

BRITISH FILM

Jim Leach

British Film

This book explores British cinema in relation to its social, political, and cultural contexts. Each chapter deals with a specific topic and includes close readings of key films from different historical periods. Topics include realism, expressionism, popular cinema, film and theater, sexuality and gender, comedy, class and ideology, heritage film, and diasporic cinema. Demonstrating the richness and variety of a national cinema that has traditionally struggled to define itself between the paradigms of Hollywood popular film and European art cinema, *British Film* also addresses the problematic concept of “national character,” as it has been applied in studies of national cinemas and cultures, and the increasing pressure on all of these ideas in the age of globalization. Designed for the general reader, this volume is suitable for use as a textbook, providing comprehensive coverage of British cinema and detailed discussion of specific films that can be used in tandem with screenings.

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National Film Traditions

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National Film Traditions examines the cinematic heritages of Great Britain, Italy, Russia, India, China, Japan, and Australia, from their origins in the silent film era to the present. Relating film production in these countries to the changing social, political, and cultural contexts in which they were created, volumes in this series will also analyze the problematic concepts of nation and nationalism, and their impact on cinema. Designed for use in undergraduate and graduate courses, volumes in this series will include in-depth readings of paradigmatic films, as well as filmographies, videographies, and selected bibliographies.

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Introduction

At the beginning of *Strapless* (1988), written and directed by David Hare, a woman (played by American actress Blair Brown) meets a man (played by Swiss actor Bruno Ganz) in a Catholic church somewhere in Europe (the sequence was filmed in Portugal) (Figure 1). This chance encounter leads to an obsessive relationship in which Lillian, a doctor in a cash-strapped London hospital, finds her life turned upside down by Raymond's unpredictable comings and goings dictated by his dubious financial activities. In a key sequence, Hare uses the American doctor to express his own dismay at the state of contemporary Britain, in a speech to her colleagues that blames the crisis at the hospital on the abandonment of national traditions by a government that places economic restraint above human need. However, her lucidity and independence are deeply disturbed by the personal needs that attract her to Raymond.

As in much of Hare's work for theater, television, and film, social and political beliefs come up against the irreducible, and often destructive, power of passion and desire (see Chapter 6). His characters also often feel uncomfortably out of place, and the casting of foreign actors in this film reinforces the disorienting effect of Lillian's affair with Raymond. At the same time, the presence of well-known European and Hollywood actors (Bridget Fonda also appears as Lillian's sister) conforms to the commercial logic of the contemporary global media environment in which producers have to sell their films in different national markets. Yet, ironically, the presence of foreign actors and characters is itself a sign of the film's "Britishness."

From the beginnings of British cinema, foreign actors have figured prominently for a number of reasons, including the political turmoil in Europe during the 1930s that led many actors to seek exile in Britain, the commercial motives of producers who sought success in the international market, and the desire of filmmakers to exploit the stereotyped exotic appeal of certain countries. After the coming of sound, the accents of these actors provided a rich counterpoint to the already complex interplay of "standard" English and class-based and regional accents.

The politics of accents, domestic and foreign, is a vital part of British cultural life and figures in many chapters of this book. Foreign actors provide alternative models against which to measure British actors and the versions of national identity that they represent, although these distinctions become

much less clear when foreign actors assume a British identity or when British actors masquerade in foreign roles. However, their presence also attests to a sense that the British national identity is rather less easy to define than is often claimed, and this insecurity informs a widespread and persistent critical tradition that depicts British cinema as occupying a kind of no-man's land between the two major modes of international film production.

The confidence and energy of Hollywood filmmaking in the "golden age" of the 1930s and 1940s reflected the emergence of the United States as a world power, at a time when Britain's status was in decline. For those who rejected what they saw as the lowering of standards brought about by mass culture, the British documentary movement offered one alternative, but another was provided by foreign-language films from other European nations that came to be identified as "art cinema." As we shall see, British filmmakers have sought to emulate both the popularity of Hollywood and the cultural status of art cinema, but critics often feel that their films do not fit comfortably into either category.

To cite just a few characteristic examples of this tradition: "as, geographically, Britain is poised between continents, not quite Europe, and very far from America, so . . . the British cinema seems to hover between the opposite poles of France and Hollywood" (Lindsay Anderson, 1949); "artistically, as well as geographically and economically, Britain's cinema belongs somewhere between America and Europe" (Penelope Houston, 1963); "British film-making is caught between Hollywood and Europe, unconfident of its own identity, unable to commit or develop strongly in either direction" (Christopher Williams, 1996).¹

As these quotations demonstrate, the sense of being in between is a symptom of larger concerns about British culture, and it lies behind François Truffaut's notorious claim that there is "a certain incompatibility between the terms 'cinema' and 'Britain.'"² One of the leading figures in the French New Wave and a great admirer of the Hollywood auteurs, Truffaut made this remark in 1962 during a long interview with Alfred Hitchcock, as part of his argument that the director's Hollywood films were superior to his earlier work in Britain. His assessment seems to have touched a nerve and, by 1986, Charles Barr was complaining that Truffaut's comments had become so "tediously familiar" that it was virtually impossible to write about British cinema without quoting them.³

It is quite reasonable to ignore Truffaut on the grounds that "this linking of national characteristics with a capacity for contributing to the cinema is inane."⁴ Yet the frequent repetition of this inanity shows that it tapped into deeply ingrained responses to British cinema. Rather than ignore this phenomenon, we need to look more closely at Truffaut's claims to discover how he envisages the relations between cinema and nation.



Figure 1. A romantic encounter: Lillian (Blair Brown) is attracted by the charm of Raymond (Bruno Ganz) when she meets him in a European church at the beginning of *Strapless*.

According to Truffaut, the futility of British cinema is the result of “national characteristics – among them, the English countryside, the subdued way of life, the stolid routine – that are anti-dramatic in a sense.” He even added that “the weather itself is anti-cinematic.”⁵ His argument depends on a particular view of cinema (he equates “cinematic” and “dramatic”) that conflicts with the moderation and inhibition often seen as basic attributes of the British national character. Implicitly, he contrasts British filmmakers with those from other nations who are more in tune with the needs of the medium: In the context of the interview, we are likely to think of dynamic Americans (who welcomed Hitchcock to Hollywood) and passionate Frenchmen (like the New Wave filmmakers).

The persistence of this view of British cinema suggests that, on the one hand, it has a good deal of truth to it and, on the other, that it is a rather too convenient way of describing – and often denigrating – a complex and “messy” national cinema.⁶ It also tends to ignore the difficulty of distinguishing clearly between popular and art cinema. While the distinction is useful as a critical tool, these are not mutually exclusive categories: Popular cinema is an art form as well as an industry, art films may become popular, and many films include significant elements from both models. The boundaries between popular and art cinema were never as clearly drawn as critics sometimes try to make them seem, and these distinctions are becoming increasingly blurred everywhere.⁷

It is also becoming increasingly difficult to define the boundaries of national cinemas. Many British films have been made with 100 percent U.S. financing, and a recent issue of the American journal *Literature/Film Quarterly* illustrates the uncertainty that this situation can create. A reviewer casually refers to *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998), a film hailed in

Britain as a triumph for the national cinema when it was chosen Best Picture at the 1999 Academy Awards, as a Hollywood film. In the same issue, an article discusses *Shadowlands* (Richard Attenborough, 1993) and asks, "how true to life should a Hollywood movie be?"⁸ The production of these films, like many others, was dependent on U.S. funding, but both have their roots in, and engage, with British cultural traditions. Both are also examples of popular films that incorporate features more usually associated with art cinema.

Since Britain formally joined the European Community in 1973, the European context for British culture has become more important, but Britain's place in Europe remains an ambiguous one. John Hill has suggested that economic and technological developments in the 1980s pushed British filmmakers toward the art-cinema model traditionally associated with other European nations.⁹ Certainly, European investment has been a major factor in the careers of British filmmakers as diverse as Peter Greenaway and Ken Loach, and their work is often discussed in terms of the director's personal vision. At the same time, the European Community has sought to compete with Hollywood by encouraging large-budget coproductions, often described as "Europudding films" because "the need to satisfy so many producers, as well as different audiences, from different cultural contexts often ends up denying the film any clear identity at all."¹⁰

The hybrid character of such productions is indeed a characteristic of contemporary media in the age of globalization. The diasporic migration of many ethnic groups throughout the world, often caused by attempts to purify the nations from which they come, only renders more visible the cultural diversity in most modern nations. If the definition of "nation" is thus rendered more complicated, "cinema" is at the same time becoming increasingly subsumed into a "global multimedia marketplace" dominated by the new electronic media.¹¹ We will examine all of these issues, but we need to look more closely at the ways in which the relations between cinema and nation have been traditionally defined.

In one of the first attempts to analyze a national cinema systematically, Siegfried Kracauer argues that "national characteristics are effects rather than causes - effects of natural surroundings, historical experiences, economic and social conditions."¹² As the title of his book *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) suggests, Kracauer studied German cinema in the period before World War II and discovered patterns of imagery and narrative that, he argued, explain why the German people supported Hitler. Although Kracauer explicitly rejected "the concept of a fixed national character," it is often difficult to avoid thinking in such terms when reading a book in which he sets out to uncover "a secret history involving the inner dispositions of the German people."¹³

Films thus function as symptoms of cultural processes of which they themselves are a product. While some critics have become suspicious of this

rather circular argument, others still write as if there were a very direct relationship between films and the nations in which they are made. Thus, in a discussion of British cinema in the 1980s, Harlan Kennedy suggests that “if the eyes are the windows of the soul, the windows of a nation are its movies” and claims that, “almost too easily, Britain’s schizophrenia can be glimpsed through the perfect transparency of its cinema.”¹⁴

If movies were “the windows of a nation,” the study of national cinemas would be a fairly straightforward undertaking; but there are at least two major problems with this metaphor. It suggests that film style has no effect on what is seen, that we look through rather than at movies, and it implies that nations have “characters” that films simply observe – or reflect, to use another common metaphor. It makes a difference whether “national character” is seen as the cause or effect of historical processes, and this distinction may affect the ways in which national traditions are represented in specific films. With regard to the theorizing of national cinemas, however, both approaches depend on the assumed existence of a shared set of characteristics that produce the distinctive qualities or limitations of a body of films identified by national origins.

This assumption has been challenged by a growing awareness that subjectivity and identity are far more complex and unstable than earlier cultural theorists believed and that class, ethnic, gender, and other differences deeply affect the experience of national identity. It is thus tempting simply to dismiss “national character” as a myth that obscures the diversity and contradictions in the nation and in the films produced in that nation. While this may true, however, the myth can have powerful effects on filmmakers, on government policy, and on the response of spectators to the films.

In his influential discussion of cultural “mythologies,” Roland Barthes insists that myths are not untrue but depend on a selective perception that comes to stand for the whole truth: Their familiarity makes them seem like natural rather than cultural phenomena. In one essay, for example, he argues that each nation has a “totem-drink,” and that a Frenchman who does not drink wine is likely to have “minor but definite problems of integration.”¹⁵ National cinemas thus provide a good site for exploring the relations between the coercive effect of cultural myths and the diversity that they seek to organize and conceal.

From this perspective, what matters is not so much whether the critics are right to define British cinema as an in-between cinema as that they have been widely perceived to be right. As Andrew Higson has pointed out, national cinemas are constructed by “critical discourses” that do not “describe an already existing national cinema, but . . . produce the national cinema in their utterances.”¹⁶ It is these discourses that produce the distinction between popular and art cinemas and then the idea of British cinema as falling in between the models thus constructed.

Discourses and myths often take the form of stories. If the stories are successful, they often come to stand in for the reality that they are apparently designed to explain. In telling the story of British cinema, critics tend to privilege certain kinds of film and, in this respect, the story has changed in recent years. Whereas the old story stressed a tradition of realist films, opposed to vulgar Hollywood cinema, a new version emerged in the 1980s that insisted on the need to take into account the full range of films produced in Britain. The success of this story has led to a surge in publications on British cinema, often drawing attention to forgotten or neglected films. It remains to be seen what effect this academic work will have on the well-established myths, but it does point to the need to rethink the implications of the earlier accounts.

At the same time that critics are rehabilitating British cinema, the idea of studying national cinemas is itself coming under increasing pressure, not only from a growing awareness of the hybridity of personal identity and national traditions, but also from political and technological developments that call the relevance of national boundaries into question. The argument against the study of national cinemas takes two slightly different, but not necessarily incompatible, forms. One insists that national identities *ought to* matter less (given the harm that they have caused); the other claims that they *do* matter less (in an increasingly global cultural environment). For better or worse, however, nations continue to play a role in the way most people define themselves, and the trend toward multinational political and commercial institutions has been accompanied by the emergence of many new nations.

Obviously, I am not raising these questions at the beginning of a book on British cinema to convince my readers that studying national cinemas is a waste of time. Rather, I want to establish at the outset that the relations between “nation” and “cinema” are complex and unstable and that we need to pay close attention to the ways in which cinematic texts are shaped by, and interact with, their national contexts. As John Orr suggests, “while there is much discussion about how cinema can reinforce national identity, it can also very effectively challenge national identity: far from confirming it, film can point out contradictions or the frailties of perception; it can unveil discord or division.”¹⁷ Preconceived notions of the national character cannot explain how specific films work, but we do need to attend to the ways in which myths of the national character are represented, examined, reinforced, and/or contested.

What matters about discourses, myths, stories is less that they are true than that they function. To do so, they must have the authority to impose themselves as truth, which means that they must serve the interests of those with cultural power but also that they must be plausible. An open-minded assessment of as many films as possible, and of the cultural contexts in which the

films were made and received, enables us to test the veracity of the existing stories and to create more informed stories; but we should never claim to have access to a truth that somehow lies beyond discourse.

In his study of literature, politics, and culture in Britain after World War II, Alan Sinfield notes that he chose the texts for analysis “because they seem to focus key issues, and discussion of those texts is meant to be symptomatic rather than exhaustive.”¹⁸ My approach is rather similar. While I have chosen films to demonstrate the range and variety of films produced by a national cinema often accused of lacking imagination and inventiveness, I focus on a relatively small number of films so that I can explore them in some detail rather than provide a lengthy list of films touched on only superficially. In the process, I have been forced to ignore many fine films that I would like to have been able to discuss.

My goal is not to evaluate the films I discuss, and I have tried to avoid the twin temptations to disparage previously admired films just because they were part of the old story or to replace the denigration of all British films with an equally indiscriminate adulation. I have also avoided the practice of ticking off the “progressive” features of a film and then taking it to task for falling short of the critic’s standards in other areas. In many cases, I cite the objections of earlier critics and suggest alternative ways of responding to the films. This usually means taking the films on their own terms, at least initially, to discover how they work and why they take the forms they do.

One of the pitfalls involved in studying a national cinema is the risk of dealing with the films in isolation from other products of world cinema that may reveal similar features. In this study of British cinema, I have made use of a number of theoretical contexts and have occasionally referred to films from other nations where they seemed relevant to the topic under discussion. While the emphasis is certainly on issues of national cinema, there is no claim that this is the only, or even the primary, context in which the films are of interest.

This book is not a history of British cinema. Each chapter is devoted to a topic that raises important issues regarding British cinema, but the films discussed are treated more or less chronologically within the chapters. There is a sort of progress, too, in that the topics discussed in the later chapters lend themselves to the use of more recent films as examples. To avoid too much duplication in the chapters themselves, I briefly describe below the structure of the book and, at the same time, outline some of the key historical moments in terms of the industry and government policy.

In dealing with British cinema, defining the nation is an especially tricky task, for reasons that are discussed in Chapter 1. This chapter explores the idea of national identity and the pressures on the idea of nationhood, and

examines some of the ways in which the British “nation” has been conceived and named. The main focus is on how these issues play out in two films – *The Captive Heart* (Basil Dearden, 1946) and *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981) – in which the tensions and contradictions in the concept of “national characteristics” become very apparent.

Chapter 2 deals with British filmmaking in the 1930s, when some of the main traditions of the national cinema emerged. Most historical accounts refer to the pioneer work of British filmmakers in the early years of cinema when, as Andrew Higson puts it, “British film-makers were among the most enterprising in the world,” competing especially with the French and Americans in technical and storytelling innovations.¹⁹ The first of many crises for the British film industry came during and after World War I, which placed a huge strain on the national economy at a time when the Hollywood studios were rapidly expanding, with the result that, during the 1920s, production declined to alarmingly low levels.²⁰ A quota system, introduced in the 1927 Cinematographic Act, rescued the industry by requiring British exhibitors to show a certain percentage of British films each year. Although the initial quota was set at the modest figure of 5 percent, the act provided for an annual increase until the figure reached 20 percent in 1936, by which time, despite a number of setbacks and abuses, cinemas were showing more British films than the legal requirement.²¹

The more stable situation allowed British studios to establish long-term production strategies. Chapter 2 focuses on three such strategies that had a major impact on the subsequent development of British cinema: the realist project associated with the documentary-film units established by John Grierson, the prestige pictures advocated by Alexander Korda, and the popular genre films that were produced by almost every studio but most influentially represented by the thrillers directed by Alfred Hitchcock.

Despite the economic revival, the subject matter of British films was restricted by a rigid censorship system. As well as regulating depictions of sexual behavior and violence, the British Board of Censors rejected any projects liable to arouse social or political controversy. It was only with the disruptions caused by World War II that the reins of censorship were loosened, and the films discussed in Chapters 3–5 show the effects of the new possibilities on the three traditions discussed in Chapter 2.

The relative relaxation of censorship allowed filmmakers in the realist tradition to deal with topics that would have been too disturbing or controversial under the previous rules. A “golden age” of British cinema emerged in the “quality” films of the 1940s, although these were not always as single-minded in their realism as critics often claimed. Chapter 3 begins with an account of the critical debates on realism in general and in British cinema in particular. It continues with an analysis of the kinds of realism found in British

New Wave films like *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1958) and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960), in the social-realist films of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, and in some contemporary films that extend the tradition in new directions.

Chapter 4 identifies a countertradition, loosely descending from the spectacle and fantasy in Korda's films, that I have labeled British expressionism. All of the films discussed in this chapter defy traditional conceptions of the national culture and push the limits of censorship, through their exploration of the unconscious mind and sexual desire. They include the popular Gainsborough melodramas and the excessive "art films" of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger from the 1940s, the films of Ken Russell, Nicolas Roeg, and John Boorman that often produced scandal in the 1970s, and the "avant-garde" feature films directed by Peter Greenaway and Derek Jarman in the 1980s and 1990s.

Chapter 5 investigates the relations between popular cinema and national cinema, using Antonio Gramsci's concept of the national-popular. It begins with a discussion of *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949), a film that draws on and responds to Hitchcock's thrillers of the 1930s. The James Bond phenomenon provides an instance of the ways in which popular success can raise questions about national identity, and some popular films of the 1990s, including *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996) and *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997), are examined for their attempts to combine the realist tradition with the "utopian" qualities of popular cinema.

Chapter 6 deals with the close relationship between theater and the film industry in Britain, drawing attention to the theatrical basis of role-playing and stereotypes in the construction of national identity. As examples, the chapter focuses on performances by Laurence Olivier and Diana Dors in the 1950s, the contribution of playwrights like Harold Pinter, David Hare, and Stephen Poliakoff to British cinema, and the cultural meanings of Shakespeare in contemporary British films.

In exploring issues of sex and gender in British cinema, Chapter 7 deals first with the new "liberated" sexuality of the 1960s, as illustrated by *Darling* (John Schlesinger, 1965) and *Alfie* (Lewis Gilbert, 1966). These films draw on the image of swinging London, which proved highly attractive to international audiences and thus to the Hollywood studios, who invested heavily in the British film industry at this time. When Hollywood withdrew its support in the 1970s, a major crisis ensued and, for a brief period, the sex film became the most prolific and profitable British genre, testing the limits of the "permissive" society, before being replaced by home videos. These soft-core films are so far removed from the standards set by the "quality" films that most critics prefer to ignore them, but they are part of the overall story of the national cinema. After examining the sexual codes at work in these films, the chapter