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BRITISH CINEMAS

Critical and historical debates

James Chapman

As, geographically, Britain is poised between continents, not quite Europe, and very far from America, so from certain points of view the British cinema seems to hover between the opposite poles of France and Hollywood. Our directors and producers never or rarely have the courage to tackle, in an adult manner, the completely adult subject; yet they lack also the flair for popular showmanship that is characteristic of the American cinema.

(Anderson 1949: 113)

Introduction

British cinema has always had a reputation as being somehow betwixt and between: on the one hand it lacks the artistic kudos of European—especially French and Italian—cinemas, while on the other hand it cannot match the zest and popular appeal of Hollywood. Jacques Rivette put it a different way when he remarked: “British cinema is a *genre* cinema, but one where the genres have no genuine roots [. . .] On the other hand it isn’t an *auteur* cinema either, since none of them have anything to say” (quoted in Hillier 1985: 32). A consequence of this sense of being neither one thing nor the other is that much of the academic criticism of British cinema has often been couched in defensive terms: there is still a perceived need to make the case for studying British cinema. Hence the critical and historical discourses of British cinema studies have generally focused on the re-evaluation of directors, genres and periods in order to show that British cinema is a site where culturally significant films have been made.

Like all national cinemas, some of the debates around British cinema are culturally specific while others are more general issues common to most Western film industries. As an Anglophone cinema it is particularly affected by the presence of Hollywood: political and cultural concerns over the “Americanisation” of British audiences have been a consistent theme since the 1920s (Glancy 2014). The familiar debates that structure critical discourses around most non-US film industries—art cinema or entertainment cinema, *auteur* cinema or genre cinema, indigenous cinema or international cinema—have been overlaid in Britain with an often fiercely contested debate over questions of quality and taste that for a long time has determined which films are seen as representative of the national cinema. This chapter will focus on three areas that are central to understanding British cinema: the political economy of

the film industry, especially the extent to which it is still appropriate to speak of a “British” film industry; the nature of British film culture, particularly the prominence of realism as the dominant aesthetic and how this has affected which films have been deemed culturally and artistically significant; and the role of British cinema as a vehicle of national projection in the construction—and latterly also the interrogation—of ideologies of “Britishness”.

The political economy of the British film industry

America’s presence in the British film industry extends back to the period before the First World War when US distributors embarked upon an expansionist strategy of overseas sales, and was consolidated by the 1920s when American films accounted for around 80 per cent of those shown in British cinemas (PEP 1952: 43). In contrast to the US film industry, which had integrated the practices of production, distribution and exhibition, the British industry was under-capitalised and fragmented. The British film industry never achieved the degree of vertical integration seen in the USA: the Associated British Picture Corporation (founded in 1933) and the Rank Organization (from the early 1940s) were the only two British companies operating as combined producer–distributor–exhibitors on the model of the US “majors” and even then only Rank (for a relatively brief period in the mid-1940s) positioned itself as in competition with Hollywood in the international market (Street 2002). American distributors have accounted for the lion’s share of the British market since the interwar period, while the institutional links between British distributors and Hollywood have meant that American films have generally been favoured at the expense of the domestic variety.

The British production sector has historically experienced periods of boom and bust: a pattern emerges whereby occasional high-profile successes have led to over-production and consequent heavy losses. The Anglophone Hungarian producer Alexander Korda was the first to make a breakthrough in the international market during the sound era with his historical drama *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933, UK, Alexander Korda). The film’s success prompted Korda to embark upon an ambitious production strategy with a cycle of increasingly expensive films that were notable for their cultural and aesthetic ambition but failed to replicate the original success: hence Korda was forced to scale back his production activities and sell the studio he founded (Denham) to his rival J. Arthur Rank. The Rank Organization in turn set its sights on the world market at the end of the Second World War and tried to out-Hollywood Hollywood in the production of “prestige” films such as *The Red Shoes* (1947, UK, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger) and *Hamlet* (1948, UK, Laurence Olivier); but the critical kudos it gained from backing such relatively high-brow fare did not make up for the losses sustained in its production programme and accordingly Rank was forced into a policy of cost-cutting and retrenchment. Other independent producers, including Woodfall Films in the 1960s, Lord Grade in the 1970s and Goldcrest in the 1980s, have similarly failed to sustain ambitious programmes. Grade’s *Raise the Titanic!* (1980, UK/USA, Jerry Jameson) and Goldcrest’s *Revolution* (1985, UK/Norway, Hugh Hudson) both suffered losses heavy enough to sink the companies.

The economic instability of the British production sector has brought about different strategies for supporting it from government. The Cinematograph Films Act of 1927 was the first instance of state intervention: it was a protectionist measure that introduced a minimum “quota” of British films mandatory for all exhibitors and distributors. The impetus behind the Act—popularly known as the Quota Act—was both economic (to boost British production) and cultural (to promote the treatment of British subjects and themes rather than leaving the screen representation of Britain in the hands of Hollywood). The quota remained in force in one form or another until the early 1980s when it fell foul of the free-market doctrine of the

Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. The other major official measures to bolster the industry came from the Labour government of the late 1940s. In 1949 the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC) was set up to assist producers in raising production finance. The NFFC provided so-called “end money” that allowed producers to raise capital via bank loans and advances from distributors: in total it assisted over 750 films until it was abolished in 1985 (Street 1997: 16). The Eady Levy was a further attempt to assist the domestic industry: this was a levy on sales of cinema tickets in order to create a fund that was then shared among producers and distributors in relation to the box-office returns of their films. It amounted in effect to a subsidy for box-office success and it drew criticism for the fact that American companies were among the chief beneficiaries: it too was abolished in 1985.

The post-war period saw profound changes in the political economy of the British film industry. Indeed, the idea of a genuinely “British” industry had been largely eroded by the end of the 1950s as wholly British-owned producers such as Ealing Studios wound down and more films were produced with American investment. Hollywood studios had been investing in British production since the 1930s—MGM set up its own British studio in 1937—but this practice became more common after the Second World War when a combination of factors including a favourable exchange rate following the devaluation of Sterling in the late 1940s and the subsidies available via the Eady Levy encouraged the trend for so-called “runaway” productions shot overseas as nominally domestic films (Stubbs 2009). The production ecologies of such runaways were varied: they ranged from co-productions between British and American producers such as *The Third Man* (1949, UK/USA, Carol Reed) and *The African Queen* (1951, UK/USA, John Huston) to films that were to all intents and purposes top-line Hollywood films made in British studios by the British subsidiaries of US studios such as Disney’s *Treasure Island* (1950, UK/USA, Bryon Haskin), Warner’s *Captain Horatio Hornblower, RN* (1951, UK/USA, Raoul Walsh) and MGM’s *Ivanhoe* (1952, UK/USA, Richard Thorpe). Columbia’s *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957, UK/USA, David Lean), *The Guns of Navarone* (1961, UK/USA, J. Lee Thompson) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962, UK/USA, David Lean) were essentially international pictures that just happened to be produced by British companies even though in some cases they were shot largely overseas. In the 1960s United Artists—which depended upon independent producers for all of its product—led the way in British production when it backed a number of successful British films including *Tom Jones* (1963, USA, Tony Richardson) and the James Bond series. The Bond films, which began with *Dr. No* (1962, UK, Terence Young), represent the archetypal Anglo-American production alliance in their combination of British cultural capital (the source novels of Ian Fleming and most of the technicians involved in making the films, which have usually been based at Pinewood Studios) and US dollars. By the end of the 1960s it was estimated that 90 per cent of the production finance for British films came from America (Walker 1974: 16).

The 1960s was a boom period for British cinema when the phenomenon of “Swinging London” attracted foreign *auteurs* including François Truffaut (*Fahrenheit 451*, 1965, UK), Roman Polanski (*Repulsion*, 1965, UK) and Michelangelo Antonioni (*Blow-Up*, 1966, UK) to make films in Britain. However, the apparent renaissance of British filmmaking in the 1960s could not disguise the fact that the long-term trends in the British film industry since the Second World War were the decline of cinema attendances and the contraction of the production sector. Annual cinema attendances had declined steadily for a decade following their peak of 1,635 million in 1946 but had still remained above pre-war levels until the end of the 1950s when they experienced a precipitous decline with half the cinema-going audience disappearing between 1956 (1,101 million per annum) and 1960 (500 million per annum) (Wood 1980). As elsewhere, the reasons for the decline of cinema-going were complex and cannot be explained

solely by the rise of television (though that was undoubtedly a major factor): they also included changing patterns of leisure and consumption, and the decline of inner cities where most cinemas were located. A consequence of declining cinema attendances (and hence diminishing revenues) was the contraction of the production sector which by the 1980s had shrunk to its smallest size since the mid-1920s.

At the same time as encouraging American investment in the production sector, however, the British film industry has also looked to collaborate with European partners. The first example of this was the “Film Europe” movement of the late 1920s: a series of informal agreements between different European studios that saw the exchange of personnel—Alfred Hitchcock, for example, directed his first two pictures in Germany in 1925–1926—and the production of multiple-language features such as E. A. Dupont’s stagey early talking picture *Atlantic* (1929, UK). The “Film Europe” movement was an attempt to counter the economic and cultural hegemony of Hollywood by pooling the resources of under-nourished national cinemas: it flourished briefly but fell apart following the arrival of the talkies—“polyglot” multiple-language films proved too expensive to recoup their costs—and the rise of European Fascism which promoted more narrowly nationalistic and highly ideological film cultures than the idealistic internationalism of “Film Europe” (Higson and Maltby 1999). European co-productions were scarce during the 1930s but they re-emerged after the Second World War when Britain made bilateral co-production agreements with Italy, France and the Federal Republic of Germany. The Cinematograph Films Act of 1960 established a framework whereby co-productions could be classed as British quota pictures.

Britain’s belated entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 saw co-productions with European partners expand significantly, though some films, such as the espionage thriller *Permission to Kill* (1975, UK/Austria/USA, Cyril Frankel), attracted the derisory label of “Europuddings”. From the late 1980s, however, the European Commission launched a number of initiatives to support filmmaking across the EEC and its successor the European Union (EU). Ken Loach, Britain’s most critically (if not commercially) acclaimed filmmaker of the 1990s and 2000s, directed a series of low-budget realist dramas including *Riff-Raff* (1991, UK), *Land and Freedom* (1995, UK/Spain/Germany/Italy/France), *Carla’s Song* (1996, UK/Spain/Germany) and *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006, Ireland/UK/Germany/Italy/Spain/France/Belgium/Switzerland), all of which were supported by EU funding. At the other end of the scale Britain’s most successful independent producer of the 1990s, Working Title Films, responsible for major box-office hits such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994, UK, Mike Newell) and *Notting Hill* (1999, UK/USA, Roger Mitchell), was a subsidiary of the Dutch media conglomerate PolyGram. Indeed, it might be argued that British cinema was never more “European” than it was during this period: Loach’s films, in particular, were held in high esteem by European critics and won major prizes at the Cannes, Venice and Berlin film festivals. It remains to be seen what the consequences will be for British cinema of the United Kingdom’s decision in 2016 to leave the European Union.

The contemporary British film industry resembles many other medium-sized national cinemas in so far as distribution and exhibition are dominated by multinationals operating on a global scale and the domestic production sector now more resembles the cottage industry of the early years of cinema than the golden age of the Rank Organization. It is an industry where occasional major successes—including Working Title’s Hugh Grant-starring romantic comedies and ‘heritage’ films such as *Elizabeth* (1998, UK, Shekhar Kapur) and *The King’s Speech* (2011, UK/USA/Australia, Tom Hooper)—disguise the fact that many British films fail to secure a full theatrical release. And the definition of what constitutes a British film has become increasingly blurred so that a mainstream Hollywood vehicle such

as the swashbuckling fantasy *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (2011, USA/UK, Rob Marshall) met the British Film Institute's "cultural test" of a British film, while the science fiction drama *Gravity* (2013, UK/USA, Alfonso Cuarón) was claimed by the British media as a British film on account of its special effects work having been done in Britain. The increasing fluidity over how a national cinema can be defined was summed up thus by the veteran director Lewis Gilbert: "You should be able to define a British film in the same way you can define a British Premier League football team—one where 60% of the players are foreign" (*Screen International*, 8 January 1999: 32).

British film culture and questions of quality and taste

The dominant mode or style of British cinema has been realism: this has been the preferred aesthetic of many British filmmakers and critics. Hence the most acclaimed filmmaking practices in British cinema history have been the documentary movement (especially during the 1930s and 1940s) and social-realist feature films such as the "New Wave" cinema of the late 1950s/early 1960s—exemplified by *Room at the Top* (1959, UK, Jack Clayton), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960, UK, Karel Reisz), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962, UK, Tony Richardson) and *This Sporting Life* (1963, UK, Lindsay Anderson)—and the work of directors such as Ken Loach and Mike Leigh. It is impossible to exaggerate the significance attached to the documentary movement in British cinema history. Documentary—associated principally with a group of filmmakers who clustered around the austere Scots Presbyterian John Grierson in the 1930s—was seen as a socially purposeful film practice committed to portraying the real lives of ordinary people that was qualitatively different from the fictions of Hollywood or the British studios. The post-war Arts Enquiry (a survey on behalf of the Dartington Hall Trustees written by members of the documentary movement) asserted unequivocally that "documentary is Britain's outstanding contribution to the film" (Arts Enquiry 1947: 11). Although it has since been pointed out that documentary itself was a relatively marginal mode of film practice at the time, whose audiences were on the whole quite small (Swann 1989), it has nevertheless exerted an influence on British film culture out of all proportion to its popular appeal. The influence of documentary can be seen in the films of Ealing Studios—often claimed as the most quintessentially British studio of all—and in the cycle of popular war movies during the 1950s such as *The Cruel Sea* (1953, UK, Charles Frend) and *The Dam Busters* (1955, UK, Michael Anderson) which exemplified a merger between the narrative conventions of the feature film on the one hand and the style and technique of documentary on the other.

John Ellis (1996) has shown how the preference for realism emerged during and after the Second World War—often characterised as British cinema's "golden age"—which he sees as a critical project to support the development of a British "quality" cinema distinct from the artificial glamour of Hollywood. The dominant critical discourse of the 1940s—exemplified by broadly "middle-brow" film critics such as C. A. Lejeune (*The Observer*), Dilys Powell (*The Sunday Times*), William Whitebait (*The New Statesman*), Richard Winnington (*News Chronicle*) and Arthur Vesselo (*Sight and Sound*)—promoted an idea of "quality" cinema based on realist narratives and aesthetics. The overwhelming preference was for films with unsensational stories, believable characters and a sober, pared-down visual style such as *This Happy Breed* (1944, UK, David Lean), *The Way to the Stars* (1945, UK, Anthony Asquith) and *Brief Encounter* (1945, UK, David Lean). There was also a critical investment in quality literary adaptations that showcased the creative imagination of British filmmakers, such as Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* (1944, UK) and David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946, UK) and *Oliver Twist* (1948, UK).

It is no coincidence that ever since the 1940s, the two genres most associated with “quality” British cinema have been the social-realist drama and the classic literary adaptation.

The preference for realism has had important consequences for the historiography of British cinema. The standard histories of British cinema have on the whole privileged periods and movements when realism has been in the ascendancy, particularly the Second World War and the new wave—which, like its French counterpart, flowered briefly, emerging at the end of the 1950s and generally held to have run its course by 1963—but have neglected other film styles and genres characterised by non-realism or fantasy. The most persistent metaphor of recent British film historiography has been the idea of the “lost continent”—a term coined by Julian Petley to describe “the repressed side of British cinema, a dark, disdained thread weaving the length and breadth of that cinema, crossing authorial and generic boundaries, sometimes almost entirely invisible, sometimes erupting explosively, always received critically with fear and disapproval” (Petley 1986: 98). The “lost continent” represents the disrespectable side of British cinema—exemplified by *film noir*-style thrillers, horror movies and low-brow comedies such as the *Carry On* series—in contrast to the respectable world of documentary and prestigious adaptations of Charles Dickens or Jane Austen.

A critical project of British film studies over recent decades has been the exploration of this “lost continent”. The chief beneficiaries of this historical revisionism have been once-popular but critically despised genres such as the Gainsborough costume melodramas of the mid-1940s—exemplified pre-eminently by *The Wicked Lady* (1945, UK, Leslie Arliss)—and the Hammer horror cycle beginning with *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957, UK, Terence Fisher) and *Dracula* (1958, UK, Terence Fisher). The Gainsborough melodramas are now championed for their transgressive gender politics and for flaunting the conventions of visual authenticity in their flamboyant and expressive *mise-en-scène* which mobilises the past for symbolic effect rather than being tied to a strict discourse of historical authenticity (Harper 1994; Cook 1996). And Hammer horror has been claimed both as a distinctively British genre with (contrary to Rivette) genuine cultural roots in the tradition of English Gothic literature (Pirie 1973) and as a site for exploring changing social and sexual mores that anticipated the cultural revolution of the 1960s (Hutchings 1993).

The exploration of the “lost continent” of British cinema has also brought about the critical rehabilitation of filmmakers such as Michael Powell and Ken Russell, disregarded for what the critical orthodoxy regarded as their melodramatic excess and flamboyant visual style. Powell is the filmmaker whose reputation has undergone the fullest reassessment. The conventional account of Powell’s career saw it as a gradual trajectory from the documentary-influenced style of films such as *The Edge of the World* (1937, UK) and the wartime propaganda features *49th Parallel* (1941, UK) and *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* (1942, UK) to the allegorical fantasy of *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946, UK)—which Richard Winnington described as “even farther away from the essential realism and true business of the British movie than their two recent films *I Know Where I’m Going* and [*A*] *Canterbury Tale*” (Winnington 1949: 69)—the melodrama of *Black Narcissus* (1947, UK) and the extreme stylisation of *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951, UK), and finally culminating in the sordid psycho-sexual horror of *Peeping Tom* (1960, UK) that provoked such a hostile backlash from the critics that it was blamed for ending Powell’s career. Yet, following decades of sympathetic reassessment (Christie 1985; Moor 2005), a new orthodoxy has emerged that casts Powell as one of British cinema’s great visual stylists and (along with his writing partner Emeric Pressburger) as one of its most visionary filmmakers, while *Peeping Tom* is now understood as a serious examination of emotional repression (in its way a critique of the traditional style of British films) and as a metaphor for the voyeuristic impulse of the filmmaking process.

British cinema and the projection of Britishness

The principal ideological project of British cinema throughout much of its history has been the projection of national identity (Richards 1997). The potential value of film as a medium of national projection was recognised from early in its history. This idea informed the debate around the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927 and was the subject of Stephen Tallents's highly influential pamphlet *The Projection of England* (1932) in which he argued that "we must master the art of national projection and must set ourselves to throw a fitting presentation of England upon the world's screens" (Richards 1984: 248). This became the self-appointed role of the leading British producers of the 1930s and 1940s. Alexander Korda's London Film Productions, for example, produced a series of expensively mounted historical/costume films such as *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934, UK, Harold Young) and *Fire Over England* (1937, UK, William K. Howard), while its triptych of British Empire films—*Sanders of the River* (1935, UK, Zoltan Korda), *The Drum* (1938, UK, Zoltan Korda) and *The Four Feathers* (1939, UK, Zoltan Korda)—sought to present the imperial project as a progressive civilizing mission that brought British values to the rest of the world. Michael Balcon followed a similar path during his period as head of production at the Gaumont-British Picture Corporation, producing films such as *The Iron Duke* (1934, UK, Victor Saville) and *Rhodes of Africa* (1936, UK, Berthold Viertel and Geoffrey Barkas), though when he moved to Ealing Studios at the end of the decade he became more associated with films that poked gentle fun at the British character. In particular, the postwar cycle of Ealing comedies—including *Passport to Pimlico* (1949, UK, Henry Cornelius), *Whisky Galore!* (1949, UK, Alexander Mackendrick), *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951, UK, Charles Crichton) and *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (1953, UK, Charles Crichton)—characterised the British people as a nation of eccentrics. Balcon averred that "the comedies reflected the country's mood, social condition and aspirations" (Balcon 1969: 158). They are acclaimed for their celebration of community action (*Passport to Pimlico*, *Whisky Galore!*) but at the same time have been criticised for their nostalgic conservatism (*The Titfield Thunderbolt*).

The projection of nationhood is of course always ideologically charged: national identity is itself an ideological construct and its meaning in film has often been contested. Nowhere is this more evident than in the cycle of "heritage" films that have divided critics over their representations of class and nation. The heritage cycle—it is largely a critical term rather than one that has any currency in the film industry itself—comprises costume dramas of the 1980s and 1990s such as *A Passage to India* (1984, UK/USA, David Lean), *A Room With A View* (1986, UK/USA, James Ivory), *Maurice* (1987, UK, James Ivory), *Howards End* (1992, UK/Japan/USA, James Ivory) and *The Remains of the Day* (1993, UK/USA, James Ivory). All but the first were made by the producer-director team of Ismail Merchant (Indian) and James Ivory (American)—again demonstrating the fluidity of the concept of the national in contemporary British cinema—and all but the last were adapted from the novels of E. M. Forster. With their languid pace and highly pictorialist visual style, these films belong squarely within the tradition of the quality literary adaptation. Yet they have sharply divided opinion. For their critics, heritage films are nostalgic and backward-looking: they employ their period trappings as a means of distracting audiences from real social problems. Hence Andrew Higson argues that the films "construct such a delightfully glossy visual surface that the ironic perspective and the narrative of social criticism diminish in their appeal for the spectator" (Higson 1993: 120). Jeffrey Richards, however, regards this critique as "short-sighted" and argues that the films "are profoundly subversive" in so far as "they provide a continuing and comprehensive critique of the ethic of restraint, repression and the stiff upper lip" that has traditionally been seen as a defining characteristic of British national identity (Richards 1997: 169).

It would be fair to say the projection of Britain in British films was often not a very realistic one. A frequent complaint during the 1930s was that too many British films were West End dramas or Art Deco musicals and that the working classes (a group that made up the majority of the cinema-going public) were largely absent except as comedy caricatures. As John Grierson complained in 1932:

It is not satisfactory to face the world with British films which are, in fact, provincial charades of one single square mile within the Empire [...] There is an unknown England beyond the West End, one of industry and commerce and the drama of English life within it, which is barely touched.

(Richards 1984: 245)

It was left to documentary to explore this “unknown England” in short films such as *Industrial Britain* (1931, UK, Robert Flaherty) and *Night Mail* (1935, UK, Harry Watt and Basil Wright). Excursions by feature films outside the London metropolis were rare until the New Wave filmmakers adopted the practice of shooting on location around the factories and terraced houses of northern industrial towns: even *Love on the Dole* (1941, UK)—John Baxter’s film of Walter Greenwood’s Depression-era novel—was shot largely in the studio. It is probably fair to say that the films of the British New Wave were the first to put Grierson’s “unknown England” on the screen in all its grim and unfettered glory.

The increasingly fragmented nature of the film industry in Britain over recent decades has seen the emergence of more regionally diverse filmmaking practices. This process began with the setting up of regional filmmaking collectives such as Amber Films of Newcastle (1969), the Edinburgh Film Workshop (1977), the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop (1981) and the Derry Film and Video Collective (1984) which adopted alternative documentary practices and positioned themselves outside the institutional production and distribution structures of the mainstream film industry. Amber’s *Seacoal* (1985, UK, Murray Martin and Amber Production Team)—a one-off venture into fictional feature film production albeit one that was based on actual experiences—exemplifies a practice of regionally specific filmmaking that bears favourable comparison with acclaimed television dramas such as the BBC’s *The Boys from the Blackstuff* (1981, UK). Since the 1980s the introduction of regional government subsidies (the Scottish Film Production Fund was created in 1982, for example) and the advent of Channel 4 (the fourth terrestrial television channel which began broadcasting in 1982 with a mandate for “alternative” provision) provided a stimulant for independent filmmakers. The emergence of small-scale but culturally distinct filmmaking traditions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has challenged the hegemony of the once-dominant English/British cinema. These traditions exemplify Stephen Crofts’s definition of regional cinemas existing both within and as alternatives to a national cinema (Crofts 1993: 57). Northern Ireland further exemplifies a sub-state cinema caught between two alternative national cinemas: it can be seen as a part of both British cinema and Irish cinema. Scottish cinema has been the most visible through the films of writer-directors such as Bill Forsyth and Bill Douglas. The international profile of Scottish cinema received a major boost in the 1990s with the success of *Shallow Grave* (1994, UK, Danny Boyle) and *Trainspotting* (1996, UK, Danny Boyle) (Figure 12.1).

Another consequence of the fragmentation of the film industry in Britain has been the greater visibility for hitherto marginalised social groups. Again this process began through the film collective movement, exemplified by groups such as the London Women’s Film Group (1973), the Black (Afro-Caribbean) collective Ceddo (1981), Asian collective Retake (1982) and the Black Audio Film Collective (1984). The breakthrough for filmmakers from ethnic



Figure 12.1 The international profile of Scottish cinema received a major boost in the 1990s with the success of *Trainspotting* (1996, UK, Danny Boyle). ©Channel Four Films/Figment Films/The Noel Gay Motion Picture Company.

minority backgrounds came through figures such as the British-Pakistani writer Hanif Kureishi (*My Beautiful Laundrette*, 1985, UK, Stephen Frears) and the Ghanaian-born documentarist John Akomfrah (*Handsworth Songs*, 1986, UK), though the most commercially successful director has been a British-Asian woman, Gurinder Chadha, whose films *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993, UK) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002, UK/Germany/USA) explore the hybridity of ethnic cultures in contemporary Britain in suggesting that it is possible to be both British and Asian. Chadha's most successful film has been *Bride & Prejudice* (2004, UK/USA/India), a delirious mixture of Jane Austen and the conventions of "Bollywood" that included funding from British, American and European sources. A tradition of women directors in British cinema can be traced back to the careers of Muriel Box and Wendy Toye in the 1950s, and to Mary Field and Jill Craigie in the documentary field, though perhaps only Sally Potter, through films such as *Thriller* (1979, UK) and *Orlando* (1993, UK/Russia/Italy/France/Netherlands), has succeeded in making overtly feminist films that have bridged the gap between the avant-garde and the mainstream.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of British cinema has seen a transition from a hegemonic national cinema in the 1930s and 1940s—the period that marked the height of cinema-going as a social practice in Britain—to a more fragmented contemporary film culture characterised by its diversity and hybridity. The emergence of regional and other alternative film practices suggests that it is no longer appropriate to think in terms of one British cinema but rather of British *cinemas* in the plural. This also applies to the critical discourses: there is no longer a single critical construct of British cinema but rather a range of cinemas that allow space for fantasy and melodrama to coexist alongside the documentary-realist tradition within a national filmmaking tradition that need not be narrowly defined by one aesthetic practice. A film culture that includes talents as diverse as David Lean, Carol Reed, Ken Loach and John Akomfrah is not one that suggests a monolithic view of national identity. In fact, British cinema has arguably been one of the film cultures most

open to—and certainly enriched by—exile and émigré filmmakers, from Alexander Korda in the 1930s to Ang Lee with *Sense and Sensibility* (1996, USA/UK) and Shekhar Kapur with *Elizabeth* (1998, UK). Some of the most acclaimed dissections of the English class system—including *The Servant* (1963, UK), *Accident* (1967, UK) and *The Go-Between* (1971, UK)—were by the exiled American director Joseph Losey. British cinema (in all its forms) need no longer be seen as caught between Hollywood and Europe but rather as a subject worth exploring—and celebrating—in its own right.

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