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Acting Styles of the British New Wave

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British New Wave cinema is typically associated with two groups of actors. One includes those with an established position (such as Peter Finch, Laurence Olivier or Dirk Bogarde), and the other those at the beginning of their film career. The latter group seems to be much more interesting in terms of their lives, background and their methods of work. Most of them come from a working-class, non-artistic background (from which the directors of New Wave films asked them to draw inspiration). However, all of them received a solid theatrical education. In this way, a unique collage of skills and experience was created, the elements of which produced a very interesting artistic result. This sheds new light on the phenomenon of the British New Wave: actors, graduates of renowned schools, known from the most famous theatres and troupes (such as the Royal Court Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company or the Old Vic) end up in films where they are supposed to play characters from the lower social classes, speak their language and make reference to their own memories and background.

KEYWORDS: acting styles, British New Wave, Richard Harris, Richard Burton, Tom Courtenay

Good acting always tells a story
Tom Courtenay

Drawing inspiration from the Angry Young Men literature, documentary projects (by John Grierson, Humphrey Jennings, and Free Cinema), as well as nouvelle vague experiments, British New Wave film directors started to bring a new quality to the cinema of the late 1950s. There was a noticeable mood of social discontent in the films, however, it is impossible to trace its actual source, and so it is in the case of the attitudes of the main characters. The lack of the acceptance of the social norms was the feature which made the British New Wave different from other film projects from that time. European productions from that period are comparable in terms of realistic images, original editing or natural sound, however, certain elements of the world depicted were characteristic of the UK films, and they became a new and consistent trend in the English cinema. Starting from the accent with which the characters spoke, the way the actors dressed (the actors had working – class background, just like the characters they played), the new type of acting (blending into the social background and drawing from individual experience), to natural locations, and the current social problems – all this served the purpose of creating social realism in the cinema of the British New Wave, which was understood in a very original way.

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as Peter Finch, Laurence Olivier or Dirk Bogarde), and the other – those at the beginning of their film career. The latter group seems to be much more interesting in terms of their lives, background and their methods of work. Most of them have a working-class, non-artistic background (from which the directors of New Wave films asked them to draw inspiration), however all of them received a solid theatrical education. In this way, a unique collage of skills and experience was made, the elements of which produced a very interesting artistic result. It puts the phenomenon of the British New Wave in a new light: actors, graduates of renowned schools, known from the most famous theatres and troupes (such as the Royal Court Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company or the Old Vic) end up in films, where they are supposed to play the characters from the lower social classes, speak their language and make reference to their own memories and background.

It should be remembered that the early 1950s was a period of an enormous popularity of the Method, which allowed the American actors from the Actors Studio to get deeper into their roles by getting immersed into the abyss of their mind. In most cases there is no clear evidence that the angry young actors of the British cinema “borrowed” their acting styles from those from the US. But some kind of intensity and artificiality can be seen in their acting, at that time typical of the roles played by James Dean and Marlon Brando. It should be added that, as pointed out by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, acting is virtually always evaluated with regard to its realism, which at different historical moments can be understood in an extremely different way. The researchers emphasise that the Method of the Actors Studio in the 1950s seemed to be realistic, but now it is perceived as exaggerated and artificial (Bordwell, Thompson 2010, p. 151). The change in the perception of these phenomena with time is quite obvious, however, there is no doubt that Marlon Brando’s acting in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951, dir. Elia Kazan) and that of Richard Harris in *The Sporting Life* (1963, dir. Lindsay Anderson) have a lot in common.

Another area of research on the characteristic features of acting in the cinema of the British New Wave is an attempt at juxtaposing it with possible sources of inspiration provided by the cinema of Italian new realism and nouvelle vague. However, probably no one could state that the performance of the British New Wave actors resemble the acting of the amateurs known from neorealism. Such a comparison would be justified, considering the fact that both groups of actors – neorealist and the British New Wave tried to find out the truth about the played characters. On the contrary, in the characters played by Richard Harris, Richard Burton or Tom Courtenay there is distinct mannerism and artificiality (which can be also seen in the experiments of nouvelle vague), which cannot be seen in the technique of the amateurs of the neorealist cinema. The way of acting represented by the actors named above has a unique result, perfectly corresponding to the style of the British New Wave cinema. Like in the neorealist cinema, on the screens

of the British cinemas in the 1960s, there were faces which were serious and meaningful, but also beautiful in a not-obvious and unconventional way. Unlike in the post-war Italian cinema, each of the British actors had a theatrical education, which made them free to play a role without drawing from their own emotions and experiences.

The dichotomy between the British New Wave acting and other currents of that time is reflected in a funny anecdote from the set of *Marathon Man* (1976, dir. John Schlesinger), starring Laurence Olivier and Dustin Hoffman. Hoffman, tired and up for three nights, when asked by Olivier why he looked so bad, answered that the character played by him was going to be exhausted. ‘Why don’t you just try acting?’ – asked Olivier. It seems that for a long time in the acting techniques of the angry young men there had been a battle between the two types of approach – that adopted by Olivier and the other one, adopted by Hoffman. The combination of these two methods not only proved to be effective, but it was also largely consistent with the rules of the New Wave cinema. On the one hand, the actors represented common people, spoke their language (often the famous Northern accent, as Karolina Kosińska wrote: ‘They spoke the language of the masses – with all the typical diversity of accents, slang, and rough colloquialisms’; Kosińska 2014, p. 179), looked like them and lived their lives (like the actors of the neorealist cinema) On the other hand, the same actors exaggerated with expression and distinctness of acting (exactly like the actors using the Method and nouvelle vague actors). What is more, the New Wave actors had a solid theatrical training, received not only at schools, but also on the stages of famous theatres. Therefore, the position of the actors from poor backgrounds, but studying at Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), corresponded to the attitudes of the characters of the New Wave cinema, who found themselves in the centre of current events within the society, but at the same time, like outsiders, they distanced themselves from the world (just like the character of Colin Wilson’s essay).

According to David Bordwell, acting can be evaluated in terms of two of its aspects: the extent of individualism and the extent of stylization. Nowadays, the realism of acting can be achieved by creating a unique character, who will be neither flamboyant nor flat (Bordwell, Thompson 2010, p. 155). As stated before, the acting of the British New Wave actors may seem artificial today, but in the 1960s it was not perceived as such. However, numerous opinions from that time provide evidence that what was emphasised in the first place was originality, an interesting method and appeal rather than realism. The unique way of acting matched the characters created at that time. The directors did not want to present an Everyman, someone ordinary – they rather looked for an outsider, who, although showed against a realistic background, would remain entirely original: ‘A character is by no means “typical” – on the contrary, he/she is as unique as can be in terms of his/her profession, experience and personality.’ – said Lindsay Anderson

(1964, pp. 22–23) about the main character of *This Sporting Life*. In “Cahiers du Cinéma”, Louis Marcorelles stated: “Lindsay Anderson’s Frank Machin is a close relative of Arthur Seaton, but his rebellion is presented with power and passion we have never seen before in the English actors in the English films.” (1964, p. 23). In a similar way the characters played by Tom Courtenay can be analysed (even today, the actor fascinates with his unique, remarkable talent¹). The reviewers were impressed by the combination of his original look, talent and acting skills: “In Tom Courtenay, Billy has found a perfect performer. He is an actor who is talented on an amazing scale. Each of his gestures, a tone of his voice, a wink of his eye – express a protest. At the same time, in the attentive, prematurely old face of Courtenay, there is resignation of a tired, experienced man” (Skwara 1965, p. 4).

What results from the cited opinions is that in order to understand the technique of an actor of the British New Wave, one must first look for the truth about his/her background, look at his/her education and only then search for the relationships with the film trends of the 1950s and 1960s.

Background

The top actors of the New Wave cinema experienced poverty and since their early childhood they had to face the everyday problems of the working class life. Richard Burton, the son of a miner, was born in a family with many children (just like Richard Harris). Tom Courtenay is the son of a boat painter and grew up in the docks in Hull. And Albert Finney (according to Courtenay’s words) came from the “almost” lower middle class, because his father was a bookmaker. Tough living conditions not only influenced further artistic development of the actors, but they often became a valuable lesson which bore fruit in the future. What also determined the accent and behaviour of the young actors was the place of their origin. Hull, where Courtenay came from (he used to say about himself and Finney: “We both have the same problem trying to get rid of the flat, rough speech of the North”²). Also Pontrhydyfen in Wales, where Richard Burton was born and Limerick in Ireland, where Richard Harris grew up provided the experiences from which the productions of the British New Wave took advantage many years later.

Courtenay mentioned that his working class roots determined his early fame, but he had never tried to expose his background too much. As he said, the London of the 1960s glorified the working class life stories of the artists who by means of their ambition and determination made their work even more convincing. In the same manner it provided a doubtless truthfulness of expression, impressing the people from the higher social classes. Courtenay believes that his background was neither something to be ashamed of, nor something to be proud of

[1] Which he confirmed with his outstanding role in *45 years* (2014, dir., Andrew Haigh).

[2] Interview for RADA, <<https://www.rada.ac.uk/watch-read-listen/listen/alumni-interviews?start=12>> [Accessed: 13.10.2015].

(Courtenay 2000, p. 190). He adds: “It is hardly surprising that young actors such as Albert [Finney – A.Š.] and myself should be the ones to benefit from the leading parts that suddenly appeared. With our lowly social backgrounds – especially mine, I have to say; Albert’s Dad was a bookie and almost lower middle class – we were excellent casting for what was being written” (Courtenay 2000, p. 335).

Also Albert Finney was perceived as a working class actor³, not only because of his background, but mainly because of his looks and behaviour, which in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960, dir. Karel Reisz) are characterised by the clichés regarding the idea of working class masculinity (such as “resilience, belligerence, exuberance, even loutishness”; Ashby 2001, p. 179). What corresponds to the above are the terms cited by Justine Ashby (who cited various researchers) and called Finney “beefy, scowling, tow-haired”, and wrote: “With his wary eye, cocky banter, short neck and jutting chin, Finney possessed the naturalistic vitality of a working-class environment” (Courtenay 2000, p. 335). Christie Geraghty pointed out that Finney’s sex appeal had physically dominated the mise-en-scene of the whole film: “through the use of flaming techniques, camera angles and voice overs, the film’s formal devices invite the audience’s engagement with and contemplation of Finney as a star whose image has so clearly been constructed around sexual presence” (Courtenay 2000, pp. 179–180). Someone who looked like this and spoke with the genuine working class accent and was additionally characterized by carefree boldness of behaviour, was bound to become a living contrast to the actors who were jovial and reserved, and whose background was associated with the middle (Courtenay 2000, p. 182) or upper class.

In the image of the actors of the British New Wave there is a clear change of guard at the end of the 1950s. There is no place for gentle facial features, Hollywood-style look or elegance. Instead, what is preferred are rugged features, rebellion visible in every gesture and move and a costume from the working-class streets of the North.

To the young angry actors, just like to the characters they portrayed, physical activity and sports were particularly important. Tom Courtenay admitted many times that he regretted not becoming an athlete (Courtenay 2000, p. 184). Burton,



Fig. 1–4. Richard Harris in *This Sporting Life*, Richard Burton in *Look Back in Anger*, Tom Courtenay in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, and Albert Finney in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*

[3] It should be remembered that not all New Wave actors had poor, working class background. There is another group of actors whose families had academic and artistic associations. Alan Bates came from a family of musicians, Julie Dench’s father was a doctor, and

Charlotte Rampling is a daughter of a painter and an Olympic gold medalist/army officer. Julie Christie’s youth was also interesting as her father was an owner of a tea plantation in India.

himself fond of cricket and table tennis, admired his older brother Ifor [Welsh transcription, English equivalent of Ivor – A.Ś.], who was a miner and a rugby player. According to an anecdote, Burton said that he would rather have played for Wales at Cardiff Arms Park than Hamlet at the Old Vic. Richard Harris's rugby career was interrupted at an early age when he contracted tuberculosis. All of the mentioned actors never stopped supporting their favourite teams and following their results. Their interest in various types of sports resulted in roles in which they could make use of their passions and experiences. (*This Sporting Life*, 1963, dir. Lindsay Anderson; *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, 1962, dir. Tony Richardson).

Theatre

When comparing theatrical and film acting, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson point out that cinema requires more reserved and less expressive acting, because a camera is able to show characters in close-up. Both acting techniques are not so distant from each other: film acting requires being more skilful shifting between reservation and emphasis." (Bordwell, Thompson 2010, p. 158). Virtually all actors⁴ appearing in the New Wave cinema received solid preparation for their work. The skills they learnt in the theatre did not interfere on the set, they often helped the actors develop the achieved skills.⁵

Many actors of the British New Wave graduated from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, which, as Tom Courtenay recalled, had been an elite school, but since his time it has become more available to the middle class (Courtenay 2000, p. 153), or (like in his case), the working class. Other graduates of the RADA include: Laurence Harvey, Alan Bates, Tom Courtenay and Albert Finney. Richard Harris did not manage to get accepted there. At that time he was also rejected by the Central School of Speech and Drama, the alma mater of Laurence Olivier, Julie Christie, Judi Dench and Vanessa Redgrave. Eventually, Harris undertook his studies at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA). The actor recalls that during the entrance exams to LAMDA, he met one of the most distinguished professors, to whom he introduced himself as a candidate and let himself get discovered by him. Apparently, this type of boldness and self-confidence made Harris get admitted. People were joking later that someone who acts so badly, but is still brave enough to stand in front of a jury, must succeed (BBC Programme *Parkinson* 1973).

[4] Only Rita Tushingham was not educated at any a distinguished theatre school. However, she had wanted to be an actress from an early age and so she attended the Shelagh Elliott-Clarke School. Thanks to the experience acquired there she got a job as an assistant stage manager at the Liverpool Playhouse, where also Richard Burton worked.

[5] As Piotr Skrzypczak pointed out, since the be-

ginning of the cinema, theatrical background made acting more difficult, but it could also be a starting point for new experiments: "Although it became evident that the set of skills acquired in the theatre rarely proved to be useful in the film, since its beginning actors and filmmakers did not resign from the skills tried out on stage. Theatrical acting was used for working out new methods." (Skrzypczak 2002, p. 11).

Harris says that at the time when he was a student at an art school, ugly people (like him) could only open the door for the attractive ones (BBC Programme *Parkinson* 1973). His words correspond to the change that took place in the British cinema and theatre in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, it was a time when only a moment before (that is right after the Second World War) an actor's task was to "present himself/herself well", have immaculate facial features and speak perfect English. Tom Courtenay said that when he was joining the Old Vic, one of the first conditions for being accepted was getting his teeth straightened (Courtenay 2000, p. 305–308). Today we can only speculate whether his crooked teeth would not have matched better his roles in the British New Wave films. Either way, a new type of theatre and cinema meant interest in different actors and a new type of acting. Original, uncommon faces were sought for, which no one would have regarded as handsome or Hollywood-style. In fact, only two of them made a career in America – Richard Burton, with his appearance meeting the Hollywood standards (he also was not called "pretty" – what was emphasised was his masculinity and the strength of expression; Cottrell, Cashin 1984, pp. 82–83), and Julie Christie, a universal beauty, rather than a typically British one. The star of *Darling* (1965, dir. John Schlesinger) is the least British and the most "classless" of all the actors of that time, and her background and look are definitely the most international.

All of the actors (including Tom Courtenay, Alan Bates and Richard Burton) emphasized that during their studies and stage debuts it was very important to them to practice their speech.⁶ A Welshman, Burton probably also struggled to attain proper pronunciation. As it was later recalled, he closely studied the role of John Gielgud who played Hamlet at the Haymarket. Burton not only tried to remember every gesture, but also the way of speaking to achieve higher flexibility, power of voice and a technique of managing it (Cottrell, Cashin, 1984, pp. 82–83).

Although Richard Burton devoted so much time to getting rid of his Welsh accent, it was the power of his voice reflecting his background that turned out to be one of the most important features of his talent. Since his early years, his voice had been subjected to numerous intensive trainings led by an outstanding teacher – Philip Burton (Richard later took his surname). Reportedly, Richard Burton practiced his voice every day in the shower by moaning, yelling, speaking as fast as possible, (but still clearly), but above all he tried to speak without raising his voice, in a deeply moving way. This last exercise should be understood as a natural talent which Burton received together with his background. As Viv Allen wrote, it was about *hwyl* [Welsh name – A.Ś.] – a special tone of voice, a minor-key cadence (many of Hamlet's soliloquies have it), thanks to which Burton was able to give his grand soliloquies the depth and power of a psalm (Cottrell, Cashin 1984, pp. 370).

[6] About Alanie Bates: Zucker 2001, p. 18.

The way of speaking and proper breathing were the basic tools, which all theatre school actors had to master. Tom Courtenay remembers that at his first school performances he was praised for his acting, but criticised for “not breathing”.⁷ It is interesting, taking into consideration the fact that later it was required from the New Wave actors to give up the correct speech and get back to their local and class habits. And the roles in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* or *Billy Liar* (1963, dir. John Schlesinger) show that Courtenay’s “not breathing” was an interesting feature of a rebel who never fully accepts the world.

Training at the most famous art schools paid off – it translated into first offers of work in theatres. Tom Courtenay, Vanessa Redgrave, Laurence Harvey, Judi Dench and Richard Burton (with his Hamlet at the Edinburgh festival) became the members of the Old Vic Company. Albert Finney and Vanessa Redgrave also worked for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Almost all New Wave actors performed on the West End then, and a play that gained most publicity was John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, directed by Tony Richardson at the Royal Court Theatre. (Alan Bates, who played Cliff, made his debut there). Osborne saw Tom Courtenay at the Edinburgh festival and he happily informed Tony Richardson that he found his Runner.⁸ Courtenay believed that his further work on *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* was more natural, because it was not “overrehearsed”, like the role in *Billy Liar*, first at the theatre and later in film. By the way, Courtenay took over the role of Billy from Albert Finney, who played it successfully in a performance directed by Lindsay Anderson. New commitments (including a role in Osborne’s *Luther*) made Finney give up the role. The new Billy – Courtenay resigned (with no major objections) from his commitments to the Old Vic (Courtenay 2000, pp. 337–338). As can be seen, the lives of the makers of the British New Wave have a lot of common points, but all of them lead from the theatre to the cinema.

Maybe this is why Courtenay and Burton always said that working at the theatre is superior to working on a film set. In his interview for the RADA, Courtenay said that it is the theatrical audience that an actor learns everything from.⁹ Burton, as a mature and celebrated actor, with an exaggeration that was typical of him, referred to his acting with disdain, and, according to him, the only role which was significant in his career was Corolianus at the Old Vic (Cottrell, Cashin 1984, p. 376).

Technique

Lessons taken by Tom Courtenay at the RADA were based on a realistic portrayal of characters, which was appreciated on the West

[7] Clifford Turner, a vice coach, criticized in this way Courtenay’s role in a school staging of *Faust*. Courtenay 2000, p. 299.

[8] This story is not confirmed, because in a different place Courtenay writes that, indeed, Richardson was encouraged by Osborne to hire him, but there is no

mention of the Edinburgh Festival, only an audition at the Royal Court Theatre. Courtenay 2000, p. 327.

[9] Interview for the RADA, <https://www.rada.ac.uk/watch-read-listen/listen/alumni-interviews?start=12> > [Accessed: 23.10.2015].

End. The actor emphasizes that he was too “jumpy”, to achieve the level of fully natural acting. He constantly tried to improve his skills by doing new exercises. With a big sentiment he recalled lessons with Peter Barkworth (an esteemed West End artist), who used various techniques of acting. Courtenay’s favourite method was “anticipation”: predicting another step, and therefore acting in a way which communicated the ending of the text with an actor’s body posture. If an actor delivered a long monologue, and only in the final line he/she turned directly to another character, he/she set his/her eyes and posture in the character’s direction much earlier. Another technique applied by Barkworth and, according to Courtenay, used by Humphrey Bogart, was “interrupted action”, allowing to interrupt the action for a moment to extend the suspension and anticipation (for example Bogart drinking whisky). A different, very logical Barkworth’s method was “look, move, speak”. Courtenay explains it on the example of a marriage proposal: first one looks at the fiancée, then he kneels down and says: “Will you marry me?”. The reversal of the order of these actions would make the whole scene illogical. Similarly, at the theatre, a look is followed by movement and in the last phase, by speech (Courtenay 2000, pp. 216–217).

Summing up Tom Courtenay’s work, Peter Barkworth wrote that he was talented, but his acting was uneasy, his limbs worked too intensively, and the actor gave too little thought to the performance itself (Courtenay 2000, p. 217). Paradoxically, it was this uneasiness that was later appreciated by the New Wave artists. Also Richard Burton was accused of being overactive (eventually, he got rid of this feature), particularly in his best-known role of Hamlet, staged with the Old Vic. The reviewers wrote that Burton’s Hamlet was too lively and, particularly according to one of the reviewers, resembled a rugby player (Cottrell, Cashin 1984, p. 143–144). With time, Burton’s technique changed dramatically, and his energy and liveliness were replaced by stillness. According to Kenneth Tynan, Burton finally managed to do something that only the greatest can do – “speaking with silence” (Cottrell, Cashin 1984, p. 370). John Neville points out that Burton became particularly expressive and emotional when he was almost still (Cottrell, Cashin 1984, p. 370). He hypnotized the audience with his eyes: it was enough for him to look at them to draw their attention and dominate them. Philip Burton had taught him that holding still might be more effective than acting, just like a whisper used in a proper way might be more intense than the loudest scream (Cottrell, Cashin 1984, p. 371). We can admire the elements of Burton’s technique in *Look Back in Anger* (1959, dir. Tony Richardson), where the actor screams out his frustration without a single gesture and without a wink. The mere power of his voice and the intensity of his stillness juxtaposed with the gentle face of Mary Ure (playing his wife) make a profound impression. It can be seen the most intensively in the long shots. According to most researchers, *Look Back in Anger* was dominated by close-ups, particularly of the actors’ faces. These general conclusions should be



Fig. 5. A still from *Look Back in Anger*. “Lightness” of Alison’s face and “darkness” of Jimmy’s.

also complemented by the information on the way the bodies of the actors were filmed. As early as in the first shot, Burton’s face is shown, with a wide range of feelings and emotions. The way the actor manages to convey the simultaneous love and hatred for his wife is a masterpiece of acting. Thanks to the intensive close-ups we can see distinctly different emotions that are tearing the main character apart. As Marlon Brando said: “[...] you must learn to keep your emotion simmering all day long, but never boiling over. If you give everything you’ve got in the long shot,

you will have less in the medium shot and, where you need it most, in the close shots. You must learn to pace yourself so that you don’t dry up when the close shot comes” (Lindsey 1994, p. 102). Burton learnt this lesson perfectly, displaying on his still face a full range of his acting skills.

There is, however, much more to the close-ups of faces of the characters. The faces of the married couple are presented in a different way. The shots showing the female character are “soft” and “blurred”. Definitely, this result is achieved by means of appropriate lighting, but also thanks to the flawless, shining face of the actress, whose blond hair additionally brighten the frame. When looking at the close-ups of her, the words of Béla Balázs come to one’s mind about the inner light glowing from an actor’s face. Alison’s face, exuding peacefulness, is often juxtaposed with Jimmy’s face, to whom the camera seem to be ruthless. The intensity of his feelings is also emphasised by the way of filming, highlighting with surgical precision his chiselled features, his jet-black hair and dark eyes.

The Method

When writing about his acting, Tom Courtenay claimed that he had never used the Method, which was made famous by the Actors Studio (at the RADA it was introduced as late as in the 1980s). Lindsay Anderson, who worked with Courtenay on the role in *Billy Liar* at the theatre, tried to convince him to exercise his imagination, but to no avail – he preferred to rely on the techniques he knew from school:

Though definitely of the New Wave, I had something of the old school in me. I didn’t like doing exercises. I liked to get my words off pat, then practice them. The better I knew them, the more I could make it seem that I was making them up. And my imagination responded to the security I derived from knowing the text. More the way a musician might approach a piece of music – learning it then not thinking about it, just doing it. (Courtenay 2000, p. 248)

Alan Bates, who appreciated the work of the actors from the Actors Studio, thought the same (“You can’t just suddenly be a Method

actor, except that I think all good actors are.” (Zucker 2001, p. 20), but based his skills on a specific understanding of the Method, which in his opinion meant relying mainly on one’s instinct, not on inspiration by anybody or anything:

You trust your instincts, you trust your responses, you trust your imagination. I mean, you have to be free. There are actors who are not, who haven’t found a way to be free and daring to follow their instincts fully. For that you need what in the old days would be called technique. (Zucker 2001, p. 20)

Looking at the traditions of the English film and theatre school, Bates observes that in the past actors used to create some kind of an image of a character they played and tried to maintain the same style throughout the filming or performing. He believes that it changed with the advent of the New Wave. The new type of acting started to be based on constant changes in the perception of a role and the attitude towards it, in which he sees his own way of understanding the Method (Zucker 2001, p. 21).

The only actor of the British New Wave who admitted using the Method (and who was associated with this type of acting) was Richard Harris. While there is no unambiguous evidence that he already used this technique when working on *This Sporting Life*, some of his comments and obvious resemblance (not only physical) to Marlon Brando, one of the best known adherents of the Method let us believe that as early as in the 1950s, Harris was a proponent of getting deeply into one’s role (“Harris made his professional stage debut in *The Quare Fellow* in 1956, earning praise from Method guru Lee Strasberg; Severo 2002).

Marlon Brando’s acting was inspired by the teachings of Stella Adler who based her technique on the Stanislavski System. The main differences between Lee Strasberg’s and Stella Adler’s techniques was more emphasis given by Adler to an actor’s imagination rather than emotions. She also rejected drawing on one’s own past emotions and experiences (they appeared in Stanislavski’s and Strasberg’s notes), in order to enter the world of a character in a deeper, psychoanalytical way. Slightly against the quote from “The New York Times”, I incline to believe that Harris was eager to use the Method, but its Stella Adler’s version. There is no clear evidence that Harris was fascinated by Strasberg, however he had a lot of admiration for the technique of Marlon Brando, whom he emulated.

Both actors’ acting is intense, expressive and aggressive and it is suitable for the role of Harris in *This Sporting Life* or earlier of Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Being fit, impulsive, speaking with clenched teeth¹⁰ and, ultimately, searching for a proper impulse to suspend the “intense acting” only to strike after a while with even greater force. All these features made the roles they created similar.

[10] In the case of the role in *This Sporting Life*, a specific way in which the main character speaks is addi-

tionally emphasized by the fact that Harris’s character underwent a complicated dental procedure.



Fig. 6–9. Richard Harris imitating Marlon Brando's acting style (BBC Programme *Parkinson*, 1973) (Harris next to the stills from *Julius Cesar* and *The Godfather*)

Richard Harris frequently recalled Brando's method, perfectly mimicking his acting. In the programme *Parkinson*, he said that Brando's acting style was the result of the fact that the actor did not remember his lines. They were written on a large board, and he tried to read them. According to the anecdotes told by Harris, this is where the characteristic contorted shape of Brando's body came from, as well as his grand, piercing look. Apparently, problems with memory contributed to developing the acting technique of long pauses, characteristic of Brando (BBC Programme *Parkinson*, 1973).

In the cited interview, Harris repeatedly emphasises that he admires the realism of Brando's acting, achieved by using the Method. It does not change the fact that the collaboration with Brando on the set of *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962, dir. Lewis Milestone, Carol Reed) became one of the difficult moments in Harris's career. The actor recalls that meeting Brando, whom he had admired and respected and whose acting he imitated, was utterly disappointing to him. The idol of his youth proved to be an egoist focused on his career, more involved in the fight with the directors of the studio than in creative acting. It was a bitter moment of disillusionment connected with Brando, whose roles in *The Men* and *On the Waterfront* had been the reasons why Harris had decided to become an actor (Sheridan, Galvin 2014, p. 70).

The conclusion of the discussion on the Method based on the Stanislavski system is that depending on the way of interpreting his views, one could apply a very deep entering into a role, which resembled the process of psychoanalysis (present more in Strasberg's interpretation) and behavioural practice of the role, based on imagination (in accordance with Stella Adler's ideas)¹¹. Trying to indicate a proper context for the British New Wave cinema, the latter theory would be definitely closer.

Nouvelle vague

In an interview for "Cahier du Cinema", Jeanne Moreau said that appearing in a film was not acting, but a way of life¹². These words perfectly apply to the actors of the British New Wave, who, thanks to the films from the late 1950s and the early 1960s, started playing the

[11] This difference is vividly described by Marlon Brando: "Method acting" was a term popularized, bastardized and misused by Lee Strasberg, a man for whom I had little respect, and therefore I hesitate to use it. What Stella taught her students was how to discover the nature of their own emotional mechanics

and therefore those of others. She taught me to be real and not to try to act out an emotion I didn't personally experience during a performance." Lindsey 1994, p.45.

[12] As cited in: Vincendeau 2000, p. 123.

characters who accurately reflected their lifestyles. (passions, background, relations).

There are a few common elements which connected the *nouvelle vague* acting and the British New Wave acting. First of all, rejecting tradition, which also in the case of the acting of the 1940s and 1950s seemed burdensome and artificial. Although in the British New Wave cinema appear famous and esteemed actors (such as Laurence Olivier, Laurence Harvey, or Dirk Bogarde), but most actors are the new and characteristic faces. In the case of the French and British New Wave, aware avoidance of stars had at least a few reasons. Firstly, directors simply could not afford to pay famous and professional actors. Secondly, film makers did not want to work under the pressure of the stars system (their glamour and popularity and the tenets of the New Wave: youth, modernity and spontaneity were mutually exclusive). Thirdly, the newly discovered faces of little known actors were promoted (in the case of the French Cinema also amateurs) who later became appreciated artists and even stars¹³. In the case of the British cinema, the status of “stars” in a Hollywood style probably applies most to Richard Burton and Julie Christie. With her roles, the actress consolidated a new model of emancipated femininity, which became the symbol of the swinging London of the 1960s.

As pointed out by researchers, the acting of the *nouvelle vague* actors was largely based on behaviour, gesture and appearance, not psychology (Vincendeau 2000, p. 117). One of the main features of this acting was anti-professionalism (Vincendeau 2000, p. 117), which gave countless opportunities for improvisation (Vincendeau 2000, p. 117). The mentioned characteristics of *nouvelle vague* relate partly to the situation of the British New Wave cinema. Also in Great Britain a construction of a character which did not get too deeply into his/her mind was valued¹⁴. Characteristically, a part of the Angry Young Men literature was written in the first person, which was often disregarded by the film makers, so the construction of the character was more behavioural than psychological.

It cannot be stated, though, that the actors of the British New Wave were selected from amateurs or non-professionals. Accidental discoveries of great film stars, such as Jean-Paul Belmondo, did not happen. In the case of the British cinema, there will be no interesting anecdotes and stories about improvising on set, which frequently appear in the case of the French cinema. However, in the cinema of the British New Wave, improvisation is mentioned. During a meeting with an audience, Rita Tushingham suggested that most dialogues in *The Leathers Boys* were made on set. Also Alan Bates (Zucker 2001, p. 22) mentioned improvising, and Tom Courtenay recalled the collaboration with Tony Richardson:

[13] Loosely inspired by Chris Darke's article, *The French New Wave*.

[14] It must not be confused with the techniques of

“entering a role”. An actor could intensely “feel” the played character, but the result of the construction of the character remained behavioural.

He gave me the impression that he was letting me do whatever I wanted, even sometimes asking me to *say* whatever I wanted. All very '*cinéma vérité*', and not so technically demanding as filming usually would have been before the New Wave. Tony made me feel very much the man of the moment. And I liked that. (Courtenay 2000, p. 365)

Both in *nouvelle vague* and in the British New Wave, elements of fashion appeared, related to some kind of nonchalance of lifestyle and allowed the actors to create the image of the characters in accordance with the modern trends. Hence the similarities of the actors' style of clothes and image.



Fig. 10–12. 1st still: *Breathless*; 2nd and 3rd: *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*

Also in this case one cannot exaggerate with tracing the similarities. Yes, Colin from *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* going for a ride looks like Michel from *Breathless* (1960, dir. Jean-Luc Godard), and Tolen from *The Knack... and How to Get It* (1965, dir. Richard Lester) resembles the young criminal from *Elevator to the Gallows* (1958, dir. Louis Malle), but these similarities are rather minor, a wink given by the directors living in the world of inspirations and quotes. It is noteworthy that the young actors look very similar in films, because fashion of that time was made uniform (probably for the first time to such an extent). Young people from the US, France or Britain started looking quite similar.

In the 1950s, in Great Britain the subculture of Teddy Boys was prevalent. Its members came from the lower social classes, but they were eager to spend their hard-earned money on long velvet coats, patterned vests and shirts with large collars. Boys put brillantine on their medium-length hair and girls (Teds) wore their hair in American-style pony tails. What ruled in the swinging London of the 1960s were the miniskirt, the Mods subculture, bushy hair or cut student-style or Beatles-style (like in *Billy Liar*), or extravagant hairdos. Young people liked to shock with their provocative, ostentatious look, full of bright colours. They supported the ideas related to sexual revolution (like the characters played by Julie Christie or those from *The Knack... and How to Get It*). The nonchalance of acting was paired with fashion which described a character's personality.

* * *

The period of the British New Wave (despite numerous and noticeable similarities, for example in relation to *nouvelle vague*) remains an original period, also in terms of the applied acting techniques. British cinema of the late 1950s and early 1960s focused on the character – his frowning forehead (expressing defiance), smirk (ironically sneering at reality), or a smile (accompanying the rare moments of freedom). Each of the faces of the British New Wave tells a story; each gesture of an actor is supported by real, life experience. The everlasting value of this cinema are the faces of Tom Courtenay, Albert Finney, Rita Tushingham, Judi Dench, Alan Bates, Rachel Roberts, Richard Harris, Richard Burton, Oliver Reed. With time, the social background and the local specificity depicted in the cinema of the New Wave, fade away. The contemporary viewer is no longer interested in the social class divisions or the problems of the post-war society. However, what is still striking is the exceptionally intense acting as a part of intriguing filmmaker's workshop solutions which were the essence of New Wave cinema. It seems that for the first time in the history of film group of well educated theatrical actors faced the necessity to combine the traditional actor's tools with the roughness of the colloquial language of the street. Perhaps their acting, combining the element of the element of the street with the classics of the British theatres was insightfully encapsulated by Mike Leigh's words (said much later) that only professional actors look and sound convincingly on the screen, and amateurs always prove to be artificial.

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