Forgotten British Film

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Value and the Ephemeral in Postwar Cinema

by

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For Roz, with love

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PREFACE

The aims of this book are to consider why films become forgotten and to proselytise for some that are deserving of attention. The degree of neglect is variable, the causes numerous and the number of films I could have selected vast. Most British films released since 1945 are extant and those considered here come from this period. They are grouped loosely into categories by theme or style. A reason for limiting the selection to postwar films is that many people involved in their production have been interviewed or have published their recollections. This can add insights to the production process, though inevitably the participants introduce their own bias. Some titles are available on DVD, which does not always save them from obscurity. For readers unfamiliar with the films discussed, I have sought to summarise the stories being told. Cinephiles may find this tiresome, but there will be films even they have forgotten or never seen.

Thanks must go to the librarians at Leeds, Leeds Beckett, Exeter and Liverpool universities as well as the staff at Southend-on-Sea, Leeds and Liverpool library services who have assisted in the research for this book. I am indebted to friends and colleagues including Graham Byde, Roz Ellis and David Wilkinson who have commented on early drafts. Needless to say the errors are mine. I must also thank the staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for making the process of publication as painless as possible.

The article on *Comfort and Joy* in Chapter Eleven was first published in *Offscreen* 9, no. 7 (2005) and appears in a revised form.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABPC Associated British Picture Corporation
BBC British Broadcasting Corporation
BBFC British Board of Film Censors (British Board of Film Classification from 1985)
BECTU Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Technicians Union
BFI British Film Institute
CEA Cinema Exhibitors' Association (now the UK Cinema Association)
IMDb Internet Movie Database
NFFC National Film Finance Corporation
NFTVA National Film and Television Archive

CHAPTER ONE

THE FORGOTTEN FILM

Look at any theatre listing and a play by Shakespeare, Ibsen or Chekhov is sure to be included among the season's offerings. Attend a symphony concert and the chances are that most works on the programme were composed prior to 1914. Books by Dickens, Thackeray and Conan Doyle remain popular, while art galleries around the world are crowded with Renaissance paintings. Yet visit a cinema and it is unusual to find a film more than two months old. In common with newspapers, there is an assumption that films should be new, the implication being that they are expendable. When their novelty is exhausted, the majority of films enter that twilight world of sporadic appearances in television schedules, an unremarked existence as a DVD release or one item among many offered by streaming services.[1]

A glance through cinema listings from a decade ago highlights the fact that most releases are soon forgotten. Even avid cinemagoers will struggle to recall many titles. A few films are fortunate enough to gain a second life either by being restored or reissued as a director's cut. This ensures another round of cinema screenings and a DVD release, but they are unlikely to dislodge the latest blockbusters dominating multiplex screens.

Sitting through some films prompts the sentiment that they deserve oblivion, though Joe Queenan puts up a spirited defence of bad films, which today are dispatched to what he calls Netflix darkness.[2] A more considered response is that we should know which films audiences have avoided as well as which they have loved, if only because such judgements provide an opportunity to reassess our own moral, cultural and aesthetic values. One question this raises is how society comes to a consensus about what is worth preserving. Audiences, critics, academics and archivists from the past have reached their own conclusions, but values change and reappraising a film becomes impossible if it is unobtainable. This is a justification for keeping all extant titles available.

Extreme works can be useful in illustrating the vagaries of taste. Shifting attitudes to paedophilia, race and gender have made these topics

sensitive, where once they were uncontentious. Kubrick started making *Lolita* (1962) when Sue Lyon was 14; *Baby Love* (Alastair Reed, 1968) starred a 15-year-old Linda Hayden as an orphan who seduces the men in her adoptive family. Neither film would be made today with so young a lead, if they were made at all. Titles can fall foul of changing sensibilities. *Ten Little Niggers* (René Clair, 1945) was remade by George Pollock in 1966 as *Ten Little Indians* and by Peter Collinson in 1974 as *And Then There Were None* with the 1945 version adopting the same innocuous title, which had been used for its original American release. Conversely, attitudes towards drugs and swearing have become more relaxed as *Kidulthood* (Menhaj Huda, 2005) and *In the Loop* (Armando Iannucci, 2009) attest. Cultural change can lead to reassessments of films from the past, so that *Jubilee* (Derek Jarman, 1978) was reclassified from "18" to "15" when it was released as a DVD in 2014, but those warring rabbits in *Watership Down* (Martin Rosen, 1978) would merit a "PG" rating in 2016 rather than the original "U".[3] Producer Stephen Woolley crossed swords with the censors over the "15" certificate granted to *Made in Dagenham* (Nigel Cole, 2010) rather than the anticipated "12A", indicating a chill in the moral climate, while in France Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* was banned in 2016, seven years after its release.[4]

Even the direst offerings should not be dismissed summarily given the disparate reasons for watching a film. The drama student's primary concern is the acting and without the evidence of film, it would be hard to appreciate the appeal of Tod Slaughter, Laurence Olivier or the Crazy Gang. The social historian is more interested in the lifestyles on display with the 1970s sex comedies providing a rich seam for researchers into attitudes and mores. Where a work's entertainment value becomes important is in exploring the predilections of audiences. Not all works are equally revealing. The makers of supporting features had nothing to prove and no image to worry about, making their work less self-conscious and subject to less manipulation than more prestigious productions, where there were egos to massage, reputations to be protected and backers to be assuaged. The consequence is that *Doctor Zhivago* (David Lean, 1965) has a tenuous relationship to Russian history, though it might serve as a case study for making an epic in the 1960s. By contrast, an unpretentious "B" film such as *Smokescreen* (Jim O'Connolly, 1964) gives insights into the work and status of an insurance investigator and injects humour into what could be a dry subject.

The amount of material available on DVD, television and the internet makes it easier to explore the byways of cinema than ever before, yet many titles remain little seen or unavailable. Silent films make up a

significant proportion of what is lost; recent work is more likely to survive, but can languish in obscurity for economic, ideological or legal reasons. Economic factors will be touched on in later chapters, the salient point being that there must be a demand before a film merits being reissued. Whole tranches of material are included in the ideological category. The East German DEFA film studios archive found a home at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, which means that it is safe if little seen beyond academia. Nazi film is more widely available and original material is held in the German Federal Archives, though it rarely appears on the big screen. It is to be hoped that the work of the sixth generation of Chinese filmmakers with their critiques of contemporary Chinese society is preserved in the China Film Archive and will be made more accessible, but what else is hidden and at risk around the world?[5] One virtue of ready availability is that this is the habeas corpus of film, providing conclusive evidence of survival.

The legal framework for copyright varies from country to country, though differences in the West are narrowing with the widespread acceptance of the Berne Convention. US copyright legislation of 1909 required a copy of each film made in America to be deposited with the Library of Congress, but there was no obligation on the library to retain such material, with some films being returned to copyright holders.[6] France and Italy adopted the more satisfactory policy of retaining all material deposited under their statutory schemes.[7] The absence of such an obligation in Britain made film survival more haphazard and dependent on the whims of production companies and distributors, while British governments have shown more interest in the censorship of films than their survival. On a brighter note, David Pierce points out that since the widespread use of VHS and DVD players in the home, along with the extension of copyright protection, studios have had an incentive to preserve and market their back catalogues, though one corollary is that fewer works will enter in the public domain.[8]

Public domain is a grey area. Until 1978, the copyright of American films had to be renewed every twenty-eight years from the date of their original release, which created problems when the procedure went awry, or remakes were produced.[9] Britain's laissez-faire approach avoided these legal tangles, while creating plenty of others. Copyright in both countries currently lasts for seventy years following the death of the last survivor from among the principal director, scriptwriter and composer. Where this leaves the producer is not clear, though in practice copyright is often assigned to the producer or jointly to the producer and director. A 2015 American appeal court decision put copyright unambiguously in the hands

of the producer, which may provoke legal challenges in other countries given the international nature of both filmmaking and copyright legislation based on the Berne Convention.[10] Plenty of older films still sneak into the public domain on YouTube and other sites, while DVDs of recondite material are available on the grey market.

What we have lost

Cinema's precarious cultural status has ramifications for the survival of films. What began as a fairground novelty evolved as a medium for entertainment in its own right, but cinema's position as an art form has always been precarious and dependent on the advocacy of a few individuals. In Britain these included the archivist Ernest Lindgren, the documentary filmmaker Basil Wright and writers on film such as Roger Manvell, Paul Rotha and Ivor Montagu. Their heyday was between the 1930s and the 1950s and the continued economic dominance of the film industry by a few major players suggests that not much has changed. The very notion of the box office has disappeared in the multiplex, where buying a ticket on its own seems miserly given the array of fast foods on offer at the same counter. Film as art seems an incongruous proposition in such surroundings, which serves as a reminder that the case has to be remade continually and not always with success. Unless film is seen as an art, then the case for preservation is weakened.

The chemical characteristics of the medium constitute another obstacle to the survival of film. The nitrate stock used until 1952 was liable to decompose and become unstable at room temperature, releasing oxygen and creating a fire hazard. In Britain this led to the passing of the Cinematograph Act 1909. Aside from facilitating film censorship, the legislation stipulated measures to limit the spread of fire such as isolating the projection room from the auditorium. So long as film was considered a throwaway medium, the implications of using nitrate stock for archival purposes were not considered. The incentive was to recycle worn or unwanted prints in order to recover the silver, the cellulose base being used to produce dope, a waterproof paint used on aircraft fabric into the 1940s. To make matters worse, cellulose derived from wood was used in the manufacture of film stock during the 1940s, despite deteriorating more quickly than cellulose made from cotton, which was the traditional source.[11] The consequence is that some silent films have survived in better condition than those made a generation later.

Rather than resolving the problem of film preservation, the adoption of safety film introduced different risks. The most serious is that the acetate

base decomposes to produce acetic acid with its characteristic vinegary smell. Interaction between acetate and the iron particles in the soundtrack accelerates this process, making sound films particularly vulnerable.[12] Decomposition can be rapid once the process begins, so regular monitoring is required.

Archiving colour film presents particular challenges. The Technicolor process was unrivalled in the 1940s for picture quality and stability, though in Britain the colours could be muted because of shortcomings in laboratory processing and poor production control of prints.[13] Cheaper processes appeared in the following decade, prompting the widespread adoption of colour stock, The most commonly used was Eastmancolor, with variants appearing under such names as DeLuxe, Warnercolor and Metrocolor. These have proved less stable than Technicolor. They are prone to magenta shift, with films taking on a magenta hue as they age and requiring regular correction. Low-fade negatives and prints became available from 1983, but prints from the 1970s are showing deterioration.[14]

Digital technology might be expected to resolve the problem of how to archive film, but so far it has generated more controversy. The dilemma became acute when exhibitors adopted digital technology and film prints were consigned to history. As Matthew Dessem puts it,

> The Digital Cinema Packages that are distributed to theaters are encrypted with keys that will only work for a limited period of time—after the key expires, the data is irretrievable. So the days of a pristine print being found in the basement of a small-town theater are over—at best, trash-pickers would find hard drives with files they couldn't play back.[15]

Digital storage also presents its own problems of longevity. Linear Tape-Open (LTO) technology is a magnetic tape format that obviates the risk of mechanical failure associated with hard drives, but it has been given a practical lifespan of five years by studios, which aside from expense makes it unsuitable for archival purposes.[16] The ideal medium continues to prove elusive. LaserDiscs and VHS cassettes have come and gone within a generation. As media change, so does the software, which limits backward compatibility. In Dessem's words, "the tape drive that created an archival copy of *Skyfall* in December 2012 wouldn't be able to read the original 2006 copy of *Casino Royale*—the technology becomes obsolete faster than James Bond is recast."[17] Until common standards are agreed for converting material to a digital format with no loss of quality, many archivists opt for the known problems of safety film in preference to the uncertainties of digital storage. Britain's NFTVA relies on sub-zero temperature storage to slow the rate of deterioration in preference to

copying or digitisation, while the China Film Archive has taken the digital route.[18]

The preservation of our cinematic heritage is not a priority for production companies or governments. In financial terms this is understandable given the competing demands, but in cultural terms it is a tragedy that was realised too late to save many films from oblivion. Film is akin to an endangered species, which can be lost by design, accident or neglect. The hope is that films are no longer destroyed intentionally as in 1948, when Universal culled the remaining silent films in its library because they were deemed to have no commercial value.[19] The flammable nature of nitrate film has led to accidents throughout the history of the cinema. A fire at Kay Film Laboratories in 1980 destroyed the Mancunian Film Studios archive, while the Henderson's Film Laboratories fire of 1993 resulted in the loss of the original negatives of the Ealing films and Satyajit Ray's *Apu* trilogy.[20] Prints are available, but producing copies of copies is the route to ever-decreasing quality.

Other causes of loss are less dramatic and fall into the neglect category. Films made by small production companies were often lodged with the processing laboratory for storage. If the laboratory does not go out of business, which is an increasing possibility in the digital age, rising overheads make storage uneconomic. The production company may have long since ceased to exist and the individuals behind it prove difficult to trace. Where they can be found and want to retrieve a film, they may not be willing or able to pay the accrued storage charges. The consequence is that an unknown number of films are discarded.[21] Those that are rescued become newsworthy, as in the case of two short films starring Peter Sellers that were found in a skip when a London office block was being refurbished.[22] These are the lucky ones, but they are probably in the minority.

Ideally a pristine print and negative of each title should be retained for posterity, but in practice an archive can be the home of last resort, gaining a print when it comes to the end of its useful life and is scratched or broken. Sections may be missing as a consequence of local censorship, damage, projectionists taking frames as souvenirs, or the running time being trimmed by cinema managers seeking to accommodate more screenings or to benefit patrons catching the last bus home. Some titles found their way on to 16mm and 8mm prints for non-commercial use and these may be the only surviving versions. Quality is inferior to 35mm prints, but any version is better than none.

The problems for an archivist who is offered a print are not over. Resources are always limited, so not all material offered to archives can be

accepted. Choosing what to acquire requires the judgement of Solomon given that what will be deemed worthy of interest in a decade let alone a hundred years is unknowable. Marginal areas such as experimental film, performance art videos, pornography and amateur footage are likely to be disadvantaged if archival policies are too narrow.[23] In Britain, criteria have become more catholic, though this may change with financial restrictions, the proliferation of television channels producing original work and the sheer quantity of material uploaded to the internet.

Restoration as distinct from preservation raises further issues. As in the world of fine art, there is a risk of doing too much, or doing what is subsequently adjudged to be the wrong thing. Should the aim be to offer audiences what they saw, or what they should have seen? Taking as an example westerns from the early 1950s with their saturated colours, how do we know that the result of conservation is faithful to what those first audiences saw and which may never have been realistic? And should those poor quality British Technicolor prints be improved, or left as people saw them? Robert Harris, who restored David Lean's films, is scathing about some restoration work.[24]

Authoritative statistics on what has been lost come from a study by David Pierce for the Library of Congress in which he concludes that 25 per cent of the 10,919 known American silent films survive in a complete form.[25] Figures for Britain are less clear, though given that both countries began to take film archiving seriously in the 1930s but Britain had no legal deposit system, a similar or lower proportion of survivals might be expected. Worse figures have been put forward for other countries with 95 per cent of silent films being lost in China, 95 to 99 per cent in Japan and almost 100 per cent in the Philippines—a figure that also applies to India, where five or six of 1,700 known silent films are extant.[26] Many were lost when India's national film archive suffered a fire in 2003.[27] As to sound films, film historian Anthony Slide estimates that 73 per cent of British films made between 1929 and 1975 are held by the NFTVA.[28] The role-call of the lost is made up primarily of titles from the interwar years, though there are some notorious postwar absentees such as *Nobody Ordered Love* (Robert Hartford-Davis, 1971).[29]

The neglected films

Films that survive in archives may be destined to stay there because there is no perceived market, the print quality is poor, or there are disputes about rights. Many titles in the extant but forgotten category used to be screened on British terrestrial television until black and white films fell out of

favour. This process was accelerated with the coming of digital television, which ushered in a proliferation of new channels seeking to capitalise on the higher definition by screening predominantly colour films, though one commercial channel is now mining the archives for older British material.[30] Some titles that are available seem destined to continue lingering in obscurity. A film that does not establish its presence on the big screen is liable to be overlooked when it appears on DVD.[31] This may indicate a lack of audience appeal, but it can also result from mishandling of the cinema release when distributors have no faith in the product. A well-documented case of a distributor's lack of confidence is *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973), which became a cult film despite British Lion's efforts to bury it, but a happy outcome is an exception.[32] Tentative marketing means a poor audience response. Older films are likely to be released as DVDs with little or no publicity, particularly as there is a limited potential audience. In such cases there is a reliance on internet and magazine reviews to get titles known.

Independent filmmakers who fail to find a distributor for a cinema release are handicapped, though DVDs, airlines, film festivals, late night television and the internet provide outlets that were not previously available. In America, Aaron Katz built up a reputation using these routes, achieving wider and more conventional distribution for *Cold Weather* (2010). The same strategy has helped the careers of Kelly Reichardt, Matthew Porterfield, Jeff Nichols and Lena Dunham. Britain does not have the equivalent of the mumblecore school, so breaking into the mainstream can be more difficult. Even for low-budget filmmaking, the costs of distribution can be daunting when account is taken of BBFC classification, DVD production, website construction and marketing. Fees for classifying extra material on DVDs are an added burden for fledgling filmmakers.[33] A rare breakdown of expenditure and income on a low-budget UK film without a distributor is available for Marcus Markou's *Papadopoulos & Sons* (2013) . With a budget of £825,000, only 0.35 per cent was spent on publicity: Markou did a lot of the work himself. Of the £399,000 income as of April 2015, largest sources were the tax credit (£158,000) and a 5-year deal with the BBC (£88,259).[34]

The primary reason for neglect is that with so many films being available, some are bound to be overlooked. Janet Staiger wrote about films which rise to the top of the pile, becoming common currency among academics and critics (the canon), but those at the bottom are deserving of attention.[35] This book builds on the work of John Springer, Julian Upton and Brian Mills in attempting to redress the balance.[36] Some films tantalise by their elusiveness, including *Running Scared* (David Hemmings, 1972),

which ran as second feature to Woody Allen's *Play It Again Sam*, (1972) on the ABC circuit and then disappeared. Films that received a limited release and are out of circulation include *Eclipse* (Shaun Perry, 1977), with an early starring role for Tom Conti, and the feature film version of *Slab Boys* (John Byrne, 1997). Can we see them, please?

CHAPTER TWO

THE MAIN FEATURES THAT TIME FORGOT

Once they were new and talked about; now they are forgotten. This is the fate of most main features, however popular they were in their time. Included in this category are the Mayfair films of Herbert Wilcox starring Anna Neagle and Michael Wilding—*I Live in Grosvenor Square* (1945), *Piccadilly Incident* (1946), *The Courtneys of Curzon Street* (1947), *Spring in Park Lane* (1948) and *Maytime in Mayfair* (1949)—all of which featured in Josh Billings' annual round-up of box-office successes published in *Kinematograph Weekly* and what data are available support his assessment.[1] Also in Billings' 1950 list is *Treasure Island* (Bryon Haskin, 1950), a rare foray into Britain by Disney that was described by Billings as "a truly great film", while *The Dancing Years* (Harold French, 1949) was "one of the best of its popular type".[2] *Old Mother Riley's New Venture* (John Harlow, 1949) also makes an appearance and is mentioned elsewhere as doing excellent business during its London release, with a Colchester manager declaring it to be "our best in twelve months".[3] What these films have in common aside from their popularity is that they never carried the same cachet as work by high status filmmakers such as Carol Reed and David Lean. The consequence is that they have received scant attention from scholars as well as being overlooked by later filmgoers.

Every investment in a film represents an act of faith. This proved misplaced in the case of Alexander Korda's London Film Productions, which failed in 1938 with debts of £2 million despite the backing of the Prudential Assurance Company.[4] *Caesar and Cleopatra* (Gabriel Pascal, 1945) must have seemed a good idea to Rank's management, until the director's ambitions exceeded his budget and talents: in America, where this prestige production should have done well, the box-office returns failed to cover the cost of the 350 prints.[5] Aside from such high-profile failures, a screening in a first-run cinema could be followed by poor bookings among second-run cinemas and their lesser brethren when the film failed to generate sufficient interest from the public. In Southend-on-Sea, *Portrait from Life* (Terence Fisher, 1948) suffered this fate. It ran for

two weeks in Rank's town centre cinemas, which was a good result, but by the end of 1950 it had only managed one three-day booking among the fourteen independent cinemas in the area.[6] The film had exhausted its potential. Possibly it attracted middle-class audiences who were limited in number and more likely to attend the relatively expensive town centre cinemas. Further local studies are needed to discover whether the same screening pattern was repeated elsewhere. Another risk is that the popularity of a genre declines before a film reaches the screen. *Christopher Columbus* and *The Bad Lord Byron*, both flaccidly directed by David MacDonald in 1949, were expensive productions that came at the end of the vogue for historical drama and were critical and box-office failures.[7] The subject matter has to accord with the times, so that films about national service such as *Carry on Sergeant* (Gerald Thomas, 1958) were no longer relevant after the ending of conscription in 1960. Stars grow older and lose touch with younger audiences as in the case of George Formby, whose postwar films met with limited success. Films may drop out of circulation, only to be rediscovered and hailed as masterpieces, *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946) being notable examples.[8] In Britain, the work of Powell and Pressburger went out of fashion, to be reappraised in parallel with the rise of film studies as an academic discipline. Few first features are lucky enough to be resurrected and revered, but the rest deserve more attention than posterity has accorded them.

Daybreak (1948): noir with vengeance

Production Triton Films
Director Compton Bennett, **Producer** Sydney Box, **Scriptwriters** Muriel and Sydney Box, from the story "Grim Fairy Tale" by Monckton Hoffe, **Cast** Eric Portman (Eddie Tribe), Ann Todd (Frankie), Maxwell Reed (Olaf)

Eddie Tribe (Eric Portman) is a partner in a barber's shop with Ron (Bill Owen). Only Ron knows of Eddie's other job as public hangman, which takes him away from the business intermittently. Eddie is in a pub where Frankie (Ann Todd shelters from a storm. She is waiting for a bus to take her to a new job. Eddie offers to drive her there and after some prevarication she accepts. They make a date, which proves successful enough to be repeated and their relationship blossoms into marriage.

The couple live on the barge where Eddie was brought up as a child and which he inherited on his father's death. A Danish seaman, Olaf

(Maxwell Reed), helps with the barge business. Frankie is bored and lets him take her to a dance while Eddie is away. Afterwards Olaf assaults her, but she is reluctant to tell her husband. She pleads unsuccessfully not to be left alone with the seaman, but Eddie cannot admit where he goes on his business trips. When a prisoner is reprieved, he returns unexpectedly to find Olaf and Frankie on the barge. Only then does he understand her anxiety. Frankie is locked in the cabin as the men fight on deck. She frees herself to discover that Eddie has been lost overboard. Not realising that he is still alive, she shoots herself. Olaf is convicted of his murder and sentenced to death. The task of hanging him falls to Eddie, who has to confess to the prison governor what has happened. This scene appears at the beginning of the film, so that events leading up to that moment unfold as an extended flashback. After leaving the prison, Eddie returns to the barber's shop where he hangs himself, as Ron discovers when he opens up the next morning.

This is an odd film to be produced in postwar Britain. The air of menace and darkness owes a debt to American *film noir*, but there is a strain of French poetic realism in its despair, with an atmosphere that makes it resemble *Le Jour se lève* (Marcel Carné, 1939) or *Une si jolie petite plage* (Yves Allégret, 1948), while having a love affair played out on a barge recalls *L'Atalante* (Jean Vigo, 1934). Andrew Spicer has chronicled the troubled history of *Daybreak*.[9] Post-production was completed in July 1946, but the release was delayed for two years. The censor's objections were one cause, with the opening proving particularly contentious. Scenes showing the prisoner in the death cell and going to the gallows had to be cut, which necessitated the addition of linking sections set in the governor's office to preserve narrative continuity. Frankie's dance with Olaf and the attempted rape were trimmed, while the use of a broken bottle was removed from the fight scene.[10] Another item lost to the censor was a quotation from a House of Commons debate on the abolition of capital punishment, which was shown after the opening credits. Given that the quotation had already appeared in the press, the censor's concern about straying into politics seems overly cautious.[11] The excision of the offending passage may have prevented the film from appearing polemical, but the melodramatic plot has little to do with the morality of capital punishment. *Yield to the Night* (J. Lee-Thompson, 1956), *The Last Man to Hang?* (Terence Fisher, 1956) and *Time without Pity* (Joe Losey, 1957) offered more convincing critiques and it is doubtful that in a conservative society public opinion had changed substantially in the intervening decade since *Daybreak* was made. The cuts account for the film's running time of 78 minutes, which was below the norm for a main feature.

The husband and wife writing and producing team of Muriel and Sydney Box were unhappy with the film, making script changes well after it was completed and having Alan Osbiston reshoot and re-edit scenes.[12] Such tinkering suggests problems going beyond censorship, but given the relatively high cost of £150,000, they may have tried to make the best of the available material.[13] The result did not win the approval of critics, who were scathing about the attempt to ape the French style.[14] For the *Monthly Film Bulletin* reviewer, "*Daybreak* is endowed with a monotonous script, which seems to go out of its way to promote an atmosphere of unrelieved gloom and despondency."[15] The *Times* critic agreed: "The film itself is simple. That is not to say, however, that it is convincing; it is always too slick, too shallow for that."[16] What audiences thought is more difficult to gauge. In the absence of box-office returns, the number of screenings offers a rough and ready guide. In Southend-on-Sea, *Daybreak* ran for two weeks in Rank's town centre cinemas and was popular enough to attract bookings from four independents in the surrounding area; in working-class districts of Leeds it managed two three-day bookings in a sample of ten independent cinemas.[17] If these results are typical, *Daybreak* can be judged as fairly popular with audiences. The same cannot be said of the current situation, with no commercial release being available in Britain since VCI issued a video cassette in 1997.

Viewing *Daybreak* today, its makers' reservations seem understandable. There is a structural problem that the censor's cuts exacerbated or caused. The encounter in prison between Eddie and his putative murderer Olaf is dramatic, but it is over before an audience can grasp its import and tension sags as Eddie begins recounting his story to the governor in a cumbersome exposition. Only when Eddie first meets Frankie in the extended flashback does the pace pick up again. Joan Lester suggested in *Reynold's News* that the death cell scene was switched from the end to the beginning, but Spicer disputes this, pointing out that Sydney Box's preferred method was to present a story in flashback and that the shooting script placed the scene at the beginning.[18] The counter-argument is that not all of Box's films rely on extended flashbacks, while the shooting script need not serve as final arbiter: the scene might have been switched to the end during editing or re-editing, but the addition of linking sections in place of the censor's cuts necessitated its reinstatement at the beginning. Kubrick employed a similar device in *Lolita* with more success, using a murder at the start of the film to gain the audience's attention. Whatever happened during the production and post-production of *Daybreak*, the film is unbalanced by the prison scene. It provides the rationale for Eddie to hang himself, but wrenching it out of sequence

means that the element of surprise is lost when events in the flashback reach their climax. Placed at the beginning it arouses the audience's curiosity, but at the cost of effective storytelling. It also gives the audience time to reflect on why Eddie never considers the implications of hanging his alleged murderer before setting out for the prison. The identity of the man he was to hang could hardly have been unknown to him given the interest that such events generated in the press. And does Eddie hang himself as a belated response to the loss of Frankie, because he has forfeited all respect, or out of remorse for all that Olaf has endured?

Maxwell Reed was a graduate of Sydney Box's Company of Youth, a training scheme for young actors, his film career being launched with a clutch of films in 1947. He was not an experienced film actor when he made *Daybreak* and his abilities never matched his looks, but aside from a dubious accent he acquits himself adequately in the role of the taciturn seaman. Eric Portman was at the height of his popularity when the film was made. Spicer detects a "troubled interiority" in his performance, which appealed to women.[19] For Dylan Cave, "Portman evokes the trauma ingrained in a generation of returning soldiers attempting to separate their domestic present from their brutal past," the problem with this interpretation being that Eddie is neither a returning soldier nor trying to break with a brutal past. Yet Cave is perceptive in seeing a shift of focus from *femme fatale* to the conflicted man.[20] Ann Todd was not the most expressive of actresses, though she begins in fine fashion as a feisty working-class girl. Over the course of the film she becomes more neurotic than feisty, though her frenzied attempts to break out of the locked cabin are convincing. James Mason and Jean Kent might have brought a greater sense of passion to the doomed couple, though it must be admitted that the character of Frankie is contradictory, vacillating between devoted wife and dance hall aficionado without much preparation. The scriptwriters must bear some responsibility for this. A diary entry records that Sydney Box considered Todd's performance awful, while Michael Hodgson asserts that Box had trouble casting *The Brothers* (David MacDonald, 1947) because Eric Portman refused to work with her again, which was Todd's attitude towards Maxwell Reed.[21] Whatever happened on the set of *Daybreak,* it was not a happy shoot. As Todd appears in most of the crucial scenes, recasting would have been impossible even if another actress were available. Jane Hylton was too young and inexperienced for the part in 1946, though she makes an impression as the barmaid who is jealous of Frankie.

Compton Bennett achieved a box-office success with *The Seventh Veil* (1945), also scripted by Muriel and Sydney Box and starring Todd. The

producers must have hoped to capitalise on this success, though another diary entry reveals that Sydney Box thought Bennett's direction of *Daybreak* was poor.[22] The assumption is that it was Box who chose to emulate the style of poetic realism found in French cinema, though it would be interesting to have Bennett's viewpoint. Spicer notes how much is made of Portman's anxiously suffering eyes, accentuated by heavy make-up and shafts of light as in Jean Gabin's films.[23] Yet the acting styles of the principals are distinctly English and earthbound. The couple's first meeting in the pub could belong in any British film of the period, including Robert Hamer's *The Long Memory* (1952), which takes a more naturalistic approach to a similar milieu. The *mise-en-scène* of *Daybreak* radiates poetic despair, while the actors seem intent on delivering the plot. This need not imply a lack of subtlety on their part. Portman was adept at portraying those conflicted men who populated British cinema in the late 1940s, but he knew what audiences wanted. Visually the film is more successful. The Thames at Gravesend is evoked by art director James Carter and director of photography Reg Wyer, though much of the shooting took place at the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith, west London, or on the Thames nearby, the studio being visible in several location shots.[24]

Unusually in discussing the film, the name of the producer overshadows that of the director. Bennett's slender body of work has failed to generate more than a passing reference in the literature of postwar British film. Because he spanned the genres, it is difficult to discern a pattern to his career. On the evidence of *Daybreak* and *The Seventh Veil* he had a penchant for florid melodrama with psychological overtones, though *The Years Between* (1946) is a straightforward adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's play examining the problems of postwar readjustment. Bennett's output became sporadic in the 1950s, but it merits reassessment. Muriel Box remarked on his modesty, which is not the best attribute for a film director.[25] A stumbling block for researchers is that Sydney Box left voluminous correspondence; Bennett did not, so his role is apt to be sidelined. As Box was both co-scriptwriter and producer of *Daybreak*, Bennett's freedom of action may have been circumscribed, but there is a paucity of evidence on this point. Could he make script changes without reference to his producer? Was he involved in casting? How much did Box interfere in day-to-day shooting? Was Bennett involved in the post-production changes and if not, was this from choice? As director and a former editor, he might be expected to take an active role in re-working the material. And did Box prefer compliant directors? He dispensed with Lawrence Huntington and Bernard Knowles.[26]

This is a flawed but intriguing film. At its heart is a tale of three lonely people caught in a love triangle and unable to communicate, but this classic theme risks being swamped by the melodrama. Eddie's occupation as public hangman proves a distraction and seems contrived, yet the film's atmosphere is not easily forgotten. It points in a direction British cinema might have taken had Sydney Box not parted from the Rank organisation in the early 1950s. It also shows British filmmakers assimilating international influences at a time when few people saw French films, with British acting styles meeting a contrasting sensibility. Adopting the poetic realist style was a gamble and risked reducing the film's box-office potential. Superficially there was too much unrelieved gloom for picturegoers wanting a night out, but audiences seemed to have more catholic tastes then we might imagine. It would be intriguing to know the response of French audiences and critics to the film, but as *Daybreak* was never released in France, the question must remain unanswered.[27]

My Brother's Keeper (1948): more than a manhunt?

Production Gainsborough
Director Alfred Roome, **Producer** Anthony Darnborough, **Scriptwriter** Frank Harvey, Jr, from a story by Maurice Wiltshire, **Cast** Jack Warner (George Martin), George Cole (Willie Stannard), David Tomlinson (Ronnie Waring), Jane Hylton (Nora Lawrence)

When two men are handcuffed together, there is a story. The men are habitual criminal George Martin (Jack Warner) and Willie Stannard (George Cole), a naive youth who is on remand for assaulting a girl, though he denies the charge. When the two prisoners escape from a police car, journalist Ronnie Waring (David Tomlinson) is on his honeymoon nearby. His editor orders him to follow the story, notwithstanding the protestations of Ronnie's wife Meg (Yvonne Owen).

The escapees head for a garage run by Martin's mistress, Nora (Jane Hylton). The police are nearby, so Martin cannot risk making a noise by sawing through the handcuffs. Instead the two men retreat to a derelict cottage, where Martin can work unhindered. When Nora brings them food, she sees a man walking his dog. The dog goes into the cottage and its barking prompts the owner to investigate. Martin kills him.

With the handcuffs sawn through, the prisoners go their separate ways. Willie Stannard is unable to cope on his own and soon surrenders to the police. Martin contacts his wife Jenny (Beatrice Varley), wanting money and clothes. Her suitor the taxi driver Syd Evans (Bill Owen) drives her

from London to the country rendezvous. They are stopped by the police, who have closed the road. Journalists including Waring converge on the roadblock. Another spectator is Nora, who encounters Jenny for the first time. The assembled company watches as Martin flees across an army training ground laced with landmines. After years in the army he is confident of being able to avoid them. The explosion proves him wrong.

This was another work instigated by Sydney Box, who employed a production team stepping up to new roles: Alfred Roome the director had previously worked as an editor.[28] The film was made in forty-five days and under budget, the final production cost being £113,595; by the end of 1949 the gross return from film hire was £96,300, of which the producer's share was £74,000, which was a creditable if not outstanding result.[29] The CEA judged the film as middling to poor for the American market, limiting its box-office potential.[30] There were some cautious reviews. The *Times* critic felt that "it shirks in the whole, the genuine realism it is at pains to simulate in unimportant detail."[31] For the *Monthly Film Bulletin* reviewer, "The cutting throughout is good, but the pace is slow in the wrong places and the suspense of hunting and the hunted is consequently weakened."[32] Audiences were more enthusiastic judging by the two sample locations. In Southend-on-Sea it ran for a week at the Odeon in the town centre and accumulated another fifteen days in local independents, while in Leeds it played for nine days in the sample of independents in working-class areas by the end of 1950.[33] The film has garnered some interest in academic circles despite Raymond Durgnat omitting it from his pioneering survey, but the DVD is only available at a premium price in Britain.[34]

Following Robert Murphy's lead, recent commentators including Brian McFarlane have perpetuated the view that the sub-plot involving the newly married journalist following the story is weak.[35] Another interpretation is possible. As a junior employee and despite being on his honeymoon, Ronnie Waring is at the beck and call of his editor Wainwright (Raymond Lovell) and is coerced into joining the other journalists following the manhunt. As Wainwright makes clear, all that matters is the story. Like Martin, he begins by using charm, resorting to threats when this fails: "Of course, if you've lost your initiative and don't want the job, all you have to do is tell me." Waring is enthusiastic yet browbeaten, but marriage has changed him. Now his response to moral blackmail is to resign. His wife might be expected to applaud his stand, but she accuses him of doing the wrong thing. Because of this, or because at heart he is a journalist, he follows the chase to its conclusion. This sub-plot is a lighter story than the pursuit of the escapees, but the unequal relationship between Ronnie and

his editor mirrors that of Martin and Stannard. Like all good sub-plots, it has the potential to be developed.

At the heart of the film is Jack Warner's performance as the hardened criminal George Martin. Warner became stereotyped as the reliable family man and policeman, so it comes as a jolt to see him in one of his earlier roles as a villain. George is philosophical, fond of quoting poetry (the title is taken from a poem by Henry Hassett Browne) and gives the impression of being a self-educated man. He can turn on the charm as we see from his conversation with a fisherman at the beginning of the film, but he is also vicious, showing no compunction in killing the dog owner who ventures into the derelict cottage. This duality is also apparent in his attitude to the people he knows. He can behave like a father to the simple-minded Stannard when it suits him, but soon loses patience. Once the handcuffs are sawn through, he has no qualms about abandoning his younger companion, who will impede him. His relationships with women follow a similar pattern. This is a film about misplaced loyalty: Martin inspires devotion, but it is not reciprocated. Despite his contempt for his wife, he asks for her help and she readily accedes to his request. Nora is willing to shelter him and lie to the police for him. When she shows him the newspaper report of Willie Stannard's arrest for murdering the man in the cottage, Martin's response is "Bloody little fool," and he denies being there at the time. His willingness to let Stannard take the blame makes Nora angry. He threatens her and only the arrival of a customer prevents what might be her murder. Martin escapes through the back door and Nora seizes the opportunity to telephone the police. She cannot ignore his violent side any longer.

The culmination of the film brings the characters together on the edge of the minefield. Waring is there with his wife, who is caught in the excitement of the hunt. Nora speaks to Jenny, though without revealing that she knows Martin. When Nora asks what he is like, Jenny is candid, admitting that she does not know him, for he spent fourteen of their twenty-two years of marriage in the army and five in prison. He remains an enigma to both women and to us.

Everybody falls silent as Martin crosses the minefield. This is a tense scene, well handled by director, editor and cast. After the explosion, Waring responds, "Well that's Wainwright's story. I hope it chokes him." Jenny goes home without making herself known to the police. She has not entirely lost her affection for her husband. As she tells Syd, "He could have been a great man really, if things had worked out differently. As it is, I suppose he's better dead." Nora could also slip away, but instead she goes to the police superintendent and announces that as she was at the cottage, she knows that Stannard is innocent. Potentially she is sacrificing her own freedom for his

sake. As with *Daybreak*, the film makes no overt statement about the death penalty, but Stannard could still be hung for his involvement in the murder. The case of Derek Bentley four years later highlighted the legal ambiguity of joint enterprise, which was dramatised in *Let Him Have It* (Peter Medak, 1991).

My Brother's Keeper is an unpretentious but intriguing film and presents another of Sydney Box's damaged men as in *Daybreak*, *The Man Within* (Bernard Knowles, 1947) and *The October Man* (Roy Baker, 1947). In common with Compton Bennett who directed *Daybreak*, Roome was a former editor and no self-publicist. His assistant Esmond Seal was promoted to editor when Roome took on directing this film and co-directing *It's Not Cricket* (1949) with Roy Rich.[36] Roome confessed in 1992 that he "wasn't too keen on dealing with actors" and after working as associate producer for Box he reverted to editing for the *Doctor* and *Carry on* films.[37] He pointed out that the release of *My Brother's Keeper* coincided with that of *It Always Rains on Sunday* (Robert Hamer, 1947), which was considered a better film.[38] Hamer offers an anguished evocation of a family torn apart by betrayal. It is imbued with a sense of despair that *My Brother's Keeper* cannot match, though Roome provides an equally tense picture of trying to keep one step ahead of the police. Geoff Mayer detects a lack of compassion and a breakdown of the wartime consensus, which is unsurprising given that Martin shows himself to be so ruthless that even Nora turns against him.[39] Whether this modest film embodies the state of Britain is debatable. Martin is that recurring cinematic figure of the time: the man whose wartime service fits him for nothing but crime. The disparate array of onlookers including journalists, police and those who know Martin fall silent as he crosses the minefield. The film never transcends its storyline. This is the consequence of a script that focuses on the chase, while the characters never have the opportunity to develop beyond the demands of the plot. Stannard disappears from the story after he enters the police station, while the relationship of Syd and Jenny remains as insubstantial as that of Ronnie Waring and his wife. Only the relationship of Nora and Martin shows any complexity, but Roome cannot be held responsible for the limitations of the script and he never lets the characters become stereotyped. It might have been a more intriguing story if the title were treated ironically, with the simpleton Willie bringing down the knowing Martin. Instead the makers strive for a biblical resonance that the film never quite achieves.

The Dark Man (1950): the importance of location

Production Independent Artists
Director Jeffrey Dell, **Producer** Julian Wintle, **Scriptwriter** Jeffrey Dell, **Cast** Edward Underdown (Inspector Viner), Maxwell Reed (the dark man), Natasha Parry (Molly Lester), William Hartnell (superintendent), Barbara Murray (Carol Burns)

One visitor at a seaside resort is not a holidaymaker. A man in a dark suit (Maxwell Reed) orders his hire car driver to take him to a farm. There lives Mostyn (Ernest Haines), who is a middleman holding money given to him in a pub. He is nervous as he retrieves the money from its hiding place and with good reason, for the dark man clubs him to death. On the journey back to town, the dark man checks his revolver. The driver watches nervously in the mirror and flees at the first opportunity. Molly (Natasha Parry) is an actress at the local theatre. As she cycles past a lane, she hears two shots and sees the dark man standing by the car. She shares a dressing room with fellow actress Carol (Barbara Murray), who has read about the murders and urges her to go to the police. Detective Inspector Viner (Edward Underdown) is sent from Scotland Yard to investigate the murders, but he assumes the role of protecting Molly. He is attracted to her, questioning her over dinner. The next day they go sightseeing, visiting a ruined castle and a lighthouse.

Molly lodges with Carol and her husband. At night the dark man leaves his hotel unobserved and visits their house. Because a party is in progress, the front door is unlocked, allowing him to slip inside, remove the light bulb from Molly's room and lie in wait for her. Fortunately Viner rings her and alerts the local police when he gets no reply, enabling her to be rescued in the nick of time. On leaving hospital she goes to stay with Carol's mother for safety. In a café opposite the hospital, the dark man strikes up a conversation with the taxi driver who took her there. A woman working in the café becomes suspicious of his interest and alerts the police, who arrive at the cottage to find that Molly has left by car with a man claiming to be a policeman. Molly becomes suspicious of her companion and grabs the steering wheel, forcing the car into a shingle bank. She is shot and injured as the dark man abandons the car, but the police are closing in. He flees across the marsh and Viner kills him in a final shootout on the beach.

The Dark Man gave starring roles to Edward Underdown and Natasha Parry, whose film careers flourished briefly around 1950 and who are little known today. The plot hangs together and tension builds satisfyingly