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Radio On and British Art Cinema

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Radio On (1979) occupies an unusual position in modern British cinema. Writing upon its release, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith argued that it was sufficiently out of place within late 1970s British film culture to be considered ‘a film without a cinema’ (1979: 30). The debut of former *Time Out* film critic, Christopher Petit, *Radio On* is an existential road movie littered with self-conscious cinematic allusions, particularly to the work of Wim Wenders, who endorsed it and acted as associate producer. As a result of this all-too-clearly-acknowledged debt, many contemporary reviews of the film seemed to revolve around what Rod Stoneman and Caroline Thompson described as ‘a depressingly predictable permutation of a restricted set of components’ (1981: 19) and dismissed it as ersatz New German Cinema in English. However, such reviews failed to realise that *Radio On* brought what John Pym called an ‘authentic and firmly individual British tone’ (1979: 234) to the road movie genre and began to hint at what a British art film might look like.

Numerous critics, including Alan Lovell (1969, 1997), Peter Wollen (1993), Eric Hedling (1997) and John Hill (2000), have commented that British cinema did not have an indigenous equivalent to the modernist European art cinema of countries such as France, Italy and Germany in the 1960s and 1970s. Several key British art films of the time, such as Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow Up* (1966) and Roman Polanski’s *Cul-de-Sac* (1965) were made by visiting European directors, and only the work of a handful of British and British-based directors—Lindsay Anderson, Joseph Losey, Nicolas Roeg and Ken Russell—made works which were comparable to those of their European contemporaries. However, the same critics agree that in the early 1980s it became, for a while at least, ‘much easier to identify a recognisably British art cinema and see it as a significant strand

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of British and, indeed, European filmmaking' (Hill 2000: 18). This British art cinema, which Wollen dubbed the 'Last New Wave' (1993 41–2), is generally associated with the work of two key figures, Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway. Others, such as Hill, have also seen it as also encompassing the work of film-makers such as Bill Douglas, Terence Davies, Sally Potter, the early films of Neil Jordan and those of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh (Hill 2000: 24).

There is, however, a danger of casting the net too wide. Any definition of art cinema which manages to encompass the experimental sensibilities of Jarman and Greenaway alongside the more commercially orientated films of Jordan and the social realism of Loach and Leigh could only be broad at best. Some commentators, such as David Bordwell, have noted that definitions of art cinema, including his own, first set out in 1979 in the article 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice' and later expanded in *Narration and the Fiction Film* (1985), court the criticism that 'the creators of such films are too inherently different to be lumped together'. However, Bordwell maintains that 'the overall *functions* of style and theme remain remarkably constant . . . as a whole [and] we can usefully consider the "art cinema" as a distinct mode of film practice, [with] a set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures' (2002: 94–5) which separate it from both classical narrative cinema and the avant-garde. For Bordwell, art cinema can be characterised not only by its rejection of classical narrative forms, which often results in art films having 'open', unresolved endings and ambiguously motivated characters, but also by its concentration on themes such as contemporary alienation, an emphasis on realism (either subjective or objective) and the authorial expression of auteur directors.

The limitations of this definition are clear. In particular, some films and film-makers are likely to conform to the above criteria more readily than others. To use a few of Bordwell's own examples (1985: 205), Antonioni's *L'éclisse* (1962) fits the model far more precisely than either Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (1945) or François Truffaut's *The Green Room* (1978). Similarly, Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982) is far closer to an art film in Bordwell's sense than is, say, Loach's *Riff-Raff* (1991).

Steve Neale, perhaps more generally but nevertheless accurately, describes art cinema as an 'institution', dependent upon specific 'modes and circuits of production, distribution and exhibition' as well as upon relationships with the state (1981: 13). Regarded in this way, it becomes easier to reconcile the inclusion of the almost antithetical styles of Greenaway and Loach under the same banner, for both

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film-makers compete for backing from the same mainly European, state-run funding bodies and their films are generally distributed to the same 'art-house' cinemas. However, this does not mean that we should discount Bordwell's definition. On the contrary, despite its flaws and generalisations it remains a pivotal attempt to bring together the various national movements and new waves that made postwar European cinema so fertile. Furthermore, when one encounters a film which conforms almost exactly to Bordwell's definition of art cinema, it can be an invaluable way of discerning just what it is that sets such a work apart from the majority of classical narrative films. It will be the contention of this article that *Radio On* is precisely such a film.

Although he is unlikely to have read Bordwell's original article before writing *Radio On*, Petit's use of what Bordwell calls 'art cinema narration' (1985: 205) seems altogether conscious. The film's impassive hero, episodic narrative, numerous ambiguities and unresolved ending, as well as its black-and-white cinematography and notably long takes, clearly distinguish it as an art film in the European mode of Wenders and other auteurs whose work was championed in *Time Out* and *Sight and Sound*. Publications such as these, which helped set the trends and tastes among 'serious' British filmgoers, tended to link art cinema to 'particular aesthetic and industrial developments in Europe during the post-war period... the label "art" serving to differentiate European production by recourse to a notion of cultural value... from populist American entertainment' (Petrie 2000: 149). Indeed, a quick look at the reviews which Petit wrote for *Time Out* clearly demonstrates both his own tastes and that of the publication as a whole. He praises Henri-George Cluzot's *Les diaboliques* (1954), Jean-Pierre Melville's *Les enfants terribles* (1949) and *L'armée des ombres/Army in the Shadows* (1968) and Godard's *Bande à part* (1964) but has little time for *The Exorcist* (1973). The American films which he does admire are films noirs such as *D.O.A.* (1949) and works by the likes of Don Siegel, Robert Aldrich, Sam Peckinpah and Monte Hellman, and his reviews betray clear auteurist sympathies, comparing the works under scrutiny with the directors' previous films. In terms of British cinema Petit seems to have agreed with *Time Out* colleagues such as Geoff Andrew (1989: 377) and Chris Peachment (1989: 339) and film-makers such as Derek Jarman who thought Michael Powell the only British director 'whose work is in the first rank' (Jarman 1984: 216). Otherwise, he has little positive to say and even complained in an unpublished interview that there is 'no real tradition of British cinema'. He is also particularly critical of British cinema's attempts to appeal to

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the American market. For example, he writes that Ridley Scott's debut, *The Duellists* (1977) is

A curious mixture. This British film, based on a Conrad story, received heavy US financial backing and stars two Americans conspicuously at odds with their British supporting cast... The American influences further dislocate a script that delivers little observation, psychological or social, on their running feud... Scott, a name in TV commercials making his first feature, brings little overall thrust, working instead in short bursts. (Petit 1989a: 169)

The above comments make Petit's deliberate aping of Wenders all the more understandable. In the perceived absence of anything to admire in his own native cinema, and given his disdain for film-makers trying to make British Hollywood movies, Petit looked to continental European art cinema for inspiration.

Petit's timing was fortunate for several reasons. Earlier in the decade, material and strategic changes had brought a considerable increase in the financial resources of the British Film Institute Production Board, the film's initial backer. Indeed, the Board's income grew from £31,853 in the financial year 1970–1 to £86,8481 in 1971–2, and to £121,000 in 1975–6 (Ellis 1977: 64). This allowed the Board, then under Mamoun Hassan, to consider funding every area of independent production to some degree. For the first time, then, the Board had the option to fund narrative feature films, albeit on a very low budget, in addition to the experimental films, documentaries and narrative shorts which they had previously specialised in supporting. Peter Sainsbury, Hassan's successor, noted that with this new-found possibility came increasing ambition and a 'radical shift of policy was sanctioned: it became the avowed intention to... establish a British Art Cinema based on narrative feature forms' (1977: 11). This initiative produced several notable British films, including Bill Douglas' trilogy, *My Childhood* (1973), *My Ain Folk* (1974) and *My Way Home* (1978), Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo's *Winstanley* (1972) and Horace Ové's *Pressure* (1974), which perhaps are art films only by virtue of their production and distribution rather than on account of any particular formal qualities in the works themselves. *Radio On*, however, is an art film by virtue of both its production and distribution *and* its formal qualities, which set it apart from almost every other British film of the period.

Although the budget was only £80,000, *Radio On* was the most costly feature the Production Board had yet proposed to support. The decision to back it was perhaps influenced by the recent success

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of British independent films such as Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976) and *Jubilee* (1978) and by the fact that the script, with its numerous contemporary cultural allusions, seemed to have more widespread commercial potential than many of the Board's previous projects. However, it was still too expensive for the Board to finance alone and an 'unprecedented, uncharacteristic and very small' (Sainsbury 1981: 50) loan from the National Film Finance Corporation, then newly under Hassan, was required. It also prompted Petit to approach Wenders, who thought that the script contained enough Anglo-German elements to satisfy the co-production treaty requirements and agreed that his production company, *Road Movies Filmproduktion*, would provide half the film's budget. In addition to this, he also loaned Petit his regular cameraman, Martin Schäfer, and leading lady, Lisa Kreuzer. And while *Radio On* perhaps marked a risky change in direction for the Production Board, it in many ways looks forward to the feature-length art films which it would co-fund in the following decade, such as Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986) and Davies' *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988), as well as to the European co-productions which would become commonplace in British independent and art cinema in the 1980s and 1990s.

Philip French noted in the *Observer*, 25 November 1979, that *Radio On* 'is a picture made by a cineaste for cinephiles, the work of a man with a real feeling for film'. Like Truffaut, Godard and Wenders before him, Petit's film reviews often draw attention to matters of style and technique. For example, he praises Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974) as a 'slow, almost meditative film [made] out of carefully composed images' (Petit 1989b: 77), while he sees the 'restless hand-held camera... with enough whip-pans to defeat the most determined self-flagellant' as 'the main disadvantage' of D. A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* (1967) (Petit 1989c: 162–3). The aesthetic preferences which Petit expresses above account for the look of *Radio On*, with its careful compositions and smooth camerawork. Furthermore, they begin to explain why it, like *Les quatre cents coups/The 400 Blows* (1959) is an unusually confident debut feature with a notable authorial voice already present.

The film begins with a steady four-minute hand-held point-of-view shot with David Bowie's song 'Heroes', and his German-language version 'Helden', on the soundtrack. The shot begins at the foot of a staircase and moves upwards towards a flat with an already open front door. There, a slight pan to the left reveals a man lying dead in his bath. The camera does not enter the bathroom, however, and begins to prowl around for several minutes, as if looking for something. This

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shot establishes not only the germ of the film's plot but also sets its visual and aural qualities. Indeed, as the title implies, music plays a central part in *Radio On*. The protagonist, Robert B., is a disc jockey by profession. The opening credits privilege the film's music above all else, listing the title of every song heard in the movie, only the names of three leading cast members and none of the crew. The plot synopsis provided by the BFI similarly privileges the film's music:

A man lies dead, from cause or causes unknown, in the bath while David Bowie sings 'Heroes/Helden' on the radio. The dead man's brother, Robert, drives from another city: a journey, filmed in black and white, through an English landscape. 'Uranium' from Kraftwerk plays in an empty car. 'Sweet Gene Vincent' by Ian Dury comes through cheap loudspeakers in a biscuit factory. Driving out of the city, David Bowie's 'Always Crashing In The Same Car' and Kraftwerk's 'Radioactivity' play on the radio, and 'Whole Wide World' by Wreckless Eric on a juke box in a pub on the road. No one says much until a soldier talks for a long time about his reasons for deserting. A mechanic in a garage is obsessed with Eddie Cochran. In the city where the man has died, a German woman looks for her daughter, who has disappeared. In the brother's flat lives another woman. The weather always looks cold and changeable. On the radio, The Rumour sing 'Frozen Years'; on another pub juke box Lene Lovich sings 'Lucky Number'; and 'Satisfaction' from Devo plays inside the car while it stands in a car wash. In the end, Robert, with nothing resolved, plays himself out of the film with 'Ohm Sweet Ohm' from Kraftwerk and takes a train going anywhere. (Stoneman and Thompson 1980: 19)

However, Petit's use of music goes far beyond the mere inclusion of recent popular songs for commercial purposes; indeed, as the above summary shows, the music may well be the key organising principal of the work. In this way, *Radio On* stands alongside Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1964) and Wenders' own road movies as one of the few films to use popular music intelligently to complement or counterpoint the action.

This is apparent from the start through the use of 'Heroes/Helden'. The bilingual track at once stresses the influence of German cinema on the film, the international nature of the production and the commercial necessity to appeal to the German market. The song has another purpose, however, and that is to link the dead man to his brother, the protagonist, who of course 'proves to be less than heroic' (Nowell-Smith 1979: 30). When the opening shot finally ends the song acts as a sound bridge between their respective locations: Bristol and London, where the tickertape outside the Hippodrome

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flashes the film's title. There is then a cut to the interior of a car parked outside. The level of the music changes to indicate that it is coming from the speakers of the car radio, which is suddenly turned off. After six minutes of loud music, the silence is conspicuous. The man in the car picks up an envelope addressed to Robert B. In it are three cassette tapes by Kraftwerk and a letter simply saying 'Happy Birthday, Brother'. He selects one of the tapes, *Radioactivity*, and places it in his cassette player. These three tapes relate back to a moment in the opening shot when the camera, prowling the flat, pans across the contents of a cluttered desk and closes in on a handwritten quotation: 'We are the children of Fritz Lang and Wernher von Braun. We are the link between the '20s and the '80s. All change in society passes through a sympathetic collaboration with tape recorders, synthesisers and telephones. Our reality is an electronic reality.' This quotation is the mission statement, if you will, for Kraftwerk (Poschardt 2004) and serves not only to re-emphasise the central role of music in the film, but also the importance of technology, although, as I will show below, interactions between man and machine in *Radio On* are often less than sympathetic.

The reference to Lang is important. Stylistically, the film, with its shadowy images and stark black-and-white photography, recalls both the heyday of German expressionist cinema in the 1920s and 1930s and American film noir of the 1940s and 1950s, both of which can be typified by the work of Lang in films such as *M* (1931) and *The Big Heat* (1953). This, coupled with the fact that the opening shot also recalls the pre-credit sequence of Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), in which the film-obsessed protagonist records himself murdering a prostitute with a hand-held camera, gives the audience the impression that they are watching some sort of crime story. This is further compounded, and subtly subverted, by the presence of a copy of Patricia Highsmith's thriller, *Ripley's Game*, on the dead man's table. This is also, of course, a reference to Wenders' recently completed film version of the same novel, *Der amerikanische Freund/The American Friend* (1977). However, this is not merely an in-joke; it is also a clue for the observant viewer that *Radio On* might also subvert one's expectations of a thriller. While *The American Friend* retains the basic narrative of Highsmith's novel, in which her hero, the charming but malevolent Tom Ripley, draws a terminally ill family man into a life as an underworld assassin, Wenders' adaptation is more of a character-based study of male friendship than it is a thriller. Like *The American Friend* or *Alphaville* (1965), *Radio On* will borrow the look of film noir

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and use the trappings of a thriller to say something more profound. Petit argues that taken one way:

Radio On functions as a traditional mystery story . . . Clues can be picked up during the unfolding of the 'plot', a journey between two English cities taken by the brother of the dead man, ostensibly to discover the cause of death. [However,] within this framework the narrative operates on another level: as an examination of the hero/anti-hero in cinema at the end of the 1970s. (1981: 20)

Petit's film also shares with those of Wenders and Godard an enigmatic, ambiguous quality which is, according to Bordwell, a 'dominant principle' (2008: 156) of art cinema. For instance, the opening sequence does not reveal where the film is set nor the identity of the man in the bath, nor does it make it explicit that he is dead. Such ambiguities continue throughout the film, which is full of unresolved narrative arcs and unanswered questions.

At this point I wish to shift attention away from Petit's borrowings from Wenders and continental art cinema to another, less frequently noticed, source of inspiration for the film, namely Mike Hodges' 1971 British gangster film *Get Carter*. Although Peter Bradshaw in the *Guardian*, 8 October 2004, did detect a 'a weirdly transformed sense memory' of Hodges' film when reviewing *Radio On* on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary reissue, the majority of Petit's critics have overlooked the fact that the two films, at least at first, feature remarkably similar plots. Petit was also unquestionably familiar with Hodges' film; he had reviewed it for *Time Out*, praising it as 'one of the very few British films of the period to exploit its setting to its advantage' (Petit 1989d: 226). Both films tell the story of a man leaving London to find answers about the mysterious death of his brother who, in each, was in some way connected to a local pornography ring. An examination of the way in which these two films utilise the same narrative arc can ultimately be very useful in illustrating the essential differences in the handling of plot, character, theme and even *mise-en-scène* between mainstream and art cinema.

One of the major differences between the two films lies in the ways in which their stories are told. In *Get Carter*, Jack Carter's journey from London is covered in the short credit sequence, after which the action is located in Newcastle, where he immediately begins to investigate his brother's death. However, as Terry Curtis-Fox has noted, Petit is not crafting a thriller, but rather, 'gives us hints of a thriller in the first five minutes . . . But, as in mid-career Godard, who is as important to Petit as Wenders, this melodramatic plot is merely an excuse' to examine

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other things (1980: 25). While the film maintains at least the hints of being a thriller for its first half, rather than eliminating them after five minutes, the journey to Bristol is the film's real story and the investigation into the brother's death is little more than a red herring: a plot device needed to provide a reason for the journey. Bordwell notes that while

the characters of the classical narrative have clear-cut traits and objectives, the characters of the art cinema lack defined desires and goals... Hence a certain drifting episodic quality to the art film's narrative. Characters may wander out and never reappear; events may lead to nothing. (2008: 153)

This generic description of characters and narratives in art cinema could be applied specifically to *Radio On*, and perhaps to the road movie form in general. If, as Bordwell suggests, it is essential that the organisational scheme of art films is 'sufficiently loose in its causation as to permit characters to express and explain their psychological states' (ibid.: 153) the road movie, a film about a journey, which is by nature episodic, provides an ideal structure for an art film.

Carter and Robert begin their stories with exactly the same motivation and goal, and continue, or fail to continue, on that course in a manner typical of their respective cinematic milieus. If characters in classical narrative cinema typically 'have clear-cut traits and objectives' (Bordwell 2008: 153) and behave in a bold and decisive manner, then Carter is a textbook example of such a character. He begins the film determined to find out why his brother died and who was responsible. This done, his goal immediately changes to that of avenging his brother's death. The point at which his goal changes can be located at a precise moment in the film, when Carter, having just slept with Anna, the girlfriend of the local mob boss, projects a pornographic film onto the bedroom wall as she takes a bath. The film, *Teacher's Pet*, features a young girl being seduced by her female teacher, played by Anna, who then has sex with an older man. As he continues to watch, his amusement turns to disbelief and finally he silently cries as the camera cuts to a close-up of the young girl, who is Carter's niece. It is not long before Carter has deduced that his brother had also seen the film and threatened those responsible for producing it, after which he was duly murdered. Carter's original motivation—to discover the reason for his brother's death—changes and becomes even stronger and more clearly defined as he immediately starts on his brutal but ultimately self-destructive quest for revenge.

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This scene in the bedroom is quoted directly in *Radio On*. In the relevant sequence, Robert watches a collection of slides projected onto the bedroom wall, many of which feature images of hardcore pornography. An essential distinction can be found in the reactions and revelations experienced by the two male characters: Carter is outraged and lashes out violently at Anna; Robert, however, is conspicuously passive. These images neither disturb nor arouse him in any way. The scene in *Get Carter* is the moment of revelation in which Carter understands why his brother was killed. However, similar images in *Radio On* offer Robert no such revelation. They do not reveal, as he had hoped, the ultimate reason for his brother's death or who might have killed him. He does not even get to know which side his brother was on in the local pornography war mentioned in several radio broadcasts during the film.

This passivity signals the essential difference between *Radio On* and *Get Carter*, and between the narrative and characters of classical filmmaking and art cinema. In *Get Carter* this scene escalates the film into an even more violent and thrilling third act, whereas in *Radio On*, paradoxically, it puts an end to its thriller aspects—and indeed to the entire plot—and with these goes all the character motivation which Robert had. From this point on, Robert will begin to wander aimlessly, unsure of where to go and what to do. In this way, Petit has made his character conform precisely to Bordwell's definition of the art film central character. Petit also does little, in conventional terms, to elicit sympathy for or even interest in his protagonist, and Robert lacks both the motivation and careful characterisation of a mainstream equivalent such as Jack Carter. Indeed, while Carter risks becoming one of the more amoral and repugnant protagonists in British cinema, a misogynist monster who kills both men and women without remorse, he nevertheless manages to retain a certain amount of sympathy from the audience. Much of this was due to Caine's performance, which avoids the temptation of playing Carter as an existential loner. Rather, as Carter's reading of Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* during the opening train journey might indicate, Caine creates a more simple and old-fashioned character who, like Chandler's Philip Marlowe, is cynical, charming, pragmatic and in possession of a playful sense of humour. Carter has no time for introspection and angst, and any sense of alienation in the film comes not from within his character but from the world around him, one that sees him as an anachronistic and dangerous figure, more at home in the murderous world of the Krays and the Richardsons in 1960s London than in the increasingly 'legitimate' gangland of the 1970s, where gangsters have wallets full of credit cards and own country estates.

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Robert, on the other hand, does little that would enable an audience to identify or sympathise with him. He almost never laughs, although he does enjoy a short, rather obscure, joke with the garage attendant (played by Sting) over the fact that the first policeman at the scene of Eddie Cochran's fatal car crash had the name Dave Dee—'as in Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick and Shit' (a joke which was impossible for the film's German distributors to translate). Furthermore, unlike the voracious Carter, Robert seems largely uninterested in sex. Perhaps strangely for a film that involves, however peripherally, a pornography ring, this is a condition which he seems to share with the other characters. His relationship with his girlfriend is entirely cold; there is no sense of intimacy between them but, rather, a familiarity which has long since turned into contempt, and his leaving for Bristol marks the end of their relationship. In Bristol Robert encounters two German women, Ingrid (Lisa Kreuzer), who is searching for her daughter, and her friend, who does not speak English and, according to Ingrid, hates men. This emphasises not only the frigidity of Robert's world, but also the simple inability of the people in it to communicate at all, as Robert tells Ingrid that there is no word in English for a woman who hates men, only one for a man who hates women. Thus one of the few sincere attempts in the film to voice an emotion is hindered by the inadequacies of language. At this point it becomes apparent that the most significant male–female relationship in the film, that which forms between Robert and Ingrid, will not be a satisfactory one as, within moments of meeting, the limits of communication between the two are established. Later in the film, Robert makes an inept attempt to seduce Ingrid by reading the German translations of 'I'd like a double room' and 'I will see you home' from her German-to-English phrase book, only to have Ingrid tell him, just before their final parting: 'Last night I thought we would sleep together, but now I know we won't.' However, she is not talking about sex alone, but rather about the couple's inability to make any real connection, and while the two are unquestionably drawn to one another, this is ultimately through a sense of mutual loneliness and despair rather than through any real attraction or compatibility.

Petit visualises this in one of the most celebrated shots of the film. After talking together for some time in the Grosvenor hotel about their respective problems, Ingrid's missing daughter and Robert's own confusion, the camera cuts to an exterior shot of the hotel taken from the Victoria Street flyover. Although the two are in the same room, they are framed in separate windows looking down on the city in different directions, as if unaware of the other's presence. It is a highly potent image of urban isolation. However, the shot raises an important

question which relates to the conventional grammar of cinema. While cutting to an exterior shot at this point is neither an unconventional nor a cinematically ungrammatical move, the fact that it is taken from a moving car implies that it is a shot taken from someone's perspective. But whose perspective it is remains ambiguous.

The most likely explanation is that it came from the perspective of the director himself, who simply could not resist including the Edward Hopper-like image in a film already full of moments where 'the movement of the camera... is the only attributable subject of the shot' (Nowell-Smith 1979: 30). However, as in the opening *plan séquence*, which is also ambiguous in its perspective, the actual identity of the person looking is ultimately unimportant. What is important, however, is the purpose of the shot, which is at least twofold. On a strictly aesthetic level, this is part of what Chris Auty, Petit's former *Time Out* colleague, has called Petit's 'rare, almost eerie, attempt at mythic British cinema' (1989: 486), which tries to turn the cinematically underrepresented factories, motorways, railway lines and countryside in between Camden and Britsol into 'a landscape of the imagination' (Pym 1979: 234).

But additionally, this shot from the flyover serves to distance the viewer from what little action and human interaction is happening in the hotel room by implying its meaninglessness to any 'viewer' who happens to be passing at the time. Petit's *mise-en-scène* thus questions the very nature of the conventional cinematic experience, in which the viewer comes to identify and empathise with the characters on display. Rather, Petit keeps the viewer at an emotional distance from them. While he does not entirely avoid the use of close-ups, characters are often framed in medium-long shots and long shots or through windows and windscreens in order to keep the viewer at a distance from them. Furthermore, the film contains almost no examples of the over-the-shoulder shot/reverse shot technique conventionally used to film conversations. Instead, Petit cuts between individual shots of actors talking to one another. This way the characters are isolated and are rarely or never seen to share the same space or to physically interact.

Petit himself has noted that '*Radio On* is about the absence of a protagonist' (1981: 20). Robert is never seen to grieve for his brother in a conventional way. Even Carter, in a rare moment of tenderness, places a white death shroud over his brother's face and cries. The closest Robert comes to this is when he studies a slide of a recent picture of his brother. After a while he approaches the wall and begins to touch the image, before curling up in the corner, next to the projector. But the image of the two brothers facing each other in profile is not

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so much touching as bleak. Unlike Carter, who can touch the hands and face of his sibling one last time, Robert is left with only a two-dimensional, electronically generated copy of his brother on the wall. Thus the viewer is less likely to find any emotion in this scene than to contemplate, as the camera does, the striking resemblance between the two brothers. As Nowell-Smith notes (1979: 32), Robert is essentially a facsimile copy of his brother, just as the image of his brother on the wall is a facsimile of a once living being. Furthermore, the figure of the dead brother on the wall, who is visible but intangible, recognisable as a human form but incapable of human feelings, mirrors Robert's own internally dead state.

The sense of alienation in *Radio On* is almost total. The characters are alienated from each other, and the viewer is in turn alienated from the characters and the action. It is perhaps in this way that the film most obviously differs from the work of Wenders. While the majority of Wenders' films centre on the existential conflicts of lonely (mostly male) protagonists who feel disillusioned with and alienated from society, his work still exudes a human warmth, and, as the narratives of many of his films illustrate, a faith in the possibility of redemption and renewal through human relationships. For instance, Rüdiger, the disillusioned photographer in *Alice in den Städten/Alice in the Cities* (1974), and Travis, the hero of *Paris, Texas* (1984), find a new sense of purpose and lease of life through their relationship with children. Similarly, the two drifters in *Im Lauf der Zeit/Kings of the Road* (1976) forge a close but unspoken bond with one another before parting ways, and Daniel, the melancholy angel in *Der Himmel über Berlin/Wings of Desire* (1987), is inspired by love to return to Earth as a mortal. However, Robert's failed attempt to seduce Ingrid in *Radio On* seems like a direct inversion of the scene in *Alice in the Cities* where Kreuzer's character, Lisa, asks Rüdiger if they can 'sleep together, but not make love'. In Wenders' film the two characters, both Germans drifting through America, have been united by their common language and reach out to each other for a brief moment of warmth and companionship.

In Petit's film, however, this would be unthinkable. Certainly, the lone hero and his existential doubts are equally to the fore, as is a sense of disillusionment and alienation, but there is no possibility of redemption or transcendence. *Radio On* is one of the bleakest visions in British cinema and it occupies a space far closer to the work of Antonioni than that of Wenders. Indeed, Robert's quest for information about the death of his brother, like the search for Anna in *L'avventura*, is ultimately abandoned well before the end of the film.

However, one could argue that the sense of alienation in *Radio On* is even more deep-rooted than in the work of Antonioni. While in the world of *L'avventura* or *Blow Up* the sense of angst cannot be escaped, one can fool oneself into thinking that it can be alleviated, at least temporarily, through the hedonistic pursuit of pleasures. However, there is not even the possibility of such thrills in Petit's universe.

The only escape and alleviation comes in the form of music, which serves not only to emphasise Robert's alienation but also supplies, as Robert Canby noted in the *New York Times*, 13 April 1980, 'the emotions which he is no longer capable of feeling'. A good example of this is the scene in the roadside pub which immediately precedes Robert's encounter with the Scottish deserter. Petit films this scene in a single two-and-a-half minute take, beginning with a medium shot of a record, 'Whole Wide World' by Wreckless Eric, falling into place on a juke box. The camera slowly tracks back to reveal Robert moving slowly back to the bar, where he drinks a pint of beer silently. There is no spoken dialogue in this scene, or any other kind of communication between the people in the pub. Instead the only words are provided by the song, which contrasts dreamed-of tropical beaches and drab, rain-soaked reality. The singer asks: 'Why am I hanging around in the rain out here / Trying to pick up a girl? / Why are my eyes filling up with these lonely tears / When there're girls all over the world?' The song thus talks of wasted opportunities and dreams left unfulfilled, and Robert, like the singer, seems miserable in his drab surroundings, although he is equally unable to leave them.

Another notable music-driven sequence is that in which the garage attendant, played by Sting, sings Eddie Cochran's 'Three Steps to Heaven' to Robert at a petrol station only a few miles from the site of Cochran's fatal car crash in 1960. Here the song ironically alludes to a 'return to an age of innocence from which one can look forward to the future' (Nowell-Smith 1979: 35). However, many of the contemporary songs on the soundtrack, such as Bowie's 'Always Crashing In The Same Car' and Devo's version of '(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction' are 'by contrast, devoid of illusion' (ibid.: 35). Robert's emotional need for music also inadvertently leads to the three hostile encounters which he has in the film. In one he is refused access to a club and exchanges (inaudible) words with a bouncer; in the other two he plays music on a pub jukebox and encounters dangerous and violent characters. In the first of these it is an army deserter who has been traumatised in Northern Ireland and whose inarticulate rage causes Robert to abandon him by the side of the road, and in the second it is a female

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pool-player who attacks the impassive Robert as he accidentally causes her to foul a shot.

Robert's final contact with his dead brother is also musical and comes in the form of the three Kraftwerk albums which Robert continually plays in his car as if hoping to find answers on them. While this ultimately proves a fruitless exercise, the music does provide the viewer with insight into Robert himself. On a literal level, the use of Kraftwerk's 'Ohm Sweet Ohm' in the final scene, in which Robert abandons his car on the edge of a quarry and boards the first train going anywhere, tells us that, ironically, he has no home to go back to. More importantly, however, Kraftwerk produce music that is defined as electronic. Their work is typically performed on synthesisers and thematically concerned with nuclear power, computers and robotics. This is emphasised in the quotation that features in the opening shot which, in referencing Fritz Lang alongside Wernher von Braun, tape recorders and synthesisers, underscores two central concerns of Petit's film: cinema and the 'electronic reality' of the postwar age. While the former has often been discussed by critics of the film, the latter is also worthy of examination. As John Pym puts it, the world of *Radio On* is 'bleakly electronic' (1979: 234) and full of images of machines and technology which serve to dehumanise the film's human characters. This is particularly the case with Robert, whose primary action as a character is to operate and interact with machinery and technology: his car, its stereo, the record player he uses in his job as a disc jockey, the broken televisions in his apartment, the radio on which he hears of the pornography ring in which his brother was probably involved, the slide projector on which he watches some of his brother's pornographic material and the jukeboxes in the numerous pubs which he visits on his journey. However, these machines, modern conveniences designed apparently to make life easier and more bearable, offer Robert no comfort. His car repeatedly breaks down and has ultimately to be abandoned. The radio and the slide projector only support his suspicions that his brother's death was the result of foul play yet, like the audio cassettes, they offer no actual explanations of why and how he died.

Like many other art films, *Radio On* borrows and subverts the expectations and conventions of genre cinema. Its pleasures derive not from empathy or engagement with narrative and characters but rather from its stress on visual style. Furthermore, it also challenges most conventional notions of film construction and spectatorship (even in art cinema) by acknowledging only on the most superficial level the role of plot, motivation and characterisation and thus risks

both alienating and boring its audience. However, boredom, which Bordwell sees as 'a crucial device of modern art' (1981: 189), is part of Petit's strategy, as Curtis-Fox argues (1981: 25). In this respect, *Radio On* seems to share an otherwise completely unlikely kinship with Carl Dreyer's *Gertrud* (1964). As Bordwell notes, works such as these 'refuse dominant norms by emptying themselves of meaning, action, identification, suspense – in short, everything of interest' (1981: 189). The ironic result of this, however, is that the audience is actually drawn in and forced to create meaning from the very lack of it. In this respect, Petit's film, like Dreyer's, is an extreme example of Bordwell's adage that 'the art cinema defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode' (2008: 152).

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