

The 1950s and 1960s

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Introduction

There once seemed to be a fairly clear dividing line between ‘the 1950s’ and ‘the 1960s’ and what those two decades connoted, at least in vernacular historiography. The 1950s in Britain were black and white, defined by the hangover of war, and overwhelmingly an age of deference in spite of a few rumblings of youthful rebellion towards the end of the decade. Then the 1960s began in earnest around 1963 (as did ‘sexual intercourse’, according to Philip Larkin) and soon drab monochrome began to cede to kaleidoscopic colour, old hierarchies were overturned, and youthful innovation and daring made the country ‘swing’ like never before.¹ If one sought a microcosmic demonstration of the remarkable distance Britain seemed to travel over those years, one could scarcely do better than the biography of Keith Richards: from angelic boy chorister singing for Queen Elizabeth II to notoriously debauched guitarist for the most controversial of 1960s rock groups, The Rolling Stones (McMillan 2013, p. 23); a story of individual maturation, to be sure, but also powerfully symbolic of much wider cultural shifts in British society.

Likewise, when looking at British cinema over those two decades and comparing a film from the beginning of the period like Ealing’s *The Blue Lamp* (1950) with one from its close like *Performance* (completed in 1968 but released in 1970, and starring Richards’ bandmate Mick Jagger), the social and cinematic gulf between them seems bewilderingly wide. When neurotic young hoodlum Tom Riley (Dirk Bogarde) shoots PC George Dixon dead (Jack Warner) in *The Blue Lamp*, an entire community, on both sides of the law, expresses its cohesive collective identity by ensuring the criminal’s entrapment. In *Performance*,

individual identity, never mind group identity, is utterly protean and provisional, the personae of Turner (Mick Jagger) and Chas (James Fox) dangerously incoherent. These two British films seem not only to come from different decades but different planets, supporting the thesis that in the intervening years a true 'cultural revolution' (Marwick 1998) had indeed taken place, clearly discernible across a range of British art, music and media, including its cinema.

However, like most neat and clear divisions, the sense of definitive break between the two decades becomes harder to sustain once it is examined in any detail. Periodisation is less decisive even in Arthur Marwick's landmark historical work (1998) which has to posit a 'long sixties' stretching back into the 1950s and forwards into the mid-1970s to take into full account how and when cultural change actually happened, or in Christopher Booker's earlier post-war history in which the 1950s and the 1960s are bracketed together as the period when a dangerous 'neophilia' took hold in British society (Booker 1992). More recently, Dominic Sandbrook's histories of the period (Sandbrook 2005, 2006) make a powerful case for understanding the two decades, in Britain at least, in terms of deeper cultural continuity rather than drastic change, observing that while

perhaps half a million people might buy the biggest-selling single of the week, four times that many would head off that weekend to the nearest river or canal for a spot of fishing ... Britain in the age of affluence was a country as much of the old and the middle-aged as it was of the young. (Sandbrook 2006, p. 146)

Even the pop charts were a more complex affair than one might suppose; at the height of 1967's *Summer of Love*, The Beatles' double A-side single *Strawberry Fields Forever/Penny Lane* was kept from reaching number one by Engelbert Humperdinck's more traditional ballad *Please Release Me*. Bearing in mind such historical quirks, Sandbrook seeks to go beyond the usual mythological touchstones for understanding this period, supplementing *Lady Chatterley*, the Pill and the Rolling Stones' with more ambiguous emblems of the age combining both residual and emergent elements, such as 'bingo, Blackpool and Berni Inns' (2006, p. xxiv).

Mining their own memories, some commentators have gone even further in their iconoclasm and completely turned on its head the assumption that the 1950s meant stasis and the 1960s transformation. For Matthew Parris, reflecting on his post-war boyhood, the reverse was true:

The received wisdom about the period is wrong: that the fifties were dull, unoriginal, suburban, a sort of prim prelude to the Beatles. The era was the real turning point, when modernity arrived. The swinging sixties were merely flamboyant, a giggling reaction to the immense postwar social, moral and economic change which the fifties ushered in. The new world didn't begin with the Magic Bus and 'Yellow Submarine' but with 'Think Formica', the Ford Zephyr, the Martini cocktail, suntans, crooning, the word 'contemporary' (Parris 2002, p. 13)

From this jumble of personal and sometimes highly idiosyncratic recollections, there emerges a corrective counterpoint to the usual story of the 1950s and the 1960s. As reiterated by broadcaster Joan Bakewell, herself a key 1960s television personality, the 1950s have been ‘too often dumped into the bin of history as the so-dull, so-drab decade that sits glumly in the shadow of its younger sibling, the attention-grabbing 60s’ (Bakewell 2006). However, the recent upsurge in British histories of the pre-1960s post-war period, including works by David Kynaston (2007, 2010, 2013) and Peter Hennessy (2006), provide evidence that the 1950s is retrospectively becoming at least as fascinating as the decade which followed it.

Arguably, a similar revisionism has operated in recent scholarship on British cinema. The 1960s formed the focus of such foundational decade-based studies as Alexander Walker’s *Hollywood England: The British Film Industry in the Sixties* (2005, first published 1974) and Robert Murphy’s *Sixties British Cinema* (1992) but for a long time, no equivalent studies focussed on the 1950s were published, probably for the basic reason that British film production during those years was seen as being of little interest or value; ‘like staring into a void’, as Geoff Brown put it (quoted in Geraghty 2000, p. 37). But in the early years of the new millennium came a glut of books looking at that devalued decade: Christine Geraghty’s *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the ‘New Look’* (2000), Ian McKillop and Neil Sinyard’s edited collection *British Cinema of the 1950s: A Celebration* (2003) and Sue Harper and Vincent Porter’s *British Cinema of the 1950s: The Decline of Deference* (2003). They appeared on the heels of a number of detailed studies of previously unfashionable British directors who enjoyed their heyday in the 1950s, including the filmmaking teams Dearden and Relph (Burton et al. 1997) and the Boulting brothers (Burton et al. 1999), and J. Lee Thompson (Chibnall 2000). Thus, a period of British filmmaking previously ‘stigmatised as conservative and dull’, indicative of ‘a “doldrums era”’ (Mackillop and Sinyard 2003, pp. 2–3) now began to be reconceptualised as intensely interesting, and profoundly entangled with the challenges of modernity. Harper and Porter invoke gladiatorial imagery to suggest the period’s hitherto unrecognised dynamism, describing the 1950s as

a battleground in which different factions – in finance, in class politics, in gender representation, in technology – struggled for dominance. It was not a dull period ... but a dynamic and often confusing period in which new and old methods and materials fought, often to the death. (Harper and Porter 2003, p. 2)

It has been a hallmark of this new historical work on British cinema that it has engaged very thoroughly with industrial and institutional contexts, galvanised by the broader growth of film history.

Of course, there had been earlier works of film scholarship that had attempted to speak to the complexities of post-war British cinema. An earlier outlier was Raymond Durnat’s quicksilver study, *A Mirror for England*, which dared to

suggest, long before anyone else, that films from the era when Britain was navigating its way from austerity to affluence were actually worthy of critical interest. Showing an independence of thought that is still startling, Durgnat made a forceful case that it was 'absurd to notice such Hollywood conformists as Hawks, McCarey and Walsh, yet deny equally high honours to, say, Roy Baker, Michael Powell and Terence Fisher' (1971, p. 4). Working on a less auteurist tack, and much more influenced by *Screen* theory, John Hill's *Sex, Class and Realism* (1986) examined the important transitional period 1956–1963 when British cinema began to re-engage more thoroughly with social consciousness. Hill's work is one of many to take a 'look back in gender' at the films made during these crucial post-war decades, unearthing fascinating material around the changing and frequently paradoxical sexual politics of the period. This has been joined by subsequent studies of femininity and masculinity in British cinema of the 1950s and 1960s by Medhurst (1984, 1986), Geraghty (1986, 2000, 2009), Harper (2000), Spicer (2001), Bell (2009), and Williams (2009) among others. Other key scholarship on post-war British cinema has concentrated on popular genre, with important work looking at war films (Chapman 1998; Murphy 2000), comedy (Porter 2001; Hunter and Porter 2012), horror (Hutchings 1993; Chibnall and Petley 2001), crime drama (Chibnall and Murphy 1999), and the pop film (Caine 2004; Glynn 2013).

Building on that growing body of scholarship, the aim of this chapter is to trace some of the major developments in British cinema over the 20-year period between *The Blue Lamp's* image of cohesion and *Performance's* image of fracture, not only looking at what was happening in film production at that time but also how British cinema 1950–1970 has been conceptualised and debated by critics, historians, and theorists, both at the time and in subsequent years, and what have been understood as its most important genres, cycles, and moments. The final section of the chapter will depart on a slightly different tack, taking a closer look at a particular setting and topic which was returned to recurrently throughout the 1950s and 1960s, straddling different genres and incorporating many different ideological allegiances: school. The school-set film provides an ideal heuristic vehicle for exploring the variety of British film production over this period and for tracking changes in the ways in which fundamental ideas of class, tradition, power, gender, and youth were represented. The 1950s and 1960s were a period of 'youthquake' (Lewis 1978, p. 117), with the 1950s seeing the (supposed) birth of the teenager and the 1960s witnessing youth's triumphant ascendancy as ultimate arbiters of cultural taste. A post-war baby boom meant that young people were more numerous than ever before and, unsurprisingly, their education was a hotly contested topic. British films from this time mediated and contributed to these debates, voicing anxieties about youth or harking back to comforting certainties of the past or comic fantasy but also offering spaces for identification for young audiences – who were, after all, increasingly the cinema's main group of paying customers.

Key Trends of the 1950s and 1960s

By 1950, cinemagoing in Britain had begun to decline from its immediate post-war peak although annual admissions still numbered 1.4 billion (Harper and Porter 2003, p. 244) and therefore the cinema still constituted a major site of leisure and pleasure for large numbers of Britons. In the realm of British production, Ealing Studios were notably successful, not so much for their latterly celebrated highly distinctive comedies (and 1951 saw the release of two of the best: *The Lavender Hill Mob* and *The Man in the White Suit*) (Figure 5.1) but for realist dramas such as the aforementioned *The Blue Lamp*, the top film at the British box-office in 1950, and the war film *The Cruel Sea*, a top box-office hit of 1953. Of course, Ealing's central place in British film history was consolidated by Charles Barr's pioneering study of the studio, first written in 1976. In light of later revisionist scholarship, it is interesting to note that Barr's chapter on Ealing's output post-1951 is entitled 'stagnation', and he points to an increasingly moribund ethos that takes hold as the decade wears on, exemplified by the enclosed circular toy train track that appears in the credits of *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (1953); a formerly dynamic company now 'going round in circles, protected from the world outside' (Barr 1998, p. 159).



Figure 5.1 Highly distinctive comedy: *The Man in the White Suit* (1951).

Arguably the most successful 'Ealing comedy' of the 1950s, and another film fixated on antiquated transport, was not made by Ealing at all, but by Ealing personnel William Rose and Henry Cornelius working for the Rank Organisation employing (after the project had been rejected by Ealing's Michael Balcon): the charming vintage car comedy *Genevieve* (1953). Its carefree middle-class protagonists, played by John Gregson, Dinah Sheridan, Kenneth More, and Kay Kendall, exemplified the mid-century 'affluent cycle' identified by Raymond Durnat (1971, p. 44).

Indeed, comedy dominated popular British cinema of the 1950s, as demonstrated by Rank's *Doctor in the House* series (1954 onwards) featuring the beleaguered young medic Simon Sparrow (Dirk Bogarde), or – positioned slightly differently in the social spectrum – the travails of Norman Wisdom's Chaplinesque 'little man' from *Trouble in Store* (1954) onwards, also produced by Rank. Hugely popular with audiences, these various kinds of comedy have been slower to gain academic champions, although analyses by Geraghty (2000) and Dacre (2012) have pointed to some of their complexities. Later in the decade Anglo-Amalgamated's saucier *Carry On* films started to have an impact, with *Carry On Nurse* (1959) and *Carry On Constable* (1960) placed among the top box-office attractions of their respective years. Disregarded at the time, this series has subsequently come to occupy an absolutely central place in British popular culture, and are seen as exemplary of specifically British comic traditions (Medhurst 2007).

Comedy aside, the other genre to enjoy enormous success in the 1950s was the war film, with Second World War combat films and prisoner-of-war dramas dominating British screens. *The Dam Busters* (1955) and *Reach for the Sky* (1956) were even the biggest box-office hits of their respective years, facing down much glossier competition from Hollywood (see Thumin 1991). Despite being accused of continually harping on past glories rather than facing contemporary reality by critics of the time William Whitebait and Lindsay Anderson (see Chapman 1998), the 1950s cycle of war films was nonetheless remarkably popular with audiences, perhaps due more to its therapeutic function than to outright jingoism. As Robert Murphy has suggested, giving the films a more sympathetic hearing retrospectively:

It would be odd if a series of events as cataclysmic as the Second World War did not reverberate long after they were over. The danger, excitement, sadness, death and horror of the war had either to be deeply repressed or to find appropriate outlets. (2000, p. 235)

The Rank Organisation, along with the Associated British Picture Corporation, bestrode the British cinema landscape like a colossus in the 1950s, dominating not only film production but also exhibition (Macnab 1993), and that duopoly held fast into the 1960s. But by the end of the 1950s, the decline in annual cinema admissions had moved from slight to precipitous, dropping to 515 million. As numerous

historians have pointed out, the reasons for this were complex and various. Certainly, the growth of television ownership, spurred on by the advent of commercial television in 1955 as much as the more-commonly cited impact of the televised Coronation in 1953, played a vital role. But so too did 'increased home ownership, the growth of Do-It-Yourself, the advent of central heating' as well as greater availability of motor vehicles and other lifestyle-enhancing consumer goods which 'all meant that, for many, real life started to become as enjoyable as that on the screen' (Harper and Porter 2003, p. 244). Films had to compete for attention against many other vibrant forms of popular culture: it is indicative of the broader changes in popular taste and leisure that by the late 1950s the long-running film magazine *Picturegoer* had merged with the pop-focused *Disc Mirror* and by 1960 had been completely usurped by its pop partner and ceased publication altogether.

However, even if cinema-going had ceased to be as widespread as it once was, let alone the 'essential social habit of the age' it had been designated by J.B. Priestley in the 1930s, the cinema still carried considerable importance as a barometer of the times. Significant changes in censorship were taking place across a range of media in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Lady Chatterley trial – in which D.H. Lawrence's novel was absolved of charges of obscenity – and the relaxation of the Lord Chamberlain's prohibitive powers over theatre were matched by the enlightened tenure (or so it seemed if he was on your side) of John Trevelyan as Head of the Board of British Film Censors from 1958 to 1971 (Aldgate 1995). Under his jurisdiction, the X certificate (first introduced in 1951) was self-consciously 'rehabilitated' for critical respectability, with films such as *Room at the Top* (1959) and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) hailed for their sexual and social candour and for ushering in a 'New Wave' of British film realism. But despite being designated a breakthrough in many quarters (including *Sight and Sound* under Penelope Houston's aegis), the British New Wave was decried in equal measure by others, most notably the influential young auteurist critics at the British magazine *Movie*. They baldly stated in their opening issue that there was 'as much genuine personality in *Room at the Top*, method in *A Kind of Loving* and style in *A Taste of Honey* as there is wit in *An Alligator Named Daisy*, intelligence in *Above Us the Waves* and ambition in *Ramsbottom Rides Again*', invoking the typical products of the middle-to-low-brow mainstream of British film as a deliberately unflattering point of comparison for the films of the New Wave, before concluding that 'the British cinema is as dead as before. Perhaps it was never alive' (*Movie* editorial collective 1962, p. 3). Subsequent critics have also suggested that the New Wave's status as breakthrough should be modified by an awareness of its often retrograde or downright misogynist sexual politics (Hill 1986), conservative aesthetics (Higson 1984) and a recognition that other British films that came before or alongside the New Wave may have exhibited just as much of a sense of social concern or critique (Medhurst 1984; Hutchings 2009; Williams 2012). In fact, one of the most important generic developments in British cinema of the late 1950s

arguably lay not in social realism but in fantasy, in the shape of Hammer's reinvention of the horror genre. In colour rather than black and white, Hammer's Gothic horrors such as *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) and *Dracula* (1958) used historical and literary frameworks as vehicles for exploring the fascinations of sadism, violence, and 'monstrous or deviant sexuality' (Conrich 2009, p. 100). In response to Julian Petley's highly influential request for an exploration of the 'lost continent' of British cinema – all those modes of filmmaking that elude a realist orthodoxy and instead form 'an other, repressed side of British cinema, a dark, disdained thread weaving the length and breadth of that cinema' (1986, p. 98) – one of the most productive cartographic expeditions has been into horror territory, particularly its high-water mark of the 1950s and 1960s (Hutchings 1993; Pirie 2007). Despite frequent excoriation from the critics as purveyors of lowest-common-denominator schlock, Hammer would go on to win the Queen's Award to Industry in 1968; their financial clout in exports finally outpacing any concerns about their lack of respectability.

'Runaway' productions, US-financed but taking advantage of tax breaks offered by filming overseas, were a distinctive feature of the landscape of 1950s British film, with colour spectaculars from *Ivanhoe* (1952) to *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) enjoying international box-office success. Entering the 1960s, British cinema's internationalism became even more central to its identity and economic base, as indicated by the title of Alexander Walker's book on the period, *Hollywood England*. One of the American studios central to this new dynamic were United Artists. They backed the James Bond series of films produced by Harry Saltzman and Cubby Broccoli which started with *Dr No* (1962), incubating an ongoing franchise which still defines British cinema's global identity today and has been subject to numerous critical appraisals (Bennett and Woollacott 1987; Chapman 2007; Lindner 2013). The rise of Bond marked a generic shift too, which saw the previously strong British war film go into retreat as tales of Cold War espionage gained greater prominence, whether these were exotic and glamorous as with the Bond series or more downbeat in their take on realpolitik, as with Harry Palmer as a kind of anti-Bond in *The Ipcress File* (1965) or gloomy Le Carré adaptations such as *The Deadly Affair* (1966).

The Bond films were also important in making a star of Sean Connery, one of a number of British actors of proletarian origins who came to global prominence during the 1960s. Another was Albert Finney, the rowdy lad of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* who then became the titular hero of *Tom Jones* (1963), a highly irreverent literary adaptation. Although very different in source material, style, and setting, the Bond films, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *Tom Jones* all capitalised on British cinema's growing reputation for sexual frankness; although it's worth noting that any liberation in that area seemed to work mainly to the benefit of male sexual adventurers. Carrie Tarr's perceptive subtitle in her article on two female-centred British films, *Sapphire* (1959) and *Darling* (1965), suggests how women's sexual lives were contained within narrow 'boundaries of permitted

pleasure' (Tarr 1985), both on screen and off it. No wonder the narrative trope of unintended pregnancy haunts films of this period.

Ever at the vanguard, United Artists also supported production on The Beatles' film *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), first of a three-picture deal for the group brokered by producer Walter Shenson. Shot inexpensively but highly inventively by Richard Lester, it managed to both encapsulate, critique, and (ironically) commodify Beatlemania just as the group were spearheading the 'British invasion' that would dominate American pop music for a sizeable proportion of the 1960s. But despite their musical pre-eminence, it was not any of the Beatles' films but Twentieth Century Fox's musical *The Sound of Music* (1965) which attained the status of the most popular film of the 1960s, both in the US and the UK. Echoing Sandbrook's point about the co-mingling of tradition and innovation in 1960s culture, the film's British star Julie Andrews should be remembered as just as much a 'face of the sixties' as her cooler contemporaries Julie Christie or Rita Tushingham.

Another important cinema trend, again facilitated by American money, was the mid-1960s cycle of 'swinging London' films, responding to the idea of England's capital city as a uniquely creative and special place. Fallen upon gratefully by a Hollywood studio system increasingly in freefall (despite monumental one-off blockbusters like *The Sound of Music*) and desperate to tap into whatever money-making zeitgeist there was going, swinging London promised 'a dazzling blur of op and pop ... pulsing with half a dozen separate veins of excitement', to cite *Time's* infamous editorial of 1966 (quoted in Murphy 1992, p. 139). But strangely, as Robert Murphy points out, it's near impossible to find anything like an outright celebration of London's social and sexual possibilities in British cinema: films like *The Knack* (1965), *Darling* (1965), *Alfie* (1966) and *Georgy Girl* (1966) all took a more muted, contemplative or neo-traditionalist turn in their approach to what constituted meaningful human interaction. Likewise, the perspectives offered on swinging London by European auteurs Roman Polanski and Michelangelo Antonioni in *Repulsion* (1965) and *Blow-Up* (1967) respectively offered alienation and anomie rather than excitement and energy. Formerly dismissed as the worst excrescences of British cinema's history, Murphy's defence of many of the 'swinging London' films as 'extravagant, stylish, experimental' (1992, p. 277) has been crucial in rehabilitating the decade's cinema, particularly in DVD publishing: the BFI's Flipside imprint has made available a number of films, such as *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush* and *Joanna*, first championed in his work.

Usually characterised in terms of modishness, the centrality of period drama to British cinema of the 1960s is one of its lesser-acknowledged tendencies – although of course, as with the Beatles' faux-Edwardian Sergeant Pepper concept, a return to the past could be the very height of fashion. Columbia backed a stately film of *A Man for All Seasons* (1967) and a jolly *Oliver!* (1968), while other studios supported literary adaptations such as *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967) and *Women in Love* (1969). Military conflicts of the past were returned to in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962),

Zulu (1964), *Khartoum* (1966), and *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968). And among the most successful *Carry Ons* of the decade were the costume parodies *Carry on Cleo* (1964) and *Carry On Up the Khyber* (1968), the latter featuring its unforgettable denouement of the British Raj retaining absolute sangfroid under attack, even while the walls crumble around them and the ceiling falls in, even unto the point of absurdity – probably the scene that earned the film its place in the BFI's 1999 poll of the 100 best British films, a critical benediction that would have been unthinkable at the time of its original release. But perhaps the most profound comments on post-war British identity could only be voiced stealthily through the twin distanciations of a historical setting and low comedy.

The threat that television began to pose to cinema in the 1950s came to pass fully in the 1960s. As economist Terence Kelly outlined in 1966, plummeting cinema admissions meant the closure of cinemas and an inexorable downward spiral: 'fewer jobs for cinema workers; less money flows back through the industry; eventually less is available for reinvestment in new films' (Kelly et al. 1966, p. 16). Moreover, a model of British filmmaking funded almost entirely on Hollywood money could not be a sustainable one. By the decade's end, up to 90% of British productions were US-financed and, as Sarah Street points out, while 'it was gratifying to see Britain as a magnet for overseas investment' (Street 2002, p. 170), this over-reliance on the dollar presented self-evident dangers. With the advent of lower-budget but profit-generating youth films originating from Hollywood itself in the latter years of the 1960s – starting with *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) – it seemed that Britain was no longer the zeitgeist-harnessing location of a few years ago. That, and a pattern of economic retrenchment among the major studios which had fatally overextended themselves on unsuccessful big-budget spectacles, meant a bleak prognosis for British cinema. By 1970, Walter Shenson, the man who made The Beatles into film stars as well as pop stars, offered his verdict on the bursting of the bubble: 'It is a low profile country now ... For an American, it is impossible to make a film reflecting the British scene – there just is no scene today ... all that is left is a hangover' (quoted in Walker 2005, p. 451). Indeed, the films made by Shenson's protégés seemed to track the broader trends of the decade: from the black-and-white cinema-verité influenced laddish larks of *A Hard Day's Night*, to the Wilkie Collins-meets-comic book colour kitsch not quite disguising underlying anguish of *Help!* (1965), to the made-for-TV but wilfully amateurish psychedelia *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), the contractual obligation imaginatively fulfilled by way of animation in *Yellow Submarine* (1968), and finally the intimate documentary *Let It Be* (1970), offering a glimpse into the group's implosion as they recorded their final album. Ebullience sliding into dissipation, synergy becoming dissent: the break-up of the emblematic 1960s band seemed to speak of much wider cultural changes, including the shift in British cinema from apparent boom to undeniable bust. By 1970, the dream was over; as George Harrison's solo album of that year announced, 'All Things Must Pass'.

Back to School: An Alternative Route Through Post-war British Cinema

School has been a perennially popular setting for British films, providing a source for both conflict and comedy, and this is no less true of the 1950s and the 1960s. Tracking the varied treatments of school life that British filmmakers created over these two decades offers an alternative pathway through post-war British film history which can yield new insights on the acknowledged landmarks while also illuminating less familiar areas across a broad range of generic traditions. It is hardly surprising that education was a topic of great interest during these decades, given the major legislative and organisational changes which took place, from the implementation of the 11-Plus examination which syphoned off some working-class children into grammar school but consigned the majority to under-resourced secondary moderns, to the widespread introduction of non-selective comprehensive schools post-1965. However, the boarding school figured most extensively in British films of the 1950s, above and beyond any other kind of educational establishment, unsurprisingly given its prominence across popular culture, especially books and comics. Renown's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1951) adapted one of the ur-texts of British public school mythology, Thomas Hughes's 1857 novel, and followed the hero's progress through sadistic initiation to eventual triumph. The film's positive representation of boarding school life corresponded with a deeply embedded respect for educational tradition within British culture; hence the outcry in the following year that greeted the posthumous publication of George Orwell's seditious essay about his own bleak, brutalised schooldays in similar institutions, 'Such, such were the joys': 'A child which appears reasonably happy may actually be suffering horrors which it cannot or will not reveal. It lives in a sort of alien underwater world which we can only penetrate by memory or divination' (Orwell 1970 [orig. 1952], p. 419).² Although some distance removed from Orwell's level of critique, the Anthony Asquith and Terence Rattigan collaboration *The Browning Version* (1951) also de-romanticised the public school environment. For the downtrodden Classics master Crocker-Harris (Michael Redgrave), it is the site of his abject humiliation and misery as he endures his wife's infidelity and his professional marginalisation. The sequence in which Redgrave breaks down in tears upon receipt of one kindly pupil's gift of a book is justly celebrated as a fine instance not only of British screen acting but also that particular emotional tradition of trying to keep a 'stiff upper lip' and what occurs when that carefully maintained carapace suddenly cracks open under pressure. As Richard Dyer points out in his study of an earlier British film navigating similar emotional territory, *Brief Encounter* (1945): 'Such restraint is not the absence of feeling. Indeed, there can be no concept of restraint without an acknowledgment of feeling – restraint must keep something emotional in check' (Dyer 1993, p. 66). Revisionist scholarship like Dyer's in both theatre and film studies has been crucial in the rehabilitation of

Terence Rattigan's reputation (Rebellato 1999), going beyond a dramatic geography defined by the macho *Look Back in Anger* (1956) to reinstate the value of powerfully affective work in a more reticent register.

When it came to depicting school life in 1950s British cinema, comedy was a far more common generic pathway than tragedy and comedic forays back to school provided some of its major successes. After *The Blue Lamp*, 1950's second biggest box-office attraction was *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (1950). Made by Launder and Gilliat's Independent Pictures, it shares with the contemporaneous Ealing comedies an emphasis on the eccentric and the whimsical and two of its stars, Alastair Sim and Margaret Rutherford. They play headteachers of two single-sex schools forced to share premises due to an administrative error, who then have to cover up the fact to visiting governors and parents. The subterfuge fails, of course, and 'gender and class separatism' collapse in what Sarah Street describes as 'the chaotic spectacle of collision: screaming, fighting boys and girls on the games field' (Street 1997, p. 77). The larky, mildly satirical tone continued in Launder and Gilliat's subsequent series of *St Trinian's* films which began in 1954. Alongside BBC Television's popular adaptation of Frank Richards's *Greyfriars* Billy Bunter stories (1952–1961) and sitcom *Whack-O!* (1956–1960), the *Jennings* and *Molesworth* series (starting 1950 and 1953 respectively), Ronald Searle's *St Trinian's* cartoons and the films inspired by them testified to the buoyancy of boarding school comedy in the 1950s. But the difference of gender was crucial to *St Trinian's* and much of the humour of Searle's original drawings and the subsequent films derived from the incongruity of young ladies behaving in such a brutal and *unladylike* fashion (some of their more sadistic tendencies were inspired by Searle's suffering as a prisoner-of-war of the Japanese). Contrary to their rather anodyne depiction in many other areas of 1950s popular culture, the girls of *St Trinian's* were not only permitted to be wild and unruly but were actively celebrated for their bad behaviour. But of course the schoolgirls, whether sexy sixth formers or diabolical fourth formers, were only part of the attraction. The original *St Trinian's* series – *Belles* in 1954, *Blue Murder* in 1957, *Pure Hell* in 1960 and *Train Robbery* in 1966 – also benefitted from the performative skills of a whole roster of character actors such as Alastair Sim, Joyce Grenfell, George Cole, Richard Wattis, Dennis Price, and others, all of whom played an integral role in constituting the highly distinctive 'structure of feeling' of postwar British comedy, simultaneously cosy and down-at-heel. The public schools in most of these comedies have seen better days, and the comic plots of both *The Belles of St Trinian's* and the *Whack-O!* spin-off, *Bottoms Up* (1959), hinge on the possible riches supplied by wealthy Middle-Eastern pupils which could help solve each school's cashflow problem. If, as Sarah Street suggests, institutional comedies offer 'microcosms of British society as a whole' (Street 1997, p. 76), then the image of the nation presented in these comedies – a seedy second-rate boarding school dependent on largesse from overseas – is far from flattering.

A more ingratiating national self-image, typical of the Durgatian 'affluent cycle', could be found in the co-ed state grammar school of *It's Great to Be Young!* (1956),

an ABPC musical comedy starring John Mills and Cecil Parker as pedagogic antagonists alongside a cast of jazz-loving teens.³ The authorship of Ted Willis – co-creator of *the* figurehead of post-war British consensus, P.C. Dixon of Dock Green, but also early adopter of ‘kitchen sink’ realism with dramas such as *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (1957) – may account for some of the strange unevenness in the film’s tone. It seems caught between relishing the militancy of the students’ strike and escalating defiance (the look of the scenes in which pupils scale the roof to smoke bomb the school hierarchy during assembly seem to pre-empt *If...*) and retaining space for the previously authoritarian Headmaster to meet the protesters halfway and be seen to be reasonable. A self-contradictory hotchpotch, *It’s Great to Be Young!* also proved very popular, to the bemusement of film critic Isabel Quigly who admitted she ‘found the kids of Angel Hill Grammar School quite nauseating’ (quoted in Hill 1986, p. 185).

A particularly telling moment from the film also suggests how school representations crystallise much broader tendencies in British cinema. The deputy head’s speech introducing the new Headmaster makes use of extensive naval metaphors (‘a new man at the helm’, ‘a new face on the bridge’) prompting one kid to whisper ‘He’s making me seasick.’ It seems that the helming of school and battleship are interchangeable, and if school can be run along military lines, so too can the military sometimes resemble a school. Following this logic, the ‘school film’ goes far beyond films explicitly set in educational environments and, as Andrew Roberts observes, encompasses many British war films of the period: ‘From horseplay – “Come on chaps, off with their trousers!” in *The Dam Busters* – to reticence in the face of danger, the sporting and social ethos of the public schools permeated the screen’ (2007, p. 46). Given Britain’s interlocking military-educational complex, it is interesting to note that the schoolboy in *It’s Great to Be Young!* rejects that appeal of a captain to his cadets on the grounds of nausea, and trad jazz and activism prove more appealing for this young proto-rebel of 1956. Even in the most ostensibly bland films, there are signs of the broader dissent changing British culture.

Given their penchant for institutional comedy, it was only a matter of time before Anglo-Amalgamated’s *Carry On* series would turn to school as a setting in *Carry On Teacher* (1959). Borrowing both from *Carry On Sergeant* (1958) and *Happiest Days of Your Life*, the film hinges on an official inspection which is magically and comically manipulated. The trickery is essentially benign, its purpose to prevent the beloved headmaster (Ted Ray) from leaving by making him effectively unemployable anywhere else. More significantly, the setting is state school rather than private, co-educational rather than single sex, and there is even space in Norman Hudis’s script for some intelligent rumination on the flaws of corporal punishment (‘Extraordinary theory, you bend a child double in order to give it an upright character’) and on the battle between traditional and progressive pedagogies, the latter exemplified by Leslie Phillips’s visiting child psychologist, who espouses free expression. Although the broad humour and innuendo are present and correct

(Joan Sims's Miss Allcock splits her gym shorts while exercising too vigorously, for example), *Carry On Teacher* is one of the few school comedies of the period to demonstrate at least some engagement with the highly charged debates about secondary education that were ongoing at the time.

In completely different generic vein, the MGM British sci-fi horror *Village of the Damned* (1960), based on John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos*, culminates in a memorable scene of classroom conflict between the preternaturally gifted alien children and their teacher George Sanders as they attempt to read his mind. The film uses fantasy as a means of extrapolating an underlying ambivalence towards children, and more specifically the latent power of the large post-war baby boom generation and what would happen if they turned on their 'parents'. In *Village of the Damned*, consensus is not an option and the alien interlopers have to be destroyed; rarely has generational conflict been presented in such directly diagrammatic form. Joseph Losey's similarly titled *The Damned* (1963) offered another instance of 'edu-horror' but this time much more sympathetic to the abused children who have been irradiated and imprisoned in a state-sanctioned experiment, their only connection to the outside world being a television monitor at the head of the classroom.

Moving into the territory of the New Wave, it is interesting to note that none of its canonical films are set in school, although Jo in *A Taste of Honey* (1961) is briefly shown enduring boring lessons while *Borstal* features as an alternative educational institution in *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (1962).⁴ However, if we follow Peter Hutchings' recommendation to go 'beyond the New Wave' (2009) into the broader reaches of contemporaneous realist-inflected British cinema, a different picture emerges and we find several films which are set in and around schools (see also Hill 1986, on the 'social problem film'). However, in each one, the primary focus rests not with the pupils but with the dilemmas faced by their teachers. *Spare the Rod* (1961) chronicles the experiences of young teacher John Saunders (Max Bygraves) who takes up a post in a deprived East End school and who finds himself clashing with his superiors over the issue of appropriate discipline. A minor aspect of *Spare the Rod*, a teenage schoolgirl's attempt to seduce her teacher, becomes the central focus of another school-set film, *Term of Trial* (1962). Made by Romulus, the company behind the breakthrough film *Room at the Top*, and once again casting Simone Signoret as a dissatisfied Frenchwoman trapped in dingy Britain, *Term of Trial* is one of those films analogous to but not fully embedded in the British New Wave canon. Broadly dismissed by both Walker and Murphy in their 1960s surveys, it deserves further attention, not least for the striking writing and direction of Peter Glenville, as well as a star performance from Laurence Olivier, appearing in his New Wave film after having played Archie Rice in *The Entertainer* (1960). Olivier plays middle-aged alcoholic teacher Graham Weir, unhappily married (to Signoret's character) and professionally stymied. Not unlike Crocker-Harris in *The Browning Version*, Weir is touched by the affection shown by one of his pupils, but the fondness of 15-year-old Shirley Taylor (Sarah Miles) for

her sympathetic teacher has a much more obviously sexual dimension and her schoolgirl crush culminates in an attempted seduction during a school trip to Paris – while a thunderstorm rages outside. One poster tagline presents Shirley lasciviously as straightforward femme fatale ('Blonde, blonde hair. Soft, soft skin. Sixteen years old and a picture of innocence ... waiting to destroy a man!') but the situation presented in the film is altogether more complex. Weir encourages Shirley's advances, perhaps inadvertently but then again perhaps not, enjoying the flattery of an attractive young woman's attention. On the night she comes to his room, his rejection seems to teeter on the edge of near-acceptance for a protracted period of time. Some of the action is even partially redacted by the blinding white flashes of lightning flooding the room, making the presentation of what actually occurs even more ambiguous – to what extent does Weir reciprocate Shirley's kiss before he rebuffs her? When falsely accused of sexual assault by his hurt and humiliated pupil, the teacher insists on the purity of his motives: 'What I felt for her, was the love of an unworthy man for a quality – innocence, tenderness, love – the thing God gives us before the filth of the world begins to cover it up.' But he may be protesting too vehemently. The twist in the tale – that despite being acquitted, he has to tell his wife that he actually did have sex with the teenager because the truth of his sexual restraint is less palatable to her than the lie of his infidelity – can be read as an ironic indictment of a society which refuses to accept genuine innocence; in order to operate within its rules, Weir must pretend that he has succumbed. Or his admission of guilt might equally be seen as a true confession of repressed desire, an expression of his underlying wish that he had taken advantage of Shirley when he had the opportunity but merely lacked the courage to do so. Graham Weir's courtroom speech can function simultaneously as the authentic *cri de cœur* of a good man against a wicked world *and* as the self-deluding cant of a repressed sexual hypocrite. The intricate layers of performativity in Olivier's playing of the scene, including moments of (intentional?) slight hamminess, renders possible either – or perhaps more accurate to say both – interpretations of a character who represents the ambivalent response of an older generation towards the nascent 'permissive society'.

The most commercially profitable of the 'teacher at a rough school' narratives came a few years later and was financed with Hollywood money: Columbia's *To Sir, With Love* (1966). It grossed \$19.1 million, and enjoyed particular success in the US, where its theme song also provided a number one hit for Lulu. In fact, so unexpected was the scale of the film's success that Columbia conducted market research to find out why people had gone to see it (Walker 2005, p. 448). As Sarah Street observes, it proved that 'success in America did not necessarily depend on lavish historical settings or action-adventure thrills' (Street 2002, p. 191) or the allure of 'swinging London'; *To Sir, With Love's* London is the begrimed, deprived East End rather than the King's Road or Carnaby Street. But despite being popular with audiences, its story of an inspirational teacher winning the respect of his surly pupils met with much less critical favour, with John Russell Taylor's dismissal

of its 'old-fashioned sentimental nonsense' (quoted in Hill 1986, p. 222) being typical of the response. But this disdain seems a little too simplistic and glib. Notwithstanding the scene in which Lulu sings her song and the reformed youngsters offer their teacher Mr. Thackeray (Sidney Poitier) a gift, there is much else in the film which is more astringent in tone. Thackeray's conflict with his class comes to a head when one of the girls leaves a sanitary towel burning in the classroom fireplace as a prank, spurring the teacher into an enraged speech forging subtle intersectional links between class and race, emphasising the importance of refuting stereotypical assumptions of animalism foisted upon certain social groups. In this context, his insistence on everyone behaving like ladies and gentlemen carries a rebellious charge. *To Sir, With Love's* refusal to place racial tension centre stage could be seen as evasive but might equally be seen as liberating in its recognition that this is only one of several issues at play in this London community. And, finally, the hint that Pamela's (Judy Geeson) crush on her teacher may be partially reciprocated is alluded to delicately through mutual looks held a little longer than they should be, British cinema's lingua franca of repressed desire. It is too easy to dismiss the film for its alleged 'facile optimism' (review quoted in Hill 1986, p. 221) in light of its happy ending but to do so neglects the film's preceding moments of ambivalence about Thackeray's mission and the underrated degree of subtlety it shows as a whole in dealing with what education is about and for.

The final years of the 1960s offered a number of memorable school films. *If...* (1968) returned to the public school but took a very different narrative route from earlier comedies of scholarly insubordination such as *The Belles of St Trinian's* and *Bottoms Up!* in which one boy even proclaims 'We'll have a revolution!'. The vital difference in *If...*, as its assistant director Stephen Frears put it (in his 1995 documentary on British cinema, *Typically British*), was that in the 1968 film, they actually got out the guns and 'shot the headmaster'. As its Kipling-referencing title suggests, *If...* takes all the empire-building, man-making, nation-forging mythology surrounding public school education and repudiates it in the most violent terms, while understanding the beauties as well as the horrors of the system as only former inmates like Anderson and writer David Sherwin possibly could; the film was even shot at Anderson's alma mater, Cheltenham College. As has often been observed, *If...* chimed perfectly with the ethos of 1968, when, as Jeff Nuttall put it, across the world 'young people under various pretexts made war on their elders, and their elders made war on them' (quoted in Murphy 1992, p. 156). But the violence of the film is deliberately slow-burning, deferring the scenes that have become its defining images: Mick Travis (Malcolm McDowell), 'The Girl' (Christine Noonan), and fellow guerrillas up on the school roof, opening fire on their masters and other assembled dignitaries on Founder's Day. The school functioned for Anderson, as it had for many other British filmmakers, as 'a microcosm ... the educational system is such an exact image of the social system' (quoted in Sutton 2005, p. 44) but his approach was a far cry from the gentle institutional lampooning of the 1950s comedies. Rather it was a fever dream of violent



Figure 5.2 ‘The ethos of 1968’: Lindsay Anderson’s *If...*

revolution: the final return to the word ‘If’ at the end of the film feels like an incitement to see what would happen if the supposition became reality, perfect for the inflammatory mood of 1968 (Figure 5.2).

Even taking into account Christine Noonan’s ‘girl’ in *If...*, the focus in Anderson’s film is overwhelmingly homosocial. It falls to another film of the period to examine the psychosexual dynamics of girls’ education: Ronald Neame’s adaptation of Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969). Although in some respects, it is a defiantly old-fashioned film, a period drama set in the 1930s, directed by a British cinema veteran, its story is also timely for the late 1960s. Pupil revolts against teacher, with Sandy (Pamela Franklin) ‘putting a stop to’ her charismatic demagogue of a tutor, Jean Brodie (Maggie Smith). Initially, Brodie comes across as impressively independent, insisting that she is in her social and sexual ‘prime’, pinning a glorious Giotto reproduction over the uninspiring classroom portrait of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin. But Brodie’s supposed espousal of education as ‘a leading out of what is already there’ is the antithesis of how she actually operates, as proven by her fascist sympathies and the dangerous influence she exerts upon impressionable pupils.⁵ However, the flow of sympathies in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* are far from straightforward and for all her flaws and delusions, Jean is still presented as a pioneer and a life force, making her ‘assassination’ by her protégée, Sandy, a pyrrhic victory. And the teacher may enjoy the ultimate triumph anyway as Jean’s words echo over Sandy’s final departure from school: ‘Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life.’ A wonderful showcase for a range of great female performances, this somewhat unfashionable film merits serious attention alongside the more obviously radical and masculine *If...*

Shifting the emphasis away from the public schools of *If...* or *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* back to a far more common educational experience, Ken Loach, Barry Hines, and Tony Garnett's *Kes* (1969) is a landmark of British cinema. Unlike *Term of Trial* or *To Sir, With Love* its dead-end school is presented not through the subjectivity of a teacher but through the perspective of one of its disenfranchised pupils, Billy Casper (David Bradley). Billy's latent capacity for meaningful education is ironically realised just a few months before he leaves formal education for good, and moreover it comes about through a process of pure autodidacticism, of training *himself* to train a kestrel. School has done nothing for Billy but ignore or chastise him; the Headmaster accuses his pupils of being unable to listen but he himself thoughtlessly canes one little boy who has only come to relay a message precisely because *he* refuses to listen. *Kes* makes plain that one sympathetic teacher (like Colin Welland's Mr. Farthing) is never enough and Billy's destiny is inevitable within an educational system which merely readies its working-class pupils for poorly paid, unrewarding, manual labour.

The ending of *Kes*, in which Billy's cherished kestrel is killed by his brother and left in the dustbin before Billy takes it away for silent burial, is one of the most devastating and painful in all of British cinema, rich in metaphorical resonance about thwarted aspiration and educational failure. But somewhat ironically, its rhetorical power in invoking the death of a dream also marks a rebirth for British film: the taking flight of a new cinema of bold social critique drawing on the New Wave's legacy (with *Kes* released under Tony Richardson's Woodfall imprimatur, albeit mainly for reasons of financial expediency) and enriched by the inventiveness of socially-engaged 1960s television drama, the training ground for both Loach and Garnett. The influence of television on a film like *Kes* is particularly significant since the newer medium was, by the close of the decade, firmly enshrined as the new 'essential social habit of the age'. Although *Kes*, *If...* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* were all theatrically released films supported with US backing – from United Artists, Paramount, and Twentieth Century Fox respectively – in a few years' time, that route would be far less readily available for British films, making Hollywood exile or cross-migration into television the most viable way of being able to tell stories on film.

Television taking over from film as the dominant audio-visual medium was only one of countless major social and cultural transformations that took place between the years 1950 and 1970. British cinema underwent an irrevocable transformation over that period too, as can be traced through a survey of its widely varying treatments of school life from the consensus comedies that dominated the 1950s to the outright social protests that appeared towards the end of the 1960s. But it is equally important to register the aspects of cultural life in which social change is less readily apparent. The same years in which *Kes* and *If...* played in cinemas with considerable commercial success – and MGM had a flop with their misconceived musical remake of *Goodbye, Mr Chips* (1969) – a representation of school life with arguably much greater cultural purchase was London

Weekend Television's sitcom *Please Sir!* (1968–1972) which generated its own film spin-off in 1971. Its writers John Esmonde and Bob Larbey transplanted the scholastic high jinks familiar from countless British films stretching back to the 1930s into the contemporary world of the secondary modern school, successfully fusing residual and emergent cultural elements in the same way that the British comedy films had been able to achieve 15 or 20 years before. But by the close of the 1960s, things had changed, the baton of greater cultural relevance and demographic reach had been passed on, and British cinema would never be quite the same again. No doubt that is why the 1950s and the 1960s have been and continue to be revisited by scholars of British film.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Jenny Diski's evocative comparison:

The Fifties are often characterised by a lack of colour. Like most of the movies, they were, everyone agrees, in black and white. In memory, the streets, the clothes, the prospects of the Fifties were in shades of grey ... The middle Sixties was that moment when Dorothy stepped through her front door, out of Kansas, on the undreamed-of yellowness of the brick road on the way to the Emerald City, and the heart burst with pleasure at the sudden busting out of a full-blown Technicolor world. (Diski 2010, pp. 26–27)

- 2 Interesting how this metaphor suggests deafness and of course one of the most notable films of the 1950s to engage with education is *Mandy* (1952), in which the little girl with hearing impairment is brought out of isolation and into connection with the surrounding world through the imaginative and intensive teaching offered at the specialist school run by Dick Searle (Jack Hawkins). It's one of the few entirely positive depictions of a boarding school from this period, and even then Mandy is not a full boarder but a day pupil, for which she has to have special dispensation.
- 3 *It's Great to Be Young!* is one of the few British films with a grammar school setting and it is interesting that the experience of the working-class grammar school scholarship boy, such a recurrent trope in the literature, drama, and sociology of the period, figures far less prominently in British cinema. Jamie in the sex comedy, *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush* (1968), appears to have this provenance, as does Harry in the university drama, *The Wild and the Willing* (1962), but its most explicit expression is in *Billy Liar* (1963) with the protagonist's angry recollection of being made to feel 'grateful' for his educational opportunities. The figure of the grammar school girl is even more marginal but does figure centrally in the exploitation drama *The Yellow Teddybears* (1963).
- 4 Free Cinema, the experimental documentary movement which preceded and led to the New Wave, showed rather more of a direct interest in children, documenting their games, both benign and sinister, in *The Singing Street* (1952) and *Together* (1956) and exploring the work of a school for the deaf in Lindsay Anderson and Guy Brenton's *Thursday's Children* (1954).

- 5 The film provides an interesting companion piece to screenwriter Jay Presson Allen's later exploration of an imperceptible slide towards fascism, *Cabaret* (1972).

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