

Social Realism

Social Realism:
Art, Nationhood and Politics

By

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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For Michael

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1930s, realist cinema has maintained a consistent but ever-diversifying presence at the heart of British film culture. The broad term of social realism has come to represent numerous examples of films that reflect a range of social environments and issues, in a manner that rejects the artifice and escapism of more classically oriented narrative models. Yet, there has been a tendency to view such films in the context of what they have to tell us about the issues and themes they invoke, rather than what they say about their art. When we think of the New Wave in France, or Neo-Realism in Italy we think of film movements which reflected their subjects with veracity and conviction, but we also see their products as cultural entities which encourage interpretation on the terms of their authorship, and which demand readings on the basis of their form. We are invited to read the films as we would approach a poem or a painting, as artefacts of social *and* artistic worth. Despite the continued prevalence of social realism in British cinema, there is no comparable compulsion in our own critical culture. This study seeks to address this imbalance.

Beginning with the documentary movement of the 1930s and the realist cinema of wartime, I chart the history and progression of social realism in Britain, covering a wide range of directors such as Ken Loach, Mike Leigh, Alan Clarke and Shane Meadows and a number of film cycles, such as Free Cinema and the British New Wave. This is then by no means an exhaustive account of the historical development of social realism; rather I seek to illuminate the development of the mode through reference to key movements and moments over the last 90 years.

The key focus of my analysis lies on the aesthetic and formal constitution of the mode. I seek to highlight hitherto unrealised depths within the textual parameters of British social realism in order to propose its deserved status as a genuine and progressive national art cinema.

This project aims to display the manner in which the social realist mode can and should be acknowledged within the terms of the art cinema convention. However, without thorough explication of the significance of both terms, the debate simply becomes one of nomenclature. It is the

importance of acknowledging the significance of both art cinema and social realism that will provide the parameters for a revised understanding of what I argue here is an intrinsic component of British national culture.

Some of the pre-existing definitions of British social realism, while adequate, seem to place limits on a full and thorough consideration of its complexion and influence. In their extensive engagements with cinematic realism, Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment have offered the following overview:

Social realism is a discursive term used by film critics and reviewers to describe films that aim to show the effects of environmental factors on the development of character through depictions that emphasise the relationship between location and identity. Traditionally associated in Britain with a reformist or occasionally revolutionary politics that deemed adverse social circumstances could be changed by the introduction of more enlightened social policies or structural change in society, social realism tends to be associated with an observational style of camerawork that emphasises situations and events and an episodic narrative structure, creating 'kitchen sink' dramas and 'gritty' character studies of the underbelly of urban life.¹

What is most interesting about Hallam's and Marshment's summation of the mode's formal and thematic constitution is the identification of the importance of "environment" in designating the social realist text. Of course, the "social" in social realism already suggests such a pre-occupation. Yet, a consideration of the rest of this particular definition reveals much about the limitations of such a position. Consider the critics' highlighting of the importance of 'showing' how the aforementioned environment impacts upon its constituents, or the suggestion of a political end to this method, and crucially, the final focus on "observational" style, and the perceived revelation of the "underbelly" of an apparent reality. These positions, whilst largely accurate, inadvertently reveal the limitations of pre-existing critical understandings of social realist filmmaking in Britain. The emphasis placed on the filmmaker as performing a reflective function assumes a focus that illuminates a hitherto unseen or unspoken social reality, and in so doing, seeks to engage the political and/or social consciousness of its viewer. What I want to suggest is that the sustained social realist tradition in British filmmaking has encompassed an eclectic and persistently innovative school of creative figures, who have sought to interpret British society in an ever-diversifying range of ways. Their films have said as much about the nation

and its problems, as they have about the artists who articulate them. One of the central issues that I want to raise is that social realism is not merely a cinema of mimesis, nor is it one of leftist propaganda, or of reportage. Rather it is the default position of a national film culture that seeks to challenge both our perceptions of the socio-political sphere, and of cinema itself. It is a mode which houses British national film artistry, the details and methods of which should be highlighted, understood, and interrogated.

To this end, it is illuminating to find that pre-existing definitions of social realism tacitly underplay the mode's stylistic potentials:

Often referred to in popular criticism as 'gritty' or 'raw' dramas, words that have close associations with 'the natural', and connotations of 'earthiness', social realism is associated with a lack of stylistic artifice and a transparent naturalism. The words 'gritty' and 'raw' tend to embrace both the thematic elements of the films – which often confront the troublesome relationship between deprived environmental conditions and human psychology – and the 'no frills' style in which they are made.²

The representation of the “troublesome relationship between environmental conditions and human psychology” might appear incompatible with a cinema of aesthetic flair and formal innovation, through the presupposition of a modest and underplayed visual and textual remit in films associated with social realist methodology. From examination of British cinematic realism, which will analyse the occurrence of contemporary social representation and realist aesthetics from the documentary movement through to wartime realism, the British New Wave, the works of Mike Leigh and of Alan Clarke and Shane Meadows amongst others, the stylistic parameters of social realism cannot be described simply in adjectives which emphasise a process of authentication and the effective photography of social landscapes and character. Instead, this consistent tendency in British cinema necessitates the use of terms that seek to emphasise the manner in which social realism repeatedly takes its environment as a starting point before deploying and applying an ever-increasing palate of poetic and artistic potentials. As we will also find, even Ken Loach, whose films (on the surface at least) one might choose to associate with the definition of realism proffered by Hallam and Marshment, has amassed a rich and diverse body of work which can never be simply characterised through reference to the “grittiness” and “rawness” of the drama-documentary aspiration. In seeking to understand Loach and others like him, by first acknowledging

the style and craft of their form, rather than their content, we can present a fuller portrait of the pervasive British social realist mode and the filmmakers who contribute to it.

Social Realism and Art

Art cinema is crucial to the analysis of the history and aesthetics of British social realist filmmaking. It is a concept that provides us with a framework to understand how social realist films oppose the mainstream forms of cinematic address, both in terms of form and style and within the context of wider institutional factors such as reception, production and distribution. Moreover, by evoking the convention alongside social realism, we might be able to more subtly trace the lineage of the creative forces that shape the delivery of a filmic text, in addition to developing an understanding of the world and/or the issues that it dramatizes.

In separate works, David Bordwell and Steve Neale have effectively mapped out thorough definitions of art cinema. While Bordwell's more formal emphasis underscores many of the close readings of social realism which form the bulk of this book, I would first like to engage with the wider more institutionally focussed remit of Neale's take on the subject:

Art films tend to be marked by a stress on visual style (an engagement of the look in terms of a marked individual point of view rather than in terms of institutionalised spectacle), by a suppression of action in the Hollywood sense, by a consequent stress on character rather than plot and by an interiorisation of dramatic conflict. [...] A different hierarchy is established between action and actant. Different orders of motivation sustain the relations between the two. [...] It is also true that Art films are marked at a textural level by the inscription of features that function as marks of enunciation – and, hence, as signifiers of an authorial voice (and look). The precise nature of these features has varied historically and geographically, as it were, since it derives in part from another, simultaneous function that these features perform: that of differentiating the text or texts in question from the texts produced by Hollywood.³

As we will see, social realist cinema can be understood in the context of an authored “visual style”, which, as Neale suggests, is a central tenet within the art cinema definition. Moreover, Neale's identification of the manner in which art cinema functions in a variety of ways as a reactive response to Hollywood (and by extension mainstream cinema), is crucial if we are to acknowledge how social realism's oppositional aesthetic and

thematic inflections are relevant not only to an understanding of the departures from homogenised indigenous cinema, but of the manner in which it contributes to a wider re-assessment of cinema's functions and purpose within the global indices of the art cinema convention. Indeed, Neale's interrogation of the status of art cinema offers an inclusive means of engaging with the industrial factors which help to define a product as artistically worthy, in contrast to a contextual discourse which proffers more conservative forms as mere 'entertainment':

[...] the films will be shown in different cinemas and be distributed by different distribution networks. And they will be marked by different textual characteristics. In constructing and sustaining such differences, the films will almost certainly tend to coincide with and to become supported by discourses functioning to define and perpetuate art and culture.⁴

This kind of institutional designation can occur within the critical and audience-led reception and consumption of social realist cinema, fuelled, in part, by a willingness to accept the filmic product as an artwork. Such a status is repeatedly defined by our linking of the film to a creative presence at its heart, rather than to, for example, its stars, special-effects, or escapist narrative possibility. As Neale states, "the mark of the author is used as a kind of brand name, to mark and to sell the filmic product", which again encourages our reception of a national cinema such as social realism on the basis of how its directors work, rather than simply attempting to assess the effectiveness of their delivery through narrative means of a social issue.⁵ It is a discourse which engenders an understanding of films as exhibiting the marks and signatures of the artist as director, which in turn provides a signifier of quality. Thus we go to the cinema to see "Mike Leigh's latest" or "the new Shane Meadows". By contrast, it is more likely that one will say let's see "that *Transformers* movie", rather than the "latest Michael Bay" or one might suggest "the new Hugh Grant comedy", rather than "Richard Curtis' new one".

If we begin to understand the products of social realism within the institutional parameters of the art cinema convention, then our ability to engage with their stylistic properties is greatly enhanced. To return to Hallam and Marshment, their emphasis on conditions such as social revelation, political position, and the underplaying of style and form as existing within the limiting discourses of observation, are understandings which may be challenged if we take as our point of entry the filmmaker as artist or author. Indeed, Italian neo-realism of the immediate post-war period represents a convincing example of national art cinema, and while

its films can be understood within the kinds of parameters posited by Hallam and Marshment, the cycle owes its continued significance to a far broader understanding of its formal qualities, political complexion, and legacy. Roberto Rossellini, one of Italian neo-realism's founding fathers, discussed realism in terms far removed from those that we have seen used to portray British approaches to the realist mode:

I think there is still some confusion about the term realism, even after all these years of realist films. Such people still think of realism as something external, as a way out into the fresh air, not as the contemplation of poverty and misery. To me realism is simply the artistic form of truth. If you re-establish truth you give it expression. If it's a dead truth, you feel it is false, it is not truly expressed. With my views of course I cannot accept the 'entertainment' film, as the term is understood in some business circles, especially outside Europe. Some such films may be partially acceptable, to the extent that they are capable of giving partial expression to reality. [...] It has no love of the superfluous and the spectacular, and rejects these, going instead to the root of things. It does not stop at surface appearances but seeks out the most subtle strands of the soul.⁶

Rossellini's remarks offer numerous and fascinating points of engagement with the theoretical conception of realism. In many ways, his words can be seen as a proto-typical alignment of realism with a notion of cinema as art, particularly in the connection of art to truth: as something beyond the surface (offering the potential for subjective investigation within the realist sphere) and holding the power to "contemplate", rather than simply display the conditions of a realist filmmaker's focus. This interpretation is distinct from that which is most commonly associated with the "gritty" social realism of Britain, with its apparent focus on social conditions and environments, at the expense of how style and form shape varying levels of meaning. Moreover, the erection of a distinction between cinematic realism and "entertainment" echoes the manner in which Neale suggests that art cinema functions from a position of differentiation to the classical model enshrined in Hollywood cinema, and (with reference to our understanding of British social realism) authenticates the role of the artist as responding to a more commercialised treatment of the wider medium.

Rossellini presents realism as a mode that encourages an understanding of the potential to go beyond the mere external presentation of reality, and by extension, the limiting attribution of nothing more than a political position to the filmmaker in question. This represents a wider critical

appreciation of realism that has been lacking in critical discourse surrounding British social realism. There are numerous reasons for this. While much of this study is concerned with showing that, in social realism, British cinema has a viable mode of representation which can be subjected to the types of critical focus commonly reserved to more lauded national cinemas, the industrial context in which social realism exists is markedly different from those in countries such as France, Italy and Germany, which are more famously associated with art cinema traditions:

[...] it was not until after the Second World War that state support became firmly linked to the promotion and development of national Art Cinemas under the aegis of liberal-democratic and social democratic governments and under the pressure of the presence of America and Hollywood in Europe. The result was an efflorescence of Art Cinema, the production of the films and the figures and the movements with which Art Cinema tends massively to be associated today.⁷

For Neale, in order to build a sustained and consistent art cinema cycle, the institutional conditions of the film culture in question must be at least partly defined by persistent state subsidy, an element that has been harder to identify in the more fragmented and market-oriented landscape of public subsidy in Britain. While the creation of movements such as the French New Wave can be firmly linked to such a model, I hope to show how *despite* the political and economic difficulties involved in making innovative but commercially unpalatable films in Britain, an art cinema has been embedded and developed persistently through social realism. The artificial conditions that have enabled the flourishing of art cinema abroad explicitly draw the viewer and the critic towards an appreciation of the films in a different manner to those which have originated along a more traditional commercial trajectory. This makes it doubly important to ensure that the British films, filmmakers and cycles that deviate from cinematic norms, are afforded equal consideration as culturally worthy, in line with their continental counterparts. Therefore, the tacit suppression of art cinema discourse in Britain, in contrast to other national cinemas, explains to a certain extent the limiting critical appreciation of social realism. However, equally significant are the sustained critical debates about the problematic nature of realism in Britain, which have also ensured that an application of realism, through the liberating framework characterised by Rossellini, has rarely been achievable.

Debating Realism

The most prominent theoretical discussion of cinematic realism emerged in the pages of *Screen* with the publication of Colin MacCabe's 'Realism and Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses' in 1974. MacCabe equated the realist film text with the classic realist novel of the nineteenth century: "A classic realist text may be defined as one in which there is a hierarchy amongst the discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of the truth."⁸ Implicit in this parallel is a sense in which the presentation of a perceived 'reality' is kept in check by its integration within a closed textual discourse, which actively negates the potential for critical, and crucially political and social, interrogations of the text. MacCabe echoes Brechtian critiques of realist form and content in his highlighting of the mode's apparent negation of self-reflexivity, implying, by extension, the inactive and closed role of the realist spectator which contributes to a heavily argued condemnation of the mode's innate conservatism:

The narrative discourse cannot be mistaken in its identifications because the narrative discourse is not present as discourse – as articulation. The unquestioned nature of the narrative discourse entails that the only problem that reality poses is to go and look and see what *Things* there are. The relationship between the reading subject and the real is placed as one of pure specularly. These features imply two essential features of the classic realist text:

- 1 The classic realist text cannot deal with the real as contradictory.
- 2 In a reciprocal movement the classic realist text ensures the position of the subject in a relation of dominant specularly.⁹

For MacCabe, the apparent inability of the realist address to reveal its status and contrivance severely limits the potential to engage the viewer beyond a position of consumption. I am keen to use the understanding of British social realism within an art cinema convention, as a means of insulating realist methodology from these kinds of criticisms. In discussing the tensions between modernism and realism inherent within theoretical discussions of art cinema, Galt and Schnoover offer up the term as a mechanism for navigating these limiting debates, just as we might see it as liberating the often reductive discourses surrounding realism:

Art cinema draws our attention to the persistent inadequacy of these terms, especially in their constantly melodramatic binary opposition [...] art

cinema operates in a dialectical (or at least triangulating) fashion that demands that we overcome the binary debate.¹⁰

What we have already seen through an engagement with art cinema and social realist definitions, and what will unfold throughout this study in a survey of British realist cinema, is the manner in which social realism transcends the mere aspiration towards the specular, and can be understood as housing multiple narrative and aesthetic potentials. A deployment of art cinema reading strategies enables our understanding to encompass the means of creation as well as signification and delivery in British social realism, mapping a cinematic tradition which persistently invites us to privilege content *and* form. To emphasise this argument, I would like to point to MacCabe's own discussion of realist subject matter in connection with Loach and Costa-Gavras:

Within contemporary films one could think of the films of Costa-Gavras or such television documentaries as *Cathy Come Home*. What is, however, still impossible for the classic realist text is to offer any perspectives for struggle due to its inability to investigate contradiction. It is thus not surprising that these films tend either to be linked to a social democratic conception of progress – if we reveal injustices then they will go away – or certain *ouvrieriste* tendencies which tend to see the working class, outside any dialectical movement, as the simple possessors of truth. It is at this point that Brecht's demand that literary and artistic productions be regarded as social events gains its force. The contradictions between the dominant discourse in a classic realist text and the dominant ideological discourses at work in a society are what provide the criteria for discriminating within the classic realist text. And these criteria will often resolve themselves into questions of subject-matter.¹¹

For MacCabe, the effectiveness of a realist text is measured by its ability to investigate and portray the problematic nature of the terms of its address - it cannot simply perform a function of 'revelation'. It is in this area that the deployment of Brecht gains weight. In doing this, MacCabe initiates a reading of realist film texts which (as we will see throughout this study through an engagement with much indigenous film criticism) is dominated by a concern with subject-matter, and which marginalises a consideration of aesthetics and the textual constitution of diverse examples of realist cinema. To re-align this response to MacCabe's discussion of realism, we must therefore be mindful of mounting an investigation of the problems of the production of content alone. Of course, if a subject-matter purports to political radicalism but is integrated within a closed narrative structure then the types of concerns mounted by MacCabe, and many

other critics in his wake, are sustainable. But let us first look at form, before lamenting the apparent impotence of thematic ingredients. Again we must ask, in what way is the director involved? For realism to challenge these criticisms, the creative figure must be at the forefront of our understanding of the films' textual strategies, alerting the viewer to a conspicuous space between narrative and aesthetics, between voice and image. This can be achieved through recourse to an understanding of social realism in the context of the art cinema, in which the text is not simply understood as a closed discourse because of its adoption of a narrative programme. Such a reading strategy invites us to question the construction of that narrative, and often leads us to the realisation that the creative forces at the heart of the film's conception invoke ambiguity and fragmentation within the construction of the realist subject(s). This kind of an understanding empowers the viewer to question authorial motivation, to look beyond the apparent veracity of the images, and to construct meaning in relation to a subjective understanding of the art in question, and in terms of the social world it articulates. As such, we will see how social realism functions as an art cinema that does not simply perpetuate closed relations between reader and text, but which has a function and a potential beyond the incitement to political activity.

This draws us towards a key tenet of this study: the aspiration to re-address the critical imbalance that has blighted the reception of social realism, and which has seen the mode defined as problematic in its socio-political constitution. This conception has severely retarded the potential to engage with the practical criticism that is required to emphasise its status as art, and by extension, to underline social realism's importance to national culture.

Building a Tradition

Some have suggested that elements of British realism can be understood within the context of art cinema, and in seeking to establish the parameters of this study it is necessary to highlight pre-existing critical arguments on the subject. While the realist cinema of the 1980s provides a focus for a later chapter, at this stage I want to investigate some of Christopher Williams' claims of the emergence of a British art cinema in this period. In characterising the terms of reference against which his discussion of a "social art cinema" is mounted, he posits the following definition:

The art film deals with issues of individual identity, often with a sexual dimension, and aspires to an overt psychological complexity. Because it sees the individual as more important than the social, the social (which must normally figure in the films, if mainly by way of contrast) tends to be presented in terms of anomie or alienation, from a point of view which has much in common with the consciousness of the unhappy or doubting individual.¹²

The first tangible cinematic movement that can be associated with a history of art cinema is undoubtedly the aforementioned neo-realist cycle of Italy. Williams' underplaying of the 'social' element in his summation of the convention seems to ignore the importance of this precedent. Indeed, practitioners of realism in post-war British cinema, from Richardson to Loach to Leigh and beyond, have regularly championed the first manifestation of oppositional realist cinema in Italy. The poetic treatment of actuality bound up in the films provides a substantial foundation to the establishment of a global tradition of realist-inflected art cinema practice. To characterise the art cinema purely in terms of its focus on the individual, seems to discount its potential to marry such a character-led focus with varying degrees of interaction with the social and/or political spheres, whilst maintaining a clear authorial visibility.¹³

Emerging from Williams' assessment of art cinema is the natural conclusion that, up until the 1980s, British cinema lacked such an impulse in its filmmaking traditions:

One can summarise the situation by saying that the British, traditionally, had no art cinema, and later no specific equivalent of the European art cinema, no medium in which the leading issues of subjectivity (individual identity, sexuality, personal relations) or of socio-cultural developments and consciousness (history, community and national relationships) could be directly addressed in image related forms.¹⁴

As we will see in my discussion of the documentary movement, and crucially the British New Wave of the late 1950s and early 1960s, such a conclusion can be challenged vigorously. It is necessary to subject the British realist canon to a broader assessment than that which would be allowed to emerge in assuming a primary focus on the 1980s, a period that (with the inception of *Film on Four*) Williams suggests heralded the formation of a "social art cinema".¹⁵ John Caughie also engages with the notion that the convergence of filmic and televisual discourses in the 1980s represented a fundamental shift in British visual culture. However, unlike Williams, Caughie consciously frames this discussion within a

consideration of a British visual tradition. In discussing the formal aspects of Loach's *Up the Junction* (and thus deploying the kind of stylistic approach advocated in this study), Caughie evokes the documentary movement, and by extension its relationship to artistically-inclined European traditions:

It is precisely this montage of sound and image which links *Up the Junction* to the modernist tradition in the British documentary movement, a tradition represented in television by the documentaries of the 1950s and 1960s by Dennis Mitchell, and, in cinema, a particular tradition in documentary which stretches back through Free Cinema, Humphrey Jennings, *Night Mail*, to Cavalcanti and the experimentation with sound/image juxtapositions which he brought to the Documentary Movement from his experience of surrealist cinema in France. It also links into the modernist tradition through Eisenstein's writings on sound and image.¹⁶

What is important here is the manner in which Caughie suggests a means of linking seemingly disparate filmic moments on the basis of their formal elements. In so doing, he offers the possibility to extend such an enterprise by connecting realist cycles and auteurs to their antecedents in order to present a viable tradition of realist screen art in Britain.

However, like Williams, Caughie acknowledges the explicit formation of an emergent art cinema in Britain in the 1980s. Crucially, he frames its inception in the terms of a wider understanding of a tradition of television drama in Britain:

I am proposing the term 'art television'. What I mean by this is an area of television which occupies an analogous position within television to that occupied by the postwar European art cinema (particularly in the period 1946-80), a position which in each instance breaks up the homogeneity of the apparatus – 'cinema itself' or 'television itself'. The analogy is not intended to be precise in every detail – 'art television' and 'art cinema' each have their own pressures and limits – but there are similarities in their ways of being 'non-classical' and in the values which are assigned to them. I also have a particular interest [...] in tracing the ways in which the *art television* of the 1960s and 1970s is absorbed into the audiovisual space of the *art cinema* of the 1980s and 1990s: the birth of the British art film may have been at the expense of the death of art television.¹⁷

Caughie's suggestion of the mutual exclusivity of art cinema and art television is problematic when we consider the parameters of this study.

For example, in my discussions of Loach, Leigh, and Alan Clarke, their filmic and televisual texts receive equal consideration, drawing parallels and constructing a conjoined narrative beyond the boundaries of medium specificity. Such an approach validates a symbiosis between the realms of exhibition that is based around the sense in which signs of conspicuous authorship can be discerned across multiple sources of expression. In order to emphasise the notion of a strong artistic tradition within the British realist mode, it is necessary to position our critical perspective outside the respective film and television industries and their inherent limitation. That is not to suggest that we should ignore any distinctions: instead, it is necessary to emphasise similarities, in order re-calibrate a focus on British realism on the basis of form and style, rather than complicating its contexts.

In marking a point of separation between art cinema and art television, we risk undermining the kind of connections Caughie suggests in his linking of Loach's modernism to British documentary. For example, it is important to locate Loach and Leigh's early television films within the context of the realist cinema of the New Wave if we are to project a fuller picture of the lineage of British social realism as a mode of expression. Similarly, it is necessary to understand how Frears' and Kureishi's work in the 1980s (itself an exercise in the convergence between television and film), is informed by both the likes of Lindsay Anderson (steeped in a tradition of practical film work and criticism) and BBC drama series such as 'Play for Today' and 'The Wednesday Play'. Moreover, in a digital age, the lines of distinction between varying forms of media are blurring. Consumers who wish to compile their own personal archive of British social realism engage in precisely the same kind of viewing experience when watching a DVD of a theatrical release, as they would a copy of a television programme. For example, the Ken Loach box set (volume 2) includes *Cathy Come Home* (1965) alongside his works for the cinema, such as *Sweet Sixteen* (2002) and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006). Likewise, the cinema version of Clarke's *Scum* (1979) is sold alongside *Made in Britain* (1982), which was produced for TV. Looking forward, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the BFI's vast archive of British television and film could at some point be made available in its entirety online, providing users with the opportunity to view a plethora of visual content, distinct from categorisation. Within this climate, questions steeped in original reception and distribution can be outweighed in favour of a retrospective understanding of the manner in which social realism has (from the documentary movement to the present day), provided a worthy

artistic platform against which the personal and public faces of a nation can be portrayed.

CHAPTER ONE

SOCIAL REALISM: ORIGINS AND DEPARTURES

The documentary movement has enjoyed an acknowledged place within the genesis of British social realism. John Grierson and his followers created a space within British cinema for authentic and artistic meditations on society, which has since housed numerous and eclectic contributions to the country's realist canon. However, despite the movement's formative centrality, the true extent to which documentary impacted on post-war social realism is open to question. Whilst the wartime period saw the formal and thematic concerns of documentary comfortably inscribed within the propagandist programme of British cinema, as the century continued the development of the social realist model became increasingly characterised by a series of fundamental departures from the Griersonian prototype. I do not intend to discount completely the influence of documentary upon social realism, or British fiction film in general. Rather, it is necessary to interrogate the perceived smooth linear development from documentary, through wartime feature films to social realism, as a means of more thoroughly assessing the complexities of the latter mode.

Samantha Lay provides a broad summary of the discourses that identify social realism as a direct descendant of documentary:

Firstly, the documentary idea posited a different role for film in society. For the documentarists, film had a social purpose and a role to play for the betterment of society rather than just as mere entertainment. Secondly, and allied to this point, it did so through a belief that it could benefit British society, helping to forge a sense of national identity and belonging. Thirdly, the documentary movement brought issues and representations to British screens which portray working class caricatures rather than full-bodied characters in their own right, and as plot ancillaries rather than as the central focus. Fourthly, the documentary movement pioneered practices which would become the markers that distinguished its output

from mainstream film. These practices helped to determine the practice of future filmmakers working within the social realist mode.¹

Lay's account of documentary's influence upon social realism initiates numerous points of analysis. Of course, social realist filmmakers by definition engage more profoundly with society than their mainstream counterparts. The most immediate point at which this becomes visible in the documentary approach is through the presentation of locational verisimilitude. Social realism is visually defined by its commitment to framing the lives of the 'real', within their 'real' environment. *Housing Problems* (Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton, 1935) is a prime example of the way in which meaning is communicated by highlighting the hitherto unheard voices of the marginalised, against the previously unseen backdrop of their habitat. Although the empathetic resonance of the piece is hampered somewhat by the clearly scripted dialogue and non-diegetic voice-over, the film typifies the manner in which the powerful resonances of a revealed reality are facilitated by a visible human and environmental authenticity. Lay effectively contrasts this form of representation with that of the mainstream treatment of both working-class character and location. The implication that documentary goes some way to destabilising the pictorial discourses of conventional working-class iconography is confirmed by the manner in which social realism has consistently maintained dialogical and locational authenticity as its defining traits.

Central to the existing arguments surrounding the documentary movement is the assumption that it represented a truly national cinema directed not to the impulses of entertainment, but to a belief in an internally disseminated, realist reflection of society:

The documentary movement in the 1930s was thus at the forefront of attempts to establish an authentic, indigenous national cinema in response to the dominance of Hollywood's irresponsible cinema of spectacle and escapism.²

As Higson suggests, the documentarists created a space in which film could be defined against the hegemonic influence of mainstream cultural product. In this sense, documentary blazed the trail not only for social realism as an oppositional realist mode, but was central to the formation of a British cinematic lexicon which has, though sporadically, reflected the intellectual and cultural richness of the nation. Later, practitioners as diverse as Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, John Akomfrah, Isaac Julien, Lindsay Anderson, Lynne Ramsay and Shane Meadows, have been seen

to operate within an institutional and aesthetic realm actively facilitated by the approach and work of members of the documentary movement. The documentarists were among the first to see the potential of British cinema to be not simply a tool of mass entertainment, but a complementary sphere of poetics and information.

The documentarists created a synthesised mode of address, which united the necessary societal engagement with the performance of cinema as art. John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929), for example, did not seem out of step with Sergei Eisenstein's seminal *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), with which it was first shown in Britain. Films such as *Night Mail* (Basil Wright and Henry Watt, 1936), *Coalface* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1935) and much of Humphrey Jennings' canon, were not merely faceless expositions of working-class environs matched by staid accounts of working life: they were rich and poetic collages of image and sound recording a transient human essence, which complemented their explicit educational premise. The coming of war saw the documentary mode achieve new levels of exposure, as fiction film assumed many of its key characteristics to project a more serious and relevant tone. Although the demands of narrative and the need for concise and direct propaganda kept in check some of the more experimental aspects of the documentary aesthetic, the fiction film in Britain underwent a documentary-inspired overhaul during the wartime period.

The migration of key documentary staff to fiction filmmaking in wartime, with Harry Watt (*Nine Men*, 1943) and Alberto Cavalcanti (*Went The Day Well?*, 1942) enjoying success at Ealing, is explicit evidence of the inscription of documentary method into mainstream British film (during the period). However, more significantly, the work of figures associated with a previously elitist and/or entertainment culture, such as Noel Coward, Launder and Gilliat, and Anthony Asquith, reflected the almost instantaneous and unchallenged adoption of numerous motifs previously associated solely with documentary. Films including *In Which We Serve* (Noel Coward and David Lean, 1942), *We Dive At Dawn* (Anthony Asquith, 1943) and *Millions Like Us* (Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, 1943) were representative of a score of British features that drew their characters from across the geographical and social spectrum of the nation, counterbalanced causally-driven narrative strategies with more realist episodic approaches, and where possible, sought diegetic verisimilitude through location and actuality footage. Notwithstanding the sheer volume of the wartime realist audience, it could be argued that the

films were effective in negotiating a level of understanding between the text and the viewer that the non-fiction films could never have hoped to achieve. By projecting significations of the real through working-class characters in fictionally rendered yet believable scenarios, the war films combined the pathos of drama with the identifiable frame of reference provided by the realist aesthetic. Writing in 1947, Norman Swallow argued that, whilst documentary offered a worthy mode of address, it was the realism of wartime which provided the most effective treatment of society: 'We don't want intellectual efforts alone; we want to see human beings behaving in a human way.'³

By marrying the powerful resonance of actuality with the empathetic potential of a dramatic framework, the documentary-fiction of wartime British cinema represented an effective and successful model of realist filmmaking. Yet the mode of social realism (in its numerous manifestations) that advanced in the years following the cessation of the war, owed a great deal less to the documentary movement than many have indicated. Lay's summation that the documentary movement sought to "forge a sense of national identity and belonging", holds undeniable truth in relation to wartime fiction film, and to perhaps a lesser extent in the later social problem features, yet one cannot confidently suggest that such an aspiration is applicable to the social realist project.⁴ Indeed, this is the key area in which the apparently seamless progression of the British realist movement can be challenged. Numerous facets of the documentary form catalysed the British cinema of wartime, and laid down the conditions for realist practice that would continue throughout the century. The notion of a wide and overarching unity between state and citizen, so powerfully posited in Griersonian documentary and in the subsequent documentary-realist fiction films, is subordinated to the socio-political ambition of unity. Yet it is the expression of disunity and alienation which subsumes the social realism of post-war Britain. The cinema of margins, which evokes the sociological and emotional impulses of isolation, reframed realist content in Britain. The New Wave, and much of what followed in the 1960s and beyond, represented an outright challenge to the paternalistic humanism of documentary. In stark contrast, Grierson primarily saw film as a mode of enfranchisement and social unification, as Ian Aitken summarises:

He believed that the institutions of State possessed intrinsic merit because they were the culmination of long-drawn-out historical attempts to achieve social integration and harmony. This led him to the view that the proper

function of documentary film was to promote an understanding of social and cultural interconnection within the nation.⁵

The propagandist desire for “social integration and harmony” meant that the political ethos of documentary film perfectly suited the necessities of wartime. Many of the most well-known examples of pre-war documentary exhibited an explicit narrative of togetherness, mapping the nation and illuminating the previously unheralded communities and regions within tightly woven diegetic frameworks. *Night Mail*, for example, utilises the symbolic potential of the mail train, allowing for a seamless exposition of the interconnectivity of Britain from the rural to the industrial. The film clearly injects the institutions of the state with a romanticised egalitarianism, by capitalising on the figurative power of the train as it serves its country. The film fetishises and poeticises the machine’s function of maintaining the networks and unities constituted by the sending and delivery of post. Even the documentaries that focussed solely on specific areas of the country did so in a manner which explicitly cast their worth within the wider framework of national consciousness. Cavalcanti’s *Coalface* focuses on the practice of coalminers, and quickly asserts the geographical locations of the mines in which they work by temporarily breaking from the actuality footage of the workers and filling the frame with a map of the Britain, showing the amount of coal that each area produces (for the country). By identifying the regions of industrial production pictorially, the film seeks to induct them within an inclusive national iconography.

Though made just before the outbreak of war, Jennings’ *Spare Time* (1939) focuses on the way in which the working-class spend their time away from their occupations. The film clearly marks the separate organs of industry (in this case coal, cotton and steel) and in doing so provides each with its own autonomous cultural indicators such as music and other forms of group activity. This allows Jennings to emphasise the unity of each individual community, (achieved in typical style through the sourcing of diegetic music which is then redeployed non-diegetically throughout various scenes), whilst utilising repetitive editing and form as a means of marking a conjoined parallelism between his separate subjects. This pursuit of connectivity is extended to the nation through the use of voice-over, with Laurie Lee’s commentary notable for lines such as “between work and sleep comes a time we call our own: what do we do with it” Lee’s middle-class accent contrasted with the use of the pronoun ‘we’ displays an attempt at evoking a shared experience across social

strata. This stylistic treatment of unity is more thoroughly developed in Jennings' wartime documentary *Listen To Britain* (1942), in which the director disposes of verbal commentary and delivers a highly lyrical expression of national unity and defiance. Music acts as a thematic bridge, allowing the film's images to span the nation with cohesive verve.

Although the modernist experimentation of some aspects of the documentary aesthetic was tempered within the realm of the wartime fiction film, the documentarists' project of evoking a national unity for the greater good is undoubtedly visible throughout the dramatic output of the period. The projection of the real as a means of inculcating a discourse of unity, is therefore a concern of the documentary made thoroughly explicit in popular cinema:

Films such as *In Which We Serve* (David Lean/Noel Coward, 1942) employ location shooting and other techniques derived from the documentary film, in conjunction with a narrative which portrays a united national community [...] In addition, British war-time realism was, in the main, characterised by normative tendencies which differentiated it from the more critical realist filmmaking emerging elsewhere in Europe during the war years, and films such as *Nine Men* (Harry Watt, 1943), *The Way to the Stars* (Anthony Asquith, 1945) and *The Foreman Went to France* (Charles Frend, 1942) function mainly to reassert officially sanctioned, consensual, conceptions of national identity, rather than throw them into question.⁶

As Ian Aitken suggests, the documentary-influenced realism of the period was bound by its close relationship to the state, severely compromising the ability of the mode to interrogate the socio-political milieu in the years following the war. The "normative tendencies" of British cinema in the period were undoubtedly influenced by the social-democratic ideology of Grierson and his acolytes, who fostered an aesthetic and thematic programme that was easily transferable to the wider platform of the fiction film. Post-war social realist cinema can be seen to maintain the formal elements of the wartime drama, while departing from its hegemonic objective.⁷

The Free Cinema documentaries, associated with the early work of Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson and Karel Reisz amongst others, offer an interesting parallel to the documentary movement of the 1930s. The key similarity is that both movements gave rise to realist cycles in fiction film, yet the New Wave was significantly different from the films

of wartime. Humphrey Jennings, the documentarist whom the Free Cinema practitioners most admired, used disjunctions between sound and image as a means of creating a tone of national unity between seemingly disparate entities. The manner in which the Free Cinema directors approached this technique indicates the extent to which the aesthetic concerns of 1930s and 1940s realism remained, whilst the socio-political impulses of the period no longer applied. Anderson's *O Dreamland* (1953), for example, features the monotonous and sinister laughter of a mechanical policeman mixed with the ironic use of Frankie Laine's 'I Believe'. This is laid over images of working-class subjects surveying the exhibits of Margate Funfair, forming a mocking comment upon the paralysis-inducing powers of consumerism. Lorenza Mazzetti's *Together* (1956) assumes a semi-fictional approach to the plight of two deaf dockers in London's East End, where the subjective use of silence and the objective interplay of dialogue produces an empathetic portrait of social isolation within an industrial landscape. In many ways the Free Cinema films reappropriated the stylistic motifs of the documentary movement, to comment on the fragmentation of a society that was once represented as united, and as such, sought to imbue realist form with a new interrogative power.

For Andrew Higson, the overhaul of the realist paradigm contained in Free Cinema was confirmed in the films of the New Wave. Focussing on Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), he implies that the new social realism, liberated from the propaganda constraints of the 1940s, was free to dissect the constitution of the marginal working-class individual instead of the wider national community:

The regional emphasis of films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) also to some extent challenges the sense of a hegemonic nationality. In these films there is a marked intensification of psychological realism and a deeper attention to the articulation of character and individuality. The community now constitutes the backdrop, the setting for the exploration of the psychological complexity of the (usually young working-class male) protagonist. Both the community of the neighbourhood, and its most domestic form within the genre, the family, have become intrusions on the private (sexual) life of the individual—now the hero of the film.⁸

Before the New Wave, British realism—at least of the documentary tradition—was underpinned by a requirement to suppress individualism, as a means of enfranchising the constituent elements of society within an

idealised and mutually reliant whole. By the 1950s, this condition began to fragment, as the cinema picked up concurrent movements in theatre and literature that reflected the dissenting voices of the post-war milieu.

Ian Aitken's suggestion that Grierson held the "conviction that, in order to communicate effectively, art must employ generalised and symbolic...modes of expression" holds profound significance. This ethos is reflected in the majority of both documentary and realist cinema in Britain before the onset of new realist modes in the New Wave period.⁹ Coward and Lean's *In Which We Serve* exemplifies the point entirely, with the three central characters - Captain Kinross (Noel Coward), Walter Hardy (Bernard Miles) and Shorty Blake (John Mills) - explicitly marked as upper-middle, lower-middle and working-class respectively. Each character exudes the stereotypical 'virtues' of his class, positing the idealistic model of unification in wartime. This functional and emblematic treatment of character is problematised in the social realist model, to the extent that films like *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963), *This Sporting Life* (Lindsay Anderson, 1962) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962) adopt art cinema techniques of subjectivity to deepen their exposition of the individual, and to excavate the fragmentation and dislocation of post-war youth.

Social realism owes a discernible debt to the documentary films of the 1930s and 1940s and to the realist cycle of wartime, yet (as we have seen), numerous elements of the early models are actively reversed within the broad church of the social realist framework. *Millions Like Us* (Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, 1943), *Love on the Dole* (John Baxter, 1941) and *It Always Rains on Sunday* (Robert Hamer, 1947) all present realist treatments of social mores in the 1940s, and each could lay claim to representing an embryonic version of social realism. Yet through close textual analysis, it becomes apparent that the films made during wartime differ markedly from *It Always Rains on Sunday*, released just two years into peacetime. Launder's and Gilliat's and Baxter's films, whilst approaching completely different subjects, both exhibit the limiting and generalised treatment of the social milieu which characterised wartime realist output, where the diktats of Griersonian discourse reigned supreme. However, *It Always Rains on Sunday* can be seen as an early example of more all together more ambiguous and ambitious post-war social realism.