be swallowed up by the daunting advent of the steam and steel of Industry.

Such an anxiety is particularly evident in the shots of men working "down the mines". The music is quite ominous in this section of the film, for unlike the idyllic light-filled shots of the outdoors shown earlier, the coal mines are a dark, dangerous place. Flaherty photographs one man by firelight, and the darkness is so overwhelming it is difficult to make out anything more than his basic form. The images of this anonymous man, enveloped in the gloomy half-light of the coal face, convey a real sense of concern that industrial progress will destroy the notion of skilled labour, and obscure the essential humanity of craftsmanship.

There is a moral judgement or connotation involved in the use of types here, as Flaherty sets up a juxtaposition between craftspeople and machines that is designed to generate a message about the ethical qualities of one in relation to the other. At odds with Flaherty's striking images of toiling men drenched in sweat are the words spoken by the narrator who states in pompous tones that "the human factor remains even in this machine age". Such a view is certainly not supported by the nature of the images. This is clearly representative of the Griersonian view of the positives of industrialisation. Despite the content of Flaherty's shots and their contrast with the beauty and tranquillity of the opening sequences, Grierson's overriding faith in industrial progress intrudes upon Flaherty's poetic style and belief in the importance of craftsmanship.

The main section of *Industrial Britain* is divided into two parts: 'Steam' and 'Steel'. The 'Steam' segment is introduced by the voice-over as the "sign and symbol of the new order". There is an extraordinary sequence of shots that depict steam, a symbol of Industry, and the product of the miners' labour underground. There is something surreal about the way Flaherty films these images that is

strongly reminiscent of Cavalcanti, or the way David Lynch represents the eerie industrial wasteland of *Eraserhead* (1976, US), or the looming escalation of the Industrial Revolution in Victorian England in *The Elephant Man* (1980, US).

The first shot of this section is of smoke billowing and curling around a big black factory, which can be seen as an archetypal metonym for industrial Britain, then and now. Steam dominates the shot, moving silently across the frame from left to right, unaccompanied by music or narration. Flaherty cuts to three giant chimneys, as steam pours into the frame from the left, as though it has flowed through from the previous shot. There is an otherworldly quality to the image, with its lofty towers like black stripes against a grey, smoky backdrop. It appears at once ominous and fascinating. The soft classical music chimes in as the voice-over says: "And this is the world that coal has created". For the commentator, the images are proof of the wonders of progress. Yet the next shot is almost wholly obscured by steam, with only the top, right hand corner of the frame visible. Even then one can only make out an unidentified steel structure. Again this is a case of the optimism of the voice-over seeming to contradict the ambiguously presented imagery.

There follows a wide-long-shot of the industrial landscape we are slowly being introduced to. On the horizon are chimneys, hazily outlined, and spewing out black streams of smoke. Next is a matching shot of buildings on the horizon, scarcely discernible among the haze of steam. All the while the voice-over pontificates about the virtues of these symbols of industrial growth. A shot of a diagonal row of perfectly symmetrical chimney stacks above a sea of taller stacks emanating smoke is staggering for its composition, and yet suggests a uniformity, an ugliness in contrast to the film's opening elegy to rural life. There is no sunlight in any of these images, as the sun is blocked out by the mass of vapour

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produced by countless industrial units. It is no surprise that there are no people in this sequence, as the new world of industry takes on an awesome identity all its own. Here, poetic realism is again achieved through Flaherty's ambiguous use of striking images to imply a sense of unease about the changes taking place in Britain.

The documentary continues with an overview of the trades carried out by people working within the new industrial system. The voice-over continues: "But if you look closely enough you will find that the spirit of craftsmanship has not disappeared". One man, presented by the narrator as William Davenport-Cotton of Stoke-on-Trent, 26, is shown working at a clay turning machine, "making the same beautiful things using the same simple tools". Unlike *Housing Problems*, the people shown in this section do not speak for themselves. They are not permitted to account for their own opinions of societal change, and how this will affect their labour. On the other hand, these images of William skilfully crafting a pot from a lump of clay, or another man melting down glass and blowing it with his own mouth into a receptacle, are detailed accounts of the occupations of the working-class. The simplicity of their methods is still emphasised, despite the evolution of machines that will speed up such processes.

Unlike *Housing Problems* and *Pett and Pott* which elide the concept of a class structure, *Industrial Britain* not only shows working-class people going about their daily work, it also tries to situate them within the greater context of British society, and to determine their place in it. The glass-blowing section is the best example of this, where there is a lengthy segment depicting the minutiae involved in this particular trade. It shows the meticulous efforts of the people working together to transform raw glass into useful objects, and then how machines finish the job, fine- tuning the product for mass consumption. The

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voice-over implies that such images illustrate the harmony between humanity and technology.

The 'Steel' part of the documentary addresses this relationship more fully. According to the narrator, steel is the foundation of industrial Britain: "There would be no modern world without it". Yet again the images shot by Flaherty contradict this unproblematised notion. The music during this latter part of the film is as overbearing as the voice-over. One shot has two men standing before a furnace at a steelworks factory. As they swing open the furnace gate, flames burst forth from the oven cavity: this is hazardous work. There is no sense of a synchronisation between the people shown shovelling coal into a flaming steel hole and technology. Rather, these shots argue that technology would not operate without the efforts of people. Flaherty's photography offers a different view of what represents the foundation of capitalist society to the Grierson-inspired voice-over. For him, it is the people who propel it forward, prop it up, keep it going – the people of Britain, not steam or steel, who underpin the industrial world.

Of Robert Flaherty's contribution to *Industrial Britain*, Grierson wrote: "he simply could not bend to the conception of those species of craftsmanship which go with modern industry and modern organisation".[82] What he means is that Flaherty would not bend to his belief in industrial development, or modify the strong element of sentimental nostalgia in Flaherty's view of the working class. This conflict manifests itself in the film, where there is a de'... e tension between what the voice-over and music suggest about the images, and what Flaherty's shots actually depict. In this, *Industrial Britain* is an example of one strand of documentary film-making overlapping with another. Grierson's instructional documentary style is in conflict with the symbolism and surrealism of Flaherty's

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[82] Barsam, *Non-Fiction Film*, p. 91.

poetic approach to film-making. Furthermore, despite Flaherty's fine reputation, he still faced the same kinds of pressures experienced by the makers of *Housing Problems* and *Pett and Pott*. In this case, Flaherty's slow and ultimately expensive working style, not his ideological beliefs, resulted in his removal from the film's post-production process.

Despite the fact that *Industrial Britain* was edited by Grierson with help from Edgar Anstey[83], Flaherty's poetic vision of *Industrial Britain* and the people affected by it is a competing influence in the film. He demonstrates that poetic realism is a personal vision as opposed to the "formulaic nature of propaganda documentary".[84] The realism of the film exists in those spaces where the industrial landscape is observed both for its strange beauty, its ominous power, and its effects on the craftsmanship it romanticizes, and so is much more than observation. This idealism is itself a major aspect of poetic realism, for unlike the critical and emotional distance of the instructional documentary, it demonstrates an individual response to the film subject. Flaherty's photography, his lyrical use of framing and the movement within shots, and the ambiguity created by the juxtapositions, conveys a feeling for the people of Britain that is as valid as the other forms of realism already discussed.

A framework for future generations

The three strands of documentary realism in British cinema identified by Higson represent a movement from the instructive to the personal, or the public to the private. The instructional documentary is informative, non-emotive, and maintains a critical distance from its subject. The story-documentary moves away from the educational use of film, entering the realm of entertainment, and at the

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[83] Deane Williams, 'Robert Flaherty', *Senses of Cinema: Directors Database*, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/flaherty.html> [accessed 24 September 2003] (para. 8 of 23).
[84] Lovell and Hillier, *Studies in Documentary*, p. 70.

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same time offering certain characters a psychological complexity. The poetic

documentary is further removed from the Griersonian tradition, with its symbolic,

highly personal style of film-making. Each strand necessarily displays varying

degrees of artifice. The instructional documentary strives to appear objective

despite its intrusive narrational devices and reliance on montage. Conversely, the

story and poetic documentary styles offer kinds of realism that almost completely

abandon any pretence of mirroring reality. According to Higson, the:

> Range of documentary modes indicates the extent to which a certain
>
> aesthetic innovativeness is evident, albeit to varying degrees throughout
>
> the movement; but it also indicates the tensions and divergences which
>
> characterise the movement, and which become increasingly sharp towards
>
> the late 30s.[85]

Some of these tensions were the result of the precarious economic status of the

movement from around 1936, yet the films I have analysed were all made before

this time, when the movement was "located within a single public sector

organisation".[86]

As such it is difficult to suggest that the various modes of realism that

emerged in the early 30s were somehow connected to the fragmentation of the

movement that occurred after 1936, when "parts of the movement relocated out of

the state sector into commercial corporations like the Crown Film Unit".[87] One

would think that the only context within which Grierson's ideal of a monolithic,

unified movement could be realised was during this initial phase of apparent

solidity. As this was not the case, I would argue that the diverse, though often

overlapping, modes of realism that arose during the earlier period of the

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[85] Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 80.
[86] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 9.
[87] Ibid.

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movement were initiated by unique personalities, like Cavalcanti, who had as strong a vision for the cinema as Grierson, or Flaherty. Still, the movement's reliance on governmental sponsorship created an intense climate of pressure on film-makers willing to undermine their output simply so they could make films at all.

This enthusiasm for film-making also meant that despite the ideological and economic pressures placed on various individuals, some managed to produce subversive representations, such as the artistic abstraction of Jennings' *Spare Time*, or the expressionism of *Coal Face*. For the subsequent eras of realism to come, these strands provide an important paradigm through which the variety of realist representations in British cinema can be examined and understood. The shifting nature of this mode of representation continues in the subsequent wartime period of British realism that is the subject of Chapter Two, while the characteristic strands maintain a strong presence.

Chapter Two: The wartime era

Realism to the fore – criticism or consensus?

If, as traditional Marxist aesthetic theory suggests, realism *must* engage with the constraints of contemporary society, politics, ideologies and issues revealing inherent inequities and this *contemporaneity* is a pivotal part of a film's claims to realism, then the outbreak of World War II in 1939 created an interesting paradox for British film-makers engaged in one way or another with this contentious mode of representation. As we shall see, the rise of British documentary realism in the wartime era and the continuation of the strands outlined in Chapter One did not necessarily coincide with the use of realism to *expose* the structures and hierarchies embedded in Britain's class-bound society. Rather, the radical *historical* shift in Britain shaped by the arrival of war and the uncertainty it naturally brought with it, caused a distinct *ideological* shift in the use of various kinds of realism, from the instructional to the poetic.

Where the documentary-realist film-makers had largely focused on the depiction of working class experiences, and to some extent offered social criticism of the worker's plight, either in the face of poor living conditions or Industrialisation, wartime realist film-makers could not claim to speak for merely one group of an entire nation under threat. In a noticeable parallel to the constraints placed on the documentary film-makers by government sponsorship in the 30s, wartime directors were faced with similar boundaries created by governmental interests, only this time the concerns were of national importance. On the surface, then, British film realism of this period can at once be considered realist *because* of its engagement with contemporary society while at the same

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time this claim to realism is undermined by the influence of the unique historical events that precipitated the extensive use of modes of realism at this time.

In this sense, the wartime era is defined by what Roman Jakobson would call a 'conservative' approach to the mode, as it is concerned with preserving rather than challenging the conventions of realism in the face of an attack. As such, representations of the working class, a key element of British film realism, were also compromised by the context of war, as social differences were generally elided in favour of a homogeneous set of experiences: one war, one nation. This is not to say that there are not examples of working-class characters who are allowed some psychological complexity, a fact I will discuss in more detail later on.

Another parallel between the current and preceding eras of realism in Britain involves a concern for *collectivisation*. Both the documentary and wartime periods of British realism develop the notion of this multi-faceted mode as an ideological one, where collective activity is highlighted above individual experience. As the section on Humphrey Jennings later in this chapter will demonstrate, where the present era departs from the documentary movement is in the *connotation* that emanates from such a use of collectives and the meanings conveyed therein. So, while this chapter is primarily concerned to chart the continuation of realism in its diverse triumvirate structure in wartime British cinema, I will also discuss the ideology of the choices that are made about representations of class, community and nation across the three strands. History, as we shall see, plays an important role in the shifting meaning and use of realism as an articulation of a national cinema during the war years.

By the time World War II broke out, the supposed creative diversity present within the documentary film movement had developed into a clear dispersal, as the movement was disbanded with various film-makers moving on to

different film units or parts of the world to pursue their careers. John Grierson was working for the Canadian government where he set up the National Film Board of Canada,[1] taking Stuart Legg with him, Basil Wright and Arthur Elton helped to produce the *Documentary News Letter*,[2] while Alberto Cavalcanti, Harry Watt and Pat Jackson were at the GPO Film Unit in Britain,[3] working on instructional films dealing with the war. Beyond the geographical separation of film-makers within the movement, the division can be posited as an expression of the clash of opposing cinematic sensibilities among the group, where Grierson's documentary idea of films as a didactic tool was at odds with people like Watt (though his wartime films contained strong non-fiction elements) and Cavalcanti, who began to drift towards fiction film-making. So, Grierson's move to Canada, and Watt, Cavalcanti and Jackson's involvement with Ealing during the war are symptomatic of the separation caused by different approaches to film-making and realism.

During the immediate pre-war period, the fallacy of a monolithically defined movement was never more palpably exposed. For Watt, the turning point came during the making of what is now considered the first story documentary of the movement,[4] *The Saving of Bill Blewitt* (1937). While working with Cavalcanti on this film, Watt learned the benefits of creating an artificially rendered, though superficially realistic, representation of his subject matter. His explanation to Elizabeth Sussex about this process makes it clear that he was aware of the effect this film had on his attitude to documentary film-making. It also demonstrates the importance of his involvement with Cavalcanti, who would teach him much about the processes of film-making:

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[1] Sussex, pp. 112-13.
[2] Ibid., p. 120.
[3] Ibid., p. 116.
[4] Ibid., p. 86.

> Cavalcanti found me battling to get close-ups against the cottage, and he
> said, 'Don't you realise, Harry, that a wall's a wall...You don't need to
> shoot Bill here. Take him into the sun over there, and put him against any
> cottage, and then you can cut back to the long shot outside this cottage'. Of
> course, this is such a simple thing for features, but it was a revelation to
> me...The documentary thing was so ingrained that you would insist on
> shooting somebody outside the real cottage.[5]

For a pragmatist like Watt, any sense of loyalty to a documentary film ethic
became less important when artifice offered a more practical way of achieving the
same visual result. This in no way represented an undermining of realism; in fact
it marked a shift towards the direction that this mode of representation would take
when it entered the mainstream in the 40s.

Further evidence of the rift within the documentary movement can be
found in the fact that Watt apparently shot a love scene for *Bill Blewitt* that
Grierson cut out in post-production. Clearly the Grierson idea of screening
documentary films at large-scale exhibitions for nontheatrical audiences was in
direct opposition to the burgeoning need among certain documentarists like Watt
and Cavalcanti to introduce fictional elements into their films and compete with
mainstream British cinema. Watt articulated as much to Sussex:

> Now this idea of Grierson's didn't appeal to Cavalcanti and me at all. We
> believed...that we still could influence the cinema as a whole, that
> anybody who goes to see a film at an exhibition to rest their feet is no
> catch at all, that we would have been a failure unless we could make films

[5] Quoted in Sussex , pp. 86-87.

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that sold and competed with commercial films and we were determined to go on until we bust to prove this. So we refused to go with Grierson.[6]

It is important to consider Cavalcanti's background here, as it points to a very different motivation for rejecting Grierson than that expressed by Watt. Cavalcanti had been involved with such film-makers as "Jean Renoir, René Clair and Jean Vigo, and made two experimental films *Rien que les heures* (1926-7) and *En rade* (1927) that corresponded to the French avant-garde of the 20s who wanted to explore the possibilities of film form".[7] His involvement in experimental film-making sets him apart from his documentary counterparts and helps to explain why Cavalcanti would not bend to prescribed film-making conventions:

> I am not at all like my colleagues. I think it is one of the many differences between us, that I am like certain mothers who prefer the ill-formed children to the strong and beautiful ones. So I, in general, prefer films of mine that haven't been as successful or haven't been well understood.[8]

In addition to a conflict between basic ideas and methods of documentary film-making, members of the movement have expressed a retrospective discontent with the recognition of actual work completed on various films. It was Grierson's belief that his movement was based on the fundamental notion of collectivisation, a view which extended to the screen credit allocated to those responsible for a film's production. Grierson wanted to have collective credits or none at all, deliberately suppressing individual efforts on certain films. It is arguable that Grierson's intentions for the documentary movement had as much to do with the use of instructional realism to create an oppositional cinema as it did with his

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[6] Quoted in Sussex, p. 97.
[7] Aitken, *Film and Reform*, p. 128.
[8] Quoted in Sussex, p. 85.

reputed dictatorial style. Historically, as Raymond Williams and Jakobson suggest, realism has been developed in direct opposition to a dominant mode of representation.

From the beginning, Grierson's 'documentary idea' and its rejection of the fictional elements of popular film-making, an element of which is the creation of the 'star' director, served to distinguish the movement, through its various realisms, from the dominant Hollywood field of practice.[9] In his article, 'First Principles of Documentary' Grierson argues that "documentary can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and effect impossible to the shim-sham mechanics of the studio, and the lily-fingered interpretations of the metropolitan actor".[10] His documentary manifesto is littered with assertions about studio film-making and the opposing (and more valuable) capabilities of documentary to "open up the screen on the real world".[11] Despite this, Watt, for example, felt that Cavalcanti was under-acknowledged, failing to receive due credit for his documentary work during the 30s:

> I think Cavalcanti didn't like Grierson. He had been, to my mind,
> tremendously exploited by Grierson. His contribution had never been
> sufficiently recognized in the way of credits, which is the most important
> thing in films.[12]

Watt's attitude to what 'is the most important thing in films' is not shared by Grierson, and is perhaps at the heart of the consequent rift among the movement.

Grierson's own recollection of the way screen credits were allocated is diametrically opposed to Watt's, hinting at his vision for the documentary-realist

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[9] By this, I mean the Hollywood classical narrative system as outlined by such film scholars as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in their book *Film Art: An Introduction*, 4th edn, (London: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993).

[10] John Grierson, 'First Principles of Documentary', p. 37.

[11] Ibid., p. 36.

[12] Quoted in Sussex, p. 97-98.

film movement and also suggests how out of touch he was with some of the film-makers working around him:

> The selflessness of some of the documentary people was a very
> remarkable thing…They didn't put their names on pictures…There were
> years when Cavalcanti's name never went on a picture. It was because we
> weren't concerned with names. We weren't concerned with that aspect of
> things, with credits.[13]

Grierson obviously thought he was doing the right thing by suppressing the recognition of individual efforts of his film-makers. It is clear with his use of the personal pronoun 'we' to denote a shared view of credits among the movement that Grierson believed that his vision had the full support of his colleagues. In his essay on the E.M.B. Film Unit, he asserts that "this was the only group of its kind outside Russia",[14] pointing to Grierson's belief in the movement as part of a developing British *national* cinema. It is an important element of Grierson's enterprise to consider at this point in the thesis, where the notion of a specifically 'British' realist cinema is influenced by the historical context of the time, and will emerge more forcefully in the post-War era.

The timing of the division within the documentary movement is significant when viewed in light of the impending social changes precipitated by World War II. The shift towards an increased narrativisation within the documentary style coincided with the commercial film studios' need for a documentary approach to fictional films dealing with Britain's participation in the global conflict. It was indeed a fortuitous instance of historical change providing a fertile context for new forms of artistic expression. It was also a situation that opened the way for a film-maker like John Baxter to broach subjects in the mainstream cinema that

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[13] Quoted in Sussex, p. 98.

[14] John Grierson, 'The E.M.B. Film Unit', in *Grierson on Documentary*, pp. 47-52 (p. 29).

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would not have been acceptable before. His *Love on the Dole* and *The Common Touch* (both 1941) dealt openly and movingly with working-class characters. Absent from these films are the gross caricatures of working-class men and women previously common in British cinema.

However, in choosing to film an adaptation of Walter Greenwood's best-selling novel *Love on the Dole*, Baxter made what in the pre-war climate of censorship would seem to be a safer choice than it initially suggests. During the 30s "the British Board of Film Censors had informed would-be producers that they felt it could only show 'too much of the tragic and sordid side of poverty'".[15] The filming of *Love on the Dole*, with its populist appeal and principally studio-based settings is representative of the tension between Hollywood film practice and the need for a specifically British national cinema.

While the war had opened the way for more serious cinematic representations of the working-class, the initial feature film depictions of Britain at war were not regarded by the government as 'realistic'. At the same time that Baxter was showing British feature film audiences the experience of working-class life in *Love on the Dole*, Ealing Studios released Sergei Nolbandov's *Ships with Wings* (1939), which immediately revealed the problems war films face when entertainment is sought at the expense of factual detail. Watching this film today, with its stereotypes of class and race, the "stiff-upper-lip" version of gallantry reserved specifically for the upper-class officer, the misplaced romantic sub-plot, and the unbelievable achievements of its protagonist as lone-hero, it is difficult to imagine that it was released at the height of Britain's wartime involvement.

Such a view of the film's anachronistic content is not limited to those looking at the film in retrospect. *Ships with Wings* marks a turning point in

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[15] Jeffrey Richards & Dorothy Sheridan (eds.), *Mass-Observation at the* Movies (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 364.

Britain's wartime cinema as it displayed qualities of nationhood that were distinctly unappealing to certain powerful quarters. The class barriers are too defined, the upper-class hero too remote from the spirit of camaraderie and the binding nature of war. There is no illusion of wartime consensus here. Its far-fetched plot, centred around an irresponsible pilot who achieves redemption and heroic status by flying a ludicrous suicide mission, "conflicts with the obvious wish to show the ship as a genuine community".[16] Michael Balcon, the head of Ealing at the time, received his first clue that *Ships with Wings* might not be the kind of representation of war his studio wanted to repeat, from Winston Churchill himself. The Prime Minister objected to the film's unrealistic portrayal of battle and threatened to "delay or even cancel its release – as Balcon recalls – 'on the grounds that it would cause "alarm or despondency" as the climax of the film was something of a disaster for the Fleet Air Arm'".[17]

It is important to remember that while some sections of the media and the government disapproved of *Ships with Wings*, by and large, "reviews of the film were favourable, even enthusiastic".[18] According to the Mass-Observation report of audience response to the film, it was generally liked among filmgoers, even by members of the Navy who would have had more reason to question the factual details of the film. Evidently the grass roots support of such a wartime representation was not taken into consideration by the studio as Balcon immediately set out to change the kinds of films he released under the Ealing banner. This dismissal of the spectator's enthusiastic reception and acceptance of *Ships with Wings* as entertainment and not detrimental to the war effort is problematic and points again to the conservative approach to British realism at the

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[15] Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (London: Studio Vista, 1993), p. 24.

[17] Ibid., p. 24.

[18] Richards and Sheridan, p. 364.

time. Clearly, the unusual context of war had heightened the stake that the film medium had in portraying a certain vision of Britain's wartime participation. The exploitation of the war genre for pure entertainment purposes was simply unacceptable to Britain's most influential arbiters of taste while the nation participated in an *actual* war. If "the burden of all the criticism was that...[*Ships with Wings*] lacked realism",[19] then it is no coincidence that Balcon turned immediately to the documentary film-makers of the 30s for what he saw as a much-needed injection of British documentary realism into Ealing's contemporary war films.

It is necessary to define the kind of realism that was at stake at this time, namely, the documentary realism that grew out of the movement, a fact based in my earlier discussion of Grierson's opposition to studio-based work. He makes a distinction between studio films that "photograph acted stories against artificial backgrounds... [while] documentary would photograph the living scene and the living story, [and that] the original (or native) actor, and the original (or native) scene, are better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world".[20] In asserting the power of cinema to render spontaneity, Grierson states that "the choice of the documentary medium is as gravely distinct a choice as the choice of poetry instead of fiction".[21] Indeed, this is the point at which the documentary style, with its emphasis on the 'creative treatment of actuality', became a valuable asset for fiction films made during the war, especially those that used the conflict as their primary subject.

The collision of historical factors, where certain documentary film-makers like Watt and Cavalcanti began to gravitate towards fiction films combined with

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[19] Richards and Sheridan, p. 364.
[20] Grierson, 'First Principles of Documentary', pp. 36-7.
[21] Ibid., p. 37.

the pressures faced by Ealing studios in particular, to produce films that appeared "authentic" and took a more serious approach to wartime stories, produced a unique situation of mutual advantage on all sides. The timing of these events meant that when Balcon approached certain members of the documentary movement to come across to the so-called 'dark-side' of the film-making field, they were primed to go with him. It is certainly true that "the documentarists' films as well as their ideas had a wider currency during the war than had ever been the case in the 1930s".[22] This also made it possible for the strands of realism developed in the 30s to continue, as the documentarists most familiar with a variety of realist styles continued to engage with British cinema.

On an artistic level, documentary and fiction film-making had much to offer each other within this reciprocal arrangement. Documentary film-making seemed to benefit from the focus and increased potential for audience identification that narrativisation and classic shot-reverse-shot editing techniques could provide. The so-called disaster of *Ships with Wings* demonstrates that fiction film-making needed the experience of the documentary people to lend some credibility to its narratives of wartime combat. The combination of these two previously opposed filmic approaches was to produce some compelling representations of a nation at war, and on another level, it embedded realism in the national psyche as the 'serious' mode of British film representation. The rise, then, of British realism in its various guises at this historic time can partly be attributed to the moral and ethical dimension that is sometimes associated, such as in the writings of Marx and Lukács, with the idea of 'realism'.

As I have mentioned, with the rise of documentary realism within mainstream British cinema during the war came a continuation of the strands of

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[22] Paul Swann, *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926 – 1946*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 161.

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realism introduced in Chapter One. Andrew Higson argues that the documentary strands; instructional, story and poetic, are employed, to varying degrees, by wartime film-makers. He locates instructional documentary, the most didactic, journalistic form of realism, within the form of "numerous shorts, 'Flood Flashes', scientific and instructional films for the Armed Forces",[23] that were produced to increase community awareness of the various processes of war. It is Higson's view that "this mode of documentary production is least written into the histories of cinema in this period", due to fact that "contemporary film reviewers...favoured the mode of the studio-centred narrative film".[24] He also asserts that the lack of critical regard for this strand was based on the "need to interweave the emotionally engaging psychological realism of the strong narrative film with the social responsibility of the documentary's articulation of a public sphere".[25] The merging of certain elements of the story-documentary and the studio-centred narrative film offered a combination of social *and* psychological realism that increased the level of audience identification.

However, while Higson does make a distinction between the types of films made by Watt for the Crown Film Unit, like *Target for Tonight* (1941), which is a battle film that adopts a cause-and-effect narrative but belongs to the documentary tradition, and fictional war films like *Millions Like Us* (1943), which involves a greater degree of psychological character development that is only slightly offset by the documentary method of investigating other narrative lines, he regards them as being branches of the one strand of realism, each informing the style of the other in a process of constant cross-pollination. I would take Higson's position further and argue that one could make a strong case for two sub-strands within the

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[23] Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 88.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

narrative tradition: one with close ties to the instructional or journalistic documentary mode that adopts fictional elements as a way of making its subject matter more palatable (*Western Approaches*, 1945; *Target for Tonight*); the other that takes on the documentary emphasis on collectivisation as a way of facilitating the notion of a wartime consensus (*The Way Ahead*, 1944; *Nine Men*, 1942). Poetic realism experienced the most unproblematic transfer into the war era, probably because it revolved around the singular vision of Humphrey Jennings. This strand achieved its fullest potential in the early 40s, and, as I will discuss later, gained momentum at a time when the war offered some inspiring stories of national unity. A discussion of these central strands of British realism; journalistic, psychological and poetic will be the main focus of this chapter.

Journalism – a realist approach to battle

The journalistic strand of realism that flourished during the war with such films as *Target for Tonight*, *Desert Victory* (1943), *Western Approaches*, *The True Glory* (1945, UK/US), and *Burma Victory* (1945), maintains close ties to the instructional strand of the 30s. This relationship is based on the common use of actuality footage to enhance the surface realism of a film, or to provide additional information that mere re-enactment could not adequately express. The central concern of this mode of realism is to inform an audience about a particular story, usually involving a battle or military process. Like the instructional strand discussed in Chapter One, the journalistic strand tends towards didacticism, though in the context of war, this tendency has less to do with mass education than with propaganda, where a positive articulation of Britain's wartime progress is paramount.

While instructional documentaries of the 30s, such as *Housing Problems*, showed and often questioned social processes for the public interest, the war years heightened the government's interest in film production:

> Government film production during the war was organised through the Films Division of the MOI (Ministry of Information), and took the form of both theatrical and non-theatrical exhibition...The films were made in relation to closely specified propaganda campaigns, and this limited the film-makers' opportunities to experiment, or to engage with issues critically.[26]

The war had clearly raised the stakes of film production in Britain to a level where criticism was seen as detrimental to the national war effort. As such, the portrayal of *collective* activity as an expression of wartime consensus is also of great importance to this strand. Therefore, the use of non-actors, preferably those who have participated in the type of action to be depicted, is essential, not only to a film's sense of documentary realism, but also to its obfuscation of individuality. Non-professional actors, such as soldiers from a particular regiment, are viewed as more malleable than so-called stars from the studio system and are not recognisable and so do not create an intertextual distraction.

In a journalistic film, where individuality is typically obscured by the actions and achievements of the group, professional actors might be considered a hindrance. Such an approach to actors is one of the main reasons that I have split the story-strand into two sections. While studio-centred narrative films like *In Which We Serve* (1942) and *The Way Ahead* deal with collective activity, both films allow individual personalities to surface and define the nature of the groups represented. Psychological realism is as important to these films as the depiction

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[26] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 24.

of collectivisation or Britain's spirited wartime participation. While *Target for Tonight* and *Western Approaches* "employ dramatic development, characterisation and humour, in order to draw the audience into an emotional identification with the characters within them",[27] it is difficult to distinguish between characters who are basically types defined by the practical role they play in the films' battle narratives.

There are no examples within this strand that belong to the tradition of aesthetic realism endorsed by Lukács outlined in the literature review. He suggested that realism in art is determined by the need to depict the relationship between the individual and the social within a particular historical juncture.[28] As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, expressions of individuality and the kind of social criticism that Lukács' brand of realism require were suppressed during the conservative war years. However, the notion of realism cultivated by Marx and Eisenstein then filtered down to British cinema through Grierson is based around the *collective* and thus the primary existence of groups in British wartime cinema does not at first undermine its claims to realism. It is a closer examination of who these groups consist of, so, not exclusively the proletariat, worker or craftsman, that sees British realism deviate from Grierson's vision for it.

One film completed during this period is unique because it highlights the activities of the working-class, while conserving its illusion of consensual and collective activity. The year after *Ships with Wings* was released to the public, Ealing made a documentary about the Fleet Air Arm called *Find, Fix and Strike* (1942), produced by Balcon and Cavalcanti, and directed by Compton Bennett. It was clearly an attempt to make up for the inaccuracies of the former film, and at the same time, introduce the documentary style into the studio setting. The film

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[27] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 25.
[28] Aitken, *European Film Theory*, p. 194.

provides a stark contrast to *Ships with Wings*, especially in its treatment of the Fleet Air Arm. Both films include a scene in which a group of pilots are shown relaxing together. In each scene the men sing together as an illustration of their solidarity. The differing approach to this type of scene reveals much about the films' commitment to realism, and Ealing's changed attitude to wartime film-making.

The *Ships with Wings* singing sequence occurs late in the film, before the men go off to battle. The hero, Lieutenant Stacey (John Clements), is seated at a piano in the mess, while his fellow pilots stand around him. They are clad impressively in their white navy dress uniforms and sing along to a tune instigated at the piano by Stacey. The song has a superior Noel Coward-style tone to it, as do the high-born accents that can be heard as the men sing in unison. Both factors combine to signify the upper-class origins of the men. They are a group bound by their mutual allegiance to the navy, but they are also unified by their shared social status. Their stance and the highly accomplished nature of the singing denotes a rigidity and professionalism incongruous in the supposedly informal setting.

By contrast, *Find, Fix and Strike*, which is concerned with informing the public about the Fleet Air Arm, includes a group singing scene with an entirely different connotation. First of all, the pilots are wearing the standard navy black wool uniform as they sit together in the mess. Their attire, coupled with the fact that they are casually lounging around, provides a more natural image of men relaxing. When these men sing, it is a slightly out of tune rendition of "Bicycle Made for Two" that is performed. Unlike *Ships with Wings*, the men's accents are typically working-class, and they sing the song quietly, almost solemnly. The type of song they sing, the way they perform it, their manner of reclining in close proximity and the type of accents heard, suggest an affiliation with the working-

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classes. These elements also depict a more authentic image of military men enjoying a brief moment of relaxation as opposed to the contrived stiff-upper-lip performance of Stacey and his comrades. By adopting a working-class realist approach to the military milieu, Ealing signalled its commitment to new ways of depicting the war on film and offered a rare expression of characteristics perceived as specific to that lower class.

Another area where this strand diverts from the story-strand and reinforces its connection to the instructional mode of realism can be located in the strong journalistic style of feature-length battle films like *Desert Victory*, *Burma Victory* and *The True Glory*. It is a particular kind of narrative form, one that is condensed, exaggerated and eventually closed. Watt viewed the rise of such films as significant in pointing out the extent to which documentary realism had imposed itself on filmic representations of the war. After the apparent disaster of early film attempts to illustrate Britain's wartime activity, like *The Lion Has Wings* (1939), which Watt described as "a ghastly, bloody film...[with] Ralph Richardson in beautiful clean overalls, white, and everybody else in black overalls, so that the star would stand out",[29] it was clear that a more realistic approach to such subject matter was required.

One way of accessing the 'real' stories of the war was to produce films that comprised footage shot entirely by cameramen at the front: visceral in content, yet informative and optimistic about Britain's progress. Technically, this strand, that draws from what Grierson described earlier as the 'living scene and the living story', stakes a claim for a particular kind of purchase on the real world by emphasising its proximity to the action. Such reportage films were structured wholly around raw footage, introducing the notion that events had to be captured

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[29] Quoted in Sussex, p. 120.

on film, *first-hand*, in order to be considered 'the real thing'. The absolute immediacy of the images, depicting military campaigns barely completed, is tied closely to the realist emphasis on contemporaneity.

Due to the descriptive nature of such films as *Burma Victory* and *Desert Victory*, which contain a large amount of complicated combat information, a voice-over is frequently employed to clarify the constant flow of factual detail. The use of voice-over itself signals the films' similarity to the mode of instructional realism, with its reliance on a dominant male narrator to dictate the tone of a film. Characterisation is mostly absent, as it is events, not individuals, that such films are concerned with. The effacement of the impact of wartime encounters on the individual suggests a deliberate redirecting towards the communal for audiences at home, maintaining the importance of collective interests above the personal.

To illustrate the kind of realism being offered by such first-hand combat films, I want to look briefly at *Desert Victory*, a film directed by Roy Boulting, who also made *Burma Victory*. From the outset it is clear that the communication of detail is central to the film's purpose. The voice-over spells it out: "For the 'desert rats'...the men of the Eighth Army...who on the 23rd October, 1942 left the holes they had scratched for themselves in the rock and sand of the desert, and moved forward to destroy the myth of Rommel's invincibility..." And so the voice goes on, dedicating the film to all those who contributed to the victory in North Africa. While this information about those who participated in the triumph takes place, the images one sees are of men in uniform preparing for war. The music that accompanies the voice-over is triumphant, casting a nationalistic mood over the film from the beginning.

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The film then goes on to give what amounts to a historical lesson about its central battle, using maps, footage of planes and tanks, location shots of Cairo: edited to create a rapid montage of information. The voice-over is continuous, helping to explaining the constantly changing scenery as the film moves in quick succession from one combat perimeter, to the sea, then back to the dunes of the desert, and so on. A rapid montage sequence of battle shots is interspersed with slow tracking shots that depict the preparation required before the fight continues. It is a powerfully rhythmic sequence that successfully captures the fluctuating nature of war, where quiet moments are regularly punctuated by violent outbursts of direct engagement with the enemy.

Boulting's film, like *Burma Victory* and *The True Glory*, is about pure explication. Its purchase on realism is derived specifically from the perceived authenticity of the footage, the seeming authority of the male voice-over and the factual content of the film itself: this battle *did happen* and we have witnessed it through a *first-hand* account. The explicatory nature of these combat films, combined with the presence of an impassive commentator who mediates between the film-maker, the footage and the spectator, creates a sense of detachment from the action that is in keeping with instructional realism.

Harry Watt – Between observation and narrativisation

For all of Watt's assertions about fiction film-making and his attempts to affiliate with Cavalcanti, clearly he identified with this journalistic mode of realism, especially as he viewed it as having partly grown out of the success he achieved with *Target for Tonight*. Watt was in favour of the combat films described above, with their adherence to a documentary mode of realism, or more specifically, the preference for depicting action over the development of characterisation. In fact, as the main figure working within this strand, Watt, in his

attitude to actors, and by extension, psychological realism, maintains his strong connection to the journalistic strand.

His approach to actors as tools rather than valuable assets to a film's plot is corroborated by Gordon Jackson who worked with Watt on *Nine Men*:

> Harry Watt was happiest when he was just given a camera and a group of actors, although he didn't even want actors, but that's another story! People used to tell him to go into a field and make a film with a bunch of farmers and see how much money he made!...Harry made very successful documentary films without actors and he thought we were mollycoddled.[30]

Dinah Sheridan uses even stronger language to describe her view of Watt's attitude to actors:

> Harry Watt was a large bear of a man who should have been tied to a tree and not allowed to come to civilisation. He made very good films, but his idea of filming was that, if he got a good shot of you dying and a jolly good shot of the blood, he'd change the script.[31]

Although Watt was not the most sympathetic of directors, his desire for a more human approach to reality lead him away from a strictly observational style and into the realm of dramatisation. While this did not result in a renewed approach to characterisation, his work moved the journalistic strand closer to the studio-centred narrative film while maintaining a link with the detachment of the instructional mode.

In a sense, Watt's wartime films act as a bridge between the two modes of the story strand identified earlier, where the journalistic inclination for description incorporates story elements. This marriage of observation and narrativisation, or

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[30] Quoted in Brian McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 320.
[31] Quoted in ibid., p. 537.

the previously opposed areas of documentary and fiction film-making, is the point at which documentary realism moves into the mainstream and becomes *the* accepted mode of representation during the war. In terms of Watt's output, this progression is signified by the two landmark films he made in the early 40s: *Target for Tonight* and *Nine Men*. The former was made at Crown and although it involves a dramatisation of an actual bombing raid on Germany, it is closer in style to the journalistic *Desert Victory* than to a fiction film like *The Way Ahead*.

However, Watt's first film within the studio system at Ealing, *Nine Men*, represents a major shift in his wartime film-making towards an increased level of narrativisation and character development. Watt has spoken about this development in his film-making:

> Through some unexpected theatrical trait, no doubt inherited from my father's loud checks and extraordinary cravats, I drew documentary away from the accepted assemblage of visuals tied together with a commentary, to a dramatized more human approach.[32]

Aside from the personal and artistic reasons that Watt had for rejecting the Grierson-led documentary idea at the end of the 30s, the outbreak of war paved the way for his advancement into fiction films, and by extension, the encroachment of realism into that sphere. He articulates this fact in his autobiography, *Don't Look at the Camera*:

> War was our bonus, as was the sudden shock that our kind of film was actually taking more money at the box-office than theirs. Although documentary remained a dirty word, realism became accepted as the basis for many films. As Parker Tyler, an American film critic of the time, has

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[32] Harry Watt, *Don't Look at the Camera* (London: Paul Elek, 1974), p. 186.

said, 'Journalism crept into the techniques of American and British

films'.[33]

The war had presented to documentarists like Watt a unique opportunity to

capitalise on their ability to articulate contemporary experiences, while at the

same time allowing them the freedom to borrow from fiction films the capacity to

make wartime stories more palatable.[34]

Target for Tonight

Watt's *Target for Tonight* was the most commercially successful

documentary made during the war.[35] Like Pat Jackson's *Western Approaches*, it

uses a narrative structure to further its action-based subject matter beyond simple

reconstruction. One major difference between *Target for Tonight* and films like

Desert Victory is the method of filming the battle sequences. The Boulting films

rely on actuality footage shot at the front, whereas Watt's film dramatises a

bombing raid that has occurred prior to filming. By building elaborate sets at

Denham Studios he reconstructs the event of the raid as if it were being shot first-

hand. Watt also stresses the actuality of the event (it did occur) and the

participation in the film of real military personnel whose presence is meant to

validate its claim to realism.

Paradoxically, realism is achieved through a painstaking process of re-

enactment, where artificially rendered images can easily be mistaken for the 'real

thing'. For Watt, such artifice masquerading as reality is simply a matter of

practicality. His crew had attempted to shoot footage on board active military

aircraft, but this was too hazardous, so all of the interiors were shot in studios

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[33] Watt, *Don't Look at the Camera*, p. 186.

[34] It is important to note that Watt told Elisabeth Sussex that he regretted leaving documentary as he missed the camaraderie and found the feature film world to be too much of a "rat race" (Sussex, pp. 188-89).

[35] Swann, p. 158.

while a big set was constructed at Denham.[36] Just as his experience on *Bill Blewitt* taught Watt the practical benefits of falsifying a film's alleged location, *Target for Tonight* saw Watt embrace the advantages of fictionalisation. As long as the surfaces of the film's chosen environment *appeared* genuine, then ostensibly its claims to an empirical, journalistic realism had not been compromised. This method of dramatisation as an alternative to the first-hand location shooting of an event is in keeping with the film's overt propagandist agenda. As Raymond Durgnat points out in his book, *A Mirror for England*, "with documentaries, we have to accept that its 'documentary' purpose is secondary to propaganda, i.e. inspiring half-truths, almost fiction".[37]

According to Watt, *Target for Tonight* came about as a response to the so-called 'Britain Can Take It' approach that dominated many of the films of the period. "We were getting very tired of the 'taking it' angle, and so it was decided that we would try and make a film about bombing them, about Bomber Command".[38] Obviously the film is informed by a specific agenda that seeks to portray Britain's ability to be competitive in the war, thus inspiring a sense of national pride. So, the film's contrivance is not limited to the method of filming, rather, it extends to the type of event chosen to be depicted and the way that event is portrayed.

The didacticism of the instructional mode of realism, where film is utilised as a tool of education and mass influence has been carried over into the journalistic strand in the guise of wartime propaganda. As such, war films like *Target for Tonight* operate on two levels of communication: one being the conveying of information for educational purposes, such as the method of

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[36] Sussex, p. 130.
[37] Raymond Durgnat, *A Mirror for England* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), p. 120.
[38] Quoted in Sussex, p.128.

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executing a bombing raid; the other is the rhetorical use of certain images for jingoistic reasons, to engender a sense of national pride in an audience.

During the war, documentary realism was rightly viewed as a powerful instrument of dissemination, owing to its perceived commitment to a visual and factual truth while manipulating these to foster a certain point of view. *Target for Tonight* provides a compelling example of how the journalistic mode of realism gained mass appeal at a time when "jingoism and conformism was highly relevant and necessary".[39] The film begins with the title card: "This is the authentic story of a bombing raid on Germany…how it is planned and how it is executed". From the first, Watt's film stakes its claim for a particular type of documentary realism. This is a so-called *true* story comprising the detailed elements of an *actual* bombin' raid.

To reinforce such a view, the film goes on during the title sequence to establish that: "Every person seen in the picture is a member of the Royal Air Force from Commander-in-Chief to aircraft hand, re-enacting his own daily life on the job. They are the men and women who actually direct, plan and execute the raids". Such statements are designed to reinforce the degree of authenticity involved in the film, while subtly revealing that it is a re-enactment of events rather than a record. Watt is building a case for the film's commitment to documentary realism by recruiting real-life participants in air raids and using this fact to boost the overall validity of the film. Such opening statements also point to the dual purpose of the film: to illustrate a military process *and* to show the human side of that process. In this respect, Watt's film is positioned somewhere between the instructional documentary and the story-film.

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[39] Durgnat, *A Mirror for England*, p. 120.

He then goes on to point out the magnitude of the events to be described through a title card that reads: "In order, however, not to give information to the enemy, all figures indicating Strength, have purposely been made misleading". Here, the propagandist nature of *Target to Tonight* is conveyed through its suppression of facts to support the national war effort. Watt is considering the *national* importance of the information he depicts over and above fictionalisation for entertainment purposes.

The journalistic quality of *Target for Tonight* is established by the sheer weight of detail given about the bombing raid. The minutiae of the processes involved are depicted with clarity in spite of their inherent complexity. To define the hierarchy of power within Bomber Command, Watt relies on title cards: "BOMBER COMMAND controls a series of GROUPS…each of which has a number. Each GROUP controls a series of STATIONS, each of which has a name. Each STATION has two or more squadrons attached…each aircraft being known by an index letter. This picture mainly concerns the crew of 'F' for 'Freddie' attached to Millerton Station in Group 33 of Bomber Command". From start to finish, the film gives the impression that it is engaged in *reportage*; a first-hand account of real people and a real event, despite the opening disclaimer about it being a "re-enactment".

Watt is undoubtedly more adept when it comes to filming action sequences, for this aspect of *Target for Tonight* is much more convincing than his attempts at characterisation, however it should be noted that the development of the action is *narrativised*. Higson makes the point that films like *Target for Tonight* that "move between documentary and narrative modes"[40] offer action that is narrativised in that "there is temporal development, and a structural movement

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[40] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 84.

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from the definition of a goal to be achieved".[41] The main action of *Target for Tonight* involves the mission undertaken by the crew 'F' for 'Freddie', from its initial take-off, to the bombing operation itself, followed by tense scenes of intercutting as the crew on the ground wait for Freddie to return safe and sound. The goal in this case, the successful bombing of the target and safe return home, is the basis of the narrativisation in *Target for Tonight*.

The use of images to depict the raid in its entirety and the slow build-up of tension from take-off to eventual landing display Watt's real talent as an action director. For instance, just before the crew board the plane they have been assembled together at the Station to discuss the target to be bombed. As they leave, the camera stays on the empty room now free of diegetic sound. It is a portentous shot, held just long enough to convey the magnitude of the events that will transpire beyond this point. The image also provides a contrast to the increasingly rapid pace of the editing and action to follow. Watt then films the men as they board the plane to triumphant music, cutting to and from Millerton Operations which monitors the plane's progress from take-off. The take-off itself involves a rapid montage sequence that cuts between men on the ground, control, the men in the plane and the aircraft's exterior, giving an overall sense of pace and drive. This sequence informs the spectator of the initial element of the raid, particularly the role played by Operations, while steadily increasing the dramatic tension of the film.

Next there is night vision of the plane in flight, with a series of close-ups of the moniker ('F' for 'Freddie') on its side, reinforcing the viewer's identification with a specific aircraft and crew and perhaps stressing the representative nature of the raid. There follows a long sequence of shots

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[41] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 85.

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photographed at varying distances that depict the plane flying steadily towards its destination. The enemy contingent is shown in the subsequent segment of *Target for Tonight* in a series of shot-reverse-shot encounters. As the Germans launch their anti-aircraft defence from the ground, they are filmed in the shadows of darkness so that only the outline of their moving bodies is visible. Watt constantly moves from this obscure vision of the enemy to Freddie's return of fire, at one point cutting between close-ups of the pilot's face and the quick bursts of light that flash in the darkness from the anti-aircraft artillery at ground-level.

The editing increases to a frantic pace as Freddie's crew drops a bomb on its designated target, making it difficult to work out what is happening. At this point the focus of *Target to Tonight* switches to the tense wait back at Operations as Freddie's fate is unknown. All other planes on missions that night are shown to have returned, all except Freddie. Watt depicts the anxiety of the ground crew, as figures swathed in deep fog, pacing up and down the obscured runway. Other men run up and down the air strip with lanterns. In between these shots we see exterior footage of the plane, barely visible in the murky night sky. It is an evocative scene and Watt takes full advantage of the weather conditions in his re-enactment to illustrate the tension and danger involved in such activity.

The film has built to such a level of tension at this point that when Freddie is finally in view of the runway and lands safely on the ground and the triumphant music rises to a fitting crescendo, one would expect a huge outburst of emotion from the men on screen. When the men land, Watt cuts away from the unfolding scene as their compatriots run towards the plane. Instead of remaining with them, he moves to the control-room. The mission results are matter-of-factly reported, a board detailing the night's assignments is cleaned. Even though the music maintains it grandiosity, the tone of the film is now restrained, as men discuss

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getting "some bacon and eggs". Watt seems to be intent on stressing that each wartime activity represents an *ongoing* process, and that one night of victory, while important for morale, is not something *Target for Tonight* intends to overstate. He capitalises on the action-packed aspects of the film's narrative at the same time as tempering any flourishes towards sentimentality or exaggeration: these are, after all, 'real' events Watt is bringing to the screen.

It is true that Watt was keen to emphasise the human elements present in *Target for Tonight* by highlighting the bravery exhibited by such men as the crew of "F" for Freddie. The dramatisation of real events in the film also increases the level of identification one experiences for the people who lived them. Watt's vivid re-enactment of the bombing raid, with its expertly developed tension and ultimate climax can hardly fail to enthral an audience. As a kind of precursor to the contemporary action film, *Target for Tonight* operates on a purely visceral level, its simple narrative developed to maximise the feelings of tension experienced by the spectator. Unlike the more straightforward journalistic films such as *Desert Victory* where the use of maps and actuality footage increases the distance between the audience and film subject, through narrative *Target for Tonight* invites a sense of empathy for the people and events it depicts.

However, this is the extent of Watt's approach to the 'human' in *Target for Tonight*. The film does not attempt to introduce its participants individually or to develop any characters beyond their role in the events as they unfold. Part of this is bound up in the film's documentary realism, as the chaos of the action precludes a clear view of exactly who is doing what. It is also a link to the instructional strand, with its employment of the Soviet method of character typage. Beyond this, Watt leaves the men in the background, making Freddie, the aircraft, and by extension, the airforce, the true hero of the film: for him the *action*

is paramount. Watt's preferential treatment of the action-proper, over other elements of story-telling such as characterisation, is partly derived from his natural skill at, and preference for, directing action sequences instead of actors. It also stems from a practical consideration that has to do with making such subject matter more palatable to contemporary audiences. Watt dramatises events in a sober, journalistic style, articulating the processes of wartime activity without being alarmist.

Clearly the role of film-makers during the war was not to depict events in their unadulterated form. As a result, the film, which outwardly appears to be a first-hand account, has to make some concessions to accuracy. Whatever commitment Watt had to the tenets of documentary realism or to the re-telling of historical events with integrity, his movement into the realm of dramatisation meant that much of what he filmed was re-enacted or the truth of it altered to suit the needs of the film medium. For the sake of practicality (difficulty of shooting on actual planes), ··· to increase the sense of British air-power (Watt doubled the number of squadrons the British actually had) Watt had to 'cheat' a little, proving that it is impossible not to stumble over that delicate line between the truth and the perceived representation of it as fact.

The kind of realism represented in such feature-length story-documentaries like *Target for Tonight*, *Desert Victory*, *Burma Victory* and *Western Approaches* is generally more concerned with information and propaganda than expanding on the psychological nature of individuals. According to Ian Aitken:

> These films focused on routine service activities, showing how such
> activities were planned and exercised, but they also employed dramatic

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development, characterisation and humour, in order to draw the audience into an emotional identification with the characters within them.[42]

The didactic component of these films resides in their obvious propagandist intentions, such as *Target for Tonight*, where Britain is shown heroically 'striking back', or *Western Approaches* in which groups of men are unified by their shared struggle and commitment to each other. The dramatisation of such events facilitates such motives by making the events more accessible to a wider audience by couching them in the more familiar territory of the fiction film.

The other and altogether more implicit function of these journalistic wartime films was to show collective activity carried out by a variety of mostly anonymous but characteristically British people. In borrowing from fiction film-making the use of narrativisation, the films that belong to this strand of realism were able to increase their dramatic tension, reach a wider audience and invite that audience to identify with the plight of the characters, without completely abandoning their documentary purpose: to inform.

Watt's apparent failure to develop the psychological realism of the war films he made before going to Ealing is partly a result of his distaste for actors and characterisation in films, but it also points to the difficulty some documentarists faced when it came to dealing with aspects of narrativisation for the first time:

> The documentarists lacked experience in assembling long, complex film
> narratives and their inexperience is apparent in the awkward and stilted
> narrative construction and use of dialogue in these films. In general, plot
> development is predictable and unimaginative, and the build-up of

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[42] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 25.

dramatic suspense falls well below the standards set by some of the

commercial feature films being produced in Britain at the time.[43]

However inexperienced they might have been, the adoption of fictional elements

into the documentary family introduced to film-makers like Pat Jackson and Harry

Watt a level of popularity and notice unforseen during the so-called halcyon days

of the documentary movement.

The main and most important result of such cross-pollination of artistic

modes was the new status afforded modes of British realism, previously the ugly

relation to other modes of representation, such as melodrama.[44] Here, an ethical

judgement about realism as the 'appropriately serious' mode of representation to

adopt during hard times is developed further and suggests the formation of a

national cinema that privileged this mode above others.

As the current chapter moves towards an analysis of the further

narrativisation of realism in the psychological strand, it should be remembered

that none of the strands is mutually exclusive, a point illustrated by the fact that

the journalistic strand can be linked to the psychological through narrative, as

Grierson's interest in the Hearst Press in America demonstrates:

We were concerned with the influence of modern newspapers, and were

highly admiring of the dramatic approach implicit in the journalism of

William Randolph Hearst. Behind the sensationalizing of news we thought

we recognized a deeper principle...We thought...that even so complex a

world as ours could be patterned for all to appreciate if we only got away

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[43] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, pp. 25-26.

[44] For a closer examination of the question of 'melodrama', and its inherent complexity, see Christine Gledhill's essay, 'Rethinking Genre' in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds.), *Rethinking Film Studies* (London: Arnold 1999), and Linda Williams's 'Melodrama Revised' in Nick Browne (ed.) *Refiguring American Genres* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

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from the servile accumulation of fact and struck for the story which held

the facts in living organic relationship together.[45]

The wartime status of the strands of realism saw a reverse-cycle exchange

between methods of film-making and this will be the main focus of the next

section of this chapter, where commercial feature films adopted a documentary

purpose and achieved a related but differently weighted form of realism.

Psychological realism and the wartime fiction film

If documentary film-making in Britain during the war benefited from the

use of narrative strategies to enhance its audience reach and develop its

conception of human experience, so too did fiction film-making find much in the

documentary style. In general, the mainstream films of the wartime period began

to take on aspects of realism previously unseen in British cinema. While the

documentarists saw the advantages of narrativisation in communicating

information about various subjects, many feature film directors recognised in the

documentary realist aesthetic an important mode of strengthening their stories of

wartime Britain.

So, in this instance it is essentially the *surfaces* of things that begin to

change in mainstream films, evoking the central tenets of Grierson's 'First

Principles of Documentary': a higher regard for location shooting; the building of

elaborate sets to recreate the appearance of certain environments or structures; a

regard for specific elements, such as what people wear, the way they speak or the

work they do. Films like *The Way Ahead, Millions Like Us, San Demetrio –*

London (1943), *The Stars Look Down* (1939), *The Way to the Stars* (1945) and *In*

Which We Serve are all constrained by a need for class consensus and display the

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[45] John Grierson, 'Propaganda and Education', in *Grierson on Documentary*, pp. 141-56 (p. 151).

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influence of documentary film-making in that they achieve a certain level of surface realism through their attention to detail.

However, beyond the surfaces, what these films excel at, in a way that cannot be said of the feature-length documentaries, is a sophisticated approach to the psychological and emotional lives of their characters. In this, fiction films are able to attain a psychological realism that is almost wholly absent from the films of the above strand, while maintaining a superficial flourish towards non-psychological, surface realism. By psychological realism, I am not referring to the kind espoused by Andrè Bazin which is achieved through deep-focus photography or psychological montage, where a scene is divided into elements to replicate the natural mental process.

These films reveal the inner lives of their characters through dialogue, eye-line matching or shot-reverse-shot editing between two people (how characters see each other reveals much about their relationship and emotions), and close-ups of the face (the time taken to rest on a person's features and the expressions shown there can s nk volumes about a character's feelings). Such techniques, which belong to the classical Hollywood school of realism, are all intended to extend the audience's understanding of, and identification with, a given character. While the documentarists had to apply such techniques as eyeline matching necessary to narrative film-making, they lacked the sophistication or commitment to such film practices to develop a convincing level of psychological realism.

Aside from the creative borrowing that occurred between fiction and documentary film-makers of the time, both groups shared a common goal: to present a Britain where class divisions are present but largely irrelevant as circumstances bring disparate groups together at a unique point in history. If the British cinema of the 30s, especially that produced by the documentarists, was

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defined by a greater degree of social criticism, the 1939-45 period was not the time to pursue such a course. For all of the differences and intersections that can be mapped between the realist strands, the creation of a wartime consensus is the common factor that binds them together.

To illustrate the ways in which such a notion of consensus manifested itself across a variety of films with claims to realism, I want to discuss the *acceptance* of the status quo in British wartime features. Unlike the periods of realism that follow the war where individuality and outspokenness are defining characteristics, the wartime era of uncertainty made it inadvisable for films to display any overt challenges, even on film, to the necessary sense of consensualism in British society.

As a result, there are very few filmic examples of characters who reject the values of the group or surroundings they are confronted with. Films like *"Millions Like Us* and *The Way Ahead* seem to share with the documentarists the concept of a people's war, and both films have been viewed as typical examples of the fusion between documentary and fiction film-making".[46] Like the documentaries and features of the aforementioned strand, there is an emphasis on collective activity in such films, and the need to project a sense of civilian or military strangers uniting for the good of the nation proper. The groups in each film are symbolic of the nation's response to the war, microcosmic illustrations of the absolute necessity of consensus.

Viewed in this context it is unreasonable to expect such films to include characters who put the needs of the individual above that of the group and therefore the state: there is simply too much at stake. Indeed, in both *The Way Ahead* and *Millions Like Us* there are instances where characters are initially

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[46] Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 135.

unwilling to fall into line with the aspirations of their given groups, or reject the authority figures they are confronted with. However, instead of rationalising their behaviour, each film makes it clear that it is the fault of the individual, not the group, that any questioning has occurred at all.

In *The Way Ahead*, the source of such short-lived resistance comes from Stainer (Jimmy Hanley) and Evans Lloyd (James Donald). Stainer is portrayed as an arrogant young man, uncomfortable with authority and taking orders. He is a car salesman and has yet to lose the swagger of someone confident about his so-called verbal influence. When Stainer is first introduced he is with Lloyd at the station canteen and obviously drunk. He says to Lloyd that he 'can't stand people telling me what to do, that's why the Army will have to put up with me and not me with the Army...I'm independent and if they don't like it I'll walk right out'. He then has an altercation with Fletcher (William Hartnell), who later turns out to be Stainer's platoon sergeant.

Rather than face up to Fletcher, whom he believes to be persecuting the group because of the station incident, he snipes to his comrades, ranting about what he plans to say to Fletcher without ever actually doing anything. Stainer is revealed as a boastful man with bravado but without the courage to act on it. Lloyd, the rent collector, is at first an unpleasant person, intolerant of those he is surrounded by. Unlike Stainer, whose spinelessness sickens him, Lloyd deals with his discontent more overtly, taking his grievances to Perry (David Niven), the platoon commander. When nothing eventuates from this discussion, he leads the men in undermining a training exercise.

However, Stainer is quickly chastened by Perry whose anger and disappointment finally cause Lloyd to take his role in the Army more seriously. As the group grows close and begins to understand the importance of their new

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wartime activity, any suggestion of insubordination recedes, leaving only the solidity of the collective. So, there is no serious challenge to the order of things in *The Way Ahead*, despite Stainer's and Lloyd's early disobedience. Their behaviour is characterised as foolhardy and immature until they learn to respect everyone around them, and the hierarchy of which they are part.

Similarly, *Millions Like Us* contains two characters who are resistant and snobbish when faced with people they are not used to being acquainted with. Jennifer Knowles (Ann Crawford) and Charlie Forbes (Eric Portman) are introduced as having extremely rigid personalities at the beginning of the film. Compared to the stoicism and moral fortitude displayed by the film's resident angel, Celia Crowson (Patricia Roc), and her naïve young suitor, Fred Blake (Gordon Jackson), the former pair come across as selfish and ill-mannered. Though the film does not seek to fully transform Jennifer into 'one of the girls', nor Charlie into someone more tolerant of class differences, it does allow them a degree of self-awareness.

When we first see Jennifer, the way she is dressed and her poor behaviour set her apart from the other women at the factory: Her accent is clearly refined; she is the only woman smoking a cigarette (signifying her worldliness as well as her difference); her dress and hat are far more sophisticated that the simple attire of the others; her attitude is superior, such as when the women are addressed she says: "I rather gather that I'm included in all of this?" Jennifer eventually tones down her behaviour, a process which is mainly facilitated by the treatment she receives from Charlie who is obviously resentful of the upper classes. The film shows that for all her pretensions and his snobbery, they are required to play their part in the war effort. Charlie articulates this when he says, "we're together now because there's a war on, we need to be…"

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While *Millions Like Us* includes characters who are not always united, it makes the point that they should be, no more than when Jennifer is shown sitting alone in her room after she has left the dance hall, the film cuts to the mass of dancing people in the hall, all holding hands and dancing in unison: this is what matters. In writing about this film, Andrew Higson has noted that "the tight causal development of a goal-directed narrative and the psychological development of a central hero-protagonist are constantly deflected and marginalised in their inevitable progression towards textual closure, by a series of devices and strategies derived from the documentary form".[47] He adds that the ideological effect of such a "dispersal of narrative attention on a multiplicity of narrative lines [is]...an articulation of nation as responsible community *and* individual desire, an articulation which finds a place for both the public and the private, by inserting the vulnerable individual within the protective communal interest".[48] The wartime films within the narrative strand attempt to project a sense of collectivisation or communal effort, thus characters who speak out are eventually drawn back into the fold. The context in which a character like Jimmy Porter (*Look Back in Anger*) could exist seems a long way off.

Besides the manifestation of a homogeneously structured realism in the films discussed so far, it is important to consider the ways in which the realist films in this strand achieve a certain degree of psychological realism, and the extent to which a form of individuality is expressed. Chapter Three will demonstrate how, in a non-wartime era, character complexity is central to the version of realism prevalent at the time. Still, the wartime fiction films which adopted a documentary aesthetic in surface terms, are nevertheless more

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[47] Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 87.
[48] Ibid.

committed to the emotional complexity of their characters than those that belong to the journalistic strand.

Fully articulated fiction film-making has a whole range of techniques at its disposal when it comes to depicting people's emotions on screen. As Brian McFarlane's theory of adaptation makes clear, unlike the literary medium, which is able to directly explain through prose the inner lives of people, film must find other ways of enunciating for the audience the inner life of an individual.[49] In *Millions Like Us* a lot of attention is paid to Celia's hopes and aspirations. Since she is a reticent woman, it is left to the camera to reveal how she is feeling or what she is thinking. On one occasion, Celia is at a dance with her more gregarious and flirtatious sister Phyllis (Joy Shelton). Outwardly Celia seems disapproving of the attention Phyllis attracts from the servicemen who congregate around her.

Framing is important in the first part of this sequence in suggesting how primness might not be all there is to Celia's character. As Phyllis stands to go and dance with three servicemen, the frame isolates Celia in the left-hand corner until half of her body is positioned in the off-screen space. The camera then zooms in to offer a close-up of her face, revealing a hurt expression she cannot hide from the lens at such proximity. Off-screen, a disembodied voice asks her to dance, and her reaction tells all. Celia's head snaps to attention in clear anticipation until she sees how unattractive her potential partner is and she casts her eyes downward in disappointment. The framing, distance of the camera, and the expertise of the performer all contribute to one's heightened awareness of Celia's inner world.

On another occasion a fantasy montage sequence (there are two in the film that involve Celia) depicts how Celia might like her life to be. She sees a poster for the W.A.A.F., and begins to imagine herself in a variety of military roles, at

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[49] McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, p. 26.

first she is in the airforce, then the navy and finally the army. In each shot she is

doted upon by a dashing man from each of the services. The fantasy concludes

with Celia as a beautiful nurse receiving an engagement ring from a handsome

patient. This scene displays how fiction film sometimes pushes the boundaries of

ordinary reality in order to access the emotions underneath.

In another instance, psychological realism is achieved in far simpler terms,

without words or music to coerce the spectator's understanding. In *The Way to the*

Stars, Peter Penrose (John Mills) returns from an R.A.F. flight and we learn much

about his feelings. In this particular part of the film we learn of David Archdale's

(Michael Redgrave) death, though no dialogue is spoken and no musical score

exists on the soundtrack, instead there is utter silence for the duration of the scene.

The scene begins with pilots pouring in to the Bomber station after a

mission until the only man in the room is Peter. He walks silently to David's usual

smoking place, which is still littered with cigarette butts and a lighter. The camera

moves in to show Peter's hand slowly reaching for the lighter and picking it up.

We do not get to see his face immediately as the camera remains in a tight

medium shot on his hands as they grip the lighter, then the camera tilts up to show

his shattered face as he lights a cigarette. Peter looks to his left, somewhere off-

screen, it doesn't matter where, because we know what has happened and can

guess what he is feeling. There is no need for histrionics, just this silent scene

where a man reaches for some tangible reminder of the friend he has lost. John

Mills' eyes convey his sorrow without his needing to utter a word of dialogue. He

walks out of the shot in what has been a fine example of the way in which fiction

film can achieve a level of psychological realism that the journalistic film does

not.

There is also an implicit conflation of elements here, where the restraint

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applied to this scene which suggests something about the 'Britishness' of emotional self-control and its relationship to British film realism and national cinema. There is also evidence in the above scenes of psychological realism to support Béla Balázs' formalist film theory of realism, where cinema's ability to elicit strong emotional responses due to its proximity to reality is highlighted. What Balázs calls "the psychological act of 'identification'"[50], is the key element of this theory, as the spectator is invited to see, and by extension, feel, what the characters see and feel. Here, it is not the surfaces of reality that are familiar, it is the emotional 'truth' of what is depicted that allows for such an identification.

As I outlined in the literature review, the immediacy of the photographic image means that cinematic signs will "resemble real life referents in ways that are customarily beyond the novel's capacity for iconic representation".[51] From the spectator's point-of-view, this fundamental difference represents a compression of the space given by a novel, to make imaginative choices about a representation. These fiction films display how far removed this strand is from the documentary ideal of somehow presenting the surfaces of the world objectively. It is instead of central importance to this kind of realism that the inner world is made *knowable* through whatever techniques possible.

Where this fictional strand of realism crosses over into the domain of documentary realism exhibited in the journalistic strand is in its partial commitment to verisimilitude. For example, "Noël Coward asked Basil Wright to screen him a selection of documentaries while he was writing *In Which We Serve*".[52] As a result, the film's battle sequences at sea resemble the visceral chaos of *Fires Were Started*, and the shipbuilding introduction bears a strong

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[50] Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, p. 48.
[51] McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, p. 26.
[52] Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 133.

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documentary similarity to Grierson's own *Drifters*. This regard for the surface of things in mainstream British cinema was not entirely brought on by the influence of the documentarists, nor was it limited to the war era.

In the pre-war period, directors like Michael Powell and Carol Reed had already displayed an affinity for documentary realism in their films. "Reed's pre-war films - *Bank Holiday* (1938) and *The Stars Look Down* (1939), in particular – had been acknowledged as landmarks in the creation of a realist British cinema concerned with social justice and the lives of ordinary people".[53] However, "Reed's realism was founded on his interest in emotionally complex characters troubled by conflicting loyalties".[54] Still, his pre-war films lacked the emotional complexity that would become his trademark in the 40s, so while *Bank Holiday* makes interesting use of its English seaside locale and introduces working-class protagonists, its plot is weakened by sentimentality and stereotypical characterisations.

Likewise *The Stars Look Down*, though it bears a strong visual resemblance to Cavalcanti's *Coal Face*, and includes location shooting from St. Helens Siddick Colliery at Workington in Cumberland[55], is undermined by its focus on the central character David's (Michael Redgrave) domestic woes. This is a key element of fictional realism, as documentary is less concerned with the individual life than the fiction film which revolves around it. Paul Rotha "annihilated the picture, characterizing it as a shallow treatment of Cronin's themes, with underdeveloped characters and...a lack of realism".[56] He wrote: "Nor, to anyone familiar with the Northumberland coal fields, does the film get

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[53] Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 133.
[54] Ibid., p. 134.
[55] Robert F. Moss, *The Films of Carol Reed* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 107.
[56] Ibid., p. 108.

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anywhere near the real people".[57] He has however overlooked Reed's attempt to validate the film's setting. "To guarantee verisimilitude, pit ponies from the Cumberland mines were used and the miners' costumes were clothes purchased from colliery workers".[58] While at this point in his career Reed had not fully mastered characterisation, the best aspect of his work was the attention to detail and his observations of specific social environments.

During the war, apart from *The Way Ahead* and *The True Glory*, Reed's narratives became more sophisticated and thus his characters more complex, his earlier demonstrations of documentary realism were forgotten and replaced by largely studio-based films like *The Girl in the News* (1940), *Night Train to Munich* (1940) and *Kipps* (1941). Michael Powell's 1937 film *The Edge of the World*, about the depopulation of the outer islands of Scotland, was "shot entirely on location on the island of Foula in the Hebrides".[59] Consequently, it has a documentary aesthetic that Robert Murphy rightly compares to Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934), a film shot in Western Ireland.

Nevertheless, "Powell was interested in realism less as a progressive creed and more as an element of a visually impressive, artistically ambitious cinema".[60] His wartime films, such as *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* (1942), which in style is closely tied to *Target for Tonight* (naturalistic lighting and limited dialogue), and *49th Parallel* (1941) for which Powell had built "a life-size replica of a German U-boat out of canvas, wood and steel...reassembled it off the coast of Newfoundland and proceeded to blow it up..."[61], represent his interest in innovation as much as they mirror the parallel efforts of the journalistic strand of realism.

[57] Paul Rotha, '*The Stars Look Down*', *Documentary News Letter*, no.3 (March, 1940), p. 12.
[58] Moss, *The Films of Carol Reed*, p. 108.
[59] Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 134.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., p. 135.

Though Reed and Powell "were happy to work in collaboration with the MoI and to infuse a measure of propaganda into their films...[they] did not need the documentary-makers to incite their concern for realism",[62] nor was this their primary motivation for making films. Despite this, Reed's seminal war film *The Way Ahead* provides a fine example of the ways in which a fiction film approaches the mode of realism, borrowing in part from documentary while offering its own method of revealing its characters' experiences of the war.

The Way Ahead

The opening training sequence of Reed's film and the voiceovers of the Chelsea pensioners that accompany it are important to the film's claim to realism. The juxtaposition of current images of war training and the anachronistic views of war veterans serve to emphasise the importance of contemporaneity to a realist representation. Like realism in art and literature, that of the film medium deals specifically with modern experiences, of the here-and-now. The whole point of realism is to deal with the present, with those events that shape and effect contemporary society. This is part of the reason why realism as a mode of representation is such a liquid concept, changing and shifting across generations of film-making, because as the society and its needs change, so too does the kind of realism chosen to represent them.

In *The Way Ahead*, Reed introduces the audience to two ancient Chelsea pensioners in a pub, still talking about their exploits as soldiers of the past. Their basic complaint is that the modern soldier doesn't understand what real war is like, or the type of training it takes to become toughened for the battles ahead. Reed then uses the pensioners' dialogue as voiceovers during Perry's training montage to illustrate how out-of-date their ideas about war have become. For

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[62] Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 133.

instance, the shot of Perry swinging across a rope above a watercourse as a mock-explosion at his feet causes the water to surge up and swamp his body, is accompanied by the pensioner's voice pronouncing: "Nowadays they're afraid of getting their feet wet". On another occasion, one of the pensioners is talking about how his drill sergeant used to scream at his men to simulate the nature of battle while the film shows Perry wading in water as an instructor fires blank rounds in his general direction. The sense of irony created by the words of the ill-informed pensioner when seen in conjunction with the footage of Perry's brutal training makes an early point about the film's commitment to the present-day soldier and to the basic realist endeavour for contemporaneity.

Aside from their importance to the film's sense of modernity, the Perry training sequence and the others that follow it are filmed in a documentary style, attempting to recreate for the viewer the harsh conditions of such activities. These scenes are completely devoid of glamour or humour as their function is to provide an insight into wartime training processes. The training scenes in Reed's film are reminiscent of Harry Watt's *Nine Men*, which opens with a similarly constructed and gruelling obstacle course sequence, as men move quickly through tunnels and over walls.

Reed employs comparable techniques of editing, rapidly cutting from each part of the training course, depicting the men's physical exertion, sometimes with the camera kept at a distance from each scene, giving an overall picture of the training itself, or filming in close, to give an impression of the toll such hard work is having on the men. The mud and grime covering their bodies and faces are gritty signifiers of their struggle. Reed's dedication to showing in stark terms the methods of World War II soldier-training make these scenes convincing, even today. Speaking to Brian McFarlane in 1989, Raymond Huntley recalled that the

actors had to actually complete the training: "The part of Mr. Davenport in *The Way Ahead* was very challenging, and very strenuous…I've never forgotten that assault course!"[63] Similar scenes of such obstacle course training can be found in Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and though this film was made over forty years later, *The Way Ahead* loses nothing in comparison.

The representation of the men's training is not the only example in the film where the documentary-realist ethic of verisimilitude is evident. Here I am referring to the chaotic scenes on the ship while it is being attacked and when the men must abandon it. This section of the film takes place under cover of night, making it extremely difficult to make out what is happening or who is doing what. Reed intercuts actuality footage of ocean battle scenes with the activities on deck as men frantically attempt to relieve the ship of its excess weight. The rapid cutting and the general confusion within the shots enhances our sense of the uncertainty of the situation, while retaining an interest in the personal, such as Fletcher's plight.

It can be argued that *The Way Ahead*, and the similar battle scenes from *In Which We Serve* are referencing Jennings's *Fires Were Started*, with its frantic scenes of danger and the importance placed on solidarity. It is significant that in those instances where *The Way Ahead* attempts to recreate the atmosphere or the physical impression of certain events that there are strong documentary film comparisons to be drawn from them.

If British realism of the wartime period was defined not by social criticism but by the notion of a wartime consensus in British society, then *The Way Ahead* is no exception. The film is characterised by what Robert Murphy describes as

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[63] Quoted in McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p. 311.

"the vision of a democratic Britain with class barriers brushed aside..."[64] It is an important phrase as it does not suggest that class barriers were eradicated during the war, just that the films of the time chose to ignore such stratification. Again, it would not be appropriate for realist films of this era to deal with social change in a confronting manner. The idea of a wartime consensus, however fallaciously conceived, was extremely important at the time. Remembering that realist films are perceived as being like a mirror held up to society and reflected back to contemporary audiences, it would have been imprudent of wartime film-makers to begin questioning the fabric of a nation whose own future was so uncertain.

The Way Ahead is the key British fiction film of the period because it brings together a selection of diverse individuals, binds them as a group and then develops their respect for each other and for the authority of the Army. Unlike *In Which We Serve*, which is not as overt in its intention to provide a strong example of consensualism, *The Way Ahead*'s entire narrative is focused upon promoting a 'band of brothers' view of the wartime military experience.

To compare, note that while Captain Kinross (Noël Coward) is portrayed in *In Which We Serve* as a compassionate and widely respected officer, he is always remote from his men. When they are depicted preparing the ship before its launch, Kinross is shown signing papers at his desk. Even when he is in the water with a group of his charges waiting to be rescued, his manner remains slightly aloof. This may just be a symptom of his rank and the Coward persona, although the film initially contrasts his upper class existence with his men's more ordinary home life.

On the other hand, while Lt. Perry is also a refined man of superior rank, he is never detached from his men. This is particularly evident when he addresses

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[64] Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 134.

the platoon onboard the ship bound for North Africa. Unlike Kinross, whose addresses to his men always involve him standing above them and speaking in platitudes, Perry sits amongst his soldiers, speaking quietly, simply and humorously about the task ahead. In *The Way Ahead* it is important that even authority figures develop strong relationships with their men to heighten the sense of social harmony.

Of course, the unity of the men is not achieved instantly within the film, and Perry not always loved by his platoon. *The Way Ahead* begins by introducing to the audience seven individuals who meet and discover they are to be a part of the same platoon. They are: Brewer (Stanley Holloway), the cockney boiler worker; Lloyd, the cynical rent collector; Luke (John Laurie), a soft-spoken Scots farmer; Beck (Leslie Dwyer) the optimistic travel agent; Parsons (Hugh Burden) an insecure department store assistant; Davenport (Raymond Huntley), Parsons' haughty superior at the store; and Stainer, the overconfident car salesman.

Early in the film they are shown in their normal environments to demonstrate the diversity of their lives. Reed establishes the differences between them in order to highlight how remarkable the social context is in which such men will find themselves on equal terms. Upon arrival at the training camp, the men believe that Sgt. Fletcher is mistreating them and it is this shared belief that sees them bond as a group. It takes a long process of hard training to make them accept their role within the wider collective of the Army, bonding first as a group and then to those further up the hierarchy.

Their initial resistance to authority and the system of training is understandable when one remembers that they are civilians, unaccustomed to the methods of the military world. When Lloyd, as the platoon's most forthright member, takes his objections about Fletcher to Perry and nothing changes, in fact,

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the training becomes even harder, the group continues to mistrust its direct authority figures. Perry becomes a source of extreme dislike within the platoon, even when he helps Parsons out of his serious dilemma. So, the first section of the film is about their bonding together in opposition to a common enemy: Fletcher and Perry, as representative of the Army.

The turning point comes when Lloyd deliberately steers the men away from a training exercise and back to the barracks without completing their task. Up to this point, Perry had been understanding and patient with the platoon, but when he enters their barracks after this incident, his feelings of disappointment and anger are clear. When he addresses them, he invokes the proud history of their regiment, outlining the tremendous feats of bravery their predecessors have achieved.

This speech has a perceptible impact on the men, but the rift itself is not mended until a few scenes later, at Mrs. Gillingham's (Mary Jerrold). Perry arrives at her home to find his platoon members already there. She has heard stories about their 'dreadful officer' and mentions this to Perry, not realising that *he* is that same officer. Mrs. Gillingham's *faux pas* is the final act that bridges the gap between Perry and his platoon, as they gather together and finally forget their differences.

As their training is almost complete this scene of reconciliation is necessary as the next step for the platoon will be actual combat. Reed's film introduces a set of men from varied backgrounds with disparate temperaments, throws them together, then outlines the complex process of their physical and psychological transformation from carefree, sometimes selfish, civilians into a strong Army platoon, fully equipped to face the journey ahead.

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As well as verisimilitude and the depiction of consensual activity, *The Way Ahead* is also interested in psychological realism. Considering that this is Reed's idea of what film realism should be about, it is no surprise that a character like Parsons should appear in this film. His development from an anxious man, to someone who is clearly troubled and isolated from the group, to a more confident and happy person is portrayed in a variety of ways.

The first glimpse of Parsons comes early in the film when he goes to see Davenport about his call-up, clearly upset about having to go away. He is unable to assert himself with the superior Davenport, who dismisses him only to find he has also been called up. Reed cuts to the two men seated in a train carriage, and Parsons is offering Davenport something to eat. In the first section of the film, Parsons continues to act as though Davenport were his boss, enquiring about his comfort and so on. Then, he almost literally disappears from the film. Reed briefly shows that the other men notice his obsession with a letter that he reads over and over again. It is easy to think that Parsons does not participate in the film's middle section at all, such is his isolation from the group.

Reed depicts this effectively in the men's first visit to Mrs. Gillingham's. As the rest of the group sit with her in the front room, Parsons stands at the back of the room seeming unsure what to do. They do not notice him and he says nothing to draw attention to himself. In the same scene, while Brewer is telling Mrs. Gillingham about their dislike of Perry, Reed captures Parsons' remoteness by positioning him just to the back of the former pair with his head facing to the left of the frame. He simply stares into the off-screen space, his mind elsewhere. It is a subtle technique, but one is drawn to his troubled profile due to its incongruity in the frame, as the other characters talk animatedly all around him.

Later, when Beck is practicing his recitation and the others coach and tease him, Parsons is again a non-participant. He lies on his bed in the background, gripping a crumpled letter. To heighten what one perceives is his feeling of being alone, the platoon members only vaguely refer to his forlorn manner. Their ignorance of his problem and lack of assistance to him exacerbate our sense of his loneliness. It is absolutely a function of the film's commitment to drawing the group closer to a harmonious whole that it is Perry who prises out of Parsons his dilemma of being blackmailed by debt collectors and helps him after he tries to desert the Army.

Perry's words to Parsons are almost a verbalisation of the film's central theme: "You know, being in the Army has a lot of disadvantages, but there is one compensation, you're not alone anymore, against anyone". From here on, Parsons is freed of the burden of his problem and comes out of his shell. The manner in which Reed communicates his problems, from his positioning in the frame to his silence and final act of escape, one is able to glean much about his inner turmoil. *The Way Ahead* also employs such a character as a way of demonstrating how important it is for a group to look after its own in such challenging times.

The conclusion of *The Way Ahead* is an important indicator of Reed's regard for one of the key elements of British realism in this film: the uncertain ending.[65] After the intense village battle in North Africa, the men merge into a mist of thick smoke. As they come through the fog, the camera focuses on them one by one, resting on each face for a moment before moving on. Each man carries a rifle and wears a determined expression as they advance forward into

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[65] I do not mean to suggest that the technique of the uncertain ending is the exclusive province of British cinema. It was developed more extensively, and earlier, in the Hollywood cinema as a means of projecting a successful outcome of the war as could not be convincingly presented during the uncertain years of 1942 and 1943. Many Hollywood wartime films, such as *Flying Tigers* (1942), *Somewhere I'll Find You* (1942), *Wake Island* (1942), *Bataan* (1943), and even *Casablanca* (1942), used this device.

whatever will unfold in the future. The film is making the point that the end of the war is a long way off, and these men do not know what awaits them. Some of them will not return from combat to be with their families and friends.

To stress the uncertainty and open-endedness of the narrative's ending, Reed uses the title card: 'The Beginning' to complete *The Way Ahead*. Such a method is consistent with what many regard as realism in all forms of artistic expression. A narrative that does not tie up its loose ends or offer a neat conclusion is said to 'mirror life' and the nature of its diversity and unpredictability. It is also a sober way of ending a film that takes a contemporary war as its subject, even though by 1944 the tide of the war had begun to turn in the Allies' favour.

Films like *The Way Ahead*, *Millions Like Us* and *In Which We Serve*, demonstrate the influence that the documentary realism of the 30s had on the fiction films of the war period. *In Which We Serve* with its documentary style in depicting its action sequences, recalling Jennings' *Fires Were Started*, *Millions Like Us* with its emphasis on collectivisation, both suggesting a shift in the way that studio films approached the filming of events and the development of characters. This unique point in history not only called for films that depicted a wartime consensus, but it also brought together the usually divided groups of fiction and documentary film.

Documentary entered the mainstream and influenced the way wartime films approached their settings and characters. As Robert Murphy has said, 'the coming together of documentary and fiction is a coming together of intentions'.[66] The documentary film-makers saw that they needed to broaden their audience and

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[66] Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 143.

appeal, and the use of narrativisation during the war provided that opportunity. Likewise, the fiction film world realised after *Ships With Wings* that a melodramatic approach to war was not appropriate for so-called serious purposes, and the surface realism of documentary offered a way of legitimising their stories.

As I have outlined, aside from the creative sharing, both groups also saw the need to represent British society in whatever form, as united and harmonious. A post-war film set in a military setting such as *The Hill* (1965) about the brutality of Army discipline, in which the audience is encouraged to view the characters' insubordination as justified, could quite simply not have been made while the war took place.

The 1939-45 period not only signified the rise of realism as the privileged mode of representation in British cinema, and saw the survival of the strands outlined in the documentary chapter, but it also saw documentary realism take on a different role within society: to connect with, rather than ask questions of, the people. The next strand, poetic realism, is also involved in the creation of a wartime consensus but takes a very different stylistic approach to the lives of Britons during World War II.

Poetry for the masses – Jennings' wartime vision of Britain

C.A. Lejeune once made a statement that provides an apt introduction to the poetic realism practiced by Humphrey Jennings during the wartime era. She wrote that:

> The best and liveliest historians are those who can convey the feeling of a scene to later generations. For emotion, whether of fear or excitement, elation or impatience, or even a nervous and fretful triviality, is as much a part of any historical event as the deeds done or the people involved in them. Without some hint of this intangible quality, some ghost of a

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message from one human heart to another, no record, however factual, can

be either truthful or complete.[67]

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the purchase on the real world for this strand of realism, as distinct from the instructional or journalistic approach, is not simply an exercise in the recreation of surfaces, such as the apparent authenticity of photography (*Target for Tonight, Desert Victory*), or the accurate depiction of specific events (D-Day, Battle of El-Alamein). For poetic realism there is something else at stake that is quite separate from an adherence to, and representation of, the minutiae of contemporary events or indeed to a recognisable narrative structure.

The realism of this poetic mode of film-making resides in its ability to convey the intangibles, those seemingly elusive feelings and emotions, generated in this instance by a period of extreme crisis. In the documentary film movement of the 30s, poetic realism, as practiced by Robert Flaherty and, later, Humphrey Jennings (*Spare Time*, 1939), represented a comparatively minor yet compelling method of depicting the menacing and often beautiful elements of industrialisation. In *Industrial Britain*, Flaherty employed poetic realism to convey the effects that such contemporary economic changes were having on individuals, and collectively, the nation. It also defined in visually symbolic terms the *Zeitgeist*, or the way it might have felt to have lived at a time when steam and steel began to shape a modern, mechanised world. It stands to reason, then, that the outbreak of the war, with its inherent social and economic ramifications, would provide the perfect breeding ground for another generation of poetic realism in British film-making.

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[67] Reprinted in *The C.A. Lejeune Film Reader*, ed. by Anthony Lejeune, (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1991), p. 193.

Certainly the persistence of this strand from one era to the next can be specifically attributed to two inextricably linked factors: Britain's participation in the war and Humphrey Jennings' wartime involvement in film-making. Jennings' films represent the most significant contribution of any film-maker of the period to the endeavour of a poetic style of realism and so it is primarily his work that I will focus on here. In subsequent chapters I will discuss his direct influence on Lindsay Anderson's film-making and the uncanny parallels between Jennings' work and that of contemporary poetic realist film-maker Terence Davies.

It is widely held that Jennings produced his most significant and poignant films during this time, as he was focused on the contemporaneous issues affecting his nation and the crucial need to project a unified image of Britain. This is all the more evident when one looks at the films he made after the war. "In the post-war period, notions of the connectedness of experience became less appropriate, as political divisions developed within Britain"[68] and, as such, films like *Diary for Timothy* (1946) and *Family Portrait* (1950) which attempt to engage with issues of nationhood and identity, lack a sharpness of vision. In these films, "the contradictions and oppositions which are synthesised in *Listen to Britain* often remain unresolved".[69]

Therefore, the key to Jennings' successful execution of his poetic style was contemporaneity, and this defines his place in the wider scheme of British realist cinema. With the war as his subject Jennings was not operating outside the events he depicted; rather, he was witnessing them first-hand and so created films that were invested with a deeply emotional spirit and sense of purpose. Realism is dependent on just such an engagement with the here-and-now, lending a temporal weight to its concern with actuality.

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[68] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 216.
[69] Ibid.

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In 1950, Richard Winnington recalled that Jennings told him "firmly and passionately, that good films could only be made in times of disaster".[70] Lindsay Anderson believed that "it needed the hot blast of war to warm Jennings to passion, to quicken his symbols to emotional as well as intellectual significance".[71] Anderson also remarked that the films Jennings made throughout the war "will last because they are true to their time, and because the depth of feeling in them can never fail to communicate itself".[72] It is no surprise that Anderson should be drawn to Jennings, a fellow intellectual artist whose interest in surrealism – "he studied at Cambridge and was a key figure in mounting the first International Surrealist Exhibition in London"[73] – provides a strong link between the two film-makers who share an unconventional approach to issues of nationhood.

It is important to establish exactly what it was that Jennings was responding to within the context of a nation at war. Again, it is Anderson who provides some insight:

> Jennings was never happy with narrowly propagandist subjects...But in wartime people become important, and observation of them is regarded in itself as a justifiable subject for filming, without any more specific 'selling angle' than their sturdiness of spirit. Happily, this was the right subject for Jennings.[74]

This 'sturdiness of spirit' that Jennings so admired and sought to celebrate was principally defined by what Philip Strick identifies as a duality operating among wartime people in Britain:

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[70] Quoted in Philip Strick, 'Great Films of the Century No. 11 – *Fires Were Started*', *Films and Filming*, 7:8 (May 1961), 14-16, 35, 39 (p. 35).
[71] Lindsay Anderson, 'Only Connect: Some Aspects of the Work of Humphrey Jennings', *Sight and Sound*, 3:6 (April/June 1954), 181-86, (p. 186).
[72] Ibid.
[73] Brian Winston, *Fires Were Started* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 11.
[74] Anderson, 'Only Connect', p. 182.

> Jennings constantly returns during his war films to the reflection that
> Londoners in the blitz led a double life. During the day they were civilians,
> in businesses that were open as usual...At dusk, however, they became a
> sort of rearguard army...This transformation, from a daylight maze of
> individuals to a compact and determined defence force at night, was a
> patriotic phenomenon that appealed particularly to Jennings.[75]

The theme of a chameleon-like people, operating on two levels of activity like an efficient, well-organised machine, is the driving force of films like *Britain Can Take It* (1940), *Listen to Britain*, and *Fires Were Started*.

An important point to make here is that while Jennings' wartime films have been described as powerful propaganda due to his capacity to vividly portray a harmonious domestic front, he was not necessarily following any party line or participating in an organised propagation of governmental doctrine when he took on the subject of the unifying potential of war. While his personal preoccupations corresponded well with the kind of message the government wanted to covey to film audiences, he genuinely believed that there was something special, and specifically British, about the kind of behaviour he depicted again and again in his films.

The nature of Jennings' attitude to his home country and its people is described in his essay 'The English', where his nationalistic fervour is telegraphed:

> The English are in fact a violent, savage race; passionately artistic,
> enormously addicted to pattern, with a faculty beyond all other people of
> ignoring their neighbours, their surroundings, or in the last resort,
> themselves. They have a poetry which is the despair of all the rest of the

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[75] Philip Strick, 'Great Films of the Century', p. 14.

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world. They produce from time to time personalities transcending ordinary human limitations.[76]

It is abundant and colourful praise, with an acknowledgment of violence and savagery quickly followed by one of passion and creativity, not so much to outline a contradiction but a commonality: all represent something irrepressible within the English spirit. Certainly, there is a reliance on routine and a penchant for stubbornness, but there is poetry too, and above all the ability to overcome the limits of everyday life.

The suggestion is that what may appear to be failings or strange quirks of nature, are actually the qualities that have enabled the English to overcome great obstacles, in war and peace. Taken in the context of Jennings' wartime films and their celebration of a people's transcendence of an extraordinary shared experience, such a statement becomes a revealing lens through which one can better view Jennings' emotional and poetic response to this period in his nation's history.

Reconciling poetry and realism

Aside from the context and motivation of Jennings' film-making, it is necessary to define the *style* and *nature* of his poetic realism. How did Jennings go about unifying the seemingly contradictory spheres of poetry and reality, and what do the results reveal about the people of wartime Britain? Russian formalist Yuri Tynyanov helps to elucidate this peculiar strand of realism through his writings on the cinema. Like Eisenstein, he conceives of the cinema as having a poetic quality in its structure, through montage:

> In cinema, images do not 'unfold' in sequential order, nor is their development progressive. They *alternate*. That is the principle of montage.

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[76] Reprinted in Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 222-223.

They alternate in the same way that one metrical unit replaces another on a precise frontier in verse. The cinema makes 'jumps' from image to image as poetry does from line to line.[77]

Tynyanov's analogy of a cinema that is structured like poetry is relevant to Jennings' film-making, where individual images form part of a cohesive whole, developing a general idea about national identity or spirit.

In his introduction to *Pandæmonium*, an unfinished "imaginative history of the Industrial Revolution"[78] comprising images and ideas from the past, Jennings describes how historical iconography can reveal the emotional nature of a people:

And these images – what do they deal with? I do not claim that they represent truth – they are too varied, even contradictory, for that. But they represent human experience. They are the record of mental events. Events of the heart. They are facts (the historian's kind of facts) which have been passed through style: the feelings and the mind of an individual and have forced him to write. And what he wrote is a picture – a coloured picture of them.[79]

This extract is strongly reminiscent of the Lejeune statement quoted at the beginning of this section, where the best kind of historian is described as one 'who can convey the feeling of a scene to later generations'. Jennings understood the sentiment behind this assertion, believing that his task was to try and document the collective human experience of war, just as *Pandæmonium* provided a document of the collective human experience of Industrialisation.

What is interesting are the terms Jennings chooses to describe the process involved in selecting a variety of images that somehow represent the emotional

[77] Quoted in Christopher Williams, *Realism and the Cinema*, p. 142.

[78] Humphrey Jennings, 'Introduction', in *Pandæmonium, 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as seen by contemporary observers*, ed. by Mary-Lou Jennings and Charles Madge (London: André Deutsch, 1985), p. xxxv.

[79] Jennings, 'Introduction', in *Pandæmonium*, p. xxxv.

and mental condition of a people undergoing social change. He uses the phrase 'what he wrote is a picture', which deliberately blends words associated with distinct art forms, but in a sense, this is what Jennings does. It is this same mixture of artistic elements that has led many people to describe Jennings' modern-day successor, Terence Davies, as a 'painterly' film-maker.

The association for Jennings is partly symptomatic of his painting background, and his love of writing poetry, that Jennings should view his film-making style as akin to 'writing a picture'. In fact, this terminology is entirely appropriate when one looks at the way his films are structured. As Ian Aitken has described:

> In his films, Jennings is concerned to explore the revelation of the symbolic in the everyday, through the use of an impressionistic style dependent on juxtaposition and association. Jennings believed that within the collective consciousness of a people, a distinctive 'legacy of feeling' could be discerned, which could be captured symbolically through art. The task of the documentary film-maker is to record these manifestations through symbols. For Jennings, then, the documentary film-maker is both an observer, capturing what emerges from within the legacy of feeling within the nation, and a creative artist, embodying what is observed within an image containing a multiplicity of meanings.[80]

Returning to the writing/painting conflation again, it is useful to assess Jennings' use of images as a set of symbols that increase in significance when combined. From this point of view his films are composed like visual essays, building an argument from a variety of sources. Letters are symbols that have limited meaning in their singular form, but when combined can take on an infinite variety of

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[80] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 216.

meanings and associations. For Jennings, each image is - like a letter, a word, or a phrase - invested with meaning on its own, but, when viewed in a thoughtfully juxtaposed sequence, is augmented, gaining a wider meaning and context.

There is a relationship here between Jennings' poetic realism and Russian Formalism which is essentially a "theory of poetic language".[81] The formalists believed that "the cinema serves a symbolic function when it simply reproduces reality. It serves an aesthetic function when it forces us to attend in a special way (via its unnatural techniques) to that reality".[82] This, in turn, mirrors Jennings' view of wartime people, as unique individuals, yet all the more powerful when viewed collectively. In both form and content, Jennings is always more interested in the joint potential of images and people than any individual symbol or person.

To illustrate, I want to look briefly at the structure and content of Jennings' non-narrative wartime documentaries, *Listen to Britain, and Britain Can Take It* before examining his feature-length semi-narrative film *Fires Were Started* in greater detail. In the former documentaries, Jennings uses "assembled actuality footage in a creative way that...[does] not involve re-enactment".[83] For example, *Listen to Britain* comprises numerous sequences that depict a wide variety of civilian groups and behaviours, interlaced with images of war. As a film it represents:

> a move away from dependence on linear narrative, and an emphasis on
> associative editing. Sound and image are built up through a series of
> oppositions which express the underlying unity beneath apparent
> contradiction...an expression of the connectedness of experience; it

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[81] Andrew, *The Major Film Theories*, p. 79
[82] Ibid., p. 80.
[83] Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 137.

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projects a fluid and ambiguous space, within which meanings evoke a sense of national identity.[84]

Consider the parallelism of the concluding sequence of *Listen to Britain*. The film's climax is based around two simultaneously occurring lunchtime meetings, one in a workers' canteen where the Crazy Gang's Flanagan and Allen sing "Underneath the Arches", and the other, at the National Gallery where Dame Myra Hess performs Mozart for white-collar workers. The class distinction is clearly delineated by the setting of each performance, and the nature of the entertainment. It is the worker enjoying popular Music Hall performers cast against the high-art pursuits of the middle class. However, Jennings does not set up such an opposition just to point out the differences, or to make some form of judgement about the values of each class. This is a case of him juxtaposing overtly contradictory experiences for the purpose of demonstrating what each group has in common.

The film constantly cuts between the lunchtime scenes to independent images, such as close-ups of covered windows, a barricaded building with the windows concealed, an eerie image of a zeppelin hovering in the sky, a street scene where a bus picks up waiting passengers and so on until he abandons the cross-cutting between the lunch meetings, continuing with unrelated images of daily life in wartime London. Eisenstein's theory of montage (of which there are several) is important here, as the Russian conceives of the juxtaposition of images as a form of poetry. "They are rather like building blocks, or, to use his analogy, 'cells'. Cinema is created only when these independent cells receive an animating principle. It is montage that gives life to these stimuli".[85] Eisenstein invoked the

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[84] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 216
[85] Andrew, *The Major Film Theories*, p. 51.

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so-called 'alphabet' of Japanese language, particularly that of haiku poetry[86] to argue that "the film frame can never be an inflexible *letter of the alphabet*, but must always remain a multiple-meaning *ideogram*. And it can be read only in juxtaposition".[87]

As such, Jennings' symbols of wartime experience which form a bridge between the two groups depicted, combine to create meaning (the value of collectivisation in the face of upheaval) through montage. In isolation they are merely 'cells', cut adrift from that fabric of meaning. The lunch scenes themselves are significant statements of the worth of collective gatherings, of maintaining group morale through music, no matter what the style or location. Each group is seen enjoying its respective amusements, smiling, or in the case of the canteen, whistling in unison to the Flanagan and Allen song. For Jennings, music is a powerful signifier of unity among people. With *Listen to Britain*, Jennings demonstrates that "musicians and audiences are distinct from one another but on the same side; their particular locations, classes, jobs, tastes, differentiate them but do not divide them".[88] It is important that he doesn't attempt to magically erase the notion of Britain as a class-conscious society which would be utopian at best, and not in keeping with the realist mode of production. The film's main claim to realism lies paradoxically in its poetic style, as it establishes through opposition and contradiction the 'connectedness of experience' that existed between a variety of wartime people.

Britain Can Take It, a film credited to Jennings and Harry Watt, deals with the theme of the duality of Londoners during the Blitz. Originally titled, *London Can Take It*, this documentary begins with a sequence of shots depicting city-

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[86] Andrew, *The Major Film Theories*, p. 51.
[87] Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Filmic Fourth Dimension', in *Film Form*, pp. 64-72 (p. 65).
[88] Charles Barr, 'Broadcasting and Cinema 2: Screens within Screens', in *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. by Charles Barr (London: BFI, 1986), pp. 206-224 (p. 219).

dwellers making their way home from daily activities. It is an intense opening comprising quite rapidly edited shots that themselves depict people in a hurried state. The combination of the pace of the editing and the movement within the shots creates a sense of collective agitation. Groups of people are shown walking swiftly down the street or boarding buses, as though motivated by a shared agenda. According to the film, their aim is not simply to make it home before the hours of darkness and the threat of a bombing raid. American war correspondent Quentin Reynolds speaks over these images, describing the people as a "civilian army", those who work all day then hurry home to serve organisations like the Red Cross, contributing in various ways to the war effort. The connotation of everyday civilian crowds going home shifts to that of the mobilisation of disciplined "army" units.

The film's attitude to such dually characterised behaviour is clear from the shot that follows the opening sequence. It is of a street scene and features a building that carries a huge sign that reads, "Carry On London and Keep Your Chin Up". The notion of an unspoken consensus among wartime people is openly articulated here, with the suggestion of a united front working together to ease the burden placed on the nation by war. The film's commentator confirms this view a short time later when he states that "the people accept it as their part in the defence of London". They are "good soldiers". Adding to this is the ensuing juxtaposition of shots: masses of people waiting for access to public shelters, anti-aircraft artillery pointed towards the faint light of the dusk sky, an infant girl tucked in her mother's arms, a shot of the sky and the tops of buildings, search lights and guns manned by civilians. Firemen, air-raid wardens, ambulance drivers, all are members of the "people's army". There is constant cutting between

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shots of civilians preparing for combat, making provisions for safety, and the world outside, the sky that holds real danger for them, night after night.

Jennings and Watt follow this with actual footage of an air raid, revealing the utter confusion and alarm caused by the aerial attack and the swift response of the defence force at ground level. The authenticity and intensity of the footage is of course important to the realism of the film, but the film-makers do not employ it purely for this reason. Such terrifying images of war are used to heighten one's sense of the indefatigable spirit of the people who actually endured the experiences they represent. After the harsh sounds and confused images of the attack, the film cuts to "the very young and the very old" somehow managing to sleep in shelters. "Do you see any fear on these faces?" asks Reynolds. Such a rhetorical question is answered in images where people are shown to be peacefully asleep, while the ferocious battle is waged outside. Reynolds confirms this in a statement that concludes the film: "Bombs cannot kill the unconquerable courage and spirit of the people of London".

Like *Listen to Britain, Britain Can Take It* is concerned with the creation of a national legend or myth of consensus and collective transcendence. Jennings clearly had a romanticised view of ordinary people taking on roles they had hitherto never imagined for themselves. He once said: "I have found people extra helpful and extra charming in war time. They are living in a more heightened existence and are much more prepared to open their arms and fall into somebody else's".[89] Basil Wright has noted that he and his colleagues found Jennings' attitude to such ordinary people problematic, telling Elisabeth Sussex that "Humphrey seemed to show, in our opinion, a patronizing, sometimes almost sneering attitude towards the efforts of the lower-income groups to entertain

[89] Humphrey Jennings Collection, BFI Library, File 8.

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themselves".[90] He has since revised this somewhat harsh view[91], but it is an important one to note as representations of the working class by film-makers from upper class backgrounds tend to evoke this kind of response.

From Jennings' point-of-view it was entirely reasonable to depict people living in harmony, sleeping without fear while the war took place over their heads. It is difficult to dismiss the propagandist nature of such a myth-making vision, which in this respect is not dissimilar to *Target for Tonight* or *The Way Ahead*. Yet it is not the absolute truth or remembrance of history that is at stake for Jennings during the war. There is something unique about the style within which such a sentimental view of Britain is explicated. The poetic nature of Jennings' brand of realism is conveyed through the contradiction of shots of harmony and brutality, giving a sense of the unique character of the British people.

Fires Were Started

No film of the period better displays the power of poetic realism than Jennings' narrative film, *Fires Were Started*. It is a dramatisation of the activities of sub-station 14Y during, as an early title-card reveals: "the bitter days of winter and spring, 1940-41, played by the firemen and firewomen themselves". The *Documentary News Letter* of '?43 felt that the film contained "'the best handling of people on and off the job that we've seen in any British film', and that it offered 'maybe for the first time – proper working-class dialogue', and that all in all it was 'a fine and fruitful record of a way of living and doing a job that *did* work and of a discipline that came from the job itself'".[92]

This is not to say that Jennings had exclusive rights to the poetic potential of cinema during the war. Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale* (1944) and

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[90] Quoted in Sussex, p. 110.

[91] Sussex, p. 110.

[92] Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The feature film in British and American society* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 124.

Anthony Asquith's *The Way to the Stars*, both contain images that have a remarkably lyrical quality. However, there is more at stake in these films than poetic realism and any resemblances to this strand are purely flourishes. Just as the poetic in these narrative films was secondary to other considerations, so was the use of a linear story line for Jennings. *Fires Were Started* symbolised for him a rare foray into narrative film-making. In fact, apart from this film and *The Silent Village* (1943), which closely resembles Cavalcanti's *Went the Day Well?* (1942), all of Jennings' wartime films are made in his unique poetic documentary style, which is at odds with what we accept as Hollywood narrative realism.

Nevertheless, *Fires Were Started* is one of the most significant films of the period, and so its narrativisation cannot be overlooked. Jennings' use of a story line, however loose, problematises the notion of a strictly non-linear strand of poetic realism. Clearly, the line between narrativisation and that of poetic realism has been crossed. Such an example again highlights the fact that the strands of realism are not mutually exclusive. However, it is also true that while *Fires Were Started* is based around a dramatised story, Jennings is not overly committed to the narrative structure itself. For him, the story of the film is totally subordinate to the establishment of the mood of the time and the establishment of a familial sense of community among the firemen.

This group represents a microcosm of England, a family of men and (sometimes) women bound by the common goal of endurance. Their activities are simply the vehicle of elucidating such an idea. Unlike most fiction films of the day, *Fires Were Started* contains:

> No romantic interest, no set-piece rivalries...Jennings uses real firemen
> and real fires – kindled among the blitzed warehouses of London's
> dockland – but his aim is something more than documentary realism. It is

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the epic quality of the firemen's struggle that excites him and there are moments when his celebration of ordinary people working together in the shadow of disaster is very impressive.[93]

The opening shot and accompanying soundtrack of the film immediately alerts the viewer to Jennings' interest in the epic qualities of his subject. It focuses in close-up on a classical engraving of a group of firemen hanging on a wall. The music is grand, almost ostentatious. From the outset it is clear that the film-maker has artistic leanings and is concerned with the historical context of his filmic subject. His firemen are not merely civil servants, rather, they are introduced as modern-day gladiators, protectors of the nation. The voiceover reiterates: "When the Blitz first came to Britain, its fires were fought by brigades of regular and auxiliary firemen, each independent of the rest, though linked by reinforcement". On this level, the film is not just about firemen and their work, but about a process of myth-making, where firemen become soldiers standing between death-bringing flames and the people of England. So, while *Fires Were Started* is superficially a documentary about the AFS and its attendant procedures, Jennings' intentions are far removed from mere description.

Consider the sequence where the role of the female telephone operators is shown. Sound and editing are crucial to the explanation of how they fit into the firefighting system. Jennings cuts from shots of the women talking animatedly on the phones, to the clock on the station room wall, and then the information board. As the women adjust information on the boards and relay the changes to the men on duty, their voices begin to take on a lyrical quality as they harmonise vocally and co-ordinate the procedures of the AFS. Jennings uses their voices "passing on weather reports, the progress of the fires and the availability of pumps and units as

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[93] Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 40.

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a reassuring chorus"[94] Sound and editing, as they were in *Listen to Britain*, are used to create an atmosphere derived from the collective activity of people. What begins as a descriptive sequence of work processes becomes an expression of the unity of the company of women. Poetic realism is based on revealing the inspiring elements in the everyday.

As stated earlier, Jennings is not really interested in foregrounding individuals in his films. Individuals are important in so far as they benefit the promotion of unity among a group and represent a microcosm of the whole idea of wartime consensus. *Fires Were Started* is no exception to this rule, where despite the use of character names and some dialogue, there is no sustained effort to foster one's identification with a particular person. The dialogue spoken by the characters is either specifically related to the task of firefighting or comes across as the stereotypical kind of conversation the director imagines working-class people engage in. The suggestion here is that Jennings is too remote from the working-class and has no real knowledge of their lives. It is an accusation levelled at many realist film-makers, like Anderson, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson or Mike Leigh who do not hail from the milieux they have chosen to depict.

Philip Strick points out that "Jennings had a tendency to miss authenticity in his scripted dialogues; the colloquial framework is there, but in speech its spirit gets lost".[95] For instance, a fireman's wife farewells her husband who is off to face the dangers of his duty with: "Don't do nothing silly". This comes across as trite, despite Jennings' clear intention to feature the vocal cadences of real working-class people. Even so, the insubstantiality of dialogue is significant, as in narrative films dialogue adds a dimension to characters that actions or facial expressions alone cannot provide. Individuality is more likely to be obfuscated if an emphasis

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[94] Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 145.

[95] Strick, 'Great Films of the Century', p. 14.

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is placed on what people *do*, especially in a group situation, rather than what they say. Furthermore, the majority of the film takes place in the midst of a deafening fire, where dialogue is difficult to hear let alone understand. The men look for other ways to communicate, like hand signals and their knowledge of what needs to be done leads to a natural efficiency. What really matters for Jennings is that the people he films are *real*, they have actually experienced the sorts of things he portrays them doing and in the interests of realism this is paramount.

The film's use of characters as types or symbols is vital to the reinforcement of harmony among the firemen. As I have discussed, typage is a central facet of Eisenstein's film practice and it is important to Jennings' methodology, where symbols form a cohesive structure of meaning. One identifies people based on their role within the station: Griffiths is an obvious leader among men; Barrett is the new chap; Jacko is the plucky cockney selected to die. All are recognised in terms of their societal role, namely where they fit into the system of the fire station, not by any personal relationships or beliefs. In a Marxist conception of realism, typage is instrumental to the production of realism, as it allows a focus on the overarching *social* reality of an event.

The scene that takes place before the main fire sequence typifies such a use of characters. What takes place resembles a bonding ritual among the working-class firemen, and music is once more an important component in its construction. It is evening and the men are relaxing at the station, playing games like snooker and darts. They joke together in an expression of their camaraderie. Underlying the apparent ease of these interactions is a tension that suggests the men's anxiety about the tasks that the night will bring. "Jokes become broader, laughs more extravagant, personalities exaggerated. The cutting begins to chop

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more quickly".[96] The men involve themselves in distracting activities, concealing any fears they might have.

The increased pace of cutting coincides with the men preparing their gear while Barrett plays a lively version of 'One Man Went to Mow' on the piano. The song becomes non-diegetic as Jennings cuts to images of boats, and a building, the kinds of things the men will have to protect. The music continues as the film returns to the station where the men partake in a sort of mock-dance, a rowdy action designed to keep their spirits up. Each member of the unit takes up a refrain of the song and as each member comes in a new verse can be heard on the soundtrack. The use of music in this sequence cleverly fuses the men into an amalgamated group, moving away from expressions of personality into the preparations for duty. The men sing in unison and as each verse incorporates another member into the fold, the group is consolidated further. At the completion of the song, each man who had previously been fooling about is now in uniform and fully equipped for his role as a fireman. Any signs of individuality are consigned to the more serious needs of the collective group. Music, as we shall see with Terence Davies in Chapter Four, is used to promote the notion of a shared experience, and offers the sort of symbol of strength in numbers that was especially important during wartime.

One could argue that in the above scene Jennings romanticises the behaviour of the working-class firemen. In his article, 'The People as Stars: Feature Films and National Expression', Peter Stead remarks that the "handling of the firemen is assured, but the *Documentary Newsletter* noticed that there were moments when the director went 'all arty' and shots of firemen playing the piano, reading and reciting are there more as a projection of his own idealised view of

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[96] Strick, 'Great Films of the Century', p. 14.

the working man".[97] Stead also points out that such an idealisation is indicative of Jennings' "unfamiliarity with working-class people".[98] This is a problem that realist representations are susceptible to, and usually stems from the (mostly unconscious) patronage of the working classes by an educated, upper-class author. Although, as I stated at the outset, with Jennings such an approach to working-class people comes from an unstinting faith in this group as the foundation of England's struggle against tyranny. Stead himself attested to this when he wrote that it was Jennings' "love of the cultural and Socialist values inherent in working-class life that inspired his films".[99]

If Jennings handled the recreational pursuits of his working-class firemen clumsily, he did not err with the scenes of actual firefighting. As soon as the men leave the station after their supposedly cheerful interlude, the tone of the film changes to a sombre one. This change in mood is reflected on the men's faces as they ride in the engine towards a fire raging out of control. Jennings provides a series of close-ups of the men's faces. Some are pensive, while others offer a weak smile of reassurance to a comrade off-screen. It is a powerful sequence that belies the cheerful optimism of the earlier scene. Such details, like the way a man's face expresses his fear or anxiety are exactly where Jennings crystallises his poetic purchase on the real world. Emotions are candidly observed in this poignant scene, conveying the variety of feelings experienced by the men.

The notion that the firemen are a microcosmic symbol of the nation is powerfully rendered during the lengthy firefighting scene, as they display the virtues of teamwork and personal sacrifice and individuality is subdued. The danger posed by the fire is spectacularly represented in a succession of wide-angle

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[97] Peter Stead, 'The People as Stars: Feature Films as National Expression', in *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. by Philip M. Taylor (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 62-84 (p. 71).
[98] Ibid.
[99] Stead, *Film and the Working Class*, p. 124.

long shots. From a distance, the flames are shown bursting over the rooftops of buildings, like ghostly hands grasping at the sky. There is a pounding noise on the soundtrack as London is continually bombed that adds to the foreboding quality of the shots. In true poetic realist style reminiscent of *Industrial Britain*, the images of the fire are at once stunning and terrifying. When the firemen arrive and begin their assault on the inferno, Jennings uses rapid editing to recreate the chaos of the night.

He also highlights the dangers faced by the men at every turn, crosscutting between images of the fire at close quarters and the details of the firemen's task. At one point Jacko and Barrett are shown on the roof of the building trying to evacuate an injured Sub who has fallen from a scaffold. The towering inferno before them is an incredible sight to behold. At the same time as trying to lower the Sub to safety by rope, Jacko keeps his hose trained on the worsening fire as the blitz continues overhead. Jennings uses close-ups of his face to emphasise the physical effort and emotional distress involved in attempting to save his colleague *and* fulfil his duty.

While the men in *Fires Were Started* are portrayed as types, they are not totally stripped of all personality or emotion. Barrett leaves Jacko to attend to the injured Sub, until he is safely out of harm's way. Soon after, the roof collapses and Jacko is cast into the sea of flames before him. His hose does an involuntary dance in mid-air before it cascades limply to the ground, an emotive emblem of the life now lost in the fire. One man is saved while another is lost. Once more it is clear that Jennings' aim with *Fires Were Started* is not one of mere documentation. While following a more linear pattern of events, the images of Jacko's struggle, then death, form a deep statement about the heroism of human

sacrifice. It is folklore in the making, with Jacko standing in as the symbol of the nation's resistance to the uncertainties of war.

The firefighting is enunciated in terms of a battle, ending with a triumph over the fire that is achieved at a terrible price. Instead of building up meaning through images of opposition and contradiction to imply consensus, Jennings finds a context within which to construct "a symbol of the British patriotic spirit",[100] where the individual is prepared to make the ultimate declaration of devotion to duty and nation. Like soldiers, the group transcend their grief and go on fighting the fire, defining that intangible "sturdiness of spirit" that helped a nation to overcome extraordinary circumstances during the war.

A belief in the "underlying unity of the nation"[101] greatly influenced Jennings' wartime films. The emotional core of films like *Listen to Britain*, *Britain Can Take It* and *Fires Were Started* is located in those images that seem trivial when viewed independently: people at the theatre; couples dancing; huddled around the family wireless; singing in unison; children at play; men playing cricket. When combined, these fragments tell a tale about the nation of people they represent. It is a story about unity and mutual obligation, and is one that Jennings returned to constantly during the war.

Interestingly, what attracted him to his subject also led to the creation of a wartime consensus. Representations of the duality of wartime people in *Britain Can Take It*, the so-called 'connectedness of experience' developed in *Listen to Britain*, or the sacrificial act of bravery in *Fires Were Started* are all centred around promoting a consensual war effort. The mythological nature of such an notion stems from Jennings' elevated view of British people but it happily

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[100] Strick, 'Great Films of the Century', p. 15.
[101] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 217.

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coincided with the needs of the film industry and the British Government during the war: to encourage a sense of harmony among people.

While poetic realism certainly had a role to play in the realisation of such aims, Jennings' unique style elevates his films above that of mindless propaganda. His often insightful 'revelations of the symbolic in the everyday' allowed him to tap into the *spirit* of people faced with immense daily pressures and reveal something about how the times affected them. Lindsay Anderson suggested earlier that Jennings was never content with the limitations of propagandist subjects and the proof lies in his capacity to define the unique responses of wartime people to their situation. Anderson was also right when he said that Jennings' war films will be remembered because of the depth of feeling they naturally communicate. This is the legacy of the strand of poetic realism during this period, that is its ability to connect with the elusive feelings experienced by people during a collective crisis and convey them in a lyrical and often moving fashion that is at once personal to Jennings and yet about the very public experiences of the British during the war.

The wartime era in Britain saw a significant shift in the strands of realism in terms of the approach to certain themes and preoccupations common to the mode. The instructional mode as I have examined it, moved away from purely didactic instruction on a *domestic* level into a more journalistic style of *national* reportage, though its propagandist nature was enhanced rather than negated by the historical context of war. The fictional strand of realism, which overlaps in certain films with the latter strand, saw the use of a documentary regard for verisimilitude uncommon to studio-based film-making, as the war created a context in which a visual or stylistic authentification of narrativised cinema was required. The degree to which characters are made known to the spectator was defined through a greater regard for psychological or emotional realism in fiction

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films. The poetic strand maintained a strong continuity with that of the documentary period, and through Humphrey Jennings, engaged in a mostly non-linear form with the effects of national changes on groups in British society.

In all, collective, consensual activity is paramount to the articulation of a national cinema, so individuality and the key realist concepts of depicting social structures such as class difference are necessarily sacrificed. Another key theoretical concept of realism, contemporaneity, is retained during this period of wartime realist film-making, and interestingly, is the source of changes to the mode in British cinema. In dealing with the effects of war on Britain, the realist strands reinforced a national *mythology* about collectivisation and consensus, maintaining the documentary movement's engagement with *public* interests above the personal. The war created a unique context for such a myth-making approach to realist cinema, and as we shall see in the next chapter on the New Wave, societal and attitudinal changes in post-war Britain brought about a radical shift in the use of the strands with the mode of realism once again.

Chapter Three: The New Wave

The psychology and mythology of the individual:

The subject of this chapter is the Free Cinema movement[1] of the early-to-mid 50s and the New Wave, that period of British cinema limited to the years 1958-63, and, in my opinion, comprising only ten films, *Room at the Top* (1958), *Look Back in Anger* (1959), *The Entertainer* (1960), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), *A Taste of Honey* (1961), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), *A Kind of Loving* (1962), *Billy Liar* (1963), *Tom Jones* (1963) and *This Sporting Life* (1963).[2] Upon initial examination of this post-war period, the continuation of the realist tradition in its triumvirate form appears at first quite remote, and far more difficult to chart in any distinct way. Writing about these post-war developments in British realism, Andrew Higson contends that "these movements constitute at the same time a break with and a renewal of the British realist tradition, or genre. They both conform to the expectations of the genre, and transgress them in limited ways, thus producing a new sense of freshness, vitality, reality".[3] If in the documentary movement discussed in Chapter One, the strands were evidence of a splintered use of realism, the attempted shift away from the strands during the period of the 50s and 60s was meant to result in less of an evocation of the past, as the new generation sought to produce a far more personal engagement with contemporary stories and issues than the films of the

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[1] A series of film programmes at the National Film Theatre which included several documentaries made by young British film-makers, accompanied by various manifestos and polemics by the Free Cinema group. (Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 90)

[2] This list of New Wave films is not indisputable as films such as *Billy Liar*, *Tom Jones* and *Darling* (1965) are sometimes included, while other scholars, such as Peter Hutchings, argue that there was an intermittent engagement with realist practices and themes prior to 1958 by a number of British film-makers (see his article, 'Beyond the New Wave: Realism in British Cinema, 1959-1963' in Robert Murphy (ed.) *The British Cinema Book*, 2nd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

[3] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 90.

documentary and wartime eras. In Jakobson's estimation, the use of realism in this era is 'revolutionary', in that it views its own approach as 'more real' than that of past generations.

Beginning with the Free Cinema movement which I will discuss in more detail below, post-war realism sought to make "statements about the human condition that were markedly personal, that laid emphasis on the individual and his environment and dealt with the pressures, corruptions and frustrations of everyday life".[4] However, Higson argues that the Free Cinema films (e.g. *Momma Don't Allow*, 1955; *Everyday Except Christmas*, 1957; *We Are the Lambeth Boys*, 1959) are a restatement, albeit in new terms, of the instructional strand of realism, in that the "exposition is much looser and more ambiguous, but there is still a clear reliance on montage construction and an interplay of the public gaze and private points of view".[5] The limited number of films that can be described as belonging to the New Wave and their narrativised form, somewhat reduces the critical scope of this chapter and the exploration of the strands. This does not mean that the psychological and poetic modes of realism explored in previous chapters are absent from the realist landscape. The rise of individualised narratives and the influence of Humphrey Jennings' poetic style during this period saw a movement away from Mass-Observation towards a more psychologically complex, subjective cinema, recalling "Michelangelo Antonioni's suggestion that neo-realism can only develop by taking more interest in the private worlds and feelings of characters".[6]

In trying to account for the continuation of the strands that encompass the British realist tradition, it should be remembered that the sphere of influence and

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[4] Ernest Betts, *The Film Business: British Cinema 1896-1972* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), p. 272.

[5] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 91.

[6] Eric Rhode, 'Why neo-realism failed', *Sight and Sound*, 30:1 (Winter 1960/61), 27-32 (p. 32).

change was not limited to the cinema. It was British theatre, not film, that provided the original setting for the revolutionary return of realism to the British artistic scene in the late 1950s. The historic performance of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre on the 8th of May, 1956,[7] precipitated a wave of new plays like *A Taste of Honey*, *The Hostage*, *The Caretaker* and *Chips with Everything*, by fresh young writers, the majority from working-class backgrounds, who chose to engage with issues pertinent to British contemporary society. The direct link to the New Wave cinema was provided by these dramatic and literary narratives, many of which were adapted to the screen during this period. Much like the realms of art and literature in the nineteenth century, theatre in Britain's immediate post-war climate was still the province of the high-brow, dominated by such theatrical luminaries as Nöel Coward and Terence Rattigan who wrote about, and for, the upper echelon of society. Parallel to the advent of realism in the theatre was its re-arrival in distinctly new terms in British literature, through authors such as David Storey (*This Sporting Life*), Colin Wilson[8] (*The Outsider*), Kingsley Amis (*Lucky Jim*) and John Braine (*Room at the Top*), who were also producing challenging narratives that engaged with, and were critical of, contemporary British society, offering similar statements of protest in the literary medium.

In 1998, Ian Rickson, then Artistic Director of the Royal Court Theatre stated: "We're not particularly interested in plays with wigs or plays set in drawing rooms. We want to put real life on stage in all its complexity, and we

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[7] John Russell Taylor, *The Angry Theatre: new British drama* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), p. 9.
[8] It is significant that in the postscript to his book *The Outsider*, Wilson writes angrily of being lumped in with the other so-called Angry Young Men by the British Press: "In my case, nothing could be more grotesquely inappropriate". (New York: Harper & Row, 1953, p. 311). His tone is remarkably similar to that of Lindsay Anderson, whose critical writing always insisted on his separateness from anything that could be called a movement, or a convergence of ideas.

look for actors who can do that".[9] His words are a classic statement of realist

intent: to replace obsolete representations of genteel society and replace them with

everyday, so-called 'real life' experiences of ordinary people. Within the wider

context of realist theory and criticism, it is not a terribly original declaration, and

spoken in the late 90s, Rickson's sentiments are certainly not new to the Royal

Court Theatre. However, his words are an echo of the past and remain relevant to

the politically charged plays performed at the Royal Court as far back as 1956,

and the controversial films of the New Wave which took their narrative cues from

the 'angry young men'[10] who dominated the 60s British literary landscape.

Owing to the relatively short-lived lifespans of Free Cinema and the New

Wave, it is important to examine other British films of the period, particularly

those studio-based films that attempted a challenge to entrenched social attitudes,

within a melodramatic context. Running alongside the continuation of British

documentary-realist cinema in the late 50s and early 60s, director Basil Dearden

and producer Michael Relph made a number of controversial 'social problem'

films, dealing with sensitive issues in the mainstream. In an interview with Brian

McFarlane in 1989, Relph spoke about the New Wave of social realism: "We

welcomed it tremendously because that was what we had been trying to do,

although by that time we were a bit old-fashioned...All those regional people who

came in with the 'kitchen sink'[11] era were revolutionary, a real shot in the arm".[12]

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[8] Quoted in Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. xiv.

[9] Term coined by the media to describe writers who came to prominence in the latter 1960s in the wake of the Royal Court Theatre's production of *Look Back in Anger* (1956), written by John OSBORNE, who became the archetypal AYM, in the public perception at least. The AYM were vociferously opposed to the Establishment as they saw it, sustaining its privileges through the public school system, the Church of England, and all the subtle and not-so-subtle means open to a class-divided society. (Brian McFarlane, 'angry young men', in *The Encyclopedia of British Film*, ed. by Brian McFarlane, London: Methuen/BFI, 2003, p. 20)

[10] Phrase coined when a kitchen sink appeared on stage in *Look Back in Anger*, suitably shocking the upper-middle-class who were used to the drawing rooms of Coward and Rattigan.

[11] Quoted in McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, pp. 483-4.

While the films made by Dearden and Relph operate within a conventional narrative formula, their bold treatment of a wide variety of social taboos deserves some consideration. *The Violent Playground* (1957) was made at a time when "a psychoanalytical approach to personal problems...gain[ed] importance after the Second World War when social work assumed a new role".[13] As such, the film sees its main character, tough detective Truman (Stanley Baker), reach an understanding "that juvenile crime *can* be caused by poor parenting and inadequate social conditions".[14] The melodramatic framework of *The Violent Playground* sets it apart from a film like *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, which deals with juvenile delinquency in more abstract, poetic terms, but its engagement with psychological *and* societal influences gives it a narrative complexity not unlike the films of the New Wave.

Victim (1961) offered the first mainstream treatment of homosexuality in British cinema, and demonstrates Dearden and Relph's strong engagement with post-war discussions about sexuality. In Britain in the early 50s there was

> a growing debate about homosexuality, fuelled in the early 1950s by the
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> Home Office decision to tighten up the enforcement of the laws
>
> criminalising homosexual behaviour. This led to a series of high-profile
>
> prosecutions in the early 1950s, accompanied by lurid press coverage,
>
> although the policy backfired by drawing attention to the dubious
>
> procedures used by the police to get the cases to court.[15]

Victim brought this debate into the public realm of cinema and its attempt to generate sympathy for homosexuals by questioning the legislation that placed individuals at risk was ground-breaking. Relph was surprised that Dirk Bogarde, a

[12] Elizabeth Wilson, *Women and the Welfare State* (London: Tavistock, 1977), p. 86.

[13] Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 153.

[14] Ibid., p. 177.

famous matinée idol, should agreed to play the central role of Melville Farr, a married man facing blackmail because of his secret homosexual past, but it did not harm his career and helped to shore up the success of the film, despite its daring subject matter.[16]

Dearden and Relph challenged other important contemporary issues, such as racial prejudice (*Sapphire*, 1959) and religious fundamentalism (*Life for Ruth*, 1962), and in all the films discussed, they "use a melodramatic framework to accommodate a concern for social reform".[17] Some critics reacted cynically to directors applying traditional methods to social problems. V.F. Perkins wrote that

> The traditional "quality" cinema has given us a series of problem pictures
> dealing with, for example, race-prejudice (*Sapphire*), homosexuality
> (*Victim*) and education (*Spare the Rod*). Their method is to devise a
> number of stereotypes to represent every possible attitude to the matter in
> hand; they have no success in their attempts to pass these stereotypes off
> as human beings.[18]

What Perkins fails to see is the capacity of these films to engage the mass population, and the treatment of controversial subjects within the melodramatic mode ensured its reach beyond the limits of so-called 'art cinema'. The fact that the Dearden and Relph chose to examine such social issues at all points to a strong commitment to social issues *and* to mainstream film audiences. Far from underestimating them, as Perkins' does when he states that "these pictures are particularly offensive in assuming that their holy platitudes are too loftily intellectual to be accepted by audiences unless the pill of wisdom is sweetened

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[15] McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema.*, p. 483.

[16] Ibid, p. 161.

[17] V.F. Perkins, 'The British Cinema', *Movie*, No. 1 (June, 1962), 3-8 (p. 5).

with spurious excitement",[19] Dearden and Relph made an important contribution to the social cinema of the time, even if they felt 'old-fashioned' in the face of the more heavily intellectual, youth-oriented Free Cinema and New Wave.

Free Cinema – Mass culture and society

Free Cinema, founded by Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson and Lindsay Anderson, provides an important link to the instructional and poetic strands of documentary realism, and to the New Wave films where a shift from Mass-Observation to psychological narratives marks a significant change in emphasis within the British realist tradition. This move from the public gaze to the private, 'inner' worlds of characters is foreshadowed in the films of the Free Cinema movement, though there is still a largely traditional documentary approach to collective activity. Free Cinema was a brief but powerful period of documentary film-making led by Anderson as key polemicist and film theorist in such journals as *Sequence* and *Sight and Sound*. This period is often compared to the documentary era of the 1930s, due to the stylistic echoes mentioned above and its privileging of working-class experiences.

Yet, the intention of Free Cinema was to offer "a radical challenge to the existing forms of documentary film-making, which the group saw as now part of the Establishment rather than as critical of it".[20] The government sponsorship of the 30s documentaries is central to this idea of institutional bias. Free Cinema was not a movement in the sense that the documentary period was, and as Alan Lovell and Jim Hillier point out, in "talking about Free Cinema we are talking about something *partial*, an activity which is best regarded as an episode in the development of a particular tendency within the British cinema".[21] In a way, Free

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[18] Perkins, 'The British Cinema', p. 5.
[20] Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 90.
[20] Lovell and Hillier, *Studies in Documentary*, p.133.

Cinema can be regarded as a short bridge between two eras, for it demonstrates the influence of those 30s documentaries on contemporary film-makers like Reisz and Richardson, while making a stake for *now*, for modernity, youth culture and a new way of engaging with working-class narratives.

Part of the realist project for Free Cinema involved a need to set their activities apart from traditional cinema, either in Hollywood or Britain, despite what they might have in common. The overtly stated distaste for much of British and American cinema expressed by Lindsay Anderson, the central film-maker-theorist of Free Cinema and the New Wave, did not preclude some interesting praise. Anderson and his fellow *Sight and Sound* critic, Penelope Houston:

> Never ceased to hammer away at the political dangers and intellectual
>
> immaturity of much of the Hollywood product and yet not at all
>
> infrequently found themselves fascinated by either the poetry or the
>
> dramatic intensity of individual films.[22]

While Anderson wrote about the covert propaganda of Hollywood films like Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954, US),[23] he dedicated a whole book to the cinema of American director John Ford whom he considered to be "one of the great poets of humanity in our time".[24] The dual influence of the art cinema of Italy and France and elements of American cinema led to an interesting fusion of cinematic styles. Alan Lovell has stressed the importance of Anderson to British cinema at this time because of his attempt "to grapple with the problem of the British cinema's relationship with the American cinema and the art cinema by positively combining elements from both".[25] Lovell's assertion opens the way for a

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[22] Stead, *Film and the Working Class*, p. 179.

[23] 'The Last Sequence of *"On the Waterfront"'*, *Sight and Sound*, 24:3 (Jan-Mar, 1955), 127-30 (pp 127-30).

[24] Lindsay Anderson, *About John Ford...* (London: Plexus, 1981), p. 11.

[25] Alan Lovell, 'The British Cinema: The Unknown Cinema', BFI Education Department Paper, 13 March, 1969.

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discussion of British realist cinema that allows for outside influences, regardless of any perceived notions of opposition and isolation.

Anderson's polemical essays published during the 50s are characteristic of his desire to distance his work and that of his peers, from past and present British cinema, but he is drawn to the poetic humanity of Humphrey Jennings, to him a shining light on a dull stage. Anderson takes on the realist mode and its notional sign-post, working-class experience, as a way of rebelling against the social and artistic status quo, and somehow distinguishing the New Wave films from the rest of 50s British cinema. In his essay 'Get Out and Push', Anderson decries the status of British cinema and its seeming refusal to engage with contemporary subject-matter, namely, stories of working-class people:

> It is characteristic of a flight from contemporary reality by a whole,
> influential section of the community. And, which is worse, by reason of
> their control of the cinema, they succeed in imposing their distorted view
> of the present on their massive and impressionab'e audience.[26]

In pushing for films about contemporary subjects, Anderson unintentionally aligns himself with the realist films produced by the 30s documentarists or the wartime feature film-makers, and their emphasis on the present-day.

In another important essay introduced in Chapter Two, 'Only Connect: Some Aspects of the Work of Humphrey Jennings', Anderson pays tribute to the British artist and documentarist, but only after offering something of an apology for Jennings' involvement in the 30s documentary film movement, and marvelling that someone so interesting should have operated within such a context:

> Indeed it comes as something of a surprise to learn that this unique and
> fascinating artist was from the beginning of his career in films an inside

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[29] In *Declaration*, (1957), ed. by Tom Maschler (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1957), 153-81 (p. 141).

member of Grierson's G.P.O. Unit, and made all his best films as official, sponsored propaganda during the Second World War.[27]

Anderson then goes on to say in no uncertain terms that "it might reasonably be contended that Humphrey Jennings is the only real poet the British cinema ever produced".[28] Despite Anderson's disparaging comments about the documentary movement in general, his love of Jennings' work, which in Chapter Two formed the basis of the poetic strand of wartime realism, reinforces this period's continuation of the British realist tradition, albeit restated in new ways by individual film-makers such as Richardson, Reisz and Anderson.

It is not difficult to place the influence of Humphrey Jennings' poetic realism and, its connection to the creation of national identity, in the early films of Free Cinema. There is a strong degree of traditionalism present in films like *Everyday Except Christmas* and *We Are the Lambeth Boys*, epitomised by the title, 'Look at Britain' that Anderson and Reisz gave to their respective films. The echo of Jennings' film title, *Listen to Britain* is also an extension of Free Cinema's sense of patriotism, such as in *Everyday Except Christmas*, when 'God Save the Queen' is played in non-diegetic accompaniment to the early morning efforts of the Covent Garden market workers. Anderson has spoken about this sequence and the traditionalism it implies:

> I've got nothing against traditionalism unless it is distorted and made absurd. But often this is misunderstood. In *Everyday Except Christmas* there is a little prologue when a truck is driven off through the dark streets to the sound of 'God Save the Queen'. Now when that film was shown to the National Film Theatre the audience laughed because that was the trendy London audience who thought that if you played 'God Save the

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[30] Anderson, 'Only Connect', p. 181.
[31] Ibid.

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Queen' you must be sending it up. But this wasn't the intention. In fact,

Everyday Except Christmas is a very strongly traditional film.[29]

Anderson also confirmed that the use of the title 'Look at Britain' was a product

of his and Reisz's patriotism.[30]

The treatment of the workers in *Everyday Except Christmas* also recalls

Jennings' wartime celebration of collective activity and the romanticisation of the

fishermen in Grierson's *Drifters*. The film is defined by these two influences, the

nationalist-poetic in Jennings and the instructional-romantic in *Drifters*. Higson

points out that Anderson's film "operates within the liberal humanist tradition of

representing working people as dignified and heroic".[31] The hushed, almost

reverential tones of the upper-class narrator, a key element of the instructional

strand of realism, create a sense of awe that is out of proportion to the simple tasks

of crate packing and unloading on display. Like the instructional strand, *Everyday*

Except Christmas relies on its narrator to define the content of the montage

sequences that make up the film. Echoing the criticism of *Housing Problems*,

John Hill asserts that "what is absent is the voices of the workers themselves, or

their interpretation of events, either reduced to inconsequential chatter or overlaid

with a musical soundtrack".[32]

Higson's notion of "an interplay of the public gaze and private points of

view"[33] is exemplified in one montage sequence that recalls a similar interchange

of public and private perspectives in Jennings' *Fires Were Started*. Anderson's

montage comprises a series of shots that use diegetic music to emphasise the

relationship between individual workers. Like the scene in *Fires Were Started*

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[29] Quoted in Jonathan Hacker and David Price, *Take 10: Contemporary British Film Directors* (Oxford: OUP, 1992), pp. 49-50.

[30] Ibid., p. 50.

[31] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 91.

[32] John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism* (London: BFI Publishing, 1986), p. 133.

[33] Ibid.

where the firemen sing in unison and as each verse incorporates another member into the fold, the group is consolidated, the Covent Garden workers are shot individually, each carrying crates and singing as they work. Anderson's montage proceeds fluidly as each worker is depicted moving either to the left or right of the frame, conducting the same form of labour, singing a line of the same tune. This representation is reminiscent of the kind of interplay between public and private points of view one would find within the 30s documentary instructional strand.

Momma Don't Allow, directed by Reisz and Tony Richardson, is another key Free Cinema film that, unlike *Everyday Except Christmas*, focuses on leisure instead of labour. It is a compelling slice-of-life documentary detailing a night in the social lives of a group of unnamed and unheard (the soundtrack does not feature discernible dialogue) young, working class people. Like *O Dreamland* (1953), it also makes a case *against* mass culture, and the "erosion of traditional, organic culture".[34] Higson argues that *Momma Don't Allow* "poses the question of whether the newly emergent perception of 'spontaneous youth culture' (the jazz club in the film) has come to replace the traditional forms of working-class culture as the site of 'real', 'authentic' cultural values".[35] There is a subtle form of patronisation at work here, as the directors, operating at a remove from the experiences of their working-class subject, offer "a middle-class conception of what working class youth needs".[36] Here traditionalism extends to the notion of working-class life, which is viewed as organic and therefore central to British national identity.

In Chapter Two I discussed a similar criticism of Jennings' work, but the influence of his wartime films extends beyond its middle-class perspective, as

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[34] Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p. 133.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Eves, 'Britain's Social Cinema', *Screen*, 10.6 (November/December 1969), 51-66 (pp. 60).

Momma Don't Allow adopts a comparable poetic style to that of *Listen to Britain*, cutting between images of people at work, groups leaving their jobs for the evening and convening for a night of dancing to melancholy, evocative jazz music. As I have mentioned there is no dialogue, so the film relies on the music and general sounds of chatter and laughter on the soundtrack and the physical interactions between people to illustrate the nature of its chosen milieu. In the contemporary setting of Reisz and Richardson's film, the emphasis is on the younger generation and their modern lives (music, cigarettes, stylish clothing, individuality), and the pursuit of entertainment (occupations such as butcher or dental nurse are presented as a means to an end).

Unlike the Jennings approach to collective activity where indistinct groups of people from all classes are shown within a shared framework, the purpose of poetic realism here is to demonstrate the conformity of the group. The characters in the film are depicted as an interchangeable mass without distinction, reinforcing the film's traditionalist view of mass culture. Like Anderson's *O Dreamland*, "there is a continual ambiguity in the use of eyeline matches, such that it is impossible to be sure who is looking at what".[37] This "respect for the traditional working class and hostility to the corruptions of modern mass culture",[38] are in tune with the sense of loss contained in Jennings' *Spare Time* and Flaherty's *Industrial Britain* as organic British qualities of craftsmanship are supplanted by machines. The influence of traditional styles of British realism on Free Cinema expands to include a shared attitude to cultural change as it affects the working class.

The emphasis on the working-class and the presence of key stylistic influences such as instructional and poetic realism in films like *We Are the*

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[37] Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p. 152.
[38] Ibid.

Lambeth Boys and *Everyday Except Christmas* suggests that there is a strong link to be made between the 30s documentary period and Free Cinema. However, "if [Free Cinema] is related ... to feature films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, A Taste of Honey, This Sporting Life* [and so on], the continuity is not so apparent".[39] Just as the central documentarists of the 30s, Jennings, Watt and Cavalcanti, moved into the realm of fiction film-making during the war to express their personal creative styles, so too did the major players of Free Cinema such as Richardson, Reisz and Anderson, inevitably make the shift from documentary to fiction films.

The result was twofold: "it changed the focus of interest in the British cinema away from the documentary film"[40] and led to a shift away from the public gaze to a more personal, individualistic approach, as classic fictional narratives tend towards an engagement with a central protagonist whose story is followed through a series of cause and effect episodes. The New Wave chose male protagonists in domestic, working-class contexts as its signpost of a new kind of realism, and this marks the first major shift from the antecedent generations of realism, as we move away from mass observation to a greater focus on the individual.

The New Wave – Cultivating the myth of the individual

The anti-Establishment climate of post-war Britain created the perfect context for young writers and film-makers to rise up and attack the status quo through plays, novels and films. The result was a brief resurgence of realism as *the* mode of representation in British mainstream cinema, and the rise of the working-class, usually male, individual as the signifier of that realism. The New Wave films also developed the visual and aural iconography of realism that is so

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[42] Lovell and Hillier, *Studies in Documentary*, p. 134.
[43] Ibid.

specific to British cinema, where contemporary images of local environments are used to establish a sense of place, space, class and time.

In Chapter One, I introduced Higson's phrase, 'That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill', the term he uses to describe a shot "where we are outside and above the city, but where the city is itself prominent in the frame".[41] This 'Shot' is used frequently, often serving a function beyond that of the conventional establishing shot, in such films as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *This Sporting Life*, and *A Taste of Honey* to evoke a sense of place and has become an indelible part of the fabric of British cinematic realism.[42] John Hill argues that:

> Conventional narrative films tend to be characterised by a high degree of ordering and minimisation of 'redundant' detail…By contrast, what becomes a characteristic of the 'new wave' is its deployment of actions, and especially, locations which are ostensibly non-functional, which only loosely fit into the logic of narrative development.[43]

The reiteration of place in these films has more to do with the signalling of a working-class milieu, and, by extension, realist intent, than setting in the conventional sense.

The use of the domestic realm is also central to the working-class realism of the New Wave, as for the first time the middle-class sitting-room was usurped by the working-class kitchen, or home, as *the* locus of narrative development, signalling the conflation of realism and the everyday. The choice of actors was also important to the creation of a specifically *British* realism in the 50s and 60s, such as the casting of Albert Finney and Tom Courtenay, who were Northern working-class men with strong vocal links to their origins, indicating their

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[41] Higson, 'Space, Place, Spectacle', p. 145.
[42] The opening credits of the working-class British television drama, *Coronation Street*, contain a classic example of this 'Long Shot' which has become synonymous with realism in Britain.
[43] Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p. 129.

'authentic' place and class in wider British society. All of these elements, along with the details of everyday life (as grimy streetscapes, noisy pubs brimful with people sharing a drink after work) depicted in the films of the New Wave accumulate to form a larger picture of place and class that is now instantly recognisable as British realism.

The shift from the public interests of community that characterised the wartime era to the private considerations of the individual in the 50s coincided with a change in the way that the working-class began to perceive itself. Writing about British social cinema in 1969, sociologist Vicki Eves stated:

> There is some evidence that working-class attitudes are now moving towards a slightly more individualistic orientation – and although the films of the Free Cinema directors do not show us a strongly individualistic, home-centred proletariat, they do centre on characters who feel that they have to make their own way in the world – unlike the miners of *The Stars Look Down* who know that achievement can only come from collective action.[44]

Just as audiences in the late 1950s began to look to a new type of meaningful cinema,[45] the working-class began to perceive itself in a highly individualised way, a fact substantiated by the individual-oriented narratives produced by working-class writers such as Allan Sillitoe and David Storey.

The New Wave individual is usually set against the ideological needs of the 'group' and thus engaged in intense personal conflicts and a new kind of realism began to emerge which attempted to go beneath the surface reality of

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[47] Eves, 'Britain's Social Cinema', pp. 64-5.
[48] Penelope Houston and Duncan Crow, 'Into the Sixties', *Sight and Sound*, 29:1 (Winter 1959/60), 4-8 (p. 5).

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things to the 'inner life' of its individual characters. Hill writes that the implication for British realism at this time was that:

> It should do more than merely duplicate the surface realities of working-class life. Karel Reisz was careful to distinguish 'sociological fact' from 'poetic truth' while Walter Lassally...suggested that the 'remarkable thing' about the 'new wave' was not its 'strictly realistic view' nor its treatment of 'working-class problems' but its 'very poetic view of them.'[46]

What Hill, Reisz and Lassally are invoking is Bazin's view of poetic realism, who believed that "there was no way of speaking of realism without poetry and conversely no film or technique could approach the poetic without a degree of realism".[47] Dudley Andrew has elaborated on this Bazinian idea by suggesting that "'poetic realism' vaguely addresses what most audiences seek at the movies, something that is true to life, yet more concentrated and intense than life".[48] As I shall demonstrate, the New Wave film-makers employed psychological *and* poetic realism as *the* key modes to explore and reveal the intangibles of human experience.

One of the established ideas about British realism that is beginning to emerge in this thesis is the extent to which its diverse application contributes to the articulation of a national cinema. Within this articulation is the development of certain mythologies about what it means to be British and the shifts in the nature of those myths reveal as much about changing attitudes within British society as they do about the shifting nature of the film realism directly engaged with that society. In the previous chapter, the myth-making enterprise centred around the notion of Britain as a unified community during the war years. What the films of

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[46] Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p. 129.
[47] André Bazin, *"Le jour se lève*...Poetic realism", in *Le jour se lève*, ed. and trans. by Dinah Brooke and Nicola Hayden (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1970), pp. 5-13 (pp. 8-9).
[48] Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. x.

this period:

> ...lacked, and what was not to emerge until the period of 'Free Cinema',
> was an awareness of class antagonism and an absence of caricature. The
> emphasis in *Millions Like Us*...and the other comparatively few films
> making some form of social comment in the forties and early fifties, was
> on national character, underplaying the divisive factor of class.[49]

I have chosen to characterise this particular version of national identity at a
point in history as mythological because its images were created "as a substitute
for direct knowledge or experience".[50] Social conflict, ever-present in British
society, was replaced in films like Pen Tennyson's *The Proud Valley* (1940), with
images and narratives that reinforced the myth of social harmony. Eves noted the
gap between the Britain depicted at this time and that which actually existed:

> As during the war period miners did strike (and were imprisoned) one
> must conclude that industrial conflict was therefore clearly manifest and
> that [Michael] Balcon's 'national mood' was certainly not the mood of
> even the specific section of the population with which Tennyson was
> dealing.[51]

Just what this suggests about the class concerns and ethical considerations of the
film-makers are areas I will elaborate on later in this chapter.

While the war created a need for British film realism to depict a false sense
of social harmony, the post-war period saw realism shift its boundaries from the
politics of consensus to a far more individual and questioning engagement with
contemporary issues such as class, sex and sexuality, work, and race. If the
chaotic war period required the projection of a unified national identity, the

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[52] Eves, 'Britain's Social Cinema', p. 52.
[53] Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'Movie and Myth', *Sight and Sound*, 32:2 (Spring 1963), 60-64 (p. 60).
[54] Eves, 'Britain's Social Cinema', pp. 53-54.

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opposite is true of the New Wave, as realism's other potential use – as an instigator or reflector of individuality and social change – determined the kinds of representations of British society on offer. "The 'New Wave' films now *acknowledge* the separation of the individual from key political decision-making processes, and use the generic form to explore this social gulf in psychological terms (alienation as a state of mind) as in sociological terms".[52]

The apparent sense of alienation endured by the 1958-63 working-class individual as depicted in the films of the New Wave was very much a product of the new challenges faced by young people in post-war Britain, coming to terms with the initial affluence of the boom period (higher incomes, rampant consumerism, full employment, new housing) and the subsequent realisation of how the foundation of this new and improved way of life was extremely superficial. "What the rise in incomes and apparent abundance of consumer goods disguised then was the fragile and temporary base upon which such 'affluence' had been secured. Moreover, what it also disguised was the persistence of inequality in the enjoyment of 'affluence' and its continuing complicity with a structure of class division".[53]

So, while one could afford more than before and acquire the kinds of consumer goods that superficially indicated a newfound wealth and social equality, in fact, "economic inequalities had not been eroded".[54] The class system was alive and well, and so too the sense of disaffection with a society that on the surface appeared to offer greater opportunities but was actually operating under the same hierarchical structure of inequality and difference. This social reality and the alienation it caused for a particular type of individual informs all of the New

[55] Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", pp. 92-3.
[56] Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p. 9.
[57] Ibid.

Wave films and the characterisation of their central protagonists (usually working-class men). This shift in usage from the collective (public) to the individual (private) does not mean that the realist enterprise of the so-called New Wave, is any less concerned with the projection of a myth related to British national identity. This time the myth of the alienated, working-class, male, anti-hero was explored in the ten films that comprise the New Wave period of realism.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith recalls the reception of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* to suggest another gap, this time between the fictional social experiences depicted on screen and the dominant social origins of contemporary film critics and audiences. Nowell points out that class origins influenced the interpretation of the anti-hero myth, either as 'real' because it was remote from one's experience or as an 'ideal' despite the mythological aspects of his make-up:

> Most middle-class spectators (and critics) accepted the film as a realistic picture of working-class life, because it fitted in with a vague idea they had of the subject—mythical, of course, but only in the loosest sense of the word. For many working-class spectators, on the other hand, *Saturday Night* was a myth in the narrow sense, he did things, like getting blind drunk when he felt like it, or sleeping with his mate's wife, which morally or materially they were afraid or unable to do, and they identified with him as an ideal, the mythical hero, different from the heroes incarnated by Marlon Brando or Kirk Douglas only in being more local and accessible, a hero of our own place and time.[55]

The localisation of the anti-hero myth influenced two major areas: it increased the level of identification for those who lived in similar social circumstances and his domestic proximity helped to ground the films in a recognisable milieu even if the

[58] Nowell-Smith, 'Movie and Myth', p. 60.

events or people seemed alien. In this sense, British realism, through its treatment of contemporary, native experiences, facilitates the creation of cinematic myths by offering an unfamiliar character set within a recognisable milieu.

There is also a point to be made about contemporaneity and the limited social knowledge of the middle-class critic or spectator, for whom the films of the New Wave introduced a set of working-class characters who were actually perceived as exotic despite their domestic frame of reference. As Allan Sillitoe, key novelist of the period, asserted in 1960: "*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was well received by the book critics, but that was because its Nottingham setting was so far from their own experience that I might as well have been writing about Istanbul".[56] The gap between social experience and those depicted on screen can result in an automatic acceptance of representations *outside* of the middle-class milieu and undermine the degree to which the anti-hero is recognised as mythic.

As I discussed in Chapters One and Two, the use of working-class character types prevailed in the realist strands of the documentary and wartime periods. By comparison, the rise of the New Wave protagonist suggests that this era of British realism is concerned to offer far more psychologically complex working-class characters. The protagonists of the films, such as Jimmy Porter from *Look Back in Anger* and Joe Lampton of *Room at the Top*, are multifaceted individuals, characterised by numerous traits. Among other things, the New Wave anti-hero in his various guises is depicted as loving, sexual, violent, tortured, articulate, remorseful, introverted, and rebellious.

While these central characters are permitted all of the complexities previously given to people only of middle-to-upper-class backgrounds (eg. *Brief Encounter*), there are numerous examples of lower-class stereotypes in these

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[59] Quoted in Derek Hill, 'A Writer's Wave', *Sight and Sound*, 29:2 (Spring 1960), 56-60 (p. 58).

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films, drawing further attention to the middle-class perspective of working-class life that informs the New Wave films. The 'typage' I am referring to during this era is linked in the films to the insidiousness of mass culture and female consumerism.

In *A Kind of Loving*, Vic's mother-in-law, and to a lesser extent, his wife Ingrid (June Ritchie) are stereotypes of women who engage with popular culture and little else. Ingrid doesn't read and, like her mother, is obsessed with television soap operas and game shows. In this film, "the viewing of television is associated with women, Vic's wife and mother-in-law, whose preoccupations throughout the film are highlighted as shallow and consumerist".[57] The film is scathing in its depiction of these women, heightening our sense of Vic's disgust at the superficial life he has settled for.

Despite the gap between Vic's mother-in-law and Colin's mother in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* in matters of aspiration, the latter is characterised in similarly judgemental terms, as the death of her traditional working-class husband signifies a shift in the family's value system. The money bestowed upon the family after the husband's death is quickly exchanged for frivolous products purchased by the mother, who also takes up immediately with another, more 'modern' man, the exact opposite of her husband. Rather than explore her motives more deeply, the film consigns her actions to a symbolic role, signifying as they do, the moral bankruptcy of the modern era and the "triumph of female consumerism".[58]

In these instances, character typage has become caricature, and it is not limited to the women, or the working-class. The upper-middle class Jack Wales (John Westbrook) in *Room at the Top* is portrayed in an extreme way, because he

[57] Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p. 156.
[58] Ibid.

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functions as a symbol of the society that Joe cannot enter[59], just as the parodic authority figures in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* are symbols of the society that seeks to suppress Colin. Despite the repeated use of stereotypes, and "the feeling that this is a middle-class vision of the working class which, of course, taking into account the social background of the directors…it is",[60] the main characters of the New Wave provide an important link to the next era of realism, as working-class people were permitted all of the anxieties, fears and doubts of the middle-class.

As I have explained, Marxist and Lukáscian theories of realism demand that art depict the tensions that exist between the individual and society, thus revealing "the underlying causal networks which bring phenomenal reality into being".[61] For Lukács, a representation could only claim to be realist when it encompassed both the external *and* the internal, such as the details of a given society and an account of an individual's experience of that society. While the wartime era analysed in Chapter Three, with its mythical emphasis on community at the expense of individuality, could not conform to Lukács' notion of realism, the New Wave and its focus on individual experiences of contemporary society correspond, in part, to Lukács' realist aesthetic.

In the British cinema of the 1958-63 period, realism is absolutely defined within the boundaries that Lukács describes and the result is a list of films that depict brutally honest assessments of contemporary society[62] *and* the effects of that society on the individual in question. In this sense, British realism in this era is more overtly *politicised* than ever before, because it is as interested in the social

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[59] Eves, 'Britain's Social Cinema', p. 63.

[60] Ibid., pp. 63-4.

[61] Aitken, *European Film Theory*, p. 193.

[65] Even by today's standards, a film like *A Taste of Honey* takes a disarmingly honest attitude to issues like single motherhood, inter-racial sexual relationships, and homosexuality, all filtered through the eyes of a young girl who is at once innocent and terribly mature about modern life.

dynamics that affect individual lives. However, counter to the Lukácsian

conception of realism, the social conflicts encountered by the New Wave

individuals appear to stem from personal rather than industrial or political

phenomena. According to Higson, "it does seem as though social relations are

marginalised in favour of personal relations, and the formal strategies of the genre

are newly inflected towards this exploration of – if not fulfilment of – individual

desires".[63]

Unlike other studio-based films of the period, like *The Angry Silence*, *I'm*

All Right Jack (1959) and *No Love for Johnnie* (1961), which "deal, quite

specifically, with a form of [industrial] social conflict",[64] the anti-heroes of the

New Wave experience personal crises that stem from their aspirations and

relationships with women, their families or communities: Joe Lampton aspires to a

middle-class way of life, but is tragically in love with a woman who would

compromise his 'ideal' life; Frank Machin from *This Sporting Life*, is boastful,

intense and in love with a widow who refuses to accept him; the swaggering anti-

hero of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Arthur Seaton, wants 'more' but

never really finds a way to achieve it; *A Kind of Loving*'s Victor 'Vic' Arthur

Brown finds himself trapped in an unhappy marriage and Billy Fisher of *Billy*

Liar, who lives through fantasy and finds he does not have the courage to take

what he wants from life.

In all of these cases, the macrocosmic community of Britain that

dominated films of the wartime era has been replaced with "the 'traditional

working-class community'...[now] the setting for the exploration of the

psychological complexity of the (usually) young working-class male protagonist

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[63] Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 93.
[64] Eves, 'Britain's Social Cinema', p. 64.

of these films".[65] In turn, industrial or external conflict is marginalised in favour of personal crises that exist within private, internal parameters.

The psychological and the poetic

I have established that the major shift in the New Wave era, from the public gaze of documentary realism to the private 'inner' world of individual characters, resulted in a greater degree of psychological realism than ever before in British cinema. Just how this 'inner' world is revealed on screen has yet to be developed with regard to the New Wave films. That there is a connection to the use of poetic realism is the major assertion of this section of Chapter Four. I will explore this idea more closely in a lengthy analysis of Tony Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, but for now I will outline the technical and stylistic aspects of psychological and poetic realism.

Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment argue that in films like *A Taste of Honey* and *This Sporting Life* the 'poetic' realism of Free Cinema is carried over to the "stylistic excess of creative montage"[66] to develop the psychology of characters. For instance, in *A Taste of Honey*, Jo (Rita Tushingham) accompanies her negligent mother, Helen (Dora Bryan), and new boyfriend Peter (Robert Stephens) to Blackpool, and montage is employed to convey Jo's isolation, and a pejorative view of Helen and mass culture. "The shots of obvious pleasure on the faces of the couple are intercut with a close-up of the laughing face of a clown (used in an earlier documentary on Southend and Margate, *O Dreamland*) that seems to mock their enjoyment, critiquing the commercial culture that is the source of their delight".[67] On one level, the montage operates to give a sense of Jo's alienation from her mother, it also caricatures the leisure activities of the

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[65] Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 92.
[66] *Realism and Popular Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 49.
[67] Ibid., pp. 49-50.

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lower-class couple, and communicates the film's view of the mother as grotesque. Higson has also written that:

> the montage constructions in [Tony] Richardson's films produce a poetic
> experience of a state of mind – for instance the montage of shots of the
> canal which a melancholy Jo walks beside in *A Taste of Honey*, or the
> montage of shots of the countryside as an 'ecstatically free' Colin goes
> running in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*.[68]

The same poetic use of montage occurs in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, where the opening sequence depicts images of industrial sites that recall the photography of *Industrial Britain*, and again, that famous 'Long Shot' identified by Higson, as the camera lingers over the rooftops of row upon row of poor housing. "Reverberating with connotations of personal freedom and entrapment",[69] this sequence interacts with the conflicting content of Arthur's subjective voice-over narration saying "don't let the bastards grind you down" and the poetic images of town and place that dominate the introduction (our first sighting of Arthur is substantially delayed considering his centrality to the film). Here, montage is used to suggest that Arthur's philosophy has a limited prospect of success. In the shift from the public gaze to an individualised approach to psychology in the New Wave, a movement from "an 'objective' statement of commonality and universality, to a 'subjective' impression of experience"[70] has also occurred.

Montage is not the only stylistic technique used in the development of psychologically complex, subjectively conceived, characters. The "excess of

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[68] Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 93.

[69] Hallam and Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, p. 49.

[70] Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 93.

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mise-en-scène is [also] integral to the psychological development of characters",[71] and in Anderson's *This Sporting Life*, moves the poetic into the realm of the surreal. There are two scenes in the film that are as perplexing as they are powerful, and what they say about the kind of realism sometimes on display during this era is worth noting.

The first scene in question takes place at the hospital towards the end of the film. Frank has gone to see Mrs. Hammond (Rachel Roberts), the woman he loves, where a doctor tells him she is dying, or at least, has lost the will to live. To this point, *This Sporting Life* has shown their relationship as a battle of wills, or a conflict between her desire to hold on to her past (the memory of her deceased husband) and his need to possess her and bring her to him. It is indeed significant that a film made during this period should depict such a conflict, as all of the New Wave films engage in some way with the onslaught of modernity on a more traditional or preferred way of life.

Mrs. Hammond is in a comatose state, and Frank sits beside her, gently whispering and stroking her hand. Frank looks above the bed and sees a large spider crawling down the wall towards them. Holding a hand above Mrs. Hammond's face to shield it, Frank reaches up to try and kill it but it falls away from him. The visual symbolism is clearly intended to suggest something about the nature of their relationship, and why Mrs. Hammond is dying. This notion is reinforced when Frank looks down at her face and sees dark ribbons of blood oozing from her mouth: she is dead. Frank is obviously devastated and does not want to accept that she is gone. He looks at the wall again, and we see, in close-up, the spider once again and the Frank's fist crushing it to death.

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[71] Hallam and Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, p. 49.

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It is a surreal scene that recalls the skewed cinematic worlds of Cavalcanti in the 30s and 40s, and suggests that for Anderson, or for Schlesinger with a film like *Billy Liar* with its fantasy sequences, there is more at stake in this period than realism. However, the spider scene speaks volumes about Frank's nature, his relationship with Mrs. Hammond and his current emotional state, and so the slippage into surrealism is not unwelcome.

The same can be said of the eerie country sequence earlier in the film, when Frank takes Mrs. Hammond and her children to a park which is near the ruin of an old church. There is a wide, long shot of Frank playing with the children. The landscape is spacious and picturesque. The outdoor country setting means that there is more natural light than the film has shown before, so the scenery is bathed in bright sunshine. It is a poetic scene until the focus shifts to Mrs Hammond and there is again a tilt towards the surreal. She is framed in a medium shot against the backdrop of the church ruin, making it seem extraordinarily dark in contrast to the sunlight we have just seen. The image is a portent of the future, with Mrs Hammond placed firmly in the realm of the past and through her association with the ruined church structure. Her separateness from the others in this brief but powerful scene does not bode well for the future as she continues to be torn between two worlds.

The shift of realism from a documentary context to fiction films allowed a greater degree of scope to explore the inner lives of the people that inhabit the New Wave films. The question of how a film like *This Sporting Life*, with scenes such as these that, on the one hand, are strange and dreamlike, comes to be judged as a realist film relies on a analysis of *what is at stake* in the film. Clearly, for Anderson, like Jennings before him whose films are far less conventional in their

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revelations of a legacy of national feeling, a naturalistic rendering of surface reality is secondary to an elucidation of private feelings.

Bazin's own conception of 'poetic realism' is that "the greatness of...cinema stands out in the way it provokes its 'poetry' by reference to the social conditions it directly sets forth, and at the same time by the way it inflates a social conception of life to a level Bazin was not hesitant to call 'metaphysical'".[72] As such, the poetic use of montage or the excesses of mise-en-scène in the New Wave became important ways for the New Wave film-makers to visually apply serious emotional and aesthetic weight to the symbolic experiences of the working-class individual.

Just as Jennings and Flaherty originated the idea that the working-class life could be photographed poetically and meaningfully, the New Wave film-makers used poetic realism to illustrate the complexity and beauty of the relationships, environments and lives of their working-class subjects. Although, as we have seen, the externality of the middle-class directors to this working-class environment problematises the nature of certain characterisations which swing towards the parodic or the romantic. An analysis of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* will extend this discussion of psychological and poetic realism.

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner

Directed by Tony Richardson, based on a story by Allan Sillitoe and starring Tom Courtenay, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* is an important film of the New Wave in that it contains key examples of poetic and psychological realism and has a complex central character who struggles to assert his identity within a social context that seeks to suppress his individuality. I have chosen it for close analysis as Colin Smith (Courtenay) is the paradigmatic anti-

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[72] Andrew, *Mists of Regret*, p. x.

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hero of the New Wave, struggling with community, family and personal conflicts that led to his eventual subversion of the status quo.

The film operates on two levels of perceived reality: the present, where Colin is incarcerated in a Borstal for juvenile delinquents, and the past, where through a series of memory sequences we learn about Smith's family and social life, and his emotional state and sense of alienation, then and now. The use of memory or flashback sequences and their often lyrical treatment are typical of the New Wave manifestation of psychological realism, and of what sets this era apart from other generations of realist film-making in Britain.

Not all of the memory sequences in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* are presented in the same style: some are matter-of-factly expressed, while others are defined by a sense of nostalgia and poeticism that sets them apart. It is significant that the only memories that receive any sort of poetic treatment are those that deal with Smith's relationship with his girlfriend Audrey (Topsy Jane) and the times they spent together before his arrest for robbery. The first time that Smith and his friend Mike (James Bolam) meet their respective girlfriends, Audrey and Gladys (Julia Foster), they go to a hilltop overlooking the industrial landscape of their home city of Nottingham. A long panning shot takes in a panorama of factories as billowing clouds of smoke rise out of steel parapets.

Again, in the same way that *Industrial Britain* makes such a shot seem at once threatening and breathtaking, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* lingers over its industrial vista with poetic intent, pausing to view the menacing beauty below. The scene takes on a misty appearance and the soundtrack becomes quiet as the couples lie in the grass together and speak in hushed tones. Sitting above the harsh reality of Nottingham, the couples appear to have found a tiny pastoral oasis of calm above a sea of churning industry, or at least, this is the way

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that Smith remembers it. His memory of this incident is imbued with a strong sense of romanticism and thus its poetic treatment suggests that it is particularly special to him. In a Bazinian sense, the clouded surface of this memory sequence "corresponds in a physiological way to the dreaming state".[73] If the scene is blurry it is because Colin's memory is vague, or romanticised.

The other major sequence that involves the two couples – the trip to the beach – is represented in a similarly poetic manner. The contrast between town and country life is poignantly conveyed as Smith, Audrey, Mike and Gladys spend a carefree day walking among sand dunes, sharing a brief respite from their Nottingham lives. The camera spends a long time at a distance from the characters, allowing the open spaces to dominate, signifying the freedom they find there. Again, the appearance of the sequence is quite hazy, denoting the physiological state of dreaming or remembrance and its place in the past and the feeling that it gives its owner to recall it. The purpose of Smith's poetically rendered memories of Audrey is to provide insight into his psychological and emotional state, both at the time, and now.

It is important to consider just when Smith has these memories: the hilltop sequence occurs not long after he is brought to Ruxton Towers and follows immediately after Smith's memory of his father, dying in bed; the beach memory takes place when Smith is allowed to run outside the Borstal grounds without supervision for the first time, and again, immediately follows an unhappy family memory, that of his mother using his father's insurance money to buy household and other superfluous luxury items. It would seem that Audrey provided Smith with a haven from his everyday existence in the past, just as she does for him now, in the present, if only in the form of memories. Smith uses memory as a form of

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[73] Bazin, 'Le jour se lève', p. 5.

escape, and the more freedom he is given to run on his own, the more freely do his memories flow.

Distinctions are important in British New Wave cinema, particularly the contrast between different modes of realism and various ways of life, whether it is the industrial set against the pastoral, or a Borstal dormitory set in opposition to good and bad memories of home. *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* uses Smith's memories to demonstrate his emotional and psychological complexity, and to allow the audience a greater point of access to its protagonist's thoughts and feelings.

While the film communicates Smith's individuality and sense of his own identity through a series of flashbacks that elucidate his inner life, the narrative proper is concerned only to deny him any form of overt personal expression that might lead to rebellion. The sporting activities of the Borstal institution, such as rugby and athletics, are employed as an analogy of conformity to the institution's rules, so that throughout the film, Smith's level of participation in sport can be seen as a marker of how far he is willing to 'play the game', or is able to express his individuality.

The Borstal Governor (Michael Redgrave) is a great believer in the rehabilitative powers of sports, despite assertions to the contrary from the Borstal psychologist, Mr. Brown (Alec McCowan), who argues that the boys' emotional needs must be addressed first: "I was just wondering whether life wasn't a little more complicated than a football match". Brown sees that life is more complex than sport, and that such troubled young men require more sophisticated treatment. The authority of the Borstal is upheld by the continued willingness of the boys to compete well in sports and their conformity to this central rule is viewed by the Governor as an indication that they are reforming.

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To co-operate with the status quo in this scenario is to participate and excel in an arena valued excessively by one man. His main "ambition" for the Borstal institution is that they defeat a neighbouring public school in the cross-country run and when he learns that Smith is a natural distance runner he encourages him to train: "you might find you've a great future ahead of you as an athlete". However, these are the Governor's ambitions, not Smith's, and no amount of encouragement or privileges can erase the statement made by Smith early in the film: "I'm gonna let them think they got me house-trained, but they never will, the bastards".

The majority of the film is taken up with Smith's training sequences as he runs across country, and while these are also given poetic treatment which is, in part, informed by the pastoral landscape, the distance of the camera, the soft, natural light of the sky and Smith's apparent sense of freedom, they do not indicate that he is necessarily happy to have been chosen by the Governor to lead the cross-country team. The final scene of ultimate rebellion is not surprising when placed in the context of Smith's current state of incarceration and the nature of his memories of home.

We have seen that he has become estranged from his family who have embraced post-war consumerism after using his father's insurance money to facilitate their new lifestyle (the television blares with mindless advertisements and a Tory politician uttering platitudes about the luxuries now available to all), and from his mother who moves her sleazy boyfriend into the family home only hours after his father has died. Smith doesn't want to work while the inequities of the current system still exist and he despairs that the values his father once held have been so swiftly abandoned in his own home (he burns the money his mother gives him from the insurance payout). With all of this knowledge of Smith and his

personal sense of alienation in mind, it is easy to understand his decision at the end of the film to deliberately lose the cross-country run after leading: It is his statement of rebellion against the Governor and the status quo he represents, and the first situation in his life where he is in control and able to decide what to do.

As the hordes of boys around him scream for him to "Run!!", Richardson cuts between shots of Smith's strained and conflicted face, images and voices from his past, and shots of the trophy he stands to win to illustrate his inner turmoil as he builds up to his decision to reject everything that the Governor, and his society, stands for. Just as the realism of this film is essentially poetic and psychological, it can also be found in the rebellion of its protagonist and the fact that while this is a significant personal triumph for Smith, he remains in the Borstal in the end and is not embraced by his fellow inmates: in the world of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, it is only important that the individuality of its central character is at some point able to be expressed, but like other films of the New Wave, there is no illusion that society is now changed because of it or that even the life of that individual will be any different.

Although Free Cinema and the brief New Wave that followed it cannot be considered as movements, what is interesting for the purposes of this thesis is the degree to which the echoes of the past are apparent with a continuation of the strands of realism established in earlier chapters. As much as Lindsay Anderson tried to distinguish his films from the tradition of realism in British cinema, it would seem impossible to depict poetic images of the working-class in Britain without evoking Humphrey Jennings; to examine the nature and simplicity of labour without recalling Flaherty and Grierson; or portray the psychological through the surreal and the strange without suggesting an affinity with Cavalcanti.

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The traditionalism that characterised the Free Cinema films is also carried over in the films of the New Wave through the partiality shown towards a specific kind of working-class life that has somehow been forsaken for modern mass culture. The notion of a British national cinema, produced in opposition to Hollywood cinema and non-realist British narrative films, is again a strong theme of the current realist era. In its movement away from the public gaze of documentary cinema practised within Free Cinema, the New Wave embraced a more individualised narrative model, leading to a development of psychological realism and a continuation of the poetic realist strand.

In keeping with the concept of British realism that is emerging in this thesis, the New Wave was able to stake its own claim to a particular manifestation of realism through its engagement with a society making significant changes and the social attitudes and problems that existed there. The rise of the anti-hero myth and a more overt politicisation of realism in this era of the 50s and 60s provide significant links to the next generation, where we shall see that an even greater emphasis on politically challenging narratives (Ken Loach), the complexities of working-class life and the usage of types (Mike Leigh) and the restatement in extremely personal terms of poetic realism (Terence Davies).

Chapter Four: Contemporary British Realism

Politics, satire and memory in the work of three directors:

British realist cinema from the 1980s to the present has not been defined or precipitated by a movement, cataclysmic world event, nor a convergence of like-minded individuals whose work could feasibly be described as a 'New Wave'. However, the repressive political and economic climate in Britain under Thatcherism created conditions that contributed to the rise of a new era of film realism. During the 1980s, the "British film industry underwent unpleasant shock therapy under Thatcherism. The quota ensuring that all cinemas showed a percentage of British films was abandoned in 1982; the Films Act of 1985 abolished the Eady Levy[1] and pulled the plug on infrastructure that ensured they reached an audience was kicked away".[2] Despite the difficulties of producing and releasing films of any kind in Britain during this disastrous period, "a clutch of films emerged which made a powerful riposte to the Thatcherite ideology of self-interest and materialism".[3]

Once again, realism became an important avenue for questioning the status quo for film-makers like Ken Loach (*Riff-Raff*, 1991), or to reassert the humanity to be found among the working classes for Mike Leigh (*High Hopes*, 1988). For Stephen Frears (*My Beautiful Laundrette*, 1985; *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, 1987), Hanif Kureishi (*London Kills Me*, 1991) and Paul Greengrass (*Resurrected*,

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[1] Named for Sir Wilfred Eady, the treasury official who devised the scheme, this levy was introduced in 1950 as a temporary, voluntary measure to aid film production and became enshrined as a regular form of support for the film industry in the Cinematograph Films Act of 1957... It clearly respected box-office success but its abolition in 1985 was a further setback to producers in already constrained times. (Brian McFarlane, 'Eady levy', in *The Encyclopedia of British Film*, p. 193).
[2] Robert Murphy, 'A Short History of British Cinema', conclusion in *The British Cinema Book*, pp. 255-67 (p. 263).
[3] Ibid.

1989), realism was also a powerful mode of highlighting the experiences of Britain's Asian community or in the latter case, the detrimental effects of the Falklands War on a returned soldier. There are also numerous examples in contemporary British cinema, of directors who have made films with strong claims to realism: Chris Bernard (*A Letter to Brezhnev*, 1985), Mike Ockrent (*Dancin' Thru the Dark*, 1990), Coky Giedroyc (*Stella Does Tricks*, 1996), Angela Pope (*Hollow Reed*, 1996, UK/Ger), Carine Adler (*Under the Skin*, 1997), Gary Oldman (*Nil by Mouth*, 1997), Tim Roth (*The War Zone*, 1999, UK/It), Anthony Neilson, (*The Debt Collector*, 1999); or, whose film work has included films that are compatible with the realist strands in British cinema, but who also produce work in a variety of other modes: Neil Jordan (*Mona Lisa*, 1986; *The Crying Game*, 1992), Antonia Bird (*Priest*, 1994), and Michael Winterbottom (*Go Now*, 1996; *Wonderland*, 1999; *The Claim*, 2000, UK/Fr/Can). All of these film-makers have taken on realism, in different guises, as the mode of representation that will define their contribution to cinema.

In his article, 'Paradise Found and Lost: The Course of British Realism', Geoff Brown argues that realism has not been the dominant mode or style of film-making in the British cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, and he is certainly correct if one considers the weighty presence of "the fantastical films of Derek Jarman (*Caravaggio*, 1986; *The Garden*, 1990), the surrealism of Peter Greenaway (*The Draughtsman's Contract*, 1982; *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, 1989, UK/Fr), Danny Boyle's black, urban comedies *Shallow Grave* (1994) and *Trainspotting* (1996) and the heritage cinema of Merchant-Ivory (*A Room with a View*, 1985; *Howard's End*, 1992; *The Remains of the Day*, 1993)".[4] Brown asserts that this modern British cinema is a far cry from the model of realism

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[4] Brown, 'Paradise Found and Lost: The Course of British Realism', in *The British Cinema Book*, pp. 187-97 (p. 196).

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espoused by Grierson in the 1930s. He writes that "out in British cinema's commercial sector, a hundred years after the medium's birth, Grierson's concern for 'recording...the real world' finds scant reflection".[5] All of the films mentioned above contain elements that are recognisably British, yet many modern "film-makers are variously adapting, adopting or paying homage to American cinema rather than setting themselves in total opposition to it".[6]

This diverges from the attitude of the New Wave film-makers discussed in Chapter Three, where the realist mode was adopted in opposition to the dominant Hollywood paradigm in order to emphasise specifically *British* notions of national identity. Brown also quotes film producer Andrew MacDonald (*Shallow Grave*, *Trainspotting*) who said of his involvement in the style of the latter film, "We made a very early decision...that it wasn't realism and we didn't want to do it like that...Real cinema...is about the imagination, about fantasy".[7] It is true that there has been a push away from the spectre of Grierson, or the images of the New Wave that gave social realism its localised sense of place and space. Certainly, in terms of the triumvirate of strands (instructional, story and poetic) within the wider tradition that are the focus of this thesis, the modern manifestation of realism can at first seem disjointed.

In some ways, contemporary British realism has become a more malleable, adaptable mode of representation in the hands of modern directors. For instance, there is a sequence in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), which, in terms of style, is curiously unlike that of the rest of the film. It is the section of the film that depicts the funeral of the title, and it seems to belong to a different kind of film, one that has more in common with the instructional strand of British realism

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[5] Brown, 'Paradise Found and Lost', p. 196.
[6] Samantha Lay, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), p. 102.
[7] Brown, 'Paradise Found and Lost', p.197.

epitomised by *Housing Problems* or the poetic realism of *Industrial Britain* than any other non-realist mode of representation: the bleak horizon of smoke stacks and industrial structures; the portentous clouds heavy with rain; the rows and rows of uniformly designed houses, all signalling a shift in the film's tone due to the death of Gareth (Simon Callow). It is the sheer working-class nature of the images that is so startling here, in a film where none of the characters is viewed outside of their exclusively upper class context. We see where they live, such as the mansion where Fiona (Kristin Scott Thomas) and Tom (James Fleet) live, but we never see the characters at work, or where they have originated from, until the funeral sequence.

What is remarkable about this section of the film is that Mike Newell, in seeking to portray Gareth's last rites, should choose such an incongruous setting. Before his death from a heart attack, the film provides no hint that Gareth hails from working-class origins, in fact, everything about his character suggests the exact opposite, from the company he keeps, to his speech and diction. It is, of course, not the kind of film that is concerned with such things; its characters exist to facilitate the aims of the narrative formula and so we know as much about them as we need to. Clearly, by the 1990s, working-class realism had become such an entrenched signifier of the more sober, human aspects of British life, that it is seems natural for Newell to adopt realist iconography when dealing with such things as death and grief. As opposed to the dominant Hollywood classical narrative style of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, which was apparently far too lightweight and whimsical (characteristics that depart from the British realist tendency for solemnity), to do justice to the loss felt by the other characters after Gareth's death, British documentary realism is adopted as a convenient mode of representing the bleaker moments in life.

On the one hand, modern British class life has entered the mainstream in a way that it has not before, and in some cases, most particularly with films like *Brassed Off* (1996), *The Full Monty* (1997), and *Billy Elliot* (2000, UK/Fr), have been spectacularly successful at capturing the ordinary cinemagoer's imagination on a worldwide scale.[8] All of these films are set in Northern working-class communities, and have some important things to say about the nature of life in those communities in a post-Thatcher environment. They contain some tough, emotional scenes, but often seem too self-conscious to support their apparent claims to serious realism.

The images of Northern life that grew out of the realism of the late 1950s and early 1960s have the unfortunate tendency to appear imitative rather than inherently inspired in the context of 1990s cinema. It is fair to suggest that "the passage of three decades has reshaped... [the] images [of the 1960s] to connote a distinct, recognisable, image of nation"[9] Aside from the relationship between British realism and the development of a national cinema, it is also the case that issues of class and place remain pertinent for this new generation of film-makers which explains why so "many 90s films stabilize their representations of regional difference within the UK by articulating the north/south divide in terms borrowed from 1960s cinema".[10]

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[8] In her article, 'Men in the 90s' (in *British Cinema of the 90s*, ed. by Robert Murphy, London: BFI, 2000, pp. 156-67), Claire Monk notes that *The Full Monty* displaced *Four Weddings and a Funeral* as British cinema's biggest all time hit in 1997-8 (p. 160). It has since slipped to number three since the release of the first two Harry Potter instalments (BFI website: www.bfi.org.uk); *Billy Elliott* was nominated for several American Academy Awards (Director, Screenplay, Supporting Actress) and won BAFTA awards for Best Film, Best Actor in a Leading Role (Jamie Bell) and Supporting Actress (Julie Walters) and numerous nominations; *Brassed Off* made less money and received less official praise through coveted award nominations than its counterparts, but was critically well-received, and was second only to the juggernaut of *Trainspotting* in the British box office results for 1996 (BFI).

[9] Moya Luckett, 'Image and Nation in 1990s British Cinema', in *British Cinema of the 90s*, pp. 88-100 (p. 94).

[10] Ibid.

Repetition is a key factor in contemporary British cinema, and in this thesis, with many references to past films signalling an awareness of the power such images still hold. Films like *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998), and *Gangster No. 1* (2000, UK/Ger/Ire), while imbued with a strong sense of modernity, are evidently conscious of iconoclastic British crime films such as *The Italian Job* (1969), and *Get Carter* (1971), just as "*The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off* borrow the shots of 'our town from that hill' from the realist/New Wave films with equal awareness".[11] Inserting the now-clichéd shots of smoke stacks and public housing has become a way of suggesting a kind of realism by association while remaining within the mainstream of cinema: the British working-class tradition is alluded to but not embraced in any radical way and a Hollywood-style optimism prevails. However, as John Hill has pointed out, what these "films have done successfully is provide – despite the persistence of politicians in arguing for the classlessness of British society – a reminder of the continuing economic divisions within Britain as well as giving voice to the desire for a different kind of society in which community and social attachment are accorded greater importance".[12]

It would be easy to imagine that with such a volume of films and film-makers intermittently contributing to the wider body of realist work in Britain that the tradition of the strands has been dispersed, absorbed, or forgotten entirely. Samantha Lay makes a case for the modern phenomenon of the "star-author" in British social realist films, "a new development which in many ways confirms Higson's assertion that realist tendencies in British film have been characterised

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[11] Luckett, 'Image and Nation', p. 94.
[12] 'Failure and Utopianism: Representations of the Working Class in British Cinema of the 1990s', in *British Cinema of the 90s*, pp. 178-88 (p. 186).

by a move from public to private, and personal".[13] This arc of development has seen realism in British cinema shift from the publicly funded era of the 1930s documentary movement, to the publicly sanctioned wartime period of realism, to the privately inspired group of New Wave film-makers, and now it rests in the hands of individuals whose purchase on realism is far more personal.

What Lay does not investigate is whether the so-called "star-authors" such as Loach, Leigh, Roth and Oldman, to name a few, have pulled realism further away from its antecedent eras, delineated by such terms as instructional/didactic (Grierson, Watt), fictional/surreal (Cavalcanti, Anderson) and poetic/psychological (Jennings, Richardson). Lay's investigation of social realism does not extend the notion of the strands defined by Higson, rather, it is more concerned with an examination of how market forces have splintered realism into a variety of areas. As important as the commercial aspects of cinema are to discussions of British realist cinema, there are three central contemporary British directors who have invested more screen time in realism than any others in Britain, Ken Loach, Mike Leigh and Terence Davies, and despite the deeply personal nature of their approach to realism, their work is also strongly representative of the strands of realism as identified by Higson.

The most remarkable thing about the trajectory the strands of realism have taken through the incomplete contemporary era in British cinema is the individuality expressed within the strong repetitions of the past. The principal representatives of this modern era that I want to discuss are all archetypes of modern British realism, all deeply personal film-makers and all committed to their own purchase on British life. They are also responsible for the often uncannily related continuation of a three-pronged tradition that has survived decades of

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[13] Lay, *British Social Realism*, p. 102.

upheaval and social change, without detracting from the idiosyncratic relationship realism can have to the film-makers' personal interactions with British life.

Politics and Persuasion – Didacticism in the films of Ken Loach

There is no other British director working today who has such a level of commitment to a politicised brand of realism as Ken Loach, which is the reason for the exclusive focus on him here. Like Mike Leigh, Loach has developed a uniquely personal approach to his particular purchase on realism during a long career spent examining the lives of Britain's working class. "He generally doesn't cast well-known actors, but looks for individuals closer to the subject matter, bringing with them added authenticity".[14] For instance, in casting for *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994) he chose Crissy Rock, a Liverpudlian comedian, to play the central character, Maggie, and Vladimir Vega, a musician, to play her boyfriend, Jorge. In *My Name Is Joe* (1998) the young soccer players are all played by local Glaswegians with no acting experience.

There is something very natural about the performances given by these non-professional actors, a trend begun in Britain by the documentary film movement, which is central to the realism Loach is striving to achieve. Loach has described the importance of using naturalistic performances in his films and how he assists the actors in this enterprise:

I never work closely on the words, because then the words would become stale. You need to see the thought come into the brain of the actor. You see it behind his eyes; the real uncertainty. The camera can pick out the lie very quickly…But for the kind of things I do, you've got to try and

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[14] Sara Squire, 'Ken Loach has the film bug again', in *Moving Pictures*, 28 October, 1993, p. 18.

prevent that premeditated quality so that you feel that it really has just happened.[15]

Further to this, "there are never any rehearsals before filming...[Loach] has informal chats and holds improvising sessions, developing the characters in the process".[16]

One example of this approach is the filming of *Family Life* (1971), which involved a lot of improvisation, especially the scenes between Janice (Sandy Ratcliffe) and the analyst, "based on the family knowledge which everybody had".[17] Producer Sally Hibbin describes the process of filming *Ladybird, Ladybird*:

> 'Ken always films in script order and the cast is only given the script for the scene they are about to film...the idea being that the actors have less time to prepare for the scene, allowing their responses to be more natural...There is never much commotion around the set of a Ken Loach film. He has this ability to merge into the background, with nobody really noticing him, but all the while the camera is running'...Loach films in 16mm and at eye level. 'There are no wide-angle shots, and the set is lit to look as real as possible', says lighting cameraman Barry Ackroyd, explaining the documentary look so characteristic of Loach's films.[18]

The use of non-actors and a documentary-realist style suggest an alignment between Loach and the tradition of British documentary realism established by John Grierson. Considering his commitment to exposing social inequities, it seems at first a strange idea to suggest that Loach has anything in common with Grierson or the realist tradition he is associated with, namely, the instructional or didactic

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[15] Quoted in Hacker and Price, *Take 10*, p. 300.
[16] Squire, 'Ken Loach has the film bug again', p. 18.
[17] Hacker and Price, *Take 10*, p. 300.
[18] Squire, 'Ken Loach has the film bug again', p. 18.

form of documentary cinema, but closer examination of Loach's work reveals as many points of intersection with this strand of realism as it does a sense of his individuality and personal beliefs.

In the concluding passages of his 1974 autobiography, Harry Watt writes about the status of forms of documentary film-making at the time of publication in 1974. He decries the development of *cinema vérité*, which he believes to be as "phoney as a four dollar bill",[19] because of its spurious claims to spontaneity. "One unit went into a factory during an industrial dispute, and filmed for a month. Their first viewing copy—for an hour-long film—lasted thirty-two hours! So then they started cutting, selecting, and rejecting, in fact making their own personal interpretation of the material".[20]

One of the few "glimpses of hope"[21] that Watt identifies for the future of the docu-drama in Britain is Ken Loach, who he says "opened the way again for using amateur actors in films of the feature length and shocked that most constipated of bodies, Cinema Exhibitors, when *Kes* [1969] became an unexpected box-office smash".[22] Watt's identification with Loach and his early films points to an important connection between the latter film-maker's work[23], which often combines documentary and dramatised elements, and the documentary film movement of the 30s. As we have seen, Watt, a central figure in the documentary and wartime eras of realism, also made narrative films that overlapped with the instructional mode of realism (*Target for Tonight, Nine Men*).

Retrospectively, Loach has acknowledged that much of his work has in fact continued to develop the British realist tradition established decades before he

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[19] Watt, *Don't Look at the Camera*, p. 192.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., p.193.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Robert Murphy makes the same connection between the films of Harry Watt and Ken Loach in his book *British Cinema and the Second World War* (p. 142), particularly through the combination in their work of a documentary ethos and fictional forms.

began making films. Sarah Street makes the point that "Loach's *Kes* draws on some of the established generic codes of [New Wave] social realism but, at the same time, prefigures the films of Terence Davies which appear in part to draw on that heritage".[24] While Loach has become aware of the characteristics that make these eras important to realist film-making, especially with respect to the working class, he also sees a continuing need for a shift away from some aspects that comprise the tradition:

> I think when I started with Tony Garnett and the other people at the BBC
> we felt we were working in opposition to what they'd [British
> documentary tradition; Free Cinema films; New Wave cinema] done...We
> never thought about this Free Cinema at all, but I think what was
> interesting about Tony Richardson and Lindsay and Karel Reisz and so on
> was that they used the north of England and the working class as a location
> for four or five or six years, then they all left...in general, it seemed it was
> only a location for them, there was no long-term commitment to really
> exploring that experience, politically and socially, and trying to develop it
> and constantly re-evaluate it. It seemed to be a location which went out of
> fashion...The fact that it happened when it happened was very important,
> but it was also important for us to try to build on it.[25]

As I pointed out earlier in this chapter, there is a tendency in British cinema for film-makers to adopt realism and by extension, the working class, for a brief period or single film before moving on to other subjects and modes of representation. I have also shown how each generation of realism must assert its own contemporary concerns and thus shift the nature of realism into new areas within an often traditional framework.

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[24] Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 90.
[25] Quoted in *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p. 372.

Loach is certainly more overtly committed to the *realism* of his films or the ways in which film-making can examine reality than Mike Leigh or Terence Davies. This commitment is partly derived from the *political* agenda that defines his work, where realism is seen to be *the* mode of representation to depict the inequities of working-class life. Here, the Grierson connection extends beyond a question of style to a shared philosophy of the didactic function of film-making and its ability to reach the masses.

In 1975, Loach, Jim Allen and Tony Garnett wrote and directed *Days of Hope*, four feature length episodes for the BBC, which detailed the 1921 Durham miners' lockout. "*Days of Hope*, although his first fully historical piece, was very clearly created out of the contemporary situation...of the early 1970s, in which the parallels were easily drawn between the political and industrial struggles of the early 1920s and those of the early 1970s".[26] Loach's own words point to the purpose of invoking the past struggles of the Durham miners - to enlighten and empower the contemporary working class:

> We want anybody who feels themselves to be suffering from crises today,
> people caught by price rises, inflation and wage restraint, to watch the
> films and realise that all this has happened before. And we hope they will
> learn some lessons from the opportunities that were lost in 1926 and the
> defeats inflicted on the working class at the time.[27]

There are distinct echoes of the Griersonian film theory discussed in Chapter One, and the author Jacob Leigh makes this exact point when discussing Sydney Newman's response to Loach's early television work at the BBC. Newman had worked with Grierson at the National Film Board of Canada and was then hired by

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[26] Stuart Laing quoted in Jacob Leigh, *The cinema of Ken Loach: art in the service of the people*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), pp. 101-2.
[27] Quoted in ibid., p. 102.

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the BBC in the 1960s "and [Grierson's] ideas about 'art in the service of the people'...[and his] support for *The Wednesday Play* team [provide]...an important context for Loach's early career".[28]

Newman had been heavily influenced by his contact with Grierson in Canada, saying, "He crystallized, in my mind, art that had to leave a residue of conscious thinking on the part of the audience, so that the arts would stir them into action the following day, the following days".[29] Such a view of art, or more specifically, the cinema, is mirrored in Loach's passionate assertion above, and his contact with Newman, who in the broader BBC framework supported art that, in Grierson's own words, should "pursue the more difficult and controversial themes",[30] provides an important philosophical connection between Grierson and Loach, both advocates of the working class in the realist mode and the capacity of film to reach people on a wide scale.

Though this connection to Grierson is important to the process of situating Loach within the strands of realism, it is important to point out just how at odds Loach's approach to cinema and its *political* potential is to that of Grierson. Grierson's utilitarian model of documentary film-making which argued for an approach to cinema that 'could help to preserve the framework of democracy', and the often emasculating context of government sponsorship of the 30s documentary movement does not mesh with Loach's own approach to cinema.

Grierson's vision of 'civic education' was based on the unifying potential of cinema and the idea that 'modern democratic structures could work if adequate public information systems could be constructed'. In such a context, any serious questioning of the status quo was simply not possible, a fact that Grierson himself

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[28] Leigh, *The cinema of Ken Loach*, pp. 25-6.
[29] Ibid., p. 25.
[30] Quoted in Julian Petley, 'Doing without the Broadcast Media', in *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, ed. by Margaret Dickinson (London: BFI, 1999), pp. 188-90 (p. 188).

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acknowledged after the Second World War: "I think it will be well to examine in future years the sponsorship potential of authorities and associations who are less hamstrung than governments necessarily are. In particular one expects much from the trade unions and co-operative movements".[31]

Loach's realist enterprise is rooted in a traditional Marxist approach to art, which as I have pointed out, 'focused on the way in which a contextual economic, social or political environment shaped, moulded and determined the modern subject'. In Chapters Two and Three, I discussed Marxist and Lukácsian theories of realism which demand that art depict the tensions that exist between the individual and society, thus revealing "the underlying causal networks which bring phenomenal reality into being".[32] Upon close examination, the British realism of the wartime era was seen to conceal such tensions, and the New Wave, while revealing class differences and introducing an individualised approach to the poetic strand, focused on personal rather than socio-political conflicts.

It would seem that Loach's didactic realism comes closest to the realism espoused by Marx and Lukács, in that it is solidly founded on a need to expose the failures of governments, not just British, and to demonstrate the ways in which socio-economic structures impacted on collectives and individuals. So, for Loach, didacticism means something very different from what it does for Grierson. While both perceive the power of film to communicate aspects of the 'real' world and conflate realism with a working class milieu, as is common, Loach is not looking to inform or educate the people he depicts, rather he is their voice, "a crusader who vehemently proclaims his political views"[33] on their behalf. As he has said:

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[31] Petley, 'Doing without the Broadcast Media', p. 188.
[32] Aitken, *European Film Theory*, p. 193.
[33] Hacker and Price, *Take 10*, p. 273.

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It's not only because I believe the working class are very interesting. I also

believe that, however much thirty years in the film industry detaches

yourself from your roots, it's where my loyalty is. I also believe that one of

the things which is good to do is to give voice to those who don't have

one, and who in film and television generally become stereotyped – that is

the working class. The prevailing ideology sees the working class as

victims, or as the deserving or undeserving poor, who must adapt to

market forces. In fact, I see the working class as the vehicle for

change...The analysis that change will come from the working class

means that it is there that you have to aim your work, whether you are

working class or not.[34]

Loach is a rare entity among the British realist tradition, in that he actually

originates from the milieu he has adopted as his signpost of the 'real'. His films,

in the Marxist-realist sense, constantly make a connection between the way people

relate to each other, sometimes in relationships, and the affects that their social

situations have on their capacity to stay together, or to continue living.

Accordingly, for Loach, politics is not always about the inequities of the

workplace, as it is to a certain degree in *Riff-Raff*, or the tragedies of war in such

films as *Land and Freedom* (1995, UK/Sp/Ger), and *Carla's Song* (1996,

UK/Sp/Ger). He is not always concerned to frame his realism around a *collective*,

as Eisenstein and Jennings were, and though films like *Riff-Raff* and *Land and

Freedom* do at times revolve around the effects of environments on a group, they

are as concerned about the specific romantic relationships contained therein.

Speaking about his film *My Name Is Joe*, Loach has said:

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[34] Quoted in Hacker and Price, *Take 10*, p. 293.

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Politics, in the wider sense, is how we live together…It is indivisible from

our lives. It is always exciting to see people's relationships – how they are

with each other and whether they are together or falling apart. That is the

red meat of drama, but in commercial films these emotions are

disconnected and they are simply about rich people with no visible means

of support. The way you make a living affects your relationships and the

way you live your life. It's that whole area of connection between private

and social.[35]

My Name Is Joe tells the story of Joe (Peter Mullan), a recovering alcoholic who

begins a relationship with a community health worker Sarah (Louise Goodall). Set

in Glasgow, the film revolves around the tentative development of a romance

between Joe and Sarah, and the football team of delinquents coached by Joe.

Running beneath these relationships is Loach's covert commentary on the social

problems of the city, particularly unemployment, which he sees as the dominant

factor affecting his characters. "There are a lot of people like Joe around in one

shape or another – people with enormous energy, fine talent and great things to

offer…They just have no space or place to offer it to the world".[36]

There is, then, a fair degree of inevitability about the decline of Joe and his

relationship with Sarah in *My Name Is Joe*, which is directly related to Joe's past,

and the general social isolation created by unemployment, and its related by-

products, poverty and drug abuse. Loach couples Joe and Sarah, offers a sense of

hope that they might make it together, and then tears it to pieces.

The same is true of *Cathy Come Home* (1966), which details the lives of a

married couple, Cathy (Carol White) and Reg (Ray Brooks), whose happiness is

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[35] Quoted in Catherine Lambert, 'Loach Lens Still On Human Spirit', in *Sunday Herald Sun*, August 8, 1999, p. 69.
[36] Lambert, 'Loach Lens Still On Human Spirit', p. 69.

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dependent on their socio-economic situation. Loach relates their separation from each other and their children after a heartbreaking descent into poverty and eventual homelessness to the British government's tragic attitude to housing in the 1960s, as the numbers of families in need of shelter far outweighed the availability of housing. His feature, *Ladybird, Ladybird*, tells "the emotional and harrowing story of Maggie, a woman fighting to keep her kids and current relationships intact, having had children from previous failed relationships removed by social services".[37]

There are countless examples of the tragic clash between public and private considerations in Loach's films, including his latest work, *Sweet Sixteen* (2002, UK/Ger/Sp), which again draws a link between social conditions and the pressures on personal relationships. Any assumptions that Loach's films are defined by their political aims misses the point, as his interest in people is central to his personal politics and the development of a realism that is extremely persuasive.

Loach has been criticised for the didacticism that informs his films, especially as it pertains to the ethics of applying a pseudo-documentary style to factual events. The response to this approach has not always been favourable. For instance, Loach's early television docu-dramas came under fire for their apparent fictional manipulations of 'real' stories, and the potential for the spectator to accept the film as 'fact'. Writing about *Up the Junction* (1965), television critic, T.C. Worseley stated: "Audiences may have been a bit confused by the télé-vérité approach (Was this supposed to be reality or fiction?)".[38] Wyndham Goldie was troubled by the same ethical issue in *Cathy Come Home*, asserting that the film's billing in *The Times* as 'semi-documentary' "means we are being offered a

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[37] Squire, 'Ken Loach has the film bug again', p. 18.
[38] T.C. Worseley, *Television: The Ephemeral Art* (London: Alan Ross), p. 36.

production which the B.B.C. accepts as a style, and which deliberately blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. Viewers have a right to know whether what they are being offered is real or invented".[39]

Apart from underestimating the capacity of the television spectator to make a distinction between fact and fiction, the quoted critical responses to Loach's docu-dramas suggests a moral judgement about his politicisation of the working-class. In response to "*The Daily Telegraph*'s campaign against *Days of Hope*, Loach said: "Criticisms about confusing fact with fiction are reserved by certain papers for political films but ignored when Edwards VIII or Churchill's mother are romanticised and glorified".[40] The critics responses also highlights the moral and ethical questions that accompany realist representations that attempt to obscure their fictionality for propagandist purposes.

In Loach's case, the ends certainly justify the means if you consider the immediate impact of *Cathy Come Home*, which resulted in the creation of a homeless charity called Shelter. The marriage of factual and fictional elements in Loach's docu-dramas is absolutely calculated to produce the strongest response, positive or negative: "The shock you get by cutting back and forth between the private world and the public world was just what we wanted".[41]

Criticism has also been levelled at Loach's perceived use of characters to propagate his own point-of-view. Unlike Grierson and his instructional documentary contemporaries, Loach works mainly with a narrativised form of realism, and so his political arguments have greater scope to be communicated *through* characters' emotional responses and dialogue. This again emphasises the

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[39] Grace Wyndham Goldie, 'Stop Mixing TV. Fact and Fiction', *The Sunday Telegraph*, January 8, 1967, p. 14.
[40] Quoted in Julian Petley, 'Factual dramas and fictional fallacies: Ken Loach's documentary dramas', in *Agent of Challenge and Defiance: The Films of Ken Loach*, ed. by George McKnight (Connecticut: Praeger, 1997), pp. 26-60 (p. 47).
[41] In *Loach on Loach*, ed. by Graham Fuller (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 10.

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connection between the people in Loach's films and his political aims. He is aware of the power of fiction to manipulate the emotions or beliefs of the spectator, and when asked by Jonathan Hacker and David Price if he saw any danger in succumbing to a form of emotional blackmail in portraying political arguments through fiction, he answered:

> Well it's never a danger with yourself because you hope you've taken the right decisions about the characters. But yes, I know what you mean. It is a danger but if they are your own views then you must be satisfied that you use emotion in a justifiable way. You mustn't get the audience to sympathize with things that are untenable. The danger is inherent in fiction.[42]

In an instructional documentary, like *Housing Problems* or *Workers and Jobs*, the film-maker would resort to graphics or commentary to publicise important facts about a given situation, event or milieu. Loach's modern films, though typified by an attempt to appear naturalistic through a documentary style, are fictional, and so must find contextual ways of conveying fundamental political arguments or historical facts.

For instance, it has been argued that some of Loach's characters have functioned as political/emotional mouthpieces, such as George (Robert Carlyle) in *Carla's Song* and Dave Carne (Ian Hart) in *Land and Freedom*, who at times seem like instruments for Loach's overtly political views about specific subjects. There are examples in each of the films mentioned where it seems that Loach is present in his characters, despite the camera's distance from the action, his voice is strong in the dialogue they are asked to speak.

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[42] Quoted in Hacker and Price, *Take 10*, pp. 295-6.

In *Carla's Song* there is a scene that involves a conversation between George and his younger sister Eileen (Pamela Turner). They discuss the situation in Nicaragua, and it has an extremely artificial feel about it, as the dialogue seems unnatural or forced. Jacob Leigh notes that "the excessive earnestness that George's nodding head and facial expression convey in the reverse-shot after Eileen stumbles on 'Sandinistas' compounds the sense of unwieldiness; Carlyle appears to encourage Turner not Eileen".[43] Loach contrives to have his characters talk about Nicaragua as a way of communicating certain facts to the audience. Leigh describes such a use of dialogue as a "crude device"[44] and "[John] Corner calls this kind of dialogue 'leaky', in that a conversation between two people 'leaks' information to the audience in a manner he finds familiar from British wartime propaganda and documentary films".[45]

In *Land and Freedom*, Dave talks to Kitty (Angela Clarke) about his decision to go to Spain and join in the fight against fascism. He is a member of the Communist Party in Liverpool, and has attended a meeting with Kitty in which the Spanish Civil War is the subject of passionate discussion. When asked by Kitty why he feels he has to go, the actor, Ian Hart, stumbles awkwardly over his dialogue in this scene as he declares his commitment to the Communists in Spain:

> Because I can. I haven't got any kids. What'm I doin' here Kit? I'm on
>
> fifteen bob a week on the dole and there's millions of us out of work, on
>
> the demonstrations and marches. I wanna do somethin'...We've gotta do
>
> it. We've gotta stop them, otherwise we'll have no future here.

This scene, which is pivotal in that it marks Dave's first life-changing decision in the film, lacks conviction as the dialogue sounds contrived, sounding more like a

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[43] Leigh, *The cinema of Ken Loach*, p. 6.

[44] Ibid., p. 7.

[45] Ibid.

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cliché of political discourse than the deeply personal opinions of an individual character. Loach employs Dave's voice here to communicate issues such as Liverpool's high unemployment rate and the city's high involvement in political activism at the time.

In a sense, George and Dave are used to communicate information that Loach deems important to the spectator, or to be present as the director's British eyes in a foreign environment. This use of character dialogue is an example of Bill Nichols' notion of the 'voice of God' in documentary film. As discussed in Chapter One this 'voice' derives from "the expository mode"[46] of documentary, which "rely heavily on an informing logic carried by the spoken word".[47] In the scenes discussed, the characters perform the *same* function as the narrator in an instructional documentary, controlling our access to information, defining the political discourse of the film.

Jacob Leigh and John Corner have both argued that Loach loses his perspective of distance in *Carla's Song*, and it is true that Loach, as a committed social commentator, does not have the level of political objectivity towards his subject that permits the distance that Nichols, Leigh or Corner are at issue with. However, this need not be characterised as fundamentally detrimental to the *realism* his films represent. If Loach's films are weakened because of their, at times, blatant politicisation of situations and interactions, they are at once strengthened by the *emotional distance* Loach is able to maintain from his subject. The problem of *distance*, emotional, physical, and political, in film usually applies to documentary. In writing about emotional proximity in documentary film-making, Bill Nichols discusses the fine line between a filmed event and propaganda:

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[46] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p.107.
[47] Ibid.

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The documentary apparatus...persists by never collapsing the distance

between itself and the world reported. Television news is a prime example,

and closer to being an 'apparatus' than the work of an individual like

Flaherty. Reporters bring back news of the world, but neither they nor we,

the viewers, are encouraged to tarry. Our engagement is meant to be with

the news *show*, with the flow of events chronicled or dramatized. To

linger, to experience the full flowering of empathy and identification, to

make an issue one's own threatens...to transform news into

propaganda...Unlike activists, who make a cause their own, filmmakers,

like anthropologists, must retain a measure of remove, no matter how

compassionate or dedicated they may be. Their loyalty remains divided:

between making representations and taking on the issues represented.[48]

Loach's films are not documentaries in the strict sense, but they do effect a

documentary style, so in examining the didactic or politically instructional nature

of his feature films, Nichols' argument is highly pertinent.

This so-called emotional distance is partly achieved in technical terms, as

Loach's films are curiously devoid of close-up shots of characters. Action is

filmed at a distance, and characters framed in medium-wide shots, particularly at

moments of great emotional distress when a more commercial film director might

zoom in to exploit its sensationalist potential. Despite what Loach reveals about

his own political beliefs, he is an unsentimental director, and stays removed from

his characters at their most challenging times. This is particularly the case when

one considers the manner in which he handles the endings of his films. Two

examples of staunchly unsentimental conclusions in Loach's films are found in

Kes and *My Name Is Joe.*

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[48] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 185-86.

The former film is about the young boy Billy's (David Bradley) love for his pet kestrel. His family is poor and his own life prospects so limited that he focuses on the single thing that brings him solitary joy: his bird, Kes. Just before the film's final scene, Billy discovers that his malicious brother Jud (Freddie Fletcher) has murdered Kes. It is a terrible act, and is obviously devastating to Billy, but the final scene that follows his discovery keeps a deliberate distance from the gravity of the event and its affect on Billy. *Kes* ends with a single, long take of one minute and twenty-one seconds duration, showing Billy in a field burying his bird. Loach maintains a medium-wide frame, never closing in on Billy as he steps over a barbed wire fence, and walks slowly to the left of screen with the limp body of Kes in his hand. Quietly sombre music can be heard on the soundtrack and the camera is absolutely still as it stays on Billy, his face looking downward as he concentrates on digging a grave for, and burying, Kes. The screen fades to black and *Kes* is concluded in the most matter-of-fact manner.

The same remarkable level of emotional distance characterises the ending of *My Name Is Joe*. Again, the scenes that precede the ending are deeply harrowing in content, as Joe falls into alcoholism after Sarah leaves him, and Liam (David McKay) sacrifices his life to save Joe, committing suicide from the latter's window as he lies in a drunken stupor. The concluding sequence of the film depicts Liam's funeral, but it is far from overwrought or indulgent, as Loach's camera is too physically remote to engage with the emotions of Joe, Sarah or Liam's partner, children and friends. Sarah and Joe are framed separately during the service, with Sarah at the extreme right of a medium shot, and Joe in the centre of a similarly framed image. Loach accentuates *her* distance from him, and even in the last frame of the film when they are walking side-by-side, they have their backs to the camera, they do not touch and they do not speak. There is

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no satisfying suggestion of reconciliation here, only distance: Loach's distance from the funeral proceedings and the weight of space between Sarah and Joe.

Loach's emotional and physical distanciation in his films, of which there are countless more examples, is a symptom of his documentary style, which relates again back to the Griersonian model, and his own realist intentions but it also recalls the early Italian neo-realist films of Roberto Rossellini, which were in turn, compared to the documentary films of Robert Flaherty. In *Rome Open City* (1945), *Paisà* (1946) and *Germany Year Zero* (1947) Rossellini "develops his scenes on locale, with only a rudimentary story serving him as a guide".[49] Like the Flaherty of *Moana* or *Nanook of the North*, these films are less about a subjective engagement with individuals than the milieu they depict. Like Rossellini and Flaherty, Loach stands back from his individual subjects to allow room for the spectator to evaluate the films' connections between public structures and private outcomes.

Cathy Come Home: ## 'Housing Problems' in the 1960s

Loach's documentary drama, *Cathy Come Home* is a significant film when considering how his approach to filming social problems overlaps with the Griersonian strand of instructional/didactic realism. On the one hand, it bears a striking resemblance to Elton and Anstey's 1935 documentary *Housing Problems*, a classic instructional documentary, but it is also a product of Loach's own style of film-making and socio-political agenda in contemporary Britain. In his essay, 'British TV Dramadocumentary: Origins and Developments', John Corner writes about the phenomenon of 'documentary and the realist play', where dramatised events are located within a documentary context, and cites *Cathy Come Home* as

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[49] Kracauer, *The Theory of Film*, p. 248.

an important example. He writes that the film, about the disastrous problems of housing shortages in 1960s Britain:

> Dramatises these circumstances through the use of a single-narrative concerning one 'case' – fabricated from material drawn from a wide range of real cases and developed into a dramatic fiction. The portrayal of this constructed 'typical' instance is grounded in the then-developing conventions of realist dramatic fiction, but it also uses a number of more directly documentary conventions, such as the use of anonymous 'testimony' to camera, the use of expert and vox populi voice-over, the occasional use of a visual field and mode of cutting that imitate the modes of television reportage.[50]

Cathy's dramatised story is deliberately embedded within a landscape of actual accounts, and juxtaposed to montage sequences depicting the very real conditions of the lower classes, to reinforce the spectator's sense of the authenticity of her story. To identify with the specificity and intrinsic power of her individual tale, is to take on board the wider problems on display. Loach's use of Cathy's representative story sets it apart from a film like *Housing Problems*, as instructional documentaries were never concerned with *individualised* or in any way *narrativised* accounts of British social experiences.

However, *Housing Problems* was something of a breakthrough film in Britain, and its importance lies in the fact "that in some sequences, it sets aside the conventional technique of voice-over commentary to present an account of conditions within the slums given by those who lived there".[51] The montage sequences and anonymous accounts in *Cathy Come Home* are strikingly similar to

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[50] In *Why docudrama?: Fact-Fiction on Film and TV*, ed. by Alan Rosenthal (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1999, pp. 35-46 (p. 41).
[51] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 23.

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those in *Housing Problems*, and the picture of contemporary Britain's treatment of the poor no less miserable. In one particular sequence, Loach melds the dual layers of his film – the dramatic and the documentary – by having a fictional character, Reg's mother, Mrs Ward (Winifred Dennis), walk slowly through her slum environment so Loach's camera can dwell on the conditions there. It is what Jacob Leigh describes as the film's "fictional journalism",[52] as Loach is able to access the empirical world of the housing estate by way of his contrived narrative to bring to life the problems located there.

The shot of Mrs Ward is a slow tracking shot that follows her climb up the dark, grimy stairwells of her building. Her ascent takes in various important sounds and sights of the location: rows and rows of washing tied between parts of the building; the constant barking of local dogs; numerous children trying to play games on the steps, and so on. The scene seems at first to be about Mrs Ward and her tired return to her home but it is really an emblematic picture of the kinds of housing conditions that Loach is concerned to reveal. There are many examples in *Cathy Come Home* of sequences like this one, which function as a part of the film's fictional narrative but also contribute to Loach's political case. Despite the presence of fictional elements, *Cathy Come Home* shares with *Housing Problems* a use of images to make a rhetorically persuasive argument.

In true instructional documentary style, Loach uses a combination of voice-over, interviews (Cathy's interactions with other working-class people seem more like planned interviews than natural conversations, undermining the film's claims to documentary realism) and montage sequences of illustrative images to build his case against the government's housing policies, but reverts to shot-reverse-shot strategies (central to narrative continuity editing) and fictional

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[52] Leigh, *The cinema of Ken Loach*, p. 39.

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dialogue when filming Cathy and Reg, reinforcing the intimacy and depth of their dramatised relationship. The voice-overs in *Cathy Come Home* are not examples of the strictly didactic and overbearing commentary to be found in *Housing Problems*. While Elton and Anstey employed what came to be regarded as the 'voice of God' style of voice-over, Loach varies the commentary in *Cathy Come Home*, using an official-sounding, though not unsympathetic, voice to communicate facts that emphasise the dire situation Cathy is in while highlighting housing as a *national* problem.

Loach also employs Cathy's own past-tense voice-over, describing her feelings at the time of the events portrayed, to reinforce our sense of identification with her individual story. The anonymous accounts in *Cathy Come Home* could also easily be thought to have originated in *Housing Problems*. Over the scene described above with Mrs Ward, Loach uses several voices with distinctly working-class accents to convey in frank terms their experience of poverty in the slums. The voices segue into each other and the content of the accounts strengthens the case that Loach has developed with images. The first is that of an older man who says: "This is what you call 'the island of paradise'. Kids here have seen rats running 'round the place nearly as big as cats". The second voice is a woman's and she reports that "Anytime the children 'ave accidents, nine out of ten times all the mothers come down to see it they can do anything to 'elp ya". The next account is again spoken by a woman who says, "They're so old, damned old places. They want pulling down". While *Housing Problems* was remarkable for its use of actual working-class accounts in an instructional film context, it was sponsored by the gas industry and the London County Council (LCC), and, in this instance created "a discourse which further[ed] the interests of these institutions,

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rather than fully examining the problems of the slums conveyed in the location-shot ciné-vérité sequences in the film".[53]

Cathy Come Home is not undermined by such sponsorship concerns, but this does not necessarily undercut the connection to the instructional/didactic strand of realism. In fact, it is no less a didactic film than *Housing Problems*, as every frame, fictional element and line of dialogue in *Cathy Come Home* is designed to further Loach's case. Instructional documentaries are associated with realism that is informed by an overt moral and ideologically defined agenda, which is consistent with the extreme anger behind Loach's relentless focus on the microcosmic decline of Cathy and her family structure. The main difference lies in Loach's freedom to express that moral outrage, both through his fictionalisation of Cathy's story (albeit a composite of true accounts), and his chosen instructional style. Without governmental, ideological or social constraints *Cathy Come Home* is a devastating report, highlighting the problems associated with callous government policy and its affects on individuals and their relationships.

In *Imagining Reality*, Kevin MacDonald and Mark Cousins include an essay by Loach titled 'Death of a Nation', about John Pilger's television documentary of that name. They preface the essay with a comment about its genesis, reporting that the French film magazine *Positif*, in celebration of its 400th issue, asked "film-makers from around the world to write something 'about an actor, or a film, or a director who has had a special significance' for them".[54] MacDonald and Cousins are fascinated that Loach should have chosen to write about a television documentary, but it does not seem strange when you consider his own preference for documentary elements in his fictional work, such as hand-

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[53] Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement*, p. 23.
[54] MacDonald and Cousins, *Imagining Reality*, p. 302.

held camera, non-actors, location shooting, photography that seeks to be remote from its subject, and what the ways in which these devices place his films within a strand of realism that is *didactic* and *political* in its conception. Therefore, it makes sense that Pilger's film about the Indonesian occupation of East Timor should resonate with him, a fact revealed in his concluding paragraph to 'Death of a Nation': "Film-makers with access to mass communications have a responsibility to expose the lies and hypocrisy of politicians and the interests they represent. This film is more valuable to us than a hundred self-absorbed movies, however prettily shot".[55]

Strange but 'true' – The eccentric realism of Mike Leigh

The name Mike Leigh has become synonymous with British realism. For those who have seen his films, his name immediately conjures up images of the working-class experience of contemporary British life: Cyril (Phil Davis) and Shirley (Ruth Sheen) talking about whether to have children in *High Hopes*; Andy (Jim Broadbent) with his feet up in the lounge-room after a work-place accident, good-naturedly laughing off the pain in *Life is Sweet* (1991); Hortense (Marianne Jean-Baptiste), Cynthia (Brenda Blethyn), and Roxanne (Claire Rushbrook) enjoying a spell of sunbathing in the backyard at the end of *Secrets and Lies* (1996): These are just a few of the many scenes of the everyday played out so vividly in Mike Leigh's films. They are the details of people essentially 'getting on with things', despite the tough times of the past or the present. Aside from this common thread, these scenes share an overriding sense of humour in the face of the tougher aspects of life. Comedy is a hugely important feature in Leigh films, whether it takes the form of affectionate ribbing between characters, ironic jibes,

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[55] MacDonald and Cousins, *Imagining Reality*, p. 303.

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witty dialogue, or outright absurdity: humour is one of the defining factors of his work.

When asked by Brian McFarlane whether he felt his films, particularly *Bleak Moments* (1971), were "descended from the earlier kinds of British realism – the documentary movement of the 30s and 40s and then Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and that New Wave realism?"[56], Leigh admitted to an implicit sense of belonging to that tradition[57] but said that:

> If there is a tradition of English filmmaking of a very specific nature about
> which I feel a much stronger connection with as an aspect of my films –
> the humorous aspect – it is with Ealing comedies…I grew up looking at
> those films as a kid and as a teenager and they had a way of depicting the
> world that was comic but still 'realish'. It related to the real world,
> notwithstanding a certain kind of caricature, and it would be wrong to
> deny those roots.[58]

Certainly Leigh's sense of incongruity and his penchant for characters whose behaviour tends to the extreme suggests an affiliation with Ealing films like *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), and *The Ladykillers* (1955). There is much more to this affiliation with Ealing, particularly with respect to the films of Alberto Cavalcanti, a connection I will expand on later in this chapter.

This shared love of exaggerated character traits has led:

> Critics of Leigh's work [to] argue that many of the characters found in the
> films are only ever stereotypes. Additionally, critics have charged Leigh
> with creating caricatures, which poke fun at the ordinary lives that the

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[56] *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p. 359-60.
[57] Quoted in ibid., p. 360.
[58] Quoted in ibid.

films represent. [As I have discussed] a degree of social typage is an inevitable and necessary part of all realist representation.[59]

However, what such criticism fails to recognise is the degree to which Leigh's most idiosyncratic characters "do work through a heightened sense of realist observation".[60] For instance, the peculiar character Ricky (Mark Benton) of *Career Girls* (1997) is quite grotesque physically, and his painful stutter acts to accentuate his severe social anxiety. The actor, Benton, exaggerates the markers of Ricky's personality, heightening those aspects that are particular to his eccentricity but also recognisable as ordinary to human experience. The result is a characterisation that evokes many responses, from laughter, to pity, but most especially, empathy.

The same can be said of Ron Cook's performance as Stuart, the former photography partner of Maurice (Timothy Spall) in *Secrets and Lies*. His 'type' is the miserable drunk whose life has not panned out the way he had hoped or planned. "Part of the comic quality of certain characters comes precisely from the acute accuracy of performances".[61] This is also true of Stuart, whose dismal personality should be depressing, but his constant rebuttals of any attempts by Monica (Phyllis Logan) or Maurice to cheer him up about: the weather in Australia where he has been living (Stuart found it too hot, but by contrast England is too cold); or the fact that his mother will be pleased to have her son home ("She's dead", is Stuart's matter-of-fact response). His extreme depression and lack of any ability to see the 'brighter side' are stereotypical of alcoholics without any shred of hope, but Cook's exaggeration of such a trait only serves to heighten our sense of his pathos.

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[59] Paul McDonald, 'Secrets and Lies', in *Screen Acting*, ed. by Alan Lovell and Peter Krämer (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 138-52 (p.150).
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.

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"If these performances evoke laughter, then it is a humour based on recognition",[62] and so such 'types' serve to heighten our understanding of the people in Leigh's films and the realities they inhabit, rather than undermining them. The presence of caricatures or stereotypes in Leigh's films can be linked back to Grierson and Soviet cinema as discussed in Chapter One, where types were used to convey the moral, social or political qualities of characters.

Despite his love of Ealing comedies and their influence on the humour in his films, Leigh's characters usually belong to a much grittier world than that populated by characters like Holland (Alec Guinness) and Pendlebury (Stanley Holloway) in *The Lavender Hill Mob*. As important as comedic elements and images of the ordinary are to Leigh's films, there is also a tragic side, often bizarrely rendered, to his depiction of working-class life in Britain. For every scene that attempts to capture a commonplace interaction, there are others that highlight the misery barely disguised beneath the surface.

In the same films drawn upon to demonstrate Leigh's capacity for giving a sense of everyday suburban life in England, there are also images of pathos not easily forgotten: Mrs. Bender (Edna Doré) locked out of her house then cruelly belittled by Laetitia Boothe-Braine (Lesley Manville) in *High Hopes*; Aubrey (Timothy Spall) in *Life is Sweet* smashing up his kitchen in front of the married Wendy (Alison Steadman) after the failure of his restaurant and then attempting to kiss her[63]; Cynthia's (Brenda Blethyn) desperate, cloying attempts to hug her brother Maurice (Timothy Spall), or her lonely moment in front of the bathroom mirror as she grasps at her breasts, aching for tenderness in *Secrets and Lies*.

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[62] McDonald, 'Secrets and Lies', p. 150.

[63] In *The Films of Mike Leigh: Embracing the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Ray Carney and Leonard Quart assert that in the portryal of Aubrey "Leigh's penchant for cartooning goes over the top...[and that his behaviour in the scene described]...make him ridiculous rather than granting him genuine pathos". (pp. 7-8)

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Aside from these portraits of pathos, Leigh also tends towards depictions of truly disturbing expressions of human behaviour: the masochistic tendencies of Sophie (Katrin Cartlidge) in *Naked* (1993) who submits to cruel sex with Jeremy (Greg Cruttwell); Craig (Ben Crompton), an odd lad whose intense crush on the promiscuous Samantha (Sally Hawkins) in *All or Nothing* (2003) is typified in the scene where he proudly displays her initials that he has carved into his chest, not comprehending her horror at this act and his bleeding; or the disturbing conduct of the anorexic Nicola (Jane Horrocks) of *Life is Sweet* who smears her body with chocolate during sex with her bewildered boyfriend (David Thewlis) in a bizarre expression of her warped relationship with her body and food.

These vignettes are representative of the kinds of cruel, humiliating and self-debasing behaviour present in many of Leigh's films. Far from presenting his audience with caricatures or parodies of human experience, what seem like overblown scenes actually allow Leigh to proffer deeply valid emotional responses to everyday situations. If 'real life' can be banal then it can also be hysterical ¬d irrational in those darker moments that occur in the private realm of the home. Such distasteful or uncomfortable scenes are inescapable in the world according to Leigh and are important to this balance between the comic, ordinary and heartbreaking aspects of living.

As Leigh's films do so often contain 'bleak moments', there is a tendency among some critics to view Leigh's films as unnecessarily miserable. In a recent review of Leigh's *All or Nothing*, Australian cinema critic Adrian Martin complained that the film seemed inappropriately steeped in misery and that its director had presented his audience with characters and situations so vile and without redemption as to be ultimately pointless. He wrote, "Leigh's films once seemed to suggest an angry, political viewpoint. At present, with *All or Nothing*

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stacked up against Ken Loach's *Sweet Sixteen* in our cinemas, the empty, bankrupt character of Leigh's world view is transparent. There is not a skerrick of social analysis here. The unhappiness in *All or Nothing* comes down to bad, personal behaviour..."[64] In searching for a political agenda and finding none, Martin decides that the film is worthless and that Leigh must hate the people he has chosen to represent, even suggesting he is a misogynist.

I would agree that Leigh's films did once have a greater sense of anger at the inequities of the British class system, but that was never their sole purpose. Films like *High Hopes*, *Life is Sweet* and *Secrets and Lies* are more concerned with the nature of connections between people than the relationship between people and society. Any social analysis is usually incidental and a by-product of the working-class milieu that always engages his interest.

Martin also makes the mistake, as so often happens in discussions about Leigh, of conflating or comparing his work with that of Ken Loach, who has a film-making agenda that is quite distinct from that of Leigh. Their careers collide mainly through a shared choice to continually examine working-class people within a realist framework (a phrase which means something different to both), but diverge when it comes to their methodologies and personal preoccupations.

Unlike Ken Loach, whose films have tended to focus on the emotional and economic impact of governments on the collective,[65] Leigh seems to have graduated to a different kind of commitment to his characters that is even more focused on their relationships, hopes, and regrets. Leigh himself has said:

It is perfectly obvious to me that my films are motivated by a love for people. My job is to put characters in the screen the way people are –

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[64] 'Miserable and Pompous', *The Age*, Thursday, April 10, 2003, A3, p.14.

[65] Loach's more recent work on *My Name Is Joe* and *Sweet Sixteen* suggest that he too is moving towards a more specific and personalised focus on individuals and their emotional lives.

which is to say warts and all. Conventional film characters don't behave like real people, they behave like actors. I think my films celebrate the human condition. Of course there are characters who are depicted unsympathetically but that's because there are people in society who are deeply dangerous and disgusting.[66]

This love of people's idiosyncrasies and its centrality to Leigh's realism is usually the focus of critical writing about Leigh. His conceivable position within the wider tradition of British realism is rarely dealt with beyond generalities. Ray Carney and Leonard Quart contend that, "starting with *Bleak Moments*, Leigh's films have been in the general tradition of English realism, which was one of the dominant strains of British cinema".[67] They do not attempt to place Leigh's films more specifically within that realist tradition, nor do they examine the plurality of that tradition, instead they define the latter more broadly through "the social documentary cinema of the thirties...and in the work of the more formally adventurous and poetic Humphrey Jennings".[68] I will demonstrate that Leigh's films can be placed very specifically in the critical theoretical framework of this thesis, namely, within the story strand of realism inhabited by Alberto Cavalcanti.

Carney and Quart also discuss Free Cinema and the New Wave[69] but only to rule them out as direct influences on Leigh, and then go on to discuss his acknowledged debt to Cassavetes, Altman and Ealing comedy.[70] The New American cinema, which was in part influenced by the British New Wave of Chapter Four, is a crucial connection to Leigh's pre-production film-making methodology (see analysis below), especially with respect to John Cassavetes, but not necessarily to his cinematic style. Carney and Quart go on to place Leigh

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[66] Quoted in Tom Hibbert, 'Mike Leigh: Director', *Empire*, 54 (December 1993), 54-56 (p. 56).
[67] in, *The Films of Mike Leigh: Embracing the World*, p. 8.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., pp. 9-10.
[70] Ibid., p. 11.

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within the English tradition of realism and then largely dismiss all of the elements that make up that tradition. Indeed, there is little relationship between Leigh's films and the instructional/didactic or poetic strands of realism. At most there is sense of connectedness between the visual style and admirable inclusion of personalised working-class stories in an early instructional documentary film like *Housing Problems*, and Leigh's *Bleak Moments* and perhaps *Meantime* (1983).

For the most part, though, the instructional and poetic strands have dealt with the concerns of collective activity and have stronger affiliations with the documentary mode of film-making, while Leigh concerns himself with fictional narratives that revolve around families of individuals with whom the films engage on a most intimate level. Unlike Loach, there are few examples of a pseudo-documentary style in Leigh's films. The British New Wave films relied heavily on exterior shots of townscapes to signify their allegiance to working-class life, while "the emphasis in Leigh's films is rarely on the landscape or cityscape bounding his characters' lives. He has no interest in providing a documentary realist vision of the way the world looks in his films".[71]

As I have shown, films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Look Back in Anger*, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* revolved around a dominant male protagonist fighting against the status quo, but aside from *Naked*'s Johnny (David Thewlis), Leigh "builds all of his films on an ensemble of actors, with five or six characters playing central roles".[72] It is difficult to consider Johnny, who engages in a constant and grimly pessimistic existentialist rant against anyone who will listen, as a mouthpiece for his generation, just as the verbally aggressive Jimmy Porter was before him. Johnny, whom Sheridan

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[71] Carney and Quart, *The Films of Mike Leigh*, p. 10.
[72] Ibid.

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Morley described as "Alfie in the grips of Thatcherite depression",[73] is so alienated from society that he provokes people into engaging with him through verbal assaults that are at once fabulously intelligent and witty as they are cruel and dystopic. In Johnny, the individual has moved beyond mere issues of politics and class to despairing about the very point of life: "God is a hateful God. God doesn't love you, he despises you, so there is no hope". Whether or not Johnny is representative of the way young unemployed men and women felt under Thatcherism, he is certainly specific to his times and could never have been a product of the previous eras of British realism.

The basic fact of Leigh's commitment to working-class stories and people suggests an alignment with the early documentary period and the subsequent eras of realism. Regardless of all of the exclusions listed above, it is in the bizarre aspects of Leigh's work and his focus on characters to define his realism that point to a recognisable relationship with documentary and one-time Ealing director, Alberto Cavalcanti, whose story-documentaries of the 30s helped to form the basis of the mainstream fictionalised strand of realism during the wartime era. It is not a comparison that has been made before, but Cavalcanti's often surreal/realist work also features humour and exaggeration to emphasise certain character traits or emotions.

Working alongside directors like Harry Watt, Robert Hamer and Charles Crichton at Ealing, Cavalcanti's film-making was not necessarily representative of the dominant style of the studio when he arrived there, but he was undoubtedly influential. Sidney Cole, editor at Ealing from 1942-1952 has said that "of course, the big influence at Ealing in those days was Cavalcanti. He not only had a feature

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[73] Quoted in Michael Coveney, *The World According to Mike Leigh* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), p. 19.

background…but he also gave documentary a great sense of style".[74] The editor and director Charles Crichton, central figure at Ealing also recalled that he "worked with Cav, who was the real guru of Ealing Studios…Cavalcanti was the one who had the inspirational effect on us all".[75]

The discernible influence of Cavalcanti at Ealing can be located in the presence of distinctly Cavalcanti/Ealing flourishes in Leigh's work. Even though Cavalcanti was from South America, he made very *English* films at Ealing, like *Went the Day Well?* about the German invasion of a small English village and the townspeople who fight back, or *Champagne Charlie* (1944), made about the British music halls of the 1860s with larger-than-life characters and situations. While Leigh does not name Cavalcanti as a specific influence when he talks about Ealing films, many people who worked at the studio consider the latter film-maker to be "the 'great spirit' behind Ealing films"[76] and there are strong similarities in a few of Leigh's films that suggest an affiliation with the Cavalcanti-inspired strand of realism.

The general Ealing influence, with distinct echoes of the character of Cavalcanti's *Champagne Charlie*, are overtly present in Leigh's one period film, the largely musical *Topsy-Turvy* (2000). Departing from his usual contemporary, working-class focus, the film is about the working lives of Gilbert and Sullivan and contains more colour, costume and historical fact than any Leigh film before or since. Both *Champagne Charlie* and *Topsy-Turvy* combine a naturalistic visual style with over-the-top characterisations and a sense of vibrancy achieved within the musical narratives. "One feature of Cavalcanti's work which should be noted…is his tendency to employ a neutral visual style influenced by the French

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[74] Quoted in McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p.137.
[75] Ibid., p.152.
[76] Ibid., p.420.

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realist and naturalist traditions".[77] Leigh's film, with its typical Bazinian style of long takes that privilege the spatial and temporal elements of the 'real' is stylistically comparable to *Champagne Charlie*, with its 'frequent use of static, deep-focus long shots, in which movement largely takes place within the frame".[78]

Beyond what these films share in technical or stylistic terms, there is also a mutual humanist approach to the depiction of the theatrical world. In *Topsy-Turvy* Leigh does not emphasise the working-class experience as he does so often in his contemporaneous films, instead he celebrates the egotism and eccentric temperaments of his central characters, Gilbert (Jim Broadbent) and Sullivan (Allan Corduner) and their theatrical counterparts, revealing his love of this community. *Champagne Charlie*, like many Ealing films of the time, is also concerned to celebrate small communities, such as the group of music-hall people in Cavalcanti's film. Ian Aitken argues that the acceptance of others is the dominant discourse of the film: "This basically humanist orientation means that the differences of social class, gender, age and geographical region which appear in the film are all subsumed within its overall portrayal of the polyglot community of music-hall goers".[79]

Like *Champagne Charlie*, there is a high degree of ironic humour in *Topsy-Turvy*, but Leigh treats his characters as he would any of the people in his films, so they are permitted the same moments of sadness and/or absurdity as those of *Life is Sweet* or *Secrets and Lies* . That the milieu is so markedly different from all of his other films is perhaps because for the first time he allows the Ealing influence, where pomp, circumstance, bright rooms and music are accepted ingredients, to burst forth. Unfettered by his normal interest in contemporary

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[77] Aitken, *Alberto Cavalcanti*, p. 145.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., pp. 142-3.

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reality, Leigh is free to allow his love of the theatre, of music and humour to enhance all of the surfaces and characters in *Topsy-Turvy*.

While this film is certainly exceptional in terms of Leigh's career, the Cavalcanti-Ealing connection is an important one for another key reason. A closer examination of Leigh's tragi-comic style in his usual contemporary context leads to a much stronger point of comparison with the Brazilian film-maker. Cavalcanti was certainly comfortable exploring the darker, often surreally depicted, side of human experience, a point typified by his contribution to the Ealing portmanteau film of ghost stories, *Dead of Night* (1945). He directed the segments titled 'The Christmas Story' and 'The Ventriloquist's Dummy', and the latter, set amongst more conventionally realised stories, is a frighteningly surreal piece of film-making replete with disturbing, dreamlike imagery as the paranoid ventriloquist Maxwell Frere's (Michael Redgrave) fear of his dummy is realised. Here, one can perceive Cavalcanti's connection with the *avant garde* French cinema of the early part of the twentieth century, where many of the films "contained…uncanny and bizarre motifs which would later be highly prized by the surrealists".[80]

The specific connection to Leigh is contained in a point made by Ian Aitken about his work at Ealing, especially in *Dead of Night*:

> Cavalcanti was also skilled at obtaining a particular type of performance from his actors, one characterised by a degree of emotional and sometimes hysterical excess.[81] The best example of this is 'The Ventriloquist's Dummy' sequence in *Dead of Night*, in which Michael Redgrave exchanges personalities with his malevolent mannequin, but such performances are common in Cavalcanti's other films, and [Richard]

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[80] Aitken, *European Film Theory*, p. 74.
[81] It is no surprise, then, that Cavalcanti should have been drawn to the work of Dickens in his Ealing film, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (1947), whose literature is also epitomised by numerous caricaturish 'types' and slippages between both surrealist and realist imagery.

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Todd's performance in *For Them That Trespass* as Herb Logan...is a fine

example of this aspect of Cavalcanti's work.[82]

These qualities are strongly manifested in Cavalcanti's *Pett and Pott*, the story-

documentary film discussed in Chapter Two, which offered a contrast between

two couples, one of which was characterised by extreme behaviour in order to

accentuate the morality of the other. This relatively obscure film is an uncanny

link across five decades to the current-day realism of Mike Leigh, specifically to

his film *High Hopes*, which also focuses on a comparison between couples, one

affluent, one grotesquely aspirational and one contentedly working-class, and

employs similar techniques of typage, exaggeration and contrast to comment on

the couples' respective behaviours.

Both Cavalcanti's *Pett and Pott* and Leigh's *High Hopes* cut between

scenes involving their central couples. The former tells the story of two

neighbouring households, the conservative, decent Petts and the avaricious Potts,

while the latter engages with three couples, colourfully described by Pauline Kael

as:

> The rich twits [Rupert and Laetitia Booth-Braine] (David Bamber and
>
> Lesley Manville as a young champagne dealer and his cool socialite wife);
>
> the pushy Yups [Martin and Valerie Burke] (Philip Jackson and Heather
>
> Tobias as a boorish car salesman and his shrill, social-climber wife); the
>
> working poor [Cyril Bender and Shirley] (bearded Philip Davis and dark-
>
> eyed Ruth Sheen as a pot-smoking Marxist who scrapes by as a
>
> motorcycle messenger and his companion of ten years, who likes to grow
>
> things).[83]

The main difference between the two films is that *Pett and Pott* deals purely in

[82] Aitken, *Alberto Cavalcanti*, p. 115.

[83] Kael, *Movie Love: Complete Reviews, 1988-1991*, (Plume, 1991), pp. 87-88.

binary opposites and applies moral judgements based on the polarities contained therein: the Petts live their lives simply and are deemed morally upright, whereas the Potts are shown to be a Dionysian nightmare for which there are harsh consequences, whereas Leigh, while depicting the extreme differences between his couples, never makes it easy to judge one and not another. Life in *High Hopes* is not as easily delineated and packaged as it is in *Pett and Pott*. Cavalcanti, though, does reserve the lives of the Potts for surrealistic treatment, and in doing so, suggests a complexity in their lives that is absent from the straightforward 'goodness' of the Petts.

With greater freedom to embrace the techniques available to him with fiction film-making (and without the restraints of official sponsorship), Leigh can explore the relationships in *High Hopes* in way that Cavalcanti was simply unable to, but still, the realism of both films is contained in: the treatment of characters and the details of their domestic habits; the use of 'typage', and caricature through the extreme behaviour of characters to illustrate core moral and emotional differences.

"One of Leigh's basic narrative devices to test his characters and reveal their limitations is to pair them with antitypes".[84] Couples are the subject of parallelism in films like *Grown-Ups* (1980, TV) and *Life is Sweet*, or widely divergent individuals are paired to great dramatic effect, such as in *Abigail's Party* (1977, TV) where Leigh parallels the ruthless but fascinating man-eater Beverly (Alison Steadman) with the unattractive yet mostly good-natured Angela (Janine Duvitski) and the anxious and withdrawn Susan (Harriet Reynolds), or in *Career Girls* where he matches the outwardly tough Hannah (Katrin Cartlidge), with the spotty and inhibited Annie (Lynda Steadman).

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[84] Carney and Quart, *The Films of Mike Leigh*, p. 130.

Leigh's contrasts are often designed to elucidate the nature of relationships within or between couples and individuals, and though the eponymous couples in *Pett and Pott* never meet, their pairing in the narrative operates to create a wider context and meaning for their relationships. The same is true of *High Hopes* and its treatment of its couples and they way they interact within their relationships and each other. Writing about the film, Michael Coveney said that "no film-maker has an obligation to be fair, or balanced, about the society he by rights claims as his material. His only obligation is towards the truth as he perceives it, and Leigh perceived a divided and demoralised nation".[85]

Leigh's couples function to illustrate that social division and the spirit of the Thatcherite times. For instance, bedroom scenes are employed to illustrate the different levels of interaction the couples display, to provide a commentary on the types of people they are in relation to each other, highlighting that sense of division across a shared context. Leigh cuts between these scenes, all of which involve role-playing with unusual elements specific to each couple. Martin, who is a misogynist and womaniser is shown in bed with Valerie, who writhes next to him in an embarrassing display of mock-sexiness. Her approach to lovemaking seems borrowed from popular media and so is quite prescriptive and forced: "You're Michael Douglas, I'm a virgin". We have already seem Valerie's attempt to become like Laetitia, by imitating her dress sense, again trying to borrow elements from other sources to define herself. Martin promptly falls asleep.

Cyrii and Shirley also engage in sexual role-playing, but this is where the comparison between the two couples ends. This couple is shown to be so much more in sync and able to respond to each other as they begin by casting each other as characters in a Western. "The two lovers turn the moment into a dramatic skit

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[85] Coveney, *The World According to Mike Leigh*, p. 191.

but how rapidly and supplely they respond to each other's leads – sometimes following each other, at other times taking things in a whole new direction".[86] Cyril and Shirley's fluid and imaginative bedroom interaction is sharply contrasted by "the Boothe-Braines' bedroom [scene in which] Laetitia lies immobile with restorative cucumber slices on her eyes while Rupert boasts of having consumed 'Two steaks, same day totally different'".[87] The parallelism here serves to highlight the Booth-Braines' "imaginative and emotional limitations",[88] as their bedroom scene contains none of the role-playing of the other two.

The extremely defined types in *High Hopes* point to the ever-present class consciousness in Britain, with a working-class that feels it is under direct siege from the government, containing those who are content (Cyril and Shirley) and others (Valerie) who aspire to be more like the upwardly mobile middle-class epitomised by Rupert and Laetitia. They are representative but also given individualised traits, such as their definitive speech patterns, or distinctive modes of interaction.

Made in the 30s, *Pett and Pott* is never as intimate as this, but Cavalcanti cuts between the private spaces inhabited by his couples, showing the Petts to be conservative even in the privacy of their home, remaining aloof from one another, while Mrs Pott is sexualised with images of her stocking-covered legs and Mr Pott enjoys a wild night at home with another woman. Cavalcanti's 'types' function on one level to promote a moral lifestyle but they also indicate the strictures of the film's informant social mores. Owing to the complicated and emotional nature of the Potts' lives, they in some ways transcend mere stereotypes, as they are at least permitted to act freely and without restraint, whereas the Petts are so devoid of

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[86] Carney and Quart, *The Films of Mike Leigh*, p. 188.
[87] Coveney, *The World According to Mike Leigh*, p. 193.
[88] Carney and Quart, *The Films of Mike Leigh*, p. 183.

individuality, it is difficult to characterise them beyond the traits that reflect their conservative 'types'.

Obviously *High Hopes* has a far more complex narrative, where "the *differences* are not treated as something to be resolved or ignored or glossed over but as a play of counter-charged energies that allow the characters to make something larger than either could alone, something valuable for both them and us".[89] However, this brief look at the interior worlds of *Pett and Pott* and *High Hopes* shows that these individual film-makers do not have strong affiliations with the documentary-based instructional/didactic strand or the poetic mode of realism, but they share a penchant for the point of access to the 'real' world that fictional characters can provide. Calvancanti and Leigh both reside comfortably in the story strand of realism that is wholly centred around narrativisation and the ways in which characters reveal the 'truths' about themselves and their milieu.

By suggesting his position within the wider tradition of British realism, I do not mean that Leigh's films are not defined by a strongly individual sense of realism, influenced in part, by the John Cassavetes' approach to film-making. Like Cassavetes, Leigh likes to develop characters and narratives through pre-production improvisation. Drawing on his experience of 'Method' acting and rehearsal at the Actor's Studio, Cassavetes developed a process of improvisation, such as in *Shadows* (1960, US), where the story "emanates from character".[90] Before shooting the actors are asked to do life study, inhabiting the lives of their characters, working their jobs, playing music they would listen to, and so on. Their experiences could then be incorporated into the film's narrative. [91] Cassavetes described his approach thus:

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[89] Carney and Quart, *The Films of Mike Leigh*, p. 189.
[90] Ray Carney (ed)., *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 63.
[91] Ibid., p. 64.

If the film is primarily the creation of the director or the writer, then you have only a single viewpoint upon the theme. It is the creation of only one imagination. But if the film is created out of the actors, then the work has many facets as there are actors.[92]

Aside from the American influence of Cassavetes, Leigh's background in the theatre as a playwright and director of original narratives has also informed his atypical approach to the pre-production process of film-making, and this in turn has influenced the degree to which the illusion of temporal realism is produced in all of his films. Leigh describes his method of direction, which relies heavily on improvisation and intense rehearsal with his actors, thus:

...all of my films evolve out of improvisation and the scripts come out of improvisation...On *Secrets and Lies*, we spent five months with the actors preparing it before we ever got around to shooting it, and that means that, with my sort of films, you haven't got actors who are wearing costumes they've only just been given and places they're supposed to be living in but have only just seen, and playing husbands and wives when they've only just met and not knowing who their characters are and how to play them...But I'm a very precise director. If you look at my stuff it's very firmly directed and very clearly directed. On the whole I'm not very excited by improvisation *on camera*...[93]

In a remarkably similar approach to that of Cassavetes, in Leigh's plays and films "the actors invent characters, the characters are put together in improvised situations and out of the material thus created comes...a finished piece of drama".[94] For instance, actors might be required to go out 'in character' as part of

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[92] Quoted in *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, p. 64.

[93] Quoted in *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p. 361.

[94] Paul Clements, *The Improvised Play: The Work of Mike Leigh* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 7.

the process of exploration. During their preparations to play the snobbish characters in *High Hopes*, Leslie Manville and David Bamber spent time in various parts of London as 'Laetitia' and 'Rupert'. Manville recalls, "'If you think Laetitia is over the top, you should meet some of the women *we* found researching in the country, at the opera, at Harrods. I overheard a woman ordering a sofa in Harrods; she was so posh, I just wanted to die'".[95]

Another factor important to the way Leigh's films are made is that "actors are required to keep private the construction of their role and the character's circumstances...The reason for this is that Leigh hopes that the all-important first improvised meetings between characters will only be informed and motivated by what individuals would plausibly know of one another in that situation".[96] Claire Rushbrook, who plays Roxanne in *Secrets and Lies*, recalls the first improvisation of the revelations that occur at the end of the film:

> When we improvised the revelations, it freaked me out. I didn't have a clue. How it is in the film is pretty much how it happened...When Marianne's character arrived, that was weird. We asked the questions you see in the film...But when Cynthia said 'This is my daughter' I could not believe my ears...I don't think I could have played it as honestly as I had if we'd worked on it any other way. I remember feeling as Claire, as an actress, and no doubt it helped my performance,...really appalled that these other actors kept it from me.[97]

The process of improvisation, then, allows the actors to understand and thereby communicate the emotions of their characters in extremely powerful and apparently truthful ways. However, rather than focusing on the process *before* the

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[95] Quoted in Coveney, *The World According to Mike Leigh*, p. 195.
[96] McDonald, 'Secrets and Lies', p. 144.
[97] Ibid., p. 147.

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films are made, I would prefer to concentrate on the impact Leigh's love of actors and his methods of eliciting screen performances has on the visual methods he uses to achieve realism in his films.

Technically, Mike Leigh's films tend towards the Bazinian view of film realism that privileges onscreen space and time, as they feature significant use of the mostly static long take, allowing important interactions between people within the frame to be viewed without the constant interruptions of editing. While Leigh's films contain many diverse elements, such as metaphorical narrative devices and a wide range of editing techniques, it is his use of the long take that is significant here.

It was Bazin's belief that "the long or uninterrupted take represented 'true continuity' and reproduced situations more realistically than montage, leaving the interpretation of a particular scene to the viewer rather than to the director's viewpoint through cutting".[98] Leigh's pre-production emphasis on character development is reflected in his constant employment of the long take, which serves to highlight the complex relationships between characters and their emotional responses to situations in an ostensibly organic way.

The Bazinian approach to cinema not only privileges temporal and spatial realism, it also creates an artificially rendered impression of *objectivity*, as editing is viewed as the imposed choice of the director. In a long take, the spectator's view is supposed to be primary as he or she is conceivably free to interpret the scene in ways that are unique to themselves. Leigh does not use the long take indiscriminately in his films, usually reserving the technique for crucial moments in his characters' lives, or to further our understanding of their relationships. For example, Leigh's first film, *Bleak Moments*, ends with a devastatingly still long

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[98] Cardullo, 'Introduction', *Bazin at work*, p. xiii.

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take (one minute, twenty seconds) in which the main character, Sylvia (Anne Raitt) sits resignedly at a piano with her back to the camera, playing a sombre tune. It is an ending that is not unlike those Loach endings to *Kes* and *My Name Is Joe*, as the film has depicted the intelligent Sylvia's largely monotonous, lonely life, and this final long take provides a powerful punctuating full stop to a life that it seems will not change when the film moves on from her story.

The dynamics of the family in *Life is Sweet* are revealed in an introductory long take early in the film, while the characters are in the kitchen. The camera is still and no editing occurs for just over a minute while the family move in and out of the room (and the frame), chatting and moving around each other in the comfortably effortless manner of people who are intimately acquainted. Again, the long take enables the actions of his characters to transpire in a 'natural' fashion. There are scores of examples of the long take in Leigh's films, but never more so than in *Secrets and Lies*, which makes significant use of the long take, especially for scenes that represent major events for its central characters.

Secrets and Lies:
The realistic potential of the long take

Secrets and Lies represents a convergence of all of the elements that I have described as belonging to Leigh's personal version of realism. It contains moments of humour, bitterness, regret, spite, and in some instances, intense love and extreme dislike. It is also an example of the power of realism to *observe*, to reveal at once moving and banal things about human nature in the time spent on screen examining at close quarters the lives of ordinary people. In terms of Leigh's ultimate claim to realism, I would argue that the contemporaneity of his films (with the stark exception of *Topsy-Turvy*) is in some ways secondary to their observational nature.

On the whole, Leigh does not offer contemporary stories for their

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contextual relevance, as his films are not engaged in the same social realist enterprise as those of Ken Loach. Leigh's modern-day characters do not generally function as symbols of rebellion or repression, rather their existence in what are recognisably modern milieus and narratives offers an emotional as well as historical proximity to the spectator. It is his characters' ability to provide a profound source of identification that makes Leigh's use of the long take, especially in *Secrets and Lies*, so very important to his overall realist enterprise. By providing an illusion of distance between himself as director and his subject within the time spent simply observing his characters he also creates a space and allows time for the audience to observe and form associations with certain scenes and people.

The most famous example of the long take in the film is the café scene, where Hortense (Marianne Jean-Baptiste) meets her biological mother, Cynthia, for the first time. Seated in the café, Leigh frames the women in a medium two-shot. The scene's running time is approximately seven minutes and forty seconds. The camera does not move, and no editing takes place. It is no coincidence that this, the longest shot of the film, is also the most dramatically important. Hortense and Cynthia's meeting is a painful affair for both women, as the latter confronts her birth mother with her existence. As they see each other for the first time, as strangers, and yet as mother and daughter, the spectator is shown their meeting in an apparently unmediated form. Their interaction is allowed to unfold in such a natural way, that one feels a little uncomfortable, almost voyeuristic, watching this most personal of meetings taking shape. Temporal realism is achieved within this shot, and the importance of the occasion is marked by the significantly shorter shots that precede and follow it. Bazin would have approved of Leigh's employment of the long-take, especially for such an event, that once

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introduced, informs the rest of the film's narrative. As with dialectical materialism, Leigh and Bazin favour an approach to editing which portrays the real world *as it exists*. Perceptually, spectators are able to 'edit' their own experience of the scene, looking at whichever character is speaking or watching the other as she reacts.

While the scene is relatively unremarkable in a film that contains other long takes and sequences of quiet, deliberate observations, in the wider context of cinema, especially of the big-budget Hollywood variety with glossy surfaces, and rapid editing, it is extraordinary but not entirely specific to the British realist sensibility. Italian neo-realism, a major influence on the British New Wave with films such as Luchino Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (1947, Italy) that uses the long take to explore the minute details of everyday life for a group of Sicilian fishermen, also supports the Bazinian view of filming the 'real' world. For this reason, Kracauer admired the neo-realists for their "sensitivity to the flow of life",[99] a phrase that seems appropriate to Leigh's consideration of spatial and temporal realism.

An important factor to remember, and it is one that Leigh himself is anxious for people to be aware of is the degree of choreography and planning that goes into *every* scene in his films, even those that seem rudimentary in their construction. This is certainly true of the second longest single take in *Secrets and Lies*, namely, the barbeque scene (four minutes and forty-eight seconds). Of this scene Leigh has said, "You can see there's a huge amount of choreography, it's very precisely worked out, and I wanted that to happen for different reasons, because there I felt there are so many things on the go".[100] As Leigh mentioned above, he is a precise director, his improvisational pre-production style does not

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[99] *The Theory of Film*, p. 254.
[100] Quoted in *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p. 363.

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extend to random movements or dialogue during filming.

Thus, while the barbeque scene has the kind of chaotic manner that one would expect from such a gathering, with some dialogue overlap and people leaning across and around each other as they jostle for food and space, it is, as Leigh says, absolutely planned. Here, the camera is like an extra guest at the party, Roxanne's twenty-first birthday, as it is perched in what appears to be an extra chair in the central background position of the frame. With the camera so close to the action, we are able to discern the nuances of the relationships and the tensions that are building despite the surface pretence of celebratory banter and ribaldry. Leigh again: "There's the food and the comings and goings and there's the mounting tension and the threat of what's going to happen when they find out about Hortense and there's the general kind of physical nervousness of Cynthia and so on".[101]

So, despite the obvious artifice of the film-making process, in this uninterrupted sequence, one is able to observe and conclude much about the dynamics of the gathering at this point. Cynthia is fussing over Hortense, anxious that she enjoy herself and feel at ease, despite her own nervousness; Maurice teases Roxanne in a good-natured way that suggests his affection for his niece; Monica and Cynthia deliberately ignore each other, denoting their mutual dislike, and so on. With so much going on, the long-take allows a greater degree of familiarity with the characters and the ability to closely observe their behaviour. There are other long-takes in *Secrets and Lies*, and, though much shorter in duration than the two described here, they reinforce the kind of realism at stake in this and other Mike Leigh films.

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[101] Quoted in *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p. 363.

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Bill Nichols has suggested that "Realism requires distance",[102] and Leigh's use of the long-take in *Secrets and Lies* certainly bears this notion out. Nichols was referring to documentary realism, but it is just as applicable to Leigh's dramatised realism, and "as we have already seen, realism supports an epistephilia that arouses curiosity about objects whose knowability is limited only by the physical capacities of camera and filmmaker".[103] Leigh finds technical ways to facilitate his brand of observational film realism, and the result is a unique and highly personal approach to working class people, their emotions, behaviours and domestic milieux.

Terence Davies and the poetics of memory

In looking at the possible manifestation of poetic realism in the contemporary era of British realism, I have come across individual films that recall the kind of lyrical treatment of the everyday found in all of Jennings' documentaries and the films that belong to the New Wave. John Boorman's *Hope and Glory* (1988) evokes an at times elegiac sense of middle-class, London suburban life during World War II, told from the perspective of a nine-year-old boy. More currently, Michael Winterbottom has made films among what is now a diverse oeuvre covering many narratives and genres, that have a distinctly poetic feel, such as *Wonderland*, a film about isolation and connection in modern London, or *The Claim*, a starkly beautiful adaptation of Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Fred Schepisi's *Last Orders* (2001), stars actors like Tom Courtenay and Ray Winstone who evoke memories of realism both past and present, and is a poignant film detailing the nostalgia and regret felt by a group of friends after the death of Jack Dodd (Michael Caine).

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[102] *Representing Reality*, p. 186.
[103] Ibid.

A key contemporary British film-maker to have taken on a sustained approach to poetic realism, is Terence Davies, a Liverpudlian director, whose autobiographical cycle of films, *Children* (1976, short), *Madonna and Child* (1980, short), *Death and Transfiguration* (1983, short), *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988, UK/Ger) and *The Long Day Closes* (1992) is distinctively personal and symbolic in its conception and thus has much in common with the earlier poetic films of Humphrey Jennings.

Davies' films, about his family's struggle to overcome a brutal patriarch, and his personally-based conflict between Catholicism and homosexuality, are like musical compositions or tapestries of memory containing images of his life, and in style they are deeply resonant of Jennings' poetic realist films which also relied on an 'impressionistic style dependent on juxtapositions and association to explore the revelation of the symbolic in the everyday'. In a television interview with Melvyn Bragg (BBC, 1992) Davies said: "I passionately believe in the poetry of the ordinary", and as I will discuss, his lyrical treatment of what are very commonplace aspects of everyday life is central to his personal brand of poetic realism.

Both Davies and Jennings discard linearity in favour of a collage of symbolically or emotionally connected imagery. In Jennings' films, the connection between images lies in what they could symbolically relate about the 'legacy of feeling' of the nation, but for Davies the connection is more individual and private, based as it is on his personal experiences and feelings:

> The reason I began making films came from a deep *need* to do so in order to come to terms with my family's history and suffering, to make sense of the past and to explore my own personal terrors, both mental and spiritual,

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> and to examine the destructive nature of Catholicism. Film as an
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> expression of guilt, film as confession…[104]

The poetic documentaries made by Flaherty in the 1930s and Jennings in 1940s

are compelling because of their method of depicting images in a poetic style that

is in direct conflict with their content, such as their lyrical depictions of the

menacing elements of industrialisation. Again, while Davies's films do not engage

with such macrocosmic symbolism, they contain numerous moments of extreme

suffering or banality conveyed in sometimes disturbingly poetic ways, often

through the use of joyful music that is at odds with the brutality or mundanity on

screen.

Music performs an important function in Jennings's wartime

documentaries, influencing the emotional tone or rhythm of sequences, and is at

the core of what connects the images and the people within them. At the heart of

Jennings' use of music is its power to signify unity among people, such as in

Listen to Britain, where he demonstrated that 'musicians and audiences are

distinct from one another but on the same side; their particular locations, classes,

jobs, tastes, differentiate them but do not divide them'. For Davies, music is just

as important to the rhythm and tone of his films, but he has an emotional stake in

the function it serves:

> Music plays a crucial part in all my films. I was brought up in a house that
>
> was filled with music – on the radio, on records and people singing. And
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> of course, the musical comedy films of the period were part of this. If
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> music is movement and rhythm in time, then film is both movement and
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> rhythm through space *and* time…But music also performs another
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> function in my films. It very often stakes over the narrative and becomes

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[104] Terence Davies, *A Modest Pageant* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. ix.

the narrative itself when it is not used in counterpoint to the story...the

music in my films represents my emotional autobiography.[105]

Davies grew up in the post-war era of the 1950s, a time when British films relied

heavily on American finance to support the local industry,[106] so it is no surprise

that the dominance of Hollywood cinema, in this case, the American musical

comedy, should have had such an impact on him. There is an important shift here

from Jennings to Davies that relates to English nationalism, as the former

represents traditional English culture while Davies symbolises the

internationalisation of modern English popular culture.

As I discussed in Chapters One and Two, the realism of this poetic mode

of film-making resides in its ability to convey the intangibles, those seemingly

elusive feelings and emotions. As with Jennings, Davies' 'painterly' instincts as a

film-maker allow those intangibles to come to life, and as his autobiographical

work is entirely based on an exploration of memory, poetic realism is *the* mode of

representation that is equipped to render psychological as well as physical

landscapes on screen. In tracing the wide and varied arc of realism, from the

public realm of Griersonian documentary, to the stories of wartime consensus and

the shift to the domestic and psychological interiors of the New Wave, it appears

that the contemporary era of realism is defined in part by its personal edge. It is

fitting, then, that Davies and his deeply personal films, should be the last major

film-maker I will discuss in relation to the strands of realism.

Before looking at Davies' films in greater detail, I would like to briefly

examine how others have attempted to analyse his work and whether he perceived

his work in the wider context of the British realist tradition. Some critics have

pointed out the realist nature of Davies's films, in part because of their working-

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[105] Davies, *A Modest Pageant*, p. x.
[106] Street, *British National Cinema*, pp. 14-17.

class context, the austerity they detail, while others are interested in his use of music or the invocation of an impressionistic European cinematic style. Writing about *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, Tony Williams states that it encountered:

> ...critical misinterpretation. Desperate for another energetic 'New Wave' emerging from a cinematically impoverished culture, British reviewer Derek Malcolm regarded Davies as a 'unique voice' responsible for a 'musical version of Coronation Street directed by Robert Bresson, with additional dialogue by Sigmund Freud and Tommy Handley'. Geoff Andrew compared Davies to an Ingmar Bergman who has produced 'the first realist musical'. Thomas Elsaesser associated Davies' cinematic exorcism of male childhood trauma with a recent upsurge of British films dealing with masculine subjectivity. [107]

Film criticism often seeks to label films with a particular cinematic style or to attempt comparisons with other film-makers or traditions, and, in the individual process of interpretation, film-makers are positioned in critical areas that often reveal more about the writer and what he or she understands, than the films themselves.

Williams' own analysis of Davies' films is based on a rejection of the New Wave and subsequent sixties-influenced documentary style and he asserts that after *Children*, Davies' moved towards "an achronological, inner world of tormented personal psychobiography".[108] On *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, Williams feels it "eschews the realist devices of earlier decades of British cinema...[presenting] antirealist representations as if recognizing the ineffectiveness of traditional British cinematic discourses to combat the historical

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[107] 'The Masochistic Fix: Gender Oppression in the Films of Terence Davies', in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. by Lester Friedman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 237-55 (p. 237-8).
[108] Ibid., p. 238.

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situation that has resulted in Thatcherism, "[109] thus negating the notion that his work has any connection to a British tradition of film-making.

In my view it is incorrect to invoke Thatcherism when considering Davies' films, as they are not polemical, and only engage with historical or social contexts in so far as they influence his memory of family life. His films do not engage with contemporary life, as their autobiographical content means they are set well before Thatcher came to power, and there is no discernible link made between the family's hardships and societal structures. To suggest any sense of politicisation in Davies's work suggests an affiliation with British political-oppositional cinema to which it does not necessarily belong.

Williams' determination to situate Davies within a "vein of antirealist tradition"[110] is useful when considering the gay film-maker's contribution, along with Derek Jarman, to the "eighties realm of the 'other'"[111] and as a means of examining his non-linear style in an independent, modernist film context, however it is reductive to insist that Davies has no relation whatever to the British realist tradition. If there were greater critical knowledge and consideration among reviewers of the documentary movement and the strands of realism established at that time, of which Jennings represents an important part, then perhaps Davies' films would have already been considered within the *poetic* realist tradition, but at this point that has not been the case.

For Davies himself, the notion of being influenced by any form of British cinema is a strange one. In 1992, Wheeler Winston Dixon asked Davies where he saw himself in the continuum of British Cinema, and the following is part of his answer:

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[109] Williams, 'The Masochistic Fix', p. 239.
[110] Ibid., p. 247.
[111] Ibid.

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I don't see myself in it at *all*, really. It's very difficult to say, really, because I was brought up on the American musical. That's what my sisters took me to see when I was a child. 'Real' sorts of films, Hollywood films, were made by people who didn't come from my sort of background. I'm from a large working-class Catholic background. People in England who were making films were all middle class.[112]

It is symptomatic of Davies' intense engagement with his own life that he should insist on the cinematic influence of films he loved when he was a child, of which the use of big musical numbers by singers like Doris Day and Debbie Reynolds in his films and the strong presence of American popular culture in his family's life are the obvious signifiers.

The style of his films, as Melvyn Bragg pointed out during his interview with Davies, has no apparent relationship at all to mainstream Hollywood cinema, especially the musicals, but their presence in the films suggests a movement away from traditional British working-class culture towards the American mass culture decried by Free Cinema. Dixon went on to question Davies about his response to the New Wave films, asking: "Did you find them utterly inauthentic because the people who were making them were doing it from the outside of the culture...?" to which the director replied:

They looked authentic at the *time*...For the first time in a film, people were speaking with Northern accents...These films started out as plays, plays or novels, and they were made into films, shot on real locations, with people doing proper accents for that particular part of Manchester, or whatever, and that was a revelation...But if you look at them now, you realize that

[112] Quoted in Wheeler Winston Dixon, 'The Long Day Closes: An Interview with Terence Davies', in *Re-Viewing British Cinema, 1900-1992: Essays and Interviews*, ed. by Wheeler Winston Dixon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 249-259 (p. 254).

they are drawn from the middle class point of view. And they're

relentlessly *dreary*. Those constant shots of canals with stuff floating in

them. Working-class life was difficult, but it has great beauty and depth

and warmth.[113]

Whether Davies relates his own motivations for making the kinds of films he does

to his retrospectively adverse view of New Wave realism, it is clear that he desires

to depict the working-class in Northern England *authentically*, in a manner that is

true to his own experience of the time and place as a cultural insider. Though

Davies does not call his films realist, nor has he mentioned an awareness of

Jennings, and it is true that his stylistically adventurous films are only remotely

connected to the New Wave, he has said, "I'm trying to be truthful to the audience

in my background",[114] and in doing so he signals an intrinsic link to the realist

tradition in art, which seeks to be 'honest' in its depiction of working-class life.

At the core of Davies' poetic realism is his ability to find beauty in

ordinary objects, events and people and the cinematic style he has developed to

render that beauty on screen. It is a sensibility he shares with Jennings, who turned

his poetic lens on a wide variety of everyday activities and settings, from the work

of craftspeople to industrial edifices. Both film-makers deny linearity in order to

explore a range of associative images, chosen for their emotional, visual or

geographical connection, rather than on what they might contribute to the

conventions of storytelling. Davies often connects a montage of images through

four-second dissolves, so that a visual remnant of each preceding shot hovers

briefly over the next. His method of using dissolves to connect the images of

memory sequences is again representative of Bazin's idea of poetic realism, such

as he locates in *Le Jour se Lève* (Marcel Carné, 1939, France), where the dissolves

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[113] Quoted in 'The Long Day Closes', pp. 254-5.
[114] Ibid., p. 251.

correspond to the physiological act of dreaming: "The eye states, the pupil dilates, the images of objects on the retina is blurred. The lack of voluntary attention prevents the lens from focussing".[115]

Children contains one such montage sequence, where dissolves connect the exterior and interior images of Davies' childhood Catholic school: A children's choir sings 'Way down upon the Swanee river' to piano accompaniment on the soundtrack as the camera, in a long wide shot, tracks from left to right across the exterior of the school. Davies uses a long dissolve to segue into a long shot of a hallway in the school's interior, then another long dissolve to a shot of the empty piano room, a visual reference to the music on soundtrack. The last shot occurs after another long dissolve to a shot of an vacant classroom, as the soundtrack changes to children praying ("I believe in God, the Father, Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ".). Davies pauses on each image, lingering for a few seconds on the aural and visual memories contained in the sequence. This montage of images that dissolve into each other is graceful in its conception, providing an expressive quality to the sequence of the everyday. Like *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, it evokes a Bazinian conception of poetic realism as its editing technique corresponds to the way *we experience* thought and memory.

Along with painfully bleak scenes of violence and spiritual conflict, the visual and aural landscapes of the early films contain long sequences that are lyrical in their conception, such as *Death and Transfiguration* with its extended opening montage as Robert (Terry O'Sullivan) goes to his mother's funeral while Doris Day sings 'It All Depends On You' on the soundtrack. In this scene, Davies paints a moving portrait of a man preparing to farewell the most important person

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[115] Bazin, '*Le Jour se Lève*', p. 5.

in his life through the use of associative images. It is not until *The Long Day Closes*, a film depicting the halcyon days of Davies' family after his father's death, that Davies seems able to rejoice in the beauty he perceives in single images or brief scenes in his family's ordinary life. Having worked through the darker aspects of his past it seems that he has arrived at a point where the beauty is all he remembers, making the film far more sentimental than any of his other autobiographical works.

This sentimentality is the by-product of Davies' mythologisation of his working-class background, and recalls the same myth-making processes involved in the realist films examined in Chapters Two and Three. John Caughie has argued that in representing working-class life:

> The values of community, resilience, having a good time, virility (verging on brutality) and the enduring 'mam' map out the real, which holds its natural shape behind the simulations of an acquired culture, and legitimates the nostalgia of the left for a past it may never have had. Terence Davies has the virtue of having been there...This gives him a complicated relation to the past, marked in the films by an aesthetic formalism which struggles to keep its distance from sentimental nostalgia even while it is celebrating sentimentality.[116]

Of this film Davies has written that it was "about the loss of childhood paradise and innocence, with the enduring power of the imagination (seen through the movies), and the all-pervasive, all-enduring power of the love for my mother...I employ a great deal of elision and indeed poetic licence".[117] In engaging in nostalgia within a poetic realist context, Davies risks the same criticism applied to

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[116] John Caughie, 'Half Way to Paradise', *Sight and Sound* (May, 1992), 11-15 (p. 13).
[117] Davies, *A Modest Pageant*, p. xi.

Jennings wartime documentaries, that they sentimentalise working-class life, creating a mythology of social experiences rather than an accurate account.

As an example of Davies' intense love for his mother, there is a stunning scene in *The Long Day Closes* where Bud is sitting in a window above his mother as she hangs clothes on the line in the garden below. She shouts up to him: "Where's those nets? I want to wash them!" Davies shoots her face from a high angle, Bud's point-of-view, as she looks up, smiling beatifically. Davies cuts to Bud's face in medium close-up, framed by the window as he grins back at her, releasing the white net in his hand and, like a bird descending in flight, it floats gracefully down to Mother. Instead of having the net fall into her hands or onto the ground, Davies completes the lyrical grace of the sequence by showing the net as it completes its slow descent, draping itself perfectly over Mother's head like a veil. His moving treatment of such an ordinary event is central to the manner in which Davies is able to articulate his love for his mother and belief in the poetic nature of the everyday.

Later in the film, Davies shoots a series of elliptical interior images of the family home at night while it rains outside. Lying in his bed, Bud is shown in a close-up side view, watching the rain's reflection on the wall beside him. Davies hold on this image, as the mirrored rain cascades down the wall, past the window panes also reflected there. Bud's hand reaches out to touch the shadowy ripples on the wall. Next Davies frames the same reflection of rainfall, but this time as it is projected on the parlour floor from the window above. Over what is probably the longest single shot of carpet in the history of cinema, an orchestral version of 'A Shropshire Land' plays on the soundtrack and continues until the rain stops and light filters into the parlour, again lighting up the floor. The elegiac treatment of what should be a banal domestic image is aided by the reflective beauty of the rain

and the textures it adds to the ordinary patterns of the carpet. As Davies has said,

The Long Day Closes is also concerned to reveal the power of the imagination,

particularly through the movies.

It is important to note that the film contains as many fantasy elements as it

does images of poetic realism. Bud's imagination is rendered on screen, such as in

the scene where he is sitting in his classroom, lit up, as though under a spotlight,

looking out of the window. Davies shows his point-of-view, as Bud imagines a

sailing ship moving across the frame instead of the Liverpool skyline. Davies'

belief in the power of the creative mind is demonstrated as actual wind and rain

blow onto Bud's face as he gazes intently at the ship. The light that focuses on

Bud is repeated in the following scene at the cinema, which is shown to be a

source of great joy for him, and by extension, for Davies. In a close three-shot of

Bud flanked by his mother and Helen (Ayse Owens), the projection light in the

cinema beams down on Bud, blanketing him in its symmetrical glow. This shot

signals Davies' own identification with the character, the centrality of cinema to

his childhood experience and the further poetic treatment of the ordinary event of

cinemagoing. Speaking about this time, Davies has talked about:

> The *rapture* of being alive, of discovering the world every day, of being
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> taken to the *movies* all the time, I mean, it was a state of permanent
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> ecstasy. In a way, that comes from naïveté, but I rue the loss of that. I
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> knew the conditions were pretty bad, but emotionally that's not what you
>
> remember.[118]

The Long Day Closes marks the end of Davies' autobiographical cycle of

films, and it is the most poetic due to its inherent nostalgia for what he described

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[118] Jessica Winter, 'Terence Davies on the Cruel Inventions of *The House of Mirth*: Spite Club',
The Village Voice, December, 2000 <http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0049/fwinter.php>,
[accessed 20 May 2003] (para. 7 of 17).

earlier as the 'loss of childhood paradise and innocence'. While Jennings' poetic treatment of actuality revealed much about the spirit of national culture, Davies's poetic realism elucidates his intense engagement with personal and family memories. Despite this important distinction between the *content* they explore, both Davies and Jennings films poeticise the everyday in a stylistically similar fashion and exhibit a strong sense of nostalgia that is often inherent to this strand of realism.

Distant Voices, Still Lives: Davies' own 'Family Portrait'

In *Distant Voice, Still Lives*, Davies offers the strongest example of contemporary poetic realism and his most powerful recreation of the nature of memory, and its influence on the past and the present, through representative stories and images of his family's life. The first half of the film titled "Distant Voices" takes place at the height of his father Tommy's (Pete Postlethwaite) brutality, and the second half, "Still Lives" is a portrait of the Davies' lives after Tommy has died. "Proceeding by memory association from one family gathering to the next, and revealing a world frozen by terror, the film is remarkable for the expressive fluency of its camera, and its innovative use of music, particularly popular song".[119] Due to a desaturation process which drains away some colour from the film print to emphasis the desired shades,[120] the visual surfaces of the film are awash with muted tones, mostly browns, adding to the bleak atmosphere of the narrative. While Jennings' *Family Portrait* was about Britain as a collective family unit, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* is not a microcosm of nationhood or unity, it is absolutely personal and specific to Davies' own life experience and the memories of his family.

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[119] Wendy Everett, 'Terence Davies', in *The Encyclopedia of British Film*, p. 163.
[120] Duncan J. Petrie, *Creativity and Constraint in the British Film Industry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 39-40.

In his introduction to the film's published screenplay, Davies writes: "*Distant Voices* is about memory and the mosaic of memory...Memory does not move in a linear or a chronological way – its pattern is of a circular nature, placing events (not in their 'natural' or 'real' order) but recalled for their emotional importance... Memory *is* its own validity".[121] So, Davies' poetic style of elliptical imagery that continually folds back in on itself is intended to replicate in filmic terms *the way we remember*. It is a form of psychological realism, poetically expressed, that seeks to render the inner lives of a family "rather than from without as in the sixties' British New Wave".[122] The representation of memory in *Distant Voice, Still Lives* is manifold and complex, as befits such a fluid and intangible aspect the mind.

There is a particular sequence at the beginning of the film that provides an unforgiving juxtaposition to illustrate the selectivity of memory and Davies' abhorrence for sentimentality, especially when it applies to his father. It begins with a tableau (the second of the film), where the family is arranged in a medium-wide photographic pose for Eileen's (Angela Walsh) wedding day. Mother (Freda Dowie) is standing to the far left while Tony (Dean Williams) and Eileen are positioned in the center of the frame, and Maisie (Lorraine Ashbourne) stands to their right. The camera moves in to a close two-shot of Tony and Eileen which also takes in the photograph of Tommy on the wall between them. Silence has dominated the sequence until now, when Eileen says, "I wish me Dad was here". As the film begins with Tommy's death, the depth of his viciousness has not yet been revealed, so Eileen's emotional need for her father seems natural. Davies immediately pans right to a close-up of Maisie's face and, in voice-over mode she says, "I don't. He was a bastard and I bleedin' hated him".

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[121] Davies, *A Modest Pageant*, p. 74.
[122] Williams, 'The Masochistic Fix', p. 238.

With the camera still on Maisie's face, the voice-over then switches to a past conversation between Maisie and Tommy, as she pleads with him to let her attend a dance. His harsh voice tells her she must clean the cellar first, even though she's afraid of the rats. Davies cuts to Maisie's memory of the cellar scene, at first in a medium shot of the lower part of the room as she scrubs frantically at the stone-flagged floor. Her father's legs appear, walking from the left of the frame, stopping just to Maisie's right. It is interesting that this first image of her memory takes in her whole body, and her father is disembodied, suggesting the subjectivity of her recollection. After Tommy throws down some money from the as yet unseen upper portion of the off-screen space, Davies finally cuts to his upper body (Maisie is now off-screen) and shows him pick up a broom and beat Maisie over and over again as he screams at her.

Not quite finished with the ways in which this memory might serve to undercut Eileen's longing for Tommy, Davies cuts back to the two-shot of Tony and Eileen as she turns to her brother again and repeats her earlier statement, "I don't half wish me Dad was here". Based on what we have seen, Eileen's words are now instilled with a sense of irony that was absent before Maisie's corrective recollection. Davies does not romanticise Maisie's suffering, but he will not allow Eileen's words to go unchecked. The sequence also embodies Davies' notion of how memory should be depicted in a cyclical, not linear, style, by moving fluidly between time and place, from Eileen's wistful words spoken out loud to Maisie's facial expression, her inner thoughts and then her verbal and visual remembrance of her father: "The film constantly turns back in on itself, like the ripples in a pool when a stone is thrown into it. The ripples are the memory".[123]

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[123] Davies, *A Modest Pageant*, p.xi.

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Music is the dominant form of personal expression for the people in *Distant Voices, Still Lives*. Dialogue, as in his other autobiographical films, is absolutely secondary to what is revealed through symbolic images, and the use of music. In *Listen to Britain*, Jennings used music to promote the notion of a shared experience, and on one level, Davies does the same. He has repeatedly spoken about the role music played in his home and surrounding culture which he states was "very *rich*, because you had to make your own entertainment, which was why when you went to the pub you sang, and then when you came back to the house with some beer you sang *again*".[124] In his short films there are countless examples of what one might term *institutional* singing, such as the choir singing on the soundtrack in *Madonna and Child* or times when singing is performed for pleasure, either for oneself or for others, such as in *The Long Day Closes*, when Mother (Marjorie Yates) sings 'If You Were the Only Girl in the World' while she does her housework and Bud (Leigh McCormack) listens to and watches her with delight from the stairwell.

Sometimes the music conflicts disturbingly with the images, or adds a sense of irony to them, such as in the harrowing scene in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* where Tommy beats Mrs Davies until she is left moaning like an animal on the hall floor, while on the soundtrack Ella Fitzgerald sings 'Taking a Chance on Love'. The film is also full of scenes where the group of friends sing in unison, usually at the pub, revealing their familiarity with the songs and with each other. There are instances, as Davies points out above, where the songs take over the narrative, whether they are songs on the soundtrack or those sung by a film character. One particular case involves a group gathering at the pub, where the disintegration of Eileen's relationship with her husband Dave (Mickey Starke) is

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[124] Quoted in 'The Long Day Closes', p. 251.

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conveyed through song. They have argued bitterly in front of their friends and family, and Mother steps in telling them to stop, "We don't want any upset". Monica (Debi Jones) tries to diffuse the situation by singing "Bye Bye Blackbird", and they all join in. Eileen then begins her own song, 'I Want to Be Around', unaccompanied and with genuine feeling: "I want to be around, to pick up the pieces, when somebody breaks your heart, somebody twice as smart as I". It is a melancholy song about heartbreak and while the tune is pleasant the words are bitter.

Davies stays on Eileen in close-up as she sings, belting the tune out with great emotion. The lyrics, the way they are sung, and their meaning for the singer are all important to the narrative and how music functions to express Eileen's feelings at the time. The poignant use of music is as central as the images to what is revealed about the *psychological* state of Davies' family, in fact music and imagery are often powerfully combined to delve into their inner life. The nature of memory and its centrality to the way people interact and connect is the source of great tragedy and joy in *Distant Voice, Still Lives*, and Davies' stylistic equivalents for those intangibles are the foundation of his poetic realism.

Writing about his style of film-making Terence Davies has stressed that "the images *must* live, the images must *reveal* the story".[125] His symbolic use of images, poetically combined to form mosaics of memory and music recalls the description of the documentary strand of poetic realism of Flaherty and Jennings, whose 'impressionistic style [was] dependent on juxtapositions and association to explore the revelation of the symbolic in the everyday'. The real difference lies in

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[125] Davies, *A Modest Pageant*, p. xii.

what the symbolic in Davies' films reveals about *himself* over a long period of autobiographical film-making.

After exhausting his personal supply of film material, Davies' has made two film adaptations set in America, *The Neon Bible* (1995, UK/US) and *The House of Mirth* (2000, UK/Fr/Ger/US, filmed in Liverpool), and now feels: "My personal past is gone now in terms of film. I've nothing else to say on that, and if I have it will be in the autobiography I'm writing. But I mean to develop until I die".[126] With these latest films, it is clear that his commitment to a poetic style of film-making has not faded, but the connection to a British experience of working class life and his commitment to revealing the beauty contained therein ends his strong relationship to the strand of poetic realism in British cinema.

Writing in 1986 about post-war British realism and the continuation of the strands, Higson signals the importance of the television documentary-drama work of Ken Loach and Tony Garnett, noting that "their aesthetic project is not dissimilar to the development of the story documentary and the marriage of documentary and narrative modes during World War II".[127] He does not go on to specify other directors whose films might be seen as a return to the documentary strands of the 30s. What he does say that is of the utmost importance to this thesis, is that today, "the conditions are different: a national interest can no longer be so easily assumed or constructed".[128]

In looking back at the films of Loach, Mike Leigh and Terence Davies, it is clear that although they are all working at the same time and feeding back into the British realist tradition as formulated by Higson, their individual purchase on

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[126] Interview with Trevor Johnston in *The Independent on Sunday: Culture*, 1 October, 2000, page 2.
[127] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 95.
[128] Ibid.

realism sees them approach representations of reality from distinctly different and personal vantage points. Loach's personal interest in Marxist politics and his own working-class background are as crucial to his didactic realism as the influential context of Thatcherism. Leigh's experience in the theatre as an innovative director informs his work as much as British social conditions or cinematic traditions like Ealing or the New Wave. For Davies, the most technically radical director of the three, the similarity to Jennings is remarkable, however, his poetic realism is not concerned to make statements about nation, rather they comment on his personal life, his memory. The shift from a British realist tradition that had previously sought to construct notions of national identity, to one that is more personal and dispersed, is interesting as it has *not* coincided with a dilution of the strands, which are as identifiable in the films of Loach, Leigh and Davies as they are in the 30s documentary movement that gave birth to them.

Conclusion

Persistence and change in British realist cinema:

Andrew Higson's notion of strands of documentary film-making in British cinema has proved an extremely fruitful one for the purposes of this thesis. The general categories of realism - instructional, narrative and poetic – have allowed me to engage in a detailed analysis of specific directors, films, historical periods and the changes and similarities between eras of British realism. Higson has asked, "whether the term 'realism' can have any consistency in relation to such a wide range of cinematic...practices".[1] For me, the demonstrable persistence of the strands across each generation of British realist cinema shows that there *is* consistency and continuity; it is simply that there are several sub-genres within the wider mode of realism. Higson's thesis, which I have developed and expanded on, runs counter to the idea that British documentary, with its triumvirate foundation, and British realism, that stems from that documentary foundation, can be characterised by any one set of conventions or preconceptions.

In Chapter One, I established the basis of these strands in the documentary film movement founded by John Grierson in the 30s. Despite some erroneous analyses of this period, it was far from a monolithic movement, defined by the work of idiosyncratic and inventive film-makers such as Alberto Cavalcanti and Humphrey Jennings. There is much evidence of the continuation of the strands in the wartime era discussed in Chapter Two, as the documentarists (Cavalcanti, Jennings, Harry Watt) were recruited to lend credibility to studio films dealing directly with the war. This era is defined by the degree of overlap between the strands. The instructional strand, with its propagandist potential, was located in

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[1] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 95.

journalistic films such as *Target for Tonight*, which is also a narrative film, and the narrative strand acquired a documentary style while extending the depiction of characters to include psychological realism. The films of Humphrey Jennings, with their 'revelation of the symbolic in the everyday' were shown to be a crucial extension of the poetic realism established in the 30s.

In Free Cinema and the New Wave, the subjects of Chapter Three, the influence of Jennings' poeticisation of national themes on Lindsay Anderson is ever-present. Despite Anderson's 'revolutionary' stance in his famous writings, the rise of mass culture and consumerism in the 50s saw Free Cinema reinforce traditional notions of working-class life. Again, the films of Free Cinema demonstrate an overlap between the strands, with the employment of instructional elements such as 'voice of God' narration along with the ambiguous juxtaposition of shots common to poetic realism. The poetic strand is continued in the New Wave, such as in the dreamlike use of flashbacks in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. With narratives centred around a single individual, psychological realism is also continued and extended during the New Wave. There are some transgressions of the realist mode in general, such as in the surrealist sequences of *This Sporting Life*, but overall Free Cinema and the New Wave restate the previous conventions outlined in Chapter One.

The final chapter deals with the persistence of the strands in the contemporary era of realism, and the similarities between the films of specific directors and their documentary counterparts. Although Ken Loach also works in the narrativised mode, his pseudo-documentary didactic style places him firmly within the instructional strand. As I demonstrated, Loach's *Cathy Come Home* shares a major social concern with the 30s documentary *Housing Problems*, as both deal with the effects of poor housing on the working class. While these films

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also share a documentary style, Loach deals with the social problem more directly, moving beyond the instructional desire for mere education to an attempt for social change. Mike Leigh belongs to the narrative strand, and his idiosyncratic realism was found to bear a striking resemblance to that of Cavalcanti. I compared Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy* and *High Hopes* with Cavalcanti's *Champagne Charlie* and *Pett and Pott* respectively, to demonstrate that both film-makers employ satire, caricatures and incongruity within a narrative-realist framework.

The last director, Terence Davies, makes films that are deeply personal examinations of his past and, in style, belong to the poetic realist strand. Davies' 'painterly' use of images to reflect the intangible nature of memory were found to have much in common with Jennings' poetic realist approach to cinema. The strong points of comparison between the documentary and contemporary eras in this final chapter emphasises the strong continuation of the strands.

It is fitting to include at this point a quote from Grierson, whose ideas I have shown to have a great influence on the trajectory of British realism over time, especially on the instructional strand:

> As I keep reminding you, the changes in the reality dictate the changes in
> the arts. What I think we have most surely to do as observers of the arts is
> to realise the great shapes of change in the reality which drive the arts
> historically forward.[2]

The words quoted above were written in 1966 when Grierson had revised many of his views on film, and they are especially relevant to a thesis that is concerned with the historical contexts surrounding the changes in realist strands and eras, as well as the similarities. What all of the previous chapters demonstrate is that British realism in its various guises *has* shifted as contemporary 'reality' has

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[2] 'Art and Revolution', in *The Documentary Film Movement* (previously unpublished), p. 133.

changed. This is a symptom of one of the key principles common to most claims

to realism, that it should engage with *contemporary* society and people, and in

doing so, changes in the nature of such representations are unavoidable.

One of the greatest 'shapes of change' occurred with the arrival of World

War II in 1939. In Chapter Two, it is clear that this historical event led to a

reinforcement of the documentary-realist tendency to emphasise collectivisation,

but it also meant that class distinctions, which had been addressed to a certain

degree in the 30s, were necessarily obfuscated. In Chapter Three, I discussed the

'Angry Young Man' phenomenon which encapsulated the discontent seething

beneath the so-called post-war 'boom' and its relationship to the shift away from

collectives in British realism towards a more *individualised* approach. In keeping

with Lukács' Marxist theory of realism, the New Wave era emphasised class

distinctions and attempted to communicate the alienation and confusion of its

numerous young, male, anti-heroes. The final chapter continues the trend to a

certain degree, as the so-called attacks on the working class and high

unemployment of the Thatcher years influenced the heavily politicised films of

Loach and the grim surfaces and outlook in the cinema of Leigh. There is much

evidence here of what Roman Jakobson and Raymond Williams have both

characterised as the artistic tendency to 'revolt' against previous conventions or

eras, while, paradoxically, moving towards realism.

Within this assessment of the historical impact on the generations of

British realism resides another interesting arc of development, from the public to

private, and by extension, the collective to the individual. The social

documentation of the films of the documentary movement constructed a public

sphere which "addresses the spectator as a citizen of the nation, not as a subject of

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one or another antagonistic class, race or sex".[3] As such, the depiction of cohesive

group activities in films such as *Drifters, Coal Face, Industrial Britain* and *Night*

Mail functions on a microcosmic level to emphasise the importance of

collectivisation to the nation. While it is true that *Housing Problems* allows

individuals to speak about their own lives, their comments are mediated by the

controlling narrator and the public gaze constructed within the film. My analysis

of the wartime era revealed a reinforcement of collective representations in British

realist cinema, as images of nation had to reflect a consensuality of views and

attitudes. The myth of a national consensus was realised as characters in films like

Millions Like Us and *The Way Ahead* who questioned the status quo were quickly

absorbed back into the cohesive structure of the collective.

The New Wave signalled the first stage in the move away from the public

sphere towards the private realm of individual problems and emotions. This

movement is replicated in the contemporary era, as we move from the political

and public-oriented films of Loach, to the domestic sphere in Leigh's work,

finishing at last with Davies, whose personal engagement with his own memory is

an entirely private enterprise. As I have shown, the arc of development in British

realism, from the public to the private sphere, represents an important progression

from issues of collectivism and nation to an individualised and far more personal

approach to the dominant strands.

I have already addressed the manner in which the eras of realism in British

cinema were in some way attempting to define themselves against previous

generations. Another significant conclusion to be drawn from the investigation of

the strands is the process by which each era sought to define itself against the

dominant Hollywood paradigm and create a specifically *British* national cinema.

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[3] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 77.

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Higson points out that Grierson's documentary idea was based on "the struggle to establish an authentic, indigenous national cinema in response to the dominance of Hollywood, or rather the idea of Hollywood as an irresponsible cinema of spectacle and 'escapism'".[4] In the 30s, this meant a focus on stories of British working-class labour, such as the fishermen in *Drifters* or the miners in *Coal Face*. Higson correctly points out that the issue of class is raised in these films to foreground "the issue of citizenship, and the idea of a universal humanity".[5] The Soviet method of typage is prevalent during this period, where representative characters 'concentrate and intensify a much more general reality', to use Raymond Williams phrase.

During the war working-class images were subordinated to the myth-making project of consensualism, so the creation of a national cinema was tied at this time to the idea of Britain as a family. This notion is most powerfully rendered in Jennings' films, such as *Listen to Britain* and *Fires Were Started* and in Carol Reed's *The Way Ahead*, where ordinary citizens are depicted as the 'heroes' of the home front. The Free Cinema of the 50s signals a return of the working-class signpost of British realism. In an echo of the documentary era, these films reveal a traditionalist attitude to working-class culture through their celebration of everyday labour activities (*Everyday Except Christmas*) and a critical view of the impact of modern, mass culture on the adolescent generation (*Momma Don't Allow*). The New Wave era extends this era's national specificity by establishing a specifically *British* iconography of realism located in the landscapes and rooftops of the local working-class environment. Higson's 'That Long Shot' might now be considered a cliché of British realism, but it was an

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[4] "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film", p. 74.
[5] Ibid., p. 95.

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important method of signalling a commitment to a particularly British sense of place.

In the contemporary era, working-class life is again a crucial signpost of the 'real' in British cinema. The dominance of working-class images within the strands is further evidence of the conflation of such images and their application to the mode of realism. It also suggests something about the ways in which British film-makers view themes of national identity. Unlike in the documentary era, for Loach, issues of class are not used to signify a universal humanity, but are central to his didactic enterprise: to highlight social inequities and make a difference. As he chooses to return repeatedly to issues associated with class that affect people within Britain's contemporary society, the formulation of a *national* identity in his films is unavoidable. The same is true of Leigh, whose films also engage with exclusively (*Topsy-Turvy* is the one exception, although the theatrical cast includes working-class people) British working-class people struggling in a contemporary world. Davies' films are about working-class people, namely, his Liverpudlian family, and while they are set in his past, they are no less representative of a British national identity, as the experiences and images belong to an unmistakable milieu. As we have seen, the realist project, with its emphasis on contemporaneity and working-class life, is bound to develop the concept of a national cinema, dealing as it does with issues of identity, place and class.

In considering the future of the strands, it is useful to examine current films and film-makers to determine whether the persistence I have mapped will continue. Gary Oldman, who made the uncompromising *Nil by Mouth*, has said: "I think people lay the foundation for you. I don't know if there could be a *Nil by Mouth* without people like Tony Richardson, Ken Loach, Mike Leigh -- I guess it

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follows in the tradition of that type of British film. And John Cassavetes"[6]

Although Oldman has yet to add to his own foundation realist film, his words illustrate the network that connects the strands within the British realist tradition. He mentions Leigh and Cassavetes as influences, while Leigh himself names Cassavetes as a major influence on his work. The connections that can be made between influences within the strands are the subject of another thesis entirely.

Film-makers such as Paul Greengrass with the documentary realism of *Bloody Sunday* (2002, UK/Ire), and Peter Mullan, the lead in Loach's *My Name Is Joe*, whose *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002, UK/Ire), is filmed "with a kind of breakneck realism",[7] are closely aligned to the instructional strand. Their work is evidence that this strand will continue to overlap with the narrative mode of realism. In Chapter Four I mentioned Michael Winterbottom as a film-maker with claims to the poetic realist strand, such as in *Wonderland* where the "documentary ambience is broken up with stylistic flourishes (time-lapse, slow motion)".[8] Winterbottom's recent work, such as *The Claim*, which also contains poetic elements, suggests that he will continue to be aligned with the poetic strand of British realism. As Davies has ceased to engage with his past, and moved on to non-British subjects, Winterbottom stands as the most significant director to contribute to this aspect of the British realist tradition.

Finally, in the Introduction I mentioned Shane Meadows' film, *24 7 TwentyFourSeven*, and its visual resemblance to the New Wave films of the 50s and 60s. His last two features, *A Room for Romeo Brass* (1999, UK/Can), and *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* (2003, UK/Ger/Neth), which are defined by their working-class environments, caricatures and sense of humour alongside

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[6] Original Film Scouts interview conducted by Henri Béhar, during the Cannes-festival, May 8, 1997, quoted online at <http://hemsidor.torget.se/users/b/boatman/interviews/scouts.html> [accessed 28 January, 2001] (para. 5 of 39).
[7] Nick James, 'Keeping it clean', *Sight and Sound*, 13.3 (March 2003), 16-17 (p. 16).
[8] Xan Brooks, 'Wonderland', *Sight and Sound*, 10.1 (January 2000), p. 62.

more sombre moments, suggests a closer relationship to Leigh. Meadows, who admires the work of both Loach and Leigh,[9] has developed his own style of film-making, but there are resonances of the British realist tradition in his oeuvre to date that make him an important director for future writers on the strands. The last shot of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* bears this out: it is 'That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill', as the camera rises up to look out over the rooftops of a Midlands town, signalling the persistence of an old symbol of realism and its continued currency in modern British cinema.

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[9] Nigel Cliff, 'The scholar of hard knocks', *The Times* (January 27, 2000), available online at: <http://www.the-times.co.uk/news/pa.../timartcin02004.html?00099> [accessed on 27 January, 2000] (para. 6 of 16).

Filmography

21 Up, Dir. Michael Apted, Granada, 1977.

24 7 TwentyFourSeven, Dir. Shane Meadows, Scala Productions, 1997.

24 Hour Party People, Dir. Michael Winterbottom, Channel Four Films, 2002, UK/France/Netherlands.

28 Days Later, Dir. Danny Boyle, British Film Council, 2002, UK/US/Netherlands.

28 Up, Dir. Michael Apted, Granada, 1985.

35 Up, Dir. Michael Apted, Granada, 1991.

42 Up, Dir. Michael Apted, BBC1, 1998.

49th Parallel, Dir. Michael Powell, Ortus Films, 1941.

Abigail's Party, Dir. Mike Leigh, BBC, 1977.

About a Boy, Dir. Chris and Paul Weitz, Working Title Films, 2002, UK/US/France.

Above Us The Waves, Dir. Ralph Thomas, London Independent Producers, 1955.

The Acid House, Dir. Paul McGuigan, Picture Palace North Limited, 1998.

All or Nothing, Dir. Mike Leigh, Thin Man Films, 2003.

Among Giants, Dir. Sam Miller, BBC/British Screen, 1998.

Angela's Ashes, Dir. Alan Parker, Universal Pictures, 1999, Ireland/US.

The Angry Silence, Dir. Guy Green, Beaver Films, 1959.

The Baby Of Macon, Dir. Peter Greenaway, Allarts Enterprises, 1993, UK/Netherlands/France/Germany.

Backbeat, Dir. Iain Softley, Polygram, 1994.

Bank Holiday, Dir. Carol Reed, Gainsborough Pictures, 1938.

Bedrooms and Hallways, Dir. Rose Troche, BBC, 1998.

The Bells Go Down, Dir. Basil Dearden, Ealing Studios, 1943.

Bend It Like Beckham, Dir Gurinder Chadha, British Screen/Film Council, 2002, UK/US/Germany.

The Best Years of Our Lives, Dir. William Wyler, Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1946, US.

Bhaji on the Beach, Dir. Gurinder Chadha, Umbi Films, 1993.

The Big Tease, Dir. Kevin Allen, I Should Coco Films, 1999, UK/US.

Billy Elliot, Dir. Stephen Daldry. Arts Council of England/Studio Canal, 2000, UK/France.

Billy Liar, Dir. John Schlesigner, Vic Films, 1963.

Blackmail, Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, British International Pictures, 1929.

Blanche Fury, Dir. Marc Allégret, Cineguild/Independent Producers, 1947.

Bleak Moments, Dir. Mike Leigh, Autumn Productions, 1971.

Blithe Spirit, Dir. David Lean, Two Cities Films, 1945.

Bloody Sunday, Dir. Paul Greengrass, Granada/Hell's Kitchen Films, 2002, UK/Ireland.

The Blue Lamp, Dir. Basil Dearden, Ealing Studios, 1950.

Born Romantic, Dir. David Kane, Kismet Film Company, 2000.

Brassed Off, Dir. Mark Herman, Channel Four Television Corporation, 1996, UK/US.

Bridget Jones's Diary, Dir. Sharon Maguire, Working Title Films, 2000, UK/France.

Brief Encounter, Dir. David Lean, Cineguild, 1945.

Brighton Rock, Dir. John Boulting, Associated British Picture Corporation, 1947.

Britain Can Take It!, Dir. Harry Watt and Humphrey Jennings, GPO Film Unit, 1940.

Burma Victory, Dir. Roy Boulting, Army Film Unit, 1945.

Campbell's Kingdom, Dir. Ralph Thomas, Rank Film Productions, 1957.

A Canterbury Tale, Dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, Archers Film Productions, 1944.

The Captive Heart, Dir. Basil Dearden, Ealing Studios, 1947.

Caravaggio, Dir. Derek Jarman, Channel Four, 1986.

Caravan, Dir. Arthur Crabtree, Gainsborough Pictures, 1946.

Career Girls, Dir. Mike Leigh, Thin Man Films, 1997.

Carve Her Name With Pride, Dir. Lewis Gilbert, Keyboard, 1958.

Cathy Come Home, Dir. Ken Loach, BBC, 1966.

Champagne Charlie, Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, Ealing Studios, 1944.

Children, Dir. Terence Davies, British Film Institute Production Board, 1976.

The Chiltern Hundreds, Dir. Carstairs, John Paddy, Two Cities Films, 1949.

The Citadel, Dir. King Vidor, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer British Studios, 1938.

Citizen Kane, Dir. Orson Welles, RKO Radio Pictures/Mercury Productions, 1941, US.

The Claim, Dir. Michael Winterbottom, Arts Council Of England, 2000, UK/France/Canada.

Clockwork Mice, Dir. Jean Vadim, Metrodome Pictures, 1995.

Coal Face, Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, GPO Film Unit, 1935.

Cocozza's Way, Dir. Peter Capaldi, Arts Council of England, 2001.

The Commitments, Dir. Alan Parker, First Film Company, 1991.

The Common Touch, Dir. John Baxter, British National Films, 1941.

Convoy, Dir. Pen Tennyson, Ealing Studios, 1940.

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, Dir. Peter Greenaway, Allarts Enterprises, 1989, UK/France.

The Crying Game, Dir. Neil Jordan, Palace Productions, 1992.

Dance with a Stranger, Dir. Mike Newell, Channel Four Films, 1985.

Dancin' Thru the Dark, Dir. Mike Ockrent, Palace Pictures, 1990.

David, Dir. Paul Dickson, World Wide Pictures, 1951.

A Day at The Beach, Dir. Simon Hesera, Cadre Films, 1969, UK/US.

The Day Will Dawn, Dir. Harold French, Niskos Films, 1942.

Dead of Night, Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, Basil Dearden, Robert Hamer, Ealing Studios, 1945.

Death and Transfiguration, Dir. Terence Davies, British Film Institute Production Board, 1983.

The Debt Collector, Dir. Anthony Neilson, Channel Four Films, 1999.

The Demi-Paradise, Dir. Anthony Asquith, Two Cities Films, 1943.

Desert Victory, Dir. Roy Boulting, Army Film Unit/RA Film Production Unit, 1943.

A Diary for Timothy, Dir. Humphrey Jennings, Crown Film Unit, 1943.

Distant Voices, Still Lives, Dir. Terence Davies Channel Four, 1988, UK/Germany.

Dockers, Dir. Bill Anderson, BBCTV, 1999.

Doctor Zhivago, Dir. David Lean, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1965, UK/US.

Don't Take It To Heart!, Dir. Jeffrey Dell, Two Cities Films, 1945.

Doss House, Dir. John Baxter, Sound City, 1932.

The Draughtsman's Contract, Dir. Peter Greenaway, British Film Institute Production Board, 1982.

Dreaming of Joseph Lees, Dir. Eric Styles, Midsummer Films, 1999, UK/US.

The Dresser, Dir. Peter Yates, Goldcrest Films And Television, 1983.

Drifters, Dir. John Grierson, EMB Film Unit, 1929.

East Is East, Dir. Damien O'Donnell, Film Four, 1999.

The Edge of the World, Dir. Michael Powell, Joe Rock Productions, 1937.

Educating Rita, Dir. Lewis Gilbert, Acorn Pictures, 1983.

The Elephant Man, Dir. David Lynch, Brooksfilms, 1980, US.

English Without Tears, Dir. Harold French, Two Cities Films, 1944.

Enough to Eat?, Dir. Edgar Anstey, Realist Film Unit, 1936.

The Entertainer, Dir. Tony Richardson, Woodfall Film Productions, 1960.

Eraserhead, Dir. David Lynch, AFI Center for Advanced Film Studies, 1976, US.

Everyday Except Christmas, Dir. Lindsay Anderson, Graphic Films, 1957.

Face, Dir. Antonia Bird, British Screen, 1997.

Family Life, Kestrel Films/Anglo-Emi, 1971.

Family Portrait, Dir. Humphrey Jennings, Wessex Film Productions, 1950.

The Filth and the Fury, Dir. Julien Temple, Film Four, 2000, UK/US.

Find, Fix and Strike, Dir. Compton Bennett, Ealing Studios, 1942.

Fires Were Started, Dir. Humphrey Jennings, Crown Film Unit, 1943.

Flame In The Streets, Dir. Roy Ward, Rank Film Productions/Somerset Productions, 1961.

For Them That Trespass, Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, Associated British Picture Corporation, 1948.

Four Weddings and a Funeral, Dir. Mike Newell, Working Title Films, 1994.

Frenzy, Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, Universal Pictures, 1972.

Full Metal Jacket, Dir. Stanley Kubrick, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1987.

The Full Monty, Peter Cattaneo, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1997, UK/US.

Gangster No. 1, British Screen/Film Four, 2000, UK/Germany/Ireland.

The Garden, Dir. Derek Jarman, Channel Four, 1990.

The General, Dir. John Boorman, J & M/Merlin Films, 1998, UK/Ireland.

Genevieve, Dir. Henry Cornelius, , Sirius Productions, 1953.

The Gentle Sex, Maurice Elvey and Leslie Howard, Two Cities Films/Concanen Productions, 1943.

Germany Year Zero, Dir. Roberto Rossellini, Teverfilm, 1947, Italy/France/Germany.

Get Carter, Dir. Mike Hodges, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1971.

The Girl in the News, Dir. Carol Reed, Twentieth Century Productions, 1940.

Girl with Green Eyes, Dir. Desmond Davis, Woodfall Film Productions, 1963.

Go Now, Dir. Michael Winterbottom, Revolution Films, 1996.

Golden Salamander, Dir. Ronald Neame, Pinewood Films, 1949.

Gosford Park, Dir. Robert Altman, Capitol Films/British Film Council, 2001, UK/US/Italy/Germany.

The Governess, Dir. Sandra Goldbacher, Parallax Pictures, 1998.

Granton Trawler, Dir. John Grierson, EMB Film Unit, 1934.

Great Day, Dir. Lance Comfort, RKO Radio Pictures, 1945.

Great Expectations, Dir. David Lean, Cineguild, 1946.

Grown-Ups, Dir. Mike Leigh, BBC, 1980.

H.M.S. Defiant, Dir. Lewis Gilbert, John Brabourne Productions, 1962.

The Heart of Britain, Dir. Humphrey Jennings, Crown Film Unit, 1941.

Heart, Dir. Charles McDougall, Charles, Granada Film Productions, 1999.

Hearts of Humanity, Dir. John Baxter, UK Films, 1936.

Henry V, Dir. Kenneth Branagh, Renaissance Films, 1989.

Henry V, Dir. Laurence Olivier, Two Cities Films, 1944.

Hidden Agenda, Dir. Ken Loach, Initial (II), 1990.

Hideous Kinky, Dir. Gillies MacKinnon, BBC/Greenpoint Films, 1998, UK/France.

High Hopes, Dir. Mike Leigh, Portman Productions, 1988.

The Hill, Dir. Sidney Lumet, Seven Arts Productions, 1965.

Holiday Camp, Dir. Ken Annakin, Gainsborough Pictures, 1947.

Hollow Reed, Dir. Angela Pope, Scala Productions, 1996, UK/Germany.

Hope and Glory, Dir. John Boorman, Columbia Pictures/Goldcrest/Nelson, 1987.

The House of Mirth, Dir. Terence Davies, Arts Council Of England, 2000, UK/France/Germany/US.

Housing Problems, Dir. Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey, British Commercial Gas Association/London County Council (LCC), 1935.

Howard's End, Dir. James Ivory, Merchant Ivory Productions, 1992.

Human Traffic, Dir. Justin Kerrigan, Irish Screen, 1999, UK/Ireland.

I Live In Grosvenor Square, Dir. Herbert Wilcox, Associated British Picture Corporation, 1945.

I See a Dark Stranger, Dir. Frank Launder, Individual Pictures/Independent Producers, 1946.

I Thank a Fool, Dir. Robert Stevens, Eaton Productions/MGM, 1962.

I Want You, Dir. Michael Winterbottom, Revolution Films, 1998, UK.

I'm All Right Jack, Dir. John Boulting, Charter Film Productions, 1959.

In Which We Serve, Dir. Noël Coward and David Lean, Two Cities Films, 1942.

Industrial Britain, Dir. Robert Flaherty, EMB Film Unit, 1933.

The Innocents, Dir. Jack Clayton, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1961.

Intimacy, Dir. Patrice Chéreau, 2001, Studio Canal/Greenpoint Films, UK/France/Germany/Spain.

The Intruder, Dir. Guy Hamilton, Ivan Foxwell Productions, 1953.

The Italian Job, Dir. Peter Collinson, Oakhurst Productions/Paramount Pictures, 1969.

Jude, Dir. Michael Winterbottom, Revolution Films, 1996, UK.

Judgement Deferred, Dir. John Baxter, Group 3, 1951.

Kes, Woodfall Film Productions, 1969, UK.

Kind Hearts and Coronets, Robert Hamer, Ealing Studios, 1949.

A Kind of Loving, Dir. John Schlesinger, Vic Films, 1962.

Kipps, Dir. Carol Reed, Twentieth Century Productions, 1941.

La Terra Trema, Dir. Luchino Visconti, Universalia, 1947, Italy.

Ladybird Ladybird, Dir. Ken Loach, Parallax Pictures, 1994, UK.

The Ladykillers, Dir. Alexander Mackendrick, Ealing Studios, 1955.

The Lamp Still Burns, Maurice Elvey, Two Cities Films, 1943.

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Land and Freedom, Dir. Ken Loach, Parallax Pictures, 1995, UK/Sp/Ger.

Last Orders, Dir. Fred Schepisi, Scala Productions, 2001.

The Last Yellow, Dir. Julian Farino, Scala Productions, 1999.

The Lavender Hill Mob, Charles Crichton, Ealing Studios, 1951.

Lawrence Of Arabia, Dir. David Lean, Horizon Pictures (G.B.), 1962.

"Let Him Have It", Dir. Peter Medak, Vivid, 1991.

A Letter To Brezhnev, Dir. Chris Bernard, Yeardream/Filmfour International/Palace, 1985.

Liam, Dir. Stephen Frears, BBC, 2000, UK/Germany/France.

Life for Ruth, Dir. Basil Dearden, Allied Film Makers, 1962.

Life Is Sweet, Dir. Mike Leigh, Thin Man Films, 1991.

The Lion Has Wings, Dir. Michael Powell, Adrian Brunel and Brian Desmond Hurst, London Film Productions, 1939.

Listen to Britain, Dir. Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAllister, Crown Film Unit, 1942.

The Little Foxes, Dir. William Wyler, Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1941, US.

Little Friend, Dir. Berthold Viertel, Gaumont-British Picture Corporation, 1934.

Little Voice, Dir. Mark Herman, Scala Productions, 1998.

Live Forever, Dir. John Dower, Film Council, 2003.

Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels, Dir. Guy Ritchie, HandMade Films, 1998.

The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog, Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, Gainsborough Pictures, 1926.

London Kills Me, Dir. Hanif Kureishi, Working Title Films, 1991.

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, Dir. Tony Richardson, Woodfall Film Productions, 1962

The Long Day Closes, Dir. Terence Davies, BFI Productions, 1992.

Look Back In Anger, Dir. Tony Richardson, Woodfall Film Productions, 1959.

Love on the Dole, Dir. John Baxter, British National Films, 1941.

Love Story, Dir. Leslie Arliss, Gainsborough Pictures, 1944.

The Love Test, Dir. Michael Powell, Fox-British Pictures, 1935.

Lucky Break, Dir. Peter Cattaneo, Film Four/Fragile Films, 2001, UK/Germany.

Madonna and Child, Dir. Terence Davies, British Film Institute Production Board, 1980.

The Magdalene Sisters, Dir. Peter Mullan, Film Council/Scottish Screen, 2002, UK/Ireland.

The Man In Grey, Dir. Leslie Arliss, Gainsborough Pictures, 1943.

Man of Aran, Dir. Robert Flaherty, Gaumont-British Picture Corporation/Gainsborough Pictures, 1934.

Masculin Féminin, Dir. Jean-Luc Godard, Anouchka Films/Argos-Films, 1966, France/Sweden.

Meantime, Dir. Mike Leigh, Central Production, 1983.

Millions Like Us, Dir. Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, Gainsborough Pictures, 1943.

Miracle In Soho, Dir. Julian Amyes, Rank Film Productions, 1957.

Moana – A Romance of the Golden Age, Dir. Robert Flaherty, Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, 1926, US.

Momma Don't Allow, Dir. Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson, British Film Institute Experimental Film Fund, 1955.

Mona Lisa, Dir. Neil Jordan, Handmade Films, 1986.

Morvern Callar, Dir. Lynne Ramsay, Company Pictures, 2002.

My Beautiful Laundrette, Dir. Stephen Frears, Working Title Films, 1985.

My Name Is Joe, Dir. Ken Loach, Parallax Pictures, 1998, UK/France/Italy/Germany/Spain.

Naked, Dir. Mike Leigh, Thin Man Films, 1993.

Nanook of the North Dir. Robert Flaherty, Robert Flaherty Productions, 1922, US.

The Neon Bible, Dir. Terence Davies, Scala Productions, 1995, UK/US.

Nicholas Nickleby, Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, Ealing Studios, 1947.

Night Mail, Dir. Basil Wright and Harry Watt, GPO Film Unit, 1936.

Night Train to Munich, Dir. Carol Reed, Twentieth Century Productions, 1940.

Nil by Mouth, Dir. Gary Oldman, Se8 Group, 1997.

Nine Men, Dir. Harry Watt, Ealing Studios, 1942.

No Love for Johnnie, Dir. Ralph Thomas, Five Star Films, 1961.

North Sea, Dir. Harry Watt, GPO Film Unit, 1938.

Nuts In May, Dir. Mike Leigh, BBC Birmingham, 1976.

O Dreamland, Dir. Lindsay Anderson, A Sequence Film, 1953.

Odd Man Out, Dir. Carol Reed, Two Cities Films, 1947.

Oliver Twist, Dir. David Lean, Independent Producers, 1948.

On the Waterfront, Dir. Elia Kazan, Horizon Pictures, 1954, US.

Once Upon a Time in the Midlands, Dir. Shane Meadows, Film Council/Film Four, 2002, UK/Germany/Netherlands.

One of Our Aircraft Is Missing, Dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, British National Films, 1942.

Onegin, Dir. Martha Fiennes, Canwest, 1999.

Opening Night, Dir. John Cassavetes, Faces Distribution Corporation, 1977, US.

Orphans, Dir. Peter Mullan, British Screen, 1997.

Paisà, Dir. Roberto Rossellini, Foreign Film Productions, 1946, Italy.

The Passionate Friends (One Woman's Story), Dir. David Lean, Cineguild, 1948.

Perfect Strangers, Dir. Alexander Korda, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer British Studios, 1945.

Persuasion, Dir. Roger Michell, BBCTV, 1995.

Pett and Pott: A Fairy Story of the Suburbs, Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, GPO Film Unit, 1934.

The Phantom Light, Dir. Michael Powell, Gainsborough Pictures, 1935.

Piccadilly Incident, Dir. Herbert Wilcox, Associated British Picture Corporation, 1948.

The Pillow Book, Dir. Peter Greenaway, Kasander & Wigman Productions, 1996, UK/Netherlands/France/Luxembourg.

Pimpernel Smith, Dir. Leslie Howard, British National Films, 1941.

Poor Cow, Vic Films, 1967, UK.

Pretty Polly, Dir. Guy Green, Mariana Productions/Universal Pictures, 1967.

Priest, Dir. Antonia Bird, BBC Films/Polygram/Electric, 1994.

The Proud Valley, Dir. Pen Tennyson, Ealing Studios, 1940.

Purely Belter, Dir. Mark Herman, Film Four, 2000.

Raining Stones, Dir. Ken Loach, Parallax Pictures, 1993, UK.

The Rake's Progress, Dir. Sidney Gilliat, Individual Pictures, 1945.

Reach For The Sky, Dir. Lewis Gilbert, Pinnacle Productions, 1956.

Red Ensign, Dir. Michael Powell, Gaumont-British Picture Corporation, 1934.

Regeneration, Dir. Gillies MacKinnon, BBC/Scottish Arts Council Lottery Fund, 1997, UK/Canada.

Remains of the Day, Dir. James Ivory, Merchant Ivory Productions, 1993.

Resurrected, Dir. Paul Greengrass, British Screen, 1989.

Riff-Raff, Dir. Ken Loach, Parallax Pictures, 1991, UK.

Romance, Dir. Catherine Breillat, CB Films, 1999, France.

Rome Open City, Dir. Roberto Rossellini, Minerva Films, 1945, Italy.

Room at the Top, Dir. Jack Clayton, Remus Films, 1958.

A Room For Romeo Brass, Dir. Shane Meadows, Arts Council of England, 1999, UK/Canada.

A Room with a View, Dir. James Ivory, Merchant Ivory Productions, 1985.

Rooney, Dir. George Pollock, Rank Film Productions, 1958.

Sailor Beware, Dir. Gordon Parry, Romulus Films, 1956.

Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, Dir. Stephen Frears, Working Title Films, 1987.

San Demetrio – London, Dir. Charles Frend, Ealing Studios, 1943.

Sapphire, Dir. Basil Dearden, Artna Films, 1959.

The Saturday Men, Dir. John Fletcher, Graphic Films, 1962.

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, Dir. Karel Reisz, Woodfall Film Productions, 1960.

Saving Grace, Dir. Nigel Cole, Portman Entertainment Group, 2000.

Secrets and Lies, Dir. Mike Leigh, Thin Man Films, 1996.

The Seekers, Dir. Ken Annakin, Group Film Productions, 1954.

Sense and Sensibility, Dir. Ang Lee, Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1995, US.

The Servant, Dir. Joseph Losey, Springbok Films, 1963.

Seven Up, Dir. Paul Almond, Granada, 1964.

The Seventh Veil, Dir. Compton Bennett, Ortus Films/Theatrecraft, 1945.

Sexy Beast, Dir. Jonathan Glazer, Film Four, 2000, UK/Spain.

Shadows, Dir. John Cassavetes, Cassavetes-McEndree-Cassel Productions, 1960, US.

Shallow Grave, Dir. Danny Boyle, Figment Films, 1994.

Ships with Wings, Dir. Sergei Nolbandov, Ealing Studios, 1942.

Shirley Valentine, Dir. Lewis Gilbert, Paramount Pictures Corporation, 1989, UK/US.

Simon and Laura, Dir. Muriel Box, Group Film Productions, 1955.

Sky West and Crooked, Dir. John Mills, John Mills Productions, 1965.

Small Faces, Dir. Gillies Mackinnon, Skyline Film & Television Productions, 1995.

Snatch, Dir. Guy Ritchie, 2000, SKA Films, UK/US.

Something Always Happens, Dir. Michael Powell, Warner Brothers First National Productions, 1934.

Song of Ceylon, Dir. Basil Wright, GPO Film Unit, 1934.

Spare the Rod, Dir. Leslie Norman, Bryanston Films, 1961.

Spare Time, Dir. Humphrey Jennings, GPO Film Unit, 1939.

The Stars Look Down, Dir. Carol Reed, Grafton Films, 1939.

Stella Dues Tricks, Dir. Coky Giedroyc, British Film Institute Production, 1996.

Sweet Sixteen, Dir. Ken Loach, Parallax Pictures, 2002, UK/Germany/Spain.

Target For Tonight, Dir. Harry Watt, Crown Film Unit, 1941.

A Taste Of Honey, Dir. Tony Richardson, Woodfall Film Productions, 1961.

Tawny Pipit, Dir. Bernard Miles, Two Cities Films, 1944.

Terminus, Dir. John Schlesigner, British Transport Films, 1961.

There's Only One Jimmy Grimble, Dir. John Hay, Arts Council of England, 2000, UK/France.

They Made Me a Fugitive, Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti Cavalcanti, Alliance Film Studios, 1947.

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