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CONSTRUCTING A NATIONAL CINEMA IN BRITAIN

Andrew Higson

Ph. D. 1990

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Ph.D., at the University of Kent.

## CONSTRUCTING A NATIONAL CINEMA IN BRITAIN

Andrew Higson

<i>CONTENTS</i>	<i>PAGE</i>
Abstract	
Acknowledgements	
<b>Chapter 1:</b> <b>Introduction</b>	1.
<b>Chapter 2:</b> <b>The idea of national cinema</b>	7.
i) The concept of national cinema	7.
ii) Hollywood, British cinema and the audience	14.
iii) Industrial and governmental responses to American domination	21.
<b>Chapter 3:</b> <b>Film culture, cultural tradition and British national cinema</b>	34.
i) The formation of intellectual film culture in Britain	34.
ii) Cultural <i>élitism</i> and the fear of de-nationalisation	42.
iii) Genres, movements and histories	49.
<b>Chapter 4:</b> <b>The heritage film, British cinema and the national past:</b> <b><u>Comin' Thro' The Rye</u></b>	55.
i) Introduction: <u>Comin' Thro' The Rye</u> and the heritage film	55.
ii) Hepworth and film culture	69.
iii) The heritage industry and the construction of the national past	78.
iv) Pictorialism and pastoralism	93.
v) Narrative sources, expectations, and motivations	111.
vi) Film style and the standards of American cinema	126.
vii) Modes of narration	140.
viii) Conclusions	152.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **Economic competition and product differentiation:**

<b>popular cinema and the film industry in the mid 1930s</b>	<b>162.</b>
i) Introduction: two films of 1934	162.
ii) The British film industry and its genres in the mid 1930s	171.
iii) Associated Talking Pictures	181.
iv) Gaumont-British	189.
v) Jessie Matthews: star-image and the star system	201.
vi) <u>Evergreen</u>	207.
vii) <u>Sing As We Go</u> , performance and the cinema of attractions	218.
viii) Desire, the feminine and identification in <u>Sing As We Go</u>	235.
ix) Conclusions	241.

## **Chapter 6:**

### **The documentary idea and the melodrama of everyday life: the public, the private and the national family**

	<b>259.</b>
i) Introduction: the documentary idea and the public sphere	259.
ii) Realism and national cinema	270.
iii) Montage and the public gaze	278.
iv) Documentary film practices in the 1930s and early 1940s	286.
v) The story-documentary	294.
vi) World War 2 and the 'Golden Age' of British cinema	306.
vii) Narrating the nation: <u>Millions Like Us</u> , part 1	316.
viii) Documenting the community, authenticating the fiction: <u>Millions Like Us</u> , part 2	330.
ix) A conservative populist vision of the nation: <u>This Happy Breed</u> , part 1	345.
x) The public sphere as spectacle: <u>This Happy Breed</u> , part 2	358.
x) Conclusions	366.

## **Chapter 7:**

### **Constructing a national cinema in Britain: some conclusions**

380.

<b>Notes:</b>	401.
Chapter 1	401.
Chapter 2	401.
Chapter 3	410.
Chapter 4	418.
Chapter 5	443.
Chapter 6	468.
Chapter 7	496.
<b>Bibliography</b>	497.
<b>Filmography</b>	528.
<b>Appendices:</b>	
I: Credits and plot synopsis for <u>Comin' Thro' The Rye</u> and details of prologue	533.
II: Credits and plot synopsis for <u>Sing As We Go</u>	542.
III: Credits and plot synopsis for <u>Evergreen</u>	547.
IV: Credits and plot synopsis for <u>Millions Like Us</u>	552.
V: Credits and plot synopsis for <u>This Happy Breed</u>	557.

## ABSTRACT

This exploration of British cinema as a national cinema looks at various cultural, political and industrial responses to the dominant presence of Hollywood, including competition, collusion, protectionism and product differentiation. Introductory chapters survey debates about British cinema, and offer an overview of the film industry and intellectual film culture in Britain since the 1920s. The first of three historically specific case studies looks at Hepworth's *Comin' Thro' The Rye* (1924) in the context of the 'heritage genre'; its pictorialism and 'primitive' narrational qualities are seen as a coherent attempt to establish an English art cinema which can display the 'national past'. The second study contrasts the activities of one of the 'majors' attempting to break into the American market with films which emulate the Hollywood style (*Evergreen* (1934), starring Jessie Matthews, is the example used) with an 'independent' making broad musical comedies for the domestic market (*Sing As We Go* (1934), starring Gracie Fields, is the example used). The final case study concentrates on the the influence of the documentary movement of the 1930s on the 'melodrama of everyday life' in the mid-1940s, focussing on two critical and box-office successes, *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *This Happy Breed* (1944); the episodic, multiple narratives, the play with both the 'public gaze' of documentary and the subjective point of view of narrative cinema, and the realist detail of these films produces an image of the nation as a knowable community. These analyses reveal distinctive modes of narration and uses of space, and a distinctive way of articulating the public and the private in the British films most self-consciously differentiated from Hollywood. Although the various films examined seem quite different, they have a surprisingly consistent way of imagining the community of the nation, its history, and the space which it occupies, often within the tradition of pastoral.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

When Colin Welland received his Oscar for *Chariots of Fire* in 1981, he announced that "the British are coming",<sup>1</sup> and for most of the 1980s, when this thesis was being researched and written, British film critics were talking of a renaissance of British cinema, looking back to *Chariots of Fire* as its starting point. Perhaps the most resolute attempt by the industry itself to consolidate this image and affirm the optimism about British cinema was the designation of 1985-86 as British Film Year.<sup>2</sup> This attempt to revive a popular interest in British cinema as a national cinema was simply the latest in a long line of such attempts to confront the fact that American films have dominated British cinema since at least World War One. The aim of this thesis is to explore some of the more pervasive cultural and economic forms that this construction of a national cinema has taken in Britain.

The materials with which I will be dealing include films, the industry which produces and presents those films, and the culture which consumes them - in particular what I call the intellectual film culture, which orders them into hierarchies of value. One of the central arguments of the thesis is that critical discourses do not simply describe an already existing national cinema, but that they themselves produce the national cinema in their utterances. Representations of the nation in British films are, likewise, not reflections of the actual formation of the nation-state, but rather ideological constructions of 'the nation', a publicly imagined sense of community and cultural space.

Chapters two and three map out a broad context within which three historically specific case studies will be developed. These introductory chapters offer a



survey of the existing literature and its various constructions of British cinema, and an outline of methodological propositions for the study of a national cinema. Chapter two opens with a discussion of how one can make sense of the terms 'national identity', 'nationhood' and 'national cinema', in particular drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of nation-ness as an imagined community,<sup>3</sup> and seeking to understand this in the context of both differentiation from other nations (and national cinemas), and affirmation of 'indigenous' cultural traditions and identities.

Hollywood is defined as the most significant 'other' for British cinema, not just another national cinema, but the *international* standard for almost all national cinemas. Various responses to the fact of American domination of the film market place are charted, including those of audiences, the film industry, and the state. Chapter three constructs a preliminary history of critical discourses, concentrating on the formation of an intellectual film culture in Britain since the mid-1920s, and examining how it has responded to the presence of Hollywood. Of particular interest here are four attitudes which dominate this culture: the fear of mass culture and especially of 'Americanisation'; the concern to develop cinema as an art form; the interest in a realist aesthetic; and the concern to insert cinema into and use it to reproduce the national heritage. This nexus of interests constitutes a critical orthodoxy on British, American and European film-making which still has a certain influence in the 1990s.

The full, diverse and often antagonistic range of practices which make up British cinema as a whole is re-constructed in this discourse as a moral hierarchy, in which the documentary-realist tradition has held pride of place above all others. The discourse thus de-values and marginalises other film

practices in the process of constructing a unified, coherent and homogeneous national cinema. I will attempt to re-locate the documentary-realist tradition here as just one aspect - and indeed an often quite marginal aspect - of the work of the film industry, its generic systems, and the range of cultural traditions on which those genres draw. Its exploitation of a space that has not already been thoroughly colonised by international corporate forces is only one way of responding to Hollywood's economic and cultural hegemony.

The core of the thesis is the three case studies which explore different but often interdependent areas of British film practice which have in various ways been interpreted as models for the construction of a national cinema in Britain, and which relate to the various terms that have been laid out in the previous two chapters. The case studies reveal the diversity of British cinema, and illustrate different strategies of product differentiation and market control, including both popular cultural practices and the more *élitist* forms of what is now called art cinema.

Two of the case studies deal with key moments in the development of specific traditions of British film-making which have been taken up within intellectual film culture as authentic versions of national cinema. These are the documentary-realist tradition, and the heritage film, which seeks in various ways to represent the national past. These are the areas of British film practice which have been most self-consciously articulated as distinctive and indigenous, and critically received as culturally respectable, and one of the central concerns here is to explore their similarities with and differences from classical Hollywood. The other case study deals with much more popular and critically less respectable genre films, and looks at the ways in which they

have exploited rather different indigenous cultural traditions. All three case studies relate the cultural analysis of films to the economic context of those films. Detailed analysis of the ways in which the film industry seeks to exploit British cinema as an international cinema through its economic and cultural policies is, however, reserved for this study of popular cinema. Thus each case study takes on different aspects of the debates about national cinema, and explores different aspects of British cinema history. Since the first case study deals primarily, although not exclusively, with the early 1920s, the second with the state of the commercial film industry in the mid 1930s, and the third with the development of the documentary-realist tradition between the late 1920s and the mid-1940s, some sort of chronological history of British cinema and British film culture is produced, although it is not in any way intended to be exhaustive as a history.

Chapter four is concerned with the heritage film and the role of cinema in the construction of the national past, and examines in detail Cecil Hepworth's period literary adaptation of 1924, *Comin' Thro' the Rye*. This film is often regarded as *retarded* in comparison with American cinema of the period, but I re-present it as an example of a genre which is quite self-consciously developed as a form of product differentiation from Hollywood, and an affirmation of established cultural traditions. I argue that its pictorialist *mise-en-scène* can be understood as a perfectly appropriate form for the display of heritage properties, and that its period setting, its slow-moving narrative, and its idiosyncratic editing strategy are integral to its ideological project of producing an 'English' film. Its formal characteristic of refusing classical narrative integration is, I suggest, common not only to other heritage films, but also to the other British filmic traditions which are examined here.

Chapter five takes as its starting point two box-office successes of 1934, **Sing As We Go** and **Evergreen**, both musical comedies and starring respectively Gracie Fields and Jessie Matthews, the two biggest British female stars of the period. The two films therefore share a great deal, but they also represent two relatively distinct industrial responses to Hollywood's international domination of the cinema. The former exploits the indigenous popular traditions of music hall and northern English working-class culture to produce a film primarily for the domestic market. Both its form and its content render it virtually inexportable, and the film should again be understood as a quite self-conscious instance of product differentiation by a small independent production company.

**Evergreen**, on the other hand, is the product of one of the two British vertically integrated 'majors' of the period, Gaumont-British, who were at the time attempting to establish a strong enough economic basis from which to compete with the major Hollywood studios on their own terms, and in their own markets. The film is much closer formally to classical Hollywood cinema, as a result, and particularly to some of the musicals of the mid-1930s: this is quite clearly *not* a case of product differentiation, but a very different attempt to create a strong national film industry.

Chapter six is a study of the documentary-realist tradition, from its beginnings in the documentary idea and film practices of the 1930s, via the story documentary, to the mainstream feature films of the war period which draw on these ideas and practices. These latter films form a generic hybrid, marrying documentary modes to more classical narrative film practices, and I examine two examples here, **Millions Like Us** (1943) and **This Happy Breed** (1944). The documentary-realist tradition as a whole, and these films in particular, are

again conceived as *national* products, and my interest is, once more, in their difference from Hollywood, and in the way in which they construct a particular image of the nation as a knowable community. By way of concluding the thesis, I will draw together various strands from the three case studies, and relate them back to some of the more general arguments about the formation of national cinemas.

## Chapter 2: National cinema

### 1) The concept of national cinema

*"Not only is national character made; it continues to be made and re-made. It is not made once and for all; it always remains, in its measure, modifiable."*

*Sir Ernest Barker, National Character and the Factors in its Formation, 1927.<sup>1</sup>*

*"The cinema is today the most universal means through which national ideas and national atmosphere can be spread and, even if those be intangible things, surely they are among the most important influences in civilisation."*

*Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, President of the Board of Trade, introducing the Cinematograph Films Bill to the House of Commons, 1927.<sup>2</sup>*

My concern in this chapter is threefold. Firstly, I want to generate a model for understanding notions of 'nationhood' and 'national identity', in particular looking at the role of language, representation and communication in producing and reproducing the national experience in its modern sense, as both self-identity and differentiation from others. Secondly, I want to explore some of the implications of using the term 'national' in discourse about cinema. And thirdly, I want to relate some of these debates to the actual structures of the British film industry, its policies, and its relationships with Hollywood, the state and its audiences.

Much discussion of national cinemas has proceeded with great imprecision, not least the discussion of British cinema. Thus Raymond Durnat suggests at the outset of his influential account of post-war British cinema, A Mirror for England that, in selecting the films to be discussed, "our criterion has had to

be *rather arbitrary and subjective*: is it about Britain, about British attitudes, or if not does it feel British?"<sup>3</sup> One can, of course, sympathise with Durgnat to some extent, since national identity is a notoriously shifting phenomenon, constantly being re-imagined, and itself a masking of internal differences and potential and actual antagonisms. The concept of national cinema also has a shifting identity, and it has been mobilised in different ways, by different commentators, for different reasons. In general, one can summarise the various mobilisations as follows.

(1) Firstly, there is the possibility of defining national cinema in economic terms, establishing a conceptual correspondence between the terms 'national cinema' and 'the domestic film industry', and so being concerned with such questions as: Where are these films made, and by whom? Who owns and controls the industrial infrastructures, the production companies, the distributors and the exhibition circuits?<sup>4</sup>

(2) A second way of discussing national cinema is in terms of exhibition and consumption. Here the major questions have been: Which films are audiences watching? How many foreign films, and especially American films, are in distribution within a particular nation-state? Such questions are generally formulated from a position of anxiety about the dangers of cultural imperialism.

(3) Thirdly, there is a criticism-led approach to national cinema, which tends to reduce national cinema to the terms of a quality art cinema, a culturally worthy cinema steeped in the high-cultural and/or modernist heritage of a particular nation-state, rather than one which appeals to the desires and fantasies of the popular audiences. The debate about national cinema is inevitably characterised

by a struggle to elevate one standard, one value system, at the expense of others - and, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has noted, it has always been something of a struggle to enable "the recognition of popular forms as a legitimate part of national cultural life".<sup>5</sup>

(4) Fourthly, there is the possibility of a text-based approach to national cinema. Here the key questions become: What are these films about? Do they share a common style or world view? What sort of projections of the national character do they offer? How do they dramatise the fantasies of national identity? To what extent are they engaged in "exploring, questioning and constructing a notion of nationhood in the films themselves and in the consciousness of the viewer"?<sup>6</sup>

The nationality of a film may be conceived in terms of subject-matter, structure of feeling, or style. British writers of the 1930s, for instance, were typically concerned that "we are not putting Britain, and British people, on the screen"<sup>7</sup>, and that British films had failed to establish a "really intimate contact with the national idiom."<sup>8</sup> The most common version of this view of national cinema is the argument that "a nation's films reflect a nation's thoughts", implying that cinema simply reflects or expresses a pre-given national identity, consciousness or culture.<sup>9</sup> This view in effect denies any specificity for film, and refuses to accept that cinema might actively work to produce - and to naturalise - such identities through its own textual processes and forms of engagement with the spectator. A central tenet in this thesis is that national identity is precisely constructed in and through representation: "a nation does not express itself through its culture: it is culture that produces 'the nation'."<sup>10</sup>



Whichever version of the concept of national cinema is used, the process of identifying a national cinema involves specifying a coherent and unique identity and a stable set of meanings, at the expense of other possible identities and meanings. This very often means that the interests of one particular social group are represented as in the collective national interest. In the international arena, on the other hand, it is clear that proclamations of national cinema are almost invariably part of a strategy of cultural and economic resistance, a means of asserting national autonomy, in the face of (usually) Hollywood's international domination.

The potential coherence and unity of a national cinema consists in both its difference from other national cinemas, and its self-identity as part of the already existing cultural and economic traditions of a particular nation-state. In the final analysis, it is the process of differentiation which is the most powerful, since identity can never be understood objectively as fixed and immutable: it is itself constantly being re-negotiated in a system of differences.

Benedict Anderson has argued that the experience of nationhood, the sense of belonging to a nation, is a question of feeling part of an *imagined* community.<sup>11</sup> He sees four key elements to this mythic experience of nationhood:<sup>12</sup> the sense of *community*, "a deep, horizontal comradeship"<sup>13</sup> (as opposed to, for example, antagonism, and regardless of inequalities and exploitation); the inherently *limited* nature of that community as it is imagined, the sense of territorial boundaries to the cultural space of the nation; the sense of *sovereignty*, of both pre-eminence and independence; and finally of course the process of *imagining* itself. The process of imagining must be able to resolve the actual

history of conflict and negotiation in the experience of community - which, as I will hope to show, becomes a very powerful figure in the imagination of British films and the discourse about them. It must be able to hold in place - or specifically exclude - any number of other experiences of belonging, whether to a particular class, a race, a gender, a region - or another nation. The extent to which these different social experiences can be transformed into the singular experience of a coherent *national* community, with boundaries clearly demarcating the 'inside' from the 'outside', is evidence of the power of national sentiment - or rather of the narratives and apparatuses which mobilise it.

The language of national identity implies not only the sense of a collective identity but also the existence of a common culture, a collective memory of an undisputed national past, a culture which can somehow overcome difference. As Sean Cubitt has suggested

"the national is a process of remembering, a pulling together and reassemblage of its members - both citizens and organs - into a novel whole. It is a continuing process, incomplete, presenting itself none the less as eternal even as it attempts over and again to ossify history into tradition."<sup>14</sup>

Cultural practices, values and hierarchies of difference which have been developed or invented under specific historical conditions are transformed in the "corporate imagination"<sup>15</sup> of a nation into authentic, timeless and uncontestable national traditions. This produces a rich paradox, for, to the historian's eye, nations are decidedly modern, products of the period since the late eighteenth century, whereas the mentality of nationalism is imbued with a sense of the antiquity of nations and their traditions.<sup>16</sup> It is these

imaginative processes which are constitutive of national identity, and which render a heterogeneous mass public as a knowable self-contained community.<sup>17</sup>

For Anderson, it is primarily ideological work, rather than militaristic intervention, which secures the imagined community of the nation. Nations - and the shift from achieved local communities to imagined national communities - are forged through systems of language, education and socialisation, not through blood, he argues, such that one can be 'invited into' the imagined community. Communities are imagined and become knowable through language and communication. The mass communications systems of the twentieth century must clearly play a major role in this process of interpellating a national community - although, surprisingly, Anderson does not address this issue. Cinema, as one of these systems, constructs imaginary bonds which hold the peoples of a nation together as a community, by dramatising its current fears, anxieties, conceits, pleasures and aspirations. The apparatus of cinema is one of the means by which the public sphere is constructed on a national scale: it presents the nation to itself as a nation, it 'invites' a diverse and often antagonistic group of peoples to recognise themselves as a singular body with a common past. As Stephen Heath has suggested, "nationhood is not a given, it is always something to be gained"<sup>18</sup> - and cinema is one of the processes by which it is 'gained'.

Imagining a national community is in part a question of establishing limits and marking boundaries - and cinema and the other media play a crucial role in this process of "communicative boundary maintenance".<sup>19</sup> The film industry has developed within a capitalist economy, however, such that certain sectors of the industry, in seeking to maximise their market potential, have attempted to address *international* audiences, so imagining the social on an *international*

scale. The maintenance of national boundaries is thus increasingly at odds with the potential of the mass media to cross national boundaries, and create new multi-national, even global, imaginative territories and cultural spaces. This of course has been the experience of Hollywood.

Anderson's argument has been developed in a very useful way by James Donald, who suggests

"a ... slightly different, three-way distinction between, first, specific nationalist ideologies (whether imperialist, isolationist, or liberationist); second, a communality figured as a narrative of nationhood (Anderson's imagined community); and third, the apparatus of discourses, technologies, and institutions (print capitalism, education, mass media, and so forth) which *produces* what is generally recognised as the 'national culture'."<sup>20</sup>

This thesis is concerned to a great extent with the content of Donald's latter two distinctions: firstly, communality figured as a narrative of nationhood, specifically in filmic narratives; and secondly the apparatus of cinema itself, its discourses and its institutions. In both cases, however, it will be necessary always to see the question of national cinema in the context of the international film industry, and to take note of Hollywood's place within that industry.

ii) Hollywood, British cinema and the audience

*"There is a strongly effective continuation of relatively old ideas of nationality, and beyond these of race, while at the same time there is an extraordinary and yet widely accepted penetration and coexistence of powerful international and para-national forms."*  
Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000*.<sup>21</sup>

*"Hollywood can hardly be conceived ... as totally other, since so much of any nation's film culture is implicitly 'Hollywood'."*  
Thomas Elsaesser, *Monthly Film Bulletin*.<sup>22</sup>

How does this combination of national and international forms take effect within film culture? What are the relations between Hollywood's internationalism and the perceived national identity of British cinema? Hollywood, of course, is not only the most internationally powerful cinema in economic terms, it is also the cinema which has represented itself most easily as an international *culture*. It has achieved this position by successfully appealing to fantasies, desires and aspirations that are not simply of local or national interest, by crossing boundaries, penetrating borders, and establishing its own margins of quality and appeal. As a result, American cinema never functions as simply one term within a system of equally weighted differences, since it has also for many years been an integral and naturalised part of the national culture and the popular imagination of most countries in which cinema is an established entertainment form; in other words, Hollywood has become one of those cultural traditions which feed into so-called *national* cinemas: "America is now within."<sup>23</sup> Hollywood thus functions as a doubled mode of popular fantasy, being both a naturalised part of national culture, and, at the same time, 'other', visibly different, even exotic,<sup>24</sup> hence its propensity to be dismissed as escapism, while at the same

time being so evidently the mode of production, representation and consumption that has become the international standard.

The British film market, for instance, has been dominated by American films since World War 1, and this continues to be the case in the late 1980s: for instance, the proportion of British films exhibited in 1927 was not more than about 5%,<sup>25</sup> while in 1987, 45 of the top 50 box-office successes in Britain were American.<sup>26</sup>

It is undoubtedly the case that the majority of British audiences have consistently supported Hollywood films. The movie-going habits of these audiences have never been organised solely around the viewing of British films, and the pleasures of American films have always been much appreciated. A trade journalist could write that, as early as 1925,

"It is hardly too much to say that the ordinary British kinemagoer has been educated actually to prefer an American picture to a native one. ... They feel that any pictures which are not constructed according to the American conventions fall short of the recognised standard."<sup>27</sup>

This support can be accounted for both culturally - in terms of the particular appeals of Hollywood films for young working-class and lower middle-class audiences (until recently, the bulk of the cinema-going public) - and economically - in terms of the limited range of alternatives offered by exhibitors, and the intensive marketing of American films. Nowell-Smith puts the case most forcefully:

"The American cinema set out in the first place to be popular in America where it served an extremely diverse and largely immigrant public. What made it popular at home also helped make it popular abroad. The ideology

of American cinema has tended to be far more democratic than that of the cinema of other countries. This in part reflects the actual open-ness of American society, but it is above all a rhetorical strategy to convince the audiences of the virtues and pleasures of being American. Translated into the export arena, this meant a projection of America as intensely - if distantly - appealing. When matched against American films of the same period, their British counterparts come across all too often as restrictive and stifling, subservient to middle-class artistic models and to middle- and upper-class values."<sup>28</sup>

Nowell-Smith's claims seem at times over-stated.<sup>29</sup> To suggest, for instance, that "British cinema ... has never been truly popular in Britain"<sup>30</sup> is to ignore the box-office success over the years of numerous British stars, films and cycles of films. To argue in terms of a generalised, monolithic 'British public' is, likewise, to ignore class, gender and regional differences.<sup>31</sup>

Nowell-Smith's revaluation of American films in terms of the appeal of apparently democratic aspirations does however seem useful, despite these qualifications. It displaces the idea that American box-office success in foreign markets is due solely to manipulative marketing and aggressive economic control. Furthermore, it challenges the conventional conservative and radical attacks on American culture by noting the way in which its integration into the British cultural formation broadens the materials, ideas and pleasures available to audiences. American popular culture in general, and American cinema in particular, may construct "worlds in which there may have been large amounts of fairly banal material" but they also provide "phenomenal new cultural excitements and possibilities."<sup>32</sup> The argument that America is involved in a form of cultural imperialism, as Tony Bennett has suggested,

"although not without point, ... misses much of the essential ambivalence of the impact of American popular culture in Britain which, in many respects, has been more positive, particularly in making available a repertoire of cultural styles and resources ... which, in various ways, have undercut and

been consciously mobilised against the cultural hegemony of Britain's traditional elites."<sup>33</sup>

The rhetoric of democracy and populism is built into the formal organisation of the American film, with its classically strong and dynamic narrative drive towards individual achievement - although this also points to the limitations of the rhetoric since problems and their resolutions are invariably articulated only in relation to the *individual* within a substantially unchanged capitalist patriarchy.<sup>34</sup> Classical Hollywood cinema conventionally ties this narrative structure of achievement to the romantic appeal of the formation of the heterosexual couple,<sup>35</sup> and situates the narrative within a *mise-en-scène* and an organisation of spectacle and spectating which has proved intensely pleasurable,<sup>36</sup> and within a physical context of film-watching which emphasises the process of fantasising.<sup>37</sup> Overall, this form has a propensity to thoroughly engage the spectator in a complex series of identifications, with an almost ruthless disregard of the nationality, class and gender of the spectator, and it is often the figure of the star which holds together these various formal strategies, narrative, visual and identificatory.

The tradition of film studies on which this type of formal analysis draws tends to posit texts as essentially closed, and the reading process as essentially passive and determined by the organisation of the text. More recent work on popular television and its audiences suggests other ways of thinking about these same texts as relatively open and the reading process as relatively active. These two approaches may be seen as complementary in this instance, despite their often dramatically different methodologies and assumptions. John Fiske, among others,<sup>38</sup> has argued that popular texts must offer a variety of



possible points of identification and reading positions to be able to recruit as and to its audience what are ethnographically quite distinct social groups.

The appeal of Hollywood films may well be related, then, to their relative openness, their multi-accented potential to be read in different ways, by different social groups and national audiences. The range of pleasures and meanings offered may even run against the grain of their dominant ideology or preferred reading. We cannot of course ignore real questions of cultural power, and the differential ability to promote or naturalise particular readings over others within the culture at large, but resistance is always possible as a reading practice. This potential may be much reduced in the theatrical exhibition of narrative films compared to television because of the particular and peculiarly intense viewing conditions and the movement towards a marked degree of *narrative* closure in cinema.<sup>39</sup> Even so, this is not enough to shut off other readings altogether, I would argue.

American film-makers innovated this form of film-making and have since exploited it more consistently than their British counterparts who have operated with a much more mixed range of representational forms, compared to Hollywood where this mode of representation had become institutionalised by 1917.<sup>40</sup> This thesis is in part an exploration of those traditions of British film-making which modified and partially differentiated themselves from Hollywood's formal system, by articulating narratives around *community* rather than around a heroic *individual*, by concentrating on character and atmosphere rather than goal-directed action, or by rendering individual episodes or images as more powerful than the narrative momentum.

Hollywood has of course had the resources, which British film producers have lacked, to exploit the potential appeals of the institutional mode of representation. British cinema has never been able to sustain a star system on the same glamorous scale as Hollywood for long periods of time, for instance - not least since Hollywood tends to consume British stars for its own films. This in turn enables the American studios to increase the stake which British audiences have in Hollywood films.

If Hollywood constitutes the international standard, then in a sense a distinctive national film production is by definition non-standard and marginal. It is certainly the case that the types of British film which have over the years been understood within intellectual film culture as truly national - the documentary-realist tradition or the heritage genre, for instance - have been unable to *consistently* win popular support. The terms 'national' and 'popular' are therefore not generally equivalent within British film culture, with 'national' tending to indicate bourgeois interests, values and tastes.<sup>41</sup>

The other side of this scenario is that, for a cinema to be nationally popular, it must paradoxically also be international in scope: that is to say, it must achieve Hollywood's international standards. For, by and large, it is the films of the major American distributors which achieve national box-office success, so that film-makers who aspire to this same level of box-office popularity must attempt to reproduce the standard, which in practice means colluding with Hollywood's systems of funding, production control, distribution and marketing, and so losing the cultural distinctiveness which the term national cinema is very often intended to mean. Any alternative means of achieving national *popular* success, if they are to be economically viable, must be conceived either on an

international scale, which is virtually impossible for a national film industry, unless it has a particularly large domestic market; or they must be conceived on a relatively low budget, which has been the basis of British popular film comedy over the years. Other forms of British cinema which have been self-consciously differentiated from classical Hollywood have tended to be addressed to specific segments of the market, such as the art-house market and other cinemas catering for a primarily middle-class clientele, or the non-theatrical market.

### **iii) Industrial and governmental responses to American domination**

From the point of view of political economy, a national cinema is a particular industrial structure, a particular pattern of ownership and control of plant, real estate, human resources and capital, and a system of state legislation which circumscribes the nationality of that ownership - primarily in relation to production. The relative economic power of a national film industry will depend upon the degree to which production, distribution and exhibition are integrated, regulated, technically equipped and capitalised; it will depend also on the size of the home market and the degree of penetration of overseas markets. At the level of production, we need to take into account both the means and modes of production employed (the organisation of work, in terms of systems of management, division of labour, professional organisations and ideologies, availability of technology) and the access that producers have to both domestic and overseas markets. It is important to recognise also that even the domestic market is not homogeneous, and that production companies often deliberately limit themselves to specific areas of exploitation, especially when faced with the mainstream box-office supremacy of the major American distributors overseas. These limited areas of exploitation will in many cases be areas considered marginal - that is, marginally profitable - by Hollywood.

In practice it is possible to distinguish four main types of response by the European film industries, including British cinema, to the facts of American domination of the market-place. Firstly, there is the possibility of collusion with the American film industry in jointly exploiting the domestic market through the distribution and exhibition of American films. Secondly, there are various forms of self-regulation by a film industry on a national scale, seeking

to build a relatively autonomous domestic film industry and indigenous film culture; thirdly, there are various forms of state intervention, again conceived as a defence of a national cinema on a national scale; and fourthly, there are various forms of trans-national or international co-operative resistance to American supremacy. I will explore the first three strategies in more detail below. The fourth strategy, however, is relatively rare, which produces the irony that solutions to a fundamentally international problem - media imperialism - tend to be formulated in national terms, as Steve Neale has argued:

"The production, distribution and exhibition of films nearly always takes place within the context of pre-defined national boundaries, cultures, governments and economies. Because of the determinations exercised by this context, Hollywood's international dominance is nearly always conceived by the countries whose market it dominates as a specifically *national problem*. Because of this, policies articulated as a solution to the problem nearly always involve the construction and reconstruction firstly of a national industry to whose experiences they can refer and to whose structures, practices and problems their statements can be addressed, and secondly, of national cultural and cinematic traditions which the measures embodied in such policies are expected to foster, through protection, encouragement and incentive. " 42

1) Collusion with the American film industry.

The difficulties of successfully operating one or other of the strategies for resisting American domination are very much bound up with the nature of that domination, and the major capitalist organisations within other nation-states have often sought to guarantee profit through collusion rather than competition with the American film industry. Thus, in the case of the British film industry, the distribution and exhibition arms of that industry have primarily been organised to foster, extend and consolidate the domination of the British market by American popular films. The major American studios have had their own distribution companies operating in Britain for some time, while the major

British companies have built up close relationships with American producers and distributors, who often also have substantial financial interests in British companies. British companies have found this sort of co-operation necessary, since, in capitalist terms, the American film industry was much better organised well before the British film industry, and was able to pursue imperialist policies with some vigour, undercutting the charges of local distributors, since they could go into the British market in the knowledge that costs had already been recovered from the huge American domestic market.<sup>43</sup>

2) Industrial self-regulation on a national scale.

National film industries have sought to resist American penetration and to promote a national production sector through various mechanisms of self-regulation. It is possible to delineate at least three sub-categories here: the development of a strong domestic economic base; direct competition with Hollywood; and product differentiation.

2a) A strong domestic economic base.

The first type of industrial self-regulation can be found in the attempts to create national industrial structures capable of monopolising domestic trade. The British film industry did not organise along these lines until much later than the American film industry - despite the energies of the early British pioneers, and despite the fact that, prior to World War 1, London had been the centre of world trade.<sup>44</sup> A strong and effective vertically integrated British 'major' was one of the economic solutions to the British film industry production crisis of the mid-1920s successfully promoted by the Board of Trade around the time of the 1927 Quota Act (thus signalling the frequent interdependence of self-regulation and state intervention).<sup>45</sup> It is thus only

from this period that the British film industry becomes consolidated along American lines, with two vertically integrated 'majors' emerging: Gaumont-British and BIP (British International Pictures), later re-named ABPC (Associated British Picture Corporation).

By the mid 1940s, Rank, which had taken over Gaumont-British in building up its formidable operating base, and ABPC effectively controlled the British film industry in collaboration with the major American distributors. This duopolistic situation still prevails in the early 1990s.<sup>46</sup> This duopoly has run the major *British* distribution operations, and has owned and controlled the major theatrical exhibition circuits. It has also been involved at various times in production, the provision of studio and other production facilities, and the manufacture of production and exhibition equipment, as well as diversifying into other areas of the leisure, entertainments, communications and electronics industries.<sup>47</sup>

It has rarely been the case that industrialists have considered building up a strong domestic economic base in Britain, however, without at the same time considering colluding with the American film industry, and the power of the British combines has depended on close collaboration with the American film industry. As Michael Chanan has noted,

"In the long-term, the British film industry came to recognise that it could only sustain its position by accepting symbiotic allegiance to the American leaders in the field - that is to say, through a mutual agreement to share the exploitation of the British market - since neither party was able to do without the other. But it was an agreement in which the British played the junior partners and acceded to American domination."<sup>48</sup>

The British duopoly has thus, for economic reasons, encouraged the influx of American films into the British market, over-riding the interests of its own production activities. The interests of British 'majors', and particularly the major distribution and exhibition companies, have often been diametrically opposed to the interests of 'independents', especially small independent production companies, as a result. It has indeed been the production sector of the industry that has most consistently and anxiously cited the American domination of British distribution and box-office success as a problem. As Tom Ryall has noted in relation to the inter-war years,

"the exhibition sector of the British film industry had established itself substantially on the basis of screening American films and had generated a large audience whose tastes were attuned to Hollywood. This factor was important in defining certain limits within which the production industry was obliged to work. The work of building up a cinema audience and the work of building up a national production industry ... can be seen to have been in a state of contradiction."<sup>49</sup>

## 2b) Direct competition with Hollywood.

There have however been occasions when certain British corporations have felt that they have built up strong enough economic bases to enable direct competition with Hollywood. Competition effectively meant producing films with similar budgets, production values, and distribution, the assumption being that the best form of self-defence is to attack the aggressor. Vertically integrated corporations have thus used the fruits of their distribution and exhibition arms to try to gain a foothold for British films in the American market. The difficulty however has always been in consolidating early successes on a consistent commercial scale.



Corporations engaged in such projects have thus developed a policy of producing relatively high-budget films with an international appeal to audiences used to Hollywood production values, and designed to break into the American market, arguing that the domestic market is too small to support such expensive productions. In other words, a strong national cinema is assumed to be one that can compete *internationally* with Hollywood, on its own terrain, by reproducing Hollywood's economy of production and its pleasures. This has traditionally been the policy favoured by major British studios or production companies: Gaumont-British and Alexander Korda's London Films in the mid 1930s, attempting to capitalise on the success of *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933); Rank in the mid 1940s;<sup>50</sup> Lord Grade in the late 1970s; and Goldcrest in the mid 1980s (with films such as *The Killing Fields* (1984), *Revolution* (1985), *Absolute Beginners*, and *The Mission* (both 1986)). Perhaps the most consistently successful product of this policy has been the James Bond series of films, through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. I will be looking at this particular strategy for building up a strong British cinema in chapter five, when I consider the case of the Gaumont-British Jessie Matthews vehicles, and especially the musical *Evergreen*.

#### 2c) Product differentiation.

In contrast to the policy of direct competition is the policy of self-consciously *differentiating* product from Hollywood. Product differentiation is generally achieved through a combination of necessary and voluntary, financial and cultural measures, attempting to generate a qualitatively different regime of experiences and pleasures. But product differentiation - the creation of something new - means also recruiting and building a new audience, since the majority of audiences are already strongly attached to American films. This is often achieved by reproducing a pre-cinematic audience.<sup>51</sup> Attempts at product

differentiation or specialisation can and indeed have taken various forms, specialising in different corners of the market: for instance, cheap, popular but often inexportable genre films or programme fillers, such as numerous low-budget British comedy films;<sup>52</sup> or, at the prestige end of the market, art cinema for the international arena, or 'national quality' films, not necessarily developed for the export market, but for solid middle-class domestic audiences, the category which state intervention is generally designed to protect.

The production of a (usually state-subsidised) art cinema in western Europe has been developed as one major solution to the problem of how to maintain both some form of national cultural specificity and achieve a relative degree of international visibility and economic viability.<sup>53</sup> This strategy hardly resolves the problems of building a national cinema in the context of an increasingly internationalised market-place, since the market for art cinema is itself decidedly international, as is the network of Film Festivals and reviewing practices, and other means of achieving a critical reputation and both a national and an international cultural space for such films. This strategy of product differentiation at the so-called quality end of the market is also unlikely to succeed unless it is combined with some form of state protection or encouragement. The various international art cinemas have, however, rarely achieved a national popular success, partly because of their *elitist* modes of address, and partly because of Hollywood's economic strength at the level of distribution, exhibition and marketing.

It has often been argued that British producers have failed to sufficiently differentiate their product from the international standards of the Hollywood model, and thereby failed to establish a recognisable national cinema with a

readily marketable label. There have, however, been two relatively sustained and in many ways quite different attempts to create an art cinema, in the form of the heritage genre and the documentary-realist tradition, both the subject of case studies later in this thesis. The documentary-realist tradition can also be linked to other more popular film-making practices in Britain: the production, generally by smaller, independent production companies, of relatively low-budget films with a mainly indigenous cultural appeal specifically for the domestic market.<sup>54</sup>

The most celebrated exponents of this policy have been ATP (Associated Talking Pictures) in the 1930s, and its successor Ealing Studios in the 1940s and 1950s;<sup>55</sup> Gainsborough Studios (in fact a subsidiary of Rank) in the 1940s;<sup>56</sup> Hammer from the mid-1950s through to the 1970s (although they also made strenuous and often successful efforts to gain American distribution)<sup>57</sup>; and Woodfall in the 1960s (interestingly, from the beginning, Woodfall acquired some of its funding from American sources).<sup>58</sup> Films from each of these sources have, in fact, had some success on the American market, either as support features, or with limited art-house-type runs. This production policy has also generally been closest to the film critics' concept of the *quality* British film, over against the film industry executives' notion of the big-budget prestige film, with supposedly international appeal.<sup>59</sup> I will be exploring this strategy for building a national cinema by contrasting the business policies and practices of ATP in the mid 1930s to those of the major, Gaumont-British, in chapter five.

The two policies of direct competition with Hollywood, and self-conscious product differentiation are, in many ways, not so much mutually exclusive, as economically and culturally interdependent. The extent of this interdependence

can be seen in the mid-1940s when Rank, by then a vertically integrated corporation, effectively sponsored both policies. On the one hand, it directly funded high-cost prestige films produced specifically for the international market; on the other hand, it supported small independent productions through its deals with Ealing Studios, and several production units which operated jointly through the umbrella organisation, Independent Producers Ltd. This made good economic sense, of course, since it enabled Rank to both occupy his studios and ensure that he had a good supply of British films for his now extensive chains of cinemas.<sup>60</sup>

This interdependence notwithstanding, these policies do at the same time represent two contrasting ways of working with the domination of American cinema, and the form, subject-matter and appeal of the classic Hollywood film. The 'international' policy of competition attempts in effect to reproduce Hollywood's successes, writing money on the screen in an imitation of Hollywood production values. The policy of product differentiation seeks to offer a different experience from the mainstream American film.

The history of a national cinema is in one sense, then, the history of a business seeking a secure footing in the market-place, and seeking to maximise profits while at the same time bolstering a nation's cultural standing. To label a group of films a 'national cinema' is, in part, a marketing strategy, an attempt to sell a relatively diverse group of films with a brand-name, promising a coherent and singular experience, and so attempting to negotiate a place for them in the international market-place.<sup>61</sup> British domestic product has, indeed, on a number of occasions, been particularly intensively marketed and promoted in this way, as in the case of British Film Year (1985-1986)<sup>62</sup> and the British Film

Weeks of 1923-24, which were the site for the initial circulation of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, which will be discussed in chapter four.

Even those areas of commercial feature film-making which are most strongly and self-consciously differentiated from Hollywood still draw on the traditions of the classical Hollywood film. Hollywood films are far too central to the film culture for British cinema to have become an entirely *other* cinema.<sup>63</sup> As Edward Buscombe has suggested, film-makers working outside Hollywood are always caught between a desire to emulate Hollywood, and a desire to wrench themselves free from its modes of production and representation. But the strength, resilience and pervasiveness of these modes mean that Hollywood comes to be seen as *the* cinema. The popular understanding of cinema is formed on the basis of watching American films, such that to revolt against Hollywood is to revolt against the very idea of cinema.<sup>64</sup> The strategy of product differentiation always runs the risk of alienating the majority audiences who enjoy Hollywood films.

### 3) State intervention on a national basis.

Industrial self-regulation as a response to the facts of American domination is rarely entirely divorced from some form of state intervention in the film industry, which plays an important role in determining the parameters and possibilities of a national cinema. Such intervention in Britain has taken the form of various legal barriers to 'free trade', supplemented by various incentives for domestic production. This has been the case at least since the mid 'teens, by which time the popularity of film-going had established it as a cultural form of national, and even international, dimensions, and governments had begun to recognise the power of cinema in reproducing nationalist ideologies. The wide circulation of American films inevitably produced great

anxiety on the part of many commentators, who believed them to be having a detrimental effect on both the national culture and the national economy, and various protectionist policies began to be introduced.

The discourses circumscribing and justifying state intervention in Britain - and indeed the interventionary practices themselves - almost invariably bring together both economic and cultural terms of reference. Once cultural arguments had been invoked to justify the introduction of quota regulations in 1927, as Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street have suggested, "a few remarks about the cultural importance of film became an almost obligatory element in any preamble to a statement on film policy."<sup>65</sup> Much of the rhetoric surrounding state intervention in the film industry is thus about preserving and fostering a national heritage, and a national film culture - and thereby conjuring up an image of the state as cultural patron. But it is also the case that the various protectionist measures adopted over the years have not stipulated strong *cultural* criteria, or quality controls, of the sort which helped produce art cinemas in USSR, Germany and France in the 1920s.<sup>66</sup> One of the main planks of the government's intervention since the 1920s has been protectionist quota regulations; as Armand Mattelart *et al* have pointed out, this type of strategy relies on a territorial or geographical definition of nationality in the end. It establishes a geographical and politico-judicial boundary between the nation and its others, and "while it limits foreign influence, it proposes no other alternative than the limit itself."<sup>67</sup> What is absent from such strategies is the formulation of a positive production policy, a genuinely culturalist intervention. Cultural tradition, national identity, and cultural energy are assumed, negatively, rather than planned for and fostered.

The government *did*, however, help to foster an art cinema tradition in Britain through its involvement in the documentary movement from the late 1920s,<sup>69</sup> and later, through the system of state arts subsidies, local government cultural funding, and the establishment of Channel 4.<sup>69</sup> The state's provisions in these cases made possible various types of independent production, distribution and exhibition.<sup>70</sup>

It remains the case, however, that, while these cultural arguments may have had some impact on the ways in which politicians and other public figures thought about the film industry, and while they may have also enabled the development of a minority art cinema, the government has almost invariably opted for a strongly economic policy, dominated by the thinking of Board of Trade and the Treasury. Dickinson and Street have shown that the deliberations in the late 1920s about the economic state of the industry, and about the desirability of a well-financed and vertically integrated British combine, helped to establish a close relationship between the interests of the Board of Trade, the City, and monopoly capital in the film industry. This relationship has effectively blocked attempts to introduce more culturally sophisticated forms of protection than the notoriously ineffective quota regulations.<sup>71</sup> Dickinson and Street also draw attention to the close relationship established between American trade interests, the British Treasury and the Board of Trade, which produced legislation designed both to appease the film industry leaders, and to encourage the introduction of dollars into the British economy, particularly in the late 1930s and 1940s. As Dickinson and Street conclude,

"finance and profit have always been the main factors in deciding what films are made and shown in Britain. The system of State aid was not

designed to replace or compete with commercial finance, and it failed to reverse the long-standing trends towards monopoly and American control."<sup>72</sup>

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that the main strategies developed in response to American market domination - collusion, industrial self-regulation, and state intervention - can never be entirely separated from one another. The pervasiveness of American interests means that almost every response involves some form of collusion. Economic predicament does not necessarily determine the forms of cultural debate, however, and in the next chapter I will explore in more detail some of the ways in which British cinema has been defined as a *distinctive* national cinema.



## Chapter 3: Film culture, cultural tradition and British national cinema

### 1) The formation of intellectual film culture in Britain

*"In relation to the people-nation, the indigenous intellectual element is more foreign than the foreigners."  
Antonio Gramsci, commenting on inter-war Italian culture.<sup>1</sup>*

In the previous chapter, I looked at various ways of mobilising the term 'national cinema', and various means adopted by the industry and the state to produce a cinema in those terms. In this chapter, I want to look at the ways in which British cinema has been defined as a national cinema within intellectual film culture (as distinct from popular film culture). In keeping with the model of national cinema developed in the previous chapter, I do not see British cinema as something which simply expresses itself in or is described by critical discourses, but as the 'imaginative' product of those discourses. It is film culture, in this instance, which produces British cinema as a national cinema, and what is needed is a history of film culture, and of critical discourses, and not simply a history of films, the objects of those discourses.

Tom Ryall has usefully defined the term 'film culture' as follows:

*"'Film culture' entered the critical vocabulary of cinema in the early 1970s as a term referring to the limited and specifiable intellectual and cultural activity centred on the production of films. A film culture - 'an intermingling of ideas and institutions into recognisable formations' [Alan Lovell] - is constituted by the ideologies of film that circulate and compete in a given historical period and the forms in which such ideologies are institutionalised. The ensemble of practices captured by the idea provides a crucial determining framework for the production and*

consumption of films. The term embraces the immediate contexts in which films are made and circulated such as studios, cinemas and film journals, and those contexts which have to be constructed from the material network of the culture, the philosophies and ideologies of film. The various elements of a film culture constitute a complex, non-monolithic entity containing within itself a set of practices and institutions, some of which interact in a mutually supportive fashion, some of which provide alternatives to each other, and some of which operate in a self-consciously oppositional manner." <sup>2</sup>

My concern here is with one aspect of film culture, the public debate about national cinema in Britain, and in particular the dominant critical discourses which write British cinema into film cultural memory in particular ways, vaunting and valorising particular films and ways of approaching them, so proposing an orthodoxy of British film history. One of my tasks in this chapter is to describe the central terms of these discourses, and to compare them to other ways of making sense of British cinema. Another task will be to explore the ways in which these various intellectual discourses about cinema in Britain respond to the presence of American cinema, and the distinctions which are made between British and American films.

An intellectual film culture does not really emerge in Britain in a systematic form until the mid 1920s, but from this period there is a certain flowering of intellectual debate about and interest in cinema. This can be seen in the founding of the London Film Society in 1925, and the subsequent development of the Film Society movement;<sup>3</sup> it can be seen in the publication of specialised intellectual or critical film journals (as opposed to trade papers or fan magazines), starting with *Close-Up* in 1927, and in the beginnings of serious film criticism in daily and weekly newspapers and magazines from the mid 1920s;<sup>4</sup> several books of film theory and history were also published in this period - notably Paul Rotha's The Film Till Now (1930);<sup>5</sup> finally, there is the

founding of the British Film Institute in 1933, and the opening of a few art cinemas and repertory cinemas, in London and a few other major cities through the 1930s.

The discourses circulating in this context have in many cases been renewed through the publication in the 1960s and 1970s of film histories which simply reproduce the cultural values, standards and judgements of earlier writers, or which were themselves written by critics and film-makers whose cultural formation and most significant work had been in the earlier period. Another instance of this reproduction of critical discourses is the re-publication of work itself first published in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>6</sup>

British film culture in its most 'serious' and intellectual formation has been dominated by a cluster of closely related moral attitudes. These attitudes can be interwoven in different ways, thereby producing different versions of the national cinema, diverse strategies of product differentiation, each with a distinctive relationship to the concepts and practices of established culture,<sup>7</sup> *avant-garde* and modernist culture, and popular culture.

The first of these determining attitudes is a fear of mass production and what is conceived of as a standardised, artistically impoverished, trivial and escapist mass culture. This distinction between the 'serious' and the 'popular' is manifested particularly in the dismissal of the majority of popular American films, "a showmanship built on garish spectacle".<sup>8</sup> Many aspects of commercial British film-making are of course subject to the same types of criticism. The initial articulation of this fear of 'mass culture' within intellectual film culture is in the mid-1920s, but it is most trenchantly formulated in the

discourses which circulate around the documentary movement in the 1930s; the attitude is also consonant with the cultural formation of two other institutions emergent in this period, the Reithian BBC and the Leavisite construction of English literature and the teaching of English.<sup>9</sup> The charges of artistic impoverishment and trivialisation tend to recur in later decades, even though the *auteurism* of *Sequence* in the late 1940s, and *Movie* from the early 1960s, finds much of value in American cinema.<sup>10</sup> The most extreme versions of this attitude will see, not just American cinema, but the very apparatus of cinema itself as a culturally debilitating form. This attitude must then be aligned with other attitudes in order to rescue cinema from the cultural abyss.

The second of these attitudes is, predictably, a concern to promote a national cinema which can be described in terms of 'art', 'culture' and 'quality'. During the 'teens, and into the 1920s, this tended to involve the promotion of a cinema which is parasitic upon the other more established arts, especially theatre and literature. Although heritage films constructed in this way continue to have a certain privileged place in intellectual film culture, the dominant discourse about art in the international arena by the 1920s was modernism, with its concern to establish an autonomous aesthetic realm, a pure art separate from everyday life, each art with its own specific formal tendencies and practices.<sup>11</sup> From the mid-1920s, debates about film as an art-form take place in the context of this modernist sensibility, hence the various versions of pure cinema, defined in terms of a distinct and 'specifically filmic' aesthetic, and breaking away from more established literary and theatrical modes:<sup>12</sup> the essence of the filmic process is assumed to exist variously in the visual, in rhythm, or in montage.<sup>13</sup> Interest is initially focussed on the European art cinemas of the 1920s, in USSR, Germany and France (as well as certain aspects of the American cinema,

notably the comedian comedy of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, D.W.Griffith's narrational sophistication, and the epic Western). It is in the dissemination of this modernist sensibility that the Film Society and the journal *Close-Up* play such an important role.

Indeed, there is something of a paradox here in relation to the culture of Americanism. On the one hand, those interests which are articulated by the heritage film fear the cultural effects of American cinema in Britain; on the other hand, as Peter Wollen has noted, within certain sections of European modernism, "Americanization stood for true modernity, the liquidation of stifling traditions and shackling life-styles and work-habits."<sup>14</sup> The traces of this celebration of Americanism are there within British modernism, and can be seen for instance in the pages of *Close Up*, but they are for the most part overwhelmed by the other side of the argument, the fear of American culture. As such, the modernist aspects of British cinema look more towards Europe (which may itself of course have been looking back to America!).<sup>15</sup> In the end, it was the documentary movement which, as Alan Lovell has noted, "captured the interest in film as an art that was developing in Britain in the late 1920s"<sup>16</sup>. Film-makers working within the arena of documentary, more than any other film-makers in Britain in the 1930s, self-consciously explored intellectual, artistic and aesthetic ideas and experimentation within this modernist tradition. The post-war development of *auteurism* begins to transform this perspective, by looking once more towards the now re-developed European art cinemas, and particularly neo-realism, the *nouvelle vague* and the work of Ingmar Bergman, and by stressing the twin terms of artistic self-expression and psychological realism.

The third moral attitude which characterises intellectual film culture in Britain is the desire to produce a *realist* national cinema, which can 'reflect' the contemporary social and political realities of Britain as perceived from a social-democratic perspective. This concern is again initially most clearly formulated around the work of the documentarists of the 1930s, and eventually produces a desire for and celebration of a particular representational mode, the contemporary social drama, or melodrama of everyday life. Embodied here is a desire for Englishness - but not the archaic Englishness of the heritage genre or of London's bourgeois society theatre. It is, on the contrary, a desire for a modern representation of England and Englishness, stressing some of the key themes of modernity - the city, industry, social change, a discovery of the under-classes, and so on. The potentially *elitist* way in which the documentary idea embraces modernism is thus counterbalanced by the rather different way in which it engages with the cultures of the 'ordinary people' of Britain. This is bound to a social-democratic view of the potential of mass communications systems, the idea that they can be emancipatory forces,<sup>17</sup> and there are recurrent calls for an extension of the public sphere, a democratisation of representation, and an extension of the iconography of the social<sup>18</sup> - that is, a democratisation of the community of the nation as imagined by the cinema.<sup>19</sup> If this is an effort to, in Tom Nairn's phrase, "invite the masses into history",<sup>20</sup> it is, however, very much a 'top-down' look at 'ordinary people', the voyeuristic gaze of one class looking at another, a process of absorbing the working-classes into the established national culture.

The fourth concern of intellectual film culture deals with the question of heritage and indigenous cultural tradition. It takes the form of a concern to represent what is imagined to be the national past, its people, its landscape,

and its cultural heritage, in a mode of representation which can itself be understood as national, and as traditional. This also involves the concern to insert cinema itself into the national heritage, to establish it as one of the institutions for reproducing the national heritage. An iconography of the national past must be developed, but also a means of displaying it within a primarily narrative mode. The realist discourse is re-worked in terms of 'attention to historical detail', authenticating the representation - for, as has already been suggested, the documentary idea is in some ways at odds with the heritage impulse. A central feature of this impulse is the adaptation of heritage properties, whether novels and plays or buildings and values. The concern for heritage is a concern to reproduce the indigenous, the distinctive, the national: the culture of heritage is assumed to be in the national interest, and capable of 'elevating' the general public.<sup>21</sup>

This set of concerns has been substantially challenged by the rather different agenda that has been explored over the last two decades, in a new flowering of intellectual interest in film theory and film history. There is, as a result, a split in contemporary intellectual film culture between the dominant discourse of 'serious' film journalism committed to the *auteurist* concerns of post-war art cinema, and the structuralist and post-structuralist debates of academic film theory and the revisionist perspectives of the new film history.<sup>22</sup>

There are now numerous articles, chapters and books available which offer revised, alternative and often oppositional perspectives to those that have dominated thinking about British cinema since the late 1920s. One strand of work to have developed recently has been social history of the cinema, characterised by the seriousness with which it treats popular British films, neither simply

celebrating popular cinema, as in fan magazines, nor dismissing it wholesale, as in the dominant critical discourses of the middle decades of the century, but attempting to delineate the pleasures offered and the ideological work performed by such cinema for its audiences, and to situate film texts in their broader institutional and cultural context. As such, the boundaries of 'British cinema' are being re-drawn and new connections and links are being made. Much of this work nevertheless remains bound to problematic explanatory frameworks which fail to break with the concerns of earlier discourses, particularly with regard to the relationship posited between 'films' and 'society', and the assumptions made about how films produce meanings and pleasures.<sup>23</sup>

There are also studies like this thesis which seek to make strange those discourses that have been taken as natural and unquestionable within intellectual film culture since the 1930s, which explore the characteristics of these discourses themselves, and the understanding of British cinema which they have promoted, and which re-evaluate the films which they have held sacred. Such studies have also attempted to re-think previously denigrated bodies of work (both genres and directorial *oeuvres*), drawing on recent developments in formal or textual analysis.<sup>24</sup> There have also been several attempts to expand our understanding of the political economy of British cinema, going back to primary sources, rather than relying on the often journalistic glosses of others.<sup>25</sup>



## ii) Cultural elitism and the fear of de-nationalisation

*"A subtle, penetrating, persuasive Americanism is following [the American film]. The entire earth is being unconsciously Americanised by the American movie picture. ... America is swamping the world."  
Boyle Lawrence, writing in The Morning Post in 1924.<sup>26</sup>*

*"Unfortunately, the domination of American films has already Americanised our younger kinema-goers, just as it has disgusted our older generations. It is not a question of our public becoming Americanised. That has already happened, and is an even more serious obstacle in the path of British progress in films than the cramping economic conditions caused by American competition. Our own people actually view the world through American spectacles."  
E.A.Baugham, writing in the Sunday Chronicle, also in 1924.<sup>27</sup>*

The central place of Hollywood films in popular British film culture has of course been a major source of consternation within debates about the possibility of a viable British national cinema since at least the early 1920s. For the majority of mainstream film critics and other key cultural, political, and moral guardians and commentators, the problem is conceived in terms of media imperialism and the erosion of 'the national culture'. Thus Britain's late- and post-imperialist crisis over national identity is worked out in terms of "the potential danger of the Americanisation of the world"<sup>28</sup>, the fear of losing an organic national identity and authentic cultural values to a standardised mass culture.<sup>29</sup>

If this was the period in which interest in cinema as an art form emerged in a systematic way, it was also a period which saw the consolidation of a particular institutional form of cinema, whose social function was naturalised in terms of ideologies of entertainment, and whose existence was economically dependent on the international investment of monopoly capital. The innovation of sound, the

lavish production values of 'international' film-making, American and British, and the architecture of cinema building and the showmanship of cinema managers in the 1920s and 1930s, instituted a specific regime of spectatorship in which cinema existed as spectacle, as a machinery of 'escapism'.

With the building of this institutional cinema, and the attraction of increasingly large and regular audiences, there is a growing concern amongst contemporary commentators about this mass popularity and the potential ideological power of the cinema. The 'power' of cinema is primarily conceived in terms of the effects of films on a mainly working-class audience assumed to be easily manipulated, "the most impressionable sections of the community"<sup>30</sup> - an assumption which of course has been a key element within *elitist* arguments about mass culture and popular culture, and which has shown some resilience over the years in discussions about British cinema - *vide* Eric Knight's comments in 1933 that "audience minds begin to grope toward real cinema" only "vaguely ... blindly ... and half-consciously",<sup>31</sup> and Lindsay Anderson's reference in 1957 to cinema's "massive and impressionable audience".<sup>32</sup>

There were always more liberal readings of the 'power' of cinema. Harold Weston, for instance, called cinema "the greatest democratic factor of the twentieth century" in 1916,<sup>33</sup> but by this he understood a top-down democracy rather than a bottom-up one: cinema might perform a cultural 'levelling-up' process, where the masses might become initiated into the realms, practices and value-systems of high culture:

"it is to this newest of arts which is given the power of awakening the people's minds from their apathy toward art in general; it is teaching them aesthetic values by the skilful arranging of light and shade and by the choosing of beautiful spots in which to enact the exterior scenes; it is

showing them life in all quarters of the globe and expanding their sense of the beautiful."<sup>34</sup>

The discourse is not unfamiliar. It is there, for instance, in the work of the early Reithian BBC, which described itself as a Temple of Arts and Music,<sup>35</sup> and it feeds into the public service ethos of the documentary movement in the 1930s. But it was really only the other side, the more optimistic side, of the same coin: it was the same 'massive and impressionable audience' that was to be levelled-up and become civilised:

"That the Picture Play as a commercial proposition occupies one of the foremost places in the national life of both Great Britain and America is surely a proof that it is no longer to be classed with skating rinks, shooting galleries and other ephemeral pastimes. Perhaps its greatest claim to the serious attention of the thinking populace is its tremendous power to influence the minds of the masses."<sup>36</sup>

On the one hand, there is the thinking populace; on the other, the ephemeral pastimes of the masses: but cinema can become more than ephemeral, indeed, as an art properly handled, it can transform the masses into the thinking populace. This is the function of art.

When the recognition of the ideological power of cinema was linked to the domination of British screens by American films, two powerful lobbies were thrown into some consternation. On the one hand, there were those businessmen and others who believed that "films are a real aid to the development of Imperial trade; we all know the catch phrase 'Trade follows the Film'",<sup>37</sup> as the Prince of Wales put it at an event to promote British films in 1923. The real worry in this context was that American industry had an unfair advertising advantage over its British counterpart.

The second lobby consisted of educationalists, politicians and other ideologues worried about the potential erosion of British culture at home and in the Empire: the threat of 'de-nationalisation'. At the same event, the President of the British National Film League, had suggested that "the nation which today has no films of its own will become inarticulate in a world sense, its aspiration hidden from sight, its culture, its trend of thought overlooked."<sup>38</sup> Even the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, was impressed in 1925 by

"the enormous power which the film is developing for propaganda purposes, and the danger to which we in this country and our Empire subject ourselves if we allow that method of propaganda to be entirely in the hands of foreign countries."<sup>39</sup>

It was these concerns which led to the quota regulations, introduced in 1927 to ward off the threat of 'de-nationalisation':

"The widespread and potent influence of the Cinema makes it of vital importance that there shall be a substantial output of British films which shall not only be of good entertainment value, but shall also be expressive of the character, habits and ideals of our peoples."<sup>40</sup>

The power of cinema, the fear of mass culture, the desire to represent the nation, and the developing interest in cinema as an art-form, come together to form the main tenets of the intellectual film culture. Within that cultural formation, various arguments have been put forward over the years as to how British cinema can be saved from virtual barbarism. In each case, the argument involves firstly differentiating films from Hollywood and the mass culture that it is perceived as representing and engendering; secondly, developing some form of governmental protection of the interests of British film production; and

thirdly, attempting to produce a distinctively British, artistically respectable and socially responsible cinema and film culture. The main problem in each case has been the difficulty of winning consistent popular support for the cultural activities proposed, given that they are precisely deviations from the most popular film practices. There was an attempt to produce a 'national cinema' which was responsible and artistically respectable, and which at the same time appealed to 'the general public', in the mid-1940s. But populism as a strategy has not always been pursued with the same vigour and at other times there has been a deliberate fragmentation of the film market and of film audiences, producing an art cinema infrastructure separate from the mainstream infrastructure of commercial cinema.<sup>41</sup> Philip Dodd has argued that

"The various sectors of the artistic life of the period [1880-1920] ... were stabilised and fixed (always precariously) in terms of their different functions and related audiences. *Élite*/mass and *avant-garde*/commercial were not pairs of oppositional terms but pairs of complementary ones."<sup>42</sup>

Much the same can be said of the parallel cinemas with their different audiences and cultures that have developed since the mid-1920s, despite all the arguments about independence and oppositionality in the 1930s, and again in the period since the late 1960s.

These cultural arguments for producing a national cinema can generally be aligned with the industrial strategy of producing low- or medium-budget films for the domestic market. The financial inability of small independent producers to indulge in concerted mass production, is also, from the point of view of at least certain sectors within the intellectual film culture, one of its virtues, since it seems to imply a resistance to cultural standardisation.<sup>43</sup>

Part of the discourse about a quality national cinema involves contrasting the individuality of style and comparative artistic freedom of small independent production units - and later *auteurs* - with what is seen as "the rubber stamp of Hollywood entertainment":<sup>44</sup>

"[T]he emotional atmosphere [of Hollywood films] is nearly always 'dressed' with a certain showmanship. It makes immensely effective cinema, but it seldom lives in the knowledge of the close and personal heart. It turns too easily to sentimentality, to sexual or social heroics. The maturity of American cinema is a technical one. It is immensely at ease with itself because of its huge and assured market, its topline stars, its effective small part players, its ace directors and its efficient opulent studios. But it lacks the emotional purgation caused by struggle and stricture."<sup>45</sup>

This distinction between heartfelt emotion and mere technical accomplishment comes from a key publication of the mid-1940s, Roger Manvell's Film. It is typical of the discourse of a period which has been described as the 'Golden Age' of British cinema, since so many of its films have been presented as unproblematically 'national', and of high quality. As John Ellis has shown, and as I will elaborate in greater detail in chapter six, there is a certain consonance between the political and economic conditions of the film industry, the production policies of majors and independents alike, and the terms of the dominant critical discourse of the period.<sup>46</sup> Ellis argues that these conditions dissolve in the late 1940s: the economic crisis of 1948 meant a contraction of the industry and the loss of a material base for a quality cinema; a divergence had appeared between the industry's notion of the prestige film and the critics' notion of the quality British film; and there had been a failure to construct a sufficiently large audience for the kinds of films privileged in the critical discourse.

There is something of a break in the history of British film culture and intellectual film criticism in this period, and the terms of the dominant critical discourse are stressed differently in the interventions of the magazine *Sequence*, which had a rather different view of the qualities of British films in the mid 1940s, and a major impact on British film culture over the next decade or so.<sup>47</sup> In the light of this break in the development of critical discourses in the late 1940s, Ellis notes a shift of attention away from the 'quality British film' and the construction of a mass, popular but discerning audience for it, and towards a celebration of the foreign art film, and the construction of a new specialised infrastructure to house it.<sup>48</sup> The art/industry opposition is now thought through primarily in terms of the industrial structure of cinema encroaching on the space, the energy and the freedom of the artist as individual, the *auteur*.<sup>49</sup>

The critical methodology of *auteurism*, as a way of understanding and evaluating cinema as an art form, has increasingly taken hold of the imagination of British film critics, from which point of view, in the words of James Park, writing in the 1980s, "the history of British cinema is one of unparalleled mediocrity".<sup>50</sup> But the problem with British cinema is in the end an economic problem: even when the 'mediocrity' of British cinema is explained in terms of a poverty-stricken film culture, the solution is still in terms of creating a free space for the *auteur*, who has become the central marker of difference, the guarantee of uniqueness in the international film culture of the present.

### iii) Genres, movements and histories

The intellectual film culture in Britain has, for the most part, been unable to take seriously whole areas of popular cinema, including both the box-office appeal of Hollywood films and film stars, and the most popular British film genres. Instead, attention has been focussed on what are in fact quite marginal areas of British film activity. An alternative to this particular approach to British national cinema, with its inbuilt tendency to evaluate as to 'good' and 'bad' cinema, is to examine British films in terms of genre. Genre analysis has been one of the most productive means of making sense of American cinema as a national cinema. The processes of repetition and re-iteration which constitute a genre are highly productive ways of sustaining a sense of cultural identity.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, there have been British film histories which draw on theories of genre, but it is still very much an under-worked area.<sup>52</sup>

Popular cinema has always been organised generically - in part because genre production is a convenient means of managerial control necessary under conditions of standardised mass production and profit maximisation<sup>53</sup> - and a strong and popular national cinema must also to some extent be generically rich and resilient, its genres either deeply rooted in the cultural traditions and mythology of the nation, or imaginatively related to the contemporary concerns, pleasures and anxieties of its audiences.<sup>54</sup>

One of the problems in considering British cinema in terms of genre is that *American* genres are of course central to the viewing experience of British cinema audiences, and several British film genres draw on these American cinematic traditions as much as more indigenous traditions. Although the British



film industry has been involved in mass producing standardised films since at least the 1920s, it has not been characterised by the same degree of mass production in several large companies which was the economic context for the development of the American system of genres, as Tom Ryall has suggested.<sup>55</sup> Even so, "the British film industry did produce ... a small number of broadly defined genres with a certain degree of internal diversity"<sup>56</sup>, including the horror film,<sup>57</sup> the spy thriller and the crime thriller,<sup>58</sup> melodrama and historical romance,<sup>59</sup> and above all a strong tradition of popular comedy.<sup>60</sup> These genres have a similar indigenous strength to the American Western, gangster and melodrama genres, despite those arguments that mainstream British cinema has been unable to develop distinctive national cinematic traditions. The consistent critical neglect of these genres has been matched only by the extent to which they have dominated film production in Britain.<sup>61</sup> I will attempt to redress this imbalance when I look at *Sing As We Go* and the part it has played in reproducing ideas of national identity in chapter five.

The various forms of the thriller, the melodrama and the horror film owe a great deal to already existing novels by British writers, and testify to the importance of the literary adaptation for British film-making, as well as pointing to an already-formed popular cultural tradition on which the films can draw. Various aspects and several of the leading performers of the comedy genre are similarly derived from the music hall tradition. There is undoubtedly also a strong formal correspondence to the classical Hollywood film (at its weakest in the case of the popular comedy), even if the thematic focus and the source material are often more recognisably indigenous.

It is characteristic of histories produced from within the orthodox discursive formation defined in previous sections of this chapter<sup>62</sup> that, while popular genres are ignored, a series of relatively self-contained 'quality' movements are identified as carrying forward the banner of national cinema. This is a familiar move in debates about the construction of national cinemas outside Hollywood,<sup>63</sup> as can be seen in the relationship between a small group of radical film makers in the 1920s and understanding of Soviet Russian cinema as a national cinema, or the place of neo-realism in debates about Italian cinema, or the *nouvelle vague* and French cinema. In the case of British cinema, if one movement has pride of place, it has been the documentary movement, but several other movements have been identified and proclaimed as the cultural high-points in an otherwise un-impressive history: Ealing Studios and the quality film movement of the mid 1940s; Free Cinema and the new wave of the late 1950s and early 1960s;<sup>64</sup> and the renaissance of the 1980s. These other moments are seen as revivals, or continuations of the work of the documentary movement, and, in conventional histories of British cinema, they tend to be pulled together into one *national* tradition. Thus a familiar narrative sense of the historical development of British cinema is articulated, a seamless linear chain of causality.

Certain activities prior to the formation of the documentary movement are also retrospectively pulled into this teleology. Thus, Lumière is discussed as a potentially realist film maker, much is made of the work of Percy Smith and his *Secrets of Nature* series, and certain silent feature films are picked up for their 'realistic' qualities - that is to say, for their similarities to certain of the documentary films of the 1930s.<sup>65</sup> Indeed for some writers, the realism

associated with the documentary movement constitutes the only authentic national cultural tradition.<sup>66</sup>

This history is filled out by foregrounding certain feature films which again seem 'realistic' - some of Anthony Asquith's and Alfred Hitchcock's films of the 1930s for their attention to the surface details of English provincial life, and other films of the period which construct as their object social problems such as poverty and unemployment (e.g. *South Riding* [1938], and *The Stars Look Down* [1939]);<sup>67</sup> one or two late offerings from Ealing, some of John Grierson and John Baxter's work at Group 3, and the Free Cinema films, screenings and polemics in the mid-1950s, and so on.

Since the history of British film-making has been one of consistent under-capitalisation, virtually permanent crisis, and the fragmentation and dispersal of potential, there has been an understandable fear on the part of mainstream critics to face up to the actual differences and discontinuities which run across British film culture, and a corresponding desire to identify renewed traditions of 'quality', at the cost of ignoring, repressing and marginalising other cinematic practices. *One of the problems with this critical-historical identification of an on-going movement of documentary-realist film-making is that most of the conventional historians have seen no problems in writing about the films of the past in the same terms in which contemporary critics wrote about these films at the time of their initial release: "It is as if that history [of the cinema in Britain] were so self-evident and transparent as not to require a reading or writing."*<sup>68</sup> As Michel Foucault has argued in another context:

"we must question those ready-made syntheses, those groupings we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is recognised from the outset. ... The tranquility with which they are accepted must be disturbed."<sup>69</sup>

What is taken for granted in conventional discourse about cinematic movements are concepts such as 'uniqueness', 'originality', and 'coherence'. The term 'movement' is a label for films which are seen as departing from the mainstream, and which can be discussed in terms of their difference, their otherness, their self-sufficient and enclosed nature. This uniqueness is defined not only in relation to Hollywood and American cinema, but also to the very idea of genre and standardised, formulaic production. In fact, as the history of most film movements shows, in order to sustain their productive energy, the participants of a film movement must move in one of two ways.<sup>70</sup> Either the movement concretises into a reproducible genre, and this has certainly been the case with the most critically celebrated British film movements: as I will demonstrate in the case of the documentary-realist tradition, a genre of shared and repeatable characteristics is first built up, and then transformed and renewed in various ways - although mainstream critics and historians have resisted describing this area of film-making as a genre since this would be to acknowledge conventionality over against uniqueness, contemporaneity and immediacy. Alternatively, movements will fragment into a series of identifiable and bankable *auteurs*, as in the late 1940s, the mid-1960s, and the 1980s. Thus we are presented with the paradox of individual *auteurs*, whose work is legitimised primarily in terms of a discourse of self-expression, also being taken up as representatives of and vehicles for the expression of *national* culture.<sup>71</sup>

Audiences, and therefore box-office returns, have to be forthcoming if production is to be sustained, regardless of whether the movement sediments into a genre or fragments into a series of *auteurs*. The recruitment of sufficiently large audiences means, in practice, either moving towards Hollywood and the mainstream, or establishing a separate infrastructure of funding, production, distribution and exhibition. The documentary movement in the 1930s was founded on just such a separate economic base, funded by state and commercial sponsorship, with films made on minimal budgets. It was not therefore dependent on re-couping costs from box-office receipts, so the documentary units needed neither to compete with Hollywood in the British market, nor to break into the American market. It was for these reasons, amongst others, that the documentary movement could be taken up so readily in debates about national cinema. This same economic base, however, effectively disbars such film-making from the huge theatrical market, and therefore from developing into a *popular* cultural form. It is significant, therefore, that attempts to popularise documentary in the late 1930s involved a re-alignment with the theatrical market and a move to take on some of the narrative forms of the mainstream cinema, a move consolidated during the war years (and virtually reproduced by certain film-makers within the 'Independent Cinema' of the late 1970s and 1980s). I will be looking at this development in chapter six.

The purpose of the broad surveys of critical debate and industrial practice carried out in chapters two and three has been to establish a general context within which the three historically more specific case studies can be situated. I will now move on to the first of those case studies.

## Chapter 4: The heritage film, British cinema and the national past

### 1) Introduction: Comin' Thro' The Rye and the heritage film

*"They look back to periods of apparent stability and order that, to some people, seem preferable to the chaos of the present."  
Commentary on the experience of the country house, in The National Trust Book of the English House.<sup>1</sup>*

*"The people of these islands with their diverse cultural traditions were invited to take their place, and become spectators of a culture already complete and represented for them by its trustees."*

*Philip Dodd, writing in Englishness: Culture and Politics, 1880-1920.<sup>2</sup>*

One of the key strategies adopted in the bid to construct a national cinema in Britain has been the exploitation of what we may, following Charles Barr, call the heritage film<sup>3</sup> - that is to say, a genre of film which re-invents and reproduces, and in some cases, simply invents, a national heritage for the screen. This has been presented in the confirming and celebratory discourse that surrounds the genre as one of the major sites of 'quality' in British cinema - in part a quality which is assumed to rub off the heritage properties adapted for the screen, and in part one which is constructed in the modes of representation adopted within the genre.

The term genre is perhaps being used too loosely here - it is not after all commonplace to hear films being described as heritage films in the way that one might identify a western or a spy thriller. It may be that a term such as code would be more appropriate, for the films to which I am referring constitute a

specific codification of the melodrama, and particularly the historical romance or costume drama. Nevertheless, across the history of British cinema a fairly distinct group of films can be identified which share a similar coding, and which are treated by the critical institution and by the industry, whether at the stage of planning productions or marketing products, as distinctive.<sup>4</sup> The status of such films for the industry is ambivalent: they are not generally seen as potential commercial successes, but they are valued for their assumed cultural prestige. The recognisable status of such films suggests that, despite the drawbacks of using the term genre, it is worth retaining.

The central focus of the genre is undoubtedly the adaptation of literary and theatrical texts which already have some sort of classic status, as part of the accepted canon of plays and novels. But the genre can be seen to plunder the national heritage in other ways too, and also to invent new texts for the canon by treating otherwise marginal texts or properties to the same modes of representation and marketing.<sup>5</sup>

The genre involves much more than simply the adaptation of literary and dramatic texts: the notion of heritage property needs to be extended to cover also the types of architectural and landscape properties conserved by the National Trust and English Heritage, as well as 'significant' historical moments, and particular aristocratic character-types, reproduced in a performance style associated with English theatrical acting. These properties - the term seems more than appropriate - constitute the iconography of the genre. Iconography likewise seems the appropriate term here, since it implies a sign system which can be reproduced as easily inside or outside the cinema: iconography is not a specifically cinematic element of the *mise-en-scène*, just as this genre of films

has often been accused of being poor cinema, mere adaptation, no more than illustrations of the 'original' properties.<sup>6</sup>

Hence the importance in the validation of such cinema of terms such as authenticity - the desire to establish the adaptation of the heritage property (whether conceived as historical period, novel, play, building, personage, decor or fashion) as an authentic reproduction of the 'original'. A version of realism is thus at work in the production and consumption of the heritage genre, just as it is in the documentary-realist tradition - except that it is a different version of realism, primarily in its stress on the reproduction of what is taken to be a pre-existing historical reality as opposed to a contemporary reality. Indeed, this other genre, the documentary-realist tradition, may be seen in some ways as anti-heritage, or, at least, the *democratisation* of heritage, in its concern to represent the mundane cultural traditions of 'ordinary people', rather than of the canonical, the acclaimed, or the distinctive.<sup>7</sup>

Paradoxically, the two genres most frequently cited in debates about British cinema as a national cinema seem to pull in opposite directions, and to embody different ideological perspectives. Yet on several occasions they have coincided in particular productions, which then reveal how close the two genres may in fact be. Thus, *This Happy Breed* (1944) and *Great Expectations* (1946) - both discussed in chapter six - seem to thrive on what is in effect a conjunction of the two genres in the specific conditions of the mid 1940s, while *Tom Jones* (1963) uses the heritage genre to negotiate and consolidate the shift from one contemporary 'reality' to another: that is, from the working class kitchen-sink of Britain's new wave to the classless modernity of swinging London.<sup>8</sup>



In the 1980s, the heritage industry as a whole - "one of the most powerful imaginative constructs of our time"<sup>9</sup> - has undeniably expanded and been exploited on a massive scale, and has inserted itself at the very centre of the construction of the national imagination.<sup>10</sup> Cinema, too, has been a vital part of that industry, and many of the British films of the 1980s can be seen to inhabit both the heritage genre and the quality end of the market in one way or another. But the play on heritage, and the whole process of inventing tradition and conserving particular images and properties of the past in order to represent the nation can be found in many other periods as well. However, the commodification of our relationship with the past on an industrial scale, with a mass market, can be said to have taken place in the late 19th century, with the 'discovery of Rural England',<sup>11</sup> and the development of an organised conservation lobby - issues which will be discussed in section iii of this chapter. The heritage genre, likewise, has a long history within British cinema. One of its earliest protagonists was Cecil Hepworth, and I will explore some of the issues at stake in the heritage genre by looking in detail at his literary adaptation, *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, made in 1923 and released in 1924, which has a reputation as one of the most accomplished British films of the early 1920s, much praised for its photography of English landscapes and country houses.<sup>12</sup>

*Comin' Thro' The Rye* was, for the time, a relatively conventional project, from what was already recognisable as a "typically British school of film-making",<sup>13</sup> and it should be seen as part of a quite self-conscious bid to find an English idiom for film by reference to a perceived heritage. The heritage genre, and this film in particular, are thus part of a deliberate attempt at product differentiation, and to accuse such films of being un-cinematic, or too literary, or too theatrical, is to fail to take into account the particular conditions of

this differentiation. 'Un-cinematic' may simply mean not like classical Hollywood cinema - but, as this is precisely the objective of the heritage film, it is hardly a valid criticism.

*Comin' Thro' The Rye* is an adaptation of a best-selling Victorian novel by Helen Mathers, a three-decker romantic melodrama first published in 1875. Mathers is generally regarded as no more than a minor Victorian novelist, with *Comin' Thro' The Rye* her best known work, reprinted many times over.<sup>14</sup> The book deals with the mid-Victorian gentry class, it was addressed to a leisured middle-class readership, and, by 1923, it was very much a period piece; it could therefore be construed as having a certain cultural value. On the other hand, in the context of 1870s writing and politics, the novel was, according to Elaine Showalter, relatively sensationalist, not least for its muted feminist protest against the conditions of upper-class women and its re-working of romance conventions; it was also a best seller.<sup>15</sup> This meant that it was only with some difficulty that the novel could be represented as an unproblematically high cultural text; at the same time, it does seem to aspire to some sort of cultural status through its constant references to classical literature, Shakespeare, and the traditions of the nineteenth century novel, and the trade paper *The Bioscope*, at least, saw it as "a perfect epitome of a certain type of English life and thought."<sup>16</sup>

Hepworth clearly hoped that, by selecting this novel for adaptation, the film could garner around it both a literary quality, and a certain popularity given the wide readership of the book - the title 'From the novel by Helen Mathers' is prominently displayed at the start of the film. Hepworth in fact made two versions of the film, the first in 1916 with modern-day dress and settings.<sup>17</sup> The novel had been reprinted in both a complete edition and a popular edition

the previous year, thus giving it a renewed popular currency, and it was around this time that Hepworth had adopted the policy of "pay[ing] good money for books or plays that were already successful in the eyes of the public. In other words, cash in on the popularity already secured."<sup>18</sup>

The second version of the film was set in the 1860s, thereby transforming a novel with a contemporary setting into a historical romance with a period setting. Hepworth had, in fact, had some regrets about up-dating the story for the 1916 version, since clearly part of the appeal of the novel in the 'teens, some forty years after it had first been published, was the way in which it could be read as having preserved in aspic a nostalgically recalled moment in the history of Englishness.<sup>19</sup> The 1923 version is, like the novel, set firmly within the milieu of the gentry, and readily makes jokes at the expense of the lower classes.<sup>20</sup> The rye field for the landowning class is primarily a place of leisure and romance, rather than agricultural labour, and images of sowing and harvesting have symbolic rather than material significance in the film. As such, the film can be read as a paean for and a mythologisation of a disappearing class and culture and the class system on which it depends, a celebration of the traditional upper class values of honour and propriety (hence the unhappy ending), a reproduction of a *moral* heritage. It conducts this paean within the discourse of pastoral, employing the photographic conventions of pictorialism, which again lends the film a certain cultural status - and the more conservative versions of pastoral, at least, relate very closely to the ideological project of the heritage industry. As Terry Morden has noted, "in Britain, the pastoral has a particular resonance. It lies deep within the national consciousness providing the dominant and enduring image of the British land."<sup>21</sup>

The Hepworth company already had a reputation for producing 'tasteful' films, well-made by British standards, and often adaptations of well-known novels and plays (including adaptations of Dickens, Shakespeare and Pinero, and many other currently popular works).<sup>22</sup> To Hepworth, these were "important and worthwhile pictures", "lengthy ... pictures [which] had won great success", "sterner material among that which is merely entertaining",<sup>23</sup> by comparison with the material produced before the 'teens - despite the fact that "I had always had the feeling that picture making was an art in itself and should depend upon its own original writers for its material."<sup>24</sup> As Rachael Low notes, films like the 1916 *Comin' Thro' The Rye* were praised for their "excellent photographic quality, beautiful exteriors, restrained acting and unsentimental stories";<sup>25</sup> as one reviewer put it, "Hepworth's productions are always remarkable for their delicacy of touch and the beauty of their countryside settings."<sup>26</sup> In addition, Hepworth's films were being praised for their Englishness - or rather, these same qualities were understood as essentially English qualities. Thus *Picturegoer* described Hepworth's films as "representative of English thought, ideals, and character, without any imitation of other countries whatsoever."<sup>27</sup> The full force of this particular discourse is to be found in the pages of the intensely patriotic *Bioscope*, as in their review of *Drake's Love Story* (1913):

"One's first sensation on seeing this very fine production by the Hepworth Company is a feeling of gratification that the splendid chapter of English history which it represents has been immortalised in pictures not by a foreign firm but by a company essentially and entirely English. ... We must all be ready appreciatively to recognise the laudable efforts of Messrs. Hepworth ... to establish the art of film manufacture on quite as high and as national a basis in our own, as in other countries."<sup>28</sup>

The 1916 version of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* was equally well received:

"[The novel] is so essentially English that the task of interpreting it in pictorial form would have been beyond the powers not only of any foreign film producer but also of a great many British ones. In Mr. Cecil Hepworth, whose unsurpassed skill in the representation of typically English scenes is well known, Miss Mathers may justly be said to have found an ideal interpreter for her book. ... In his search for backgrounds, Mr. Hepworth seems to have ransacked the country for open-air beauty of the most perfectly and essentially English type. We have never seen a film which embodied more thoroughly the true inner spirit, as well as the outward appearance, of the English countryside. ... As a great picture-maker, Mr. Hepworth has never done a finer or more artistic piece of work."<sup>29</sup>

Such nationalistic sentiments are central to the critical reputation of Hepworth's films, but in retrospect, as far as Hepworth himself was concerned, it was the 1923 version of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* which was "my best and most important film".<sup>30</sup> Contemporary reviewers tended to agree: "*Comin' Thro' The Rye* has excelled [Hepworth's] own high standards";<sup>31</sup> "it ranks among his finest achievements. ... It is the Hepworth school at its very best - and this is praise unstinted."<sup>32</sup>

The 1923 version of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* was in fact the last film produced by the Hepworth company before its bankruptcy the following year,<sup>33</sup> an economic failure symptomatic of the state of the British film industry in the mid-1920s.<sup>34</sup> While distributors and exhibitors were relatively buoyant from the profits of the American films which they handled, the production sector was in crisis. As Low notes, the early 1920s saw the emergence of a new generation of British film producers such as Michael Balcon and Victor Saville,<sup>35</sup> but for the most part, the production sector was under-capitalised, poorly managed, inadequately resourced, unable to secure sufficiently profitable distribution at home or abroad, and lacking the advantages of vertical integration increasingly enjoyed by the American companies with whom they were competing.

The situation can however be looked at in a different way, for 'the old' and 'the new' can also be distinguished between as those attempting to produce a distinctively national cinema, and those attempting to compete with Hollywood on its own terms, as in the case of another 1923 film, *Woman to Woman* (which is discussed later in this chapter), for which the American star Betty Compson was imported. Thus, in a review of 1923, *The Bioscope* noted that

"British pictures during the year were numerous and varied, ranging from big supers (made in the American style with a view to entering the American market) to typically national plays of more modest character but not less artistic merits."<sup>36</sup>

But generally in this period, one finds the standards of the American film becoming increasingly accepted as international standards, such that films which deviated from those standards were seen as backward, rather than as 'typically national'. Hepworth's work is at the very centre of this debate.

The general problems facing the British production industry were not new - but they had by this time reached crisis point - "the British film industry is dying", pronounced *The Morning Post* in early 1924.<sup>37</sup> The build-up had been long-term, and can be traced back to three main causes: the much earlier and much more intense capitalisation of the American industry in comparison with the British industry; the much smaller home market in Britain than in America; and the profits that were to be had from involvement in London-based international distribution of American and other films. This third factor encouraged investment in and development of distribution at the expense of production, and the exploitation of American films at the expense of British films.<sup>38</sup> The situation for British producers had been drastically exacerbated by

the blind- and block-booking practices of the major American companies, by the early 1920s. Although the Hepworth company was one of the more successful British production companies during the 1900s and the 'teens, with its own distribution arm active both at home and in the United States, by the mid 1920s, its business methods, and the products themselves were out of step with the international standards being set by the American majors. The final straw for Hepworth was a public flotation to raise capital to fund plans for a new studio complex - which, significantly, was already outmoded in its design.<sup>39</sup> The flotation, during a general trade depression, was under-subscribed, and Hepworth was eventually forced into bankruptcy.<sup>40</sup>

The production sector of the industry, and the trade press, were working hard to stave off the impending crisis. The British National Film League had been founded in 1921 with the object of attempting to re-establish British films on an equal footing with American films both in the domestic market and internationally, and "to raise the standard, improve the quality and promote the general interests of British films."<sup>41</sup> According to its secretary, the foundation of the League was "the existence of good will between British producing and renting firms",<sup>42</sup> but in fact it was much more attuned to the interests of (British) producers than anyone else in the trade:

"For the first time in the history of the business, British producers have pooled their energies to embark upon an important communal enterprise. Realising that in all fundamentals they are co-operators and not competitors, they have tackled the problem of British Films in the only practical way by combining forces to further the general interests of the British producing industry."<sup>43</sup>

A campaign of British Film Weeks, with the slogan 'British films for British people', was launched in November 1923 at a prestigious Luncheon Party attended by the Prince of Wales, and many other distinguished guests from the worlds of politics and the arts.<sup>44</sup> The presence of the Prince was seen as a great boost to the industry - "a unique national tribute to the screen [and] a gesture of goodwill to the British film producing industry".<sup>45</sup> Sentiments were high, with much talk of the power of film, the threat of Americanisation, the necessity for cinema to be recognised as a national industry, and so on, with due attention being paid to "the moral effect of the Weeks, besides the immediate commercial results."<sup>46</sup> The President of the League announced that "the project is to celebrate in co-operation with the exhibitor and the theatre-owner the immense progress and improvement of the British film during the last eighteen months."<sup>47</sup> But something more was at stake too, since, as *The Bioscope* noted, the event "implied that the importance of the industry in general, and home production in particular, is now acknowledged in the most influential circles."<sup>48</sup> Occasions such as this were, in the long-term, paving the way for government intervention to protect the British producing industry from American cultural imperialism.

*Comin' Thro' The Rye* was one of the films that was trade shown in this context - indeed, Hepworth recalled in his autobiography that the film was specifically prepared for the British Film Week.<sup>49</sup> It is obviously significant that for "such an important occasion"<sup>50</sup> he should have selected an historical adaptation, with all the prestige and conservative bourgeois values that the heritage genre, the historical period and the literary adaptation could bring to the popular entertainment medium of film.<sup>51</sup> After the screening of his film, Hepworth made a speech in which he predicted that "the year of 1923 will go down in history



as the year of the renaissance of the British film, and of the sudden dramatic collapse of the American 'banana' film", adding that

"a sound moving picture industry is an absolute necessity to the health of any country today. The whole world is being Americanised as a direct result of the fact that the United States possesses the premier moving picture industry."<sup>52</sup>

Certainly, British films received a great deal of publicity in late 1923 and early 1924, but if there was any such renaissance, it was neither accompanied by the collapse of the American film in the British market, nor was it long lasting. Most of the press went along with the rhetoric of the Film Weeks, but as *The Manchester Guardian* suggested "the British film Trade is in a bad way and extremely nervous. The Weeks are a last desperate bid for favour"; it was also noted that "the films of which the Week promoters seem most proud ... have been built entirely around the personality and methods of a specially imported star",<sup>53</sup> and certainly the most heavily promoted and best-received film was *Woman to Woman* (1923), with its American star. It was precisely the power of the American film industry that forbade any real renaissance of British films, and only a year after the launch of the Film Weeks campaign, November 1924 went down in history as 'Black November' with not a single film in production at any studio in Britain.

The predicaments facing an outmoded operation like Hepworth Pictures in the context of the state of the international film industry in the early and mid-1920s are all too evident from the tone and contents of a letter from Hepworth's publicity representative, Cecil Palmer,<sup>54</sup> published in the trade papers in July 1924.<sup>55</sup> Palmer was attempting to secure the future of the now

rapidly collapsing Hepworth Picture Plays by appeals to British exhibitors on the grounds of patriotism - these are *English* films - and justice and generosity towards a pioneer British producer whose "name and [whose] productions have brought prestige to the industry".<sup>56</sup> The discourse is in many ways characteristic of certain more conservative strands within the film culture and political culture of the 1920s, expressing a deep anxiety at the erosion of Englishness by American popular culture. The proposed solution takes the form of self-regulation by the industry: in essence, the message is 'Buy British', which should be enough of a guarantee of quality.<sup>57</sup>

Palmer's intervention fails to address the potential contradiction between ideologies of nationalism, and the development of international markets and the flow of capital; more specifically, it fails to address the deep-seated conflict of interests between British producers on the one hand, and on the other hand distributors and exhibitors operating in league with the much more powerful major American companies. The trade press were not slow to point out the inadequacies of the argument, especially from an exhibitor's point of view. An editorial in *Kine Weekly*, for instance, attacked producers like Hepworth for their

"lack of vision [and their] narrow insistence on stars, stories and methods which have no value outside a small circle. ... Grant that a producer of the type of Hepworth considers himself an artiste. Accept the idea that he is trying to find a means of personal expression. But if that attempt at artistry fails, if the expression does not find general acceptance, it is folly to blame the world at large."<sup>58</sup>

The implication is that Hepworth's films were of interest only to a minority: they were in modern terminology art-house films, but still attempting to operate

within the commercial environment, which was dominated by American standards, methods and products. It was on these grounds of failure to adapt to the conditions of the market-place on which Hepworth, and others like him, were criticised:

"Our producers - particularly our producers who fail - must face the facts. They have not made the kind of pictures that have been wanted. They have studied their own narrow conception of a public as conceived by them, instead of a broad conception of humanity. They have been too self-satisfied, too insular, too unorganised both in their production and their selling. ... To ask the exhibitor to book pictures which his judgement and his estimates of box-office potentialities have already caused him to pass by, and to book them because a producing organisation is British instead of because the pictures are worth his while as against what else is in the market, is to appeal to misguided sentiment. And curiously enough, the sentiment is all on one side. For the very firm which is handling Hepworth films [Ideal] has passed its own verdict on British production by ceasing to make films and, instead, making heavy contracts with American producers."<sup>59</sup>

As the 1920s progressed, it became clear that appeals to industry self-regulation alone would be insufficient to protect the interests of British producers, and only the combination of State support and the concentration of ownership and control in the industry as a whole would come anywhere near to offering the sort of protection required. Even then, small companies like Hepworth Picture Plays would find it difficult to survive for reasons discussed elsewhere, not least since the emerging minority film culture and the development of an art cinema, in which context films like *Comin' Thro' The Rye* might ideally have thrived, were increasingly dominated by European films and a modernist aesthetic very different from that of Hepworth.

#### 11) Hepworth and film culture

*Comin' Thro' The Rye* is undoubtedly a significant text in terms of debates about British cinema as a national cinema, not only because it operates within the conventions of what I am calling the heritage genre, but also because it occupies a highly symbolic place in an international film market increasingly dominated by the institutional mode of representation of the American cinema industry. The film is in many ways the product of a transitional moment for the British film industry, in which one set of filmic and industrial conventions - as adopted by *Comin' Thro' The Rye* and the Hepworth company which produced it - are being superseded by a new set of conventions, those of what is now called classical Hollywood cinema. But further, this is also a period in which debates about the nature of film as an art and about the relations between cinema and national identity are coming to the fore. Indeed, in the press during late 1923 and early 1924, one finds a surprisingly optimistic tone adopted in discussions about the possibilities of British film production. This is despite the parlous state of that sector of the industry, and due in no small part to the propagandizing efforts of the British National Film League. An article by a young Iris Barry - in one of the trade papers - is typical of this discourse for the way in which it combines issues of art and national identity in relation to cinema:

"Art at its source is national. ... The moment has arrived for the British film industry to take one road or another: to make films using every resource or technique on which it can lay its hands, while remaining in essence British - or to attempt to imitate the films of other countries in spirit as well as in form. ... And the British producer in considering technique will do well to look, like Janus, two ways - to California certainly, but to Berlin as well. He may look two ways and move in neither, remaining British."<sup>60</sup>

Comin' Thro' The Rye, because it is situated at quite such a transitional moment, at a time of intense negotiation between different film cultures and different business practices, has a very ambivalent reception, both at the time, and in subsequent histories. Roy Armes, in his standard A Critical History of British Cinema sees the two extant Hepworth films of the 1920s, *Comin' Thro' The Rye* and *Mist In the Valley*, as "retrogressive in so many ways", but notes also that "Hepworth's approach seemed successful even in 1922 [sic]",<sup>61</sup> a view which largely reproduces that of Rachael Low in her History of the British Film.<sup>62</sup> The contemporary reception was, in fact, more complicated than this: *Comin' Thro' The Rye* was neither summarily dismissed nor unhesitatingly celebrated. On the one hand, the film is praised for its uniqueness, its Britishness, and on the other hand, it is berated for failing to adhere to the conventions of narrative film-making in continuity style which were being refined in the studios of Hollywood. The reviews in *The Bioscope* - "one of the most beautiful and dramatically effective pictures yet made by Mr Hepworth"<sup>63</sup> - and *The Times* can be read as reasonably confident ovations for the film, with *The Times* commenting more generally that

"Mr. Cecil Hepworth himself is one of the pioneers of the British film industry, and the work that is put out by the organisation of which he is the head is typical of the best class of British film."<sup>64</sup>

While this may in fact be damnation by faint praise (and there are certainly several moments of hesitation in *The Bioscope's* review), it is undoubtedly also the sort of praise which Paul Rotha attacks in his influential survey of world cinema, The Film Till Now, first published in 1930. In the section on British films of the 1920s, Rotha establishes for posterity the line which the journal *Close-Up* had been pushing since 1927. These critical judgements are almost

wholly reproduced in subsequent critical accounts of the period, notably the Low and Arnes texts cited above. Rotha opens his chapter on British films with the following passage, which is worth quoting at length:

"The British film is established on a hollow foundation. Perhaps it would be more significant to write that it rests upon a structure of false prestige, supported by the flatulent flapdoodle of newspaper writers and by the indifferent goodwill of the British people... The whole morale of the British cinema is extravagantly artificial. It has been built up by favoured criticism and tolerance of attitude. ... Well-merited castigation would have laid bare, and therefore more easily remedied, the root of the evil. Instead, there have been British Film Weeks and National Film Campaigns which have nourished the cancer in the film industry. As it is, the British film is spoon-fed by deceptive praise and quota regulations, with the unhappy result that it has not yet discovered its nationality."<sup>55</sup>

Hepworth's *Comin' Thro' The Rye* was of course one of the key films of the November 1923 launch of the British Film Week campaign, as noted earlier, and so must bear some of the burden of Rotha's criticisms. Yet the film was certainly conceived as an attempt to 'discover the nationality' of British films. The particular set of *élite* cultural references with which Hepworth works in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* in itself represents something of a paradox, since it shows the thinking of Hepworth, at least, about the sort of standards and qualities with which the British film should be invested, at a time when audiences on the whole were attuned to the somewhat different standards of the Hollywood film. Hepworth himself was quite adamant about this process of differentiation from Hollywood. He was not in any way of the school that felt that the best way to compete with Hollywood and find a comfortable niche in the market place was by imitating its films:

"It was always in the back of my mind from the very beginning that *I was to make English pictures, with all the English countryside for background and with English atmosphere and English idiom throughout.* When the Transatlantic films began to get a stranglehold upon the trade over here

it came to be generally assumed that the American method and style of production was the reason for their success, and the great majority of producers set about to try to imitate them. The Americans have their own idiom in picture-making just as they have their own accent in speaking. It is not necessarily better than ours and it cannot successfully be copied. We have our own idiom too which they could not copy if they tried. It is our part to develop along the lines which are our heritage, and only in that way can we be true to ourselves and to those qualities which are ours."<sup>66</sup>

These statements are not unusual in the discourse of the period, as the extracts from Iris Barry's 1924 article quoted earlier testify: Barry chastises the British film-maker who makes films which speak "in an American tone of voice" and specifically mentions Hepworth as a film-maker who has "remain[ed] in essence British."<sup>67</sup> Hepworth's comments should then be taken as a cue to reassess *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, which is so often seen as a retarded, even primitive film by comparison with the prevailing international standards. Even at the time, the more commercially-minded reviewers saw it, and other Hepworth pictures of the period, as old-fashioned, and not comprehensively enough addressed to the mass market.<sup>68</sup> Hepworth's recollections suggest, however, that his company was not trying to reproduce or adhere to the conventions being established by the American studios. On the contrary, it was quite self-consciously trying to do different, to produce a distinctive national cinema. We can, perhaps, be even more precise than this, and argue that Hepworth was deliberately exploiting what would now be called the art cinema end of the market, with all its middle-class pretensions. This view is confirmed by the general tone of the trade press comments on Hepworth's films, by the suggestions in their reviews for exhibitors that this is "a picture that will interest better class houses",<sup>69</sup> and by the evidence of the limited and specialist exhibition that it actually received.<sup>70</sup> Reading the heritage genre in

these terms more generally would certainly be a worthwhile and fruitful endeavour.

Hepworth's thinking about cinema at the time of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* was of course the product of the film culture of the 'teens, and the general desire on the part of the industry as a whole to 'move up-market'. He felt in retrospect that he had begun to make "important and worthwhile pictures"<sup>71</sup> in the years just preceding the first world war. In the film culture of the 'teens and the early 1920s - prior, that is, to the founding of The Film Society - he was considered an artist of the cinema, "an artist in the truest sense of the word",<sup>72</sup> "the poet producer, who can write lyrics with his camera",<sup>73</sup> "an artiste ... trying to find a means of individual expression"<sup>74</sup>; and *Comin' Thro' The Rye* was seen as being "stamped indelibly with the personality of the producer".<sup>75</sup> Individuality, self-expression, the authorial signature, were already being constructed within British film culture as important markers of difference, and, in the film culture of the period, artistry was never far from Englishness. The individual artist is thereby constructed (in Hepworth's case no doubt willingly) as a sort of ambassador of the national culture. This paradox of the individual-yet-national, as noted earlier, is often central to the discourse of art cinema, even in its more self-consciously *auteurist* version, where the cultural status of the artist can legitimise a certain regime of representation. The personal/national expression of the English film-maker became Canute to the tide of American popular cinema:

"No artist has ever given us with a paint brush more beauteous pictures to gaze upon than some which have flashed (alas! their impression is all too fleeting through the medium of the screen) before our charmed vision during the screening of any one of [Hepworth's] famous productions. ... [For example] in *Comin' Thro' the Rye* [1916] the incomparable charm of English gardens - of rye fields, of blossom-burdened trees - vied for supremacy as



representatives of English art in its cleanest, grandest form. ... While the prestige of the English film remains at the status set by the House of Hepworth, then the English film will stand, an undisputed proof of home efficiency."<sup>76</sup>

The problem for Hepworth, for *Comin' Thro' The Rye* - and indeed for subsequent films in the heritage genre - was that 'English art in its cleanest, grandest form' was no longer quite so fashionable. The debate about cinema as an art form, and prevailing definitions of good film practice, rapidly took off in quite new directions in the mid-1920s, under the influence particularly of German expressionism and the Soviet montage school, and through the aegis of The Film Society and *Close-Up*, *inter alia*. Few of the idiosyncracies of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* are followed up in later British films of the decade aimed at the 'quality' end of the market, and it is no surprise that Rotha, in his survey of British cinema in *The Film Till Now*, can find no place to mention Hepworth's later work: it in no way coincides with his ideas of cinematicity, which had moved away considerably from the more conservative notions of the 'teens as to how film could aspire to the status of art. Rotha, like most of the contributors to *Close-Up*, embraced a typically modernist concern to establish a specifically cinematic mode of representation. John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929) was, for Rotha, "the only film produced in this country that reveals any real evidence of construction, montage of material, or sense of cinema as understood in these pages",<sup>77</sup> but the work of Anthony Asquith and Alfred Hitchcock was also of course singled out for consideration. In a similar vein, one contributor to *Close-Up* suggested that Hitchcock "is the one man in this country who can think cinema".<sup>78</sup>

Hepworth certainly did not 'think cinema' in the way that Hitchcock did, and his approach to film as an art involved a much more parasitic strategy *vis-à-vis* the other arts. Numerous efforts had been made throughout the 'teens to establish cinema as an important and worthwhile art by drawing on literature and legitimate theatre, notably by adapting established, familiar literary and dramatic texts - texts, that is, which already had both an audience and a status. Hepworth had been one of the leading figures of this tendency within the British film industry. But with films like *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, it was not only that already established plays and novels were being adapted to the screen. *Comin' Thro' The Rye* also retains a link with the 'superior' world and status of legitimate theatre in its style, which is predominantly 'theatrical' - in contrast to what is generally considered to be the 'filmic' style of the emergent classical Hollywood film. Thus the acting in some cases is much more heavily mannered and gestural, and the staging much more frontal than in most contemporary American films, with the actors apparently performing to a relatively static camera; the shot is very often in *tableau* form (long takes, composed in long shot, with strong pictorial values), and there is consequently a relative lack of scene dissection or penetration of space. *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is further parasitic of the status and conventions of other arts in its re-working of certain of the aesthetic and moral principles of pictorialist photography, which by the 1920s was well-established as the mainstream photographic art practice.<sup>79</sup> Hepworth and Hitchcock were thus from quite different generations. *Comin' Thro' The Rye's* sprawling narrative, pictorial display and theatricality were a far cry from the accomplished narrative cinema and visual story-telling of Hitchcock, who much more readily embraced contemporary developments in American and European cinema, and who had a much

more populist approach to English culture. He would, no doubt, have done something very different with Mathers's novel had he been so inclined.

Hepworth's approach to cinema was, in fact, already at odds with the more progressive elements in the prevailing debate about film as art. The editor of *The Cinema*, for instance, in a foreword to a 1916 script-writing manual, argued that

"The 'picturisation', as it is uncouthly called, of the play or novel ... hinders the development of the cinema as a separate art, and weds it, unless the subject is handled with notable freedom and license ... to traditions from which it is trying to shake itself free. ... [The] smallest but the most important [line of effort in film-production] has been in the construction of the photo-play which owes little or nothing to the drama or literature, but aims at being an embodiment in itself of that newest of all the arts, the art of thinking continuously in pictures, with few or no sub-titles to eke out the exigencies of the story. It is this line of effort which is most closely identified with that great future which, we all believe, is in store for cinematography."<sup>80</sup>

'The art of thinking continuously in pictures': this is not quite yet a theory of montage as would be elaborated through the 1920s, and nor is it something with which Hepworth would have had much trouble in accepting as a principle. On the other hand, Hepworth's films of the 'teens and early 1920s were heavily reliant on pre-existing written texts. Of course, this was in part a marketing strategy, but one can see that as an aesthetic practice, it did, from one point of view, 'hinder the development of the cinema as a separate art'.

In the same manual, it is stated that "sub-titles ... must not be relied upon to interpret action, but should merely assist in carrying the story forward, when the characters refuse to tell the story without them."<sup>81</sup> Yet, in *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, there are a number of titles which have a symbolic rather than strictly

narrative intent, such as the quotations from the traditional song by the same title,<sup>82</sup> which give a sort of poetic intimation of what is to come, rather than indicate that a diegetic character is actually singing the song; likewise, on a couple of occasions as the action switches back from one scene of action to another, in a moment of parallel editing, Hepworth feels the need to add what are really quite redundant titles - 'Naturally the tragedy makes no lasting impression on those not involved', and 'In Rome meanwhile, the plot is deepening' - which by their presence draw attention to the mechanics of story-telling, and the difficulties which this film has in working fluently with them. Moments such as these suggest that Hepworth was 'trying to think continuously in pictures', yet was still attached to a film practice which relied heavily on inter-titles: once again, the film seems to be caught between different tendencies in the film culture.

### iii) The heritage industry and the construction of the national past

*Comin' Thro' The Rye* needs to be related to a broader perspective on heritage and the national past. I will therefore look at some of the ways in which the national heritage has been constructed since the late nineteenth century, and some of the implications for cinema of those constructions, before I move on to a detailed analysis of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. Michael Bommers and Patrick Wright have argued that, in producing a national heritage, "a particular conception of the past [is] produced, privileged, installed and maintained as a public and national 'consensus'."<sup>83</sup> Elsewhere, Wright maintains that this national past is "above all a *modern* past", "an imaginary object",<sup>84</sup> which is continually being re-imagined, re-conceived, re-invented from the perspective of the present, as a response to "the leading tensions of the contemporary political situation".<sup>85</sup> The construction of the national heritage - a moral space as much as anything else - involves not so much the selecting of only certain values from the past, as the transference of present values on to the past as imaginary object.

Wright shows how a significant strand of the national heritage has been articulated above all in terms of landscape, property and history, through the activities of the conservation lobby since the late nineteenth century: "the impulse to preserve landscapes and buildings is an insistent cultural tendency within Western modernity."<sup>86</sup> The conservation lobby has worked to represent particular landscapes as both natural and national, and to render the private property of the upper classes as in the general, public interest, as part of the national imagination. He shows, in particular, how the practice of bodies like the National Trust, founded in 1895, seeks to resolve this tension between private property and public interest by promoting the category of *national*

interest.<sup>87</sup> The full name of the Trust was initially 'The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest and Natural Beauty', and it is terms such as these which are used to negotiate this transformation of bourgeois interest, values and taste into national culture: the properties, the buildings, and the homes of the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy are re-presented as the national properties which are of most 'historic interest'; their land, often heavily landscaped, and produced according to specific aesthetic and moral perspectives, is mythologised as places of 'natural beauty'.

"National Heritage is a public articulation or staging of the past ... (which) appears to involve nothing less than the abolition of all contradiction in the name of a national culture."<sup>88</sup>

More specifically, as Wright points out, the work of the National Trust can be seen as

"a vindication of property relations: a spectacular enlistment of the historically defined categories 'natural beauty' and 'historic interest' which demonstrates how private property simply *is* in the national public interest."<sup>89</sup>

Clearly, although Wright does not broach the subject, cinema can be seen as another of the apparatuses by which these "dominant and publicly instituted representations of the past"<sup>90</sup> are reproduced and secured as a cultural presence in twentieth century Britain. Cinema is one of the means by which the national past is quite specifically 'staged' and made generally accessible, as the spectacular object of the public gaze. It is one of the means by which certain types of landscape and property are appropriated as 'naturally British' - for heritage films like *Comin' Thro' The Rye* are replete with stately homes and

other ancient buildings and picturesque landscapes (many of them no doubt now National Trust properties): they are yet one more example of "how extensively rural and 'historical' conceptions of the nation have been elaborated within the changing public spheres of twentieth century Britain."<sup>91</sup>

These processes need to be related to the strength in British culture of the pastoral tradition, and in particular to the nostalgic, ruralist response to industrialism and modernity described by Martin J. Wiener. Concern and anxiety about the very industrialism that the English bourgeoisie had pioneered, a "suspicion of material and technological development",<sup>92</sup> became increasingly prevalent in the late Victorian period, expressed in terms of "ideals of stability, tranquillity, closeness to the past, and 'non-materialism'."<sup>93</sup> In a period which in fact sees the consolidation of urban society, these ideals, Wiener argues, were paradoxically most easily encapsulated in rural, pastoral imagery, the mythology of 'this green and pleasant land': "this countryside of the mind was everything industrial society was not - ancient, slow-moving, stable, cozy and 'spiritual'."<sup>94</sup> This pastoral vision produced a particular conception of 'Englishness' as an ancient inheritance, and England as 'an old country': "the new national self-image dressed itself in the trappings of an older tradition."<sup>95</sup>

Alun Howkins has shown in detail how what he calls 'the discovery of Rural England' - the construction of a very specific rural vision of the national landscape and the national character - is achieved in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in art, literature, music, architecture and garden design.<sup>96</sup> What becomes clear is that the nation, in a familiar slippage, becomes England, which itself is reduced to a particular vision of the 'South Country',

the area south of the Thames and the Severn, and East of the Exe, and some other areas topographically and culturally similar, such as the southern Midlands, and even Shropshire. This may be represented as a rural space, but its landscapes are also crucially populated and cultivated, not wild or sublime. This sense of landscape as the *staging* of national identity and national experience is precisely captured in the following statement from 1906: "You will find nowhere a *mise-en-scène* so suggestive of the ancient and enduring as in an English rose garden, walled in and stone-pathed, if it be not in an English cathedral close."<sup>97</sup>

The rose garden, a particular (if imagined) place, with its own narrative, its own history of careful construction, cultivation and refinement, is here transformed into another narrative space, a *mise-en-scène*, a staging of the 'ancient and enduring' experience of Englishness. This 'Rural England', the invention of historical circumstance, is the same national landscape constructed, reproduced and narrativised in films such as *Went The Day Well?* (1942) and *A Canterbury Tale* (1944),<sup>98</sup> but also in a different way (for unlike the other two films it is a period piece) in *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. Indeed, the timing of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is important. As Wiener notes,

"By the time of the first world war, nostalgic visions and utopian dreams centering on the countryside had been blended in literary and beyond that in middle-class culture. Martial horrors made this rural myth even more appealing than ever. As one writer remarked in 1915, 'the soul of England must not be sought in the city but in the countryside!'"<sup>99</sup>

Helen Mathers's novel *Comin' Thro' The Rye* was first published in 1875, and can in that form be seen as a relatively early nostalgic, ruralist and escapist response to the late nineteenth century conditions of modernity and urbanisation



(city life, let alone industrial activity, never intrude upon the consciousness of the novel, and even the business dealings and journeys to the other place of the city by the men of the story are moments of moral ambiguity). One writer, looking back from the time of the First World War, recalled its impact:

"it spoke of England, of the Old Country which is so dear to us all, of a romance which is still as green in our memory as the little rye shoots were green. We all loved Helen. We who lived in the dull towns and great cities, where there are only hot pavements to tread or prim parks to walk in, yearned to walk through the rye even as Helen did."<sup>100</sup>

The novel was also re-published in the middle of the war, and no doubt, as Wiener's points above suggest, it represents in this form just one instance of the wider circulation of the ruralist mythology of the nation and national character in the specific nationalist circumstances of war-time. The first version of the film was described in one trade paper as "reveall[ing] to us the spirit of the true British countryside. It is a perfect pastoral."<sup>101</sup> The full flow of nostalgic pastoralism was reserved for the period version of 1923, which can be seen as a specific populist product of middle class culture, a popularisation - a re-visioning, a re-imagining - of the mythology of 'the old country'.

'The soul of England' is, in each case, located very clearly in the countryside: national identity as an ancient construct, continuous, unchanging, finds one of its most powerful images in the 'natural' landscape. Landscape seems so indisputably a metaphor for the antiquity of forms, and yet as I will hope to show the perspective from which this 'countryside of the mind' is transformed into a series of concrete visual images (except that the metaphor is far too modern) in the 1923 version of the film is indeed very carefully constructed.

The significance of the pastoral tradition does however extend far beyond the representation of place. For, as Howkins points out, "central to this ideal [of the South Country] were the ideas of continuity, of community or harmony, and above all a kind of classlessness",<sup>102</sup> producing an image of "an organic and natural society of ranks, and inequality in an economic and social sense, but one based on trust, obligation and even love",<sup>103</sup> ideas which have been pervasively incorporated by numerous traditions of British films.

Tom Nairn has argued that "nationalism ... is invariably populist. People are what it has to go on", and that "the mobilising myth of nationalism is an idea of the People"<sup>104</sup> - but he also argues that there is

*"an absence of popular nationalism among the English. There is no coherent, sufficiently democratic myth of Englishness - no sufficiently accessible and popular myth-identity where mass discontents can find a vehicle."*<sup>105</sup>

Nairn suggests that the English mythology is on the contrary dominated by patrician benevolence and popular deference to authority, a processing of class relations which is evident in many films within the heritage genre. But clearly, while this national myth holds sway, it is complemented by the pastoral myth, and its ideology of community, and potentially of one large national family, an ideology capable of uniting diverse social groups;<sup>106</sup> as Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith have suggested, this is "the ultimate hegemonic idea", "the basic principle that England meant the same to everybody."<sup>107</sup> There is, in other words, a powerful, coherent and pervasive image of the people in British/English culture, an image of an organic community, which is hierarchically and deferentially organised, as if this were entirely 'natural'. As a powerful ideological figure, the nation constructed as a family is a major representational source for

British film-making, a figure which is consolidated in the documentary-realist films of the World War Two. Since then, the cosy security of the family has been increasingly represented within that filmic tradition - in films from *The Blue Lamp* (1949) to *Letter To Brezhnev* (1985) - as suffocating. At the same time, the image of the nation as a family has found renewed strength within the post-war heritage film, especially in the 1980s. If the security of the nation-as-family representation cannot be gained from the present, then it is projected nostalgically into the past.

What becomes clear from the above discussion is the extent to which ideologies of Britishness, of national identity and nationhood, are produced through processes of displacement and condensation: the slippage from the South Country to England, from England to Britain, from urban to rural, from class antagonism to patrician authority, and thence to organic community, and from the interests of one class to the national interest. More than this, there is at stake a powerful sense of the *invention* of tradition in the process of forging a national identity apparently continuous with the past. Eric Hobsbawm has defined 'invented tradition' as implying

"a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values or norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past."<sup>109</sup>

The consolidation of at least certain key aspects of the aesthetic project of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* in the genre of the heritage film - particularly in its 1980s variant - can be understood precisely as a rule-governed set of representational practices. These generic conventions further invite the putative

spectator-in-the-text to take on board the moral implications of the particular pastoral mythology of the nation outlined above, establishing the sense of community which national identity depends upon, and legitimating the institution of British cinema as a national cinema. There are clearly variants within this project, but there are also enough shared characteristics to establish a genre or tradition. The adaptation of 'classic' texts and of other less literary representations of the past, the construction and repetitive reproduction of a specific iconography of the past - all this both establishes references to particular historical pasts, as well as implying continuity with those pasts. But Hobsbawm also notes that the past can be invented "by quasi-obligatory repetition",<sup>109</sup> which term can also usefully describe the way in which a filmic genre, once established, can take on a life of its own: however fictional the representation, generic motivation (the repetition - and expectation of repetition - of key elements of the genre) can establish a real-seeming world, the past as an entirely imaginary object. Cinema must, in fact, by its very technological nature, imagine the past from the point of view of modernity, it must produce a modern past, very often a past beautiful to the eye of the present-day beholder: the past as an alluring spectacle, both exotic in its difference from the present, and familiar in its repetition of generic elements.

As a filmic representation, the heritage genre both draws on established traditions - the storehouse of "an elaborate language of symbolic practice and communication"<sup>110</sup> - and invents a new (audio-)visual tradition which is then, as it were, inserted into the past. It is a new tradition grafted on to older ones, where existing practices are modified, institutionalised and ritualised.<sup>111</sup> The mode of narration of narrative cinema, with its peculiar present-historic tense, is able to convey the sense of a very precise continuity of present and past:

the events of a narrative film, even though it is set in the past, will stage the past as if it were happening here and now for the spectator.

At the same time, as Wright has argued, the heritage industry severs the past from the present, and the other side of the present-historic tense of narrative film achieves this same rupture within filmic representations: it situates the representation as not only present but also very much in the past, as already completed. For Wright, this severing erases the potential challenge of history by rendering it as spectacle, *separate* from the viewer in the present, something over and done with, achieved. Hence the sense of timelessness rather than historicity in relation to the national past, a timeless fully accomplished past, "purged of its leading political tensions", which can then be appreciated as visual display.<sup>112</sup>

Hobsbawm suggests that "the object and characteristic of 'traditions', including invented ones, is invariance."<sup>113</sup> In the case of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, the project of the film is in part to establish, in the face of potential and actual American domination, a specifically national cinema which can be seen as having some continuity with the past. The novelty of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, in this sense, is its 'invariance' - or at least its bid for insertion into a tradition which implies 'invariance'. For Hobsbawm, the poignancy of invented traditions derives from "the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant."<sup>114</sup> For Hepworth, the era of the pioneer inventor-showmen had been superseded by an era of highly industrialised, aggressively monopolistic capitalist corporations (and in the wake of the war to end all wars too); the turmoil of the film industry and its markets changing

beyond the terms of his recognition, and the innovations in particular of the American studios and distributors, produced a desire to establish a national cinema (to invent a tradition) which could at the same time be seen as an invariant within the continuity of English culture.

A particular set of social relations and a class-specific form of social existence which has already passed are reproduced in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* in all their authentic detail as if they had never disappeared, as if they were unchanging, invariant. As Wright has commented in another context, "in a world where values are in apparent disorder and where the social hierarchy has lost its settled nature, it is not so surprising that old forms of security become alluring."<sup>15</sup> The particular social order laid out before us in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is, however, already shown to be in moral decay, as it is in so many heritage films, thereby establishing an even more profound sense of nostalgia: nostalgic narratives so often chart a process of cultural decline. On the one hand the diegetic world of the film is imbued with an upstairs/downstairs sense of class relations, a patriarchal sense of family relations, with a marked division between the public and the private, between what is properly masculine and properly feminine: everyone has their allotted place, the order is clear, relations are unproblematic. But there would be no narrative development if these relations were not disturbed, and it is the transgressions of Sylvia, the jealous former lover of the hero, aided and abetted by a maidservant who does not know her place, which enable a drama to proceed. Such transgressions, and the unhappy ending of the narrative, can be seen as presaging the passing away of this particular set of social relations.

At the same time, these social relations, always potentially antagonistic and exploitative, are presented as natural and self-evident. As Wright has noted in relation to other representations, "the national past is capable of finding splendour in old styles of political domination and of making an alluring romance out of atrocious colonial exploitation."<sup>116</sup> This comment seems more than appropriate for the consideration of the heritage genre, which obsessively constructs (often aristocratic) romances around authentic period details. Class relations are in effect re-presented as just so much *mise-en-scène*, displayed in splendid costumes, language, gestures, and all the props (the properties) of the everyday life of one or another class.

Indeed, one can see this process of finding splendour in old styles of domination in the transformations that the film version of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* performs in relation to Mathers's novel. In the shift from the novel, which is written in the first person from the point of view of the daughter of a gentleman coming to terms with her position within mid Victorian patriarchy, to the film which rejects all sense of this first person narration, we lose the subversive feminine critique of the conditions of patriarchy. As Elaine Showalter has noted,<sup>117</sup> the novel is quite outspoken in its depiction of the heroine's father as sadistic towards and exploitative of his wife and his children, especially the girls. Other men are equally problematic figures, almost without exception, either behaving like children, or weak-willed and boring, or pompous and decrepit old fools. In each case, they represent what in her early teenage years the heroine, Helen, sees as the perversity of marriage. Her beloved brother Jack may well be an exception, except that we only know him as a boy, never as an adult man; even the romantic hero, Paul, is inscrutably enigmatic and unable to speak his mind or behave rationally - and his fate is

to live with a broken heart until he sacrifices himself on a foreign battlefield. Beyond this critique of men and masculinity is a further critique of the patriarchal conditions of women, the physical, cultural and psychological constrictions of femininity, and especially the marriage market and its commodification of womanhood.

But the film loses altogether the female perspective, and, although a couple of intertitles and a brief scene at the start of the film suggest a mild tyranny in the father, the images generally suggest otherwise: he is genial enough, as are the other men. Likewise, Helen's tomboyish qualities at the start of the film are hardly sufficient to expose the domination of patriarchy: rather the relations of patriarchy are here part of the splendid visual attractions, the period details of the film, especially the full costumes of the women, which in the first volume of the novel are the source of such annoyance for Helen.<sup>118</sup>

The same is partially true of class relations - except that novel and film here share the same ground. The gentry are represented as a tightly-knit class in the film, in effect the community of the extended family. That community is served by the other classes, for the most part deferential to the gentry: this is the natural community of the nation. *Comin' Thro' The Rye* seeks to efface history: it attempts to both re-construct a particular *authentic* past, and at the same time posits it as a timeless and unchanging essence, an Englishness outside of the ravages of history and culture. Except of course that this Englishness, this natural community of the nation, is crumbling, as the villainess and her maidservant transgress the moral boundaries of their social positions, and so wreak havoc within the community that had seemed so settled. But this narrative must fight against the allure of the image, and as will



become clear, for reviewers at least, it is the image which is the more powerful.

This version of the national past, this version of history, in which a critical perspective is displaced by decoration and display, "an obsessive accumulation of comfortably archival detail",<sup>119</sup> is not in any way confined to the cinema: it is the very substance of the heritage industry and its commodification, idealisation and marketing of the past, "a perspective in which 'the past' is defined entirely as bits and pieces which can be recovered, commodified and circulated in exchange and display."<sup>120</sup> The difference for cinema of course is that the bits and pieces, the talismanic objects of the past, can circulate only as images. But like the tangible objects which Wright discusses, these images are de-contextualised, taken out of history; or rather, history, the national past, is re-presented as a series of splendid, romantic - but always of course 'authentic' - images which both invite the spectator into the narrative continuity of tradition, and separate the spectator from history as spectacle. Wright argues that this National Heritage version of the past

"involves the extraction of history - of the idea of historical significance - from a denigrated everyday life and its re-staging or display in certain sanctioned sites, events, images and conceptions ... [for a] generalised public attention.... History is presented as a gloss, as the light touch of a dab hand, an impression of a pastness which can be caught at a glance.... Abstracted and redeployed, history seems to be purged of political tension; it becomes a unifying spectacle, the settling of all disputes."<sup>121</sup>

In a sense, the project of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* can be seen as one of legitimating cinema as a site sanctioned for the re-presentation of the past (as event, image, conception), yet another institutionalisation of a particular mode

of looking, and a specific regime of spectacle. In cinema, then, the past is re-created in a peculiar (in)tangibility of the image, the icon, the gesture. It is re-created in all its authentic fullness, yet at the same time it is absent: this is the fascination, the efficacy of a photographic medium.<sup>122</sup> The past of the heritage film is constructed not so much as object of desire, but rather as *image* of desire. The image can in the end only be possessed *imaginatively* by the spectator, however much the image is commodified, and its means of production and circulation have become the site of intense capitalist control.

This condition of unattainability is also the basis of nostalgia, the basis of a nostalgic relation to the past, which is the central psychological attitude of pastoralism, and indeed of the heritage industry more generally.<sup>123</sup> While the heritage film tries to re-create the past, we know that the past is irrecoverable: the pleasure of re-creation, of plenitude, comes tinged with an overwhelming sense of loss. Nostalgia posits two different times which are opposed to one another as poles of positivity/negativity: the present, marked by moral disintegration, deterioration and degeneration, and the longed-for past, marked by purity, truth and fullness. Nostalgia is then both a narrative of loss, charting an imaginary historical trajectory from stability to instability, and at the same time a narrative of recovery, projecting the subject back into a comfortably closed past. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges have argued in relation to literature, that the nostalgic relation to the past, the longing to return home, represents a desire for a stable referent:

"it acts as an authentic origin or center from which to disparage the degenerate present.... [The referent] is always located in the past. At the same time, nostalgic writers know, with agonized awareness, that this past is a product of their own textual strategies."<sup>124</sup>

Nostalgia is not the past, nor is it the product of the past, but it is a way of relating to a past imagined from the point of view of the present: it is a response to and a re-organisation of contemporary experience.<sup>125</sup> This imagined past is constructed in terms of what the present is felt to lack: the past as referent is related to other images, other times, other referents, which render it as the site of authenticity, vividly reconstructed. Nostalgia uses an image of the past to enter into dialogue with the present: it is the imaginary site of plenitude in relation to the experience of loss or lack in the present; it is a means of re-negotiating our identity in a changing present. Hence in literary, but also for my purposes, filmic texts, it is indeed the textual strategies adopted, the particular modes of narration and of address, and the processes of representation, which construct the past as the imaginary object of the nostalgic narrative. It is these processes that I will be exploring in subsequent sections of this chapter with reference to *Comin' Thro' The Rye*.<sup>126</sup>

#### iv) Pictorialism and pastoralism

*"I remember in one of the first films I made, twenty-five years ago, there was a row of cottages, a long, flat straight row of red-brick cottages. Mr. Charles Pathé saw the film, and he said to me, I have never forgotten it:- 'Yes. Yes. But it is so ugly. Is there any necessity to make it ugly? Why don't you make it pretty?'"*

*I shall always remember that long flat row of cottages and their lesson. Unless there is some very vital reason there is no need for a photograph to include ugly things."*

*Cecil Hepworth interviewed in Snapshots magazine, July 1924.<sup>127</sup>*

In this section, I will begin to analyse in detail some of the ways in which *Comin' Thro' The Rye* might be said to work within what Hepworth called an English idiom, and at the same time how it might as such be seen as producing and celebrating a national heritage. This means of course examining also how it exploits an alternative representational system to that of classical American cinema. There are two areas in particular which I want to explore: the function of the image, and the organisation of the narrative and its modes of narration - which obviously in part depend on the function of the image. In this section, I will be concentrating on the function and stylisation of the image.

It is important to note at the outset that *Comin' Thro' The Rye* was both constructed in promotional material released by the studio and read by contemporary reviewers in terms of a discourse of heritage and authenticity.<sup>128</sup> There is a great attention to period detail which has two separate but inter-related functions: firstly, precisely to meet the desire for *authenticity*; and secondly, to achieve a certain visual splendour - "as a spectacle ... this picture will bear comparison with any extravagant foreign productions."<sup>129</sup> Neither function was lost on reviewers when they had a chance to see the film, and to

some extent the discourse is consistent across the trade press, 'quality' national newspapers, and fan magazines - although the latter devote far less space to the review of this film which is not, evidently, seen of particular interest to its popular readership. *The Bioscope*, for instance, commented on

"The skill with which the Victorian atmosphere has been reproduced, not only in the settings and costumes, but also in the characterisation. ... Never has the atmosphere of quaintly formal yet graceful and decorative Victorian England been more vividly reproduced on the screen than in this skilful and sympathetic version of Helen Mathers' well-known novel. As an impression of Victorian life and manners, the film is well-nigh perfect."<sup>30</sup>

One gets the impression of a cultural memory being self-consciously re-fashioned by the film in several reviews:

"There is a beautiful atmosphere to the well-known story which is largely due to the setting of it in the 'sixties. One is accustomed to regard this period as not very attractive as regards dresses and furniture, but that there is a quaint charm about it is abundantly demonstrated here. Much thought and research have resulted in a convincing portrayal of mid-Victorian days, which extends beyond appearances to manners and sentiments. Indeed, the story is infinitely more credible and acceptable thus dated."<sup>31</sup>

Here are the elements of a familiar discourse: the value placed on the 'sympathetic' adaptation of the 'original' novel; the emphasis placed on setting, costume and manners; and the appeal of exotic otherness. The historical past becomes mere style, a series of images, achieved by extracting the 'authentic' from its material context. The past is thus transformed into a 'vivid' museum display designed to attract the curious gaze of the spectator:

"The settings, both interior and exterior, are a constant delight to the eye, while the costumes have the charm to the modern spectator of quaintness as well as beauty."<sup>132</sup>

The popular press begins to de-construct this discourse - "Victorian England ... might not have been attractive to live in, but as it is shown on the screen it certainly appears to be so"<sup>133</sup> - but this still concedes the spectacle of the image. Part of this spectacle is the vision of (a particular version of) Englishness, which is contrasted to the different, more vulgar and garish attractions of American cinema: "the old world charm of this pleasant picture is so soothing after a spell of transatlantic 'stunt' features."<sup>134</sup>

Without exception, all the contemporary reviews place great value on the visual qualities of this "beautiful production".<sup>135</sup> *The Bioscope* notes "the brilliant camerawork",<sup>136</sup> and describes Hepworth as "a producer with a keen feeling for atmosphere and pictorial effect."<sup>137</sup> *Kine Weekly*, while generally much less favourably inclined toward the film than the obsessively patriotic *Bioscope*, was still of the opinion that "there is a great deal of merit in this production and, perhaps most of all, in the photography, which is of rare beauty" and adds that "the exteriors have been chosen most artistically".<sup>138</sup> *The Motion Picture Studio* found that "many shots linger in the memory ... and the photography is peerless."<sup>139</sup> Hepworth himself later asserted that

"always ... I have striven for beauty, for *pictorial* meaning and effect in every case where it is obtainable. Much of my success, I am sure, is in the aesthetic pleasure conveyed, but not recognised, by the beauty of the scene..."<sup>140</sup>

The terms used here establish the visual conventions of the film as pictorialist, and begin to point to a distinction between pictorialist visual strategies and a more functional or expressive *mise-en-scène*. Although *The Bioscope* posits that Hepworth has a keen feeling for atmosphere, all the other comments suggest a visual pleasure, a spectacle, which is not apparently integrated into the narrative weave of the film, but which stands out as aesthetically pleasing imagery and camerawork: it is precisely 'pictorial effect' and 'pictorial meaning' which is achieved, and not narrative effect or meaning. Exteriors, likewise, are not chosen for their narrative significance, but are chosen 'artistically'.

Pictorialism is a specific photographic practice, an aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century, which had as its central aim the promotion of photography as a fine art.<sup>141</sup> This meant aligning photography with painting, constructing it as a *plastic* art, over which the photographer had some considerable control, rather than as a means of mechanical reproduction: the spontaneous, the mundane, the mere copy could not be admitted as art within this discourse. The photograph was to be seen as a means of individual expression, personal vision, a poetic conception, not as an objective scientific document. Pictorialism as art photography was thus conceptualised very much in terms of contemporary aesthetic traditions and values.<sup>142</sup>

Pictorialism as a photographic aesthetic was particularly popularised through the work of H.P. Robinson (1830-1901), a prominent member of the Royal Photographic Society, who was well-known both as an amateur photographer, and as author of several influential publications. Photography, for Robinson, was "a means of representing the beautiful".<sup>143</sup>

"A picture ... is ... calculated to give pleasure to the eye of the beholder by the skilful way in which the intention of the producer is expressed by pictorial means, consisting of lines, light, shades, masses, and preferably, but not necessarily, colours. This is the material part of the picture.... Beyond ... is poetry, sentiment story, the literary part of a picture..."<sup>44</sup>

Thus the pictorialist landscape photograph for instance organises and displays the landscape as precisely something to be looked at, primarily from the point of view of the outsider, a spectator as opposed to a participant.<sup>45</sup> The immutability and truth of nature were terms central to the pictorialist discourse, but, while "the study of nature has been recommended as the essential foundation of art",<sup>46</sup> nature itself is not art, it must be pictorially composed. A picture must be interesting, it must aim at truth, but it must also possess spirit: it must not merely imitate. A modicum of individual mannerism was to be encouraged, but above all, the picture must be ordered according to artistic convention: "harmony of lines and parts, breadth of effect, observation of values."<sup>47</sup> There is then a tension emerging between truth, personal expression and artistic convention, which is resolved in favour of the central term: pictorial effect is in the end the product of the photographer working within the conventions of representation upon a sufficiently plastic medium. Robinson's own work, and the work of others which he favoured, is heavily mannered and stylised, both in choice of subject, and in composition, developing and printing. It is this conventional construction, manipulation and aestheticisation of the image which linked pictorialist photography to both fine art, but also to Hepworth's work on *Comin' Thro' The Rye*.

By the 1890s, this pictorialist photography was widely accepted as fine art, and as a practice was institutionalised in the English Linked Ring, and the American Photo-secessionist movements. Later practitioners such as P.H.Emerson (1856-



1936) and Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) modified the aesthetic in various ways, with Emerson for instance advocating naturalism over against Robinson's academic realism. Emerson, following the dictates of impressionist painting, also favoured an image that was sharply focussed in the centre, but gradually less clearly defined and more softly focussed towards the edges,<sup>148</sup> where Robinson had worked to produce images which were in sharp focus throughout.<sup>149</sup> The underlying sense of the plasticity of the medium does, however, remain, along with the desire to produce images which can organise the attention of the spectator. John Taylor has noted that the British pictorialists of the 'teens - that is, in the period immediately prior to the production of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* - were still operating with an otherwise virtually obsolete, pre-modernist, classical set of compositional rules for capturing the beautiful and the picturesque. Their restraint, decorum, shunning of novelty and innovation, and adherence to convention showed barely any concessions to the French painterly modernisms or the American photographic modernisms.<sup>150</sup>

Cecil Hepworth was operating in a climate when these by now thoroughly conventional, indeed traditional ideas about the aesthetic values of pictorialist photography were very much taken for granted. A popular photography magazine of 1924, for instance, has no difficulty in distinguishing between "practical snapshot work" and "elaborately deliberate pictorial photography": pictorial photography, in a non-specialist sense, simply means quality photography, artistic photography, over against the mere snapshot.<sup>151</sup> Hepworth himself had had some art training,<sup>152</sup> and had been a photographer himself, as well as contributing to various photographic journals, and writing a primarily technical manual of film-making, Animated Photography: The ABC of the Cinematograph, published in 1897.<sup>153</sup> His father, T.C.Hepworth, had published a handbook, Evening

Work for Amateur Photographers in 1890, as well as for a while in the 1890s editing *Photographic News*, for which Robinson, among others, wrote. Cecil Hepworth also describes images from his films as pictorialist on a number of occasions in his autobiography, notably in the extract quoted above - although he never attempts to define the term, suggesting perhaps that it was so much a part of his common sense that it would not ever occur to him to do so.

The picturesque photography for *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is, likewise, very much within the pictorialist tradition and, as such, entirely conventional. The *mise-en-scène* of the rye field in particular encourages it to be looked at from a distance as an object of beauty, rather than a narrative space to be inhabited by character and spectator. The recurring shot of the lovers' meeting place on the edge of the rye field, and the more emblematic shots prefacing two of the film's three sections, are carefully organised according to the principles laid out by Robinson: the central place of the path, the tree to the left of the picture in middle ground, the play of light across the rye itself, the placing of either characters or a fence in the foreground: all these devices serve to lead the eye of the spectator into the image, to display the field as something to be looked at.<sup>154</sup>

Kristin Thompson has discussed the influence of pictorialism on American cinematography in the 1920s, and she concentrates on the attributes of the soft-style of filming which came to represent quality cinematography in this period. "Cinematographers", she notes, "hoped that by imitating earlier established styles in the other arts, they could achieve the same public status themselves."<sup>155</sup> Although there is no direct evidence that Hepworth was influenced by these developments, it would seem clear that a number of the

photographic devices and developing and printing practices adopted in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* serve the same purpose - that is to say, they seek to aestheticise and stylise the image in various ways, with the emphasis being on softness, though not simply in terms of the softness of focus and diffusion of the image that the photographer P.H.Emerson had favoured.

A number of the shots are soft and fairly heavily diffused, with relatively low contrast - notably two shots of Helen praying for the safe return of Paul from Rome, but the extreme softness of these shots is exceptional, having a symbolic function in the context of a film otherwise sharply lit and focussed. But there are other images which have a more subdued softness in the background, notably the key shots of the rye field, particularly those which open the final *Harvest* section of the film, in which there is a distinct Autumn mistiness over the field. Most of the shots, however, are composed in relatively deep focus, a stylistic strategy closer to the work of Robinson, and one which also enables a clear display of the heritage backgrounds in both interiors and exteriors. But there are two other devices that are used frequently in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* to stylise and soften the image, and the relationship between images: the fade out/in, and the vignette.

There is a fade out to black at the end of every shot in *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, and a fade in again at the beginning of the next shot., which device, Hepworth believed, "created a feeling of smoothness - avoided the harsh unpleasant 'jerk' usually associated with change of scene."<sup>156</sup> The standard practice for shot transitions at this time was in most cases to cut, with the fade being reserved for those transitions which were intended to imply a time-lapse - in the words of the 1916 script-writing manual quoted from earlier, "this method of showing

your audience that time has elapsed has become a convention, and will be accepted as such by the audience;<sup>157</sup> other uses include fading in the opening shot of the film - so that, as the manual put it, "it is not suddenly jerked upon the scene" (Hepworth's terminology and thinking was evidently not entirely aberrant);<sup>158</sup> and finally the fade might also be used, at least within British cinema, to imply an entry into a more psychological space, or self-consciously imaginary realm. But it was not, even in 1916 considered "a practical method for opening and closing *each* scene."<sup>159</sup>

Hepworth, however, felt that the cut produced an irritating jerk in all circumstances: "smoothness in a film is important and should be preserved except when for some special effect a 'snap' is preferred."<sup>160</sup> This desire for smoothness is akin to the American cinematographers desire for softness of image, and can be seen as a re-working of pictorialist conventions. As Rachael Whear has noted, "the technique was appropriate to the soothing, gentle and visually pleasing effects [Hepworth] sought".<sup>161</sup> It also enables Hepworth to overcome one of the problematic side-effects that troubled American film-makers working in the continuity style and favouring the straight cut between shots, namely the sometimes dramatic changes in contrast and haziness from one shot to the next. The fade out/in used in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* means that one is much less aware of any such discontinuities across shot transitions.<sup>162</sup> Hepworth softens his images in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* in another way as well, through the use of vignettes around almost every image: "I had found by an early experiment that a soft vignetted edge all round the picture was much more aesthetically pleasing than a hard line and the unrelieved black frame."<sup>163</sup>

It is in this same paragraph that Hepworth speaks of striving "for beauty, for *pictorial effect*", and it does not therefore seem unreasonable to speak of this softening of the image in the same way that Thompson speaks of the soft-style of American pictorialist cinematography. Hepworth's bid for smoothness, for a soft image which is gentle on the spectator, is a deliberate aestheticising of the image. If we link this to the extremely slow cutting rate of the film, and note that the fade out/in device significantly slows down the narrative pace and forswears the dynamic energy of continuity cutting, we can see that there is a quite self-conscious emphasis on the image itself. Admirers of this style spoke of Hepworth's work in terms of poetry:

"there is indeed almost a lyric touch in some of these screen pictures, showing dainty white columbine figures gliding, like rose petals blown by the wind, through flower-laden arbours and across mossy lawns."<sup>164</sup>

This immediately relates the style of the images to their heritage qualities, their celebration of a particular version of pastoral; as Terry Morden has pointed out,<sup>165</sup> there is an integral relationship established between pastoral representation and pictorialist photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pictorialism develops as a way of representing the pastoral, a function which is reproduced in *Comin' Thro' The Rye*.<sup>166</sup>

The narrative takes place for the most part in picturesque rural landscapes, and the country houses that exist therein - notably the appropriately named Silverbridge Manor, the home of the Adairs. As landscapes, they are part of the imaginary cultural space of the 'South Country', an idealisation of the national topography.<sup>167</sup> The city and industrialisation are banished from this Rural England, as has already been noted - but there is at the same time a certain

narrativisation of the pastoral country/city opposition, particularly through the system of values invested in each character.

Helen, the youngest Adair daughter and heroine of the film, is closely associated with Nature. In the opening title shot of the film, the spectator gradually becomes aware that someone is crawling through the ripe rye field. Eventually, an as yet unidentified Helen<sup>168</sup> grins up at the camera and mouths 'Boo'. She is next seen as a young teenager, playing up a tree with her childhood friend George; later they play in a somewhat wild garden area, with Helen eventually having to hide in some bushes to avoid detection between a quarrelling Paul and Sylvia. Helen as a young girl is represented in these scenes as a joyous innocent child, simple, natural and pure.<sup>169</sup> It is these very qualities in her both as a girl and as a young woman which appeal to the worldly, experienced, and recently embittered Paul. Her first meeting with Paul is at the end of a path which crosses the rye field, and she holds a bunch of wild flowers. This place becomes the regular meeting place of Helen and Paul as lovers, and they return here towards the end of the film to part. This is all very much in the novel's scheme of things too, where Helen, as the story's narrator, constantly describes the flowers and the seasons by which she charts her emotions and her growth as a woman.

Sylvia, Paul's former lover, who subsequently becomes very jealous of Helen, is, on the other hand, first seen in the suburban street in which she lives. As the film progresses, she is mainly filmed indoors - which, within Hepworth's system, has a sort of negative connotation:

"I would never work indoors if I could possibly get into the open air. It was always in the back of my mind ... that *I was to make English pictures, with all the English countryside for background*"<sup>170</sup>

It is almost as if to stay indoors is un-English, unhealthy - and that is precisely Sylvia's problem, at least in terms of moral health. When she does venture outside, she is twice shunned by Helen on 'mossy lawns' and twice rejected by Paul in more wild garden areas. At a horse race, she witnesses the suicidal death of her former lover, Dick Fellows, driven to despair by her actions. It is this suicide which provokes Paul into breaking off his engagement to Sylvia. Finally she goes to Rome - the city - in pursuit of Paul.

Sylvia then is very much a woman of the world, experience to Helen's innocence - but it is a complicated, and morally degenerate existence which she leads. She is the ugly face of progress, the scheming modern woman, to Helen's nostalgic, un-complicated child-woman, the embodiment of passive moral stability faced with the un-feminine active enterprise of Sylvia. Paul, on the other hand, is caught between the pastoralism of Helen, and the tainted, immoral urbanity of Sylvia. It is his absence in Rome, his distance from the charms of Helen and her rye field, which is his moral and romantic downfall. It is perhaps significant that it is not an English city to which he must travel. England, in this representation, remains almost exclusively pastoral, exclusively rural; but it also remains exclusively Protestant, and Paul's downfall is also in part that he leaves the 'natural' landscapes of England for a city of such Catholic artifice, theatricality and depravity. Rome is, on the other hand, the most ancient of cities, so the film even then does not have to bear any intrusions of excessive modernity or industrialisation.<sup>171</sup>

The various manifestations of the rye field in the film add further dimensions to its pastoral representation. The narrative is broken down into three major sections which are each prefaced by an emblematic shot of the rye-field with a superimposed title. The progress of the narrative and the development of the film's various relationships - notably that between Paul and Helen - are charted symbolically through the seasonal situation of the rye field. The first section of the film is entitled *Seed-time*, and does indeed see the sowing of the seeds of romance, but also of intrigue: it establishes the narrative possibilities. *Summer* sees the ripening of the rye and the flowering of the romance: when Paul is obliged to leave for Rome on business, Helen says, in intertitle, "the rye will all be harvested by the time you come back, and the field will be as empty as my heart". The third section is *Harvest*: the various narrative threads are gathered in, the now empty field provides the scene for Paul's return to Helen, but too late, since Sylvia has tricked him into marrying her. Helen's heart is empty...

This pastoralism establishes a natural evolution to the course of love, it establishes the narrative as potentially cyclical (there will be another seed-time, another spring). For Helen, the narrative charts both a loss of and an awakening from the bliss of childhood innocence (precisely the quality which had attracted Paul to her in the first place). At the same time the representation establishes this whole way of life as natural, but lost, past, and only to be regained nostalgically (the camera maintains a fairly consistent distance from the characters and their actions; as spectators, we rarely penetrate the narrative space, and must observe from a distance).



The rye field is primarily a place of leisure and romance, as noted earlier, but there are also two particularly significant shots of agricultural labour. These appear in the emblematic shots which preface each major development in the narrative. *Seed-time* shows the bare field being hand-sown by a solitary broadcaster in the middle distance. *Harvest* shows a bucolic labourer - "an old man who looks something like Father Time"<sup>172</sup> - scything the rye by hand, working his way towards the camera. *Summer* on the other hand needs no human intervention: the rye simply grows, naturally. The men at work are thus effectively part of the natural order, labour is un-mechanised, traditional, innocently pre-industrial - almost a solitary communion with nature. The effect is underlined all the more by the separation of these images from the narrative proper in emblematic shots.

Morden argues that it was "the role and position of the viewer [which] formed the basis for the special relationship that was formed between the pastoral and pictorialism":<sup>173</sup> the viewer is placed as an outsider observing from a distance, an onlooker, a spectator of pastoral England. The landscape becomes an object to be looked at, rather than a place in which one might act. *Comin' Thro' The Rye* initiates a similar spectatorial position. The film's images are predominantly in *tableau* style with a studied distance between camera/spectator and action or setting, and thus serve to display the 'English landscape' of the rye field, various gardens and the country house (and Helen's family home, featured in several scenes, is indeed very impressive as a building, "a magnificent timbered building which made lovely backgrounds from a dozen different angles"<sup>174</sup>). But it is not only landscapes which are on display: there are also numerous carefully selected and often highly detailed Victorian interior decors and ornaments.<sup>175</sup>

The refusal on so many occasions to penetrate space, and the lingering of shots more than is strictly narratively necessary - and the consequently slow cutting rate - affords the spectator time to look around the image, and produces a *mise-en-scène* in which objects, buildings and landscapes become heritage fetishes, objects to be looked at, rather than to be used as narrative devices. The attractions of pictorialism - the heritage attractions of the pastoral - are at the same time narrative distractions. This is the *mise-en-scène* of authenticity and of display; it is designed to show off, rather than to tell stories, and, as such, it is narratively excessive - which may at the same time be indicative of the excesses of a leisured class.

Morden points to a shift in pictorialist practices in the 1920s and 1930s, as witnessed in magazines like *Country Life*, away from an emphasis on photographs of pastoral landscapes. In its place, *Country Life* begins to concentrate on "collecting and connoisseurship and other subjects of escape and distraction. The country estate contracted to be represented by its house which was now valued for its architecture, decor and treasures."<sup>176</sup> *Comin' Thro' The Rye* seems to be moving in this direction too, its pastoralism tempered by a fascination with and display of Victoriana, a sort of taxonomic *mise-en-scène*.<sup>177</sup> There are thus two types of heritage property on display, the pastoral English landscape, and the collectible Victoriana, the ornamental decor of both interiors and exteriors: "everything was perfectly in keeping", recalls Hepworth.<sup>178</sup>

The use of mirrors in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is of some significance here: they are used neither narratively (whether expressively or symbolically), nor to create an illusion of depth within a confined space; instead, they reflect back the ornaments and furnishings on display. Mirrors thus render the richness and

diversity of the period trappings even more visible - for instance, at the house party where Helen and Paul formally meet, a large mirror on the wall is positioned to reflect and display otherwise invisible details of chairs and carpets.

Once again, these features of Hepworth's aesthetic are somewhat aberrant. It is undoubtedly the case that within the trade discourse of the period, great value was placed on 'pictorial values', but at the same time the standard view was that the story should be paramount. As one contemporary manual put it, a simply furnished set is best because

"there would be less to detract the eye from the action of the play. ... [If] the action is strong [the audience] will have no time to verify whether the scene is an absolute replica of a room of the kind suggested or not. If the producer goes to the other extreme and crowds his stage, the action will be delayed, for the mind of the audience will be busy in appraising the various articles of furniture in the scene."<sup>179</sup>

It seems reasonable to assume that this distraction away from the action and towards an appraisal of the *mise-en-scène* was not seen as a problem by Hepworth: it is on the contrary a self-conscious part of his aesthetic system.

There is much in the textual strategies of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* which prefers a reading of the film as a nostalgic experience. For a start, the whole project of producing an English film in an English idiom at this particular time can be seen, as already suggested, as a nostalgic return to an imaginary past more stable and secure, and above all more English, faced with the onslaught of American films and American methods. Moreover, the sense of loss which is a potential experience in any photographic representation - the peculiar presence-

absence of the photographic image - is here intensified, not only by virtue of the period represented, but also by Hepworth's idiosyncratic resistance of close shots: one always feels distanced from these characters, they are never quite recoverable as protagonists contemporary with us, or as objects of easy identification. The drama itself also charts a narrative of loss and cultural decay, in its movement from the blissful innocence of Helen's uncomplicated childhood to the emotional traumas of the long, drawn-out unhappy ending: in the full version of the film, Helen loses not only her innocence, but also her loved one - twice - and the small child onto whom she displaces her love. This nostalgic sensibility made its mark on at least one reviewer of (the 1916 version of) the film:

"after seeing this beautiful and sympathetic rendering of a tender ideal, [we have reason] to respect, almost, indeed, to envy the people of what seems a very remote age, many characteristics that are sadly lacking in the more prosaic, up-to-date generation of today. Helen Mathers's story of the trials and temptations of Helen Adair and Paul Vasher teaches a moral that is sadly needed, for personal selfishness is one of the greatest failings of the present age. ... The story is so tenderly, so sympathetically told ... and set in such lovely surroundings, that to watch the love-making ... of Helen and Paul almost makes one yearn to be young again, in order to seek out such ideal settings for one's own romance, and to live it through once more."<sup>180</sup>

But there is nostalgia too in relation to the history of a class, for there is a sense in which we can also see the incipient moral decay of the Victorian gentry, a class under attack not from without, but from within. Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller have written, in a quite different context, that

"The content of cultural conservatism has undergone fundamental changes.... It can no longer find a circumscribable social *topos* whose morality and especially whose taste could be conserved as an unimpaired paradigm. Its essence lies rather in the protective gesture itself."<sup>181</sup>

Comin' Thro' The Rye turns to the mid-Victorian gentry, both for its source novel, and for its subject matter and drama. It seeks out Victorian values and proprieties, it seeks an 'invariant' Englishness in a traditional mode of representation. But it finds this class and those who service it, or at least some of them, an unstable and untrustworthy lot: they cannot constitute the unimpaired paradigm which the nostalgic journey seeks (but can never find). What seems to me powerful in the end is not so much this particular social *topos* as its mode of representation, the 'protective gestures' of pictorialism and pastoralism, but also the narrative dignity of the film.<sup>102</sup>

v) Narrative sources, expectations and motivations

To read the contemporary reviews of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is to gain the impression that it is the visual pleasures of pictorialism and the Victorian heritage which are the film's main attractions. Even the loyal *Bioscope* is more ambivalent about the narrative cohesion and plausibility of the film. Thus although *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is "a delightful Victorian impression" it also has "an improbable and rather stilted story" - or at least this is how it would seem if it were not "invested with real human appeal and dramatic interest by the skill with which it has been told and the distinctive period atmosphere with which it has been surrounded."<sup>123</sup>

The heritage aspects of the film are thus felt able to offset what might otherwise be seen as a problem of narrative motivation and drive - suggesting that a different set of expectations and narrative conventions apply to the emergent heritage genre. This is confirmed in a later comment in *The Bioscope*:

"[*Comin' Thro' The Rye*] has the additional attraction of a plot which, though it might well have seemed stilted and unconvincing if brought up to date, is both human and dramatic in the period setting to which it essentially belongs. ... [Some of the plot details] are not perhaps very plausible, but they open the way for intensely dramatic situations in which violent passions blaze fiercely beneath the prim Victorian exteriors. It is surprising indeed how thrilling the old story becomes when presented in its true environment."<sup>124</sup>

The authenticity of the period representation - 'its true environment' - can thus carry what would in other circumstances appear as narrative problems. There is also a suggestion that we should enjoy the by now somewhat dated

Victorian moral values as part of the heritage on display, rather than worry about them as no longer dramatically convincing.

For *The Bioscope*, *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is first and foremost a quality film, "completed with ... care and good taste",<sup>186</sup> but it also attempts to persuade its readers that the film

"should prove a real box-office success if it is properly handled. Its appeal is not restricted, like that of so many costume plays, to better class audiences, for its story has as much human interest and strong dramatic punch as most modern melodramas. It is however in the Victorian atmosphere that the main appeal of the film lies, and an effort should be made to play up this feature of the picture in presentation."<sup>186</sup>

*Kine Weekly*, on the other hand, sees *Comin' Thro' The Rye* as something far removed from the contemporary popular melodrama. This trade paper generally aligns itself much more closely with the standards of American films of the period, and it is much less inclined to overlook what it sees as a lack of narrative motivation, slowness of pace, weak plotting, and inadequate character development, or to pass off such narrative implausibilities as authentic heritage qualities:<sup>187</sup>

"The story seems as dead as Queen Anne. It is unreal and unconvincing. The recent tendency of the screen to present films which deal with living, vital themes in a serious way, has taken us very far away from the mincing mannerisms of Victorian days. ...This production suffers also from mechanical treatment, seen most glaringly in the prolongation of individual scenes beyond their climax ... [which] makes the film drag very badly at times ... The picture seems to suffer from over-direction, in the sense that players have been allowed to accentuate types rather than portray characters and contribute to action. ... The continuity would be greatly improved by drastic cutting."<sup>188</sup>

In a second review of the completed film as released, *The Times* is also critical of the added sections in the new version: "At once improbabilities multiply, the continuity of action vanishes, unnecessary incidents are emphasised, and important ones slurred over."<sup>189</sup> A number of these points are echoed by *The Bioscope* in its second review, where it mainly confines itself to commenting on the new ending to the film:

"The real theme of the film is the love of Helen and Paul. When that is summarily terminated by Sylvia's trickery, the interest of the story also ends and the prolonged agony of the lovers ... tends to create an anti-climax. ... The death of Sylvia's little son, though very tenderly and prettily told, is unconvincing in respect of material facts, for it seems improbable that the parents, who were apparently within walking distance of their home, should have heard nothing of their child's mysterious illness. Most picturegoers, however, would have liked to see Sylvia punished with a severity befitting her altogether un-Victorian behaviour."<sup>190</sup>

It is worth comparing these comments to the observations of Colden Lore, author of another contemporary British script-writing manual:

"Broadly speaking, the structure of a film story does not differ from that of a novel or a drama. Each must have a central theme, and a plot by which this theme is propounded, *but a film plot must be smoother, more probable than its cousin of the printed page.*"<sup>191</sup>

Lore's guidelines for screen-writing are indeed very strong on questions of causality and motivation, and for the reviewers, this is one aspect of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* which was less than perfectly handled. Similarly, Lore's comments about the requirements of a strong and satisfying sense of narrative closure are heavily underlined, so reinforcing the various criticisms of the ending of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, in which the compiling of yet more climaxes serves only to produce a sense of anti-climax:



"What in a novel or drama merely constitutes the plot, forms practically the whole 'story' of the Photoplay. The plot itself is a chain of circumstances and events arising out of some struggle or clash of interests so contrived that, in a crescendo, after periods of suspense, when the issue is still in doubt, they lead to one big crisis - the climax. *Here the story must end. To prolong it would be to produce an anticlimax.*"<sup>192</sup>

Another way of reading the various criticisms of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is to turn them back on the reviewer. The comments about the stereotyping of characters and narrative coincidence and improbability are thus all familiar characteristics of the criticism of popular melodrama by more high-brow critics.<sup>193</sup> This suggests a number of things: firstly, it reminds us of the debt which popular cinema owes to nineteenth century melodrama; secondly, it suggests that Hepworth has failed to pitch his film adequately at a coherent and homogeneous putative audience, since the film falls between the expectations of quality cinema and popular melodrama. There may well be far closer links between these two types of film than is generally acknowledged; there is, for instance, a great deal in common between the psychological realism of post-war European (including British) art cinema and the thematic concerns and modes of representation of popular film melodrama; certainly also, there was a concerted effort to produce a popular 'quality' cinema in Britain during the mid 1940s. There was, however, no common agreement that Hepworth had managed to achieve the right blend of ingredients and pleasures in *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. It thus appears too evidently a mix of two genres, the art film and the woman's picture. The two had perhaps not been convincingly enough reconciled, yet the blend in itself has remained a characteristic of the heritage genre - many of BBC Television's classic serials, for instance, can be read as sort of high-class, respectable soap operas.<sup>194</sup>

Part of the problem surely lies in Hepworth's choice of material, and what he has proposed to do with it, for, as we have seen, the novel is indeed popular melodrama, or, in literary terminology, popular romance fiction, addressed primarily to a female readership. Its central protagonist is female; its dominating relationships are between the heroine and her loved ones; its major drama lies in the romance of love thwarted, misunderstood, achieved and destroyed; and the whole story is told from the insistently feminine perspective of the heroine. The suspense of the narrative is the suspense of 'if only...', and the novel is accordingly full of intense emotions, huge coincidences, and the discrepant and often blind points of view of the two main protagonists and the more omniscient but powerless point of view of the reader. All this tends to establish a strong complicity between reader and protagonist.<sup>195</sup> Elaine Showalter discusses the general romance conventions of Mathers's novel in the context of an historically specific tendency in Victorian literature, the series of spectacular best sellers by women writers of the 1860s and 1870s, such as Mary E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (both published in 1862).<sup>196</sup> This was a very different literature from the women's writing of the previous generation, the work of the Brontes, Mrs. Gaskell, and George Eliot; it was a type of sensation fiction whose commerciality and transgressive passions, and especially the fact that it was written by women, shocked both male critics with an allegiance to high culture, and the older generation of women writers and reviewers. Indeed, Mathers wrote the novel in secret, and published it anonymously<sup>197</sup> - this was clearly not a fit book for a woman of her standing to write.

*Comin' Thro' The Rye* is not, therefore, from this point of view, auspicious material for the production of a quality film addressing a middle-class audience

in a traditional English idiom. Yet it does have the advantage of being set in a period which had already been heavily mythicised by the heritage impulse. There is a heavily sedimented notion of 'Victorian-ness' at work in the reviews of the film, for instance, one which is evidently taken for granted in a very unquestioning way by the writers, in phrases such as "most picturegoers ... would have liked to see Sylvia punished with a severity befitting *her altogether un-Victorian behaviour*", and "the lovers ... are, quite properly, *too Victorian* to have the courage of their passion".<sup>198</sup> We are assumed to have no doubt in our minds as to what constitutes 'Victorian behaviour' here: whatever may have been intended by Mathers, or picked up on by her predominantly female readership,<sup>199</sup> 'Victorian-ness' is now something safe and secure, an unimpeachable image of moral stability which can be looked back upon as an authentic and instructive referent, abstracted from its historical context.

In the novel itself, it is precisely the moral sensibility of mid-Victorian patriarchy which is the site of dramatic struggle: a very particular set of cultural tensions and antagonisms are explored in the course of a narrative about learning what it means to become a woman within a very specific class milieu; in the film, however, we are presented with a much more generalised imaginary object, 'Victorian-ness'. A specifically modern cultural memory of a period, and an ideological paradigm, is imposed on a text which is the product of that period, whose leading political tensions have been purged, or at least reduced to individual character traits. In the style of this sensation fiction - "a genre in which everything that was not forbidden was compulsory"<sup>200</sup> - 'Victorian exteriors' have not as yet been re-constructed in the novel as 'prim', and 'violent passions' do indeed 'blaze fiercely'.<sup>201</sup> A front must certainly be put up for the intolerant father, and on other occasions as well, but it is not

a *prim* front, and there is in *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, as there is in other sensation novels, a running *critical* commentary, for which one does not have to read between the lines, on how the womenfolk of the gentry class were expected to behave as daughters, wives and mothers, a commentary which expresses a great deal of anger and frustration. The novel, as such, can be read as attempting to create a space for the emergence of a new woman, even if the heroine does at one point explicitly distance herself from any political version of feminism.

The transgressive qualities of the sensation novel are to some extent contained by the conventional structure of the three-decker, however, as Showalter points out, and this process of recuperation is even more strongly marked in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* than in some of the other novels of the period. This begins to explain how a sensation novel, a transgressive feminist text with a very particular line on mid-Victorian patriarchy, could be re-worked as a text which might express the 'charm', 'quaintness' and 'primness' which 'Victorian-ness' evidently connotes in the early 1920s (these are all terms used in the reviews quoted above).

"[E]ven as they recorded their disillusion, their frustration, their anger, indeed, their murderous feelings, the sensationalists could not bring themselves to undertake a radical inquiry into the role of women. ... Typically, the first volume of a woman's sensation novel is a gripping and sardonic analysis of a woman in conflict with male authority. By the second volume, guilt has set in. In the third volume we see the heroine punished, repentant, and drained of all energy. ... The very tradition of the domestic novel opposed the heroine's development. It was so widely accepted that marriage would conclude the representation of the fictional heroine, that 'my third volume' became a coy euphemism for this period of women's lives."<sup>202</sup>

The structure of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is not quite like this, because - and perhaps this is one of its major transgressions - guilt never sets in. Volume

one deals with Helen's early teenage years, and her confrontation with various models of masculinity. There is the tyranny of her father, and her idealisation of brother Jack (her friendship with him gradually recedes as their sexual difference is more profoundly culturally demarcated). There is also the potential boredom of her future life if she were to pledge herself for marriage to the sweet but dull, and ironically named, George Tempest (he is neither adventurous like her brother, nor a passionate romantic figure). Finally of course there is the enigmatic figure of Paul, her future lover, a figure both carefully eroticised, but also heavily sentimentalised. The conflict with male authority is worked through in various ways: in terms of her relations with her father; in terms of her resistance to the insistent George, who would implicitly in the eyes of her family make the future 'ideal partner'; and in terms of her often forthright commentary on the plight of girls within the society which she lives.

Volume two, the chronicle of her eighteenth year, far from being an admission of guilt, deals with the 'Summer' of her love for Paul and his love for her; it is a fantasy of romance, a fantasy which is conspicuously played out in the absence of her father. Volume three, which ought to be the movement towards the happy ending - the containment, the closure - of marriage, instead does indeed punish Helen for the passion of her romantic fantasy. Sylvia, Paul's former *fiancée*, successfully plots to win back Paul by villainous means, and marries him by a trick. When Paul tries to explain to Helen that the marriage is on his part entirely loveless, and implies that they should continue to remain lovers, Helen insists instead on the self-sacrifice of their parting, a form of repentance which drains Helen (and Paul) of all energy. Finding a sort of release in mothering the son of Paul and Sylvia, she is once more struck down by the death in her arms of the son, and eventually the death of Paul.

Showalter suggests that the conventions of the three-decker mean that the only proper escape from the tyranny of the father is through marriage. The obvious partner for Helen is George, but the fantasy is of being with the far more exciting Paul. In the end she can have neither.

"Mathers could neither abandon the sentimental conventions of the three-decker, nor believe in them. Her solution to this dilemma was perhaps the only one possible for a novelist in her circumstances; she concocted a romance for her heroine, but ended it unhappily. Nell is left in limbo; we have no right to predict that she will do anything with her life, but at least she is not confined to marriage."<sup>203</sup>

Showalter notes further that the sensation fiction of the 1860s and 1870s broke with "the code of renunciation and submission that informed earlier [women's] fiction".<sup>204</sup> But in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* there is still a strong sense of self-sacrifice, which leads, one gathers, to a very serious nervous illness on Helen's part; she does, in other words, submit to the proprieties of marriage, even if it is articulated in terms of her staying away from Paul in his marriage to the evil Sylvia. Herein lies another distance from some of the more sensationalist fiction of the period: while Helen does have a feminist sensibility that may have shocked some of the novel's readers at the time of its initial publication, the more villainous, if not exactly murderous, crimes of passion are displaced on to the figure of the other woman, Sylvia. But even here, there is a feminist critique of male fantasies, since Sylvia is otherwise the perfect woman, immaculately beautiful, admired by everyone that sets eyes on her, always graceful in public, whether in church, on horseback or on the dance-floor. Helen by contrast is plain-looking (or at least believes herself to be), exuberant rather than graceful, and unable to dance or ride. She is not the accomplished and elegant lady of the etiquette manuals. On the contrary, it is Sylvia who

holds this position; and while Helen knows better, to others, it may seem that it is Sylvia who is the abandoned *fiancée*, and later the neglected wife, and Paul that is at fault. But Mathers shows that beneath this surface, this male fantasy of womanhood, is a complete bitch.

A feminist sensibility does still remain, therefore, even if the sensational transgressions of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* are muted by contrast with some of the other novels in the genre, and compromised by the romance conventions of volumes two and three. The sense of a critique of patriarchy has been lost in the transformation from novel to film, as have many of the little details of female deviance, to be replaced by the caresses of the period piece, and the reconstruction of 'Victorian-ness'. Rather than trying to explore or understand the nuances of women's experience, Hepworth focusses on the externals of their appearance, reducing them to just so much *mise-en-scène*, to authentic period costumes on the bodies of modern stars. Yet it is this very garb which is the source of so much frustration to the young Helen in the novel:

"By and by I pluck up sufficient spirit to put on the despised female garments that I hate so thoroughly. How cumbrous, and useless, and ridiculous they are! how my gowns, petticoats, crinoline, ribbons, ties, cloaks, hats, bonnets, gloves, tapes, hooks, eyes, buttons, and the hundred and one *et ceteras* that make up a girl's costume chafe and irritate me!"<sup>205</sup>

There are marked differences, too, between the ways in which the novel and the film deal with issues of romance and fantasy. Showalter argues that the exploration of feminine fantasies is central to sensation fiction:

"These women novelists made a powerful appeal to the female audience by subverting the traditions of feminine fiction to suit their imaginative impulses, by expressing a wide range of suppressed female emotions, and by

tapping and satisfying fantasies of protest and escape. ... The enormous popularity of the women sensationalists reflects the skill with which they articulated the fantasies of their readers, fantasies that they themselves fervently shared."<sup>206</sup>

Hepworth's adaptation however captures little sense of this feminine fantasy. This is partly because he was evidently trying to create a tasteful period piece as much as a popular melodrama, but partly also because his aesthetic cannot really accommodate a complex and sophisticated narrative development - and it is the passionate energy of the narrative drive which is so important to the expression of fantasy in the novel of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. Hepworth's primarily distanced *tableau* narration, likewise, cannot on the whole generate the imaginative qualities and the complicity with the reader which the 'autobiographical' first person narration of the novel achieves.

The *structure* of the story may be substantially the same in novel and film, but the pacing, and the emotional depth and psychological complexity of the novel are missing from the film. Hepworth's aesthetic does not easily lend itself to the creation of psychological space, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter: the *tableau* style of narration cannot insert the spectating subject into the narrative space of the film in an identificatory way, but instead leaves the spectator on the outside, looking in from a distance. This is ideal for the display of heritage properties, but not for the development of a powerfully engaging romantic drama.

Steve Neale has argued that one characteristic of the classic film melodrama's potential to move its audience is the distinctive way in which it plays on point of view and its relationship to knowledge.<sup>207</sup> The processing of the drama in



many cases involves initially establishing that the full passion of romance cannot be consummated because the characters are unable to see what we as spectators can see only too well; the characters thus lack the knowledge which would enable the romance to progress, while the spectator is powerless to intervene ("if only..."). The successful movement of the narrative, as Neale points out, often actually requires not simply that the main characters *see* what they so far have not seen, but that they *see each other*, that they exchange looks - which also enables the spectator finally to see *with* the characters. It is this conjunction of looks which in part gives the classical melodrama its emotional power.

It is certainly the case that we see more than the characters in *Comin' Thro' The Rye*: we know that Sylvia is scheming to win back Paul, for instance, but neither Paul nor Helen know this. There is, furthermore, a relatively knowing play on the desire of each of the two protagonists to see each other when parted by Paul's second visit to Rome. They had last seen each other across the rye field, as Paul walked away into the distance. Helen later returns to the same spot, and looks across the now empty field, stretching her arms towards where she had last seen Paul, as if to will him back. Paul, meanwhile, recalls that his last view of Helen had been as he looked back across the field to see her being comforted by George, a scene which he subsequently misinterprets. These two 'empty gazes' must be brought back into alignment if the romance is to resume - but Sylvia's intervention makes this impossible. The play on processing the characters' intra-diegetic looks as at one physically with the look of the spectator is beyond the scope of the film anyway, given the virtually relentless use of *tableau* shots, and relative avoidance of point of view shots, or even eyeline matching. The moment is not played for the passion

which the manipulation of points of view might have enabled, even when they do look at each other. The difference from the classical system is underlined further by the marked frontality of the acting, so that when Paul and Helen do meet again, they are consigned mainly to looking out at the camera, rather than at each other.

The transformation from novel to film loses altogether the sense of a critique of patriarchy, or an exploration of the codes and pleasures of romance. In their place is a perspective which idealises the past. Some of the more populist reviewers of the film hinted at the problems with this idealisation, but even they were unable to develop this into a full critique: *Picture Show*, as we know, suggested that "Victorian England, with its quaint formality and graceful dignity, might not have been attractive to live in, but as it is shown on the screen it certainly appears to be so."<sup>208</sup> Other reviewers seem much happier with this transformation of a cultural memory: "One is accustomed to regard this period as not very attractive as regards dresses and furniture; but that there is a quaint charm about it is abundantly demonstrated here."<sup>209</sup> The shift from a critique of Victorian clothing in the novel to a celebration of it in the film is, then, part and parcel of the whole transformation of a contemporary romance, albeit one already tinged with nostalgia, into a period piece replete with the paraphernalia of the heritage perspective. While the delight in the pastoral vision of the English landscape is evident in both novel and film, there is a new departure in the way in which the film also fills its images with collectible Victoriana, formal gardens and the facades of country houses which reek of 'past-ness'. There is really only one brief passage in the five hundred and ten pages of the novel which gestures towards this heritage sensibility. This particular occasion is very much in line with the film's perspective on the

national past, except that the reference is to Restoration properties, not Victoriana:

"...and I look round the room at the dark oak, at the massive sideboard, on which is carved the date 1690. How small and insignificant that date makes me feel, and how evanescent a thing life is. For how many generations has not that sideboard held food and drink? for how many more will it not hold the same? ... Stately old houses certainly lessen one's sense of self-importance. It is impossible, in the face of the stored traditions and memories of many hundred years, not to feel that these things remain, and we go."<sup>210</sup>

This sense of continuing tradition is not at all typical of the novel, which is very firmly situated in the present (it is told throughout in the present tense, for instance). There are otherwise very few descriptions of rooms or of buildings, or of the decor, furnishings and ornaments of those buildings, beyond the purely functional descriptions required for narrative development, in marked contrast to the film. These heritage elements tend to stall the pace and economy of the narrative too, or to lead the spectator in narratively irrelevant directions. This can be seen particularly in the opening sequence of the film. Shot 1 - on which the title is superimposed - shows the rye field (with Helen as a young girl); shot 2 (after the credits) is an emblematic shot of the rye field being sown, superimposed with the title 'Seed-time'; then follows an intertitle:

"If the spirits of Old Houses have anything to do with the Moulding of Character it will not be surprising if the occupants of Silverbridge Manor have some well-marked Peculiarities."

Shot 3 is a long shot of the Manor seen from across the rye field. The verbal and visual underlining of the presence and nature of the house are neither in

the novel, nor strictly relevant to the development of the drama in the film - indeed the details of the intertitle are actually misleading. Their only real function is to display the house as precisely a heritage property, to instill a particular mode of looking at the film from the outset.

Hepworth thus endeavours to use a deviant fiction for a traditional de-politicised representation of 'Englishness', but in fact it is the narrative conventions of the popular romance fiction, more than the feminist voice of narration, or the absence of a developed heritage perspective, which seems to constitute his main stumbling block. Hepworth's aesthetic sensibility does not really seem suited to the passions of the novel; he does not really know how to deal with the narrative conventions of the melodrama - hence the problems into which he runs with the critics on this front. What appealed to Hepworth was clearly the genteel framework within which the passions of the melodrama are handled: the class milieu of the setting, but also the language of the novel, for every chapter is prefaced with a quotation from some classical, Shakespearean or otherwise culturally respectable source, and Helen herself is always demonstrating the breadth of her reading and depth of her learning with further such quotations. For all intents and purposes, these quotations are narratively redundant (Helen's learning is of no narrative consequence), slowing down the pace of the fiction, in the same way that the pictorialist embellishments and the primarily *tableau* style of narration in the film retard the narrative.

#### vi) Film style and the standards of American cinema

The problem with constructing an efficient narrative which can unhesitatingly win the support of the film critics of the period is not simply a problem of having chosen a somewhat anomalous source novel, but is integral to Hepworth's whole film aesthetic. Even within a cinema industry that was much less standardised than its American counterpart, Hepworth's style was highly idiosyncratic. As *The Bioscope* notes, *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is "an entertainment as effective dramatically as it is unusual in character"<sup>211</sup> which "bears throughout the imprint of Mr Hepworth's individual style". The rider that this "will undoubtedly charm admirers of this typically British school of picture-making"<sup>212</sup> is implicitly an acknowledgement that the style is of limited appeal, despite the attempts of *The Bioscope* to sell it to a wider audience. It is revealing to compare these sorts of comments to the same trade paper's reference to another British film trade shown the same week:

"Among the modern British stories shown, Graham Cutts' ornate and dramatic version of Michael Morton's *Woman to Woman* takes first place as a polished and elaborate production done in the American style. Apart from its intrinsic qualities as a powerful entertainment, the film proves that British studiocraft is now capable of equalling if not eclipsing the best American work so far as technical finish is concerned."<sup>213</sup>

*Woman to Woman* was the critical success of late 1923 and early 1924 - "in strong drama, *Woman to Woman* ... is perhaps the outstanding picture of the year". All the trade papers, the national dailies and the fan magazines praised it lavishly, and noted the degree to which it worked smoothly "on lines which the Americans have hitherto made their own",<sup>214</sup> seeing it as "a challenge to the American producer, accustomed to make pictures on a similar or greater

scale."<sup>215</sup> *The Bioscope*, quoted above, went on to note that "this is a film of exceptional artistic and dramatic interest, and of outstanding entertainment value ..., and will fully justify extensive exploitation."<sup>216</sup> *Kine Weekly* thought the film

"an outstanding British achievement and ... a screen entertainment that is far above the average. ... No praise is too high for the artistic direction and the eminently human way in which Graham Cutts has unfolded the story."<sup>217</sup>

*Woman to Woman* was of course a sign of things to come: although nominally directed by Cutts, one of the leading directors of the period, the young Alfred Hitchcock had a large part in the script-writing and directing process, and was officially credited as Assistant Director, co-screenwriter, and Art Director. His future wife Alma Reville was the editor.<sup>217</sup> The film was, in addition, co-produced by Victor Saville and Michael Balcon, for whom it was their first foray into feature film work. These too were names of the future (both Balcon and Saville worked on *Evergreen* (1934), discussed in the next chapter). Perhaps the most significant aspect of *Woman to Woman* was that it was "produced on lines frankly designed to appeal to America."<sup>219</sup> This applied to the technical qualities praised by all the reviewers - *Kine Weekly's* comment is typical: the film "need fear no adverse comparison in the matter of setting, lighting or photography with the best American pictures."<sup>220</sup>

The film also self-consciously competed with Hollywood on its own terms through its casting: the American star Betty Compson had been specially imported for the film. The bid to work in the American style was also felt by contemporary reviewers to be evident in the narrative construction and mode of narration of

the film: the play on which the film was based, "which had little intrinsic value as dramatic entertainment",<sup>221</sup> was not adapted with the aim of preserving some perceived 'authenticity' of the 'original', but was "modified for screen purposes - and improved."<sup>222</sup> The continuity of the film impressed - "the action moves smoothly from the beginning to the end"<sup>223</sup>; "there is no side-tracking, no involved detail, the [central] theme ... is kept prominently to the fore."<sup>224</sup> The balance of spectacle and emotional intimacy and sincerity was favourably commented on, too:

"The producer has given his story beautiful and lavish settings, but never once does he allow these to overshadow or interfere with the action of the plot; they are all part and parcel of the story and are used to lead up to some dramatic climax."<sup>225</sup>

For once, this was not patriotism running riot among the British reviewers, since the reviewer for *Variety* made similar comments on the occasion of the film's New York release:

"nothing either the British manufacturers or Miss Compson need be ashamed of... as a whole it is not any more guilty of the usual sequence of deficiencies than is included in the average features produced and made within our own home territory... It's a workmanlike piece of production ... and rates above some of the vehicles Miss Compson has done on this side... After viewing this picture there seems no evident reason for the continual antipathy expressed towards British-made films, as this assuredly must be an example of the better grade of work over there. It is unquestionably equal to a vast majority of the releases viewed in the first run houses over here and vastly superior to those witnessed in our daily change theatres."<sup>226</sup>

Again, technical qualities are praised, with costumes, lavish set design, good photography and lighting all being singled out for attention. While the reviewer by no means goes overboard about the film, its closeness to American standards

enables a warm reception. Another American trade paper suggested this was "one of the two best English pictures ever shown on the screen",<sup>227</sup> while *Kine Weekly's* New York correspondent reminded readers that "we of the States ... have claimed for many years that our public would accept a British production if thoroughly adapted to our market. *Woman to Woman* is."<sup>228</sup> Indeed, *Woman to Woman* was one of the few British films of its time to receive American distribution, opening in the United States at the same time as in Britain. It also sold for a good price, and did good business in key cities.<sup>229</sup>

This was in stark contrast to the reception for *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. The *Variety* review for this film concluded that its differences from the prevailing standards meant that "[a]s far as the American market is concerned it hasn't a chance."<sup>230</sup> The picture was slated by *Variety* for what were seen as its primitive, antiquated methods:

"*Comin' Thro' The Rye* as a picture is just as much a picture as the average English production was back in 1912 when they were being distributed in this country by Mutual. They haven't advanced a bit. The handling of the story is wretched, the story itself being worse than that; the photography is bad... The picture is draggy. It is shot principally in exterior scenes until it gives the impression English must live in their gardens [sic]. The photography is what might be termed foggy almost through the picture and the actors walk right up to the camera as in the old days and they make faces at is [sic], showing plainly they have too much make-up on."<sup>231</sup>

The aspects of story construction criticised here were, as we have seen, also worried over by the English reviews, but the criticisms are much closer to those of the *Kine Weekly*, since the heritage qualities of a period piece are seen as detrimental rather than mitigating by *Variety*:



"the picture is a costume piece laid in the period of the early fifties, which is enough to condemn it in American eyes... The story could just as well have been modernized. There was no reason to plant it back in the Victorian days, but for some reason or other the English producer preferred to keep it there."<sup>232</sup>

My argument, of course, is that there are indeed good reasons for the film being a period piece, in terms of its 'authenticity to the period', and the space it creates for the display of heritage properties, including the (revised) moral properties of the period story itself. But it is evident that what can be seen, from another perspective, as a deliberately pictorialist cinematography and pastoral representation with specific heritage qualities means nothing to the American reviewer. The *New York Times*, less concerned than *Variety* with matters of box-office, and more concerned with film as an art-form, was more optimistic on this count: "We had hoped for much in this picture - which is a sweet old-fashioned love story - with its beautiful English background." In the end, though, it is "an old-fashioned story produced in an old-fashioned way. ... [A] frayed and clumsy production", particularly disappointing in terms of its theatrical acting.<sup>233</sup> Most of all, the reviewer expresses surprise that "this production has been highly praised in England - which is strange, for it is hardly comparable with ordinary features produced in this country."<sup>234</sup> What these American reviews make clear is the vast gap that existed between Hepworth's aspirations and the expectations of the standard American film which dominated the market - and since those aspirations evidently included American distribution, one can but sympathise with *Variety's* comments that

"with the English clamouring to get into the America market it seems surprising that they would not educate themselves in the picture producing field and ascertain what is wanted. Certainly this example of production will not sell on this side of the Atlantic."<sup>235</sup>

Hepworth was evidently well aware of his distance from the increasingly international standards of the Hollywood film,<sup>236</sup> and made little effort to keep abreast of developments in the film world.<sup>237</sup> The most obvious difference between *Comin' Thro' The Rye* and most commercially successful films of the early 1920s is in the pacing of the narrative, its system of motivations and its overall structure. The reviews of both *The Bioscope* and *Kine Weekly* reviews are concerned that some scenes, and indeed the whole film, are prolonged beyond their climax, and suggest that the film is therefore in need of judicious cutting to improve continuity. Implicit is a desire for a more fast-moving narrative, in keeping with the economy, efficiency and speed of American films of the period. Certainly, by comparison with an American film such as *Tol'able David* (1921, but not released in Britain until 1923<sup>238</sup>) or *Woman of Paris* (1923, premiered in Britain in 1924<sup>239</sup>), *Comin' Thro' The Rye* has a much looser, much less economic and much less well-motivated narrative development.

This is in part a function of the cutting rate and Average Shot Length (ASL). The National Film Archive Viewing Copy of the film - incomplete, but still giving a good indication of the statistics for the original full film - has 230 shots,<sup>240</sup> and 79 intertitles.<sup>241</sup> When projected at a speed of 18 frames per second, which feels the right speed, this gives a running time of about 100 minutes. Using Barry Salt's method of calculation,<sup>242</sup> this gives an ASL of about 19 seconds. This is substantially longer than any of the 1920s films for which Salt gives ASLs (although he doesn't give figures for any British films). Salt notes that the slowest cutting rate for the American films of the 1920s which he has analysed is for the films of Rex Ingram, whom he describes as the leading American pictorialist of the period - but even here the ASL is only 7.5 seconds.<sup>243</sup> Salt also notes that European films are generally slower than

American films with a slower cutting rate, and longer ASL: "when it comes to making zippy movies, the Americans were always in front";<sup>244</sup> but again, the ASLs he gives for 1920s European films are much shorter than that of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. Salt further suggests that European film-makers during the early 1920s tend to shoot from far back, with a slow cutting rate and without reverse angles; European film-makers were also not matching eyelines as consistently as American film-makers in this period.<sup>245</sup>

The slow cutting rate and the long ASL are themselves inseparably bound to Hepworth's pervasive use of the *tableau* shot, with slow fades between each shot, and a preference for re-framing (sometimes several times in one shot) rather than scene dissection for following or re-centering action. There are occasional edits to closer shots, though nothing closer than a Medium Close Shot (except for letter inserts), and it is in fact only on rare occasions that the scale is greater than waist-up medium shots.<sup>246</sup>

The most common form of scene dissection in *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, where there is any (and in many cases there is not), is to move once into a closer shot (generally a medium shot) on the same frontal axis, around an intertitle; another occasional form of scene dissection is to break up a *tableau* shot with a letter insert in close up. There are also occasional point of view shots and reverse shots, but in general scene dissection is kept to a minimum, and such editing strategies are reserved for quite specific emotionally significant moments within the drama, as will be discussed later.

As such, *Comin' Thro' The Rye* has a stylistic system almost the opposite of contemporary American films, with their much faster cutting rate, analytical

continuity editing, and short ASL. Further, where American films are able to work with a relatively shallow staging, given the pace of the montage, much of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is staged in depth, with often two sites of action as well as a heritage 'backdrop'.<sup>247</sup> This staging in depth is of course only really possible given the slow cutting rate and long ASL, allowing the spectator time to scan the image. As we have seen, this visual style is part and parcel of a pictorialist cinematography, enabling the display of heritage properties (pastoral landscapes and Victoriana): the longer ASL and the particular narrative rhythm of the film are necessary in order to render the *mise-en-scène* legible, and in order to allow the eye to take in the full richness of the heritage and its visual pleasures. In this respect, *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is closer to contemporary European art cinema than popular American films, and even if it does not have anything like the complex, narratively significant *mise-en-scène* of, say, German 'expressionism', the richness of the pictorialist imagery has its own aesthetic and moral (if not narrative) complexity.

This suggests that there is a contradiction at the heart of most of the trade papers' reviews of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, since they both celebrate the visual qualities of the film and decry the slowness of the narrative, calling for judicious cutting. *Kine Weekly* for instance complains that "the treatment is slow and mechanical, it lacks the flesh and blood effect it should have expressed" but adds that "the photography is really beautiful".<sup>248</sup> It is, of course, precisely this vulgar carnality, this American virility,<sup>249</sup> that Hepworth is seeking to repress. Hollywood's 'zippy' narrative style, with all the dynamic energy of its tightly directed continuity cutting and scene dissection is simply not culturally suited to Hepworth's cinema, the quality film in an English idiom; as *The Motion Picture Studio* commented: "The Hepworth method of placid story

development seems eminently suited to the subject; and the dramatic values are at the same time not slurred."<sup>250</sup> Even the unhappy ending, with all its moral implications, can be seen as an integral part of this project,<sup>251</sup> and the whole adds up to a coherent and consistent stylistic system, fully in accord with the ideology of the film.

It is, however, debatable whether some of the narrative longeurs criticised in the trade papers' reviews are strictly necessary even within the representational project of this film. Narrative economy may be secondary to pictorial meaning, but surely if it thereby sacrifices narrative clarity, it becomes a problem. This lack of narrative clarity is most glaring at the start of the plot, which includes several scenes and characters which seem redundant to the extent that they have very little pay-off or narrative consequence. The process of establishing that a story is about to unfold is very drawn out, such that one becomes almost too aware of the mechanics of story-telling<sup>252</sup> - and, in the contemporary script-writing manual quoted earlier, Lore recommends that "all [structurally necessary] incidents must be sufficiently emphasised to impress themselves upon the memory of the spectator, yet without making, by undue accentuation, the skeleton of the structure too apparent."<sup>253</sup>

Part of the problem here is undoubtedly the length and complexity of the source novel, which has had to be drastically compressed for the film, while still trying to retain the narrative scope. In order to do justice to a certain cultural memory of the novel, a number of plot-lines are established which are really unnecessarily complex given their ultimate function within the narrative. Another script-writing manual recommends that "one eliminates the essentials from one's story"<sup>254</sup>, while Lore proposes that:

"In a Photoplay only the essential incidents, only those that bring the story forward, are worth portraying. Mere incident, as such, has no place in the plot. ... Unless [incidents] have a distinct contributory place in the story, the photo playwright must restrain himself."<sup>255</sup>

There are a number of ways in which *Comin' Thro' The Rye* fails to obey these fairly standard narrative conventions (standard, that is, for narrative texts in general, rather than specifically for films). This is particularly the case with the scenes involving Dick Fellows, and the consequences of his suicide; and also with the elaborate lengths to which the film goes to establish a childhood romance between Helen and George.

For the purposes of the narrative economy of the film, in the former case all that is needed is the knowledge that Paul has broken off his engagement with Sylvia, because of her tainted reputation, which is virtually established in an intertitle anyway. But in fact we have a long scene of Sylvia with Dick Fellows, followed by a scene in which Paul proposes to her, only to be interrupted by Dick; next is a scene at a steeplechase, in which Dick is riding, and in which he deliberately pushes his horse too hard, so that he is thrown and killed, intercut with shots of Sylvia, Paul and Dick's parents watching; then a scene of Paul reading the letter from Sylvia ending her affair with Dick, which Dick had been carrying at the time of his death; and finally the scene in which Paul breaks off their engagement (inadvertently overheard by Helen). As *Kine Weekly* noted, characters "do not contribute sufficiently to the action of the plot"<sup>256</sup> - and the script-writing manuals were adamant that

"characters should be drawn by, and solely by, the action as it progresses. ... The unnecessary characters in the plot should be dispensed with; for ... these characters, which are not of vital necessity to the telling of your plot, will retard it."<sup>257</sup>

The case of the relationship between Helen and George is very similar;<sup>259</sup> for the sake of the film's narrative economy and dramatic punch, all that is needed is that it be established that George and Helen have for some time been close friends; the details are irrelevant. To discard them means effectively discarding most of Volume one of the novel, but for the film's purposes this would have been no great loss: the full drama of the romance narrative is really not developed until Volumes two and three. The script-writing manuals are again insistent on this point: "the story *must* begin just at a point when the struggle [which drives the narrative], that no doubt has been brewing for some time, assumes critical proportions, and be then followed rapidly to its close."<sup>259</sup>

The same lack of classical narrative efficiency is there also in the several intertitles and shots introducing the other members of Helen's family at the start of the film, which tend to imply that these characters will play a central role in the narrative. While in the novel this may be the case, here in the film it is not: they are really quite marginal figures. Yet even by 1916, scriptwriters were being encouraged to "not commence by long scenes describing the character of one individual, however important it may be to the story; but [to] strike right into the heart of his play."<sup>260</sup> In other words, in a somewhat misplaced attempt to remain faithful to the narrative scope of the novel, a rather inefficient narrative has been produced. Too much has been invested in an effort to present, or show, a ready-made story, rather than to re-tell it for the screen. This same process could, however, be looked at in a more positive light, for it is as if a certain cultural memory of the novel - and of the social milieu which it depicts - is being 'documented' by the film.<sup>261</sup> The diegesis has, in effect, become far broader than the narrative; from the point of view of the prevailing international standards, it has been insufficiently

linearised and narrativised - but at the same time this does enable this 'documentation' of the social milieu which is so important to the film's appeal.

Lore's recommendations are once more precise in this respect: the number of characters in a plot - including those adapted from existing literary works - "should be as few as possible, not only in order to make the plot compact and intimate, but also to minimise the spectator's effort in remembering who's who."<sup>252</sup> In strictly narrative terms, the attempt in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* to embrace such a wide set of characters and incidents seems misplaced given the other shifts that have been made from the novel, in terms of mode of narration, sensibility, and so on. As the reviewer in *The Times* commented, "the producer had to follow the book closely, but a little alteration of the emphasis on various incidents would have made a great difference."<sup>253</sup> On the other hand, in terms of the heritage project, the Hepworth-style adaptation seems less misplaced, since it allows for a proliferation of images of country houses, lavish interiors and costumes - but only at the expense of narrative clarity and easy recognition of characters.<sup>254</sup>

The somewhat sprawling, uneconomic nature of the narrative is thus in part the result of trying to do justice to the narrative scope of a three-decker novel within the quite different structure of the feature film, which probably owes more to the short story than the nineteenth century novel.<sup>255</sup> In fact the first volume of the novel is itself only weakly narrativised, and is instead quite episodic and impressionistic, concerned as much with atmosphere and detail as it is with drama, and it is this sensibility which the film reproduces in its own narrative structure and process. *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is also initially relatively episodic in its development, although it becomes more action-



orientated as the plot develops. But since no clear goal is identified at the outset, there is no clear sense of closure, but instead, the accumulation of endings noted earlier. British script-writing manuals were, however, even as early as 1916, arguing against the episodic narrative, and for a strongly goal-directed narrative drive, with tight continuity, cohesion and economy in the American style:

"Character should be bound to character by force of circumstances, each portion of the theme should bear upon the following portion, and the plot should present itself as a whole, not as a series of incidents insecurely linked together by a number of connecting scenes."<sup>266</sup>

Hepworth was not however attempting to transform the novel into conventional screen material in the American style. This practice can be seen as typical of the quality British literary adaptation, a key strand within the heritage genre, and relatively distinct from the standard Hollywood mode of adaptation.<sup>267</sup> Hollywood studios have tended to *exploit* a novel for its basic story-line and characterisation, cutting out unnecessary details, in order to construct a good drama - which is precisely what the script-writing manuals are recommending. The British heritage adaptation, on the other hand, in most cases involves trading on the prestige of the 'original', attempting to preserve and reproduce it as an *authentic* copy. The 'original' is as much a part of the heritage on display as the material with which it works (something which *The Bioscope* alludes to in its comment about the joys of seeing the "old story... presented in its true environment"<sup>268</sup>).

In the case of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, as we have seen, the prestige of the source novel is somewhat more ambivalent, and its cultural memory must be carefully

negotiated, both attempting to attract an audience and resisting its sensationalist aspects. The novel is used for its 1920s connotations of a generalised and mythicised 'Victorian-ness', not for its more specific mid-Victorian feminist value system. It is in this respect an imaginary object, a reconstructed version of the novel, which is on display in the film, not the 'original'.

## vii) Modes of narration

*Comin' Thro' The Rye* operates with a different set of narrational strategies from classical Hollywood cinema, one which makes the most of the slow cutting rate, the *tableau* shots, often staged in depth and occasionally re-framed to maintain the centering of significant action. Action for the most part is displayed in long shot or medium shot for the camera as recorder. There are two particular aspects of this narration within the *tableau* format which are worth commenting on in more detail: the use of the frame-edge to reveal or conceal information in a dramatic manner, and the development of two sites of action within the single frame, staged in depth. Both of these imply a particular mode of perception and spectating, which serves to concentrate the eye on the visible, and to downplay the narrative possibilities of off-screen space (the invisible). This of course relates closely to the pictorialist sensibility of the film and the particular aesthetics of display and to-be-looked-at-ness which this sensibility produces.

The development of two scenes of action within a narrative space staged in depth is, in effect, narration by means of a virtual montage within the *tableau* frame, rather than alternation between spaces, or the penetration of space through scene dissection. Thus, while the *tableau* style is an integral part of Hepworth's particular variant of pictorialism, the image is able to have more than a simply decorative pictorial function: montage within the frame creates a narratively dynamic image.<sup>269</sup>

There are a number of examples of this strategy in the film. Near the beginning of the film, for instance, the unknowingly jilted Dick Fellows returns to the

drawing room of his former lover, Sylvia, apparently to propose marriage to her - only to find another lover, Paul, doing the very same thing. The scene is staged in long shot, with Sylvia furthest from the camera, Dick nearest to it, and Paul in between. Both Paul and Sylvia face the camera, while Dick is in three-quarter profile. Sylvia signals from behind Paul, unobserved by him, but observed by the spectators and by Dick, for Dick to be quiet, and not reveal what he was about to do. The dynamics of the scene, its drama, depend on the spatial (and emotional) relationships between the three characters, and what is visible and therefore what is known to us - but not to all the characters because of the frontality of the staging. It is also significant that, in a rare moment of inter-shot alternation, we have seen Dick outside the house preparing to return to Sylvia, and also the scene in the drawing room for a second or two before Dick enters, so that we know exactly what is happening.

Other examples of this strategy include the scene of the house party where Paul and Helen establish their love for one another;<sup>270</sup> the scene in which Paul tells Helen and her family that he must return to Rome on business - information which is overheard by the maid who is being paid by Sylvia to spy on Paul;<sup>271</sup> and the scene towards the end of the *Summer* section of the film, where George explains to Paul in Rome that Sylvia has tricked him into marrying her.<sup>272</sup> The organisation of such scenes seems, from the point of view of the classical system, static, theatrical and uneconomic, with little or no cutting, markedly frontal staging, and long takes. It is, however, a perfectly acceptable means of narration within the terms of Hepworth's system of staging in depth in a *tableau* format. A series of alternating shots would undoubtedly have produced a different sense of suspense, but the *tableau* style still retains a certain dynamism. The *tableau* shot staged in depth, with two scenes of action, affords

in addition a perfectly coherent means of orientating the spectator in relation both to the characters and the space which they occupy and to the drama which eventually brings them together. Although the camera does not penetrate the narrative space or break it down and analyse it, it is not at the same time a passive camera: the camera and image at the centre of the aesthetic produce and work on a dynamic and dramatic narrative space within the *tableau* format.

Another scene, which takes place mainly in one long take, employs a number of different strategies for narration, including re-framing to centre (new) action, staging in two separate action spaces, and using the frame-edge as a means of concealment. It is near the beginning of the film, before Paul and Helen have met. Paul has told Sylvia that he no longer wants to see her because of the accident to Dick which she has provoked; Helen, unobserved, is hiding in the bushes behind them, "an unwilling eavesdropper" (as an earlier title has described her). Sylvia, in the foreground, falls to the ground, distraught. As she falls, the camera re-frames - rather than cuts - to keep her in the centre of the frame; it then tilts up again to reveal Helen still hiding in the bushes in the background. She creeps out of the bushes and towards the camera, until she is practically standing over Sylvia, who is out of frame (concealed). Helen looks down out of shot at Sylvia, and creeps off, apparently undetected by Sylvia simply because she is concealed out of shot. In an earlier shot in the same scene, Helen fails to notice a hammock until the camera pans to reveal it to us at the same time: that which is concealed, out of frame and off screen, is apparently not visible to characters until it is visible to us.<sup>273</sup>

This moment of revelation, this entering into the frame, and therefore into the visible, indicates a sudden shock to the emotions, a shock which depends

precisely on this play as to what is and is not visible. There is then a rather ambiguous sense of off-screen space. On the one hand, off-screen space is clearly implied: the diegesis would be incomprehensible without it. On the other hand, this strategy of playing on the strictly visible does precisely draw our attention to the confines of the frame itself, rather than to the space off.

There are other ways too in which the *mise-en-scène* of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, apparently so naively primitive and irredeemably pictorial, can be seen to have important narrational functions. There is, as we know, a fairly sophisticated naturalistic construction of character through landscape and *mise-en-scène*, notably through the association of Helen with nature (and similar constructions of Sylvia's and Paul's characters), and through the imagery of the rye field. The progress of the narrative, and the development of personal relationships, as noted earlier, is charted in part symbolically through the seasonal situation of the rye field, a point which is underlined by occasional intertitles, and by the fact that the two main lovers, Paul and Helen, meet on numerous occasions at the same spot in the rye field, initially by coincidence, and later by arrangement. The frequent return to the same romantically imbued spot in the rye field, and to the same camera set-ups showing virtually identical character placements and movements, builds up important narrational and visual rhymes and echoes, which underline the emotional significance of each visit to the field. On the occasion of their first meeting, Paul walks down the path towards Helen and the camera. When he leaves her for his second, fateful visit to Rome, he repeats the movement in reverse, within the same shot set-up.<sup>274</sup>

After Sylvia has initiated her plot to win back Paul, Helen returns on two occasions to the spot in the rye field, seen in the same camera set-ups, to

attempt to commune with the absent Paul, to attempt to recapture the emotions of her earlier visits; the visual rhyming of the shots invests them with the same emotions for the spectator, a nostalgic sense of romantic loss.<sup>275</sup> Later, Paul joins her in the field, having hurried back from Rome. They part sorrowfully, having established that he has been tricked into marrying Sylvia. Helen is left alone in the familiar spot, and falls to the ground, quite disconsolate. It is a moment of profound loss, which is conveyed as much by the *mise-en-scène*, and its echoes of previous scenes, as it is by the actions of the characters.

The initial impression gained from viewing *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is that Hepworth can have had no interest in the debates about editing which became so vital and energising during and after the 1920s.<sup>276</sup> Even in his autobiography, published in 1951, he can still be found defending vigorously the use of fades between shots or the use of a *tableau* shot rather than scene dissection.<sup>277</sup> He argues vigorously against the use of reverse field cutting, for instance, evidently with little regard for the psychological involvement of the spectator which such editing enables.<sup>278</sup> On closer investigation, however, it becomes clear that Hepworth does not altogether eschew the classical system of narration through the juxtaposition and alternation of shots in *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. The narrational possibilities of parallel editing between two sets of characters and spaces, both within a scene, and between scenes, are exploited at various times, and this in itself is a marked diversion from the novel's narrational strategies, since the first person narration of the novel effectively disbars this sort of play with time and space. When one reads Hepworth's statement that "smoothness in a film is important and should be preserved except when for some special effect a 'snap' is preferable"<sup>279</sup> in the context of the sentences which surround

it, one can see it as an argument for using more conventional (classical) editing strategies for certain effects, but for the main part working with *tableaux* and fades to black. A close analysis of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* reveals that some of the more standard (classical) forms of scene dissection and means of psychologising narrative space are indeed used in the film; these include point of view shots and other forms of eyeline matching; medium close shots; alternation, including reverse shots, and so on. These devices are, however, reserved for particularly poignant narrative moments of high emotional drama - the classical system after all is a much more intensely psychological narrative system, more identificatory and engaging for the spectator.

This occasional use of scene dissection should not, then, be seen as merely inconsistent, but needs to be understood as a deliberate mode of stylistic differentiation designed to push home a point.<sup>290</sup> The much faster cutting rate and shorter ASL at such moments produces a much faster pace and rhythm to the film than in the usual slow *tableau* style; that is to say, the occasional moments of relatively elaborate scene dissection in various ways formally convey to the spectator some of the agitation felt by characters within the diegesis.

Four narrative sequences in particular employ far more scene dissection than the rest of the film, and the effect is to render them more dramatically significant. These sequences are also rendered emotionally very engaging by virtue of a use of shots and editing structures that imply character psychology. - that is to say, the 'inner', the subjective state, of the characters involved is constructed more through montage than through acting.



The first sequence deals with the machinations surrounding the character of Dick Fellows, and so effectively sets the main narrative in motion. The sequence opens with Sylvia talking to a friend; she is seen to be particularly agitated, constantly looking off anxiously for someone she is expecting (presumably Paul). On the occasion of one of these looks, there is a fade to the reverse shot, matching Sylvia's eyeline with the first appearance of Dick Fellows. The friend leaves, and Paul subsequently arrives, and is introduced in the same camera set-up used to introduce Dick - except that it is no longer a reverse shot, since Sylvia and Dick have moved elsewhere. Once the three of them come together, there is a series of reverse shots between Dick and Sylvia, on the one hand, and Paul on the other hand - and when Dick leaves, he walks out of one shot and is picked up continuing the same movement and still in medium shot in the next shot.

This scene is thus in part constructed in classical continuity style, with eyelines, actions and directions matched from shot to shot - except that there is a fade to black between each shot, almost defeating the flow of the continuity, and certainly slowing the scene down considerably. There are, in addition, at least two shot transitions in the scene which do not attempt to preserve continuity at all - the fades in these cases clearly being intended to imply temporal ellipsis, when in the rest of the scene they imply temporal continuity.

After a slightly longer fade, the next scene shows Paul and Sylvia in her drawing room, with Paul proposing marriage. This scene is intercut with two shots of Dick outside, resolving to go back to Sylvia and also propose marriage. The final shot, already discussed, shows first Paul and Helen, who are then

joined by Dick, until, shattered, he leaves them alone again. There is then an important system of alternation and scene dissection developed in this part of the sequence, with several shots significantly shorter than the ASL for the film, and a much faster cutting rate for the sequence overall.

Two scenes later, we rejoin these same characters the next day at a horse race in which Dick is riding. Again, the scene is built around shot alternations, fading between shots of Paul, Sylvia and Dick's parents in the grandstand watching the race, and shots of the race itself, including Dick's fatal fall. The cutting rate is again much faster than the film's average, although again there is an idiosyncratic divergence from classical continuity, in that the eyelines are completely mismatched (as noted earlier, Salt has suggested that European film-makers in this period were generally not matching eyelines as consistently as American film-makers<sup>281</sup>).

A second sequence working with more or less classical conventions deals with the occasion of Paul and Helen's second meeting in the rye field, on his return from his first business trip to Rome. This sequence is of course central to the initiation and development of their romance, which is the core of the narrative. The drama is initially built up through alternation, including a point of view shot, indicating perhaps the emotional disturbance, nervous agitation and general psychological intensity of this scene for Paul and Helen.<sup>282</sup>

A third sequence, to some extent rhyming with the second sequence, deals with the occasion of Paul's farewell to Helen in the rye field when leaving for Rome the second time - the trip which enables Sylvia to come between Paul and Helen, and thus precipitate the climactic unhappy ending. When Paul walks off along the

path through the rye, he leaves a disconsolate Helen in the foreground. There is a fade to George, her childhood sweetheart, in a contiguous space to the right of Helen, looking off screen at her. However, rather than cutting to his point of view, we return to the previous shot of Helen on the edge of the field, with Paul in the far distance, and George joining her in the shot. Another fade takes us to a medium shot of Paul, who turns round to the camera, and looks off beyond it, and we gather from his expression that he sees George and Helen together. After an initial moment of hesitation, he thinks nothing of it - but again, there is no cut to his point of view, and the sequence ends here. Editing thus reveals the two spaces either side of the central *tableau* of Helen and the rye field, but there is a refusal to complete these shots classically with their reverse, a point of view shot from the position of the men. The significance of this strategy only becomes clear in the fourth sequence to be discussed.

This fourth sequence deals with the discovery and repercussions of the false announcement placed in *The Times* by Sylvia, implying that George and Helen have married. This is probably the most drama-laden sequence of the film, which seals the fates of all involved, and there are various stylistic aspects which should be noted. There are, for instance, several unusually close shots of individuals in the sequence as a whole.<sup>203</sup> The scene which explains the 'missing' point of view shot when Paul turns and sees Helen and George together as he leaves for Rome is probably more significant than this use of medium close shots, however. Paul, now in Rome, has received the letter forged by Sylvia, enclosing the false announcement of a marriage between Helen and George. A first shot shows him reading the letter and newspaper, the next is an insert of the announcement, and the third returns to Paul reading and reacting. There is a fade to a heavily vignettted shot of George and Helen hugging in the rye field. The shot is a

flashback, the only one in the film, and perfectly matched as a reverse angle point of view shot from his perspective looking back across the field at the couple. This dramatic break with Hepworth's usual style in this film thus clearly establishes a deep, subjectively felt, emotional poignancy to the moment, and fully justifies the refusal to withhold the point of view shot in the earlier sequence.<sup>264</sup>

The tenor of the sequence is continued in the next scene. Sylvia has arrived in Paul's hotel room suddenly and unannounced, to find him holding a gun to his mouth. She tries to comfort him, but - somewhat confused - he decides to go to a bar. The next shot shows him sitting at a table in the bar, in medium close shot; he looks off screen. There is fade to a couple 'making love' at the next table; then another fade and we return to Paul, still looking off screen. He turns eventually and stares out past the camera eventually, evidently resolving to go off and 'make love' to Sylvia. Although to a viewer used to classical continuity, this trio of shots is difficult to read because of the length of the shot transitions via fades to black, this is again a point of view set-up, once more establishing the narrative importance of such shots to Hepworth. Here, for instance, the point of view set-up is used to establish character psychology, to construct a psychological space, at a moment which is rendered significant precisely through this system of shot alternation.<sup>265</sup>

These various psychologising forms of scene construction are, however, exceptions rather than the rule within *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. They certainly have their effect, but as a whole, the film seems emotionally barren by comparison with contemporary American films. It lacks the prevailing international conventions of psychological realism, and of course some of the major criticisms

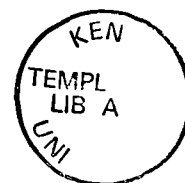
of the film on its release were to do with the weakness of the construction of character and the reliance on typing. Although there are some medium close shots, eyeline matches, reverse shots and glance-object shot structures - key devices in establishing character in classical cinema - these are not used regularly, and for the main part, as we have seen, the shots remain in *tableau* form. We are thus not able to penetrate consistently into a psychological space through scene dissection: an observational stance prevails over an identificatory engagement with characters.

This is reinforced by the occasional highly gestural theatrical acting in the film: on the one hand, a *tableau* style almost demands semaphoric acting; on the other hand, it is evident from contemporary reviews that by 1923, such acting is too recognisable as acting: "the tendency of players to overact ... induces an artificiality which eventually becomes an irritation."<sup>286</sup> It is uneconomic, therefore lacking in naturalism: the external signs of emotional states are too evident, too familiar as signs, and are no longer easily read for meaning - although in the case of *The Bioscope*, the implication is again that these melodramatics can be excused by the archival nature of the film: the performers are felt to "enter thoroughly into the spirit of both the story and the period."<sup>287</sup>

Given that the modes of narration adopted by Hepworth in this film are seen by many as primitive, it is revealing to look at the marked narrational differences between the film and the novel from which it is adapted. One way of describing the use of *tableau* shots and the minimal extent to which space is psychologised through montage or point of view, is as a narration from *outside the narrative space* (except at those key moments identified). It is, as such, a narration which

is able to observe the heritage on display within those *tableaux*, and which depends upon an 'objective' visibility rather than a subjective point of view.

The novel on the other hand is narrated in the first person from the point of view of the heroine, Helen - that is, from very much *within* the narrative space. In the film, we travel with Paul, Sylvia and George to Rome, for instance, but in the novel we only know what happens there from what Paul reports on his return to Helen. The novel is much broader in its temporal scope, covering the ten years or so, from Helen aged thirteen, to the broken young woman of her early twenties. The whole novel is written, somewhat idiosyncratically, in the present tense, despite this time-span, thus emphasising further still the experience of the resolutely first person narration. The novel codes the narrative voice very much as experiential and autobiographical, whereas the film codes the narrative voice as distanced and observational. The novel seems much more concerned to explore the nature of female identity within upper class Victorian patriarchy, within an intensely romantic (even if revisionist) mode. The film, on the other hand, is concerned as much with displaying the heritage qualities of the setting and its inhabitants as it is with the narrative of melodrama.



#### viii) Conclusions

Hepworth's film aesthetic is, in effect, camera-based, as befits someone for whom the technology itself held such a fascination. It is primarily an aesthetic of the shot and the image: hence the preponderance of the *tableau* and the pictorialist details. It is thus in marked contrast to the aesthetic which came to dominate intellectual film culture from the late 1920s, which understands the production of filmic meaning and pleasure to be generated primarily through montage, the combination of one shot with another. It is not surprising then that later critics and historians, from Rotha to Arnes, can find little enthusiasm for Hepworth's films subsequent to his pioneer days. It is significant also that the documentary idea was very much formulated around the aesthetic of montage, and that the documentary-realist tradition came to dominate the debates about British cinema as a national cinema.

In *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, the implication is so often that its *tableau* shots, and its frontality, simply illustrate a pre-given story, however much the film may actually diverge from the story and its narration in the novel. But the films favoured by a Rotha, or a Grierson, create their meanings through montage: the film explicitly *tells* the story, it *'writes'* it through the shots.<sup>299</sup>

Hepworth's aesthetic owes something in this respect to the narrational and other representational strategies of what Noel Burch has called the Primitive Mode of Representation of early cinema, and what Tom Gunning has called the Cinema of Attractions.<sup>299</sup> The classical film is concerned with an intensely identificatory, engaging mode of *story-telling*, in which the narrational form works to integrate the spectating subject into the narrative space. The cinema of attractions, and

later films such as *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, on the other hand, are more concerned with *showing*. For *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, this means in part a pictorial *mise-en-scène* which puts the decor, the sets, the props and the costumes on display; but it also means that the story, the drama itself, becomes just one of the attractions on display. Rather than the camera engaging with the story and integrating the spectator into the narrative space through scene dissection, use of close-ups, eyeline matching, and so on, the camera for the main part stands back and observes the characters and their actions from, as it were, a respectful distance. It is, as I have suggested, as if the pre-given story is being observed by the camera (and by the audience) as it unfolds before it like a stage play.

Gunning links the attractions of early cinema to certain traditions of *avant-garde* and modernist film-making; for instance, he notes the stress in the writing of Fernand Léger and others on the radical possibilities of cinema as a "harnessing of visibility"<sup>290</sup> - and as I have noted, there is a sense in which Hepworth's use of the frame-edge and general pictorialist style implies a similar aesthetic of visibility. At the same time, unlike Léger, Hepworth was not averse to drawing on theatrical or literary conventions, or "imitating the movements of nature"<sup>291</sup> in order to produce a quality film.

It would be wrong to see *Comin' Thro' The Rye* as entirely or even as primarily constructed according to the principles of the cinema of attractions. The Hepworth of 1923 could never have accepted Méliès' declaration that "the scenario ... has *no importance*, since I use it merely as a pretext for the 'stage effects', the 'tricks', or for a nicely arranged *tableaux*."<sup>292</sup> But *Comin' Thro' The Rye* can all the same be seen in part as providing Hepworth with the scope to



string out a narrative in front of (and, indeed, inside) various heritage attractions ("a magnificent timbered building which made lovely backgrounds from a dozen different angles"<sup>293</sup>). And the pictorialist composition, framing and manipulation of the image, along with the content of the image, were indeed all intended to produce a nicely arranged *tableau*. *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is either torn between two impulses, to display the heritage (the exhibitionism of the cinema of attractions) or to tell the story (the voyeurism of classical narrative cinema); or the two impulses are the same - the story is on display as part of the heritage, as one of the attractions.

*Comin' Thro' The Rye* is also, of course, not characterised by the recurring look at the camera by the actors, which Gunning sees as another feature of the cinema of attractions. The title shot of the film does, however, have Helen crawling toward the camera through the rye field, and miming 'Boo!' direct to camera; as such, if we are familiar with the conventions of most feature-length narrative cinema of the period, the shot is somewhat disconcerting. It could be suggested that this shot does not really count, since it has a marginal relationship to the narrative space, preceding as it does the opening of the story proper. But then there are other shots which have a similar marginal relationship to the narrative space, notably the three emblematic shots which preface each section of the film. Such shots can in fact be seen as attractions in the quite specific way that Gunning defines the term. The fact that they are also the shots which are the most rigorously pastoral suggests that the pastoralism of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* can also usefully be understood as one of the attractions of the film, and only weakly integrated into the romance narrative proper.

There is then a rather radical sense in which *Comin' Thro' The Rye* can be understood as constructed out of a series of relatively autonomous attractions.<sup>294</sup> This sense of autonomy is reinforced by the lack of classical continuity across the shots and sequences of the film (the slow pacing of the narrative, the use of the fade between shots, the *tableau* shot itself...). But in the end, the narrative must surely hold the spectator in place.

It would be inappropriate, then, to see *Comin' Thro' The Rye* solely in terms of the cinema of attractions, however fruitful Gunning's argument may be. For, as we have seen, the visual story-telling, the narrative rhythm and continuity, and the construction of meaning through montage which Kuleshov, Pudovkin and their contemporaries so admired in the American cinema of the 'teens and early 1920s,<sup>295</sup> is not entirely absent in *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. The difference is rather that it is not aesthetically *central*, and that there are heavy traces of the cinema of attractions.

The difference of Hepworth's cinema was explicitly taken as a national characteristic by Iris Barry, in the article referred to at the start of this chapter. She argues that

"Probably British films will always tend to be what the best popular British novels have been: developments of *character*, or the capturing of local or historical *atmosphere*, while the American film will increasingly develop pure *action* (in which they are supreme because they understand suspense)..."<sup>296</sup>

This seems to me remarkably perceptive, and this distance from a purely action-oriented cinema is something that I shall be exploring in relation to later British films from other genres in subsequent chapters, in terms of the stress

on character and atmosphere in and the narrative episodicism of *Sing As We Go* (1934) and films within the documentary-realist tradition. The episodic narrative is already seen as problematic in the context of the prevailing international standards in Weston's 1916 script-writing manual, even though it is not yet an account of what we would now recognise as an entirely classical method and still finds detailed scene dissection unusual. But it may be that the episodic narrative can be seen as a marker of difference for British cinema as a national cinema over against these very standards, set by the foreign powers of American cinema.

Hepworth's thinking about cinema also in various ways pre-figures the aesthetic of André Bazin,<sup>297</sup> whose work was so influential on a later generation of art cinema directors, and who also argued carefully against the traditions of montage. Much of what Hepworth says in his autobiography can be understood as an elaboration of the aesthetic centrality of the image: the emphasis on framing, and on the centering of significant action within the frame; on the disposition and gesturing of actors; and on the integrity of the individual shot or scene, for instance. This question of maintaining the integrity of the pro-filmic scene is particularly interesting. Hepworth suggests at one point, for instance, that, in shooting a heated conversation between two figures, "even [in sound films] I would rather, for the sake of smoothness, keep them both in view in one longer shot and allow the expressions of both faces to be studied together."<sup>298</sup> Later, he discusses the shooting of a scene of a dog rounding up sheep: "this called, I felt, for one long scene [ie shot] rather than a number of short ones, for that would not be convincing since the effect could be so easily faked."<sup>299</sup> The power of montage is evidently for Hepworth far less interesting or meaningful than maintaining the integrity of space, time, and performance in

the pro-filmic event; and as we have seen, Hepworth clearly often staged these events in deep space in such a way as to be narratively meaningful.

Space in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* thus has two important functions. Its first function is as narrative space; this may appear to be a *neutral* space in which the narrative can simply unfold, observed by the camera; but it is also a space which is at times organised to be meaningful *narrationally*. It is, in this sense, not a neutral narrative space, but an *active* narrative space, even a psychological space.

The second function of space in *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is as heritage space, an exhibitionist use of the frame, of framing, and of that which is framed. Heritage space displays props/properties as signs of an authentic national past, and calls for an observational, but also an admiring and confirming gaze. Once again, there are two ways of understanding this heritage space, one as an apparently more neutral space, the other with a more active relationship to that which occupies the space. Heritage space is apparently neutral in the same way that the heritage genre is so often a genre of adaptation: the historical period in question - here, the 'Victorian' - is apparently simply illustrated, its authentic signs put on display for the discerning viewer. Adaptation is, however, never in fact a neutral process: it is a transformative process; likewise, it is not so much that the historical period is simply illustrated, rather it is that an imaginary past is constructed at the level of representation. The framing of the heritage space proposes that it is a neutral framing, but in fact it needs to be understood as one which plays an active role in generating the spectacle of the past, which is in this way a modern past. The past, in this system, is not so much a specific place or time, as the imaginative construct of a specific

mode of representation, a specific set of production values, a series of familiar signs: it invites its spectator to engage with these images (and sounds) as authentic and desirable, as a solid referent for the national historical imagination.

This contrast and tension between the neutral and the active is synonymous with the relationship between camera distance and camera engagement. What Charles Barr has described as "Hepworth's extreme reluctance to interfere with the spatial coordinates of characters and spectators"<sup>300</sup> needs to be contrasted with an, if not equal, at least significant number of occasions when the camera does penetrate space, psychologise it, and re-orientate the spectator to it. This ties in with Barr's particularly fruitful suggestion that, while this apparently cold, distanced, observational stance in Hepworth may in some ways be typical of much of British cinema, it is only half the story<sup>301</sup> - except that Barr cannot see the other half of the story with respect to Hepworth.

The documentary-realist tradition can also be seen in terms of this tension between distance and engagement, as I will demonstrate in chapter six.<sup>302</sup> The classic documentaries of the 1930s seek to construct a public, observational gaze at their subjects, one which prefers the distanced group shot to the subjective penetration of space; but the closer the documentary idea becomes involved with the narrative feature film, the more it has also to construct the private, interior gaze of psychologically complex individuals, to take on board the practice and the implications of the point of view shot.

Barr extends this argument to suggest that all of British cinema can be understood in terms of this public/private tension: "It as though a social world

were distinguished from an imaginative world, with different rules governing them."<sup>303</sup> In *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, it is this combination of the social world - the display of the national past, the exploration of heritage space - with the imaginative world of the popular melodrama - the delimitation and psychologisation of narrative space - which creates the distinctiveness of the text. Except of course that the social world - here, the national past - is itself an imaginary object.

Another way of thinking this relationship between heritage space and narrative space is in terms of the distinction that Noel Burch has made between the experience of narrative, and what he calls the diegetic effect. Burch defines diegesis as the complete spatio-temporal world implied by a representation, drawing on the work of Christian Metz.<sup>304</sup> A strongly narrativised film will have a diegetic effect which exceeds those spatial and temporal instances strictly required for the narrative to make sense; but the narrative process, the process of centering the spectator's attention, attempts to regulate and restrict the production of the diegetic effect, to limit it to that which is needed. In this sense, diegesis is synonymous with narrative space.

But with *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, in addition to the attractions of the romantic melodrama, there are also the attractions of the heritage on display (the framing and the framed, the heritage space). The comments of contemporary reviewers, as well as the fact of the existence of the 1916 modern-dress version of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, suggest that the period setting is not necessary for the playing out of the tragic romance: the period setting, as spectacle (the spectacle of locations, interiors, decor and costume), exceeds that which is narratively necessary. What is produced is the diegesis of

history, or at least of 'Victorian-ness'; what is imposed upon the imagination of the spectator is the exotic spectacle of the national past, the English heritage. The tension of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is then also the tension between, not simply spectacle and narrative, but diegesis and narrative, as two relatively distinct ways of organising the perspective of the spectator in relation to the film.

My intention in this chapter has been to shift away from those readings of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* which regard it as retarded and theatrical, and to move towards explaining what are aberrations within the classical film system as in fact constitutive of an almost perfectly coherent and consistent alternative system. It is a system which, Hepworth implies, speaks in an English idiom, and which enables the production of important and worthwhile pictures, which might raise the standard and improve the quality of British cinema as a whole. As a system, it is a coherent enough means of orientating the spectator in relation to the hermeneutics of the film, whether the hermeneutics of the narrative or the hermeneutics of the heritage. Each aspect of this admittedly idiosyncratic system works quite adequately in conjunction with each other aspect of the film to achieve this orientation.

*Comin' Thro' The Rye* should thus be seen as an historically specific response to the increasing domination of British cinema by American films and American standards. This specificity consists of the particular place the film has within a directorial oeuvre and a generic tradition, and the promotion which it was given as part of an industry-wide effort to improve the interests of the British production sector. Its place within a rapidly changing film culture is also of course historically specific: as an attempt to produce a tasteful quality film for a middle-class audience, it is a precursor to later versions of

art cinema and the heritage film;<sup>305</sup> but in the context of the emergent intellectual film culture, it is of little interest - hence its ambivalent reception. *Comin' Thro' The Rye* also shares certain features with popular music hall comedies like *Sing As We Go* and films from the documentary-realist tradition (the subjects of the next two chapters), such that the film, for all its idiosyncracies, may be seen as constitutive of a *national* style.



## Chapter 5: Economic competition and product differentiation: popular cinema and the British film industry in the mid 1930s

### 1) Introduction: two films of 1934

*"For twenty five years the American film trade has monopolised the entertainment of the world. The American film has gone everywhere, and influenced fashion, trade and thought in every country. 'Motion pictures' have been synonymous with 'American motion pictures', and we have been perfectly prepared to accept the American idea without questioning as the inevitable material of screen entertainment."*

*C.A.Lejeune, The Observer's film critic, writing in Sight and Sound, 1933.<sup>1</sup>*

*Because of the established and irrefutable superiority of the American product, and the business technique created around that product, it is understandable how and why the Hollywood impress has made itself felt wherever the motion picture finds an outlet.*

*Maurice Kann, editor of the American trade paper, Motion Picture Daily, 1938.<sup>2</sup>*

*Sing As We Go* and *Evergreen* were both produced in Britain in 1934, and can in many ways be seen as pivotal films for that particular moment in British cinema history.<sup>3</sup> *Sing As We Go* was the product of an 'independent'; *Evergreen* was made at the studios of one of the 'majors'. They were both musical comedies, and they were both major box-office successes in Britain. Significantly, *Evergreen* also did very well in the US, thereby underlining one of the major differences between the two films: one is specifically designed for export to the prime market of the USA, while the other is (quite knowingly) inexportable. The two films can thus be seen as representatives of the two relatively distinct production policies outlined in chapter two: the larger company takes the route of direct competition with Hollywood, tackling it on its own terms, and in its own territories; the smaller outfit explores the possibilities of product

differentiation and market specialisation. Thus the policies involve both economic and cultural criteria, and need to be understood as strategies adopted by different sectors of the rapidly expanding British film industry in a bid to create a national popular cinema that could compete successfully with, or at the minimum co-exist profitably alongside the films of the American majors, in the mid 1930s.

This chapter will investigate these two strategies for creating a national cinema through a detailed analysis of the production, distribution and exhibition contexts of *Evergreen* and *Sing As We Go*, relating this work to a textual analysis of the two films. Although the moment of British cinema in the mid 1930s will not be explicitly related to other moments in the history of that cinema, it will be evident that the conclusions drawn are of more general significance than simply enabling us to understand this particular period.

The two films clearly share a great deal: as with the vast majority of commercial films, they both bid for a share of the market by playing on already well-established star-images, and by working with easily recognisable generic conventions. It is the differences between the two films, however, and not the similarities, that are most telling for the purposes of this case study. *Sing As We Go* was produced by Associated Talking Pictures (ATP), one of the larger and more successful independent production companies of the period. Along with the other films produced by ATP in the mid 1930s, it was intended for the domestic and Empire markets.<sup>4</sup> *Evergreen* was made at the Shepherd's Bush Studios of the altogether much larger and better resourced Gaumont-British (G-B), one of the two British vertically integrated corporations established in the wake of the quota regulations of 1927 (ATP, by contrast, had only a small and in 1934

embryonic distribution arm, and no tied cinemas). In the mid 1930s, G-B were making films with what they hoped would be the necessary production values to enable them to succeed in the American market as well as the domestic and Empire markets. *Evergreen* was made at perhaps the high-point of this optimistic, *internationalist* phase in G-B's history, for by the end of 1936, their ambitious production programme and their bid for a sizeable share of the American market were in tatters.

The two films thus involve different economies of scale and cultural aspirations, and are aimed at different, if overlapping, markets. They also relate very differently to the dominant formal paradigm of classical Hollywood cinema, and draw on relatively distinct, class-specific, and to some extent local, indigenous, popular cultural traditions, for their respective form and shape, their brands of comedy and song, and their modes of performance and address: in other words, they appeal to their audiences in often markedly different ways. Both films seek to establish themselves as popular cultural artefacts, but they also aspire to the status of quality productions. They both, for instance, make occasional nods towards European art cinema and the intellectual film culture of the period: *Sing As We Go* has several montage sequences derivative of the Soviet *avant-garde*; and *Evergreen* has a production number which appears to be a pastiche of *Metropolis* - Alfred Junge, ex-Ufa, was the art director. *Sing As We Go* also trades on the cultural status of J.B.Priestley, who was commissioned to write the screenplay, while *Evergreen* tries to achieve the professional standards of the quality Hollywood film.

Both films are star vehicles for the biggest female British stars of the 1930s, Gracie Fields and Jessie Matthews,<sup>5</sup> and since both Fields and Matthews play

performers of sorts, there is indeed a certain self-consciousness about the construction of the two films as star vehicles.<sup>6</sup> Both Fields and Matthews had made their names on the stage as popular musical performers before entering films, but they come from very different national cultural traditions with different cultural statuses and different class-specific national audiences.<sup>7</sup> *Sing As We Go* uses a loose episodic narrative to provide a framework for the songs and broad comedy that Gracie Fields was known for in the mainly working-class and lower middle-class entertainment forms of variety and music hall. *Evergreen*, on the other hand, showcases the persona of Jessie Matthews, forged in the more respectable, middle-class musical comedy/revue of London's West End, a tradition more easily accommodated by the narrative form of the classical film than the short 'turns' of the variety act ever could be. For where the classical film works with an extended, causally developed, goal-seeking narrative form, music hall of course depended on a series of short, relatively self-contained novelties, acts or turns, primarily comic and/or musical - and it is this latter shape as much as the former that organises the viewing experience of *Sing As We Go*.

Andy Medhurst has suggested that Gracie Fields' films of this period raise "the central problematic of the 1930s variety star film - how to accommodate such performers within existing genres."<sup>8</sup> As he notes, these films and those of other British variety performers in this period "were never particularly trying to be seamless narrative texts; they were unashamed vehicles for the talents of their stars",<sup>9</sup> and, indeed, *Sing As We Go* is little more than a narrative excuse for a collage of songs, comic gags and visual spectacle. Like *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, it works very much within the conventions of the cinema of attractions, even though the two films deal with such different subject matter and class *milieux*,

and on the face of it bid for such different cultural statuses. The attractions of *Sing As We Go* are only loosely integrated into an episodic narrative with an under-motivated causality. Although this anti-classicism is partly the result of the film's construction around Fields's stage persona, it also owes something to the fact that the film was directed by Basil Dean, one of the country's leading theatre producers, and very much a man of the theatre, whose self-confessed aim was to transfer quality plays to the screen.<sup>10</sup> Although *Sing As We Go* was actually made from an original screenplay, the frontality of the staging, and the lack of scene dissection or reverse field camera placements give away Dean's theatre background. But the finished product, with its numerous montage sequences, surely owes a great deal to Thorold Dickinson's editing, influenced as it was by the Soviet montage style.<sup>11</sup> Having said that, the script for the film reveals that a number of the effects that might be attributed to the editor were in fact already there on paper. Indeed, the script is a very effective blueprint for the film, since, like the film, it tends to separate montage off from dialogue scenes, so that the latter are envisaged theatrically, mainly in medium shot (with very little sense of scene dissection, and especially reverse field cutting), while the montage sequences are full of optical effects and rapid juxtapositions even in the script. Clearly, then, much of the final look of the film had been prepared for at the scripting stage,<sup>12</sup> but even there the clash between the two traditions - crudely, the theatrical and the cinematic - is evident.

*Evergreen* came out of a very different production context. It was directed by Victor Saville, a consummate industry professional who had been in the film business since the 'teens, producing his first feature film in 1923, the well-received *Woman to Woman*, discussed briefly in the previous chapter. The co-

producer of that film was Michael Balcon, who, by 1934, was Head of Production at G-B. As a director, he had a well-developed classical style, and was very popular with audiences of the mid 1930s.<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting also that, by the late 1930s, Saville was working very successfully for MGM, whereas Dean had returned full-time to the theatre world. *Evergreen* is a relatively lavish, big-budget musical, with several ostentatiously big production numbers ("the production is on a lavish scale hitherto rare in British musicals", wrote *Film Weekly*<sup>14</sup>). It is a polished studio film, which quite successfully emulates contemporary Hollywood musicals, in terms of subject matter and theme, energy, staging and art direction. In a verdict very similar to the one delivered by the same trade paper on *Woman to Woman* a decade earlier, *Variety* described it as "the first musical from across the sea that comes this close to competing successfully with the best efforts of Hollywood."<sup>15</sup> It has all the narrative integration, linearity and fluidity of the classical film, a modernist, specifically cinematic (as opposed to theatrical) play with time, and a classical construction of cinematic space as greater, and more spectacular, than theatrical space, despite its origins in a successful West End show. This was not an adaptation in the Dean or Hepworth mould, attempting above all else to be 'faithful' to the 'original', but one that began from a well-constructed, *cinematic* screenplay in the Hollywood mould, with new songs, routines and production numbers being added.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the style and form of the film aspire to a certain necessary universality or internationalism.

The two films are different not only in terms of the cultural background of the two stars, or the form of the films, but also in terms of their subject matter and sensibility. Fields's adventures in *Sing As We Go* are framed by a plot concerning unemployment and the depression in the Lancashire cotton industry,

although most of film is set in the popular working-class holiday resort of Blackpool, thereby dealing as much with working-class leisure as it does with work or its absence. The attempt to represent a specific regional locality, reinforced by the pervasiveness of regional and class-specific accents, also lends the film a marked resonance in terms of debates about national cinema. *Evergreen*, on the other hand, constructs a completely different world of work and leisure in the high-class showbusiness world of London's West End, with some wonderfully luxurious settings, and even a few aristocrats. But although this setting and *milieu* is just as specific and circumscribed as that of *Sing As We Go* (or indeed of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*), it is not in any way a local or peripheral culture, in terms of the dominant nationalist ideologies, but rather one that again aspires to a certain universality - which was of course precisely the intention of the producers, with their eyes firmly on the American market.

These differences in *milieu* and sensibility can be seen as characteristic of most of the films of the two stars, as both Jeffrey Richards and William K. Everson have argued. Richards, for instance, suggests, in what is perhaps a rather too easy, but certainly persuasive socio-historical analysis, that

"while Gracie maintained her popularity by being the people's heroine with her roots in the community, Jessie gained hers by becoming the embodiment of an essentially individualist middle-class success ethic."<sup>17</sup>

Not all of Fields's admirers in the 1930s would have agreed with this assessment, and, while the critic Caroline Lejeune could write that "she is as much a part of English life as tea and football pools, our green-hedged fields and the Nelson column",<sup>18</sup> she could also argue that "we have an industrial north

that is bigger than Gracie Fields running round a Blackpool fun fair".<sup>19</sup> Thus, at least among film journalists in the 1930s, there was a felt desire for a more realistic and narratively fulfilling cinema from Fields:

"If we could only see her in a real piece of life, full of strong emotion and of humour that has a human basis, she would be tremendous. Gracie is the most real person that we have met. She can give us the films of the people which have been so conspicuously absent from the British schedules, and which have been the foundation of the great film industry in America. She has never ceased to be one of the people, and as one of the people she could make us laugh and cry."<sup>20</sup>

This is a very interesting commentary, one that both celebrates Fields as the authentic representative of the people, and tries to distance itself from popular culture, calling for realism rather than comedy, and by implication a responsible cinema rather than the irresponsibilities of mere entertainment. It is a discourse which eventually finds itself more at home with the types of films discussed in the next chapter than with popular comedy - but it is significant all the same that it can be invoked with Fields in mind, establishing important links with the documentary-realist tradition.

In fact, Fields did eventually appear in some straight roles in her Hollywood films in the early 1940s for Twentieth Century Fox, but at the time of *Sing As We Go*, a move to Hollywood was almost unthinkable, given the national specificities and therefore audience appeal of the films she was then making. *Sing As We Go* does supersede her earlier films at ATP as far as the quality of the screenplay and the production values of the film are concerned, but it has not yet developed into an attempt to contain Fields's persona and cultural energy within the parameters of a more classically constructed narrative film, as was the case with her later films at ATP and Fox.



In the rest of this chapter I will explore these various issues in more detail, and assess the implications of the strategies which the two films represent for the question of national cinema in Britain. I will begin by outlining something of the general state of British cinema, the film industry, and the relationships between genre and popular culture in the mid 1930s. Within this broad context, I will look more closely at the industrial strategies of ATP and G-B, and in particular their organisation as companies, the policy statements of their main executives, and the various ways in which those policies were put into practice. Part of the cultural practice of ATP and G-B, as I have already suggested, involves the mobilisation of particular sets of production values in their films, designed to appeal to the expectations of specific sectors of the national and international audience. In this context, I will look at the question of star-image, but also the differential distribution of particular visual, aural and narrative attractions across the two films. This will involve examining the aesthetic form of the two films in some detail, and especially the relationship that they each have to the international standards of classical Hollywood cinema.<sup>21</sup>

#### ii) The British film industry and its genres in the mid 1930s

One of the most important conditions of existence of British cinema in the mid-1930s was the fact of state intervention in the form of the protectionist quota introduced in 1927, and regulating a minimum number - but significantly not a minimum quality - of British films in circulation. A second important condition was the relatively recent changeover to sound films, a changeover which had required huge capital expenditure. A third condition was the effects of the world-wide economic depression. Where the introduction of the quota had provided an artificial safety net particularly for small production companies, the effects of the latter two conditions had been to some extent to reverse this tendency, rendering film production both too expensive and too risky for the smallest ventures. These same conditions had enabled the strongest players in the field - the two British vertically integrated combines - to consolidate their position even further. A fourth set of conditions to take into account were those that prevailed in the United States. The American 'majors' had had to take on board new financial arrangements as a result of their own transition to sound and the expansion of the exhibition sector in the 1920s. Coupled with the effects of the depression, this meant that, while the American companies did not really lose any *significant* ground in Britain in this period, neither were they able to further monopolise the distribution market.<sup>22</sup>

Accessibility to statistics on cinema-going and the film industry in Britain in 1934 is fortunately aided by a detailed survey carried out by Simon Rowson of Ideal Films. Supplementing this source with other material which can be picked up from trade papers and other sources, we can produce the following picture of cinema in this period. As far as audiences are concerned, in 1934, cinema-going

in Britain was a hugely popular and inexpensive form of entertainment, with the highest measured per capita attendance in the world.<sup>23</sup>

American films still dominated the popular imagination and accounted for about three quarters of the films shown during the year, but the remaining quarter for British films represented a significant advance over the previous decade's figures and was about ten per cent above the quota of British films required by law to be exhibited.<sup>24</sup> Although a proportion of this ten per cent will have been 'quota quickies', the trade generally felt that the worst excesses of low budget production designed to exploit the quota laws were behind them,<sup>25</sup> and that British film production was generally in good health.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the total number of British feature films registered was substantially up.<sup>27</sup>

It is very difficult to obtain accurate box-office figures for individual films in this period, and one must rely on various more or less partial surveys of popularity, and the occasional indication in passing of the box-office success of individual films.<sup>28</sup> For instance, John Maxwell, head of ABPC, the other 'major', was reported in 1935 as claiming that only about ten films a year gross £100,000 in the UK, and of these, six are generally American.<sup>29</sup> From 1937, *Kine Weekly* published an annual break-down of the previous year's box-office successes. The first survey - of 1936 - is fairly general, based on an analysis of the returns of eight circuits, including ABC, and G-B's houses, but it does tend to confirm the general picture. Of the top twelve money-makers, only three are British. One of them is René Clair's *The Ghost Goes West* (1935), another the Gracie Fields vehicle, ATP's *Queen of Hearts* (1936), and the third is G-B's Hitchcock thriller *Secret Agent* (1936). Two Jessie Matthews films were runners-up, *First a Girl* (1935) and *Its Love Again* (1936).<sup>30</sup>

BIP (re-named ABPC in 1933)<sup>31</sup> and G-B, the two companies that had built up vertically integrated operations in the wake of the 1927 Quota Act, were by this time well-established, although, in the light of events later in the decade, G-B at least were over-extending themselves. Most of the 'quota quickie' companies set up to exploit the quota regulations had been weeded out, and the traumas of converting the industry to sound had been weathered. Alexander Korda's British-made *The Private Life of Henry 8th* (1933) had been a huge success at the American box-office at the end of the previous year with a prestigious run at New York's Radio City Music Hall, enabling it to become the biggest grossing British film in America to date. Korda had, in the words of the critic Caroline Lejeune, "done more than any other producer in the country to put British films on the map of the world",<sup>32</sup> and the Kine Yearbook review of 1933 claimed that *The Private Life of Henry 8th* "has been given such a reception wherever it has been seen - from Leicester Square to Hollywood - that the words 'British production' have acquired a new and highly complimentary significance."<sup>33</sup>

Other British films from Herbert Wilcox, Korda, and G-B among others had also done good box-office in the US prior to 1934.<sup>34</sup> The success of these films, but particularly of *The Private Life of Henry 8th*, encouraged many others - including G-B - to ignore the unique conditions that enabled this breakthrough and themselves bid, at great expense, for a place in the American market. The American distributors were unlikely in general to relax their hold on the US market and allow competitors to come in to the field. However, certain prevailing circumstances meant that there were *temporary* spaces for new product from other than the usual sources in the early 1930s. The financial implications of the Wall Street Crash, coming on top of the transition to sound, had required

the American studios to cut back on production, at a time when exhibitors had introduced the double bill in a bid to win back audiences. Hence there was a temporary shortage of American films, and one of the 'majors', United Artists, looked to Britain to fill up the schedule. *The Private Life of Henry 8th* was thus the first film to be financed and distributed by United Artists for London Films, under much more favourable financial arrangements than previous Anglo-American deals.<sup>35</sup>

As Kristin Thompson has pointed out,<sup>36</sup> the depression also meant a general decline in American economic exports, including film exports, from 1929 to 1934. This implies that the lower number of American films and the higher number of British films in the British market in this period may have had as much to do with the effects of the American depression, and the temporary respite in American market control, as with the quota regulations or the rationalisation and increasing vertical integration of the industry. Together, these factors enabled the British production industry to re-establish itself after the disasters of the mid-1920s, and there was a boom in production from 1933 to 1936. Against this has to be offset the rising costs of production, the particular sources and methods of funding the boom through City insurance companies, and the fact that by 1934 the Hollywood film industry was recovering from the effects of the depression. This suggests in retrospect that the rapid expansion of the British film industry in the first half of the 1930s was over-ambitious, leading to the collapse of the production sector in the years between 1936 and 1938.

The major British exhibitors were, in any case, less optimistic about the qualities and box-office potential of the British film, and were still expressing

anxiety over the quota regulations.<sup>37</sup> But the situation prevailing in 1934 generated increasing self-confidence on the part of the production sector of the industry, and encouraged much speculation and debate in the trade papers and the press about the revival of not just a film industry, but a national cinema in Britain. There was, however, no consensus as to how this national cinema could be best reproduced. ATP, of course, was of the view that films should be thoroughly British, and that producers should concern themselves only with exploiting those corners of the protected national market and the Dominions that hadn't already been systematically colonised by Hollywood. In defending this policy in 1938, Basil Dean at the same time attacked the other more 'internationalist' policy, adopted by another sector of the industry, including

G-B:

"The film that seeks to become international must first be convincingly national. Deep in the life of every nation lies the inexhaustible material with which that nation's films should be written and acted. With each nation's film activity strong and resurgent in its own right we can march confidently upon the road to the future. When that day of real advance comes, let us hope we shall have turned our backs for ever upon a condition of overgrown and domineering internationalism that sooner or later must die of its own redundancy."<sup>38</sup>

By the time that these conservatively nationalist comments had appeared in print, with their intimations of the timelessness and invariance of authentic culture, G-B and most of their competitors had indeed drawn back from the policy of internationalism. They had argued in the mid-1930s, however, that it was essential for producers seeking a higher profit margin to establish links with American distributors, imitate Hollywood films, and operate in the international arena, especially the American market. Many trade commentators concurred with the *Kine Yearbook's* review of the year in America in 1935 when

it suggested that "right now the English production has a much better than ever chance of scoring a popular success in America."<sup>39</sup> As Michael Balcon, head of production at G-B, explained to the readers of the *Evening News* in 1936,

"Until recently ... the market for British films has been strictly limited. Things are better now, but the popularity of British films is still largely centred in the home country; and that is a problem we British producers have always to bear in mind. We can get back quite a good proportion of our outlay from the cinemas of Great Britain and the Empire; but if we spend really considerable sums of money on a production and wish to get that back 'with plenty to spare' (as of course we do!) we must look further afield for larger returns on our outlay." <sup>40</sup>

The unabashed way in which the profit motive is here stated reveals the extent to which, within a large corporation like G-B, it is economic gain which motivates cultural practice. But only a year later, severe financial loss has given the 'problem' which Balcon cites a different complexion. By this time, even *Kine Weekly* had changed its tune: "Few now can deny that the panacea for our Industry's ills lies in economy, and concentration on our home markets."<sup>41</sup> The assault that G-B had launched on the American market was perhaps doomed to long-term failure; in effect, as a strategy, it involved the paradoxical situation of *competing* with the American majors as producers, yet attempting to *collaborate* with them as distributors and exhibitors in both the British and American markets. Either way, the argument was that films must be first and foremost good entertainment if they were to do good box-office. The exhibitor Sidney Bernstein, for instance, argued that "I have always been anxious to show British films, but ... as a showman bearing the responsibility of entertaining the public I know that patriotism is not enough."<sup>42</sup>

Even though *Sing As We Go* and *Evergreen* are the results of different policies, they both succeeded in entertaining British audiences - but they did so according to relatively distinct ideas of what constitutes good entertainment - bearing in mind of course that they are both genre films and star vehicles. But there was no avoiding the fact that 'good entertainment' in the *international* market invariably meant 'in the Hollywood style', and therefore *Evergreen*, not *Sing As We Go*. Although to some extent these policies could and did co-exist in the British film industry of the mid 1930s, there is also a certain conflict of interests at stake. Tighter quota regulations as to the number of foreign, and especially American films that could be screened in Britain were, for instance, much more strongly favoured by those pursuing the 'domestic' policy, and there was some disagreement between Dean and the representatives of G-B during the negotiations over the renewal of the Cinematograph Act in 1937.<sup>43</sup>

The success of *Evergreen* and *Sing As We Go* was in part due to their generic nature, and the genres inhabited by the two films were among the most prolific and popular genres in Britain in the mid 1930s. In terms of the number of films produced, the key types are melodrama, comedy, musicals and drama (especially crime and spy thrillers)<sup>44</sup> - although a full account of the period would have to take into account the various historical costume pictures and Empire epics as well. Musicals were often, as in Hollywood, adaptations of successful stage plays (*Evergreen* comes into this category), but there was also a broad range of musical types, or sub-genres, drawing variously on revue and musical comedy - and established stage stars such as Jack Buchanan, Sonnie Hale and Jessie Matthews - and on music hall. Several other music hall stars including Fields had prolific careers in the 1930s, in films designed to exploit their star-images and performance styles. This was, as Tom Ryall suggests, one of the more



vigorous if critically shunned cinematic strands of the period, "rooted firmly in British popular culture", and "crystalliz[ing] into a distinctive category of British film production in the 1930s."<sup>45</sup>

The idea of a specifically British musical genre, distinct from the American musical, is implicit in an article early in 1934 in *Kine Weekly*. It noted the current cycle of musicals on release and in production, and expressed concern that British producers should not try to "imitate" spectacular Hollywood musicals like *Footlight Parade* (1933). "A musical cycle is also in full swing in this country but it is more of an effort to combine narrative with music than to put over big spectacular routines."<sup>46</sup> These are interesting comments in the light of the critical reception for *Evergreen* later in the same year: the film was generally felt to work successfully with Hollywood's musical conventions.

The development of the comedy genre in Britain in this period was seen at the time as an even more nationally specific generic variation. Sidney Bernstein argued in *Picturegoer's* British film supplement that comedy was the only British genre that did consistently good box-office:

"Comedy pictures like *Turkey Time*, *Jack Ahoy*, *Aunt Sally*, and even Gracie Fields epics have made Hollywood reflect and consider and have definitely kept from the American companies millions in revenue that would have accrued to them from their own productions. ... It is in the realm of comedy that British films achieve their greatest success."<sup>47</sup>

American comedies, on the other hand, were he felt too much "designed to appeal to the youth of their big cities".<sup>48</sup> Bernstein adds that it is only in the comedy genre that the British film industry can claim to have major stars in the likes of Ralph Lynn, Tom Walls, Jack Hulbert, Cicely Courtneidge, and Gracie

Fields. In a similar vein, a trade review of an earlier Gracie Fields film suggested that "the picture is *essentially English* in its fun"<sup>49</sup>, while the Film Lovers Annual of 1933-4 noted that such performers

"present a type of comedy which is *essentially English* and appeals strongly to the English mentality. ... [The] appeal [of American comedies] is not, I venture to think, nearly so strong. ... How many American stars nowadays can prove so powerful a magnet to the box-office as our own Jack Hulbert or Cicely Courtneidge? I am not saying their productions reach the same level of technical excellence as some of their foreign rivals, but I do believe they are giving you, the public, what it wants."<sup>50</sup>

The wise-cracking American comedy evidently did not go down well in most British cinemas, moving *Variety*, in an article noting the popularity of Jack Buchanan in Britain, to suggest that

"the natives... have much less liking for sophisticated smartness than is generally realised. Further, the recent tendency in American films to relegate straight comedy in favor of non-stop wise-cracking by featured players finds little favor in the English, who are at heart lovers of essentially simple films."<sup>51</sup>

The comedy of performers from the music halls like Gracie Fields had required the development of sound in order to enable its incorporation into films, and it is the strength of the comedy genre at this time which adds fuel to the argument that it was as much the transition to sound as the introduction of quota regulations which enabled the British film revival of the early and mid 1930s. The other side of this, however, was the reception given to British comedy in the US. Thus the *New York Times* was well within the American critical mainstream when it commented in early 1935, in a review of *Evergreen*, that

"British humour ... is still pretty deadly according to any up-to-date standards. ... English comedians have a habit of displaying the comic understatement of a keystone cop."<sup>52</sup>

It would have been this lack of understatement in a film like *Sing As We Go* which rendered it virtually inexportable, certainly as far as the American distributors were concerned, but also evidently from the point of view of British distributors. When Michael Balcon was outlining G-B's policy of producing films for both domestic and American distribution, he made it clear that they would not be distributing comedies to the United States, since "there is still some difference of opinion between the two countries as to what is funny and what is not."<sup>53</sup>

### iii) Associated Talking Pictures

ATP was the forerunner of the re-named Ealing Studios, taken over by the ubiquitous Michael Balcon in 1938. It was established in 1929 by Basil Dean, best known as a West End theatre impresario, who saw in the talkies the possibility of producing 'quality' films adapted from respectable middle-brow plays and novels, a policy which he carried out with little success throughout the 1930s.<sup>54</sup> ATP was one of several independent production companies set up about this time, but one of the very few to survive the severe financial problems of the period, although they were themselves in financial difficulties throughout the 1930s.<sup>55</sup> In January 1930, it was announced that ATP had struck a deal with the American 'major' RKO, who would provide production finance and distribution, with the companies operating under the name of Associated Radio Pictures. Dean saw himself producing his 'quality' productions for both the British and American markets under this arrangement, but RKO had other plans, insisting on a roster of low-budget 'quickies' (such as the first Fields film). When Dean realised that RKO were interested in ATP productions only as a cheap means of fulfilling the British quota, the deal was ended (in 1932). There was one distinct area of benefit for ATP, however, since part of the deal had involved bringing over up-to-date American equipment as well as some personnel, including the cameraman Bob Martin, who later worked on *Sing As We Go*, and J.Walter Ruben, who directed another of ATP's 1934 productions, *Java Head*.<sup>56</sup>

Between the end of the RKO deal, and the re-launch of ATP in late 1933, the company was a very modest outfit, but other developments were underway. The involvement of the Courtauld family enabled the company to re-build the studio at Ealing, which was opened in 1932 by the Prince of Wales.<sup>57</sup> The studio

initially had a very modest floor capacity, capable of accomodating one production at a time, thus restricting output to about four films *per annum*. According to a contemporary account, the studio was "finely planned" and "looks almost impossibly modern."<sup>58</sup> Two new sound stages were opened in late 1934. ATP also launched their own distribution company, ABFD, in 1933, in a bid to achieve suitable distribution for their films while at the same time retaining independence, deemed important after the abortive RKO experience. They also planned to derive income from the distribution of other independent films, initially with little success. At the same time, ATP adopted a new and less ambitious policy, forsaking the American market altogether. In explaining the new policy, Dean prefaced his remarks with the proud but defensive statement that "the ARP Studios (shortly to be re-named the ATP Studios) are, and always have been an entirely British project, financed entirely by British capital." He went on to say that

"the world economic crisis has told against the chances of the successful working-out of [the] Anglo-American scheme. It has therefore been decided to re-orientate our policy. Our business will in future be built entirely upon British lines, with an eye mainly to the British Empire market."<sup>59</sup>

Dean justified the policy with the argument that "I am convinced that before one can achieve a sound internationalism, one's pictures must stand upon a broad basis of national reputation."<sup>60</sup> A key aspect of this self-consciously nationalistic policy was to put "quality before quantity",<sup>61</sup> and Dean's preferred way of achieving quality was to maintain close links with the more culturally respectable worlds of theatre and literature, pushing through adaptations of culturally respectable plays and novels, so echoing Hepworth's policy of a decade or so earlier. ATP films produced in this way included Galsworthy's

Escape! (1930) and Loyalties (1934), Three Men In A Boat (1933), Lorna Doone (1934), C.L. Anthony's Autumn Crocus (1934), and a Mozart bio-pic, Whom The Gods Love (1936). Lorna Doone and Midshipman Easy (1935) also fall into the fairly widespread category in the 1930s of historical films, made with the intention of bringing to the screen significant moments from national history.<sup>62</sup> By all accounts these films were never box-office successes, and overall lost a substantial amount of money,<sup>63</sup> subsequently leading to Dean's resignation from the company in September 1938.

Dean's involvement with the theatre in the 1930s was never simply restricted to making film adaptations of plays, and he himself continued to work in theatre throughout the decade, despite his involvement with ATP, producing three to four West End plays each year. In his policy statement of 1933, for instance, he had noted that

"Regarding my own work as a producer, I have no intention of severing my connection with the legitimate theatre..., and it will be part of the company's policy to exploit such stage successes as I may be fortunate enough to secure from the film point of view where suitable."<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, for a short time, ATP were formally associated with the Cambridge Theatre in London. The plan - a failed venture - was to transfer to the screen any successful plays, with the original author doing the screenplay and the actors from the theatre production appearing in the film version.<sup>65</sup> The production of these 'quality' pictures and the links with theatre were inspired by a missionary zeal to educate British film audiences away from Hollywood's mass culture, a zeal which parallels the work of the BBC under Sir John Reith at the time.<sup>66</sup> As a policy, it was not much admired by others in the trade, or by

those concerned with promoting popular cinema to the mass audience. An editorial in the popular magazine, *Film Weekly*, was particularly scathing:

"[Dean] is years behind the times in his outlook. He obviously regards the stage as the principal source of screen material and Hollywood as the natural enemy of British producers. Both ideas have gone out of fashion because they have been proved fundamentally wrong. ... Nor will the production of plays necessarily lead to the production of good films. Dramatists must be encouraged to write direct for the screen, not to write for the stage and then 'adapt' their plays into films. Mr. Dean seems to be theatre-minded first and film-minded afterwards."<sup>67</sup>

It was not this policy of tying film to theatre which kept ATP afloat. The fortunes of the company in fact depended primarily on the hugely successful films of perhaps the two biggest British stars of the 1930s,<sup>68</sup> Fields, first signed in 1931 and subsequently making seven films for ATP - "our mainstay in the first days of our independence ... saving our financial bacon"<sup>69</sup> - and George Formby, signed in 1934. Both were northerners from working-class backgrounds, already major figures on the music hall circuits. Their films were unhesitatingly designed as star vehicles, to exploit the talents and images already familiar from their variety acts. After the success of Fields's early films (*Kine Weekly* had described her in 1933 as "England's premier entertainer"<sup>70</sup>), she was able to command enormous fees by any standards for her film work, which inevitably put up the cost of production dramatically. She signed a contract in August 1933 giving her £22-25,000 per picture, which was only the first of the several highly lucrative contracts she negotiated with ATP, reputedly making her the highest paid British star of the time. To put this in perspective, it is worth noting that her first film, *Sally In Our Alley*, released only two years earlier, had been completed for less than £25,000, with the leads, including Fields, only being paid a total of £1,171.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the apparent profligacy of Fields's salary, and the somewhat un-commercial nature of Dean's emphasis on literary and theatrical properties, policy statements issued by ATP in the mid-1930s show a healthy concern for the streamlined efficiency of successful commercial production. From 1934, ATP's schedule was organised around the production of no more than a few carefully and extensively planned pictures, built round "outstanding British personalities".<sup>72</sup> They also adopted the practice of working in semi-autonomous production units, some four years after the major Hollywood studios had done so. The practice was justified both in Hollywood and at ATP in terms of the conjunction of good management practices and the quality of creative personal expression: "the directors [of ATP] believe ... in the policy of encouraging stars, young directors and all technicians to stamp their own individuality upon the pictures."<sup>73</sup> Economy rather than extravagance was the order of the day:

"The company was utterly opposed to the cheap quota picture ... [but] did not hold with the view that the entertainment value of a picture could be computed in terms of the money spent on it. ... By unceasing vigilance, quality could be made commercially profitable. ATP would always set quality before quantity, and confine itself to making a limited number only of the highest grade films each year."<sup>74</sup>

The products were to be commercially profitable, but it would be a culturally respectable profit without guilt: economy may have been in order, but this was no factory for mass production. As the *Motion Picture Herald* commented in 1931, "good pictures are created, not manufactured."<sup>75</sup>

Dean had earlier proposed that "our business will in future be built entirely upon British lines",<sup>76</sup> but ATP was in fact employing American-trained personnel in key positions, and using business practices very similar to those prevailing



in the American film industry. The standards of Hollywood were such that even those policies which were formulated most self-consciously as different from Hollywood were bound to involve the use of at least some American methods.

*Sing As We Go* was obviously an early prototype of this mode of production, being billed in advance in the trade papers as one of the 'super-features' to be made by ATP in 1934.<sup>77</sup> 'Super-feature' was generally a term reserved for the epics of the film industry, and could carry with it both a sense of the expensiveness of Fields herself, and a sense of cultural prestige. ATP were evidently taking all steps possible to distinguish their films from the cheap formula quota pictures.

Both *Sing As We Go* and *Evergreen* were in fact relatively expensive productions, each costing £60-65,000, which was somewhere between the average cost of a 'programme picture' and that of a 'super-feature', like Korda's *The Private Life of Henry 8th* (£93,000), *Catherine The Great* (1934, £128,000), and *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934, £144,000), or another of G-B's 1934 films, *Jew Süß* (£100,000). The average cost of a British picture was estimated in late 1935 to be around £30,000.<sup>78</sup> But *Sing As We Go* does not *look* like an expensive film - its production values seem more suited to a low-budget feature. It certainly does not look as expensive as *Evergreen*, which is so evidently lavish in sets, costumes, size of cast and production numbers. The main reason that it did cost so much was of course Fields's salary, which made up about half the budget.<sup>79</sup>

How did Dean endeavour to maintain quality control over the Fields and Formby pictures, which were obviously potentially far-removed from his idea of 'quality' productions? Dean constantly re-iterated the view that "the company was utterly

opposed to the cheap quota picture"<sup>90</sup> though he recognised later that the Fields and Formby films amounted to "successful factory-farming."<sup>91</sup> Even so, Dean explains in his autobiography that he was upset by the critics' complaints about the "poverty" of the Fields films which they saw as "mere vehicles", and, in order to combat this perceived poverty, Dean hired the services of respected populist writers like J.B.Priestley and Walter Greenwood.<sup>92</sup>

Priestley wrote the original script for *Sing As We Go*, and his name was used as a marketing point, at least to showmen through the trade papers. One of the big successes of 1933 had been the Gaumont-British film, *The Good Companions*, which had been adapted from the already successful novel and play by Priestley, and a full-page advertisement in *Kine Weekly* announcing the film stressed only the presence of Fields, the title of the film, and "an entirely original screen story by J.B.Priestley, author of *The Good Companions*".<sup>93</sup> The involvement of Priestley, given his literary and theatrical reputation, was also a way of garnering *intellectual* acclaim.<sup>94</sup> Priestley was in many ways a sensible choice given Dean's aspirations, since he could bring with him not only his solid cultural respectability, and his refined narrative sense, but also his class and regional background. Moreover, he had only recently completed his English Journey, his "rambling but truthful account of what one man saw and heard and felt and thought during a journey through England during the Autumn of the year 1933", which included a description of the diverse pleasures and attractions of Blackpool, the setting for *Sing As We Go*.<sup>95</sup>

*Sing As We Go* can therefore be seen as the beginning of Dean's efforts to refine the Fields star-image, and tailor her appeal more to the tastes of middle-class audiences, and the demands of classical narrative film form. The

success of this film meant that Priestley also wrote the screenplay for Fields's next film, *Look Up and Laugh* (1935), while Greenwood was brought in for Formby's first ATP film, *No Limit* (1935).<sup>66</sup> For Dean, these films could also be seen as culturally respectable high-quality products because of their social themes. He encouraged his writers to produce something more than 'common-place' stories, and develop 'serious' social themes and 'realistic' settings.<sup>67</sup> He later wrote of *Sing As We Go* that

"Jack [Priestley] used the current depression in the Lancashire cotton industry as the framework of his story - solid enough to support its broad humours without loss of credibility. ... This was a great advance on the fabrications of Gracie's previous films."<sup>68</sup>

It is difficult, however, to accept that the story, as laid out in the finished film, is really as 'solid' as Dean implies. The theme of the depression really only tops and tails the diverse attractions of Fields's picaresque exploits; it is a means of getting into and out of the carnivalesque location of Blackpool, a location which hardly speaks the language of depression. The social theme is, as Dean suggests, a framing device, but it is hardly a solid force for narrative integration. These are issues which will be taken up in a later section of this chapter.

#### iv) Gaumont-British

*"...international films are what good directors make..."*  
Alexander Korda, 1933<sup>99</sup>

The story of Gaumont-British is very different to that of ATP. In 1933, already one of the most powerful British film combines, they re-organised their corporate and financial management, and their distribution and production structure.<sup>90</sup> The corporation now controlled two studios, more than three hundred cinemas, a film printing laboratory, a national distribution company and fourteen thousand employees. One aspect of the re-organisation was the adoption of a policy of producing pictures for world consumption, "pictures with [an] international outlook", as G-B chief Mark Ostrer put it.<sup>91</sup> A substantial proportion of their annual production budget was earmarked for making high-cost prestige films designed to have an impact in the American market - *Evergreen* being one of these films. In the early 1930s, they had concentrated on European markets, and the production of multiple versions of their films in different languages (notably German); as they expanded, they sought bigger markets, inevitably looking towards the United States, which according to G-B's C.M. Woolf "represents 60% of the gross of any picture."<sup>92</sup> Deals with the Hollywood 'majors' were not new to G-B, who had sold a significant block of shares to Fox in 1929, thereby generating much concern within the trade as to the potential loss of control of major interests in the British film industry to an American company. This concern was renewed in 1936, when negotiations between G-B and Loew's were revealed in the press.

G-B had control of two studios, the Gaumont-British studio itself at Shepherd's Bush, and the studio of the G-B subsidiary, Gainsborough Pictures, at Islington. Michael Balcon was head of production at both studios from 1931, but overall policy was dictated by the Board of Directors of G-B. Both studios were, by British standards at least, modern, efficient and streamlined outfits, with seven floors in all (compared to ATP's three by late 1934). The Gainsborough studios had been completely re-built and modernised after a fire in 1930 (ironically its design over two storeys caused many problems for the organisation of production). The Shepherds Bush studios were described in 1933 by The World Film Encyclopaedia as "the finest studio in Great Britain ... huge ... [with] all the paraphernalia of the last word in modern film studios."<sup>93</sup> But this was a popular British publication, and its judgement stands in stark contrast to that of an American trade journalist reviewing British production facilities. By comparison with the major Hollywood studios, the physical organisation and layout of Shepherd's Bush seemed out-dated, inefficient, and "more of a handicap than a help,"<sup>94</sup> a view confirmed to some extent by Balcon's comments in his autobiography about the initial inadequacies of the studio and the difficulties of scheduling films there.<sup>95</sup> The differences between G-B's facilities and those of the bigger Hollywood studios were the sort of details which ensured that G-B faced a long uphill struggle in attempting to make films on a par with the American companies, and to gain a similar share of the international market.

The output of Shepherds Bush and Gainsborough between them was between fourteen and twenty-three films per year for the period 1931 to 1936 (ATP produced three to five films per annum for the same period), with the Shepherds Bush studios turning out sixteen films in 1934, and Gainsborough seven.<sup>96</sup>

According to Balcon,

"the policy of G-B at that time was to maintain full production at both studios, and our capacity by now could reach twenty films a year. ... In an annual output of these dimensions obviously a number of the films were of no particular significance; six or seven of them, in any case, were low-budget films designed only as supporting material, but they served the useful purpose of providing opportunities for training and experiment. ... But on the whole our films in those years were not as good as they should have been, and they were costing more than they should have."<sup>97</sup>

The trade press at the time were more optimistic. *Kine Weekly*, for instance, noted in early 1934 that G-B films have a reputation for doing good business, and for

"making the public and the exhibitor 'British-picture minded' ... The past year has abundantly demonstrated the fact that the home product has won an established place. This position has been attained in the teeth of fierce opposition and by quality of production. Patriotism or nationalism does not influence the picturegoer in his or her preference for entertainment... British pictures have won a place by merit and not by virtue of their nationality."<sup>98</sup>

Looking back on the period, Balcon suggests that Jessie Matthews vehicles were one of the most important production categories at G-B in the mid 1930s, listing six such categories in all:

"1. Hitchcock films; 2. Jessie Matthews musical films; 3. the Anglo-German films; 4. comedies, particularly those of Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge, and Tom Walls; 5. the George Arliss films; 6. the 'epics' made with an eye on the American market."<sup>99</sup>

In justifying the new 'internationalist' production policy to the Gainsborough shareholders in late 1933, Woolf argued that

"in the long run, the production of 'quality films' is more economical and more profitable than making cheap and hasty products; for only with films of world standard in technique and entertainment can the company hold its own in the world market."<sup>100</sup>

This is as neat a statement as any of the thinking behind the more internationalist of the two production strategies adopted by the British film industry. The concept of 'quality' again figures prominently, but it is very different from ATP's concept of 'quality'. If many of G-B's films were also adapted from plays or novels, it was not as adaptations particularly that they were to be valued, riding on the back of 'original' source material which might carry with it a certain cultural prestige (except perhaps in the case of some of the historical epics). On the contrary, 'quality' for G-B tended to mean *well-made* films, or at least films which *looked* well-made and had a certain international appeal, according to the standards of the best of the Hollywood studios' output of the period.<sup>101</sup> Within the film culture of the period, this was a more specifically cinematic and a more populist concept of 'quality' than that operated by Dean at ATP, but it also implied a belief that 'high-cost' necessarily meant 'high-quality', and that 'Hollywood' necessarily meant 'good cinema': "we must pursue a production policy ever less and less parochial and more and more international in appeal."<sup>102</sup> It was assumptions such as these which proved in the long run to be the main stumbling-blocks in G-B's bid for international success.

In an unprecedented bid to consolidate their position in the United States, G-B set up their own booking agency in New York in 1934, with plans to release G-B films in thirty-two American cities, promising "to spend as much money on the exploitation of our pictures as American producers spend on their product."<sup>103</sup>

This was, according to *Kine Weekly*, "one of the most important developments in the history of British Productions."<sup>104</sup> G-B arranged for Fox to handle the actual physical distribution of their films, and secured attention-grabbing openings for a number of their biggest films at the prestigious Radio City Music Hall and the Roxy, in New York. As part of this strategy, Evergreen began a successful and critically acclaimed run at the Music Hall in January 1935, some four months after it had opened in London. According to David Quinlan, it was the biggest British box-office success in the USA since *The Private Life of Henry 8th* a year earlier.<sup>105</sup> However, *Variety* reported that Evergreen was "quite a disappointment at the Music Hall", and that box-office business was "lachrymal, ... sinking house to under \$55,000".<sup>106</sup> Even so, G-B continued to exploit Matthews's star image for the export market, and her next film, *First a Girl* (1935), opened for a week at the Roxy in January 1935 some three months ahead of its London premiere, while *Its Love Again* (1936) opened at the Roxy the following May. Outside New York, however, bookings for G-B films were never brilliant, and distribution costs were very high.<sup>107</sup> *Variety's* review of 1934 noted that

"An important sidelight of '34 was the first genuine threat of the foreign film market in the U.S. This came in the decision of Gaumont-British to set up shop in this country, convinced that the pictures it was turning out in England merited such a move. Today this side of the big foam is becoming conscious of the ability of Britain to make marketable films for American audiences. London Films, with its *Henry the VIII* drew immediate attention and this picture supplied most of the impetus."<sup>108</sup>

A year later, the same paper reported that, as in 1934, thirty-three British films were distributed in the United States in 1935, with some improvement in overall grosses.<sup>109</sup> But it is clear that such competition would not be allowed to become a real threat - and *Variety* saw the G-B move in 1934 as no more than



a *sidelight* on the year, while the figures on 1935 are derived from a general article on all foreign films in the American market; evidently, British films counted as foreign language films, high-risk ventures marginal to the distribution system. The ultimate, and very costly, failure of G-B's venture in the American market was, according to G-B director Mark Ostrer, "not due to any lack of merit, but to the fact that we are not accorded playing time in the most important situations, these being almost exclusively controlled by American producing interests."<sup>10</sup> The G-B move may initially have appeared to *Variety* as a genuine threat, but the American majors clearly went out of their way to protect their existing collective interests and contain the threat as far as was possible.

Another strand to G-B's 'internationalist' policy was the buying in of the services of American writers, producers, directors and stars - the latter to be used as selling points for G-B films in the United States and other overseas markets (including Britain) dominated by Hollywood: "Our ultimate aim: ... to produce pictures with the greatest possible appeal to the greatest possible audiences in all parts of the world."<sup>11</sup>

This strategy can be seen at work in the make-up of Evergreen's production team: Saville himself had been to Hollywood a few years earlier to gain experience directing an early sound film (as in fact had Basil Dean),<sup>12</sup> and Rodgers and Hart, the American song-writing team, had written the songs for the original London stage show, with additional material for the film by another American, Harry Woods. The cameraman, Glen MacWilliams, was also American, as was choreographer Buddy Bradley (although he too had worked on the original show). Saville had even tried to cast as the male lead an enthusiastic Fred

Astaire, who had already made his mark in *Flying Down To Rio* (1933), and was at the time appearing on stage in London in 'The Gay Divorcee'.<sup>113</sup> Similar measures designed to tailor the Matthews musicals to the needs of the export market were constantly being taken: in *It's Love Again*, she was paired with American star Robert Young, while *Gangway* is set in New York, with Matthews playing a female reporter involved with gangsters.<sup>114</sup>

Inevitably, this policy of buying in American stars and other personnel forced G-B on to the defensive, and they had to work hard to convince certain sectors of the trade and the film culture that they were still making *British* films. On the introduction of the policy, Woolf had insisted that

"Although our pictures will be made for the world market, it is our intention to make them as strongly British *in sentiment* as they are today. At the same time we shall go out to compete with America for the services of the best directors and artistes."<sup>115</sup>

Balcon used similar terms in justifying the policy:

"There is no British style. Or if there is, it is a bad one. We aim to make our pictures technically as good as the best that America can produce - though we shall of course approach our subject from the British viewpoint. But that is not a question of style; *it is a matter of feeling.*"<sup>116</sup>

In an attempt to explain the G-B position in more detail, Balcon later in the same year set out to answer

"the question of why British producers have neglected the home country and the Empire in the past in choosing subjects to film. We have not been exactly blind to the attractions of the English scene or the Empire story as film fare. But we have had to tread carefully in the paths of international film markets. ... We have been fully aware of the fact that American producers have for years been punching American ideas, habits,

merchandise and morals into English cinema audiences by means of about four million feet of film a year. We know that the Empire, and Canada especially, is much more familiar with the American scene through the cinema than it is with British scenery and ideas. But don't forget that we have been building up our industry during the past five years or so. Sometimes it has been hard enough to make our films presentable in markets used to the high technical perfection of the Hollywood film. We haven't felt much like experimenting with subjects that might not have suited the tastes of people overseas. But now I think that we can say that we have got things on the move. America is finding that our films can be quite attractive."<sup>17</sup>

It is interesting that in this more detailed statement, the idea of a distinctively British *sentiment* or *feeling* - a justification often used in defence of national cinema - has been dropped. The argument is now clearly against any form of product differentiation or market specialisation, and clearly for trying to play Hollywood at its own game, and even in its own (massive) back-yard. Films must appeal to an imagination already colonised by American cinema; the threat of de-nationalisation is to be met not with a re-affirmation of English/British culture (the terms are interchangeable here), but with an attempt to exploit that colonised imagination even further.

Balcon was not, as far as one can ascertain, completely at ease with this policy, which went against both statements that he had made about production policy in the 1920s, and the strategies that he adopted at Ealing in the 1940s (the latter no doubt partly in response to the ultimate failure of G-B's internationalism). Certainly, even during his time at G-B, Balcon had reserved a place for other types of films too, notably Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran*, made for G-B and released in 1934, the same year as *Evergreen* and *Jew Süss*. In his autobiography, Balcon comments on what in retrospect seemed the "mistaken policy" of hiring American stars. His experience at G-B, he noted in a much-quoted remark, "helped to confirm my growing conviction that a film, to be

international, must be thoroughly national in the first instance."<sup>119</sup> It is worth noting the similarity between this comment and one quoted earlier from Basil Dean in 1934: "before one can achieve a sound internationalism, one's pictures must stand upon a broad basis of national reputation."<sup>119</sup> In other words, Balcon adopted an already well-established policy, even down to the rhetoric of its justification, when he moved to Ealing and took over control from Dean.<sup>120</sup>

Balcon in fact left G-B for MGM-British in December 1936, by which time G-B had abandoned their efforts in the American market, and cut back their production schedule considerably. The failure of the policy was, as noted earlier, attributed to "the resistance not of the American public but of powerful interests in the American industry".<sup>121</sup>

By this stage, the general admiration for G-B and its policies had severely dwindled. In 1937, the whole of the production sector of the industry - and not just G-B's expansionist strategy - was in crisis, lending an unexpected poignancy to the deliberations of the Moyne Committee about how best to improve the 1927 Quota Act, which was now up for renewal. An editorial in *Kine Weekly* - once a keen supporter of G-B's internationalism - indicates something of the new climate of opinion. The author tabulates various reasons for the failure of the production sector, and offers some thoughts on the way forward:

"First is the crazy and persistent delusion that it is possible to break into the American market by the purchase of American stars. In the main, the result of this policy has been additional cost without any commensurate increase in the selling value of the production concerned. ... All we have done so far in our attempt to break down the American monopoly is to provide some Hollywood throwouts with their winter's keep. ... Few can now deny that the panacea for our industry's ills lies in economy and in concentration on our home markets. ... The material for good, solid, popular product is ready to our hand, and only waiting to be woven into screen entertainment full of the drama and comedy of real life.

We have enough national characteristics of our own without slavishly imitating those mannerisms which we have (mistakenly) supposed would ensure an entry into the American market."<sup>122</sup>

Balcon himself seemed to have done his reputation as a producer no harm, and he was generally held in high esteem during the 1930s, as his appointment as Head of Production at MGM-British would suggest: "No man has been more identified with the revival of British films and no man has been directly responsible for the making of more good ones."<sup>123</sup> The move to MGM was of course short-lived, and the shifting climate of opinion on the fortunes of the British film industry, and especially its production sector, in effect paved the way for Balcon's subsequent move to the much more modest and *economic* set-up at Ealing Studios.

As a corporate strategy, G-B's efforts in the mid 1930s seem to have all the hall-marks of a potentially successful, well-directed *economic* attempt to establish a national film industry capable of operating in the international market-place. It was an ambitious effort by the industry to put its own house in order, building on the strong economic base that a vertically integrated corporation provided, competing directly with the international market-leaders by emulating their product, seeking to gain a foothold in their own home market, and engaging in aggressive promotion of its own fare. But by comparison with Rank, who made a similar assault on the American market in the mid-1940s, it lacked their greater economic power, their level of capitalisation and their market control: in other words, it had a less monopolistic hold over the domestic industry than Rank, and so was less attractive to American distributors working in Britain, who might then have developed reciprocal arrangements for G-B in the United States. As it was, G-B never pulled off any substantial deals

with the major American distributors, and it was forced to resort to setting up its own American distribution agency. The shift from attempted collusion to attempted competition at the level of distribution would not help matters, however, since it was not in the interests of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association as a whole, or any of the individual 'majors', to open up any of their chains of theatres to foreign competitors. The long-term success of the American film industry was due in no small way to the tightness with which the industry was horizontally and vertically integrated, and the degree of co-operation between the majors. There really was no room for competitors, except perhaps under the freak short-term conditions which enabled *The Private Life of Henry 8th* to make a mark; and there was no incentive to the American majors to make room.<sup>124</sup>

The situation was succinctly summarised by Korda and his colleagues in mid-1936:

"American producing companies can spend £200,000 on a picture and recover the cost and a reasonable profit in their own country and can then afford to sell the picture in the British market for a sum which would not yield to a British company a profit on a picture costing a quarter of that amount. *On the other hand, it has not yet been possible for British pictures to earn any substantial revenue in America.*"<sup>125</sup>

A combination of factors thus mitigated against G-B's efforts: first of all, the size of the home market available to American films, enabling a high profit margin to be reached by such films; and secondly, the tight control of that market by the vertically integrated American 'majors', who would 'invite' films made outside their own studios into this market only on their own terms. As the Moyne Committee noted, these factors constituted "enormous advantages [for] the

American film industry, which enable it to enter on a scale of production with which the British industry has found it impossible to compete."<sup>125</sup>

The problem was primarily economic, but cultural matters must still be attended to: the short-term gains which G-B were able to make were due not only to their relative economic power, but also to the types of films that they were making, and the production values with which they were invested. I will now explore these essentially cultural matters in more detail.

v) Jessie Matthews: star-image and the star system

The huge commercial potential of the star system was something generally appreciated within the British film industry, and not just by the production sector. Bernstein, for instance, argued that "the failure to develop British film stars is an important factor which prevents our pictures achieving maximum success at the box-office."<sup>127</sup> There was also much discussion in the trade and popular press as to how Britain could actually build up stars on the same scale as Hollywood. One solution to the problem was that adopted by G-B: the importation of various (usually second-rank) American stars. Popular support for this policy was important, and G-B evidently had a friend in the fan magazine *Film Weekly*, which worked hard throughout the mid 1930s to promote G-B's interests. An editorial in 1935 argued that

"You cannot 'build up' a star to any extent unless you have the power to ensure the widest possible exhibition of her pictures throughout the world, and particularly through Britain and America. Hollywood has the power and uses it superlatively well. Britain lacks it, and cannot acquire it except by producing pictures of international appeal - which, to the American film trade, primarily means pictures with international stars. Hence the need for 'ready-made stars' in this country. We cannot sell our own future stars - or their pictures - to America without those Hollywood 'names' for which our producers are now bidding. That is why *Film Weekly* supports the importation of Hollywood talent."<sup>128</sup>

The logic of the argument seems impeccable, but, as a leading American trade journalist later commented, this sort of policy was

"understandable perhaps as a temporary measure until producing in Britain finds firmer ground, [but it] has no lasting value. Recognising that for success in the international market - which means selling to America - personalities are essential, Great Britain will have to find another answer. That answer is the development of her own stars. Not merely stars acceptable to the British public, but stars of proven drawing-power in the United States. ... [This] will mean experimenting constantly with new faces,



surrounding them with the most expert production ingredients, and finding stories with a flavour of appeal to American audiences."<sup>129</sup>

Both Dean and Balcon were clearly very aware of the importance of stars for a profitable and successful production programme. The question of finding stars of *international* appeal did not accord with ATP's production policy in the mid-1930s, and Dean was evidently happy to continue working with the (anyway huge) domestic appeal of Fields, and to provide support by signing up other similar personalities such as Formby. Balcon on the other hand was faced precisely with the problems that the quotation above identifies. With his longer experience in the industry and greater knowledge of Hollywood studio production and publicity methods, Balcon also had a more professional and economic approach to star-building and the exploitation of a star-image. This was more than evident in the case of Jessie Matthews, "one of [G-B's] biggest star successes"<sup>130</sup> - as she herself recalls, "G-B ... poured their resources into" her star-image.<sup>131</sup>

Matthews had already had a highly successful career on the stage, even though she was still only twenty seven when she made *Evergreen*. She came to G-B in 1932, against Balcon's wishes, to make *There Goes The Bride*, but after seeing the rushes, Balcon signed her up and pushed her into two more films before *There Goes The Bride* was even released. When it was released, as Balcon noted in his autobiography,

"[Matthews] performance was unmistakably first class and a star was born. She was hailed by the critics, given a long-term contract with G-B, and made a series of musical films exploiting her many talents."<sup>132</sup>

Beginning with this picture, her films at G-B were "specially written or acquired as vehicles for her",<sup>133</sup> and, as we know, these films became a key part of G-B's production schedule. Initially, exploiting this particular category of film was considered something of a gamble, since it was felt that Hollywood had cornered the market in the production of sophisticated musicals: "we knew we were challenging fate (and Hollywood!) with *Evergreen*".<sup>134</sup> The success of *Evergreen* obviously put paid to such doubts, even though its New York box-office was not brilliant, and encouraged G-B to mine as intensively as possible what appeared to be an immensely rich vein. G-B evidently worked hard to protect their star commodity with suitable contracts<sup>135</sup> and to build up and exploit Matthews's star-image and potential, not only through press and publicity,<sup>136</sup> but also through the way in which they designed her vehicles. Her films traded on both a consistent narrative image - several of her key roles played on impersonation, role-playing and mistaken identity - and a spectacular body image, in effect an eroticisation of this narrative image.<sup>137</sup> Matthews recalled in particular the way in which cinematographer Glen MacWilliams altered her make-up and the lighting of her face for *Waltzes from Vienna* (1934), the film she made with Hitchcock prior to *Evergreen*, thereby establishing an element of the *mise-en-scène* that was crucial to the appeal of her subsequent pictures. Saville's role as director was of paramount importance too, renewing Matthews's and G-B's confidence in her own abilities, and establishing the right production ingredients around her.<sup>138</sup>

As Jeffrey Richards has pointed out, the key element of her star-image is the paradoxical figure of "innocent sexuality",<sup>139</sup> and certain terms recur obsessively in contemporary (and indeed subsequent) celebrations of her image. For the reviewers of the mid-1930s, she was both "the essence of graceful

charm", and at the same time full of "impudence"; she had a "childlike beauty", with "elfin qualities of charm and sweetness"; "her pert little face photographs irresistibly", and she had "irresistible vitality...transparent honesty...[and] extreme grace of movement".<sup>140</sup> There is, no doubt, a certain Englishness about this celebration of the child-woman, by comparison with the somewhat brasher sexuality of some of the major female Hollywood stars of the period, but it is simply a more paternalist variation of the patriarchal fetishising of the female body, and not in itself uncommon in American cinema (as the star-images of Ruby Keeler, or indeed, in later decades, Marilyn Monroe, testify).<sup>141</sup> Significantly, it is left to Caroline Lejeune, one of the few female reviewers of the period, to offer a rather less voyeuristic and prurient assessment of Matthews's qualities when she writes that "her movement and poise ... is enchanting; she has found just how to get the maximum effect with the minimum appearance of effort."<sup>142</sup> Indeed, this comment might serve as a summary of the qualities required of any movie actor to operate successfully in the classical narrative film.

G-B built up a strong and fairly regular production unit for the ten key films in which Jessie Matthews had starring roles between 1933 and 1939 (seven of them were musicals). Victor Saville directed Matthews's five most critically and commercially successful films. He was, alongside Hitchcock, G-B's most accomplished director - "a top-notch director", the *Sunday Times* called him in 1935.<sup>143</sup>

"a few years ago, such directors as Victor Saville, Walter Forde and others were comparatively unknown to the film world. Now their names on a picture's 'credit titles' make Hollywood itself sit up and take notice."<sup>144</sup>

Matthews' husband Sonnie Hale, who had already co-starred in four films, took over from Saville to direct another three, all musicals.<sup>145</sup> Glen MacWilliams photographed seven of the films, Alfred Junge art directed at least six, and various other figures cropped up in the credits fairly regularly. As Richards has noted, "the result of the labours of this team was a product that was glamorously international in appeal."<sup>146</sup> The publicity for *Evergreen* itself stressed above all the star profile of Matthews, "this new wonder star ... Princess Personality herself", but also urged showmen (exhibitors) to exploit the spectacle and lavishness of the film, which G-B had deemed to have the right production ingredients for an international appeal.<sup>147</sup>

*Variety* described Matthews as "the most sensational discovery in years",<sup>148</sup> and in its review of *Evergreen*, the *New York Times* mused:

"A joyous and captivating nymph, [Matthews] is the feminine counterpart of Fred Astaire. If Hollywood has the welfare of its customers at heart, it will immediately team her with Mr. Astaire in what should certainly be the perfect partnership."<sup>149</sup>

In fact, various Hollywood studios did attempt to sign Matthews, particularly after the relative success of *Evergreen* in the USA, and although the bids came to nothing for various reasons, the interest shown was significant.<sup>150</sup> *Picturegoer* described Matthews as "our most important feminine star" and "Britain's only world film star" in 1937, and went on to note (perhaps rather late, in view of the impending crisis in the British film industry), that

"Jessie Matthews is the only English screen actress who, without having a Hollywood campaign devoted to her, has a name which is news in the United States and is strong enough to carry a picture. She is in fact one of the

single biggest assets we have in the fight to secure a proper place for British films in the international market.<sup>151</sup>

Although she clearly was a major star, and was acclaimed by British and American critics in all her major films, there is also evidence from comments in *Variety's* reviews of *First a Girl* and *Its Love Again* that she was not yet universally accepted as a box-office certainty in the United States.<sup>152</sup> In other words, as the New York box-office takings for *Evergreen* also suggest, G-B's policy of exploiting Matthews's star-image in films which surrounded her with Hollywood-style production values was not entirely paying off.

vi) Evergreen

Whatever reservations there may have been about her selling power in the US, there is no doubt that both British and American critics were impressed by Matthews in *Evergreen*. Their praise for the film did not stop there, however, but applied more generally to the overall lavishness of the production, the 'authenticity' of the period detail for the Edwardian scenes, and the modernist spectacle of the *art deco* sets for the contemporary scenes. Before the film had actually been publicly aired, *Kine Weekly* noted that "enthusiastic reports are in circulation regarding *Evergreen*... [The trade show] is therefore eagerly awaited"<sup>153</sup> and a separate report in the same issue adds that

"Saville is said to combine some of the finest spectacle seen in any film with a delightful human story. He has not allowed the spectacular to overshadow the human element, and the result is claimed to be magnificent entertainment."<sup>154</sup>

The reports were confirmed by the paper's reviews of the film the following week: "capital popular entertainment. A potential box-office success",<sup>155</sup> "smoothly adapted", with "lavish and artistic treatment": "the money lavished on the production, which includes tuneful and scintillating dance ensembles, enables it to compare with the best."<sup>156</sup> The stir that the film caused in the trade press can be gauged from the fact that the American trade paper *Variety* actually first reviewed the film after its London screening, even before G-B had announced that it would be distributed in the United States:

"an intelligent and munificent bid to compete with recent Hollywood musical talkies was attempted, and the effort succeeded to a greater degree than anything of the kind essayed in an English studio. ... A strong contender for American recognition."<sup>157</sup>

Not all the newspaper and magazine reviews were as glowing as those in the trade press, but this didn't deter the film-going public from making it a box-office success. Most reviewers found something of value in the film, particularly Matthews's performance, and even the newly established British Film Institute magazine, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, uncertain about such popular melodrama, conceded that "the technique of this production, its presentation, everywhere rises above the material it is handling."<sup>158</sup>

The most interesting comments in the American press are those which concern the extent to which the film is able to compare with contemporary Hollywood musicals, as in the *Variety* review quoted above. The *New York Times* felt this to be "the most pleasurable musical comedy yet offered us by the ambitious British screen industry" and picked out the "suave and expert technical arrangement, ... its ... superb songs ... [and] the presence of Jessie Matthews". Finally, the reviewer notes that "toward the end, the film goes in for several extravaganza numbers in the blazing Hollywood style, executing them tastefully and well."<sup>159</sup> *Variety*, while being generally impressed, was more critical:

"Towards the end of the film, there's a definite attempt to build up a couple of dance routines in the Hollywood fashion. Uncredited, but perhaps just as well. Both attempts fall short because of lack of ingenuity from a photographic standpoint, but are interesting in pointing to the fact that London is cognizant of what is needed."<sup>160</sup>

Clearly fully cognizant of what was needed to make a mark in the international arena, Saville and his co-workers had produced a thoroughly classical narrative film in *Evergreen*. It has a wonderfully Oedipal plot<sup>161</sup> - Jessie Matthews initially plays Harriet Green, a famous music hall star, who is retiring from the stage to marry the Marquis of Staines. But she is forced to disappear without

telling her intended husband, when a former lover for whom she had borne a child that no-one knows about returns and threatens to blackmail her.

The action is then picked up some 30 years later, when Matthews reappears as the daughter, Harriet Hawkes, who is herself a performer. A young publicity agent, Tommy Thompson, and a former collaborator of her mother involve her in an elaborate publicity stunt, in which she is required to impersonate her mother returning in a new show as if she hasn't aged. The show is a great success, and the press and audience seem convinced by the stunt, especially when the now aged Marquis of Staines turns up and apparently (mis)recognises the daughter as the woman he was once to marry. He also seems to think that Tommy, who is by now quite fond of Harriet, is the illegitimate child mentioned in a letter many years previously. The Marquis apparently falls in love with 'Harriet Green' once more and proposes marriage to her once again. Meanwhile, the two young lovers are forced to go around as mother and son, to perform in a second new show called 'Harriet Gilbert and Son' (in which the first number is billed as showing that "a boy's best friend is his mother"), and even to live in the same house, a gift from the Marquis.

Finally, all is resolved on the romantic front when the Marquis reveals that he had seen through the stunt from the first, and offers no obstacle to the consummation of Tommy's and Harriet's relationship - that is, 'father' steps down to allow 'son' to become the lover of 'mother'.

In a complicated intensification of this Oedipal structure, the blackmailer had also re-appeared, obviously possessing information which threatened the status of the new 'Harriet Hawkes'. In order to restore an acceptable social



equilibrium, the 'son' also had to challenge the authority of this second 'father', in order to win the hand of his 'mother'. This too is successfully completed, thus enabling the formation of the required and expected couple of the classical narrative film.

The plot is unfolded in a smooth and linear fashion, with an almost effortless continuity. Unlike the more 'primitive' *Sing As We Go*, point of view and the construction of space are also handled in classical fashion, with gazes off-screen being used to construct a coherent sense of space. There is generally a much more classical sense of editing, with more reaction shots and cutaways, more close-ups, more reverse field cutting for dialogue scenes, and so on. The editing and the sets are also efficiently subordinated to the demands of the narrative and its narration. As some of the contemporary reviewers noted, one of the features of the film is the extent to which the spectacle of the production numbers and other song and dance routines is tightly integrated into the narrative, rather than simply accumulating into a series of turns or novelties: *Kine Weekly* noted that "extravagant dance numbers are smoothly dove-tailed into the development",<sup>162</sup> while the *New York Times* thought the film "especially skillful in its attempt to interrupt the tale at any given moment so that Miss Matthews may dash into a song and dance."<sup>163</sup> Even those moments where the film attempts a Busby Berkeley-style production - and where the theatrical space of the show is superseded by a purely cinematic construction of space - are well-enough integrated to prevent the spectacle seeming gratuitous or out of place.<sup>164</sup>

Evergreen takes on board the iconographic, thematic, discursive and structural conventions of contemporary Warner Bros backstage musicals. Numerous familiar

scenes are there: the chorus line auditions and rehearsals, the back-stage goings-on of the showmen attempting to raise adequate finance, the big production numbers, and so on. All the key character types are there too: the *matinée* idol, the chorus girl who becomes a great star, central protagonists who are performers, and who therefore have the necessary motivation and expertise to perform song and dance routines off-stage. There is also the requisite light comedy, and the ever-present narrative problem of forming the right couples. Several of the production numbers recall some of the set-pieces from *Golddiggers of 1933* (1933) - as does the brief reference to the lack of jobs, especially for chorus girls, in the early 1930s. As in *Footlight Parade* (1933), there are references to the on-going competition between musical theatre and the talkies. The finale is clearly influenced by Busby Berkeley's choreography, with its moving rings of scantily-clad chorus girls - although it lacks Berkeley's use of the overhead camera, and so loses much of its visual impact.

Contemporary American musicals like Warner Bros' *42nd Street* (1933), *Golddiggers of 1933* and *Footlight Parade* are also much harder hitting, gutsier and sexier, with a more compelling sense of energy, vitality and movement - although there is no denying that Matthews herself stands up very well, and some of the numbers and routines do have the joyous exuberance of contemporary American musicals.<sup>165</sup>

If the American films are brash where *Evergreen* is at times effete, they are in that respect similar to *Sing As We Go*, which has its own generically unique brand of gusto and energy. British films were in general perceived as slow by comparison with contemporary American films, and "the characteristic leisureliness with which most British films unfolded"<sup>166</sup> was a problem in

relation to the American market, and indeed in relation to American competition in the British market. Balcon, for instance, wrote in 1937 that:

"The consensus of opinion amongst both the trade and the public is that, generally speaking, the tempo of the British picture is very noticeably slower than that of the American product. ... As a rough estimate, I put the tempo of British pictures about half-way between German ones and American ones. Three or four years ago our pictures were very much slower than they are now: every year marks an appreciable acceleration: one of the most vitally important tasks facing us in British production is to accelerate this process until our tempo matches that of Hollywood."<sup>157</sup>

There are again no signs here of attempting to differentiate product from Hollywood's fare and build a distinctive national cinema from indigenous cultural traditions, rather than the traditions of classical American cinema. An American trade journalist confirmed Balcon's view, seeing the slower tempo of British films as an *affliction* - deviance from the international standards established by the Hollywood studios could only be so understood from that hegemonic viewpoint. And if British films were to be commercially successful exports, that is the viewpoint that must indeed be adopted. National specificity was, it would seem, a symptom of insularity and *élitism*; it was valid only for a more discerning audience:

"[A] common complaint about British films is lack of pace, which does indeed afflict many of them. Actually, this slackness is not always present, and to the more discerning American filmgoer this is quickly apparent. But films are not made for the intelligent few. To succeed they have to be of mass appeal, and to the masses they must therefore be acceptable. About the average Hollywood output there is an unmistakable breeziness and speed, both part of the American mentality. They are as much an indispensable part of the attraction as the settings or the players who perform in them."<sup>158</sup>

The pacing of the narrative was clearly one element on which British companies had to work if they wanted their films to do well in the export market. With regard to Evergreen, it is the scenes which are designed precisely to motivate the narrative momentum which are the most problematic. The opening Edwardian sequence (and the later rendition of Edwardian-style songs) slows the tempo right down, and is unnecessarily long given the amount of narrative information that must be conveyed.<sup>169</sup> At other times, the film has all the briskness that would be expected of an American musical of the period, particularly when the narrative focus of the film shifts from the mother to the daughter. Thus, once the initial machinations of the plot have been successfully processed, first establishing the star image of Harriet Green and the mystery of her private life, and then setting in motion her daughter's impersonation of her, the plot is organised much more centrally around the complicated romance between Harriet Hawkes/Green and Tommy Thompson.

With this shift in narrative focus, the film moves closer to the more sophisticated *art deco* world of Astaire/Rogers musicals (although only *Flying Down To Rio* (1933) could have been seen before production on Evergreen had started).<sup>170</sup> The emphasis is on the couple more than the ensemble, the melodrama is played as light comedy more reminiscent of Astaire than of, say, Cagney in *Footlight Parade* (1933), and the range of motivations enabling characters to break into a song and dance routine shifts significantly, taking on more securely the conventions of what has been called the integrated musical.<sup>171</sup> Thus at one point, the motivation of putting on a show and the use of a stage or rehearsal space for dancing are abandoned. In their place, the motivation for dancing an Isadora Duncan-style ballet becomes the desire to express an excess of emotion (what Jane Feuer has called the myth of

spontaneity<sup>172</sup>), and the dance space for a solo by Matthews is appropriated out of the huge, highly-polished living-room floor of the couple's *art deco* house. The dancing here is also different, much more graceful than the hurly-burly of the show numbers with big chorus lines.

In this dance in particular, Matthews achieves a level of eroticism rare in British cinema.<sup>173</sup> However, by comparing *Evergreen* to *Top Hat* (1935), another nearly contemporaneous film, one can see that, where in *Top Hat* romance is achieved and expressed through the harmoniously dancing couple, in *Evergreen* sexual desire is constantly thwarted and repressed. In the dance sequence just referred to, Matthews is forced to dance on her own in order to express her feelings. Similarly, in the final dance number of the film, Matthews dances on her own for much of the time; although the climactic finale at last brings the couple together and consummates the love affair, the single shot of a chaste kiss and clasped hands which celebrates their unity is very brief - and coy in its metaphoric intent.

The film also tries to balance both the cultural respectability of a virtuous Edwardian sexuality, and the requirement that the classical film enable a more prurient, voyeuristic (male, heterosexual) gaze for the spectator at the female body. Thus, in the opening sequence of Harriet Green's farewell performance set in a respectable Edwardian music hall, the audience in the music hall are offered only images of Harriet Green in full-length Edwardian gowns; the spectators in the cinema, on the other hand, are able to witness Jessie Matthews stripping down to her underwear backstage to change costume. The scene is narratively redundant, gratuitous, but as an image it provides the spectacle of the female body that is expected of the classical film, and it suggests also

that the film is overall going to be a bit more *risqué* than a high class Edwardian music hall show.

This tension between the Edwardian and the modern (for 1934) is exploited on several occasions in the film. When Matthews is playing the-daughter-impersonating-the-mother, she is supposed to appear to her theatre audiences as aged about sixty; yet the costumes in which she performs suggest something else altogether: the disjunction is precisely that of the chaste and the prurient. The scene of back-stage undressing in the Edwardian music hall is recalled in a much later scene which, in a sense, completes the exchange of sexualised looks that is only partially established in the first scene. The later scene is crucial, since it is the point at which Harriet Hawkes, the daughter, reveals to her audience at the theatre that she has been impersonating her mother Harriet Green. In the middle of a big production number, Harriet unexpectedly pushes the other dancers out of the way, moves to the front of the stage, strips down to her underwear, flings off her wig and proceeds to perform an exuberant tap dance, to confused jeers from the audience, who feel they have been cheated. In the earlier scene, only the cinema audience had witnessed the striptease, but this time, the theatre audience are also able to see it. Once more, it is the paradox of innocence and eroticism that is constructed as one of the central appeals of Matthews's star image, playing on both a certain English middle-class respectability and a more 'modern', international version of the woman-as-image.

Evergreen, then, draws on the conventions of the contemporary Hollywood musical, and the classical film's particular articulation of sexual difference and the eroticisation of the gaze. It also works with the conventions of the melodrama, again handling them with ease and confidence, and two key scenes in particular

exhibit a very powerful melodramatic effect in their *mise-en-scène* and use of sound. The first scene involves Matthews as the real Harriet Green, who must mysteriously disappear from her friends. At the end of the long opening sequence, Harriet rides off alone in a horse-drawn carriage through the empty night streets of London. She passes the Tivoli, where she has been performing, and hears strains of her best-known song being sung by her friends still revelling inside, unaware of her plight. She watches the lights being turned off outside the theatre, effectively extinguishing her own existence, and she slowly removes her engagement ring. It is a very nostalgic moment, invoking a powerful sense of loss. The film plays on the difference between what she, and what the spectators of the film, know and can see, and what the Marquis and her other friends know and can see. Her gaze out of the carriage cannot be met by theirs, the sense of longing it embodies cannot be overcome until her daughter returns to take her place at the end of the film.<sup>174</sup>

The second scene rhymes with and recalls the first, and it is only at this point that Matthews's un-reciprocated look can be returned by her lover, and by her audience. The scene begins in a court room where Harriet Hawkes is being tried for fraud and the impersonation of her own mother. The defence's case is that there is no fraud, Matthews as the daughter can offer the same pleasures to her audience as her mother had provided thirty years earlier. To prove this, a phonograph of the mother singing the song heard in the first scene is played in court, and the daughter joins the recording of her now dead mother in a duet, eventually drowning out her mother's voice by her own magnificence, charming both the judge and the audience in the gallery. From a close-up of Matthews's face bathed in light, the camera pans along the beam of light to reveal its source as a court-room window. This dissolves to a spotlight in a theatre, and

the camera pans back down the beam of light to reveal Matthews still singing the same song, but now on-stage, at the start of the big finale. In this reprise of the earlier scene, the sense of loss engendered by the absence of the mother is triggered by the faint recording of her voice, but Matthews as the daughter performs in such brilliance that we are presented with an experience of plenitude. The court-room scene at the same time finally gives a legal seal of approval to the impersonation and its pleasures. This ultimately removes all obstacles to the consummation of Harriet's and Tommy's relationship, which is given to us in the final shot of the film.

The result of G-B's internationalist policy, its push for ever greater short-term and long-term profits, its bid to appeal to domestic and foreign audiences attuned to the pleasures and ideologies of American cinema, is then to produce a film which works very successfully with the conventions of that cinema. There are minor deviations from the standard - the pacing of the narrative, for instance - but, for G-B, these were not to be celebrated as the positive signs of national difference, exclusive badges of uniqueness to be worn proudly by a national cinema that regretfully had to work with foreign traditions in order to build up audiences. On the contrary, these were precisely deviations to be ironed out: difference was not the name of the game.



vii) Sing As We Go, performance and the cinema of attractions

If Evergreen self-consciously emulates classical Hollywood cinema, *Sing As We Go* opts for a very different cultural stance, one that can be seen as nationalist to Evergreen's internationalism. One of the most remarkable aspects of *Sing As We Go* is the flimsiness of its narrative, in contrast to the strength of individual moments within it. Even the most classical cinema is marked by a tension, between narration and description, narrative and spectacle, movement and stasis, voyeurism and exhibitionism: that indeed is central to the pleasures of such cinema. Although the narrative system struggles to fix the meaning of an image, there is always *more* than the narrative can hold in place. As Stephen Heath puts it, "narrative never exhausts the image. ... Narrative can never contain the whole film which permanently exceeds its fictions."<sup>175</sup> The potential redundancy of the image, this 'something more', is not however, wasted by Hollywood. While *mise-en-scène* is predominantly organised in the interests of clinching narrative significance, it is also developed as something fascinating in itself, a source of visual pleasure, a spectacle. In certain genres - and particularly performative genres like the musical and the comedy - the tensions are intensified. This is particularly the case with *Sing As We Go*: here, one needs to ask, not whether the narrative is suspended for musical and comic inserts, but whether narrative structure or narrational function can at all be seen as the guiding principles in the mapping out of the diegesis, or the central motivations for the diverse attractions of the film.

There are in effect three story-lines in *Sing As We Go*. Firstly, there is the story of Greybeck Mill, its closure, the bids to enable it to re-open, by involving Sir William Upton and his artificial silk process, and the final scenes

of its actual re-opening. This aspect of the film establishes Grace (Gracie Fields) as one of the mill-workers, a member of a tight-knit community - Grace, however, is a special member of the community, an acknowledged ring-leader. A second story-line deals with the picaresque adventures of Grace travelling to and seeking gainful employment in Blackpool, "that most native of English pleasure grounds",<sup>176</sup> and getting involved in various adventures and escapades. The third story-line is a love-triangle romance, involving Grace, her boss, the upper class Hugh (who has no idea of Grace's affection for him), and Phyllis, a 'beautiful' young Londoner with 'refined' accent, who is befriended by Grace, but who also falls in love with Hugh; the triangle is resolved in terms of the conventionally pretty woman, Phyllis rather than the less glamorous Grace/Gracie Fields,<sup>177</sup> pairing off with the conventionally handsome male lead.

Structurally, each of these narratives is classically developed in terms of moving in linear fashion from an initial equilibrium, through a phase of disequilibrium, to a final, new, goal-fulfilling equilibrium. But these story-lines are never fully fleshed out in the way the above description might imply: the plots are skeletal, and overall the narrative development, although linear, is highly episodic, and new possibilities and openings are constantly being explored. Causality and motivation are weak, and potentially serious narrative points are underdeveloped and thereby rendered inconsequential.<sup>178</sup> The main attractions of the film are the scrapes which Grace gets involved in, on the way to and in Blackpool, and the various turns she performs as a result. The first narrative line is only occasionally inserted into this more carnivalesque space, where it struggles to remind us of the background and the motivation for Fields's presence in Blackpool, to give the semblance of narrative cinema, to attempt to order and regulate the pleasures of the film.

There are certain ways in which *Sing As We Go* adopts a classical stance in its narrative movement, its diegetic effect,<sup>179</sup> and in the processing of its songs. The motivations for the shift into songs, for instance, aspire to Evergreen's classicism. Grace/Gracie Fields is required by narrative circumstances to put on some sort of show for all but one of her songs.<sup>180</sup> On the one occasion when there is little or no sense of putting on a show, the myth of spontaneity is at work again, as Grace is moved by an excess of emotion to sing a romantic love-song having "just lost the only chap I ever loved".<sup>181</sup> The romantic love-song also has some narrative relevance in its sentiments, as does another song performed by Grace when she inadvertently finds herself in front of an audience at the Tower Ballroom in Blackpool. The audience are expecting to see the 'beautiful' winners of a bathing beauties contest; instead they are confronted with the less conventionally 'beautiful' Grace/Gracie Fields, who anyway is looking extremely bedraggled. Grace sings 'Little Bottom Drawer', a song about being a spinster, which also sums up the way in which things seem to be progressing for her narratively.

These songs are rather different to the conventions of Evergreen and contemporaneous Hollywood musicals in terms of iconography and performance. There are no song and dance routines, no big production numbers - although the Tower Ballroom performance could be read as a parody of the big production number, and the montage of romantic scenes which follows the love-song could be read as a sort of alternative version of the big number.<sup>182</sup> In place of such conventional Hollywood routines, we have *community* singing, led by Grace/Gracie Fields - a form of singing which potentially embraces the cinema audience as part of the community, also singing along.

In general, motivation is handled in a much more cavalier fashion, and therefore by comparison more 'primitive' fashion than in *Evergreen*. For instance, Grace's excessively emotional state may motivate the initial singing of the love-song<sup>193</sup> - but the emotional intensity of the scene is completely undercut by the re-emergence of one of the film's running gags, Stanley Holloway as a comic policeman. By huge coincidence (his every appearance is by huge coincidence!), he is drunk, in uniform, and below Grace's window as she sings. He picks up the song in comic fashion, but it is then returned to Grace. The intensity of feeling conveyed by the song subsequently finds a visual expression in the rather brilliant montage sequence which follows on from the song:<sup>194</sup> a series of images reprise various minor and major romances recalling characters from each little episode of the film.<sup>195</sup>

But the sequence does not stop there. There is a brief return to Grace as she completes the song (which continues as background music) and turns to look soulfully out of the window. With minimal motivation, there is a wipe to a shot which begins another montage sequence. In a way which looks forward to the Humphrey Jennings of *Listen to Britain* (1942),<sup>196</sup> this second sequence offers an impression of Blackpool, the playground, at the end of another day, but also at the end of this particular visit, and this particular narrative. It thus prepares the way for the movement into the equally impressive closing scenes. The sequence starts off classically enough, but then shifts into the realm of an impressionist visual imagination, a collective diegetic fantasy, the formation not of one couple, but of many couples, who are themselves situated in a wider locality. It also involves a radical switch in point of view, from the individual within the diegesis (the performance of the song) to the omniscient camera-narrator and cinema audience (the montage sequence). The continuity maintained

by the aural track effaces the shift, but the shift is there all the same, and quite exhilarating in the sudden, under-motivated leap it makes from a protagonist-centred linear narrative, to the realms of montage cinema and the more pluralist perspective on the diegesis.

Tom Gunning has argued that

"the cinema of attraction does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground, both into certain *avant-garde* practices and as a component of narrative films, more evident in some genres (eg the musical) than in others."<sup>187</sup>

*Sing As We Go* is an impressive instance of the emergence of the cinema of attractions within the field of narrative cinema. Indeed, it makes more sense to see *Sing As We Go*, not as a narrative film in which music and comic gags feature as interruptions or inserts, but as a film which is organised around its various attractions, which include the relatively *avant-garde* practice of montage. The attractions are the point of the film, not its flaws: the pleasures of this film are less the drama of narrative integration, and more the attractions of potential dis-integration.<sup>188</sup> The narrative is merely an excuse for a carnival,<sup>189</sup> a licence for the transgressions of the cinema of attractions. Once the licence has been granted, so to speak, the film can proceed according to its own desires.<sup>190</sup> Like the tradition of carnival which Mikhail Bakhtin describes, this film celebrates its own "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order" of classical cinema; it suspends the hierarchical rules, norms and prohibitions of the classical film.<sup>191</sup> Narrative cinema has in this instance been *carnivalised*, what we see is the reverse side of narrative cinema, the life of the narrative film turned inside out. Inevitably, for the

reviewer attuned to the conventions of classical cinema, the film was thoroughly deviant, its plot a "tenuous and disjointed affair that serves (only just) to hold the picture together".<sup>192</sup>

Within this tradition of popular pleasures, the attraction exhausts its own appeal, rather than motivating a narrative shift through space and time. The visit to the circus in *Sing As We Go* seems quite gratuitous, for instance. Grace is looking for Phyllis, who has found her way to the circus; two shots of Phyllis watching the circus acts are inserted, but the location itself is of no narrative consequence. Grace does find Phyllis there, but there are many more shots of the acts and the location than are narratively necessary; this redundancy then transforms them into an overt spectacle, the pleasure of which is intensified by seeing Grace floundering about in the sea lion pool: the narrative insists on its existence, but the pleasures of the scene lie in the gags themselves.

There are several other sequences made up of entirely self-contained gags, with no narrative pay-off. This is probably most marked in the scene in Uncle Murgatroyd's house near the start of the film, which involves a series of jokes about clocks, tripe, boozing and the castrating effects of middle-aged asexual women. The scene undoubtedly establishes certain character traits and provides the initial motivation for Grace's visit to Blackpool, but for the most part it is an excuse for a bit of comic business. There is little sense in which the meanings and pleasures of the sequence are dependent on the shots which precede and follow it; rather, like the other gags in the film, it is meaningful only in itself, as a gag. Gags may develop into, or provide the space for further gags, but those gags do not necessarily have any bearing on the

narrative elements of the film. This sense of parallel developments - the causality of narrative, but also the accretion of gags - can be seen particularly in the case of the running gag involving Holloway's comic policeman: Grace asks him the way on first arriving in Blackpool; disguised as a fortune-teller, she reads his fortune; she is chased by him at the Pleasure Beach and at the Tower Ballroom, where he later watches her singing; he drunkenly takes up her love-song; and he delivers her a message as she is about to depart from Blackpool. The policeman is thus a pawn in the narrative: his every intervention is either of no narrative consequence (asking the way in Blackpool), or could have been handled without his presence (delivering the message); but in terms of comedy, his presence is a great attraction: that, of course, is his function.

In a more obvious way than most musicals, the narrative is precisely a vehicle for a comic singing star, who is "its impetus and reason for existence",<sup>193</sup> and the gaps in the development of the narrative are bridged by the *presence* of Fields herself. It is her performance and charisma which hold the film together, not the principles of narrative continuity. In this film, moreover, Fields has a performative *theatrical* presence, rather than a more conventionally classical screen presence: the spectacle of Fields, her star-image, is not in this case resolutely integrated into a narrative flow, which can barely contain her down-to-earth gusto. *Kine Weekly's* comments on Fields' previous film, *Love, Life and Laughter* (1934), seem just as pertinent here:

"the construction of the entertainment is a trifle lacking in firm unity, but its weaknesses in this department are brilliantly offset by the genius, versatility and amazing showmanship of Gracie Fields. ... The genius of the star ... by the sheer force of her personality, forms a human and fascinating connecting link between the film's many widely entertaining departments."<sup>194</sup>

*Sing As We Go* is, then, performance-orientated, rather than action-orientated - and what actions there are should be appreciated for their performance, rather than for their psychological realism, or for their function within a causal chain. Indeed, Dean evidently quite consciously adopted a strategy for foregrounding performance in Fields's films at this time: "in leaving [Fields's] personality to its own devices, untrammelled by technical niceties, I was prompted by my theatre experience."<sup>195</sup>

There is then something of a tension between Grace, the narrative character, and Gracie, the attraction. The tension is true of all stars, but in Fields's case, and particularly in this film, it seems to be accentuated. Her performance style, developed in and for the variety stage, neither eschews direct address nor seeks the 'subtleties' of naturalism at all costs. It would perhaps be more appropriate to describe her as a *diegetic* character rather than a *narrative* character, given the weakness with which she is integrated into a tightly circumscribed narrative trajectory. She clearly does inhabit a relatively autonomous imaginative world, but it is not a world (a *diegesis*) where space and time are rigorously organised by narrative requirements. Grace/Gracie Fields's role in that space is to perform, to entertain, but not necessarily to trigger the next causal shift in the narrative. She can inhabit this diegetic world performatively, but she is not necessarily required to move through it narratively.

The delineation of space, and of the characters who occupy it, constantly exceeds that which is strictly narratively necessary. In a strongly narrative cinema, the *diegesis*, the implied world of the fiction, is linearised. In the absence of that strong narrative control, that which is visible of the *diegesis* is multiplied: we are witness to elements of that *diegesis* which narratively



need be no more than implied. Those elements become the space for another performance act, another gag, or another song: Thus, the performance of the gag with no narrative function does not halt the diegesis, or leave it, it simply uses it differently.<sup>196</sup>

The film is, then, a musical, but one whose roots are firmly in the tradition of the music hall and variety. Scenes and sequences are relatively self-contained, and the over-riding impression of the film is of one act, or turn, or novelty after another: "It is all very inconsequent, but rich and lively slapstick."<sup>197</sup> The film thus has the format of variety's mixed bills, with the narrative merely providing the space for the playing out of a series of acts:<sup>198</sup> the songs and the comic business, of course, but also the attractions of Blackpool.<sup>199</sup>

It is these popular pleasures which *make* the film. Like carnival, it is a radically hybrid, exuberant and excessive mix of pleasures: a series of more or less ritualised spectacles, and comic, often parodic, gags and songs, stressing regional customs and accents, and often mocking figures of authority. While Dean may have aspired to *uplift* the appeal of a Fields film, he could not at the same time entirely resist the fascination of the popular culture which she represented, a culture which resists the disciplines and regulations of bourgeois sentiment.<sup>200</sup>

Space in *Sing As We Go* is used primarily as performance space, as the diegesis of carnival, and not as narrative space.<sup>201</sup> But space also functions as spectacle in its own right. The diegesis of carnival is also the carnivalesque diegesis, the realm of visual pleasures which transgress the boundaries of the narrative and its requirements, which resist its containments. That is to say,

Dean tends to use locations as an often fairly gratuitous spectacle, another attraction, sometimes only weakly integrated into the plot or into the narrative space of his films: their excessiveness is the extent to which, as locations, they supersede any purely narrative function.

"Blackpool and Gracie are the principal characters",<sup>202</sup> as one critic noted; another suggested that Blackpool was the "scintillating, substantial pivot"<sup>203</sup> of the film. Certainly, the attractions of Blackpool are pivotal to the narrative, but it is perhaps more the lengths to which Dean goes to include yet another attraction that renders Blackpool scintillating. This is true not only of the spaces which are on show, but also of the perspective from which they are seen: there are several panoramic shots of crowds on the front at Blackpool, at the Pleasure Beach, and so on, and on another occasion the camera is fixed to the roller coaster on which Hugh and Phyllis take a ride.<sup>204</sup> Blackpool, then, is the heart of the film. The film leads into Blackpool, but, like a holiday, the journey returns home in the end - triumphantly, in this case, as if the duty and authenticity of labour were more desirable than the transitory pleasures of the holiday resort. The Pleasure Beach itself is literally the centre of the film - it takes us just over half an hour to get there, and when we leave, there are another thirty minutes of the film left:<sup>205</sup> the film seems circular, rather than linear.

The choice of this location is obviously crucial to the pleasures of the film. Blackpool is first of all of course a hugely popular working-class holiday site. But at the level of representation, Blackpool - and the Pleasure Beach as a heightening of that experience - means more than just a resort. For Priestley in his English Journey (1933), it is "the great roaring spangled beast":<sup>206</sup> not just

a place, but a metaphor for a certain regime of pleasure, "cheerfully vulgar ... terrifying ... crazy ... [full of] fantastic idiocies",<sup>207</sup> a place of "frivolity",<sup>208</sup> "a pleasure resort for the crowd."<sup>209</sup> Other places, other icons of the modern world (and the discourse of modernity is vital to Blackpool's self-representation<sup>210</sup>) could be described as being "as exciting as Blackpool."<sup>211</sup> As Tony Bennett has shown, despite efforts to maintain a bourgeois appeal, the town's pleasures were (and are) for the most part of low cultural status, vulgar, grotesque, transitory, irresponsible, often organised around bodily sensations.<sup>212</sup> What really stands out is the perverse diversity of these pleasures. Like the music-hall stage, a variety of attractions compete for attention, and refuse attempts to present a smooth, integrated, stream-lined form. Priestley described Blackpool as

"this huge mad place, with its miles and miles of promenades, its three piers, its gigantic dance-halls, its variety shows, its switch-backs and helter-skelters, its array of wine bars and oyster saloons and cheap restaurants and tea houses and shops piled high and glittering with trash; its army of pierrots, bandsmen, clowns, fortune-tellers, auctioneers, dancing partners, *animal trainers, itinerant singers, hawkers; its seventy special trains a day, its hundreds and hundreds of thousands of trippers...*"<sup>213</sup>

Blackpool can be all of this because it is a holiday resort.<sup>214</sup> It is the site for and the sign of the licensed transgressions of the very audiences to whom *Sing As We Go* is addressed: "In his one week of 'freedom' in the year the worker ... comes here to escape, to get out of the rut of time and money and limited leisure of life in his home town."<sup>215</sup> Blackpool carnivalises time and possibility for the visitor; in the film, it is as place, space and spectacle that it is carnivalesque. Of course, it is all highly ritualised, highly structured - but within that structure, something else, something other than the routine, is

possible. Blackpool provides the space for that something else, it functions as the variety stage of this particular series of music-hall-acts-as-film. It is a performance space which already brings the connotations of variety, and of popular pleasures and transgressions to the film.<sup>216</sup>

One can even see *Sing As We Go's* various montage sequences as acts, turns or novelties.<sup>217</sup> The montage sequence which depicts Grace's journey from Greybeck to Blackpool is perhaps the clearest example of montage as an attraction. Narratively, all that is required of the sequence is that it establish that Grace has travelled to and arrived at Blackpool, perhaps for reasons of realism confirming that, due to lack of money, she has cycled there. But the sequence as presented in the film vastly exceeds this minimal narrative function. In addition to various visual and verbal gags, and a raucous instrumental version of the title song, the sequence functions almost like a showreel of montage effects, a self-conscious display of special effects: overt graphic discontinuities within and between shots, shaped wipes, split screen and reverse-printed superimpositions and other *avant-garde* optical effects reminiscent of Vertov's *A Man With A Movie Camera*, and so on.<sup>218</sup>

The editing strategies in general used in this film tend to differentiate it from more classical texts. Scenes tend to be frontally composed, in theatrical style - Fields for instance, often stands frontally (facing the camera) even when addressing someone off left or right; there is relatively little scene dissection, relatively little reverse field composition or use of over-the-shoulder shots. There is some evidence, on the other hand, of cross-cutting between different sites of action within a scene for dramatic effect.<sup>219</sup>

There are also several instances of non-continuity editing: the montage sequences, of course, but then classical Hollywood also has its montage sequences; but there are also various ostentatious shot transitions (shaped wipes, an iris out from a crystal ball, and so on). There is a chase sequence that has been visibly jump cut (evidently to create a greater sense of pace<sup>220</sup>). There are some moments of faulty continuity, too, such as an inexplicable break in continuity in the middle of the scene at the music publisher's. A more interesting example of this sort of aberrance, because of its perverse unreadability, comes in a scene at Uncle Murgatroyd's house near the beginning of the film. Grace says goodbye to a young lad, in long shot; the theme tune is briefly heard being whistled, but without evident diegetic motivation; there is an unmotivated dissolve to Grace in medium shot gazing directly at camera, followed by another dissolve to Hugh, her boss, in medium shot on the phone at the factory, and a final dissolve back to Grace. It is extremely difficult to read the sequence at all (is Grace daydreaming about Hugh?) because of the lack of motivation for the shot transitions, and the lack of evident continuity across them. On other occasions in the film, there are a number of fairly long-held shots, which neither convey very much narratively nor are very interesting in themselves as images; in a number of cases, they are reaction shots of Grace, who does not actually seem to register any reaction.

*Sing As We Go's* mode of address also in various ways deviates from more classical representations. This is, in part, because the film draws on theatrical models: hence the frontality of the staging in various scenes, but also some excessively loud dialogue.<sup>221</sup> More notable perhaps is the occasional use of direct address to camera which betrays the music hall origins of the film. In the closing shots of the film, for instance, Grace marches with a crowd of

workers into the newly re-opened factory. Initially, they are all singing the title song, but Grace/Gracie Fields detaches herself from the group, turns to camera, and concludes the song for 'us'.<sup>222</sup>

Does this mean that in these moments of direct address, the character of Grace is, as it were, severed from the diegesis, and the illusion of a self-enclosed fictional world dashed? I would argue not, since by this move and by various others - such as the visibility of diegetic audiences of one sort or another within the frame - the text implies a live, theatrical audience, which can itself then be understood as part of the diegesis of the film. The address to camera can then be understood not as an address to the actual audience in the cinema at the moment of exhibition, but to an implied live audience, who can feel the presence of the performer. The implied live audience, and the space which it occupies, is thus part of - strictly, I suppose, an extension of - the performance space of the film. This feeling of liveness inevitably establishes a certain complicity with the actual cinema audience.<sup>223</sup> Significantly Fields, by her own account, hated making films, and much preferred working the halls, for the direct contact with an audience which that allowed. However much her early films at ATP tried to reproduce that contact, they could not in the end compensate.<sup>224</sup>

The attractions of liveness are the attractions of a pre-eminently exhibitionist cinema, one which acknowledges its visibility. The theatrical presence of the performers, the look at the camera, and so on, are all elements of self-display. This mode of address is one which revolves around the act of showing, not the process of story-telling and the suspense of the voyeuristic. It delights in the

gag in and for itself, and for the skill of its performance for an audience whose presence is not denied.

The non-classical form of *Sing As We Go* was evidently not a problem in box-office terms, and *Kine Weekly* had no hesitation in recommending the film as "marvellous entertainment. A box-office certainty", noting of the narrative construction simply that "the action ... follows clever cameo sketches, linked together by a neat story." The reviewer goes on to suggest that the film is

"unquestionably Gracie Fields's best... [She] has a great part... The supporting characters are brilliantly drawn... and the photography superb... Sentiment is not lacking, and the effective manner in which it punctuates the humour is a striking tribute to the competency and showmanship of Basil Dean's direction."<sup>225</sup>

It is no surprise that the 'serious' reviewers in the so-called 'quality' national newspapers, catering for a primarily middle-class readership, were less convinced by the qualities of the film, which was culturally somewhat removed from their idea of 'good cinema'. Thus *The Times* argued that despite her *commercial* success, Gracie Fields "has yet to make a good film", but it did concede that since

"the story of *Sing As We Go* was written by Mr. J.B.Priestley and it is directed by Mr. Basil Dean, [there is] evidence that a real effort has been made to provide her with a vehicle worthy of her talent. She is no longer expected to carry the whole weight of the production on her shoulders."<sup>226</sup>

The *Daily Telegraph* reviewer however felt this was still too evidently a Gracie Fields vehicle, and somewhat repetitious at that:

"It is all very jolly and riotous - and after half an hour or so, rather tiring, because 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'... Little more than a series of 'turns' for the star comedienne, necessarily all on somewhat similar lines."<sup>227</sup>

The names of Priestley and Dean (given his theatre work) clearly connote 'quality' for such reviewers, but they feel that they have been let down, since the film "finally emerged as a 'vehicle' for the talents of the irrepressible Miss Fields",<sup>228</sup> and while they can concede that she is good at what she does, and undoubtedly commands huge respect at the box-office ("the admirers of Gracie Fields will find her at the full blast of her vivacious comic genius"<sup>229</sup>), it still does not make the film one that they would feel happy recommending to their own readership. There are clearly two audiences for the cinema being delineated here: the general public, who generate a great deal of income for the trade, and who are satisfied by the likes of Fields, and a more discerning audience who demand something more culturally sophisticated and intellectually stimulating. As Dean recalled, press notices for ATP's Fields' films "were usually critical since I made no concessions either to the current conventions in storytelling or technique."<sup>230</sup>

ATP attempted to hone the attractions of Fields more and more into something that could work within the confines of the classical film narrative and attain a certain cultural respectability with each subsequent film. This meant containing the performance for the narrative, rigorously developing the character as narratively functional, and resisting the dysfunctional aspects of carnivalesque performance. The strategy certainly paid off with the critics, whose reviews improved steadily as the films moved closer to classical standards.<sup>231</sup>



*Queen of Hearts* (1936), to take just one example, was directed by Monty Banks rather than Dean, and is certainly, in classical terms, a much slicker film, with better timing, and a much stronger, more extended narrative with several relatively rounded characters.<sup>232</sup> One has much less sense of it being constructed out of a series of turns - Fields's performance is now *used up* narratively, and there are none of the montage sequences of *Sing As We Go*. It also owes more to Hollywood for its generic characteristics, for it is a backstage musical, with two big production numbers and a chorus line in the lavish show with which the film climaxes. Direct address is re-worked as address to an actual diegetic audience, rather than an implied one - that is, as interlocution within a carefully linearised narrative space. *Queen of Hearts* is also a rags to riches fantasy, a wish fulfilment of social mobility - "oh, its all been a wonderful dream", says the Fields character at one point. The sense of wish-fulfilment and of social mobility in *Sing As We Go* is much more muted, of course: the film, the characters, the audience, are out for a good time, they live for the present, not for the *telos* of closure, the fulfilment which the classical narrative seeks to provide. And indeed, the charge of the ending comes as much from the performance of the song and its visual rendering as it does from a sense of satisfying narrative exhaustion.

viii) Desire, the feminine and identification in Sing As We Go

Thomas Elsaesser has suggested that "there is a central energy at the heart of the Hollywood film which seeks to live itself out as completely as possible." He illustrates this by looking briefly at the "two major genres of the American cinema (the Western and the Gangster film)":

"There is always a central dynamic drive - the pursuit, the trek, the quest, the boundless desire to arrive, to get to the top, to get rich, to make it - always the same graph of maximum energetic investment."<sup>233</sup>

The 'boundless desire to arrive' is also almost invariably eroticised in pursuit of the formation of the ideal romantic couple. There is, in Sing As We Go, a certain dissipation of this *narrative* energy and pace in the extreme episodicism of the film which then lacks the sort of drive described by Elsaesser. This is hardly experienced as a lack, however, since the format of the film, a veritable montage of attractions, provides its own energy and vitality, with the action moving rapidly from place to place, song to song, gag to gag, according to a principle of contiguity rather than causality. It is the *variety* of actions and the mode in which they are combined at the level of editing which provides the experience of a fast snappy pace, not the rigorous and relentless development of one line of action to its logical conclusion.

Sing As We Go necessarily produces a rather distinctive articulation of desire and of sexual difference given this difference in narrative form. The formation of the couple in classical cinema figures as a key motivation for narrative integration. But in Sing As We Go the *communal* and the *collective* have as strong a role in narrative integration and closure as the formation of the

erotic couple. As we have seen, the point at which Grace acknowledges that she has lost "the only chap I ever loved" is marked by the performance of an intensely romantic song, and a sort of 'diegetic fantasy' of wish-fulfilment in the montage sequence which follows: all but one of the possible, actual and imagined romances within the film are reprised. The film thus signals its movement towards closure by showing the formation of many couples, rather than one, in which each couple is a unit within the larger community. The one potential romance which isn't able to be reprised is Grace's love for Hugh, but in the next sequence of the film, Grace's potential frustration is swept aside by the revelation that Hugh, who has just left Blackpool with Phyllis, has appointed her as Welfare Officer at the newly re-opened factory. The maternal role which she was seen to have in relation to the rest of the workers at the start of the film, is thus made official, and she can once more be absorbed into, but at the same time stand out from the crowd of 'ordinary people' with whom she marches back into the factory. In this affirmation of the collective, Grace herself is re-vitalised, but as a mother-figure. Narrative closure then is not the formation of the couple, but the (re-)formation of the collective: initially as a community of other couples, and finally as a community of workers.

Accents, customs and location mark this as a regionally specific community, but it also functions as a microcosm of the national community. Several of the marching workers are waving Union Jacks, and, in the final shot of the film, a Union Jack is superimposed onto the screen, filling the whole frame. The figure of the mother is at the centre of this community, and at the centre of the frame, binding the community together by attending to its welfare, by entertaining it - and by denying her own desires. This same articulation of the

mother as the symbolic centre of the national community re-surfaces in several war-time feature films dealing with the home front and national security.<sup>234</sup>

Hollywood's relentless and sexualised drive towards individual wish-fulfilment and narrative closure can, perhaps, be seen as culturally specific. British films like *Sing As We Go* and *Comin' Thro' The Rye* which seek to be self-consciously *national* films, very often seem to deal with sexual repression, or a resigned sense of loss, rather than with the pleasures of wish-fulfilment. That sense of loss is often replaced, however, by the sense of plenitude which comes from seeing the the emasculated individual being absorbed once more into the security of the community, as in *Sing As We Go*, but also again in several war-time features in the documentary-realist tradition.<sup>235</sup>

Matthews's mode of performance in *Evergreen* produces a certain eroticism, and her clothes and her position within the *mise-en-scène* invite a voyeuristic gaze from the spectator, so reproducing a classical ('American') articulation of desire. Fields's performance in *Sing As We Go* and her deliberate de-glamourisation within the *mise-en-scène* stands in marked contrast to this, and suggests instead a sense of frustration and asexuality. This enables the film to resist a cross-class romantic liaison - it is the upper middle-class Phyllis who wins Hugh's heart, not the working-class Grace. It also enables the possibility of same sex friendship rather than rivalry, since Grace's lack of conventional glamour offers no threat to Phyllis. Indeed Grace takes on a maternal role in relation to her, protecting her, for instance, from a lounge lizard who has got her drunk, and putting Hugh off the scent at the cost of dashing her own romantic hopes.<sup>236</sup> Can the film be seen as potentially progressive in creating a space for pleasure for the un-glamorous mother-figure, the ordinary woman? Or

is this achieved simply at the cost of other pleasures being placed out of bounds? Fields's 'grotesque' body does serve to celebrate her ordinariness, her deviance from the ideal; on the other hand, it also strengthens the appeal of the ideal - it is the 'grotesque' body which is in the end the object of fun.

Grace first meets Phyllis when they are both queueing up to enter for 'Blackpool's Bonniest Bathing Belles' competition. She looks Phyllis up and down, and decides that she is no longer going to bother to enter: "if you're going in for it, I'm not gonna waste my time." "Oh, I don't know", replies Phyllis. "I do", retorts Grace. The film, then, plays on the spectacle of the female body. Has Grace/Gracie Fields simply internalised patriarchal standards, and accepted her lot, or can she actually be seen as challenging those standards? At the simplest level, the film seems to reduce women to just another seaside novelty, another spectacle, another attraction of the film. This is really the function of the beauty contest itself: an endless parade of young women in swimming costumes. As Murgatroyd says to Ezekiah, "Let's have an eyeful of young women." But Grace's response to this, when she sees them ogling at the contest, is to call out "Mind your eyes don't drop out!"

In another scene already described, a crowd at the Tower Ballroom are waiting expectantly to see the three contest winners appear before them on the stage. By various mix-ups back-stage, an extremely bedraggled and dramatically de-glamourised Grace is revealed instead. To appease the jeering crowd, she sings 'Little Bottom Drawer', about the experience of "years and years of being a lonely spinster on the shelf." The scene can be read as a celebration of the ordinary, and a parody of patriarchal convention, and thereby of the conventions of the classical narrative film and its particular regime of visual pleasures.

The spectacle of the female body is, however, still one of the attractions of the film, and it should not be overlooked that Phyllis tells Hugh not to be such an old grandmother, after he has tried to stop her "making a show of yourself". The implication is that Phyllis is entering the competition not to invite the male gaze and impress the male spectator, but for her own pleasure.

*Sing As We Go* does then seem to operate with a somewhat contradictory system of looking in relation to sexual difference: in part a classical system, but one that is troubled both by Grace/Gracie Fields' de-glamourisation and parody of that classical system, and by Phyllis' self-satisfying, 'guilt-free' exhibitionism. What then happens to the processes of identification within this system? In answering this question, it is necessary to take into account the tension between the mode of address of 'live performance' and the mode of address of classical narration.

There is, on the one hand, an invitation to identify with Grace as integrated narrative protagonist. On the other hand, there is the play on liveness, on the presence of an audience, and on the imaginative boundaries of performance space, as opposed to narrative space, which is set in motion by the use of direct address, above all else. In these instances, the invitation is to identify with the position of a theatrical audience being addressed live by the performers - that is, not to *see with* the characters, but to *look at* them precisely as a spectator, separate from them. Thus, the absence of point of view shots and the tendency of Fields to address the spectator directly, as *another* person, mean that identification is not easily constructed on an individual-to-individual basis, despite the fact that Fields is so eminently the centre of attention in the film. This is exacerbated by Fields's unusually frontal performance, which

can be seen as a strategy for displaying the central attraction of the film at all costs, underlining her visibility, stressing her performative qualities rather than her narrative characterisation. Further, we might suggest that her deliberate de-glamourisation and de-idealisation renders her as very different to the ideal glamorous figures of identification of the classical film. Given her (extraordinary) ordinariness, Fields becomes one *of* us, rather than the easy classical identification of the spectator becoming as one *with* the Fields character for the duration of the film.

## ix) Conclusions

*Sing As We Go* is constituted in the tension between the linear forces of narrative, the forces that *contain*, and the non-linear pleasures of the gag, the song, the spectacle, the attraction, the forces which *disrupt*. But in so far as the film belongs to a performative genre rather than a strictly narrative genre, the transgressions from the classical model are licensed, the excess and the tension are part of the conventions and expectations of the genre, they are constitutive of its central pleasures. Even so, the experience of transgression - licensed or not - can be exhilarating.

Is this exhilaration in part an acknowledgement of the degree to which *Sing As We Go* differs from classical Hollywood cinema? Not entirely, because, as Peter Kramer has argued, classical Hollywood cinema always operated according to a double standard.<sup>237</sup> Alongside the tight, economic narrative feature film, the studios were also producing cartoons, comedy shorts, serials, and so on - and also, of course, very weakly narrativised, and thereby classically aberrant, feature films: musicals like *Flying Down To Rio* (1933), or comedies like the early Marx Brothers films, with their live performance conventions and carnivalesque anarchy.

Structurally, *Flying Down To Rio*<sup>238</sup> is very similar to *Sing As We Go*: instead of a journey to the playground of Blackpool, we have a trip to the exotic pleasure space of Rio to unleash all sorts of libidinal fantasies, bodily pleasures, and gratuitous spectacles. It is in effect a very classy variety show, with a proliferation of protagonists, songs, bands and dance routines. It seeks to satisfy the desire for touristic spectacle too, with a montage of post-card



images of Rio, which are tilted and wiped, giving the impression of shuffling through a pile of snapshots. Spectacular visual pleasure is also provided in the optical effects of the orchid song and the dancing on the aeroplanes. All of this is presented on the flimsiest of narrative motivations, as in *Sing As We Go*.

American films like *Flying Down To Rio* are generically licensed spaces for the intrusion of non-classical devices. Direct address is possible under certain circumstances, such as the chorus which sings to camera in one of the songs from *Forty-Second Street* (1933). *Flying Down To Rio*, as noted, uses various special optical devices, including shaped wipes, while *Forty-Second Street* has various overhead shots for the Busby Berkeley sequences, and also a prismatic montage of dancing legs - reminiscent of the French *avant-gardes* of the 1920s. These films are in many ways the American equivalent of *Sing As We Go*, but the sensibility, the setting and the milieu of *Sing As We Go* insist upon its *difference* from Hollywood, just as strongly as *Evergreen* insists that it has *become* Hollywood.

Both *Sing As We Go* and *Evergreen* aspire to the position of a national cinema, but by different economic and cultural routes. They adopt different modes of address in order to appeal to the desires and expectations of different, if overlapping, sectors of the far from homogeneous national audience, as well as relating differently to the various international audiences. *Evergreen* is the product of an industrial strategy which necessarily identifies a national audience as synonymous with a mass audience; it seeks to win that mass audience by adopting an *international* style - although on closer inspection, it turns out to be inflected slightly differently from American films working with that

style. Evergreen's formal and thematic details are, in the end, perhaps of less interest - because of their relative familiarity - than the industrial strategy and cultural practice which the film represents. As a film, it does not do much in the way of imagining a national community, nor does it particularly seek to invoke a distinctively national cultural tradition. Indeed, its project might be seen as the *effacement* of such difference, rather than its celebration. And where differences were apparent - as to the American press - they were to be read as flaws within the strategy. Internationalism might involve aspiring to certain standards, certain qualities, but, whatever the rhetoric of the policy-makers and the public relations experts, those standards were not particularly to be measured in *national* terms.

*Sing As We Go*, on the other hand, is one of many such British films of the period which work self-consciously with cultural traditions, reference points and performers which are nationally specific, and in many cases regionally specific.<sup>239</sup> There are numerous other films which feature comic variety artists like Fields, or which exhibit the same brand of comedy or the same version of the musical. The development of this genre of British films is heavily dependent on a media experience and spectacle which *pre-exists* the cinema - notably music hall and radio (and in later years, television). This type of film-making, addressed to a primarily national audience, and drawing on modes of entertainment and star-images established in other media, is not unique to Britain, and several other European film industries have used the same strategy in an effort to establish a national popular cinema - or at least to produce a type of film which is popular enough to be able to generate sufficient profits in the domestic market alone. The cultural specificity of such films renders them virtually inexportable, and indeed few of the British examples of this sort

of work had any international circulation, certainly not within the American market - even though they were the generic mainstays of British cinema in the 1930s, and in later decades.<sup>240</sup>

It is perhaps the case that an indigenous national cinema commanding mass audiences, as opposed to an art cinema, or a popular cinema with international aspirations, exists only in the form of such critically despised genre films, which rely so heavily on pre-cinematic star-images and modes of entertainment. Such films are certainly among the few examples within the European film industries and cultures of well-established generic conventions and star-images not particularly dependent on Hollywood.

*Sing As We Go* needs to be understood in this context. The particular way in which it displays its attractions should be seen as an attempt to incorporate the experience and the cultural repertoire of music hall and its audiences. The star-image of 'Our Gracie', forged in the music halls, was, of course, one of those attractions. It is foregrounded in the film by casting Fields in a role which gives her the diegetic name of Grace, a strategy used with several other comic performers whose popularity precedes their entry into films. *Evergreen* was also of course based on a theatrical entertainment. It was a re-make of a successful West End show, and starred Matthews and Sonnie Hale, both successful revue artists, but the film is hardly sold on the strength of these *theatrical* reputations. *Evergreen* also shuns the theatrical performative mode of broad gesture and playing to the camera. Indeed, as it is a back-stage musical about a theatrical performer, it is able to play heavily on the relationships and differences between theatre and cinema. It offers its audiences a reproduction of the theatrical experience, complete with diegetic audiences, but it also

suggests, like so many contemporaneous Hollywood musicals, that the cinema experience is more impressive than that of the theatre. Cinema, in this move, does not denigrate theatre, as it does television in the 1950s. It celebrates the experience of theatre, so attempting to attract its *aficionados*, but at the same time it appropriates the experience, and transforms it into a celebration of the *better* cinematic experience. This is particularly evident in the show sequences when the space of the proscenium-arched theatre is superseded by what is in effect an infinitely extendable stage, a purely cinematic construction of space, where the space of the musical number becomes larger than the space of the narrative.<sup>241</sup>

*Sing As We Go* also on occasions constructs a purely cinematic space. The montage sequence which follows on from the performance of the love-song, for instance, visually up-dates the film's various romances, including the romance of Blackpool itself, in a fashion that only the cinema could achieve. Where this purely cinematic construction of space is an imaginative extension of an actual stage in *Evergreen*, in *Sing As We Go*, the imagination of montage replaces the need for a stage altogether.

The strategies operated in these two films can thus be seen as symptomatic of the film industry's attempts to achieve a state of media supremacy, in a period characterised by competition between different media and entertainment forms for mass, and thereby national (and potentially international) audiences.<sup>242</sup> Both films work to absorb or incorporate other already existing media and entertainment forms,<sup>243</sup> and to appropriate and accumulate their audiences, in so far as they are different from the already constituted cinema audience, itself of course never a homogeneous and singular entity. *Sing As We Go*, for instance,

attempts to reproduce the participatory community audience of pre-cinematic modes of entertainment such as music hall, the pleasures on offer at Blackpool,<sup>244</sup> and more generally the tradition of carnival. Bakhtin has argued that

"Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people: they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces the people."<sup>245</sup>

Part of Fields's attraction, more than with most theatrical performances, was that she could metaphorically cross, or efface, the footlights, and embrace 'the people'. *Sing As We Go* tries to reproduce this experience of the collectively participating audience both within the diegesis and at the point of exhibition (through the repetition of songs, for instance); at the same time, the film seeks to assimilate this experience with the rather different spectatorial experience of the classical film. Thus *Sing As We Go* tries to overcome the fact that the technology of film replaces the living encounter of audience and performer with the impersonality and lack of presence of the projected celluloid image. It tries to reproduce cinematically the performative 'spontaneity' and variety of music hall, and the contact and complicity with an audience. One of the early script-writing manuals quoted from in the previous chapter suggests that

"Whereas in a drama it is desirable to make the spectator emotionally more or less a participant in the story as it unfolds itself, in a comedy he should be the witness only - the spectator in the strict sense of the word."<sup>246</sup>

That is certainly one aspect of the spectator-text relationship here: *Sing As We Go* does not seek to efface the experience of spectating in the way that the classical narrative film does. But I would argue that the sense of participation, rather than simply spectating, is not lost either; on the contrary it is self-consciously acknowledged in the film's textual strategies.

*Sing As We Go* is, then, addressed to an audience familiar with the conventions of both music hall and cinema. It is also addressed to a mass audience on a national basis. It does more than this, however, in that it also constructs an *image* of the nation as a coherent, knowable and self-sufficient community - which, moreover, includes the film's audiences. As Tony Aldgate and others have argued, the film can be read as a highly optimistic text, performing a consensual and conservative nationalising function.<sup>247</sup> Priestley's script for the film situates the plot in the context of economic depression and unemployment, which is documented in the opening montage sequence of the film. But for Priestley, this was evidently not enough: cinema must in the end be an uplifting experience:

"[I am not] in favour of a policy of giving us great slabs of English working class life, miles of celluloid showing us factories and engineering shops, folks sitting down to endless meat teas, and a dreary round of housework, machine-minding, football matches and whist drives. ... [The film] needs a bit of glamour, an increased tempo, a touch of the fantastic, people who are more vivid than the ordinary run of folk..."<sup>248</sup>

The fantasy of *Sing As We Go* is not only the play-time of Blackpool, but also the consensual solution it offers to the depression. The film promotes as strong an image of inter-class solidarity - that is, a potentially national solidarity - as it does of intra-class solidarity. While a cross-class romance may be

forbidden, it is by just such a cross-class co-operation between the worker, Grace, the boss, Hugh, and Sir William Upton, that Greybeck Mill can be re-opened.<sup>249</sup> The sentiments and the fantasy of collectivity are of course exercised in various ways, perhaps most powerfully in the closing sequence of the film, in which Grace is re-united with the people of her particular class and locality. The conjunction of the words of the song - 'sing as ~~we~~ go', the interpellation of the audience in the cinema through the direct address to camera, and the presence of the numerous Union Jacks, produces a powerful sense of the nation as a secure, all-embracing but at the same time close-knit community, a functioning consensus.<sup>250</sup>

This hegemonic image of the nation is achieved narratively: it is an instance of *narrative* closure. Therein lies a problem, since I have argued that the central pleasures, and indeed guiding principles of the film as a whole, are not concerned with narrativity. The carnivalesque qualities of the film, its celebration of popular but vulgar cultural forms, its delight in the gag, and the gratuitous moment, all run against the pressures of narrative closure. The closure of the film in fact sees narrative pleasures once more in competition with the pleasures of performance. Such exhibitionist moments, along with the vulgar attractions of Blackpool, and the transgressions of holiday-time, and even the very character of Grace/Gracie Fields, constitute the 'too much' which exceed a consensual view of national life. Hugh, Phyllis and Sir William may all visit the playground of the working class, but their bourgeois values are no match for the values of the Pleasure Beach or the bodily pleasures of 'Blackpool's Bonniest Bathing Belles' competition - indeed they are seen to enjoy this regime of pleasure.

The carnivalesque - the temporarily irresponsible and commanding pleasures of those without authority - is, from this point of view, at the centre of *Sing As We Go*. Of the three plot-lines which attempt to impose some structure on the film, the least tightly structured is that of Grace's picaresque adventures. Significantly, the other two plot-lines both have bourgeois characters as key protagonists (Hugh and Sir William), and are both much more serious attempts to frame and regulate the carnivalesque: the bourgeois form of narrative seeks to contain the irresponsible forces of popular pleasure. But carnival is always a *licensed* transgression, "a permissible rupture of hegemony",<sup>251</sup> a legitimate letting off of steam, rather than a permanent and irreconcilable disruption: it is a means of controlling excess energy. Narrative containment, the force of narrative closure is from this perspective inevitable - and the closure in the end restores the social and economic *status quo*, even if Grace has to be elevated to (incorporated into) the realms of personnel management. Carnival is thus generic rather than necessarily subversive.

The figure of Grace/Gracie Fields is also much more ambivalent than simply irresponsible: there is again a tension between Gracie the attraction and Grace the narrative character. As Grace, she is the symbol of the worker who refuses to be beaten, and the mother-figure who keeps other people's irresponsibilities in check. Depression and unemployment do not injure her personal dignity or her pride in her local culture; she survives without too many problems, and the mills are eventually re-opened by her intervention. As Gracie, she is one of 'the people', an adventurer, who cocks a snook at authority (the comic policeman, for instance); and of course she is also a performer, and very often a figure of ridicule, a clown.<sup>252</sup> She is, as such, a Rabelaisian figure who, in Priestley's



description, takes "an impish delight in mocking whatever is thought to be affected and pretentious."<sup>253</sup>

This impish delight is used to parody the affectations and the vulgar pleasures of Blackpool, among other things, in *Sing As We Go*. The clown, the fool, is thus both ridiculous, but also ridicules others. Here, ridicule is directed at the seriality, repetitiveness and grotesqueness of mass culture, a new 'low other' to replace bourgeois anxieties about carnival.<sup>254</sup> The seriality of the bathing beauties, who all look the same from a distance, is matched only by the grotesque rendering of the male spectators's voyeurism. Grace cannot really take seriously her duties as a vendor of the mass-produced Crunchy-Wunchy toffee, although this is superseded by the sham of Grace as a human spider in the fairground sideshow, and the fortune-teller whom Grace mockingly impersonates. Her performance on another occasion underlines the endless, repetitive plugging of one song at the music publishers. Grace de-bunks not only mass culture and the remnants of more traditional vulgar popular forms such as the fairground and the circus, but also the culture of patriarchy: when a guest-house customer taunts her with sexual harrassment, she tips a bowl of rhubarb over his head.<sup>255</sup>

In each case, it is the vitality and spontaneity - the 'authenticity' - of Grace/Gracie Fields's performance which rides above the mass phenomenon being parodied. The *film* of Gracie Fields, written by J.B.Priestley and directed by Basil Dean, appears in this way to be of better quality than the vulgar origins of her reputation. Fields's popular audiences are thus being invited to aspire to something more satisfying than the common fare of mass culture. The film clearly invites a working-class audience to participate in its carnivalising of

the critically enshrined film culture. There is also, however, the sense of the horrified but fascinated bourgeois spectator gazing at this other scene of mass culture and the "huge seething mass of humanity."<sup>256</sup>

Sir William and Hugh, the film's most bourgeois characters, both visit Blackpool and its "dark Pleasure Beach"<sup>257</sup> and see at first hand the mass/popular culture in full flow. In both cases, although they evidently enjoy themselves, there is a strong sense of slumming. "I'll take a stroll through the Pleasure Beach - haven't seen one of these things for years", says Sir William to his chauffeur on arriving at its entrance. It is something strange, something 'other', through which he can wander, bemused. The attractions of Sir William and Hugh are no match for the attractions of Blackpool and the music hall culture, and are rapidly absorbed into this other scene. On the other hand, the relatively minimal penetration of space by the camera produces a gaze which maintains a safe distance for the potentially bourgeois spectator, who can observe the crowd and their antics from the safety and security of the cinema seat.

The distanced gaze of the camera in *Sing As We Go* may be read as equivalent to the distanced gaze of the bourgeois spectator at the carnival from a safe place. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have commented, "at the fair the subordinate classes become the object of a gaze constituting itself as respectable and superior by substituting observation for participation."<sup>258</sup> They go on to argue that

"that moment in which the subject is made the outsider to the crowd, an onlooker, compensating for exclusion through the deployment of the discriminating gaze, is at the very root of bourgeois sensibility."<sup>259</sup>

This same gaze and the same sensibility or attitude are central to the documentary-realist tradition, the subject of the next chapter. Here, it splits the viewing position of the film between an invitation to embrace the pleasures of Blackpool, and an exhortation to remain aloof from such ephemeral enjoyments. It is this latter attitude toward the vulgar fun of Blackpool and of the music hall which the production of the film as a 'quality' product seems to want to encourage. Film can offer more than these sites, it is implied; it can introduce us to superior cultural forms and practices - this is how a film like *Sing As We Go* can exist alongside ATP's other productions which seem on the surface to aspire to something quite different.

This reading of the film is entirely in keeping with Priestley's own reading of Blackpool. It may be "the great roaring spangled beast",<sup>260</sup> but it is a beast which instils in him a certain anxiety; it may be "a pleasure resort for the crowd",<sup>261</sup> but the crowd also instils in him a certain anxiety. Blackpool, he suggests, "is a complete and essential product of industrial democracy. If you do not like industrial democracy, you will not like Blackpool."<sup>262</sup> Priestley, at the very least, is undecided about whether he likes it or not - or rather, to be precise, he is nostalgic for a Blackpool which no longer in his opinion exists:

"it is not as good as it was ... it lacks something of its old genuine gaiety. Its amusements are becoming *too mechanised and Americanised*. ... *The entertainers are more calculating, their shows more standardised, and the audiences more passive*. It has developed a pitiful sophistication - *machine-made and not really English* - that is much worse than the old cheerful vulgarity. ... [The] less intelligent and enterprising, are, I feel, fit patrons of the new Blackpool, which knows what to do with the passive and listless, but [they] would not have been quite up to the energetic old Blackpool, crowded with vital beings who burst out of their factories for the annual spree as if the boilers had exploded and blown them out. ... Blackpool ... was the Mecca of a vulgar but alert and virile democracy."<sup>263</sup>

It is precisely Priestley's *new, Americanised* Blackpool of which the film can be read as a critique. The cultural democracy has been tainted, "it is a bit too cheap. ... Too much of it is simply a trumpery imitation of something not very good even in the original."<sup>264</sup> This critique of American popular culture is there too in the film. The appeal of Hollywood is initially acknowledged by the character of Gladiola, the maid at the guest-house where Grace briefly works, who treasures photographs of *American* film stars. Grace, however, dismisses Glad's love affair with these stars as nonsense.

"Years and years ago the democratic and enterprising Blackpool, by declaring that you were all as good as one another so long as you had the necessary sixpence, began all this. Modern England is rapidly Blackpooling itself. Notice how the very modern things, like the films and wireless and sixpenny stores, are absolutely democratic, making no distinction between their patrons."<sup>265</sup>

Priestley again seems undecided about whether this is a good thing, since the authentic carnival of old Blackpool has been lost, and nostalgically re-invented as precisely authentic, pure, valuable; the new Blackpool - and therefore, presumably, "the very modern things, like the films" - are the new 'low others'.<sup>266</sup> Hence the hesitations within the text of *Sing As We Go* itself, in which Blackpool wavers between being a real place, a site of working-class pleasure, and being a metaphor for a tainted democracy.

The other side of the critique of standardised mass culture is a celebration of that same culture, re-cast as vital, enterprising and pleasurable. The film seeks precisely to call back into existence the authentic working-class communities of 'old England', knowable communities, in contrast with the anonymity and garishness of mass culture. There is then a touch of heritage nostalgia in this

film, and a touch of pastoral too. Pastoral is not necessarily a question of subject-matter, but is an attitude, a perspective on social relations - in this case, the relations of urban society.<sup>267</sup> The performance space of carnival thus constitutes an urban pastoral, where the heritage space of *Comin' Thro' the Rye* produces a more classical rural pastoral. Here, the urban pastoral imagines the complexities of the nation in the simplified form of a small, self-contained and organic urban community, in which the classes and the sexes know their places, and co-exist harmoniously. It is this community which once more inhabits Greybeck and its mills at the end of the film, a microcosm of the national community, unified around the figure of the mother, "consensus personified".<sup>268</sup>

Even the image of Blackpool in the end is somewhat muted; it is a regimented, routinised, sanitised form of carnival. It has become a safe place, recuperated in a bid to produce a quality cinema, yet at the same time commercialised, transformed into a series of image-commodities, which constitute the attractions of the film, on which it can be marketed.

*Sing As We Go* is very much a pivotal film, caught in the interplay between a variety of competing cultural practices. Raymond Williams's distinction between dominant, residual and emergent cultural forms may be useful in considering this interplay.<sup>269</sup> The dominant film practice in the 1930s is clearly the *international* standard of classical Hollywood cinema. In *Sing As We Go*, however, we can also see the residue of earlier cultural forms and practices. As Williams argues,

"certain meanings, experiences, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless

lived and practised on the basis of the residue - cultural as well as social - of some previous social and cultural institution or formation."<sup>270</sup>

The music hall elements, the cinema of attractions, the regional references, have not been entirely incorporated by the dominant film culture, and persist precisely as a residue of earlier and less culturally respectable practices, representing "areas of human experience, aspiration and achievement which the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses, or even cannot recognise."<sup>271</sup>

Interwoven with the processes of classical narration, and the eruptions of the highly localised version of the cinema of attractions in *Sing As We Go*, are instances of montage which echo the new, potentially democratic and *avant-garde* cultural practice of documentary, and its discourse of realism, which is, in Williams's terms, the emergent. Documentary, as I will hope to show in the next chapter, emerges as a film form which, amongst other things, seeks to represent *audio-visually* the working class as a complex *collective* formation with its own *milieu*, values and aspirations.

Documentary is of course valorised in terms of a discourse of realism. This discourse also emerges in contemporary reviews of *Sing As We Go*: several of the critics foreground the attempt to represent, 'authentically', a specific region of England. *Kine Weekly*, for instance, was impressed by what it saw as

"an amusing, human and interesting mass study of north country character. ... The opening scenes, employed to establish plot, give an authentic indication of the state of affairs in the industrial north, and shed illuminating light on the poverty of its family life."<sup>272</sup>

It is interesting to note here that the regional specificities of *Sing As We Go* are read very differently to the equally specific southern rural locations of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. The pastoral of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is invariably read in terms of an essential Englishness. *Sing As We Go*, however, is felt to describe only a *corner* of England, despite the various ways in which the film pushes to the fore the metaphor of local community as national community. The *urban* pastoral of the industrial north does not yet have the easy *national* identity which critics perceive in war-time films which work with similar versions of urban pastoral.<sup>273</sup>

*The Times*, for instance, described *Sing As We Go* as "a sincere effort to make a film which should truly represent an aspect of English life." The reviewer agreed that "a great deal of trouble has been taken in providing the authentic background of Blackpool", but felt that, in the end, "it is not really successful."<sup>274</sup> The comments are typical of the more upmarket reviewers, for whom the main problem was that *Sing As We Go* was a star vehicle, above all else, which compromised its attempt to represent realistically northern working-class culture.

"at the cost of being repetitious, I suggest that there is still unemployment, there is still ship-building, and there is still farming [and] we have an industrial north that is bigger than Gracie Fields running around a Blackpool funfair."<sup>275</sup>

Having fun, the pleasures of carnival, are seen as an inappropriate response to the hard realities of life:

"Blackpool and Bolton are there in truth, but there through the eyes of the studio and not through the intimacy of the English journey. In these days of social unhappiness you cannot scratch the surface of an economic

problem for the benefit of a gifted comedienne, nor can you employ comic effect to issues which are conditioning the very existence of countless persons. If this is to be the way of putting England on the screen, then stay in your studios, producers, and leave England to documentary."<sup>276</sup>

*Sing As We Go* does share something with British documentaries of the period, even if the film did not go far enough in producing a realist national cinema for the 'serious' critics.<sup>277</sup> There is, for instance, the self-conscious location shooting and use of non-professional actors, at least for crowd scenes; there is also the emphasis on the working-class, and on the collective as much as the individual; and there is the distance which the camera keeps, for the most part, and the frontality of the staging - together representing a refusal of the individualised, psychologised point of view of classical narrative cinema.

Another formal feature which plays an important part in both *Sing As We Go* and documentary films of the period is the use of montage. The montage sequence tends to function as a summary passage in classical cinema,<sup>278</sup> but in *Sing As We Go*, it does more than this; indeed, it might be said to do the opposite, on occasions, opening up the diegesis beyond its narrative requirements, instead of condensing it or closing it down. The opening sequence of the film, for instance, is classical enough as a summary and condensation of place, locality and situation, and there is an impressive economy of narration through the juxtaposition of sounds and images. There is also however an added charge of 'authenticity' through seeing such patently 'real' location shots of industrial activity, which are hardly typical characteristics of British feature films of the period.<sup>279</sup> The montage sequence which details Grace's journey to Blackpool also exceeds a purely narrative function, in its exhibition of numerous verbal and visual gags and special effects. The sequence also celebrates the energy,



vitality and above all modernity of *communication* itself, in a way that becomes typical of contemporaneous British documentary film-making.<sup>280</sup> The montage of romances after the love-song also echoes the way in which montage in documentary films works to construct a public rather than a private sensibility: the privacy of Grace's emotional situation is placed in the wider context of the romance of the community at large, and indeed the general situation of Blackpool as it closes down for the night.

*Sing As We Go* bids for both cultural respectability and popular acclaim, and seeks to do so by constructing a sense of both the national and the local, and by working with a complex mix of dominant, residual and emergent cultural traditions. The film is, like carnival, a complex hybrid of voices, forms and cultures, both high and low, respectable and vulgar.<sup>281</sup> This is evident particularly in the bizarre combination of the semi-documentary and the star vehicle musical organised around a single extraordinary individual. The film is thus characterised by a series of fascinating oppositions: work / pleasure; community / individual; extended narrative / self-contained novelty; continuity / montage, and so on. It is a very similar set of tensions to those typifying the documentary-realist tradition, which I will be exploring in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6: The documentary idea and the melodrama of everyday life: the public, the private and the national family

### 1) Introduction: the documentary idea and the public sphere

*"I liked the notion that, in making films of man in his modern environment, one would be articulating the corporate character of that environment and finding again, after a long period of sloppy romanticism and the person in private, an aesthetic of the person in public."*

*John Grierson, quoted by Forsyth Hardy in Twenty Years of British Film.<sup>1</sup>*

*"Documentary films are being used more and more to interpret and dramatize the life of a nation, not only to itself but to other nations."*

*Comment on the dust-cover of the third edition of Paul Rotha's Documentary Film.<sup>2</sup>*

It is well known that, under John Grierson's guidance, an official Film Unit was established in 1929 at the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) which specialised in the production and distribution of what came to be known as documentary films. This unit moved to the General Post Office (GPO) in 1933 with Sir Stephen Tallents, the civil servant whose expertise in public relations had done so much to enable the work of the Film Unit. These units developed a system of State sponsorship for their film-making activities, which was supplemented by commissions from corporate industry, a framework which enabled a number of other independent documentary film production companies to be established from the mid 1930s.

An article in *The Times* of 1932 suggested that, in the work of the EMB Film Unit, there existed "a possibility ... of freeing British films from a slavish competition with American methods and of establishing for them a character of their own."<sup>3</sup> In the first edition of his influential survey, Documentary Film,

published in 1936, Paul Rotha - by this time himself a documentary film-maker - described such work as "this country's most important contribution to cinema as a whole",<sup>4</sup> a view which rapidly became common-place within at least certain sectors of the intellectual film culture. Thus by 1938, *The Times* confirmed its early hopes:

"The film of fact ... is ... the distinctively British contribution to the art of the moving pictures. English producers of fiction films can scarcely do more than show America that they have mastered a technique that was first developed at Hollywood."<sup>5</sup>

A decade later, Forsyth Hardy opened his account of the development of British documentary with the observation that "there is no novelty to-day in the claim that documentary is the distinctively British contribution to cinema." Such views of course stand in marked contrast to the critical debate of the late 1920s, when critics like Paul Rotha and the various contributors to the journal *Close-Up* complained that British cinema had produced nothing of any note, had developed no indigenous tradition of film-making. Grierson, the leading spokesperson for British documentary, also felt that there was nothing *distinctive* about British cinema at this stage: "we have not yet evolved a style."<sup>7</sup> By contrast, *The Times* article of 1932 quoted above remarked of the EMB documentary films that "here - in the use of portraiture, the rhythm of cross-cutting, the remarkable fluidity of movement from scene to scene - is British film-work with a style as strongly marked and as individual as the Russian."<sup>8</sup>

To claim that documentary was Britain's outstanding contribution to cinema was to deliberately disregard the appeals of popular cinema and commercial narrative film-making, a view that was not entirely acceptable within the intellectual film culture of the middle years of the century. Thus Dilys Powell, the *Sunday Times* film critic, writing in 1946, could not allow that documentary on its own constituted a national cinema:

"ultimately it is on the quality of its entertainment films that the prestige of a national cinema must rest ... : however marked the element of imagination in a documentary film, it is to the essentially creative work that we turn for the full judgement of value."<sup>9</sup>

The presence of the documentary movement in the 1930s was not therefore enough for Powell, who felt that there was still no "school of British cinema" in this period: "The national characteristics of the British, whether good or bad, had not been infused into a national cinema."<sup>10</sup> The influence of documentary and the experience of war, however, "set the English film on the path in which masterpieces may be created [and] established precisely what was lacking in the English cinema before 1940, a traditional English style."<sup>11</sup>

This was certainly the prevailing opinion within the intellectual film culture of the period. Some two decades later, the tradition was well and truly established, such that one critic could claim that "through the first seven decades, every sustained period of success of the British film has seemed to be based in a realist approach to contemporary life."<sup>12</sup> Realism is thus equated first of all with documentary, then with the most impressive, valuable and significant tradition in the history of British feature films. Given the extent to which this view has become the orthodox version of British cinema's achievements as a

national cinema, no study of the question of national cinema in this country would really be complete without some exploration of the films valorised in such claims. It is to this which I turn in this chapter.

I will initially establish certain parameters within which films in this tradition operate, looking first at the relationship between the documentary idea and the concept of the public sphere, and then at the way in which that idea was perceived both as a realist practice and as a key strategy in the development of a national cinema. After surveying the field of documentary in the 1930s and early 1940s in a fairly general sense, focussing in particular on the initial development of the story-documentary, I will look at two feature films from the mid-war period which emanate from the commercial sector of the industry,<sup>13</sup> but which were influenced in various ways by documentary. In the discourse of the period, "it was in these documentary-feature war films that the renaissance of our cinema first took permanent form."<sup>14</sup> I will concentrate initially on *Millions Like Us* (1943), a film felt by many contemporary commentators to be "essentially British in character" and "instrumental in creating the national style"<sup>15</sup>, and then compare it with the equally well-received *This Happy Breed* (1944). In these films, as in earlier story documentaries, the nation is metaphorically represented as a small, self-contained, tightly-knit community, a unity-in-diversity, but one which is structured like a family; this representation is achieved through a particular set of narrational procedures including episodic montage construction, and an organisation of looks which inter-mixes what I call the public gaze of the documentary with the private gaze of individual narrative protagonists. Finally, I will look more cursorily at the way in which this mode rapidly became conventionalised and sedimented in the mid-1940s into a genre of mainstream

commercial film-making, with its own rules and regulations, to some extent severed from the broader political questions raised within the documentary sector in the 1930s. The chapter is, like the previous two, a case study in product differentiation, since the films in question are primarily about contemporary Britain, were made for domestic consumption in the first place, and were self-consciously set against the classical Hollywood cinema.

There are of course already numerous accounts of both the documentary movement itself and the subsequent feature films and television programmes which in one way or another draw on (or *depend on*) the rhetoric of documentary film-making of the 1930s. Much of this accounting has been done by surviving members of the documentary movement - "largely as anecdote", as Annette Kuhn has observed<sup>16</sup> - while more critical analysis of the movement has until recently only been undertaken very partially, particularly in relation to the question of national cinema.<sup>17</sup> There are now a couple of more extensive revisionist studies of the politics and organisation of the British documentary film movement, drawing on primary research materials not previously used.<sup>18</sup> Theoretically rigorous and detailed analyses of the films produced by the movement, focussing on the formal devices and strategies which they use, and the perspectives which they develop, are still few and far between, however.<sup>19</sup> This is true also of the later films which might be said to have been influenced by the work of the documentarists in the 1930s.<sup>20</sup> Even so, it is probably true to say that many aspects of the documentary film movement and the development of British cinema during World War Two have been more thoroughly researched than have the periods and developments dealt with in the previous two chapters.

Peter Wyeth and Don MacPherson have argued that "this tradition ... has set the very terms in which film-making is thought about in Britain".<sup>21</sup> To that extent, the dominant discourse about documentary film in Britain is not inaccessible - but the central operational terms of this discourse and the cinema which it supports have still not been thoroughly examined. In particular, I do not believe that the ways in which films within the documentary-realist tradition seek to articulate a sense of the public and the national, in relation to the personal and the individual, have been adequately explored. It is above all this exploration with which I am concerned here. I will not therefore be seeking to say anything particularly original about the organisation of the documentary film movement or about the course of the British film industry as an industry during the war period - although I will need to say something about these areas in order to prepare the ground for the analyses of the films which follow. I will also be working deliberately with some of the better known and more accessible manifestations of the contemporary discourse about British documentary film practice - and using as examples the films most frequently cited within that discourse - in order to produce a clear picture of the dominant form of the documentary idea in circulation particularly in the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>22</sup>

The documentary idea and the documentary movement are the products of the cultural and political debates of the late 1920s and 1930s, and, as such, developments in film are only one strand in a much broader field of social-democratic cultural practice. Grierson, for instance, argued that

"the documentary idea was not basically a film idea at all, and the film treatment it inspired only an incidental aspect of it. The medium happened to be the most convenient and most exciting available to us. The idea itself, on the other hand, was a new idea for public education: its

underlying concept that the world was in a phase of drastic change affecting every manner of thought and practice, and the public comprehension of that change vital."<sup>23</sup>

Social documentation as a mode of cultural political intervention was indeed exploited in the 1930s in radio, painting, theatre, journalistic and literary writing, photojournalism and photography, social anthropology (Mass Observation), and so on<sup>24</sup> - such that Grierson could argue that "the documentary film movement might, in principle, have been a movement in documentary writing, or documentary radio, or documentary painting."<sup>25</sup> Social documentation as a mode of cultural practice was not in itself new and, as Robert Colls and Philip Dodd have argued, the aesthetics and the ideological perspectives of the documentary movement need to be related back to the writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which explored 'Darkest England'.<sup>26</sup> The development of the documentary movement also need to be seen in the context of the development of official public relations, corporate advertising and state propaganda policy in Britain, as Paul Swann and Ian Aitken have pointed out.<sup>27</sup> Thus the development of the Empire Marketing Board, and the establishing of a Film Unit there are closely related to those cultural and political debates about the actual and potential social and educational role of cinema in helping to forge and reproduce national and imperial unity, as discussed in previous chapters.

Public relations and social documentation were not always and necessarily the same thing, but, in this case, they do have in common the desire to develop film as a tool in the ideological enterprise of producing a public sphere of communication, a public field of meaning, where the term 'public' implies something held in common, something without contestation, in the general



interest. Conceived in social-democratic terms, documentary practice establishes a relatively neutral information flow from state to citizen, educating, informing and instructing the electorate of a new enfranchisement, propagandising about the relationship between the social welfare of the citizens and the work of the state's major institutions, reproducing the idea of "the state as benevolent mediator of a mass political democracy".<sup>28</sup>

Documentary thus plays an important role in the transformation of the public sphere as a space in which rational and critical discussion of issues of general interest can take place between informed citizens. The argument of critics such as Jürgen Habermas is that the advent of capitalist-controlled mass media sees the end of free rational discussion: the mass media impose a monologic rather than dialogic communication, and the stuff of culture is transformed into commodities. The rules of the market-place and private interest in the flow of ideas and information hold sway over public interest, such that the public sphere is no longer a site for simply the *circulation* of information, but one in which information - and access to it - is managed and regulated in the interests of the most powerful social groups.<sup>29</sup>

The media's function of informing the public, of putting ideas into mass circulation may, from one point of view, have an emancipatory, democratising function, in the sense that access to ideas and information is widened; on the other hand, the media actually takes over from the individual the role of rational discussion, such that the individual is once more *outside* the public sphere, a mere passive, if enlightened, spectator of it. Confronted with the new mass public with its potentially diverse, multiple and contradictory interests, any attempt to impose a concept of the general interest, or the public interest,

or the national interest, is necessarily the site of ideological struggle: all social interests manifestly do not have an equal voice, consensus must be negotiated or acquiescence imposed.

Ernest Barker argued in the late 1920s that we "cannot see a nation. It has many members, divided by an infinity of differences; and the unity of its character must be a matter rather of faith than of sight."<sup>30</sup> The Griersonian project can be understood as a response to this situation, an attempt to render visible and knowable that which is invisible, those manifold relations which constitute the national. Thus, what appealed to the documentarists about the Soviet montage films of the late 1920s was "their emphasis not on the personal life but on the mass life, their continuous attempt to dramatize the relation of a man to his community."<sup>31</sup> From this perspective, documentary practice potentially binds together the individual subjects of a nation at a social, communicative level, reproducing the nation as a rational communicative community. The public sphere is thus to this extent nationally bounded - or rather the communications industry is the key means by which the nation is given a public, social image, the key means for moving beyond the blind faith of patriotism and dramatising that "community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations".<sup>32</sup>

Grierson himself clearly saw the documentary as having a democratic function in expanding the public sphere:

"The basic force behind [the documentary units] was social not aesthetic. ... We were, I confess, sociologists, a little worried about the way the world was going. ... The world had become very complex - and civic comprehension difficult. We were conscious of the abstraction of life under the new metropolitan skies. We saw that poverty of community life went hand in hand with the lack of civic comprehension. And of one thing we

were pretty sure - that the old stiff-backed educational system was not doing very much to help towards comprehension. Nor particularly was the new myth-making machinery of the star-struck cinema. But if we were jealous of this myth-making influence and made film the instrument of our door-step drama, it was partly by accident. We were interested in *all* instruments which would crystallize sentiments in a muddled world and create a will toward civic participation."<sup>33</sup>

Within this context, cinema is appropriated as the ideal social-democratic means of mass communication, documentation and education, the ideal means of "bridging the gap between the citizen and his community"<sup>34</sup> - where that community was understood as the nation. The task of documentary - "the public service which it is the duty of cinema to perform"<sup>35</sup> - is the "teaching of citizenship",<sup>36</sup> and the transformation of the spectator into "a thinking, reasoning and questioning member of the community",<sup>37</sup> "not merely ... a passive voter but ... an active member of the State";<sup>38</sup>

"The Documentary Film, quite simply, aims to bring about an awareness in every person of their place in everyday life and of the responsibilities of good citizenship implied by that membership."<sup>39</sup>

Terms such as 'public education', 'public comprehension', and 'good citizenship' indicate the extent to which the documentary idea was precisely an effort to produce and *regulate* an 'official' public sphere, an attempt to *discipline* public life. But further, in Grierson's words, "it was, from the beginning, an adventure in public observation."<sup>40</sup> The public must be educated, they must comprehend the values of citizenship, but they must also be observed, surveyed, analysed, categorised; they must, that is, be under surveillance, they must be policed.<sup>41</sup> Hence the number of key documentaries of the 1930s which focus on the work and the living conditions of the lower classes.<sup>42</sup> Observation and surveillance of course imply a point of view, and the point of view of the documentarist was

situated for the most part outside of the public *milieu* which was being documented in these films. Grierson, for instance, spoke of "an unknown England beyond the West End",<sup>43</sup> and of his desire to "travel dangerously into the jungles of Middlesborough and the Clyde":<sup>44</sup> the documentarist was thus separated both physically and morally from the object of investigation; he (and sometimes she) did not know the jungles beyond the West End because they were not his habitat, but the habitat of the dangerous classes, 'the great unwashed', and it was the otherness of this 'general public' which threatened, which was dangerous.

Documentary, in the end, constituted an attitude: "documentary is not this or that type of film, but simply a *method of approach to public information*."<sup>45</sup> But it was, as I have tried to suggest, an attitude not just to public information but to the public too, and one which tried to hold together profoundly contradictory tendencies. The attitude is also, of course, very similar to the gaze of the bourgeois onlooker at the carnival of *Sing As We Go*.

## ii) Realism and national cinema

*"On frequent occasions we have heard it alleged that the enemy of social consciousness among the people is amusement. But it would surely be more accurate to say that it is rather the shape and style which, for various reasons, manufacturers give to amusement that is one of the real hindrances to the general ripening of social and civic responsibility."  
Paul Rotha, Documentary Film, 1936.<sup>46</sup>*

*"Experience has shown that it is usually the short film of the documentary kind, and not the popularly conceived feature film, that presents the most authentic picture of our national life. Of necessity, the feature film must bear the burden of highly paid actors and expensive settings to secure its appeal; whereas the modest short film, making do with things and people as they really are, comes nearer to a direct statement of how we live than do the films of fiction."  
The Times, 1938.<sup>47</sup>*

The attitude of the documentary movement implies at one level a radical challenge to the given form of cinema in the 1930s, "the age of the dream palace".<sup>48</sup> The cinema of spectacle - founded of course on the pleasurable economies of American cinema, "the streamlined showmanship of Hollywood"<sup>49</sup> - encouraged cinema-going as a routine habit, an utterly familiar social practice, underpinned by the idea of going out to be entertained, and to be uplifted from everyday reality into a world of wish fulfilment, a world of "dreams stuffed with ersatz romance".<sup>50</sup> The documentary idea constructed a quite different social function for cinema, one which posited cinema as a means of communication and analysis, not a medium of entertainment which simply circulates spectacular cultural commodities within the international marketplace.

*"The purpose of the documentary film is to get away from the theatrical tradition, with its purely entertainment appeal, and to find in the wider fields of actuality an appeal which will be more educative, more intellectual, more aesthetic and therefore more durable."<sup>51</sup>*

We have here then two competing professional ideologies, two competing justifications for cinematic practice: the commercial film industry's ideology of showmanship, and documentary movement's ideology of public service. In the case of the former, critics could deride this as an essentially American phenomenon, while "the documentary film was ... an essentially British development [and] its characteristic was this idea of social use."<sup>52</sup> Within the documentary movement, then, cinema was posed as an apparatus which could be self-consciously used to construct a national imaginary. Grierson, for instance, argued to the Moyne Committee of 1936 that

"The shorts field has already in its documentary section demonstrated how different aspects of the national life can be described and brought alive. Large films must rely so much on the play, and the story film is so unrelated to reality, that if the ordinary working [sic] and traditions of the national life are to be presented, one must look mainly to the shorts field for their presentation."<sup>53</sup>

The documentary movement was thus at the forefront of attempts during the 1930s to establish an authentic, indigenous national cinema in response to the dominance of Hollywood's irresponsible cinema of spectacle and escapism. Hollywood was the embodiment of an encroaching mass culture, against which must be erected, in this case, a responsible and artistically respectable cinema - and, as we have already seen in chapter two, it was the documentary movement which "captured the interest in film as an art that was developing in Britain in the later 1920s".<sup>54</sup> The documentary film units became the site for the most systematic explorations of and experiments with intellectual and artistic ideas. Central among these ideas were questions of montage, influenced by the filmmaker theorists of the Soviet cinema, "this new rhetorical cinema [which is] the most complete approximation to our ideas".<sup>55</sup> Rotha had argued in The Film Till

Now that the poverty of British cinema was directly related to the absence of both a school of *avant-garde* film in Britain and a "school of thought for the furtherance of filmic theory, such as is found in other countries."<sup>56</sup> In later editions, Rotha argued that the documentary movement had filled this gap,<sup>57</sup> while his Documentary Film, published in 1936, was intended "to replace the theoretical discussions in The Film Till Now",<sup>58</sup> since he now believed that "the documentary method may well be described as the birth of creative cinema."<sup>59</sup>

At the heart of the documentary idea is a powerful differentiation between the 'realism' of the documentary and the 'escapism' of mass entertainment. The realist cinema, a serious, committed, engaged cinema, became the key moral standard in the call for an indigenous national cinema.<sup>60</sup> Claims for realism are invariably multivalent, and certainly there are a number of conflicting assumptions underlying the claims for the realism of the documentaries of the 1930s, and the feature films that have been seen as influenced by them, or as otherwise close to them. One starting point at least must be the recognition that cinema was felt by many within the intellectual film culture to be an intrinsically realist medium. Roger Manvell, for instance, in his widely read Film, first published by Pelican in 1944, argued that cinema "is an art based on the realistic approach to the material of life."<sup>61</sup> But within that philosophy, some films are more realistic than others, and it must then be asked: What is it that makes a film realistic? What is it that creates the impression of realism?

The term realism as discussed in relation to documentary suggests a set of aesthetic principles of verisimilitude and motivation common to almost all claims to realism. In so far as these principles are codified across a range of

texts, one of the most pervasive claims for realism is bound up with those textual strategies which serve to efface the marks of codification, transforming representation into presentation: "the real is not articulated; *it is*."<sup>62</sup> The various partial discourses of a text, whether a narrative text or not, tend to be hierarchically ordered in relation to a metadiscourse which is thereby able to present itself as the position of truth, shifting attention away from the production of representation to the content of the represented.

This 'classic realism' has never been enough for the documentary idea, and for British intellectual film culture more generally, however, and there have always been other, more clearly argued, claims for the realism of the British documentary-related tradition as *different* from Hollywood's 'melodramatic fantasies'. At the very least, the realism/escapism distinction in British intellectual film culture suggests a nuancing or even transgression of the strategies used by classical Hollywood to achieve verisimilitude and motivation. This transgression produces a certain freshness which seems 'realistic' to contemporary reviewers and film historians, and has been most noticeable in relation to questions of theme and iconography: each successive realist movement in British cinema and television has been celebrated for both its commitment to the exploration of contemporary social problems, and its working out of those problems in relation to 'realistic' landscapes and characters. One of the most consistent criticisms of the commercial cinema from within the documentary movement during the 1930s - and it has been echoed in numerous subsequent statements - was that it failed to provide any positive representations of working-class people.<sup>63</sup>



Films within the documentary-realist tradition have, by contrast, consistently been proclaimed as politically progressive, because they extend the conventional social discourse, and deal positively with working people, within an iconography of *authentic* sounds and images. The 'authenticity' of place and character, for instance, is achieved by breaking some of the studio conventions of classical cinema - shooting on location in actual British landscapes, using unknown, or un-glamorous, or non-professional, or un-trained performers, and so on.<sup>64</sup>

This *surface* realism involves fetishising certain iconographic details into a *spectacle* of the real, as distinct from its narrativisation or incorporation into a rational communicative framework. An authentic iconography is not in itself enough, and invariably there is a second claim for the realism of documentary-related films, as distinct from the Hollywood tradition. This we can name *moral realism*, in that it involves a moral commitment to a particular set of social problems and solutions, and a particular social formation. What is important is the attitude itself, the moral obligation of cinema, "its *responsibility* in showing the broader movements of history to the world".<sup>65</sup> Inevitably, moral realism is to a degree bound up with the claim for surface realism, involving an iconographic commitment to the representation of 'ordinary people'; but it also involves a particular construction of the social in terms of 'universal human values' - for Manvell, the hallmark of the best British films of the war period was "the sincerity with which human values are handled, and the authenticity of situation and environment in which these values are involved."<sup>66</sup>

The concern for factual accuracy is thus gathered up in the desire for moral truth, focussed on the figure in the landscapes. The most successful narrative films in the documentary-realist tradition reveal a concern for personal

relations and human values which invest the landscapes of the diegesis with a greater sense of moral urgency and a more compelling sense of human sympathy, while the real historical details of these landscape legitimate and authenticate the moral universe. It is an implicit acknowledgement that narrative film is precisely *fiction*, and that it must therefore be made as credible and plausible as possible, by rooting the drama in history. This is of course really only an intensification of the realist strategies of classical Hollywood, which can be used to make plausible an entirely imaginary world.

The realism of the documentary film was however from the outset conceived as "something more than a prosaic description",<sup>67</sup> despite the strength of the sociological, propagandist strand in the movement, with its rhetoric of social responsibility, education and instruction - hence Grierson's definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality".<sup>68</sup> There was always an undertow running against the most ardently voiced educative-sociologistic tendency within the movement which sought to acknowledge and foreground the aesthetic work of the text. This we may call *poetic realism*: it involves a more perfect conjunction of surface realism and moral realism, a conjunction which *transcends* ordinariness, which makes the ordinary strange, even beautiful - but, above all, which has emotional depth and integrity. Writing about the various documentary-influenced feature films of the mid-1940s, Roger Manvell, for instance, suggested that

"The use of the word realistic to describe the new British cinema is not enough. There is always a poetic quality about the emotional treatment in these films. Accuracy in the presentation of events and situations is not enough: there must also be understanding and humanity."<sup>69</sup>

The artistic, the creative, the *poetic*, had been installed right at the outset as a key term within the documentary idea, even if Grierson was, in the end, proud that "an adventure in the arts [had come] to assume the respectability of a public service."<sup>70</sup> It was this quality - especially in feature films - which was most admired within the broader intellectual film culture of the 1940s. In a sense, poetic realism constitutes the happy balance between the various conflicting and competing ideas and impulses which make up the documentary idea as a whole. It holds all excesses in check: the *responsibility* of realism blocks off the path to self-indulgent aestheticism or cloying sentimentality, while the poetic sensibility tempers both the objective coldness of the document, and the tendency towards establishing action as the ultimate logic of narrative movement and energy. It attempts, above all, to hold together the irreconcilable discourses of artistic endeavour and public service.

The strand of poetic realism in intellectual film culture and the documentary idea thus allows a (guarded) inscription of the artist in filmic discourse: the poetic film is a film of personal vision which foregrounds the work of the director. The romantic tendency is however held in check by the continuing demand for moral commitment, but there inevitably remains a tension here between the sociological and the aesthetic, the moral and the poetic.

The poetic discourse in effect transformed public observation into the fascinated gaze, which could exoticise and romanticise the object of documentation into a thing of aesthetic beauty, conceived in familiar terms. Grierson, as ever, outlined the possibilities in 1932:

"realist documentary, with its streets and cities and slums and markets and exchanges and factories, has given itself the job of making poetry where no poet has gone before it."<sup>71</sup>

Edgar Anstey, himself a documentarist, noted later how Robert Flaherty had "turned the forbidding expanses of the Black Country into some of the loveliest landscape scenes that have ever been photographed" in *Industrial Britain* (1933); the beauty, for Anstey, lay in the pictorialist qualities of the image "with black chimneys where convention demanded trees and sunlight reflecting from wet rooves instead of from sylvan lakes."<sup>72</sup> Manvell rightly called this "industrial romanticism"<sup>73</sup>, and himself delighted in the urban pastoral of "man against the black-blue sky, factories against the rolling clouds, the countryside of Britain":<sup>74</sup>

"The flash and swirl of machines, the lovely photogenic qualities of sunset over the pitshaft, the smoky shapes and grey perspectives of industrial Britain lent themselves to the cine-eye and to montage."<sup>75</sup>

### iii) Montage and the public gaze

*"In matters such as technical slickness, finished performance, modern atmosphere, and popular appeal, no other mass of film production begins to compare with the Hollywood product. These factors in combination give a 'last word' air to the most humble and incidental prop. ... It would be useless to attempt to compete with American production in the matter of massed incidental publicity."*

*John Grierson, memorandum to the Inter-Departmental Committee on Trade Advertisement and Propaganda, 1930.<sup>76</sup>*

The documentary idea sought to articulate a public sphere of responsible social activity, a field of ideas and issues assumed to be in the general interest. This was constructed in contradistinction to the foregrounding of individual desire and wish fulfilment in the classical narrative film, which was assumed to deal only with *private* personal conflicts of an essentially emotional nature. Rotha, for instance, felt that "the private passions and petulances [of human beings] are of little interest"<sup>77</sup> to the documentary film-maker, who was more concerned with developing "a method of communication and propaganda to project not just personal opinions but arguments for a world of common interests."<sup>78</sup> Likewise, Grierson could no longer see any need for fantasy, "nor the dribblings of personal sentiment or personal story";<sup>79</sup> he argued that "the individual life is no longer capable of cross-sectioning society ... its particular belly-aches are of no consequence in a world which complex and impersonal forces command"; and he concluded that "the individual as a self-sufficient dramatic figure is outmoded", since it is unable to "reveal the essentially co-operative or mass nature of society".<sup>80</sup> What was more important for him was the development of new forms of cultural practice, such as the documentary film:

"We have all been abstracting our arts away from the personal, trying to articulate this wider world of duties and loyalties in which education and invention and democracy have made us citizens."<sup>1</sup>

For Grierson, this meant "abandon[ing] the story form, and seek[ing], like the modern exponent of poetry and painting and prose, a matter and method more satisfactory to the mind and spirit of the time."<sup>2</sup> Documentary had, in the end, to temper its modernism, to re-engage with the story form, and embrace at least some aspects of commercial narrative cinema, in order to reach anything like a national popular audience. Indeed, the conjunction of a liberal humanist morality and a social democratic politics insisted also that British documentary-realism should mark out a space within the public sphere for the expression of the private, the personal, the emotional and the individual, which meant, in effect, drawing on the resources of narrative cinema. The history of the 'realist' tradition in British cinema, and the development in particular of the melodrama of everyday life, becomes the history of the changing conceptualisation of the relation between the public and the private, between the political and the personal - thus between the state and the citizen (the 'general public', the 'ordinary man in the street', television's 'viewer at home'). This developing relation involves different mobilisations of the devices and strategies of documentary and narrative fiction - in particular, the documentary's distanced public gaze at 'universalised' social processes and people, and the individuated private looks of the fictional protagonists of narrative cinema.

The documentary film and the narrative fiction construct two relatively distinct systems of looking, which bind the spectator into the ideological work of the text in different ways. The tradition of continuity editing within classical narrative cinema develops in part to establish the relations in space between

individuals; the visual devices of eyeline matching, the point of view shot, and other forms of reverse field cutting which are employed to this end tend to individuate and emotionalise the look in a way appropriate for the representation of private personal conflicts and aspirations. Further, the experience of the look of the camera at the pro-filmic event and the look of the spectator at the screen are virtually lost in the experience of watching the story unfold, which tends to draw the spectator into the organisation of looks within the diegesis, rather than the looks at it. Such drama depends upon the full diegetic effect, the containment of the gaze within the self-enclosed world of the fiction played out for us on the screen.

Montage editing in documentaries of the 1930s is, however, developed to deal with the broad overview of processes, producing a quite different system of looks, and a different relationship of the spectator to the figures on the screen, eschewing psychological realism. It is typically a distanced, observational look, an 'objective' public gaze in which, to put it crudely, the camera no longer looks from the position of diegetic figures, from within the place and the morals which they inhabit. This look no longer calls upon the facility of reverse field cutting, or the inter-view of individuals, and is thus relatively distinct from the narrative system of point of view and the identification of the look with the *dramatis personae*. As John Caughie has suggested in relation to televisual discourse, "the figures of the drama exchange and reverse looks, the figures of the documentary are looked at and look on."<sup>23</sup> The public gaze of the documentary is thus the visual enactment of the moral and physical separation of the documentarist from his/her object. The developing form of the 'realist' tradition in British cinema as an articulation of the public and the private is, then, dependent on the different ways in which

these two systems of looking are combined in the films. This is never simply an aesthetic matter, since it also depends on the changing valorisation of the institutions of documentary and narrative film making within the mainstream of British film culture.

The mixing of techniques derived from both 1930s documentary film-making and from classical narrative cinema is also a combination of narrational forms. Classical cinema provides a primarily linear narrative: a tightly economic narrative organisation of time, action, spectatorial involvement and identification. The documentary provides the principle of constructing texts out of a montage of fragments; this montage construction is dependent on a much broader diegesis, a more metonymically extensive organisation of space and time, with its attendant impression of greater realism. Together, these forms produce characteristically episodic, multiple, parallel narratives. This strategy will then tend to open up the realms of the narratable - in particular, montage construction is able more easily to represent community, the social, public life, in a moral framework of seriousness and social responsibility.<sup>94</sup>

It is montage's ability to deal with the multiple, to establish connections and relations, and visible systems of interdependence, across a broad social fabric or network, which is so vital. "Montage is a theory of relationships" argues the German film-maker Alexander Kluge, but "mere documentation cuts off relations: nothing exists objectively without the emotions, actions and desires, that is, without the eyes and senses of the people involved."<sup>95</sup> Film-makers of the 1930s and early 1940s found themselves reaching toward classical narrative strategies, and the attendant system of individualised looks, for very similar reasons.



The closer British documentary-influenced film-making moves toward the economic and formal systems of mainstream commercial cinema, and the more conventionally it is formalised as a genre, the more easily it has been able to capture the popular imagination, and something akin to a national audience, despite the fact that the documentary mode of address has been presented as potentially more democratic, more capable of adequately articulating a sense of the social, the public, the *national*. The democratisation of cinema which the documentary movement seeks to achieve is, however, stalled by its anxiety about popular cultural forms and practices, and, in particular, the forms of American cinema: documentary may aspire to the status of a democratic mode of communication, but it also aspires to the status of high culture, an artistically respectable, serious and socially responsible cultural practice. It is thus caught once more between appealing to a national popular audience, and appealing to a bourgeois audience. The period of the mid-1940s is crucial in this respect because there is an effort to use the documentary idea in a national popular context, primarily by inter-relating with narrative practices. This then raises important questions about the relationship between narrative form and the possibility of building a popular audience, and indeed about the political implications of this sort of populist communication strategy in general.

It is the story-documentary, of all the types of documentary developed within Britain in the 1930s, which becomes the most significant representational form in this respect. The story-documentary sets out to dramatise abstract ideas, social processes or situations by focussing, within a loose narrative format with a more or less conventional dramatic structure, on the experiences of groups of people or individuals of the type whom it is assumed might well be involved in such situations, but who are, in this case, playing a role under the

guidance of a director. This type of documentary therefore involved advance scripting, including the scripting of dialogue. Protagonists were required to act according to pre-conceived directions - although such performers were not usually professional actors, and were often the people who would actually be involved 'in real life' in the task being represented.<sup>86</sup> Sets had to be built and locations selected, and editing involved the creation of an imagined, if verisimilitudinous, geography. Characters needed to be more thoroughly individuated, and there had to be more synchronised dialogue, and less direct address or voice-over commentary, in an effort to create a fuller diegetic effect. "If, by severe standards," as one contemporary commentator put it, "this was fiction, then it was a fiction with the realism uppermost - an adventure was reconstituted, as nearly as could be imagined, to the real event."<sup>87</sup>

Documentary sets out to produce a new image of the 'national community' as a complex network of social groups through the devices of montage and the public gaze. The image can be seen as relatively progressive, in that it tentatively articulates 'the nation' and 'ordinary people' as the same, rather than seeing the nation only in terms of the ruling classes, as in the heritage film. The 'ordinary people' are, however, inserted into an already formed *bourgeois* public sphere. This sphere is extended, democratised even, to the extent that a new public enter it, but the relations which exist *between* different social groups are hardly altered.<sup>88</sup>

The documentarists themselves clearly felt that they were doing something new, something progressive. Rotha for instance argued that the films of the EMB unit in the early 1930s "represented the first attempt to portray the working class of Britain as a human, vital factor in present day existence."<sup>89</sup> Anstey claimed

in retrospect that *Housing Problems* (1935), a film about slum clearance and re-housing schemes, "wasn't our film", <sup>90</sup> it was the slum-dwellers' film, and his role as co-director was simply to *document*. Another commentator looking back on the documentary-realist tradition felt that, in these films, "the working class is given a language and a means of expression and that under the constraints of capitalistic production relations."<sup>91</sup> The views are familiar by now, oft-repeated. But if we take the last comment, we can see that, on the one hand, such a view constructs the working class initially as mute, and subsequently as the passive beneficiaries of generous patrons: they are subjects who must be civilised, who must be educated and incorporated into democratic citizenship, who must be humanised: they are not yet *of* the public sphere.

There is no denying that such films do extend the boundaries of permissible discourse, the boundaries of the representable, and that in this extension, working class figures are indeed often placed at the centre of the diegesis - though rarely as *active* subjects. The system of looking constructed for this cinema situates the spectator as a bourgeois outsider, looking in on this other class as spectacle. The working class are effectively captured - held in place, tamed - as the objects of a benignly authoritative gaze, the gaze which surveys and categorises, from a distance. The gaze is not purely observational and analytical, it is also the fascinated gaze: as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have commented of Christopher Mayhew, "his attempt at social analysis is inseparable from his scopophilia."<sup>92</sup> The gaze is superior, but it is also voyeuristic: it wants to both render the other class visible and therefore known, but it also wants to keep it at a safe distance. This point of view can solicit the *admiration* of the spectator as the workers and their workplaces are aestheticised into heroic things of beauty (the bodies of the miners in

Coalface, the sublime industrial city seen from above in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*<sup>93</sup>; it can also solicit the *sympathy of the spectator*, as the working class figure is so evidently the victim of circumstances. This image of the heroic labourer as a part of the natural scheme of things - as a figure in the landscape - of course has a long history in the pastoral tradition of representation.<sup>94</sup>

Some of the documentarists, especially those who moved into the area of the story-documentary, were aware of the difficulties of this point of view. Pat Jackson, for instance, felt that

"The early school of documentary was divorced from people. It showed people in a problem, but you never got to know them, and you never felt that they were talking to each other. You never heard how they felt and thought and spoke to each other, relaxed. *You were looking from a high point of view at them. You were inclined to look at, instead of being with and part of.*"<sup>95</sup>

One class is constructed in the image or from the point of view of another: the ideal trajectory (though not always the most realistic) is the transformation of the worker from a victim into a 'dignified human being' with an assigned role in the social system. That, for Harry Watt, was the credo of the documentary movement: "that we set out to dramatise reality and give a dignity in films to the everyday person and the everyday event."<sup>96</sup> Dignifying the ordinary person meant seeing them in terms of 'universal human values' - rather than, say, as class types. But those universal values are of course historically specific bourgeois values, the values of the bourgeois ego.

iv) Documentary film practices in the 1930s and early 1940s

*"The documentary method of expression must be the voice of the people speaking from the homes and factories and fields of the people."<sup>97</sup>*

*"The immediate task of the documentarist is, I believe, to find the means whereby he can employ a mastery of his art of public persuasion to put the people and their problems, their labour and their service, before themselves. His is a job of presenting one half of the populace to the other; of bringing a deeper and more intelligent social analysis to bear upon the whole cross-section of modern society; exploring its weaknesses, reporting its events, dramatising its experiences and suggesting a wider and more sympathetic understanding among the prevailing class of society."<sup>98</sup>*  
*Both from Paul Rotha, Documentary Film, 1936.<sup>99</sup>*

The previous sections of this chapter have laid out in general terms the nature of the documentary idea, and some of the forms with which it works. In this section, I will look in more detail at some of the better known documentary films of the 1930s and early 1940s, and at the textual devices which they use. The next section will deal specifically with the development of the story-documentary.

Manvell suggests that "the realist's urge [is] to see life steadily, to see it whole, to analyse society and the functions of mankind."<sup>99</sup> The documentary film achieves this by instituting a public gaze at public processes, routine operations whose scope is normally too great for the mere individual to perceive: "it is the job of documentary films to illuminate these mechanical and repetitive processes."<sup>100</sup> Rather than dealing with the desires of an individual hero-protagonist, which might, crudely, be seen as the work of the classic narrative film, the documentary tends to deal with the work of a particular 'public' institution or activity which can be broadly perceived as social. **Night**

**Mail** (1936), for instance, deals with one aspect of the work of the GPO - the night mail train from London to Scotland; **Industrial Britain** (1933) deals with the idea of work, and specifically industrial labour as a continuance of the age-old traditions of craftsmanship; and **Western Approaches** (1944), a war-time story-documentary about the work of the Merchant Navy,

*"sketched in the whole organisation and operation of the Atlantic convoys - so that each character in this drama becomes representative of the thousands who have taken part in the greater drama behind it."*<sup>101</sup>

In order for characters to become 'representatives' of a people, labour is taken out of the context of antagonistic social relations and be re-imagined in a generalised pastoral vision of humanity. **Drifters** (1929), for instance, becomes a film about "the ardour and bravery of common labour",<sup>102</sup> "the unconscious beauty of physical labour in the face of work done for a livelihood."<sup>103</sup> Films like **Industrial Britain** also draw on the poetic realism of Flaherty's earlier 'anthropological' films to construct the working class as heroes: such films gaze fascinatedly at the socially useful labour of Britain's artisans and craftsmen - coalminers in **Coalface** (1935), and fishermen in **North Sea** (1938), for instance. It is of course the smooth and benevolent functioning of the public institutions which has the capacity to alleviate social problems and thus transform the victims into heroes in their assigned role in the democratic society. The interests of the capitalist class must, likewise, be transformed into the public interest, so that **Housing Problems** (1935) becomes a film about the role of British gas companies in aiding slum clearances and the construction of new housing. It is through slippages such as these that the documentary film addresses the spectator as a citizen of the nation, a universal, politically

rational and responsible subject, not as a subject of one or other antagonistic class, race or sex.<sup>104</sup>

Many of the documentaries of the period focus on poverty as a social problem - thus *Housing Problems* deals with slum housing, while *Enough to Eat* (1936) deals with poor nutrition. The citizen is addressed as someone who has a role to play in solving the social problems presented in the films; the ideal spectator of *Enough to Eat* is thus a citizen who recognises that it is his or her duty to eat better, and to encourage others to eat better, as much as someone who recognises that it is the duty of the state to provide the material means for better nutrition. These social problems tend to be removed from the arena of antagonistic power relations and de-politicised, and the films effectively construct the working class as victims deserving of 'our' sympathy.

The implications of the public gaze - the observational gaze, the fascinated gaze, the gaze of one class at another - can be seen in *Housing Problems*, which looks at the social problem of poor housing, and its solution in the slum clearance programmes and the re-building of new homes with gas appliances. The relation of the spectator to the film is clearly regulated by the uppermiddle-class male voice-over which introduces and takes us through the film. The middle-class professional, the expert, thus intervenes between the spectator and the diegesis, keeping us at a distance from, and guiding our view of the slum-dwellers, the working class victims of the film. In so doing, it sanctions a public gaze at these victims, rather than addressing the spectator as involved in and empathetically identifying with their emotional states.

This voice-over thus situates the various other discourses of the film - notably the discourses of the working-class interviewees - and regulates their meanings in relation to each other. It is a voice which can elaborate, which can move beyond the experience of any particular individual, which can make comparisons and construct relations, whereas the anecdotes of the interviewees - comparable to the music-hall turns of *Sing As We Go* - are restricted, they can have no overview, they can draw only on personal experience and private drama.

This organising voice-over finds its visual equivalent in the shots of the slums from above. These shots attempt to convey an overview of the slums in general, rather than the restricted view of any single slum-dweller - and to this extent, the position of the shots renders the point of view outside of the capacity of those dwellers.<sup>105</sup> The voice-over and these overseeing shots also situate the spectator at a point from which all the varying private discourses of the interviewees are intelligible. In other words the means by which one idea or activity is related to another, and the means by which one sector of society communicates with another, are constructed as natural, as above the particular power relations which structure a social formation, and as outside the control or jurisdiction of any individual citizen.

*Housing Problems* cannot however be simply written off for the way in which it places the spectator in relation to the working-class protagonists in the film through this hierarchisation of discourses. There is still an incredible freshness in the direct-to-camera interviews with working-class people - as Cavalcanti much later insisted, "you can't deny that the documentary put the workers in films."<sup>106</sup> At the same time, there can be no unproblematic



celebration of this film simply because it does extend its social discourse to the representation of working class figures.

The principle of montage construction is mobilised right across the spectrum of documentary film making in the 1930s. Montage has both an *emotional* function, in terms of rhythm, tempo and momentum,<sup>107</sup> and a *rational* function, in its ability to display parallel scenes of action, to deal with the multiple, and construct a much more extensive diegesis than classical film. These effects can be seen in *Industrial Britain*, which deals with not one worker, but many workers throughout Britain; it is there also in *Coalface*, an exploration of the possibilities of sound and image montage worked on by Cavalcanti, whose own earlier 'city symphony', *Rien Que Les Heures* (1926), was itself an influence on his fellow documentarists; *Housing Problems* equally is made up of a montage of voice-overs, direct-to-camera interviews, and primarily illustrative images (with few signs of shot matching, the key to narrative continuity editing); and in the story-documentary *North Sea* there is a combination of both montage and continuity editing as the narrative aspect develops.

The work of Humphrey Jennings, particularly his collaborations with the editor Stewart McAllister in the late 1930s and 1940s, is perhaps the highpoint of this montage tradition in British documentary. Their film, *Listen to Britain* (1942), for instance, made for the Ministry of Information (MoI) at the Crown Film Unit, was just one of hundreds of war-time propaganda shorts made mostly under Government sponsorship. It is a complex, highly poetic montage of apparently discrete fragments of sounds and images of the home front at work and leisure, juxtaposed with images from the traditional iconography of pastoral England and the new iconography of the war period. The film attempts to hold

these diverse fragments together as a vision of a diverse but united nation. The film lacks both the narrative metadiscourse of the classic narrative film, and the voice-over of the more conventional documentary, and less effort is made to exhaust the meaning of each image and sound, or to dispatch the spectator down a particular avenue of meanings.<sup>108</sup>

This does not mean, however, that *Listen to Britain* lacks any organisational principal. On the contrary, the specificity of its mode of address is its very multivalency: what holds these particular images and sounds together is its diegesis - a delimited historical space, which constitutes an ideological position. The combination of images and sounds is on the basis of a particular form of contrapuntal montage - but, although the relationship between individual shots may be initially dissociative, the larger segments of the film produce a powerful series of associations which override any sense of conflict.<sup>109</sup>

The image of the nation here constructed is founded on an assertion of variety and diversity rather than difference, tension and conflict; it is presented as

"timeless moments of communion between individual and group, between past and present; different individuals and different groups they certainly are, but they hold in common an almost exactly similar experience of their group identity"<sup>110</sup>

- or, at least, this is how the film constructs relationships between these separate entities. The final effect of the film is of unity and harmony, the holding together of difference as variety. National identity is proposed as the sum of this productive variety: the contemporary co-exists with tradition (two uniformed women eat sandwiches under a classical statue; a barrage balloon is

visible through the arches of the National Portrait Gallery); the rural co-exists with the industrial (Army vehicles rumbling through the street of a Tudor village; aircraft spotters work in an idyllic rural setting); popular culture coexists with high culture (Flanagan and Allen sing in a factory canteen, while Myra Hess plays Beethoven to the Queen); and so on.'''

**Listen To Britain** also re-works the familiar iconography of work present in so many 1930s documentaries: as in those films, we have here images of the worker, the work process, the workplace and the landscapes of work. This iconography renews and reaffirms the 1930s tradition which aestheticises, humanises and dignifies these sites of work and working bodies. But there is also developing here an iconography of the leisure time and space of 'ordinary people' - and this is a major departure from the dominant Griersonian tradition of the 1930s.

This new iconography depends upon the representation of leisure as a community activity, with an emphasis on wide shots of large masses of people (the factory canteen, the dance hall) or group shots, rather than close ups and one-shots. Music, and particularly singing, is represented as performing an integrating function, as in the case of the Canadian soldiers singing on the train, the women singing in the factory, and the audience singing and whistling with Flanagan and Allen. The static high angle shot of the dance hall, with the dancers moving through the frame, in particular seems to resonate across the films of the 1940s (*Millions Like Us* and *This Happy Breed* both have variations on this image).

**Listen to Britain** is also non-developmental as a text: it is not dependent upon an internal textual structure of disruption and resolution, or movement towards

a new equilibrium, so much as upon a continual dispersal of significance from one image (or sound) to the next. Each image is in this sense inconsequential, and relates to the next as being parallel to it in time, and contiguous with it in the overall diegetic space of the film ('War time/Britain'). This, like the principle of montage construction, is another narrational strategy developed in narrative features in the documentary-realist tradition, although in **Listen to Britain** the circularity of the text (it both begins and ends by cross-cutting between images of the rural and the industrial) and the inconsequentiality of action are more marked. In **Listen to Britain** the effect is one of the continuing saga of everyday life, with the disruption of the war being assumed as outside the text.

#### v) The story-documentary

The most important of the various forms of documentary practice developed in the 1930s is, for my purposes, the story-documentary.<sup>112</sup> These were also, in fact, the films that were critically the best received, and which secured the most substantial theatrical releases and popular responses.<sup>113</sup> They were predominantly the work of the GPO, later the Crown Film Unit, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the period after Grierson left the GPO Film Unit - although there had been some experiments in this direction earlier. The GPO Film Unit, in its last couple of years, and the Crown Film Unit were regarded with some suspicion by the other members of the documentary movement as the luxury units, and the story documentaries were, even in this context, relatively high-budget prestigious films.<sup>114</sup> The strategy was developed by the units in an attempt to try to reach a wider theatrical audience than documentary films had hitherto received. "Our solution" to the problem of how to construct a meaningfully large audience, was, as Harry Watt recalled, "story-documentary, taking actual true events, using real people, but also using 'dramatic licence' to heighten the tension and the story-line."<sup>115</sup>

This was in effect a twin strategy, which involved both the development of a form which non-specialist audiences might find appealing, and the development of theatrical distribution for these films. The effort was put into attempting to *re-construct* an already constituted popular audience, rather than trying to construct a new audience separate from the audiences built up by showmen over the previous couple of decades.

The form of the story-documentary developed over time by gradually increasing the degree of narrativisation of more general documentary techniques such as montage construction, location shooting, use of non-professional actors, the iconography of work, the depiction of process, the public gaze, and so on. As Basil Wright explained in 1941:

"Experimentally speaking, the *dramatic* approach (originally signalled by **The Saving of Bill Blewitt**) was very much to the forefront. However much the conservative elements in documentary might complain it was by this time clear that the use of studio sets and reconstructions, personal stories and incidents, and actors as well, had come to stay."<sup>16</sup>

The most interesting examples of this genre are the films of Harry Watt, whether on his own or directing in collaboration with others.<sup>17</sup> **Night Mail**, for instance, adopts the loose narrative form of 'a day (or night) in the life of ...', and there are still stronger moments of narrative incident and reverse field cutting gathered around the figure of the new postal worker being initiated into his job. The film thus narrates the story of the night mail train, but it also narrates the nation: the journey of the train, the delivery of the mail, from south to north, from England to Scotland, is a movement across the space of the nation (seen from the point of view of the metropolis). It is a movement which affords a rich display of pastoral imagery. The night mail itself is also a means of networking the nation, of binding the nation together, of connecting the outer margins to the centre - crucially, it is technologies and systems of communication, the railway system and the postal system (a state system), which are dramatised as the means of achieving this binding together, the means of keeping the national community in touch with itself.

Several of the documentarists have gone on record testifying to the felt significance of *Night Mail* in the development of the documentary movement, and specifically of the story-documentary. Jackson, for instance, recalled the reactions of the audience at an early screening of *Night Mail* at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge, and what this meant to the members of the GPO Film Unit at the time:

"suddenly you see they're laughing. They're enjoying it. They're taking this as entertainment, and that, of course, changed your ideas very much. It changed immediately the idea in which you would approach a subject. To hell with commentary and stuffy old information. This idea of disseminating facts, this became immediately old hat. No, don't let's disseminate facts. Let's disseminate situations. Let's get over what we're going to say in terms of feelings, expressions on people's faces, laughter, and so on."<sup>19</sup>

The narrative work of *Night Mail* is extended in *North Sea* (1938), and *Target for Tonight* (1942), and even more so by Watt's move to Ealing Studios, where he made narrative features such as *Nine Men* (1943) - "the purest of the pure imaginative documentaries."<sup>19</sup> The *Monthly Film Bulletin* commented on the latter film that it "marks yet a further stage in the influence of the documentary on the feature film. The result comes as near to a native style of British film-making as anything which has yet been seen."<sup>20</sup> In each of these films, there is again a juxtaposition of both continuity and montage editing techniques, and therefore of linear narrative and montage construction.

*North Sea* deals with the difficulties faced by the men on a small trawler caught in a storm on the North Sea, in order, finally to demonstrate the work of the land-sea radio network run by the GPO in securing the safety of these men. *Target for Tonight* deals with the planning and execution of a bombing raid on an enemy target, and the worry over the safety of one missing aeroplane, which

does finally limp home to base. To say that these films narrativise their action is to indicate that there is a temporal development of the diegesis, and to indicate that there is a structural movement from the definition of a goal to be achieved (the return home of the fishermen in *North Sea*, the bombing of the target and the safety of those involved in *Target for Tonight*), through various blockages to that goal, to the successful fulfilment of the goal and textual closure.

These films also try to hold together two different forms of protagonist, or character: on the one hand, the *typage* of the documentary film (another Soviet influence) - that is, the casting of non-professional actors who bear a physical resemblance to the social type to be represented;<sup>121</sup> and on the other hand, the psychological realism of the narrative fiction film - that is, the progressive inscription of character with the marks of a unique individuality, the tentative filling-out of the lives, memories and feelings of particular characters.

What remains from the early 1930s conception of documentary is an emphasis, not on the narrativisation of individual desire as of central dramatic significance, but on the narrativisation of public (social) processes. The power of the state is visible here, as in so many contemporaneous story-documentaries, only as the power to set in motion a chain of communication which has two functions: firstly, it must enable the successful completion of an act in the national interest (the securing of a haul of fish in *North Sea*; and the bombing of an enemy target in *Target for Tonight*); but, secondly, it must be able to protect the private, sectional interests of a relatively individuated, but tight-knit community (ensuring the safety of the men of the fishing boat in *North Sea* by the actions of the land-sea radio network; and enabling the safe return of the



crew of the missing aeroplane F for Freddie in *Target for Tonight*). This same process of mapping a chain of authority as a communications network is later re-worked in *Fires were Started* (1943) and *Western Approaches* (1944): again there is the image of the state as a benevolent entity, an abstraction, even, which consists in this mapping and preservation of a set of relations between different sectors of society, ensuring the smooth running of the public process.

The subject matter of communication and the form of montage stand as metaphors for the nation in these films. The interdependence of a series of images which montage implies is equivalent to the network of relationships which a communications system achieves; together, they construct a profound sense of nationhood as 'interconnectedness'. Both *North Sea* and *Night Mail*, for instance, present a very precise image of, first a specific local community, and finally the nation as a whole, bound together by the systems and technologies of local and mass communication: the nation is produced as a knowable community, the imagined community of the films' narrative work.

The form of earlier documentaries is retained in these films to the extent that the narrative is not organised around the point of view of a single main protagonist, but employs a form of montage construction in order to map out a fuller diegesis. This world of the fiction is clearly constituted in terms of the relations between a variety of social groups or functional elements within an extensive but delimited social system: in *North Sea*, the women and the domestic sphere at home, the 'lost' trawlermen at sea, their 'safe' colleagues and employers, and the staff of the radio station; and, in *Target for Tonight*, the full staff of the RAF, from messenger boy, through pilot, to Top Brass. There is also a very clear movement from the general to the particular in the latter

film, situating the exploits and experiences of the crew of one particular bomber within the general narrative of a process, an operation requiring the interdependence of many people - metaphorically at least, situating the individual within the national, exploring the place of the individual within the national. Central to these films was, then, what Dilys Powell described as "the *democratic* feeling of community, of men [sic] with equal rights and responsibilities".<sup>122</sup>

The contained multiplicity of interests which the story-documentary seeks to articulate demands a combination of the forms of episodic montage construction and tightly causal narrative flow, with their different systems of editing (montage and the continuity system, respectively). It also benefits from a combination of the distance of the establishing shot and the group shot (the public gaze) and the psychologisation of the point of view shot (the private gaze).<sup>123</sup> The spectator is therefore suspended between two forms of address, two ways of looking, two possible identifications. The public gaze of the documentary offers the possibility of a rational recognition of particular social activities and areas of social knowledge, but it places both the characters of the diegesis and the film's spectator at a distance from and outside of the political regulation of social and economic processes. On the other hand, the private looks exchanged between characters in the diegesis of the narrative fiction set up the possibility of the spectator empathetically identifying with the emotional situations of psychologically defined individuals; the protagonist and spectator can, however, become involved in only limited and fragmentary forms of social and domestic activity.

A public sphere and a private sphere are thus simultaneously constructed and demarcated. The role of the individual in the work of the nation becomes the role of a cog wheel in a machine, with no control over the overall functioning of the machine. The working man of North Sea, for instance, is assigned a place within the national community in which his noble function is the heroic performance of manual labour (although significantly not modern, industrial, Taylorised labour); meanwhile, women, as mothers, wives and lovers, must stay at home and wait. The public and the private, the political and the personal, are thus effectively kept apart. There is inevitably a certain ambiguity of meaning in this interweaving of two relatively distinct forms of address, inducing some anxiety on the part of film-makers and sponsors as to whether the intended 'message' is being put across clearly enough. This anxiety can be seen surfacing in *North Sea* in the voice-over which emerges at the end of the film to bring home without any possibility of ambiguity the intended message of the film concerning the work of the land-sea radio network.

Story-documentaries were generally praised by critics of the period for the way in which they were producing a cinema that seemed, in its understatement and in its attention to "the real thing, the real people",<sup>124</sup> truly national:

"Watt has brought his skill [in *Nine Men*] ... to a simple theme and has endowed it with humour and realism. The characterisation is excellent, the dialogue is masterly in its laconic understatement. One feels that justice has been done in a film to all those qualities in the British character in war-time of which we are most proud."<sup>125</sup>

Forsyth Hardy, one of the keenest apologists for the documentary movement, wrote of *Western Approaches*,

"Its aim was to *bring alive* the drama of our struggle against the U-boats. The strength of its story ... lay in its authenticity. Here was a magnificent justification of the documentary method."<sup>126</sup>

Other writers were more impressed by "the 'humanization' of documentary"<sup>127</sup> which these films achieved, by comparison with the too austere lecturing of other types of documentary film:

"Documentary is a cold word. It suggests government offices, files, research, statistics: things that we know to be desirable, but cannot approach with enthusiasm. ... The new documentary ... *North Sea* is more exciting, touching, dramatic and entertaining than any recent film, and its visual beauty also puts it in a class by itself. In a month of ramshackle commercialism it stands out like a lighthouse. ... The GPO has many fine films to its credit, but none better than this, which makes you, no matter what the day's news from Berlin or Canton, proud after all of the human race."<sup>128</sup>

Powell wrote in similar terms:

"Many of us who before the war had seen in the British documentary school an integrity and a devotion to the task which promised more than we could find in the commercial cinema, had still been chilled at times by a want of humanity, of the poetry of human life, in the documentary output. Not always: ... *North Sea* ... had shown the ability to bring to the screen *the drama of human character*"<sup>129</sup>

Even Watt's fellow documentarist, Basil Wright, attempted to establish a distance from the connotations of 'this cold word, documentary' in his review of *North Sea*:

"Seldom has a film so poignantly revealed the inadequacy of the word 'Documentary'. The dry hard flavour of the word assorts ill with the seaspray; and with the human values of men and women, which gives this film its greatest merit, it connects not at all."<sup>130</sup>

It was this matter of real human values that was most appreciated in these films. Roger Manvell, for instance, wrote of *Target For Tonight* that

"it illustrates processes ... and at the same time shows us people. It does not forget montage or the cine-eye. ... It does not forget to dramatise the personalities of its human material who speak and act like real people in the middle of a real job with the RAF's flair for understatement."<sup>131</sup>

If a critic like Manvell also stressed the 'artistic' qualities of such films (montage, the cine-eye), others, like Powell reviewing *Nine Men*, found comparisons with American cinema more telling:

"The piece has been admirably written for the screen and the acting, with its casual understatement, could hardly be better fitted for its purpose. Do we, perhaps, miss now and then, a touch of panache? If so the fault without doubt is not in the lack of stars but in ourselves and in the tradition of Hollywood heroism to which we have grown accustomed. The direction throughout is wholly discreet with a nice mingling of documentary and fiction technique."<sup>132</sup>

Similarly, Richard Winnington praised the understatement, the avoidance of melodrama, in *Western Approaches*, perhaps the best-received of all the story documentaries of the war period: "the film is devoid of heroics although it is impregnated with heroism. ... You will not find here the chromium-plated slickness of the commercial product",<sup>133</sup> while Caroline Lejeune thought the film

"an example of the best type of British documentary. That is to say, it has emotion without sentimentality; it is laconic without being off-hand; the facts have been collated with patience and set out with fidelity."<sup>134</sup>

This compared well with what was perceived as "the crass emotionalism of the normal film", "the fairy-tale atmosphere of the treatment of the average

Hollywood picture [as opposed to] the truthful nature of the new British film".<sup>135</sup>

"The story technique [of Hollywood films] is superb ... [and] the emotional atmosphere is nearly always 'dressed' with a certain showmanship. It makes extremely effective cinema, but it seldom lives in the knowledge of the close and personal heart. It turns too easily to sentimentality, to sexual or social heroics."<sup>136</sup>

The comparison with Hollywood made sense too for someone within the industry like Michael Balcon: "If a British film lacked at times the hard technical perfection of an American film (eg *Target for Tonight*) it was substituted and overbalanced by its human impact on its audience."<sup>137</sup> But those critics who had not themselves come out of the documentary units could not wholly accept these story-documentaries when they were too close to the distanced, detached gaze, the attitude of public observation, of the documentary idea. Thus, while Lejeune concurred that what was impressive about Watt's work was "his vehement belief in the simple drama of the ordinary man", she felt also that *Nine Men* "was a detached sort of film."<sup>138</sup> In a review of the Crown Film Unit's story-documentary, *Coastal Command* (1942), she took this criticism further: while praising the "sheer pictorial quality" of various isolated scenes, she worried over the "unemotional approach" of the film, a characteristic of the documentary movement "that chills me":

"there is a detachment in much of its work, an almost scandalised mistrust of showmanship, an effort, it would seem, to avoid, not only melodramatics, but any form of human appeal or persuasion."<sup>139</sup>

Some films managed to strike the right balance for such reviewers. William Whitebait, for instance, a key supporter of the quality film movement of the

mid-1940s, praised the Ealing film *San Demetrio, London* (1943) precisely because it adopted "an approach less impersonal than would at one time have been conceivable in documentary circles", and felt that *Western Approaches* had surpassed the achievements of even that film.<sup>140</sup> What was called for was a greater stress on the individual, on story-telling, and on emotions, as Winnington suggested in his review of *Children on Trial* (1946):

"This film represents the new down-to-earth style of British documentary relying ... on a central narrative and a stressing of human values and relations rather than on a series of images for their own sakes related to each other by montage and cutting (the old fancy style of documentary)."<sup>141</sup>

The story-documentary, starting as it did from the documentarist's side of things, did not, in the end, take the marriage of the documentary idea and classical narrative techniques far enough in the direction of the latter - hence Michael Balcon's argument that the feature film must carry on the documentary tradition:

"the potential influence of the feature film is much greater: not only does it reach a wider audience, but since *feature films by their nature must treat all problems in terms of individual human beings, they avoid the slightly impersonal application to 'the people' that often mars documentaries, and, therefore, bring home to the individual human beings that make up the audience the problems in a much more personal and impressive way.*"<sup>142</sup>

This sort of argument really represents a shift away from the possibility, within the discourse of documentary, of grasping the interconnectedness of things, the complex multiplication and inter-penetration of detail which makes up social life, and which the documentary tries to grasp through the practice of montage. It sees authenticity, the essential truth, as residing instead within

the *individual* human subject, not in social *relations*,"<sup>43</sup> thus for Lejeune, "it is in this inner truth ... that *Coastal Command* is lacking."<sup>44</sup> The good film must somehow strike the right balance between the detachment of the 'pure documentary' and the melodramatics of popular drama. Standards were being set in this period - a week after Whitebait had reviewed *Western Approaches*, he was reviewing the immensely popular Gainsborough melodrama, *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944):

"Within a week the best and worst English film of many months have made their appearance. *Western Approaches* brought home to us how far we have advanced in film making since the war; with *Madonna of the Seven Moons* we slip back almost as far as it is possible to slip."<sup>45</sup>



vi) World War II and the 'Golden Age' of British Cinema

*"During the War British producers have been able to provide less than a sixth of British programme needs, but the product of their studios has reached such a remarkable artistic standard in so many films that it is obvious there has been a renaissance in the cinema of Britain and that we have founded a national school which can take its place in film history."*  
Roger Manvell, in the Introduction to the 1946 edition of *Film*<sup>146</sup>

*"Undoubtedly, it is the influence of realism on the British film in war-time which has given it its new and individual character and which has weaned it away from being an amateur and clumsy pastiche of its Hollywood counterpart."*

Michael Balcon, writing in the first issue of *Penguin Film Review*, in 1946<sup>147</sup>

Documentary is generally thought to have come of age during the war years, when it worked with a much higher public profile alongside and within the mainstream film industry and popular film culture. As a 'way of seeing', it became both officially and commercially sanctioned during the abnormal circumstances of war,<sup>148</sup> when cinema came to be widely recognised as a powerful tool for propaganda. This had of course been understood within certain circles for some time, and particularly by those within the documentary movement, but it was the extending of this recognition and its linkage to the documentary idea which was important. Michael Balcon, for instance, by now well-established at Ealing Studios, looked back over the 1940s, and "the documentary-cum-fiction technique that we developed [at Ealing Studios]" and suggested that "only then we started realising *the true significance of the cinema as a mass medium and the enormous power entrusted to the film makers.*"<sup>149</sup> Balcon had of course long been speaking of the importance of a national cinema in one guise or another, but by now the terms in which the power of cinema are expressed - cinema as a mass medium,

the responsibility of the film-maker, the importance of propaganda and documentary, and so on - have shifted far closer to the documentary discourse.

One of the functions of the propaganda machine during the war years was to create an ideological climate in which the public sphere could be represented as a sphere of national interest immediately and widely recognisable as over and above any antagonistic sectional interests; but it was also necessary that the *individual* citizen was in no doubt as to the importance of the assigned role which he or she must play. The 'national interest' must be able to accommodate the private and the domestic, and the emotional capacity of the individual - if necessary, by demonstrating the irresponsibility of holding private, and particularly romantic interests above the national interest. The individual must be allotted a place within the public sphere, and become a full member of 'the public', a part of the 'common, national experience' - at least for the duration of the war. The role of cinema in securing this consent of private citizens to the national cause became crucial, and in films, as Manvell put it, "the personal always had to be merged into the general, the story into the common mass of experience."<sup>150</sup> Documentarists such as Basil Wright argued that the most appropriate form in this ideological struggle was

"the documentary approach, [because] being based on the observance of reality and on many years' experience of the handling of ordinary people, [it] is in a position to give an impression of actuality to the public; and more importantly, to make the public feel that the subject dealt with is really a part of their own lives and responsibilities, and not a fictional episode divorced from their own experience."<sup>151</sup>

Critics such as Manvell, however, felt that the insertion of the private into the public was achieved most successfully in those films which combined the

documentary approach with the fictional. Films must be neither too distanced, which was the problem with the 'pure documentary', nor too personal, which was one of the perceived failings of Hollywood:

"For the most part, films such as *Millions Like Us*, *San Demetrio London*, *Nine Men*, *The Way Ahead*, *Waterloo Road* and *The Way To The Stars* resolved the personal equation, and showed us people in whom we could believe and whose experience was as genuine as our own. The war film discovered the common denominator of the British people."<sup>152</sup>

Films such as these, emanating from the studios, sought to authenticate their fictions by drawing on the rhetoric of documentary and the connotations of responsibility and realism, and sought to articulate a sense of national community by developing a relatively complex montage structure. A *Documentary News Letter* editorial of 1940 felt that "the war ... in bringing into sharp focus the social function of the cinema, is leading to a re-consideration of traditional principles of story selection and treatment."<sup>153</sup>

In many ways the most interesting of the war-time films which marry documentary and narrative feature modes is the first of the films cited by Manvell, *Millions Like Us* (1943), produced by Gainsborough Studios. It is an important film institutionally, in that it is cited over and over again by contemporary critics and historians as central to the idea of a British national cinema in the 1940s; it is situated firmly within the commercial sector, yet it draws in a variety of ways on the documentary idea and documentary practice. *This Happy Breed* (1944), with which I will compare *Millions Like Us*, is equally well-received, but it is a much more conservative film, which already begins to sever the democratic aspirations of the documentary idea from the quality

feature film, and especially the melodrama of everyday life. It is these differences between the two films which interests me.

Before going on to look at these films, however, I want to explore a little further some of their conditions of existence. They were in no way an isolated films, but were taken up as part of a much broader movement to establish a quality national film culture in the mid-1940s.<sup>154</sup> Films like *Millions Like Us* received considerable support from critics of the period, but they were also relatively popular films, especially compared to the story-documentary, and other forms of documentary film practice during the 1930s. The film trade, according to one report,

"discovered that whereas large sections of the public stayed away from the cinema fifteen years ago rather than see a British film, in 1945 they went to a picture for the reason that it was British."<sup>155</sup>

Certainly, several British films did very good box-office in the war years, including the two war films *The 49th Parallel* (1941) and *In Which We Serve* (1942) (probably the most successful British film of the period). Later in the war, it was 'escapist' melodramas from Gainsborough and elsewhere which were most attractive to cinema-goers: *The Man In Grey* (1943), *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944), and, after the war, *The Wicked Lady* (1945) and *The Seventh Veil* (1945) all did exceptional business.<sup>156</sup>

This period saw the first really concerted attempt to create and foster a national cinema that was both a popular cinema and a quality cinema.<sup>157</sup> The critical discourse developed in tandem with the documentary-influenced feature film; critically-favoured films were produced for the most part by small

independent companies which seemed very different to the factory-like studios,<sup>158</sup> and even proved relatively successful at the box-office. The general feeling within the film culture was that British films had improved beyond all expectations.<sup>159</sup> In a statement typical of the period, The Factual Film, a report primarily about documentary film-making, suggested that

"Before the war, it was assumed by some that imitation of Hollywood's extravagance would solve the problem [of a national cinema in Britain]. ... But the success of films such as *Millions Like Us*, *The Way Ahead*, *Waterloo Road* and *The Way to the Stars* during the war, has shown that there is another way of overcoming Hollywood domination by producing films which reflect the British scene realistically in a way which would be impossible for Hollywood."<sup>160</sup>

It is clear that the critical discourse being developed by contemporary film reviewers, and reproduced in key surveys such as Manvell's Film, and the collection Twenty Years of British Film,<sup>161</sup> favoured those films which came out of the commercial sector like *Millions Like Us*, and which tempered the emotionally engaging psychological realism of the strong narrative film with the social responsibility and realist aesthetic of the documentary.

It would be wrong, however, to give the impression that feature films influenced by documentary were either the only, or the most consistently popular, types of feature films produced in Britain in the mid-1940s. Only a small proportion of the hundreds of films produced during this period could be considered to fall into this category - although significantly they are the most *discussed* films of the period. There were still plenty of other genre films, both British and American, in circulation at the time. A full page advertisement billing forthcoming releases from Gainsborough Pictures in 1943, for instance, has stills from *Millions Like Us*, and another celebrated propaganda film, *We Dive At*

Dawn, but also the popular costume drama, *The Man In Grey*, and two comedies featuring some of the biggest domestic comic performers of the period, *Miss London, Limited*, a musical comedy with Arthur Askey, and *It's That Man Again* (all 1943), featuring the team from the popular radio series of the same name.<sup>162</sup> Inevitably, then, the critical reputation of British films in this period rests on the perceived qualities of a relatively few actual films - including *Millions Like Us* - which are cited over and over again in both contemporary writing and subsequent histories of the period.

Another significant circumstance enabling the production of 'quality British films' like *Millions Like Us* was the relative economic stability of the domestic film industry across the period as a whole - somewhat paradoxically, given the inevitable difficulties of the war economy, and the restrictions on resources and manpower.<sup>163</sup> Admissions rose steadily, and box-office takings even more dramatically; production, on the other hand, was not prolific by the standards of the 1930s - only about sixty nine films *per annum* were produced during the war years (compared to an average of four hundred from the major American studios)<sup>164</sup> - but it was steady and well-supported both by critics and at the box-office.

The increasing power of the Rank corporation as a vertically and horizontally integrated enterprise, and the continued strength of ABPC, meant that the industry was increasingly being regulated monopolistically. One of the most significant developments was Rank's support of studios like Gainsborough and Ealing, as well as a number of independent film-makers, especially through the organisation Independent Producers Ltd, which provided the space for *This Happy Breed*, among many other films, and which the directors of *Millions Like Us*, Frank

Lauder and Sidney Gilliat, affiliated to in 1944 under the company name of Individual Pictures.<sup>165</sup> Robert Murphy has suggested that "unlike any previous British producer, Rank, with assets in excess of \$200million, had an organisation as large and as powerful as the American 'Big Five'"<sup>166</sup> - and as early as 1943, Rank, like Gaumont-British some ten years earlier, began to plan its own assault on the world market, and particularly the American market.<sup>167</sup>

The various forms of state regulation of the film industry during the war years were also undoubtedly of great importance in enabling such a cinema to emerge; these forms of regulation were censorious, they were de-limiting, but they also provided positive material and moral support for the development of at least a certain type of British film production in this period. Anthony Aldgate has suggested that "the story of the British cinema in the second world war is inextricably linked with that of the Ministry of Information."<sup>168</sup> This is certainly true, although Margaret Dickinson has also shown the extent to which another sector of the state, the Board of Trade, helped to shape the film industry's international and domestic economic relations.<sup>169</sup> The MoI sought to foster a socially responsible cinema which could produce effective propaganda; they favoured realistic films, and also encouraged the production of films which emphasised "the democratic way of life."<sup>170</sup> This of course neatly intersected with the long-standing concerns of the documentary movement - but the co-option of the documentarists into the work of the MoI was neither smooth, nor as the documentarists themselves wanted it.<sup>171</sup> An early MoI memorandum, for instance, suggested that there were already quite enough *documentaries* on British life and institutions, and suggested that "an amusing American film with a few hits at the Nazi regime is probably better propaganda than any number of documentaries showing the making of bullets, etc."<sup>172</sup>

More generally, of course, *all* films produced during the war period had to have the approval of the MoI, and so to some extent they were bound to the terms of the official policy of a powerful war-time state bureaucracy seeking to construct a national unity on the basis of an assumed common interest and common struggle.<sup>173</sup> Censorship inevitably played a major role in the war-time cinema, but recent assessments of that role suggest that censorship policy during the war actually *enabled* the renaissance of British cinema in this period, and especially the production of films that were perceived at the time as realist.<sup>174</sup>

Various institutional mechanisms were established to promote the development of films and film policy during the war, and one of these was the Ideas Committee of the MoI, which brought together a variety of film production personnel, primarily scriptwriters and directors, from both documentary and the commercial sector, as well as MoI civil servants. Vincent Porter and Chaim Litewski suggest that "the Ideas Committee was the fount of feature film production policy. Here subjects and themes were discussed and checked against the MoI's information and propaganda policy."<sup>175</sup> One aspect of the committee's deliberations was a crucial sharing of ideas between the two sectors of the production industry. Paul Rotha, for instance, suggests that a screening of his company's short documentary, *Night Shift*, at one of the committee's meetings, had a direct influence on *Millions Like Us*.<sup>176</sup> Even the MoI memorandum quoted above, while generally fairly cool toward the documentary movement, notes with satisfaction the way in which, in early war films, "the documentary element is made part of a dramatic story."<sup>177</sup>



It would again be wrong, however, to promote the idea that the MoI was an ideologically watertight body acting to the letter on policies handed down directly from above. Nicholas Pronay, for instance, has shown that, despite Churchill's antagonism towards the formulation of peace aims, film propaganda sponsored by the MoI consistently formulated such aims, often from a left-wing perspective. He points out that the head of the Films Division from 1940 was Jack Beddington, from a public relations background, who had very little knowledge of the commercial film industry, and that his chief adviser was Sidney Bernstein, a key figure in the Labour Party; together, they favoured the generally left-of-centre personnel of the documentary movement, who made seventy four *per cent* of the films paid for by the MoI. Many of these films quite explicitly discussed the future, and proposed a range of peace aims.<sup>176</sup>

A more 'spontaneous' populist groundswell was also evident among the general public. A Mass Observation report of 1943 noted "the leftward drift in political outlook which has continued at a steady rate throughout the war." This was not, they felt, a matter of strict party political allegiance: "so far as it has any coherent form, it is directed towards some new ideal, not yet adequately expressed in an organised way."<sup>177</sup> *Millions Like Us*, although actively encouraged by the MoI, needs also be seen as part of this more 'spontaneous' populist groundswell invoking a potentially fairly radical notion of 'the people', and imagining a democratic peace. In the light of these popular sentiments, adjustments had to be made by the MoI in the terms of their propaganda, and the concept of an all-inclusive 'Us' came to a certain prominence.<sup>178</sup> Popular mythology has it that this was 'the people's war', and it is this concept of 'the people' which is mobilised in so many contemporary pronouncements, both official and unofficial. As Angus Calder has suggested,

"the concept of course was never universally accepted. But its influence over the press, the films and the radio was enormous; it shaped the rhetoric of five years of official and unofficial propaganda."<sup>101</sup>

This concept of the people however tends to obscure questions of class and gender differences, while at the same time invoking them at an intuitive level.<sup>102</sup> How, then, do films such as *Millions Like Us* and *This Happy Breed* construct an idea of the people, and how does this relate to questions of nationhood and national identity, and class and gender identity? How do they negotiate the different understandings of 'the people' in cultural circulation at the time, and what sort of interventions do they themselves make in this debate?

vii) Narrating the nation: Millions Like Us, part 1

*"The British feature film made great strides during the later years of the war. For many of us a foretaste of things to come was provided in 1943 by the appearance of Millions Like Us..."*  
Edgar Anstey, writing in 1949.<sup>193</sup>

Millions Like Us (1943) - "Gainsborough's vivid picture of the part played by women factory workers in winning the war"<sup>194</sup> - is a feature-length 'melodrama of everyday life' produced by Gainsborough Studios, and co-directed by Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat. Although it was not a huge commercial success, *Kine Weekly's* annual survey noted it as one of several "lively British entrants" in the box-office stakes in its first month of release.<sup>195</sup> My interest in the film is firstly in the way in which it narrates the nation, constructing it as a knowable and known community; secondly in the way in which this construction of a public arena inhabited by private individuals negotiates the relationship between the romance and work, personal achievement and public service; and thirdly in the way in which this construction of the nation depends in large part on the use of formal devices drawn from the documentary tradition of the previous decade and a half.

The film deals with a small community of people united, apparently regardless of class, regional identity and traditional gender roles, in a common cause, in which collective, social responsibility outweighs individual desires; it is this community which stands in for the nation as a whole. The film also seeks to incorporate its audience into this community by means of both empathetic identification with characters and a recognition of the 'types' on the screen as

'ordinary people' like themselves. The individual struggles of the fiction, the personalised psychologies of the melodrama, are also placed in the real public context of contemporary history by drawing on various documentary devices.

The film began life as an MoI commission for a project which might deal with the whole of the domestic war effort;<sup>196</sup> in other words, it was initially conceived as a piece of propaganda within the broad outlines of official policy. The terms in which the film operates and the debates in which it intervenes, however, situate it also as part of the more spontaneous democratic populism of the period. What seems progressive about *Millions Like Us*, in the context of the political debates of the period, is the way in which it conjures up a vision of a classless society whose basis is not in the bourgeois patriarchal family but in the *community*, which depends not upon competition but upon co-operation,<sup>197</sup> and in which women and men can play an equal role - indeed, the community is dominated by women engaged in traditionally masculine operations. This vision is compromised, however, by official policy: the MoI may have been urging women into masculine occupations, and encouraging co-operation, but they were doing so on a temporary basis, for the duration of the war only, rather than seeking to encourage the possibility of more permanent social changes. The evidence of these tensions is there in the film, which thus becomes the site of an intense ideological struggle over the ideal form of the nation.

Contemporary reviewers were generally appreciative of the film on its release, praising it for what they saw as its realism. One trade paper thought it "a mirror of modern life ... vividly realistic as to its factory background" and suggested that "the attraction and charm of this Gainsborough picture lie in its down-to-earth appeal to 'millions like us'<sup>198</sup> - in marked contrast to what

Grierson had described as the "garish spectacle" of Hollywood commercialism.<sup>189</sup> The *Monthly Film Bulletin* was impressed by the way that the film "introduce[d] a realist atmosphere and a documentary touch to life in an aircraft factory."<sup>190</sup> Lejeune felt that "you should applaud this honest, quietly-observant British film. ... It's real"<sup>191</sup>, while the *Manchester Guardian* enjoyed "it's warm-hearted temper ... salted with spontaneous humour and strengthened by intimate realism, lapsing only at the end into starry-eyed sentiment":

"Nothing more clearly marks the coming-of-age of the British cinema than its treatment of ordinary working people, especially as minor characters or in the mass. The clowns of ten years ago first became lay figures of sociological drama and then, with the war, patriotic heroes. In *Millions Like Us* they are real human beings, and the British film has reached adult maturity."<sup>192</sup>

For Lejeune, it was not so much the treatment of 'ordinary working people' that distinguished the film, as its treatment of emotion and romance; having sweepingly dismissed most screen romances for their lack of passion, she praises *Millions Like Us* for "its delicate, shy love-story... It's not often we get a more experienced emotional job from our native studios."<sup>193</sup> But it is hardly *passion* to which she is pointing here, as the *Monthly Film Bulletin* review suggests: "both directors are ... to be congratulated on the *restraint* which they have shown."<sup>194</sup> This restraint in dealing with emotions is of course one of the major features of these war-time dramas, over and over again constructed as an 'essentially British' sensibility.<sup>195</sup> Reviewers for the American trade press were equally impressed by the film's ideological project; *Variety* described it as a "picturization of the life of the 'common people'", while *The Motion Picture Herald* called it "an English film in an English idiom"; both papers thought it should do good business on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>196</sup>

In so far as evidence exists of how contemporary audiences received the film, we know that it was a fairly popular film.<sup>197</sup> Further, the mainly middle-class respondents to two contemporary surveys confirm the sentiments of the film reviewers:

"Millions Like Us - saw it last night, and consider it the best film since *Bank Holiday*. Presents Britain and life as it is - we must have truth and integrity in our films."

"Millions Like Us I enjoyed, because it really was true to its title. These were real people, people one knew and liked, not film actors and actresses."<sup>198</sup>

As an example of the way in which the film came to epitomise a certain tendency in British cinema one can cite Anstey's comments, recalling the film some half a decade later in a discussion of the overall historical development of film technique in Britain:

"It was a drama of the factory front, an examination of the emotional interplay of a group of people drawn from different levels of society and brought together for a common effort at the factory bench. Technically, it was remarkable for its use of real factory, canteen and hostel interiors, and for its naturalistic portraits of the workers portrayed. It was on the whole unsentimental and took a realistic view of the social problems involved rather than minimizing them as was then common in the more superficial forms of factory-effort propaganda. *Millions Like Us* proved to be a popular film and did something to persuade the film trade that there was a case for the documentary handling of real material even in entertainment films primarily designed to be viewed through the box-office grill."<sup>199</sup>

The film was made within the commercial sector of the industry, and starts from the point of view of narrative cinema, with the pleasures of fiction firmly in mind, but it also draws on documentary techniques, quite self-consciously at times, and so has some of the features of the story-documentary. The origins of

the film, as an official documentary about the home front are thus not without significance, and Launder later recalled that

"With this object, we toured the country, visiting docks, farms and coastal areas, and went to war factories and works all over Britain. [But] we came to the conclusion that the best way to attract a wide public to a subject of this nature, which was what the Ministry wished, was to clothe it in a simple fictional story."<sup>200</sup>

Although this was Launder and Gilliat's first feature, they had both had long experience as script-writers for some of the most important studios and companies within the British film industry of the 1930s and early 1940s; Gilliat also had a short stint as Associate Producer at Gainsborough Studios in 1935-36, while Launder was script editor there from 1936; they had both also worked for major American companies based in Britain. In other words, they were thorough products of the commercial industry, with no documentary training.<sup>201</sup> The other senior members of the production team were similarly well-established studio personnel<sup>202</sup> - and the studio itself, of course, had long had a reputation for solid commercial fare. The leading players were all trained actors from the studio system, with Eric Portman, at least, established as one of the most popular British stars of the period.<sup>203</sup>

The evidence of this commercial background can be clearly seen in the film. Several extended sequences work within the "overtly 'scripted' vein of domestic comedy", as Tim Palleine has pointed out, and Moore Marriott, who plays the father, was a stalwart of many Will Hay films, several of which had been worked on by Launder or Gilliat; Palleine also suggests that the opening scenes of the film, dealing with seaside holidays, directly recall an earlier Gainsborough film, *Bank Holiday* (1937),<sup>204</sup> a suggestion which seems to me very pertinent, not least

given the very favourable reception given to **Bank Holiday** by British critics. It is structurally very similar to **Millions Like Us**, and also has a tendency to see working-class/lower middle-class family life as comic, a mode which is counterbalanced by emotionally charged but carefully restrained melodrama. There is a further comic intertextual reference in the occasional appearance in **Millions Like Us** of two bumbling, Blimp-like officers, Charters and Caldicott, played by Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne: they had first appeared as characters in probably the best-known of the previous films scripted by Launder and Gilliat, Hitchcock's **The Lady Vanishes** (1938); they reappeared in the Launder and Gilliat scripted **Night Train To Munich** (1940), played in two radio series, one of which was adapted as a film, **Crooks Tour** (1940), and cropped up again in **Next of Kin** (1942).

Len England, reporting for *Mass Observation* at the time, also saw **Millions Like Us** - and **This Happy Breed** - in the context of a well-established popular tradition. The genre, which he calls 'family films', straddled British and American cinema, and starred the likes of Shirley Temple, Mickey Rooney and Deanna Durbin; England also mentions series such as the Hardy family films, and the Old Mother Riley films - and, "on a more serious plane", **Mrs Miniver**, and the two films being discussed here.<sup>205</sup>

The film was clearly made as a commercial project, by a production team with a solid commercial background. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Launder and Gilliat approached the project in a documentary fashion, thoroughly researching the material which eventually became **Millions Like Us**, and attempting to authenticate the fiction by shooting on location and building in local detail wherever possible;<sup>206</sup> and by using serving soldiers and airmen, and female



factory workers for various scenes.<sup>207</sup> The film was also shot in black and white when colour was available; it eschews expressionistic lighting and camerawork, in favour of a primarily naturalistic *mise-en-scène*, except for a few unusually traumatic narrative moments; and in general, there is a preference for group shots over close-ups. The structure of the film recalls the documentary tradition, too: it attempts to deal with the multiple, tracing the lives of a number of people and situating them in the context of a popular history of the home front up to 1943, even depicting the whole process of manufacturing and assembling an aircraft.

This construction of the film establishes a series of connections, both abstract and concrete, expected and unexpected, through both visual and aural links, and by means of both continuity and counterpoint. The debt to Jennings and others is more than evident.<sup>208</sup> There is too a familiar iconography of work - and a perspective for looking at it - using high-angle location shots of factory floors, for instance, drawn from 1930s documentary practice. The more specific debt to Jennings is there too in the film's iconography of the nation at war: images of St Paul's Cathedral strangely visible through the rubble of a bomb-site; single-frame bomb blasts and gun-fire at night silhouetting weird, surreal shapes; scenes of urban firefighting at night; high-angle shots of a dance hall packed with men in uniform and women in civilian clothes; the Welsh male voice choir which sings at a concert; and so on.

The narrative system of the film differs significantly from that of the standard Hollywood film, and may be compared with the 'primitive' form of *Sing As We Go*, in that it lacks the narrative refinement and economy, the tight formal integration and goal-seeking drive of the classical film. Indeed, as a result of

the narrative form adopted, it is difficult to adequately summarise the film since it is difficult to foreground any single line of narrative emphasis which is clearly structured in terms of a goal to be achieved, a wish to be fulfilled, a disruption to be resolved. Little dramas - a variety of narrative attractions - are developed around several different individuals, but none of them is ever allowed to completely dominate the narrative interest of the entire film. The way in which reviewers of the period tried to summarise the film for their readers is revealing in this respect. Lejeune, for instance, writes as follows:

"It is a story of our munition workers, Britain's 'mobile' women. It shows, not without irony, their 'direction' into industry; their arrival at a Midlands factory; their raw apprenticeship; their tentative friendships; hostel life; dances with the boys from the neighbouring RAF station; the ordeal of their first air-raid; their growing sense of pride in a corporate body. The love-story of a quiet little girl and a shy Scottish airman is worked out against this industrial background. ... As some sort of compensation [for the unhappy ending to this love-story] they have offered us a second love-story, that seems likely to work out all right, between a society girl and a blunt Yorkshire foreman."<sup>209</sup>

Lejeune is thus trying to balance at least three stories here - but even then she has left out several other more or less significant sub-plots, characters and romances, notably the extent to which the first twenty minutes of the film deal with the whole family of the 'quiet little girl' before she goes to work at the factory.<sup>210</sup> *Kine Weekly* also tried to capture something of the panoramic scope of the film in its review:

"at one and the same time a rough sketch of working class family life in war-time, a gigantic newsreel summarising salient events on the home front since war began and a tender if ingenuous love story with an aero-engine factory employing women from all walks of life for its background."<sup>211</sup>

The trade press was, in the end, more concerned with assessing the box-office potential of the film with an audience attuned to the conventions of classic Hollywood cinema than with promoting an authentic national cinema, and so was less convinced by the episodic qualities and multiple plot-lines of **Millions Like Us**:

"the overall picture is too kaleidoscopic to make significant drama. ... The tale opens with every promise of developing into a deep and significant portrait of working-class family life but all the early characters with the exception of Celia are dropped after the first three reels. True, they are gathered up for the anti-climax - Celia's wedding is the excuse - but there appears to be little point apart from the cultivation of footage in employing such an ambitious production. ... It has at least one story too many."<sup>212</sup>

If we work through the film sequence by sequence, we end up with something like the following: after an initial contextualising scene depicting Britain on holiday in the last weeks of peace just before the outbreak of war, we are introduced to the various members of the respectable working-class/lower-middle class Crowson family preparing for their summer vacation. In the film's terms, they are 'an ordinary family', just one among millions of others just like them. The narrative then details the gradual dispersal of the family by war (producing also a dispersal of narrative interest) and attempts to close off this dispersal partly by singling out Celia, one of the grown-up daughters. She is designated a 'mobile woman',<sup>213</sup> and eventually leaves home to work at an aircraft engineering factory. But the other members of the family are never ignored or lost, and the foregrounding of Celia is never absolute. The obvious way of resolving the problem of dispersal in the domestic melodrama genre would be to re-unite the family. That does not happen here, and instead the potential anxiety produced by the dispersal of the family is displaced by shifting the

focus of attention on to the supportive community of mainly women which develops at the factory at which Celia goes to work, and at the hostel where they live. The final scene celebrates the envelopment of the individual within the all-embracing community, enabling the film to end on an image of stability and unity. The film thus deals both with the dislocation of the family in conditions of war and its substitution by community, a community in which each individual proves their worth to the team, and so by implication to the nation and the war effort.

The film is structured as a series of parallel interweaving narrative lines, a web of narrative threads, following a multiplicity of characters rather than a single consistently central narrative protagonist.<sup>214</sup> The development of these narratives is episodic, often with no strong causal relationship between consecutive scenes. As such, the narrative system is able to represent precisely a *community* of people, rather than star individuals; it is able to develop a variety of limited egos, even if one of them, Celia, is developed into a more central and ideal ego. This *vertical* opening up of the horizontal linearity of the narrative, this extension of the diegetic space to embrace a multiplication of potentially redundant details, both enables the film to depict community, and creates an impression of realism: "realism is the glorification of the *unessential*."<sup>215</sup>

The associative montage construction of the film enables it to deal with parallel actions, without having to cut between them according to the conventions of suspense. The interruption and displacement of narrative logic, the repetition of situations and the display of simultaneity are acceptable within the film's terms, since they suggest the unity of the nation and the

routineness of everyday life. When the film does jump to parallel actions by other characters, there is rarely any real narrative motivation for such shifts of interest: the new scene is not designed to add necessary information to build up suspense or to make previous scenes comprehensible; rather, this sort of narrative dispersal enables general comments about the state of the family, or the community, or the nation as a whole. Thus, cut-aways to Dad at home with all his daughters away, or Phyllis working with the ATS, produce relatively self-contained scenes which have no impact on developments at the hostel. Such scenes are only very weakly motivated, if at all, within an overall interlocking system of cause and effect, and tend to function more as inconsequential gags (so once again recalling the format of the cinema of attractions). In a similar vein, when Fred and Celia leave the dance-hall where they have met, they pass Jenny entering the hall; the camera now follows her - not to suggest any intrigue in the relationship between the three characters, but simply to follow the parallel actions of another member of the community. The relative lack of causality and of goal-directed movement mean that, as with *Listen to Britain*, it is the diegetic boundaries of the family/community which define the limits of representation. Thus narrative *dispersal* is balanced by diegetic *unity*. This is in one sense no more than a specific variation on the classical narrative film's articulation of paradigmatic and syntagmatic movement, its play of repetition and difference, but it is enough of a variation to have a quite profound effect on the work of the film as a whole.<sup>216</sup>

Part of the project of *Millions Like Us* is, then, to articulate a sense of the reality of everyday life, in all its complexity and mundane inconsequentiality. The everyday would normally be represented in classical cinema in terms of the domestic and familial; here, however, the security of the domestic sphere of the

home, the familiarity of the everyday, and the reliance upon family relationships have been de-stabilised by the war. The ideological goal of the narrative can be assumed to be, at one level, the re-assertion of this institution of the family which has been temporarily replaced by a wider sense of community. This means in effect regaining the conditions that allow the traditional domestic melodrama to place the family at the centre of the narrative. At another level, this goal is impossible so long as the conditions of war continue, and a compensatory form of narrative resolution needs to be found. It is in this space, and because of the impossibility of achieving the logical goal of the narrative, that the populist celebration of community - the imagined community of the nation - emerges.

The narrative of *Millions Like Us* does, in this sense, develop, moving causally from an initial stability disrupted, to a newly forged war-time stability (with contradictory aspirations for the post war society). But this causal development remains weak and episodic, for representation of both individual, family and community. There is also a tension between the causal development of the narrative lines which focus on particular individuals and their desires (notably Celia's story, but also other romances dealt with in the course of the film) and the relatively non-causal representation of family or community life and work. There is therefore a melodramatic narrative interest for the cinema spectator, akin to the dominant pleasures of the Hollywood film - except that the consummation of individual desires and wish fulfilment are effectively postponed in the national interest to a post-war period. The more assertive narrative causality becomes, the more obviously classically constructed the scenes are, but this potentially tight causal development of a goal-directed narrative and the psychological development of a central hero-protagonist are constantly

deflected, displaced and marginalised by the series of narrational devices derived from the documentary form which enable it to explore more than simply the centre of the diegesis.

The vestiges of the public gaze are there in the way that the film resists invading 'private' space with the proximity of the close-up. There are, however, one or two exceptions to this rule, which serve to underline what is, in the film's terms, the impossible fantasy of desire during war-time - but also its opposite, the utter tragedy of losing one's loved ones in combat. Romance becomes fantasy precisely in the use of the unexpected close shot. The first occasion on which this happens is when Celia and her sister Phyllis have gone to a dance while on holiday before the war. Phyllis juggles effortlessly with four voracious young men, while the shy and innocent Celia waits for someone to approach her. Eventually, a painfully boring young man asks her to dance; while he witters away, the camera moves into a close up of Celia - the reality of her dancing partner does not match the fantasy of her desire. In a second instance, in a scene which potentially satirises classical cinema's romantic conventions (obviously in part for propagandist reasons), Celia has gone to the Labour Exchange to negotiate her call-up as a mobile woman. The scene opens with a long shot of Celia waiting for her interview; the camera tracks in to a soft focus close up as dreamy romantic music wells up; there is a cut to a point of view shot of a WAAF's poster, and a cut back to the close up. This is sufficient motivation for a fantasy sequence depicting Celia's daydream of a romantic life in the forces, with first a pilot, and then a naval officer, meeting a landowner in the Land Army, becoming engaged to an officer when nursing him - until we finally cut back to the closeup of Celia waiting for her interview, the product of which in reality is her posting to a munitions factory.

Reality and fantasy briefly come together when Celia and Fred go out into the moonlight after their first dance, and there are big soft-focus romantically-lit close ups of both characters as they talk about their personal lives. The explicit motivation of fantasy by the use of close ups occurs again when Fred apparently stands Celia up on a date. The camera tracks in from an oblique two-shot of Gwen and Celia to a close up of Celia on her own; gradually superimposed over this is a romantic scene in an idyllic rural setting, in which Celia imagines Fred kissing her in the grass. There is a cut back to the close up of a sad Celia, and then a move into another expressionist fantasy of her committing suicide. A third fantasy has a judge scolding Fred, who bursts into tears. Finally, there is a dissolve to the aeroplanes, which (unknown to Celia) contain Fred on a mission, flying overhead. Romance in war can only be a guilt-ridden fantasy, these shots suggest. The same tension is there again in a scene at the room that the newly-wed couple are to occupy, and later when Celia hears of Fred's death. The close up motivating the romantic fantasy has been replaced by its opposite, the close up as signifier of the impossibility of romantic fulfilment during the war. The overwhelming sense of loss is compensated for in the final scene, which cuts between group shots and long shots of all the workers at the factory, and close ups of Celia, as she is once more absorbed into the community.



viii) Documenting the community, authenticating the fiction: Millions Like Us,  
part 2

The community which is constructed in Millions Like Us consists of representatives of a variety of class positions, regional types, accents, ages and experiences. All characters are thus more or less symbolic types - some remaining no more than symbols, others being carefully rounded out psychologically to become complete, thinking, emoting subjects. The community as a whole depends upon reasonable, democratic and co-operative forms of authority, and has the appearance of an organic unity. The relatively self-sufficient nature of this collective, social body might be seen as potentially challenging traditional forms of power and authority, whether class or gender specific, but this challenge is circumscribed by a series of more conservative forces.

Firstly, the traditional power relations of the bourgeois patriarchal family are imposed upon the new community of the work-place, which is thereby structured like a family, with protagonists adopting the roles of father, mother, and numerous infants. Charlie Forbes, the works supervisor, is a genial but thoroughly responsible father-figure, whose parental consciousness is shared by Celia's working-class, but university-educated room-mate, Gwen. The patriarchal Charlie is in the end more powerful as a public figure, given his economic status as works supervisor, while Gwen exhibits a more traditionally feminine strength in her caring qualities; that strength is very much in evidence in the closing scene of the film, when it is her efforts that win Celia back for the community. On one occasion, both Gwen and Charlie observe their younger colleagues dancing and becoming romantically involved with some local soldiers, apparently lacking both the desire and the glamour (the eroticised body) to join

in themselves. At other times, they are both seen to take Celia under a parental wing, coaxing her into what they regard as her proper task.

The charmingly shy and naive Celia and Fred seem more like sister and brother than lovers, and they lack the moral superiority, social responsibility and experience of either Gwen or Charlie; likewise, Annie Earnshaw and Jennifer Knowles seem like their cheeky younger sister and aloof and recalcitrant older sister respectively. The incompleteness of the Crowson family - Celia's mother is dead - is therefore replaced by the virtual completeness of this new surrogate family. More significantly, if the nation is metaphorically represented by and as the community, it too is in the end constructed like a family. The nation as one large family, uniting social groups with potentially conflicting interests, is of course central to pastoral ideology, and the urban pastoral of *Millions Like Us* clearly draws on this powerful and traditional well of nationalist sentiment.<sup>217</sup> It would be wrong, however, to dismiss this family/community/nation image as irremediably conservative: it is much more ambivalent than this, with a more radical, democratic side to it as well. The over-riding sense of the film is precisely this ambivalence, even contradiction between different forces.

This sense of ambivalence, and of the containment of the potentially radical image of community, is there, too, in the narrative work of the film. Although it tries to deal with the multiple, it does also reserve an ideal hero figure in Celia. While she is subsumed within the collective, like all other individuals at the factory, she is also privileged narratively and iconographically, and her desires are utterly conventional - a fact which has profound implications for the representation of gender roles within the film. Thus, Celia's romance with

Fred is represented as healthy, innocent and thoroughly respectable, inevitably ending in marriage. She aspires to motherhood, and she and Fred plan what sort of home and what size family they will have in the future, in a scene which directly plays on thoughts of the forthcoming peace.<sup>218</sup> Celia, however, is punished in various ways for wanting to pursue individual desires during war-time.<sup>219</sup> Fred is eventually killed in action over Germany, and it is in the end the social bonds of the community, or the nation, which must hold Celia together. The wish fulfilment of private romance is, however, simply postponed until after the war, and there is little suggestion that Celia's desires to mother a family will be undermined by her tragedy.

Men are always present in the film, motivating, directing and containing female action - and rendering women passionate. But at the same time, *Millions Like Us* does validate the traditionally feminine qualities and capabilities of emotional strength, domestic order, and care for others: it does not deal with the public sphere (in this case, the masculine world of combat) at the expense of what is traditionally considered to be the realm of the feminine, the private sphere. This sphere can, perhaps, only be validated in its own more public form, the community of the work-place and the hostel, rather than in the form of the actual domestic arrangements of the Crowson family, which are so often represented as comic - but it is a validation of the private sphere all the same. In a sense the drama of the film depends upon exploring the ramifications of decisions made and actions committed in the public sphere for the personal relationships and emotional stability of those who inhabit the private sphere: the public (masculine) sphere is represented from the point of view of the personal, the domestic, the feminine.<sup>220</sup>

Celia and her colleagues are also of course engaged in traditionally masculine factory work, which threatens to disturb the patriarchal stability of prevailing gender relations. As an obedient public servant, however, Celia seems to perceive the factory work as no more than a temporary obstacle to her taking up her rightful role as woman within the traditionally domestic and familial space of the private sphere. This tension between a potential democratisation of gender relations during the war years and an attempt to reproduce traditional ideologies of femininity was, according to Denise Riley, a prominent feature of the public debate about the role of women during the war.<sup>221</sup> The government felt obliged to mobilise women for traditionally masculine tasks in the national interest; but this was counterbalanced by a virtual strengthening of images of motherhood, and of the woman at home nurturing her family. There are various ways in which the image of motherhood is secured in *Millions Like Us*, as we have seen, ranging from the figure of Gwen to Celia's dreams of home-making and settling down with a family - all the while, the both of them operating lathes in an aircraft engineering factory.

Riley suggests that a central feature of the war-time discourse about the family was "the many depictions of the family as a cellular organism in the body-politic of the state and the community. Family health was a building-block in the edifice of national health, spiritual or physical."<sup>222</sup> At the centre of this image of the family/community/nation, as Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson have noted, is the image of the nurturing mother, who thus "became the lynchpin in conceptualising national unity";<sup>223</sup> it is the maternal body which reproduces the nation, its culture and its heritage. In this context, *Millions Like Us* carefully plays off the private family (the Crowsons) against the public family (the community of the work-place/the nation): it is, then, the experience

of family relations which negotiates the distance between the private and the public, between the individual and the nation. This may be a validation of the traditionally feminine, forcing the personal and the domestic into the public realm. But it also re-constructs the social - with all its divisions of class, gender, region, and so on - entirely in terms of personal relationships, subsumed under an image of benevolent motherhood.<sup>224</sup>

Celia is also placed very much in the centre of what might be described as the *knowable* class spectrum of the film. She has a Home Counties middle class accent, and is clearly from a very different background to either Annie Earnshaw, Gwen or Fred, all of whom have regionally specific accents (northern English, Welsh and Scottish, respectively), and the first two of whom have markedly working-class affiliations. She is also very different from Jennifer, who is defined by accent, clothes, mannerisms, previous employment and affiliations as upper-class, a rich and rather snobbish society girl. Celia's ordinariness is thus socially very specific, *petit bourgeois* rather than working-class. Class differences are represented primarily in terms of *culture* and *style*, and are visible in social affiliations, clothing and certain physical attributes (the voice, gestures - the way Jennifer smokes a cigarette in a holder, for instance). This means that questions about the differential economic, social and cultural power possessed by one or other class are rarely addressed.

The relatively autonomous community constructed in *Millions Like Us* seems at first to be remarkably un-policed from outside. There are few visible manifestations of a seat of real power, a ruling class, outside this organic and self-sufficient body - it is in this sense that Celia is in the middle of the *knowable* class spectrum of the film. There is, however, this further, almost

unknowable class element - or at least, one that is known really only by implication. For the community clearly is regulated from outside by the state: Celia is directed into war work by the Ministry of Labour; posters at the factory urge greater output; the factory receives advance notice of the threat of an air-raid. Somewhere else, there is someone who knows, and who makes decisions which affect others, including this community, on the basis of that knowledge.

Power is articulated in terms of communication, as in the story documentaries, but this time by implication rather than by direct representation. Power thus resides in the technological and bureaucratic means of maintaining communicative links between the many citizens of the nation and the work that is required of them in the national interest: in the end, the power to order and discipline the nation. Those who have the power to operate or activate the chains of communication are clearly outside the community itself. The nation *is* a self-sufficient community, it *is* the general public, but there is also a further, invisible layer of people who have the capacity to *regulate* the public sphere and the national body - including of course the capacity to regulate which films shall circulate within the public sphere, and so themselves play their part in the ideological regulation of that sphere.

There are, however, two aspects to the film which threaten to undermine this somewhat conservative reading of its effects. Firstly, there are the figures of Charters and Caldicott: these two buffoons, who represent the officer class, emerge at several points in the film (quite tangentially in narrative terms, it might be added). As they have also emerged at several points in other films too, they have become comic autonomes for all intents and purposes, British

character types who can be lifted out of one text and placed in another, or, as in this case, lifted out of one situation and placed in another. Their buffoonery, their failure to make sense of the changes taking place around them, might be read as a satire of the officer class, a satire of the exploitative privileges that were felt by many to characterise all that was wrong with the pre-war society, and all that must be changed after the war. But comedy of this sort is always double-edged, and another reading of Charters and Caldicott might suggest that comic buffoonery serves only to mask the real power of the officer class.

The second aspect of the film which offers some sort of comment on the nature of the class system and its relationship to a democratic society is the relationship between Charlie Forbes, the lower middle-class northerner, and Jennifer Knowles, the upper-class southerner. The narrative has quite deliberately processed their romance as improbable - Charlie is forever disgusted by her *elitist* attitudes and anti-social behaviour - but it takes place all the same. The real significance of this is that the improbability of a relationship straddling such a huge class difference is directly addressed within the film. In a scene which stands out from the rest of the film by its setting on a rural hilltop idyll, Charlie and Jennifer are discussing their relationship. Charlie specifically stresses the peculiar circumstances of the war which have enabled the production of a community in which class differences no longer seem relevant; he fears that the community will be temporary, and that class antagonism will continue to divide the nation after the war:

"The world's roughly made up of two kinds of people - you're one sort and I'm the other. Oh, we're together now there's a war on - we need to be. What's going to happen when it's all over? Shall we go on like this, or

shall we slide back - that's what I want to know. I'm not marrying you, Jennifer, until I'm sure."

The rural setting tends to underline the fantasy of the romance, divorced from the realities of the war. The recognition that the romance may be no more than a war-time fantasy almost forces the spectator to confront the issues which Charlie is addressing. But the setting is also a traditional pastoral image of the national landscape, suggesting the timelessness of England/Britain, in this sense intimating to the spectator that things cannot possibly change in this environment. The question of social reform is addressed, nevertheless, and the fact that both Charlie and Jennifer seem part of the landscape, rather than at odds with it, and that their performances are entirely 'natural', suggests that such questions are themselves 'natural' rather than extraordinary, and that some sort of social change *may* be sensible.<sup>225</sup> The scene is a profound moment of excess within the film. It raises the question of class difference, but does not offer any easy, consensual answer to it - and, although it is only a small moment in the film, it is an intriguing and memorable one all the same.

One of the most interesting ways in which *Millions Like Us* works is in terms of how it both represents the nation as a responsible community, and finds a place for the playing out of individual desire. It is an articulation which offers space to both the public and the private, by inserting the vulnerable individual within the protective communal interest. The public, political history of the war and the work of the whole nation ('the general public') is articulated in terms of the private and personal experiences of a particular group of individuals. Our 'recognition' of the public space of their experiences as a 'real' space is consolidated in the repeated use of montage sequences which break away from



the shotmatching and point of view devices of continuity editing; in this way, the authenticity and the public significance of these private traumas and achievements is continually affirmed.

There is a continuous montage thread running through the early part of the film which manages to construct a real, public history of the home front between 1939 and 1942<sup>226</sup> alongside and parallel with the individual dramas of the various characters of the film. There is also a long documentary-style montage sequence of the complete work process involved in providing planes for the men who must fight. The sequence - a documentary within a fiction film, in effect - is presented not from the point of view of the women as they arrive at the factory, but as the 'objective', observational, documentary point of view of the spectator. Indeed, the women could not possibly witness the images we see. The complete sequence consists of numerous 'actuality' shots of mainly anonymous women arriving for work at the factory by foot, bike, car, coach, and train, the images carefully edited *against* directional matches - although they are dissolved together, so lessening the sense of discontinuity. The music track lends a strongly celebratory tone to this part of the sequence, and the only diegetic sound comes in one brief insert shot of Celia and her fellow conscripts travelling in their coach, with Gwen saying to Celia, 'There's the factory!'

The image then dissolves into a montage of shots of the whole industrial production process, from the smelting of iron ore, through the casting of machine parts, the assembly of a bomber, to its final take-off. Again, the images are all 'actuality' shots, dissolved together; the music track continues, but now does battle with industrial noises. Finally, without any attempt to signal this set of images as the object of a diegetic point of view, there is a

dissolve to a shot of the new batch of women arriving at the factory to take up their new jobs as pawns in this vast process.

These montage sequences do not operate in a classical way - they cannot, that is, simply be read as narrative ellipses, as means of condensing narrative information. The effect of these sequences is, instead, to situate the melodrama in a space - both physical and cognitive - which the spectator 'recognises' as real because of the resonances of the documentary devices used here. These sequences are almost all confined to the first part of the film before the story of Celia's romance with Fred, and, to a lesser extent, Jenny's romance with Charlie, come to occupy the dramatic centre of the film and dominate the narrative interest. The first twenty minutes or so of the film are thus much more fragmented, much less clearly narrativised, than the latter part of the film. Initially, the sounds and images of the film are organised diegetically - that is to say, they are held in place by the limits of an historically specific diegetic space, the home front in Britain, in a manner reminiscent of *Listen to Britain*. The film shifts subsequently to a mode of representation whose organisation of sounds and images, and whose production of meanings and pleasures is dependent upon a *narrative* metadiscourse taking hold of the film system. The individual dramas only make sense within the real historical space already established in the initial relatively un-narrativised diegesis, the film declares. This more 'objective' (because documentary) sense of history orders and situates, and therefore *validates* what would otherwise be the 'mere discourse' of the films' little dramas.

There is then a continual movement between history and discourse;<sup>227</sup> between the public and the private; between the general and the particular; between the

observational and the participatory. This movement is explicitly played out in the shift from the cinema audience being identified in the opening sequence as 'you', out there, to the cinema audience as individuals becoming part of the community at the end of the film which absorbs Celia and compensates for her loss. The film opens with a series of actuality shots of workers as a mass pouring through the gates of a factory, combined in montage rather than continuity style; the images are predominantly high-angle long shots, and/or shot with a long focal length lens, producing the effect of a grainy image and foreshortened perspective: all these characteristics reinforce the sense of observing the mass from a distance - and from above, from a superior position. The credits are superimposed over these images; after listing the main characters and the actors, a final cast credit reads:

*' - and millions like you... 228*

The second sequence is again a montage of predominantly high-angle 'actuality' shots, detailing a crowded station forecourt, a fast moving steam train and motor coaches rushing towards the camera,<sup>229</sup> a merry-go-round, a roller coaster, a crowded swimming pool, cyclists, a girl at the seaside, and, finally, rhyming with the first shot, a long high-angle pan across a crowded beach. This is first of all an increasingly familiar iconography of the leisure of 'ordinary people';<sup>230</sup> but it is also, of course, a familiar perspective, surveying these people from above, rendering them as an anonymous mass. An ironically nostalgic voice-over says "Remember that summer before the war, those gay coupon-free days when ... you and millions like you swarmed to the sea ...?". The use of actuality shots, montage editing, the distanced observational perspective, direct

address ('millions like you'), and the voice-over: these are all familiar as documentary devices, here lending the film the aura of the real.

The spectator is, at this stage, positioned and addressed as an observer, outside of the diegesis of the film looking in. But we are already being drawn into the diegesis, in being asked to 'remember that summer', not by means of identification with an extraordinary narrative protagonist, so much as by a real process of remembering a specific time and place in the recent past. The way is being paved for a shift from this predominantly documentary mode of observation to a fictional world - but an authentic one - in which we can participate. The next scene of the film is shot in classical narrative style, moving from an establishing shot of a street and a housefront, to a series of group shots and close ups of the Crowson family within this space, employing all the strategies of shot matching, reverse field cutting and point of view. A number of characters are gradually defined as unique individuals, invested with a set of wishes and goals - particularly the two contrasting sisters, the sweet, naive but responsible Celia; and Phyllis, more of a good-time girl. Now, the spectator has specific points of identification, and specific enigmas and dramas by which to become captivated. The film has very swiftly achieved the transition from the general to the particular, and moved the spectator from observer of the real world to participant in the drama, which has itself been validated as taking place in a real historical space. The spectators, as members of 'the nation' whom the film addresses, are becoming almost indelibly inscribed into the community of the film; the spectator's memories are substantiated by images which give concrete evidence on which to focus - not least, the image of a typical, ordinary family chosen from among the millions.

This movement between the general and the particular is re-affirmed and re-stated constantly throughout the course of the film, particularly in the first half hour or so - moving, for instance, from a montage sequence of troops coming back from Dunkirk by train, to shots of Dad, representing the Home Guard, under a railway bridge over which the trains rattle; or moving from the montage sequence of the whole industrial process of manufacturing and assembling an aeroplane, to Celia and her new colleagues arriving at the factory. The movement from the general to the particular works ceaselessly to contain the particular within the general, and to insert the individual within the general community. By this means, the individuated protagonists of the fiction are not separated from the historical process, they are not removed from the public sphere. Certainly, the dominant fictional, narrative interest concerns the ways in which public events disrupt everyday domestic life and personal relationships. But it is also the case that the ordinary people are very clearly seen participating in the public sphere, even if they are not actually present in the montage sequences which are the film's dominant means of articulating the broader sense of history.<sup>29</sup> Each, in other words, does their bit in the public arena.

The narration of the film coagulates much more resolutely around a number of romances as the film progresses, as we know; but as spectators, we are punished for our fascination with these personal romances during a time of public crisis, almost as sharply as Celia is punished when she loses her husband to the war effort and an early death over Germany. Loss now becomes the dominant register. But the final sequence once more works to bind together these disparate individuals in a remarkable series of movements and inscriptions.

A huge audience, standing in for the audience in the cinema, are being entertained in the factory canteen by a popular singer with a band. The camera performs a long tracking movement, and, with a series of cuts, establishes the place of Celia and her comrades in the midst of this mass of people. Celia is clearly distressed when she hears the sound of planes flying overhead, carrying with them a reminder of her loss - which is confirmed as our loss, too, in a brief but threatening insert shot of the planes. Gradually Gwen, the maternal figure of the community, manages to cajole Celia into joining in with the song which by now the whole canteen are singing. It is a familiar song - the music hall favourite, 'Waiting at the church' - which has been heard on a number of occasions previously in the film, notably at Celia and Fred's wedding. That sense of familiarity for the cinema audience is important, but the repetition of the song also serves to link the personal optimism of the wedding with the new optimism of the national community.

The shots cut between closer and closer images of Celia and the crowd around her (with brief inserts of the ostensible motivation for the scene, the band). The processing of these shots is at the same time a processing of our position as spectators: we both identify with Celia's personal tragedy and are inscribed as individuals like her into this vast mass of people which make up the audience, the community, the nation. All the key characters of the work-place community are blended into the mass as a whole, in the *mise-en-scène* of the group. It is a moment of intense but restrained melodrama. But the pleasure of the sequence derives also from a voluptuous sense of national unity: loss is miraculously transformed into plenitude, but it is an unconventional plenitude from the perspective of classical cinema, as a Mass Observation respondent

suggested at the time: "no attempt is made to give the film a conventional happy ending, which makes the film seem more realistic."<sup>232</sup>

The nation which *Millions Like Us* constructs in its mode of address, however much it struggles to achieve a sense of unity, is never homogenous and coherent. The film constructs an image of 'community' as a progressive, classless, co-operative social formation - but that community also takes on the form of the family, with its patriarchal structures of power and authority, re-working difference as mere variety. The film constructs an image of a post-war society which might be organised on the basis of community - and yet it privileges those characters whose aspirations for the future include the family in its present form - that is, characters who articulate no desire for change. There is a populist representation of 'the people', which seems progressive in that it does indeed depend on the narrative centrality of 'ordinary people', working people - but it is a respectable, lower middle-class position which is finally privileged within this social formation of 'ordinary people', an emphasis which is only achieved at the expense of erasing the visibility of the State and the ruling classes.

ix) A conservative populist vision of the nation: This Happy Breed, part 1

*"Noel Coward has no equal as a writer depicting the British character. The heroine of his new story is the tiny home, No.17, Sycamore Rd., Clapham, S.W. The world will love and respect 'The Gibbonses' who live in this Home. Their kind survive Wars, Zeppelins, Heinkels, the Kaiser, Strikes, Political Upheavals, Despairs, Jubilations - the same as YOU."  
Publicity handout for This Happy Breed.<sup>233</sup>*

*"When so many of you wrote to say that I gave you courage and hope, I wanted to explain that it was you who gave me courage and hope, the truth being I suppose that we all gave each other courage and hope, like members of a sensible affectionate family."  
J.B.Priestley, in the last of his radio 'Postscripts', 1940.<sup>234</sup>*

I want now to compare Millions Like Us, and the way in which it speaks to the nation about the nation, with the David Lean-Noël Coward melodrama of 1944, This Happy Breed, with which it seems to share so much.<sup>235</sup> The film, adapted from Coward's play,<sup>236</sup> also tells the story of an 'ordinary' lower middle-class family, the Gibbonses, who live in the suburbs of Clapham. There are again several narrative threads dealing with the various trials and tribulations, romances and arguments attaching to each member of the family over the twenty year period between the two world wars, as the children grow up, marry and leave home. This private narrative is placed in the broader public context of a popular history of the nation over this same period, presented in montage sequences inserted into the gaps between the episodes in the private drama:

*"On this simple basis is built a Coward pictorial history of England's ordinary folk between the wars - historically superficial, but sometimes touching deep emotion and handling simple sentiment with the deftness of which Coward is a supreme master."<sup>237</sup>*



This "British film of remarkable quality"<sup>238</sup> was a major box-office success,<sup>239</sup> and was, like **Millions Like Us**, received very warmly by most of the critics of the period as yet another example of the growing strength of the national cinema. Even the American trade press saw it as "a tribute ... to the new excellence of endeavour which inspires Britain's picture makers."<sup>240</sup> **Whitebait** linked the film directly to **Millions Like Us**:

"The number of good films about English life has been mounting up; **Millions Like Us**, **The Demi-Paradise**, quite recently, have explored the unexplorable; and with **This Happy Breed** we shall no longer be able to keep up any pretence of not knowing ourselves. It would be hard to overpraise the skill, the feeling, and the enhanced fidelity of this film."<sup>241</sup>

'Knowing ourselves': this is typical of the way the film was taken up as a realistic impression of the ordinary life of the nation, with numerous of the middle-class critics of the 'quality' daily and weekly press somewhat condescendingly celebrating the fact that "this film about the suburbs has gone out into the suburbs, and the suburbs have taken it to their hearts."<sup>242</sup> What evidence there is of contemporary (middle-class) audience reception tends to confirm this view: "I liked it because it was about ordinary people very much like ourselves."<sup>243</sup>

The trade press had kept up a steady commentary about the film while it was in production, repeatedly stressing the efforts made to create a realistic impression of contemporary English life,<sup>244</sup> and in the subsequent reviews, critics duly noted the documentary influence: "Mr. Coward and his colleagues have excelled in the exact observation of ordinary speech and behaviour."<sup>245</sup> The secret of **This Happy Breed's** critical success was, however, the way in which it was felt to have superseded the perceived coldness of the documentary idea:

"[it] is not just a photographic and microphonic record of suburban life. If it were, nobody would care to see it. Art does not consist in repeating accurately what can be seen and heard around us."<sup>246</sup>

"Not only is *This Happy Breed* true to life, to emotions as well as exteriors, but here [in the opening shot of the film] is the camera magic woefully lacking from so many documentary-inspired stories."<sup>247</sup>

It was these moments of magic, these "instants of poetry"<sup>248</sup> which distinguished the film from the mere document: "A Mass Observation report on 'Sycamore Road, Clapham' would no doubt provide us with the same detail, exhibited under glass; Mr. Coward sees it very much alive."<sup>249</sup> But the film is not only superior to documentary; it is superior also to the standards of the Hollywood film:

"In point of photography and direction and acting few recent films from America ... have approached it. This technical confidence, accompanied by a native warm honesty and an increasing sureness in the defining of atmosphere, marks the progressiveness of the British cinema as opposed to the backward trend of Hollywood, gripped in a deadly paralysis of self-imitation."<sup>250</sup>

This was a national cinema, but it was also a serious, responsible and intelligent cinema. The marks of this cinema, despite the derisory criticisms of the documentary idea, were its restraint, its sense of reserve - once more elevated to a national characteristic during the war period, and here being used to praise the acting, the emotional quality of the film, and even its use of colour - "so discreet that one almost loses sight of it";<sup>251</sup>

"The flavour of *This Happy Breed*, with its accumulation of *clichés* and small touches, is as subdued as the admirable Technicolor ... Miss Celia Johnson's performance is a miracle of unstressed vitality and charm that

makes one wonder how English audiences can ever have wept over a pasteboard Miniver."<sup>252</sup>

The distinction between the Hollywood melodrama of *Mrs Miniver* (1942), and the down-to-earth qualities of *This Happy Breed* can be seen as an attempt to mobilise a *true* sense of national identity, over against Hollywood's vision of Englishness. The effort is there too in another of Whitebait's revealing comments: "with *This Happy Breed* and *Millions Like Us* and *The Way Ahead*, British films after the war should have their chance of becoming what we should all like them to be - English."<sup>253</sup> *This Happy Breed*'s Englishness is however much less ambiguous in its conservatism than *Millions Like Us*, suggesting a domestication of the documentary idea as it is embodied in the latter - a fact which is signalled most obviously in the use of colour film rather than black and white.<sup>254</sup> The film is still very much concerned with the state of the nation and the national character, exploring family life as a metaphor for the national life: "the Gibbonses are a large family: they are found all over the British Isles ... the special quality of [this film is that it] finds in a house in a row the symbol of a nation".<sup>255</sup>

The representation of the nation in *This Happy Breed*, as this comment implies, should again be seen in terms of urban pastoral: the imagined community of the nation is an extended family, consolidated here in the image of the Gibbonses. The text seeks to establish that this community is knowable to itself - and that the nation is an organic body - even in the context of a massively urbanised and heavily populated environment. It does so for the most part by focussing on the relationships which exist between the members of one family (and one set of neighbours); but it also tries to make the metaphorical

relationship between individual family and the nation as a whole as solid and as visible as possible by developing the history of the family alongside a history of the recent national past. The shots which open and close the film are also crucial in establishing the family/knowable community/nation relationship in as fluid and seamless a way as possible. The first shot of the film is a high-angle panoramic shot of London; the camera pans across this landscape, and appears to move down toward a particular, immaculately ordered neighbourhood, then one street within this neighbourhood, and eventually the house in which the action is set. This movement in, via the pans, a crane movement and a series of dissolves, continues through the window of the house; the camera moves down the stairs and to the front door, which the Gibbons family are just entering for the first time. The final scene of the film shows, from inside the house, the Gibbons now *leaving* the house for the last time, and shutting the door behind them; virtually the same movements and dissolves with which the film had opened are now repeated in reverse, as the camera leaves the particular detail, to place it once more within the general view of the city.<sup>256</sup>

The film is also concerned, at least implicitly, with the form the nation should take after the war. It comes down on the side of stability, or at the very least, gradual evolution, but it certainly does not suggest the radical change which Charlie Forbes stands for in *Millions Like Us*.<sup>257</sup> There is a major narrative difference from the latter film which is significant here: *This Happy Breed* situates itself outside the war, in the inter-war years of peace, in order to be able to foreground the family so conclusively, but also to be able to place a *complete* family at the centre of the narrative. The narrative place of *This Happy Breed* is resolutely the home, and its protagonists are, in the end,

all members of one extended family, which enables the film to establish the family as the stable and secure cornerstone of the nation in peace-time.

**This Happy Breed** thus loses the progressive sense of community found in **Millions Like Us** by placing the family and the home firmly in the centre of the narrative. The tendency was there in **Millions Like Us**, but **This Happy Breed** follows it through to its logical conclusion. Thus the film returns again and again to scenes of the family gathered together for moments of celebration - a wedding, Christmas, or just a pot of tea. The family and the home exist as a secure, stable, virtually unchanging sanctuary from the hectic and threatening outside world. This narrative focus on the family and the home also reaffirms woman's place as firmly within the domestic sphere, her role being to transform house into home. The figure of the mother - and there are few more ideal than Ethel Gibbons - is thus placed once again right at the heart of the nation-as-family.<sup>250</sup> All the hesitations and equivocations of **Millions Like Us** around this issue are lost, as is the potentially quite radical story of the 'mobile women', involved in traditionally masculine occupations, away from the home. While there may be here an overriding sense of this work being for the duration of the war only, **This Happy Breed** explicitly shows women in their place, in the home, and never releases them from it. The film is, in this way, able to acknowledge the strength of women in processing the domestic sphere and maintaining the home - and thereby the nation - but in the film's terms, the discourse of women is constructed as both trivial and comic: the invitation is to laugh at, rather than to laugh with the women and their domestic quarrels. The image of the mother is thus no more than symbolic for the nation as a whole: outside the domestic space, within the public sphere, she has no real power.

Where *Millions Like Us* quite self-consciously plays on progressive forces within the conjuncture, *This Happy Breed* tends to close down those very issues. Both films confront historically-specific ideological and political problems of national life, and both work to forge some sort of unity of the popular forces of the moment. Neither attempts to be class-specific, but rather to construct a popular consensus outside class distinctions, above class antagonisms. But *Millions Like Us* directly questions the stability of that consensus,<sup>259</sup> where *This Happy Breed* posits it as the natural and essential product of the national character: it seeks to articulate national character as the backbone of England/Britain, as a timeless quality forged in the past.

*This Happy Breed* is thus decidedly nostalgic for the settlement, the security and the stability which it finds in its representations of inter-war domestic arrangements and family life; it may propose that this should be the social basis for the post-war world, but it also seems to suggest that such a society belongs only to fond memory. The film is invested with a powerful sense of loss throughout its course, but particularly in the closing moments.<sup>260</sup> This is achieved narratively, in the gradual dispersal of the family via marriages, deaths, and the final move to a new flat, the relentless emptying of the home that has been so carefully and lovingly established. It is there too in the constant knowledge that this film, which so carefully sets itself up as taking place in the aftermath of the war to end all wars, is being watched while a new war is being waged. This sense of loss in relation to the plenitude of the family in peace-time is finally brought home as the narrative moves towards a close just as this new war opens. It is achieved too in the camerawork, in its preference for the distance of the medium shot and the group shot, rather than the proximity of the close up, and in the way that, on a number of occasions at

the end of a sequence, the camera pulls back to an extreme long shot, as if the image, and the time that it documents, were fading from memory.<sup>261</sup>

**This Happy Breed** has a similar narrative form to **Millions Like Us**. Once again, there are several interweaving plots, and many of its scenes are markedly inconsequential - as an American critic put it, "it hardly has any story; there is much talk and the directors have taken great pains in centering their attention on characterisations."<sup>262</sup> In many ways, this film provides the model for the British low-life television soap opera, and like soap opera, a lot of the narrative work is carried in talk, with much cutting between interlocutors to provide visual interest. Most of this talk is deliberately mundane, deliberately trivial - that is, it is not narratively developed. But this insignificance is of course precisely its significance: it foregrounds the everyday, the detail of national life, over against the 'extraordinary fantasies' of Hollywood, with the understatement, the non-narrativisation, the *redundance* of the detail having a profoundly realistic effect.<sup>263</sup> The film remains very restrained for the most part, with the most dramatic and eventful incidents taking place off-screen,<sup>264</sup> providing the motivation for yet more talk. Other dramatic or spectacular incidents are taken up in the montage sequences of public rather than private life, which constitute almost a separate diegesis to that of the family and its home.

Formally, **This Happy Breed** shares some characteristics with **Listen To Britain**, since there is no central disruptive force which sets the narrative of the film in motion; rather, as in the case of the Jennings/McAllister film, and to a lesser extent **Millions Like Us**, it is organised around the 'day in the life of ...' format - although in this case it is '*twenty years in the life of a family*'.

There is no real narrative enigma to be solved in the film - the family is already intact, in place, at the start of the film - and instead, there is a multiple series of almost self-contained episodes or dramas to be completed. In so far as there is any narrative enigma at all, it is situated outside the film, in terms of the course of the on-going war - we cannot determine the real ending of the film until we know the outcome of the war.

Although there is a certain linearity to the text, it is also markedly episodic, circular and repetitive, which can imply not so much the development of a narrative across time, as a sense of timelessness and a refusal to move forward, once more invoking a nostalgic relation to the drama. Repetition is there, for instance, in the ceaseless re-working of numerous similar 'trivial', domestic situations and personal relationships, without any of these being developed into a *substantial* narrative trajectory. The circularity - another form of repetition, of course - is particularly evident in the reverse rhyming of the ending with the beginning, discussed above. Movement is the natural flow of time, and closure is thus the poetic closure of turning full circle, the end of an era, time running out, rather than the resolution of disrupted forces, the fulfilment of a wish or the achievement of a goal.

This suggests that it is again the diegetic space of the family and the home (and metaphorically at least, the nation) which binds the various disparate dramas of the film together, and organises the work of the film, rather than a strong, causally motivated, narrative linearity. If there is a sense of time passing in the narrative of the family, it is achieved above all only by the device of the montage sequences; but running against this experience of temporality is the opposite experience of timelessness, of lack of development,



of time standing still. The synchronic placing and relating of events and people within the family is then explored diachronically in the context of historical progress. The latter is a narrative of the nation - but it too is marked by a lack of causality, given the way in which the montage sequences are built up out of a series of discrete moments from the recent national past. The procedure is akin to that of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*: a sort of sampling of heritage space, a rummage through the diegesis of national history.

*Millions Like Us* may be repetitive too, and it may be marked by a sense of loss at times. But it rarely looks back further than 1939, while its ending, and several aspects of the main body of the text, are also decidedly optimistic and forward-looking. *This Happy Bred*, on the other hand, does not really seem to know how to conceive of the post-war society at all: it has no profound vision of the future, it can only return nostalgically to the beginning of the cycle, as if it wants time to stand still, as if to imply that things should continue as they were 'before', while at the same time recognising that this cannot be. Whitebait, for instance, felt that

"we sense an end to things when the house finally empties. The family life of the Gibbonses, we may feel, with its loyalties and ailments, its jokes and idols, will never return; and as likely as not Sycamore Road, Clapham, copped it in the Blitz. *The film isn't tragic, however, because the English are not a tragic people.*"<sup>265</sup>

The observation is accurate: the film revels in nostalgia, not tragedy - and, as we have seen, nostalgia can be a vital component in the formation of national identity. There is really only one aspect of the film which looks beyond this nostalgia for an un-troubled and mundane family life. It is interesting that this is also the one area in which the script allows for the development of a

more substantial and causally moving narrative line, which threatens to break out of the circularity of the text. This narrative focusses on the individual desires of one of the daughters of the family, Queenie, who finds the domesticated life of suburbia utterly unfulfilling, and runs off to France with a married man. This emphasis on the individual and her desires puts Queenie at odds with the responsibility of the family - just as, in *Millions Like Us*, individual desire was at odds with the needs of the community and the nation. In a conventional Hollywood melodrama, it would surely have been Queenie who was of most narrative interest; in *This Happy Breed*, however, her desires are always marked off as deviant, and problematic. We are never in any doubt that the unity and stability of the home and the family are the real sources of wisdom, emotional truth and moral strength, and it is inevitable that Queenie will eventually return to the fold, as she does, safely married to the boy next door. The figure of Queenie potentially offers a profound critique of everything that the film stands for, in her desire for something more than the familiarity of everyday life, the burden of domestic labour, and the claustrophobic repressions of the family. But in the end her difference is contained, defused.

*This Happy Breed* is resolutely on the side of the social, albeit a social formation which is understood in terms of a highly self-contained and heavily demarcated *private* family. The diegetic space of the film is relatively wide, inhabited by several significant characters forming a network of social relations, rather than dominated by an individual hero-protagonist. Queenie's story can thus never be developed in its full melodramatic potential, since it is constantly displaced by another line of narrative interest.

The most telling critique of the film comes, significantly, from the documentarist Edgar Anstey:

"It is a brilliant and a bewildering piece of work. It can report on the contents of the cupboard under the stairs at 17, Sycamore Road, Clapham - the gas-meter, the soda-syphon and the ironing board - with documentary meticulousness and a warm intimacy; it can supply us with dialogue really appropriate to the four-handed folding of sheets in the back-garden or to the drying of summer crockery, and yet, for all its shrewd observation of detail, it apparently can see no sense or meaning in the whole phenomenon."<sup>266</sup>

Although Anstey's desire for sense and meaning may in part be a conventional patriarchal dissatisfaction with and disinterest in the domestic,<sup>267</sup> and a desire for a rational rather than an emotional account, it does seem valid to suggest that the film can offer nothing more than a rather camp fascination with the details of the lives of the lower classes. Another critic, Dilys Powell, argued that:

"the suburban family in their suburban house are presented with warmth and sympathy; but is the sympathy too resolute? Should not the observation be a trifle less benevolent, the defence of the ordinary man a trifle less condescending. ... I find in *This Happy Breed* a tendency ... to stand well away and, however admiringly, point; Coward is here not so much the artist as the patron."<sup>268</sup>

Winnington is less severe, feeling that the little details of the film are able to "diminish [its] haunting upper middle class consciousness".<sup>269</sup> But it seems to me that it is precisely this consciousness which defines the film, and which, in this sense at least, places it very firmly within the documentary-realist tradition. *This Happy Breed* simply renews the pastoral concern to dignify the common people - and once again does so from a bourgeois perspective which is fascinated by the exotic trivia of this other class, whom it can patronise, and

with whom it can sympathise because they too are human, but who in the end must remain at a distance.<sup>270</sup>

It is perhaps for this reason that "This Happy Breed adduces no evidence of better times to come", as Anstey goes on to point out.<sup>271</sup> The nostalgia is precisely for the apparent stability of class difference and deference, so that the film cannot possibly entertain any more democratic settlement. It seeks to reaffirm the pre-war social place of 'ordinary people', and to identify the public sphere of politics as separate from but a frustrating impingement on the private, domestic sphere of the family, the home. It does remain a populist film, and the Gibbons family define themselves as 'ordinary people', just as the iconography of the film conventionally marks the diegetic world of their home as 'ordinary', rather than glamorous or exotic, but it is a much more conservative populism than that of *Millions Like Us*, lacking its (tentative) optimism and its (ambivalent) exploration of alternative social formations.

x) The public sphere as spectacle: This Happy Breed, part 2

The most conservative aspect of This Happy Breed is the way in which a public history of the recent national past is written into the private story of a family - in other words, the way in which the montage sequences are woven into the narrative web of the film. These sequences - the only occasions in the film on which we leave the Gibbons family home<sup>272</sup> - are made up of a series of discontinuous fragments of activity from the public arena, mostly depicting concrete manifestations of political power and political struggles: the victory marches at the end of World War One, the British Empire Exhibition of 1924, the General Strike, a British fascist haranguing the crowds at Speakers Corner, crowds cheering Chamberlain on his return from Munich, and so on. There are also a series of newspaper headlines, radio announcements, and street hoardings giving information of important political moments - the end of the General Strike, news of the Nazi successes in the 1933 elections, news of the 1935 General Election in Britain, the death of one king and the abdication of another, a 'Get Your Gas Mask Now' poster, 'Peace in Our Time', and so on.

These sequences are marked off from the rest of the film, and from the everyday domestic life of the family, by the repeated use of not only a different system of editing and subject matter, but also a different use of music: the montage sequences are accompanied by extra-diegetic music, and often there is no dialogue; in the private drama of the family, dialogue is pervasive, and there is no extra-diegetic music. There is also a brief passage of harp music at the beginning and end of most of the sequences<sup>273</sup> which, by Hollywood conventions, would signal the entry of the fiction into a fantasy world, a dream, or a flashback, and this is indeed the way in which we are invited to relate to this

public, political arena. It *is* almost a fantasy world, quite separate from the private world of the family. One of the sequences, for instance, shows the family and their neighbours in the crowds watching but not participating in the Victory celebrations; another shows them visiting the Empire Exhibition. Later, Vi (one of the daughters) talks of wanting to 'go and watch the crowds cheering' after Chamberlain's return from Munich: in other words, she wants not to participate in the political celebration but to look at it from the position of a spectator. The public sphere is thus reproduced as spectacle, something upon which the fascinated spectator can gaze from a distance.

The montage sequences of course serve to authenticate the 'people's history' of the Gibbons family, and to invoke the wider dimensions of public life and the national community of which they are just one small part. But the processing of the montage sequences within the fiction serves also to *separate* these 'ordinary people' and their private lives from the public arena of 'Politics' and 'History', to separate them from the public sphere, in which, it implies, they have no part.<sup>274</sup> The spectacle of the public sphere may provoke emotional crises in the home, but it has no real social or political impact on its inhabitants.<sup>275</sup>

"The national and the international background", as one reviewer noted, "is seen always from the point of view of this single home".<sup>276</sup> Important though such a perspective may be, it does at the same time effectively block any recognition of the nature of class interests, or the role of 'ordinary people' in the relations of power. By focussing so resolutely on the family and the home, and by foregrounding domestic affairs, class power as an issue or a problem is obscured from view. In so far as power is explored at all, it is entirely in terms of personal relationships, in which, of course, patriarchy is taken for

granted. The film thus reaffirms the 'ordinary person's' deference to, if at times slight unease with, the traditional forms of political and social power. It is this deference which Tom Nairn has argued is central to the dominant ideology of Englishness, the populist mythology which holds "not a belief that the People can do anything, in the last resort, but the conviction that popular aspirations will always, in the end, be attended to *up there*"<sup>277</sup>

By an allegory of the aftermath of the First World War, *This Happy Breed* addresses its audience in 1944, with the end of World War Two in sight, as a people who have played their part in the public, international struggles during the extraordinary events of the war period. It suggests however that those same people must now return to their real concerns: the domestic, the everyday, the trivial. The film opens with a voice-over which states, documentary-style, that in 1918 'hundreds and hundreds of houses are becoming homes once more'. The implication is that now, with World War Two moving towards a close, the urgent task facing the 'ordinary people' is, once more, home-making, replacing the family at the heart of the peace-time society, and woman at the heart of the family.

Various members of the family do make occasional forays into the public arena, but this serves only to reinforce the effective separation of the public and the private. In the General Strike montage, Frank Gibbons is seen working as a blackleg, driving a bus; he justifies his participation by arguing that it is the precious stability of the nation which is under threat: as he says to his son, "It's up to us ordinary people to keep things steady." While this does show a member of the family participating in political struggle, it is significant that it is the male head of the household whom we see intervening; when this montage

sequence of the strike dissolves back to the private sphere, a teapot is placed on an *Evening News* bulletin announcing the end of the strike, and the women are seen gossiping and doing the house work: Gran, speaking from the point of view of 'Victorian values', roundly condemns the strike, Sylvia goes to wash some socks, and Mum clears the table. The strike is over, and normal family life can resume. The scenes of the strike are far less dramatic than the row which ensues between the women at home.

Reg, Frank's son, and Sam, his communist-sympathising friend, have meanwhile joined the strikers, but, in a number of ways, this involvement is marked as deviant within the film's dominant discourse. Firstly, the views which we have of the strike are always from outside, from a distance - notably in a high-angle shot of a demonstration. The spectators in the cinema are thus never placed by the camera as participants in the strike, but always as observers of it. Secondly, in conversation, Reg and Sam's involvement in the strike is dismissed as mere youthful hotheadedness. Thirdly, there is a significant play on position and point of view when Frank Gibbons decides to have a talk about politics with his temporarily deviant son. In one shot, Dad explains with good common sense that problems arise from human nature not from governments and systems; Reg is in the foreground, and Dad is only visible under his arm. Reg replies that human nature would change if everyone started with an equal chance, loses his temper, and sits down facing the camera, completely blocking out any view of his father: momentarily, his point of view, his position, wins the day. But then Dad continues, in very reasonable fashion; he stands up, so becoming once more visible, and the camera follows him as he moves away: it is his point of view which dominates. Finally, the two of them are resolved in shot together as authoritative father and once more deferential son. It is by devices such as



these that difference is contained, and the deviant reduced/elevated to ordinariness.

In the next montage sequence (roughly 1927-1928-1929), we are shown the second daughter Vi at her wedding to Sam - in other words, the public manifestation of a private romance, and the institutional means of containing Sam's communist excesses, transforming him into an 'ordinary man'. Later, Vi and Sam are shown visiting a cinema to see the latest 'all talking, all singing, all dancing sensation', *Broadway Melody* (1929) - which serves to confirm the place of the spectator in the cinema watching *This Happy Breed* as the same as that of the 'ordinary people' of the fiction: primarily spectators of rather than participants in the public arena.

In between these two moments, we do, however, see the erring daughter, Queenie, precisely participating in this public arena and in consequence being transformed herself into a 'spectacle: she is shown doing an exhibition Charleston with her current lover, a married man, having won a dance competition. The audience at the dance hall gaze at her, while the audience in the cinema are afforded the privilege of a soft focus close up of her as she takes pleasure in being the object of the gaze. It is this escape from the private claustrophobic insularity of the family into the exotic, glamorous - and now eroticised - public arena, this crossing of boundaries, which constitutes the extent of her transgression. But in the context of the rest of the film, this scene serves to label her pleasure as irresponsible, and to confirm the dangers of entering the public arena and thereby leaving the safety and security of the home.

The overriding emphasis of *This Happy Breed* is a resolute separation of discourse and history: the series of montage sequences constitute an 'objective', 'real' history, a metadiscourse which places and processes the mundane discourses of the 'ordinary people'. The episodic narrative of the family consists mainly of gossip, reminiscence, uninformed and brief discussions of 'public' events, family arguments, the occasional restrained love scene - in each case, within the film's terms, inconsequential trivia, mere discourse, in relation to the important and real events of the history over which they have no control.

There are of course occasions when explicitly political views are voiced within the confines of the domestic space, but the most outspoken of these occasions serves once again to underline the improbability of the public sphere having any real bearing on the private dramas of the family. The setting is Christmas 1925, and Sam, a communist at the time, is addressing the rest of the young people: it is a set-piece speech, both diegetically, in that he is standing up and speaking in knowingly formal terms, and in terms of the way it is constructed filmically. It is also a potentially powerful speech, noting in no uncertain terms the nature and extent of class difference in contemporary society. But this power is undermined in various ways. Firstly, he is constantly interrupted by 'trivial' and uninformed comments from the women present, the gist of which is that politics are irrelevant to the everyday. But secondly, his speech seems particularly melodramatic within a text which favours restraint: in its performance, it is too evidently a speech, it is obtrusive, rather than knitted into the discourse of the film, such that the *ordinariness* of the women seems much more the position of audience empathy. They are down-to-earth where he is over the top. It is thus the (deliberate) obviousness of the performance which separates it out from the rest of the film as deviant.

*This Happy Breed*'s narrative of national history situates it at the meeting-point of the heritage film and the documentary idea, where the latter is understood as a means of detailing an *alternative* heritage of the common people - "such people with their gaiety and fortitude, are indeed the 'happy breed' of Shakespeare's sceptred isle."<sup>278</sup> Although the public events of 'national significance' in *This Happy Breed* are presented as contemporaneous with the everyday experiences of the Gibbons family, they are represented as history to the spectators of the film. The particular form of this (re)presentation plays out precisely the terms of the heritage impulse as explored in chapter four. In one of the works drawn on there, Michael Bommes and Patrick Wright argue that

"National Heritage appears to involve nothing less than the abolition of all contradiction in the name of a national culture: the installation of a spectacular display in which 'the past' enters everyday life."<sup>279</sup>

The refusal to explore the class position or the gender relations of the ordinary people at the centre of *This Happy Breed* is precisely this abolition of contradiction; at the same time, the difference between the quiet domesticated home and the lavish parade of public history for the cinema spectator serves to install 'the past' as a spectacular display within the everyday:

"At the ideological level, 'heritage' involves the extraction of history - of the idea of historical significance, process and potential - from everyday life and its re-staging and display in particular coded sites, images and events. ... In order to become spectacular, something which one can stand outside and then re-connect with in regular acts of appreciation - history must be completed and fully accomplished. As a process which is fully accomplished, history, with all its promise of future change and development, is closed down and confined entirely to what can be exhibited as the 'historic past'."<sup>280</sup>

This is exactly the procedure which *This Happy Breed* adopts in order to impose a pre-war vision of the nation, its people, and its political formation, on the prospective post-war period. The public sphere has been absorbed into the popular culture of the ordinary people, as another form of cinematic spectacle. But rather than this being the democratisation of cinema, of public life and of everyday life, it is instead the transformation of democracy into an image-commodity. The spectators of the film, far from being absorbed through it into the public sphere as participants, are offered a place precisely as spectators both of the national past and of contemporary politics. As *Today's Cinema* put it, "here, then, is memory-stirring spectacle and drama, all subtly introduced as backgrounds to the compelling domestic theme."<sup>29</sup> History as *aide-memoire*, familiar and comforting, helps us to place the narrative of the family, but it is rarely of narrative significance in itself; rather, the national past, national identity even, exists as an exotic, compelling, fascinating spectacle.

## x1) Conclusions

**Millions Like Us** and **This Happy Breed** are key texts in the formation of a relatively distinctive British film genre, the melodrama of everyday life. Although I have stressed the differences between the two films, there are clearly enough shared characteristics, not only in these films, but in others of the period too, for the term genre to be applied with confidence. The genre is formed out of diverse cultural traditions, but in particular, the incorporation of certain features of the documentary idea into the conventions of the domestic melodrama. The particular articulation of the public and the private in these films makes it possible for them to construct a very powerful image of the nation as a secure and self-sufficient community. In the context of the political debates of the period, and the push towards democratic social reforms in the post-war period, **Millions Like Us** comes across in the end as ambivalent. Questions of class and gender are certainly raised in the course of the film in an often quite challenging way, but they are always circumscribed by more conservative forces within the culture. In **This Happy Breed**, these more conservative forces have themselves become the dominant characteristics of the text. Where **Millions Like Us** tries to hold together the public and the private, the broad scope of history and the detail of discourse, **This Happy Breed** tends to separate them, and consequently to separate the 'ordinary people' from the public sphere. **Millions Like Us** can, on the contrary, show ordinary people 'doing their bit for the nation', it can leave the domestic sphere, and show the world of work, and it can articulate a more profound sense of community, one which is much greater, and more inclusive, than the extended *petit bourgeois* family of **This Happy Breed**.

*This Happy Breed's* conservatism derives in part from the way in which it also draws on certain tendencies in the heritage genre, as well as the documentary idea. There may be a potential democratisation of those tendencies in the effort to stage the heritage of the common people, but this is undermined by the film's conservative nostalgia, its suggestion that nationhood, Englishness, is a timeless and invariant category. *Millions Like Us* also draws on the traditions of urban pastoral, but it does so more ambivalently, at least suggesting that, within that tradition, a different social formation is possible, even if it cannot, in the end, make a conclusive statement about that formation.

The genre which these two films represent has a central place in orthodox historical accounts of British cinema: the critical discourses which have dominated intellectual film culture in Britain since the 1920s have preferred and promoted this genre of films above all other British films. It is in many ways perverse to describe these films in generic terms, for what has been celebrated in them has been their distinctiveness, their uniqueness, their difference from mere formulaic popular cinema. Certainly, there are particular characteristics of the films which are regularly noted in reviews and histories, but this is rarely to establish them as genre films. In fact, these noteworthy characteristics are seen, not so much as the recurring icons or themes of a filmic tradition, but firstly as indisputable signs of *Englishness*, as markers of national identity; and secondly as necessary signs of quality. This quality is always more than national, and comes to assume a universal status: this is what constitutes 'good art'.

If these films are discussed collectively, it tends of course to be in terms of *movements* and their *auteurs*, rather than in terms of genres. Movements thus

come to occupy the high ground of national cinema, unlike genres which are merely variations on the debased culture of popular cinema. Yet it would be very fruitful to discuss these films in terms of genre, and to look at the transformations in that genre as it comes to terms with changing historical circumstances. I do not have the space to do this in any detail, but I would like to make a few suggestions as to what such a history would look like.

One aspect of such films which is rarely discussed in the more conventional histories is the proximity of these films to popular melodrama. Melodrama tends to be associated above all with the feminine. It is addressed primarily to female spectators; it operates in the space of the home, the family, personal relationships and romances; it foregrounds emotions over either rational thought or aggressive action; it often seeks to articulate a female point of view, and to explore the vicissitudes of female desire and fantasy.<sup>282</sup> All this would seem to fit ill with the more self-consciously masculine realm of documentary, and its world of work, of dignified manual labour, placed within a rational framework.<sup>283</sup> Yet it is the traditions of melodrama and the documentary on which the genre draws most heavily - and all of the above features can be found in both *Millions Like Us* and *This Happy Breed*. Indeed, the trade press specifically noted that the former film at least had "terrific feminine appeal".<sup>284</sup>

How does the contemporary critical discourse respond to these features? There are three points worth noting here. Firstly, the home is not remarked upon as a feminine space, but as a national metaphor. The response to *This Happy Breed*, in particular, is to read the Gibbons family home as a bulwark of the nation; implicit here is the symbolic figure of the mother - that is, an ideal version

of the feminine - as the centre-point of the family/community/nation, but this symbolism is rarely dwelt upon in the critical discourse. Secondly, if a female point of view is articulated, it is admired not because of its femininity, but because of its humanity, in an abstract, generalised, universal sense; the point of view is significant for its sincerity, its emotional truthfulness, its mature balancing of desire and responsibility. This leads on to the third point: it is not emotionality, or romance as such which is admired in these films, but the *restraint* with which it is handled.

It is perhaps this fact above all else which enables the critical discourse to avoid the issue of popular melodrama in these films. They may occupy the *thematic* territory of melodrama, but these films tend to underplay melodramatic effect. The potentially excessive characteristics of melodrama, its overblown qualities, the passionate intensity, even hysteria, with which it deals with the subjective, are constantly offset by the details of realism. It is films like *Madonna of the Seven Moons* which are melodramatic in these terms, not *Millions Like Us*, or *This Happy Breed*, which seek always to authenticate their fictions, and to understate or even parody the pleasures of fantasy. *Mise-en-scène*, camerawork, performance, and use of music are all tastefully restrained. What is excessive about these films is the emphasis on the social, not the exploration of the subjective. The potential melodramatic intensity of any particular drama is constantly displaced by shifting focus to another drama. Individuals are present in these dramas as representatives of the social, and their capacity to resist social responsibility by pursuing an individual wish is explored less than their capacity to play an allotted part within a consensual social formation. Indeed, the most melodramatic moment in *Millions Like Us* is probably the ending, which is a celebration of the pleasures of community, and not a



moment of individual romantic fulfilment. The social constantly exceeds the boundaries of any particular narrative line. Melodrama is there, but it is the melodrama of consent, not the melodrama of wish-fulfilment.

The consolidation of this genre of British cinema in the mid-1940s was due in no small part to the peculiar ideological conditions of World War Two. These circumstances enabled a remarkable convergence of the modes of melodrama and documentary. Paradoxically, they also laid the foundations for the consequent marginalisation of British documentary proper. Post-war documentary film-making, is overwhelmingly involved in the refinement of the public gaze in the form of the instructional and scientific documentary, and tends to lose the contact it briefly had with certain sections of the mainstream cinema.<sup>295</sup>

By about 1946, the melodrama of everyday life seems to have completely absorbed the documentary idea and to have incorporated it into its own project, appropriating what it needs for its own ends, and discarding the rest. The story-documentary form, for instance, had been almost entirely fused with the narrative film-making of Ealing Studios and others in the mid- and late 1940s. Documentary devices and strategies are now so seamlessly and completely absorbed by and integrated into the dramatic conventions of the narrative that they are not visible as such. In other words, by this time, the narrative feature film had regained its pre-war position centre-stage within the film culture, establishing the norm: this is once more what cinema is about, it is cinema.

Documentary film-making *as such* still has a place - but it now seems much more confined to that place, rather than having an impact on cinema and film culture as a whole. The boundaries between documentary and narrative feature films now

seem much more clearly marked. There is no longer such a sense of each practice borrowing from the other. Certain documentary films still gain a fairly high film cultural profile, but documentary by 1946 is being discussed much more in terms of a truly public cinema, addressing and engaging in the public sphere in ways quite distinct from the commercial film industry. It is talked about much more clearly in terms of being a public information system, reaching a mass public audience through distribution networks established by the state during the war. The energies of documentary film-makers are directed toward two key involvements in the public sphere during the period of post-war re-construction: firstly, the attempt to consolidate public subsidies for educational film production and distribution; and secondly, involvement in the international arena, through UNESCO, attempting to use documentary films to promote the cause of international understanding, peace, communication and democracy. As such documentary has been wrested a long way from debates about the art of cinema, to become an official public information service.<sup>286</sup>

The most visible and most critically acclaimed aspect of documentary-realist film-making in the period between the end of the war and the mid-1960s is therefore narrative feature film-making, in the form of the melodrama of everyday life. There is still a tradition of attempting to explore contemporary social problems, using the moral perspective developed by the documentary movement of the 1930s, and tempered by the humanism of the most influential film critics of the 1940s. It is the latter, however, which tends to mark the new direction of quality cinema. The dominant critical discourse within the intellectual film culture of the immediate post-war period can be summarised as follows.<sup>287</sup>

The ideal narrative form is now felt to be a strong, solid, economic and energetic narrative, with the emphasis on narrative continuity and clear motivation, rather than a montage of stories, or episodic development. The image is important: cinema is above all a visual story-telling medium, and the best cinema adopts a rhythmic visual narration - but never to the extent of indulging in gratuitous spectacle, exceeding the narrative requirements. Most of the contemporary critics, for instance, found the crafted and atmospheric visuals of *Great Expectations* (1946) a perfect embodiment of what cinema was capable of in this department. Well-developed characters with a strong personality are considered more important than stars, who are no more than displays of types. Characters must be integral narrative elements, and marked by emotional integrity and sincerity. Thus *Great Expectations* was praised for its "solid, credible and richly detailed people you know and care about".<sup>209</sup> Narrative situations should be clearly dramatised and staged, and developed in terms of point of view structures rather than montage, or the public gaze of documentary, and diegetic dialogue is favoured over extra-diegetic commentary - where a voice-over is used, it should be subjectified; the voice of authority should be privatised.

*Great Expectations* is an interesting example in this case, since it was directed by David Lean, and, like *This Happy Breed*, straddles both the melodrama of everyday life, and the heritage genre. Its concern with the predicaments of class, its focus on 'ordinary people', and its general restraint situate it in the former category, while the fact that it is an adaptation of a literary classic links it to the heritage impulse. It was also a great critical success. *The Sunday Express*, for instance, wrote:

"In *Great Expectations* surely the last doubter will see what we, who have been signalling the advance of British film, have been making all the fuss about. Here is a picture which is British to the backbone yet belongs proudly to the cinema of the world. For beauty, good taste and intelligence, for dramatic and emotional content, and expert polish in every department, it is beyond nationality. In brief a classic."<sup>299</sup>

The *Daily Mirror's* comments are revealing, too: "It is more than a triumph for British films. It is an open proof that a film can satisfy every technical and 'highbrow' requirement and still provide outstanding popular entertainment."<sup>290</sup> What was particularly admired in this film was what was seen as the film's emotional truth, its sincerity, and its integrity; critics revelled in the aesthetic experience which it offered them, delighting in the the moral value of a human story, by contrast with documentary's perceived coldness. This is of course no more than a strengthening of certain developments there already in earlier periods. As the genre of the melodrama of everyday life - and the 'quality' British film - shift away from documentary, so the relationship between the public and the private is re-negotiated. In *Great Expectations*, for instance, it is psychologically rounded protagonists who are at the centre of the narrative, and it is their private dramas of romance, success and individual freedom which are played up. The film is not, however, taken up as melodrama, but as quality cinema. This means in part trying to construct an audience for a cinema which is differentiated from popular cinema, comparable to Hepworth's project in the early 1920s. It requires a discerning audience, but in order to survive, it must also be a mass audience. This paradox is resolved in the discourse of the period with the assumption that the emotional integrity of a film like *Great Expectations* has a universal quality which will appeal to all audiences. What this really means is that the class perspective of the public gaze has been absorbed into the subjectivity of film's central protagonists:

simple folk like Pip and Joe Gargery can express complex moral truths. They are bourgeois subjects in the guise of ordinary people. Ideally, the private emotions, the tastes and interests of the bourgeois subject are transformed into a responsible and common public experience, accessible and desirable to all classes. Art, with its civilising function, can enable this transformation to take place.

*Great Expectations* can again be read as a parable about ordinariness, and about the ideal national identity. It tries to establish a secure centre ground, against which are contrasted various more excessive positions. The core of the film, its narrative and moral centre, and its preferred figure of identification, is the moderate, undemonstrative, sensible, middle-class Pip. The characters of Magwitch, Joe, Miss Estella and Miss Havisham are, by contrast, marginal figures, representatives of undesirable excesses, in one direction or another, of Pip's moral sensibility.

Joe Gargery may be the 'salt of the earth', 'common humanity', but he is parodied for his excesses in this mode. Magwitch's problem is precisely his 'roughness'. Miss Havisham and Estella are parodies of the aristocratic sensibility. Pip also occupies this position of snobbishness temporarily, when his bourgeois values are not properly tempered by Joe's simple sincerity. The other characters all represent grotesque spectacles which constantly push us back toward the centre-ground of Pip, and his private (bourgeois) sensibility.

The privatisation of the documentary attitude, the shifting of the bourgeois gaze from outside the narrative space, looking in, to inside the narrative space, as the gaze of the central protagonist in David Lean's films eventually leads

towards the realms of art cinema. But there are other strands to the melodrama of everyday life, and other ways of exploring the nature of the national community, in the post-war period. By the late 1940s, it is possible to see a certain anxiety emerging concerning the idea of the nation as a tightly-knit knowable community, particularly in the films produced by Ealing Studios. A number of films, such as *Passport to Pimlico* and *Whiskey Galore* (both 1949), struggle to reproduce the war-time conditions of siege and insularity, and to assert and explore the idea of community, represented by a proliferation of narrative protagonists and a multiplication of incidental narrative lines.<sup>291</sup>

Other films seem to *assume* that community, that network of inter-relations, as already constructed, and go on to explore the possibility - or danger - of its de-construction by the intrusion of violent and erotic forms of individual desire - *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947) and *The Blue Lamp* (1950) are good examples of this tendency. The potentially violent dismantling of the assumed community can be seen in terms of an increasing anxiety about the relations between the public and the private, and about the emergence of a new social category, the delinquent youth of *The Blue Lamp*. The image of the family/community/nation has become a generic convention, which provides strong melodramatic potential. It can constitute the narrative buffer to the young delinquent individual, it can be exploited for the tension it forces between individual desire and social responsibility. But it is rarely any longer a powerful image of secure social cohesion, or moral and political consensus. The ending of *The Blue Lamp* is interesting in this respect. The murdering young criminal is rounded up by a *collective* effort, which relies on the interconnectedness of a communication system (the tic-tac men at a race course) and the discipline of the police force. Even so, the film cannot quite contain

the energy and vitality of Dirk Bogarde's performance as the young criminal, while the crowd at the stadium where he is captured remains a crowd, and does not become a knowable community. The community is thus reserved for small disciplined pockets (the police force); it can no longer command the consent of the national community as a whole.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there is a further transformation and renewal of this genre. The pleasures of the new wave films derive from the ways in which a single central narrative protagonist *transgresses* the parameters of the family/community/nation.<sup>292</sup> The regional emphasis of films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* also to some extent challenges the sense of a hegemonic nationality. In these films, there is a marked intensification of psychological realism and a deeper attention to the articulation of character and individuality. The community now constitutes the backdrop, the setting for the exploration of the psychological complexity of the (usually young working-class male) protagonist. Both the community of the neighbourhood, and its most domestic form within the genre, the family, have become intrusions on the private (sexual) life of the individual - now the hero of the film.

The relations between the elements of the genre have almost, it seems, been turned upside down, in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s. In 1943, in *The Bells Go Down*, a petty criminal eventually saves the life of his old enemy, the local policeman, and both individuals are enveloped by the folds of the community. In *The Blue Lamp*, the police force itself is the centre of the community, both its ideal image, and that which regulates the community. Troubling the community is a new form of criminality: a delinquent and recklessly individualistic criminality with no sense of moral responsibility, and

a dangerous threat to the fabric and well being of the community. By 1962, in **The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner**, the petty criminal has become the hero, while the police and borstal staff, as the official managers of the community, are constructed as threats to the integrity of the individual.

By the time of **The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner**, it is much more the individual who is at the centre of the narrative, and around whose somewhat irresponsible acts the narrative gathers momentum. In a sense Dirk Bogarde's psychopathic juvenile delinquent of **The Blue Lamp** has become the central protagonist, the (anti-) hero of **The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner**. This shift is even clearer in **Saturday Night and Sunday Morning** (1960) where the image of the family is now much more in the background, and, while it is still able to offer some sustenance to the individual, it is already also something of a stifling burden to the energies of the young working-class male. Similarly, the community of the neighbourhood and the work-place has become claustrophobic and debilitating rather than warm and cosy, a source of conflict and tension rather than the microcosm of the united nation.

The new wave films now *acknowledge* the separation of the individual from key political decision-making processes of society, and use the generic form to explore this social gulf as much in psychological terms (alienation as a state of mind) as in sociological terms. In the end, it does seem that social relations are marginalised in favour of personal relations. As such, the formal strategies of the genre are newly inflected towards the exploration of - if not fulfilment of - individual desires. The narratives are resolutely organised around a single central protagonist, a single psychology and subjectivity, and no longer require a multiplicity of plot lines. While this lends a stronger causal movement to the



narrative, the goals of that movement are defined as much in terms of broad character development as in terms of concrete achievements. Vestiges of montage construction remain, both in the relatively episodic structures to the narratives, and in the numerous montage sequences of some of Tony Richardson's films, notably *A Taste Of Honey* (1961) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962).

Montage no longer constructs a common public sphere of social existence, but is directed towards the the articulation of a private personal experience. Thus *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, has a relatively episodic narrative structure not because it tries to hold together a variety of aspects of the same sphere, but because it deals with loosely connected moments in the development of a character. Similarly, the montage constructions of certain sequences in Richardson's films produce a poetic experience of a state of mind - for instance, the montage of shots of the canal which a melancholy Jo walks beside, in *A Taste of Honey*, or the montage of shots of the countryside as an 'ecstatically free' Colin goes running in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. In other words, the function of montage construction has shifted from spatial metaphors (the construction of a broad inclusive diegesis) to temporal metaphors (the self-conscious elision of real time), and from an articulation of the look of the documentary, the public gaze, to the privatised look of the narrative protagonist - that is, from an 'objective' statement of commonality and universality, to a 'subjective' impression of experience. It is this establishment of an intensified psychological realism which seems as remarkable in these films as their attempt to foreground working class protagonists.

There is still the sense of one class looking at another from a position of superiority. The distanced and authoritative 'public' gaze is to some extent in tension with the subjective point of view of the protagonists. This tension is most evident in the difference between the point of view of the narrative protagonist (the working-class victim) placed within the city, and the spectacular authoritative point of view which momentarily recurs throughout these films, from a position outside and above the city ("That Long Shot of Our Town From That Hill", as one jaded critic put it<sup>293</sup>). This latter point of view is effectively the position of wish fulfilment (heavily inscribed in the realist genre) the position to which the victim who desires to escape must aspire.

## Chapter 7: Constructing a national cinema in Britain:

### some conclusions

The starting point for this thesis was the dominant presence of Hollywood in British cinema since at least World War One. The construction of a national cinema in Britain inevitably involves coming to terms with this presence. British cinema has done that in various ways: by competing with Hollywood on its own terms, and in its own markets; by colluding with Hollywood in the distribution and exhibition of American films in the British market; by trying to protect British producers from the immense power and penetration of the American film industry; and by various forms of product differentiation. It is, in the end, this question of product differentiation which is of most interest to me, and which has formed the bulk of the work in the preceding chapters. The method of developing a series of detailed and historically-specific case studies has enabled me to address a range of issues, since the case studies cover different periods, different types of film, and different industrial contexts. Although I have tended to concentrate on the formation of intellectual film culture, and its relationship to, and involvement in the promotion of these different types of cinema, it has, nevertheless, been possible to look at both various versions of art cinema and different genres of popular cinema, both the critically valued and the critically despised.

There have been some surprising overlaps - the figure of Michael Balcon moves through all of the case studies, for instance. His first feature film as producer was *Woman to Woman*, the hit of late 1923 and early 1924 with audiences and critics, British and American. This film represented a very different strategy to

that adopted by Hepworth with his contemporaneous *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, and his search for an 'English idiom'. By the mid-1930s, Balcon was Head of Production at one of the biggest British corporations, and involved centrally in Gaumont-British's attempt to break into the American market. *Evergreen* and *Woman to Woman* share a great deal, since they both aspire to the standards of the classical Hollywood film as a means of competing in the domestic and export markets with the best of American cinema. By the 1940s, Balcon was involved in a rather different strategy, the attempt to make distinctively British films, on a small scale, gaining much from the convergence of documentary and feature modes in the peculiar circumstances of World War Two. In many ways, Balcon became a spokesperson for this version of national cinema during the 1940s.

The case studies have not been discrete studies, separated from one another, or from broader historical developments, and the strength of the particular cinematic forms examined here can be seen in the fact that the same forms, and indeed industrial strategies have dominated British cinema through the 1980s. Goldcrest attempted to break into the American market with expensive 'international' films; films like *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Letter to Brezhnev* (both 1985) represent a renewal of the documentary-realist tradition and the melodrama of everyday life; and of course the heritage film has been one of the most heavily exploited areas of British art cinema, as in the case of various Merchant-Ivory productions.

The latter area of recent British film production may be seen as a relatively conservative and nostalgic attempt to turn away from contemporary realities and seek an image of national stability in some golden age of the past; inevitably, those golden ages (notably the age of the Raj) were already crumbling, and could

not offer an 'unimpaired paradigm' of national identity, but this is very much offset by the way in which these films display the attractions of the heritage, including the heritage of cinema, with its own conventions of artistry and glamour. In the contemporary melodramas of everyday life, the image of a consensual national community has been lost, fragmented into so many local communities. The centralising forces of a film like *Millions Like Us*, with its inclusive, all-embracing version of Englishness as achieved community, has been displaced by an attempt to articulate the various different social identities, imagining the differences of Britishness. While the most powerful international forces move in the direction of global markets and cultures, the independent sector of British film production, at least, has pushed toward a construction and recognition of many specific public spheres, rather than a single, 'universal' public sphere.

In summarising the conclusions of the previous chapters about the nature of British cinema as *different* from classical Hollywood, I want to concentrate on three broad areas. Firstly, I will look at the way in which these various cinematic strategies have imagined or represented the nation. Secondly, I will generalise about the distinctive stylistic characteristics of the films and filmic traditions under examination. And thirdly, I will speculate on the cultural construction of distinctiveness and otherness in relation to these films and traditions.

#### 1) Imagining the nation.

The first point to note here is the extent to which cinema is precisely an apparatus for narrating the nation as a stable entity with a strong sense of

its own identity and its past achievements, and for securing an image of the nation as a knowable, organic community. The nation becomes a body of people marked in their diversity, but even more marked in their inter-connectedness. Films achieve this image precisely by foregrounding some form of communality, often the communality of the family. This stress on the plural, on the social, on what Grierson called the *cross-section*, thus sets such films against the individualist ethic of classical Hollywood cinema. The community of the nation is very often imagined from the point of view of pastoralism, the dominant 'mobilising myth' of the British people. The populism of this myth can be rural or urban, it can be forward-looking or nostalgic - what is shared is the mobilising of an image of the nation as one large family, which rides above any sectional interests. Both the heritage film and the documentary-realist film attempt to 'document' and 'authenticate' this image of the nation. The heritage film constructs a sense of an invariant and spectacular national past, which is above all a *modern* past, imagined from the point of view of the present. The documentary-realist film tends to foreground the contemporary formation of the nation.

The ideological function of British cinema as a national cinema is thus to pull together diverse and contradictory discourses, to articulate a contradictory unity, to play a part in the hegemonic process of achieving consensus, and containing difference and contradiction. The cinematic apparatus does not simply reflect or express an already fully-formed and homogeneous national culture and identity, as if it were the undeniable property of all national subjects. It actively works to construct subjectivity by privileging a limited range of subject positions which thereby become naturalised or reproduced through the work of cinema itself as the only legitimate positions of the national subject.

Central to this image of the nation as a knowable community with a known history is the particular way in which the public (the national) is related to the private (the individual subject). The heritage film, *Sing As We Go*, and films influenced by the documentary idea, are all in one way or another marked by a dual perspective of distance and closeness. On the one hand, the observational gaze of one who is outside the narrative space, whether the space of heritage, or the space of carnival, or the broad diegesis of the people, separate from that which is being observed. On the other hand, there is the participatory stance, involving a gaze which shares the imagination of the protagonists. The distinction between these two gazes, these two opposed (but often co-present) ways of relating to the drama of the film, suggests in the end a distinction between *class* perspectives. Given that these perspectives will often embody different interests, the sense of the nation as an *un-stratified* community, with an apparently coherent and shared set of interests, begins to fall apart. Thus the community is both inclusive, but it also has the exclusivity of an institution which distinguishes between them and us, between the onlookers and the surveyed, between one class and another. Power in these films is so often the power to look, to be able to survey. Cinema is an apparatus for looking, it is a communication system, and as such, it does not simply represent the community, but *regulates* it.

Certainly, there are, over time, changes in the nature of the public sphere, and who can rightfully occupy a place within that sphere. In *Comin' Thro' The Rye*, the lower classes are virtually invisible, present only as the servants of the upper classes (and either deferential or untrustworthy). There is no representation of the lower classes as having collective interests. *Comin' Thro' The Rye* can be understood as the exhibition of a class sure of its own identity,

and sure that this identity is the essence of Englishness - except of course that the exhibition is nostalgic, and the class is already becoming culturally debased. The distanced perspective of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* is also of course the voyeuristic perspective of the heritage tourist, nostalgically seeking out this English identity.

By the time of *Sing As We Go*, under the influence of a strong tradition of popular pleasures, the lower classes can be represented both collectively and individually. But the crowd is caught in the dual perspective noted above. The crowd can be fun, it is to some extent knowable, it can be participated in; but it is still in part terrifying, grotesque, something from which one must keep a respectable distance. The task of the documentary is, in a sense, to dispel the popular and the trivial, in order to prepare the crowd for responsible citizenship: this is a question of regulating and disciplining the lower classes, before they can enter the public sphere. In *Millions Like Us*, the crowd is above all knowable, it is, precisely, millions of people like us. The development of the melodrama of everyday life from then on effectively focusses on a single figure from the crowd, an 'ordinary person', but one whose simplicity and ordinariness are the result of having absorbed bourgeois values, of having been *humanised*.

## 2) The distinctive stylistic characteristics of British cinema.

The versions of British cinema examined in this thesis can be seen as the product of engaging in a variety of dialogues - with Hollywood, with popular and *élite* indigenous cultural traditions, with notions of the people, and so on. The result of these dialogues is the development of various distinctive



stylistic characteristics. I will concentrate on three aspects here, modes of narration, types of looking, and uses of space. It is these characteristics which enable the films under discussion to articulate the particular image of the nation which I have explored above.

The difference between the classical Hollywood film and the heritage film, the popular musical comedy and the documentary-realist film is in part narrational. These filmic traditions typically refuse the rigours of classical narrative integration, in favour of what by comparison seems a more 'primitive' narrational form. It is characterised by episodicism, by multiple interweaving narrative lines, and by a diegesis which above all *displays* its attractions. This is a national cinema, then, which displays the multiple attractions of the nation. It is, in a sense, the narratively excessive realm which is the major difference of British cinema: the various attractions of Englishness, the authenticity of the national, the pictorial and the pastoral, even the carnival of *Sing As We Go*. The culture of montage, and Hepworth's aesthetic of the shot, constantly exceed the limits of narrative linearity, and very often, it is a narration from *outside* the narrative space which is developed, rather than a participatory, engaging classical narration.

This of course relates to the distinctive mode of looking in these films, the stress on a distanced and 'objective' point of view, an outsider's view, looking in from outside the narrative space, rather than the subjective point of view of classical cinema's narrative protagonists. It is a type of looking which regulates the public and the private, and the relations between the different classes. It is a type of looking which can take in the display of the public past, or the dignity of the common labourer, the 'objective' visibility of the

nation and its people. But it is also a type of looking which finds the other class fascinating and exotic, whether it is the crowd of the carnival, or the 'ordinary people' in the domestic sphere of *This Happy Breed*.

This distanced look is also more decorous, more restrained, than the engaging look of the classical film, and it relates more easily to a diegesis which is filled with detail, which foregrounds characterisation and atmosphere over action. The films under examination are decidedly not primarily action-oriented.

The construction and use of space in these films is also different from classical Hollywood. It is a much more exhibitionist space, whether it is the display of the national past and pastoral England in heritage space, or the performance space of carnival, or the *urban* pastoral of the broad diegesis of the melodrama of everyday life. The particularly extensive diegesis of these films, coterminous with the episodic and multiple narratives, is precisely a perspective on public space, on social space, and of course on national space, rather than the private space of the classical romantic hero. It is the limits of the diegesis which mark the boundaries of the national community. And as we have seen, there is always the play on the spectator being both inside and outside this space, both a participating member of the community, and a superior onlooker.

### 3) The cultural construction of distinctiveness

Nationalism is about drawing boundaries, about marking an inside and an outside. The process of constructing national identity is thus a continual process of

negotiating these limits. Film culture too seeks to identify and define others in relation to the *ideal* national cinema. The documentary-realist tradition comes to occupy that ideal position, and Hollywood, of course, becomes the most significant 'other' within the intellectual film culture. Yet a *British* film like *Evergreen* seeks to erase the boundary between the British and the American, to refuse this designation of otherness, and to 'become' Hollywood. Within the debates of the 1920s, *Comin' Thro' The Rye* occupies an ambivalent position. It is both the *ideal* British cinema, and the other, the 'too-theatrical', the old-fashioned, the un-cinematic, and so on.

*Sing As We Go* also occupies an ambivalent position. It is, from one point of view, the enemy within, the vulgar mass culture, the grotesque low other of the ideal British cinema. It was above all felt that it could not really come to terms with the political realities of the period. But it does have a critical perspective on the nation and its people, and Dean did attempt to transform it into a serious, quality film, a culturally respectable film. As we know, however, he could not resist the fascination of the popular which Gracie Fields represents.

National cinema is, then, a profoundly complex issue, and in the end, it cannot be reduced only to the consideration of the films produced by and within a particular nation-state. It is important to take into account the film culture as a whole, the overall institution of cinema, and in particular to address the whole question of consumption, which I have only been able to touch on here, rather than explore in any detail.

Another study would need to take into account in a much more comprehensive way the whole range of films in circulation within a nation-state - including American and other foreign films - and how they are taken up at the level of exhibition. In the present era, of course, films are 'in circulation' and 'exhibited' or on display in a variety of ways, and not just to be physically projected at cinemas (multiplexes, city-centre cinemas, art-house cinemas, etc): they are available on video and via the various forms of broadcast and cable television as *films*, but they are also present and re-cycled in popular culture *intertextually*, as icons, reference points, standards and pastiches.

It would also be useful to be able to take into account the whole range of sociologically specific audiences for different types of film, and how these audiences use these films in particular exhibition circumstances. That is to say, we need to take into account the historically-constituted reading practices and modes of spectatorship and subjectivity, the mental machinery and relative cultural power or readerly competences of different audiences. But we also need to take into account the experience of cinema(s) in a more general cultural sense: the role of marketing and audience expectation; the reasons why particular audiences go to the cinema, and the pleasures they derive from this activity; the specific nature of the shared social and communal experience of cinema-going, differentiated according to class, race, gender, age, and so on; the role of television (and video) in mediating and transforming the experience of cinema, and the different experiences offered by the various types of theatrical exhibition spaces. It is worth remembering that, from the point of view of economic historians such as Douglas Gomery, film industries marked by a high degree of horizontal and vertical integration can be seen as no more nor less than highly diversified cinema circuits, where production is a necessary high-

risk service industry, and where cinemas are as much luxurious sites for the consumption of or advertising for commodities other than films, as they are sites for the fantasy experience of watching films.'

An analysis of national cinema in these terms would also need to take into account the range of and relation between discourses about films circulating within that cultural and social formation, and their relative accessibility to different audiences. Crucial amongst these discourses is the tension between, on the one hand, those intellectual discourses which insist that a proper national cinema must be one which aspires to the status of art; and on the other hand, those more populist discourses where, in effect, the idea of 'good entertainment' over-rides questions of 'art' or 'nationality'. This latter discourse suggests that a cinema can only be national, and command a national-popular audience, if it is a mass-production genre cinema, capable of constructing, reproducing, and re-cycling popular myths on a broad scale, with an elaborate, well-capitalised and well-resourced system of market exploitation. Again, the role of television must be taken into account as one of the agents which generates, sustains and regulates film cultures and renders discourses about the cinema more or less accessible. (This is of course the terrain of the case study on *Sing As We Go* above.)

To explore national cinema in these terms means laying much greater stress on the point of consumption, and on the use of films (sounds, images, narratives, fantasies), than on the point of production. It involves a shift in emphasis away from the analysis of film texts as vehicles for the articulation of nationalist sentiment and the interpellation of the implied national spectator, to an

analysis of how actual audiences construct their cultural identity in relation to the various products of the national and international film and television industries, and the conditions under which this is achieved.

